



Land of plenty

For many, the biggest exertion they make on a trip to Tahiti is deciding whether to order a margarita or a mojito. Which is a shame, since on the beautiful islands of Tahiti, Moorea and Bora Bora, you'll find seriously exciting activities on land and sea. Go on, earn that cocktail.

JUST THE WORD "Tahiti" conjures up an intoxicating mental image of aquamarine lagoons punctuated by idyllic sandy atolls. A land of brochure-blue skies, bath-warm water and lazy days filled with massages and cocktails at sunset.

But what if you don't want to lounge around all day gazing into the eyes of a loved one? What if you want to get active? Explore a bit. Damn it, you want to earn that frozen margarita.

Thankfully, there are other options. On a recent trip to Moorea, Bora Bora and the main island of Tahiti, I discovered three activities that should satisfy those with a more adventurous bent.

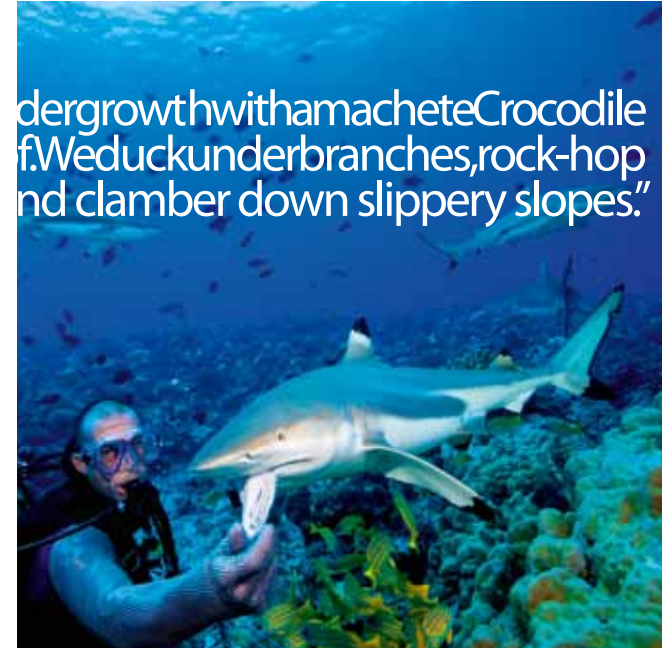
4x4 adventure in Tahiti

Most people are in such a rush to get to one of Tahiti's fabled island outposts that they overlook the main island of Tahiti. Which is a shame because in addition to the bustling city of Papeete, it has a stunning volcanic interior riddled with rivers, waterfalls and lava tubes. For most of us, this would be scenery to admire from a distance. For Arnaud Luccioni, the owner of Natura Exploration tours, it's one giant adventure playground.

After collecting us from our hotel at the slightly un-holiday hour of 7am, we head inland into the Papenoo Valley. Soon we're surrounded by lush

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Previous pages: Tahitian dancing by firelight. This page: Feeding sharks in the lagoon in Bora Bora (top); touring the interior of Tahiti by 4x4 (middle); horse trekking on Moorea (below). Opposite: Local culture is kept alive through the generations.



forest and towering volcanic cliffs streaked with dozens of waterfalls. The original plan was to go canyoning, but ironically it's raining too hard, so instead we decide to explore the Maroto River.

I follow behind as Arnaud cuts through the dense undergrowth with a machete. Crocodile Dundee would have been proud of. We duck under branches, rock-hop across streams and clamber up and down slippery slopes. It's wet, muddy and a lot of fun.

After an hour we reach the Maroto waterfall and take a well-earned swim in its clean, cool waters.

On the return journey, we stop for lunch at a school in the tiny village of Farehape. After being surrounded by inquisitive little ones, I'm lured into a highly competitive game called "Pick up Stones" and am beaten mercilessly by a 10-year-old smiling assassin called Jacques.

Of course, as soon as we hit the coast again, the sun comes out. Which is perfect timing, because back at the hotel's poolside bar, there's a mojito with my name on it.

Horse-riding in Moorea

According to Georges, "left, right, whoa and go" are the only commands I'll need in order to direct Pacifique, my trusty steed. In fact, I never have to use any of them. Pacifique and I establish a telepathic understanding within seconds of meeting each other: he goes wherever he wants; and I let him.

