

TRAVEL

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The main island of Bora Bora is surrounded by an 18-mile ring of islets encircling what James Michener called "the most beautiful lagoon in the world." In the foreground, the Hilton Bora Bora Nui.
Hilton Worldwide Resorts

Islands of love

Celebrities and honeymooners aren't the only ones who find the beauty and romance of French Polynesia to be a perfect proposal

By Debra Dunning Brouillette
Special to the Star-Telegram

BORA BORA, French Polynesia — High atop a Bora Bora hillside, overlooking the lagoon author James Michener called "the most beautiful in the world," Roberto Martinez proposed to this year's *Bachelorette*, Ali Fedotowsky.

Nearly 20 million viewers witnessed the romantic conclusion to ABC's sixth season of *The Bachelorette*, which was filmed on this resort island. And now, standing on that very spot, I was mesmerized by the gemstone shades of blue water below me — aquamarine, sapphire and topaz.

I had just left the spa, where I had a full body massage, and was about to return to my overwater bungalow by golf cart, the preferred mode of



Roberto proposed to Ali in *The Bachelorette* finale overlooking the lagoon at the Hilton Bora Bora Nui resort.
ABC

transport across the sprawling 16-acre Hilton Bora Bora Nui Resort. Aerial photos of French Polynesia — Tahiti, Moorea and Bora Bora — with their dramatic volcanic peaks and awe-inspiring blue lagoons had fas-

inated me; they represent that ultimate exotic place in the tropics, halfway around the world, almost unreachable.

Tahiti and the 118 islands that make up French Polynesia have long been a favorite spot for celebrities who have married, honeymooned or just traveled for rest and relaxation. Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban honeymooned in Bora Bora in 2006. More recently, Carrie Underwood and Mike Fisher honeymooned on the nearby island of Taha'a. *The Bachelorette's* next-to-last episode was filmed there also, before making the short hop to Bora Bora for the season finale.

Since its airing, the romantic appeal of these islands has received a major boost in popularity; bookings **More on ISLANDS, 16E**



The Hilton Moorea Lagoon Resort & Spa is TripAdvisor.com's 2010 Top Hotel for Romance in the World.

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THE ITINERARY

Grand ole impressionists

If you're looking for an excuse to visit Nashville, the Loews Vanderbilt Hotel is offering a special tied to the "Birth of Impressionism" exhibition at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts. The exhibition features 100 paintings from the Musee d'Orsay in France, including works by Monet, Renoir and Degas. The hotel package starts at \$204 and includes two tickets to the exhibition, an in-room movie with popcorn and an apple tarte tatin snack. Available through Jan. 23. www.loewshotels.com, 800-563-9792.

Deals for veterans (and civilians)

Red Roof Inn is saluting the military for Veterans Day and throughout November with special 15 percent discounts at all participating hotels. Military men and women — past or present — can receive the deal by calling 800-733-7663 or by visiting redroof.com and entering VP+ and the code 606310. And for nonmilitary folks, Red Roof Inn also offers a



Red Roof Inn

"Sleep Cheaper" deal for those who might be visiting family members over the holidays. The deal offers a 30 percent discount if you book 10 days in advance and stay at Red Roof on Thanksgiving or Christmas Day. Or receive 20 percent on the adjacent days around the holiday with an advance purchase.

Good deals on the beachfront

The beachfront Jamaica Bay Inn in Marina del Rey, Calif., is offering a special introductory rate. The Friends and Family deal lets you book any standard category room for \$149 a night. It's available for stays through Dec. 30. The 111-room hotel includes a restaurant, Jacuzzi, gardens and a fitness center. Go to www.jamaicabayinn.com and enter FRIENDS in the promo code box, or call 888-823-5333.



The new Pompidou Center art museum in the eastern French city of Metz is designed by architects Shigeru Ban, Jean de Gastines and Philip Gumuchdjian.

The Associated Press/Jacques Brinon

French modern art museum captures world of attention

It has Picassos and Warhols, but the building steals the show.

By ANGELA DOLAND
The Associated Press

METZ, France — It's France's newest architectural wonder, and it looks something like an enormous white floppy sun hat. Or a giant swimming manta ray, or maybe an alien spacecraft.

The new Pompidou Center art museum in the eastern French city of Metz has generated a big buzz in the architecture world, largely for its complex free-form roof. Open just a few months, the strange and arresting building could overshadow the Picassos, Dalis and Warhols it is exhibiting.

The building is all the more surreal for its setting amid the stern gray clock tow-

ers and church steeples of Metz, chosen for its strategic location near Germany, Luxembourg and Belgium.

The new museum is an outpost of Paris' Pompidou Center for modern and contemporary art, whose offbeat design caused a ruckus when it opened more than 30 years ago.

Even many of those who find the exterior absurd will appreciate the galleries and how they interact with the art. On the ground floor, a hanging mirror reflects a maze of small, roofless rooms, giving art-gazers a contorted, ever-shifting view of the floor plan and art in other rooms.

The Pompidou Center is the first Paris museum to embark on what authorities call "cultural decentralization" — set- **More on MUSEUM, 18E**

FUN FACT

Friend in flight

If booking air travel makes you cranky, seek refuge in CrankyConcierge.com, the go-to source for warm and fuzzy flight assistance when you don't want to face potential (and urgent) hassles or trip planning on your own.

What's hot: Founded by airline industry veteran Brett Snyder, best known for his Cranky Flier blog, CrankyConcierge.com assists travelers before, during and after their flight. Starting at \$25 for a prebooked domestic trip, you can have a "travel guardian" assist you by e-mail, phone or other means if your flight is delayed or canceled, if you miss a connection, or if you need your whereabouts communicated to others. For \$25 more, you can also get help finding low fares and the best flight before you book. Hero scenarios reported by CrankyConcierge on its website have included finding a flight for a traveler displaced by volcanic ash, and saving a couple of thousand on a trip between Saudi Arabia and the U.S.

What's not: Don't wait until it's too late to buy. Urgent help that is required within 24 hours can cost you up to three times what you would have paid if you had planned ahead.

— Los Angeles Times

Islands

Continued from 15E

at resorts are up and tour companies are offering special package prices, many of which include airfare from Los Angeles.

Modern Bride magazine readers voted the Hilton's thatched roof overwater bungalows, like the one I called my temporary home, the No. 1 Honeymoon Suite in the World. Splurge if you have to, or look for a package that includes at least part of your stay in one of these dreamy huts built on stilts above the shallow lagoon. Glass viewing panels in the floor of the decks and sitting areas, and running the length of the large bathtubs, make it possible to keep an eye on the fish below without touching a toe into the water. When the water becomes too tempting, just take a few steps down a ladder on the deck to commune with the blue lagoon and its inhabitants.

Steps away from my 950-square-foot bungalow were a pair of two-story Overwater Presidential Villas, added in late 2009. They're the only ones in French Polynesia and the closest thing to a "high-rise" you will find. *Bachelorette* fans will recall Ali introduced her parents to Chris and Roberto, the final two bachelors vying for her heart, in one of the villas. Each is a spacious 3,400-square-foot, two-bedroom villa, ideal for families, including its own private whirlpool spa on the second-story deck, a plunge pool and bathtub with a not-to-be-believed view of the lagoon.

A day in paradise

The site of Ali and Roberto's "last-chance date" was the Hilton's private islet, Motu Tapu, said to be the most photographed islet in French Polynesia. My traveling companions and I enjoyed an idyllic excursion there, where we snorkeled on the nearby reef, sipped champagne and strolled along the white sand beach of the motu, before being served an incredible lunch at the water's edge.

While we ate, calm blue waters barely covered our feet. A trumpetfish hovered in the water near me, like a pampered pet waiting for his morsel. More likely, it was searching for lunch among the small fish swimming in the shallow seawater. This was dining al fresco as I'd never experienced it.

In case we find ourselves stranded on a deserted island, we were treated to a coconut-husking demonstration, then tasted the fresh coconut milk. We also learned ways to tie the traditional colorful Tahitian wraps called *pareos*, worn by both women and men in French Polynesia.

On the short boat ride back to the Hilton, one of our Tahitian hosts sang and played the ukulele, as our private motu disappeared into the distance. This "day in paradise" on the private islet is one of the most popular excursions offered by the Hilton.



A sunset sail in Bora Bora's lagoon ends a perfect day.

Special to the Star-Telegram/Debra Dunning Brouillette

Other Bora Bora resorts offer similar excursions to their own private motus.