Georges runs horse-riding trips from a ranch in Opunohu Valley – about a 30-minute drive from our base at the Sofitel Moorea – up into the island's awe-inspiring interior. With his floppy hat, heavy French accent and belt fashioned from a piece of old rope, he's the dictionary definition of laid-back.

Our equine convoy plods up a dirt track lined with palms until we reach a clearing and the sort of panorama that should be accompanied by a fanfare of trumpets. Towering above us are four majestic volcanic peaks – Rotui (899m), Mouaputa (830m), Mouaroa (880m) and Tohiea (1207m) – while neat rows of pineapples stretch out into the distance. It is memory card-sappingly beautiful.

We continue our slow ascent, passing papaya, avocado and breadfruit trees on the way to a plateau known as Bounty Place. It's here that several scenes from the 1984 movie *The Bounty* were filmed starring Mel Gibson. Georges met Mel several times and describes him with a wry smile



STAY

The Sofitel has three stunning properties in Tahiti: all offer the activities featured here.

Located five minutes from the airport, the 216-room **Sofitel Tahiti Maeva Beach Resort** is surrounded by lush tropical gardens and has direct beach access. All rooms have private balconies with spectacular views over the mountains, the beach or the nearby island of Moorea.

The Sofitel Moorea has 114 luxurious beach, garden and over-water bungalows that overlook a sheltered lagoon fringed by a white sand beach. The resort has a seven treatment-room spa plus a choice of two beach-front restaurants, including K, an unashamedly romantic eatery where guests can dine barefoot in the sand surrounded by chandeliers.

The Sofitel Bora Bora has stunning over-water bungalows both on the main island and on a private motu across Matira Bay. A water shuttle runs between the two, allowing guests to enjoy cocktails at the poolside Hurricane Bar and dine in the resort's acclaimed restaurant, Latitude 16°. A lookout on the motu provides a spectacular setting for sunsets with views back towards Bora Bora. www.sofitel.com



Above: Snorkling in the Bora Bora lagoon takes on a frisson of excitement when stingrays are involved.

as “a good friend who likes a drink.”

We meander back down a different route, past two impressive Banyan trees and lush vegetation filled with the exotic chatter of tropical birds. Apart from one brief trot (Pacifique’s idea, not mine), the pace is pedestrian, which suits me fine. Scenery this spectacular needs to be savoured.

Shark and stingray feeding in Bora Bora

It would be fair to say I’m feeling apprehensive. Circling in the water below me are a dozen hungry-looking 1.5m black-tipped sharks.

“And I just jump in?” I hear myself asking for the third time. “Yes,” replies tall, tanned Marii. “It’s OK – they won’t eat you.” Then he adds with a grin, “maybe just a finger.”

I dive in and they don’t bat an eyelid (I later find out they can’t). They’re far more interested in the sardines being thrown in by Marii. But they do swim heart-stoppingly close, peering at me with their unflinching black eyes before darting off to the side.

After 30 minutes it’s time to move on to a nearby sheltered lagoon for our next aquatic adventure: stingray feeding.

It turns out that stingrays are a friendly bunch. Particularly if they think you might have some food. Moments after we jump into the bath-warm, waist-deep water, they swim over and start flapping their slippery bodies up against us. The air is filled with excited squeals and shrieks – mostly from me.

Organised by the Sofitel Bora Bora, this eco-tour is a family-run affair with Marii’s cousin, auntie and grandfather all on board. As we motor between stops in their impressive blue-and-white outrigger canoe, they serenade us with an eclectic playlist that ranges from traditional Tahitian ballads to vintage Bananarama.

For lunch we retire to a rustic shack on a private motu for a feast of fresh fish, beef, rice and salad served on banana leaves. In front of us is the heartbreakingly gorgeous main island of Bora Bora and it dawns on me that this pristine environment is Marii’s office. No wonder he looks so darn happy.

Full-day canyoning or hiking trips cost from XPF10,000 (NZ\$150) per person. Shark and ray feeding costs XPF11,500 (NZ\$180) per person.

Horse-riding costs XPF5,500 (NZ\$85) per person for two hours. Book them all through your hotel.

STORY **ROB MCFARLAND**


Contact

Tahiti Tourisme
www.tahiti-tourisme.com

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