It all begins in Tahiti

Most travelers to French Polynesia spend time on more than one island. All journeys to the rest of French Polynesia begin in Tahiti — and all journeys to Tahiti from the U.S. begin in Los Angeles, leaving from LAX airport on Air Tahiti Nui or Air France. (There is also a weekly flight on Air Hawaii from our 50th state.)

Within the span of a normal eight-hour workday, travelers are transported below the equator, 4,100 miles away from L.A., halfway between California and Australia, to Papeete, Tahiti. The time difference is four hours earlier than our own Central Standard Time (five hours during Daylight Saving Time months).

An overnight stay in the capital city of Papeete is required when traveling in both directions, as midday flight times from L.A. make it difficult to get to other islands by ferry or air the day of arrival, and flights leave early morning the day of departure.

Our first night's lodging was spent in Tahiti's newest hotel, the Manava Suite Resort, a TripAdvisor Traveler's Choice winner in 2010. It was perfect for a night's stay, as the majority of its 121 rooms on the edge of the lagoon offer spectacular views of Moorea, our next island destination. We arranged to stay here again on our last night, before our early morning flight to L.A.

Touring Tahiti

While many visitors immediately leave for other island destinations, we spent most of the following day touring Tahiti, the largest island of French Polynesia. If at all possible, build this into your Tahiti vacation plan. Once you are out of the hustle-bustle of Papeete, this island has its own beauty and magic to share.

You'll see lush grottos and waterfalls, the black sand beach at Teahupo'o, where the Billabong Pro World Surfing Tournament is held, the light-

house where Captain Cook first made landfall in 1769, and Matawai Bay, where scenes from *Mutiny on the Bounty* were filmed.

We ended our day at The Papeete Municipal Market, Le Marché, where we shopped for local handcrafted items, oils, *pareos* and inexpensive black pearl jewelry, before boarding the last ferry of the day to Moorea. The market is open every day, 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., just one block inland from the waterfront.

Moorea, heart-shaped island of love

Moua Roa, the most distinctive of Moorea's jagged peaks, is thought to be James Michener's inspiration for the mythical Bali Hai in *Tales of the South Pacific*. The song from the movie *South Pacific* kept playing in my head as I stood on the top deck of the high-speed catamaran, which ferried us across the Sea of Moon, the 11-mile waterway separating it from Tahiti.

The 30-minute crossing is one that many Mooreans make daily to work or to attend school in Tahiti. Air Tahiti also offers a shuttle service several times each day between the two islands; at seven minutes, it's one of the shortest commercial flights in the world.

The exotic surroundings of the Hilton Moorea Lagoon Resort & Spa, our lodgings for the next several days, were postcard perfect from every vantage point. TripAdvisor.com named it "Top Hotel for Romance in the World" in its 2010 Travelers' Choice awards. My thatched roof garden bungalow, surrounded by bougainvillea, included a private plunge pool on the deck, added as part of an \$11 million-plus renovation project, completed in 2009, of the resort's 104 overwater, beachfront and garden bungalows.

While the main attraction of Moorea may be the crystalline lagoon, an island tour is a "must do." One paved 37-mile road circles the island. Awe-inspiring overlooks, black sand beaches, ancient Polynesian temples, drives through pineapple fields

Water beyond the lagoon. As we approached the dive site, our guide told us that we would likely be seeing lots of sharks, but none of the man-eating *Jaws* variety. Minutes before entering the water, we were surprised by the appearance of a humpback whale near our boat. This was the beginning of whale season and quite a treat. We watched it break the surface several times, spraying water through its blowhole before disappearing from sight. The adrenaline rush continued as we spotted at least 30 sharks of several varieties on our dive.

Jet skiing, glass-bottom boat cruises and leisurely lagoon tours are other ways you can experience the lagoon's beauty above the water. A visit to the Lagoonarium and half- or full-day Jeep tours of the main island of Bora Bora are also easily arranged.

French Polynesian dining
If you are a "foodie" like me, French Polynesian dining will not disappoint. The chefs at the Hilton (on Bora Bora and Moorea) creatively combined the two cuisines for unforgettable meals. One night, however, we left the Hilton in Bora Bora to go into Vaitape on the main island for an evening at Bloody Mary's. Named for the character in *South Pacific*, Bloody Mary's has been visited by celebrities from around the world. Diners view the evening's fresh-catch selections displayed on ice, hear how they can be prepared, then place their orders. While waiting for our meals, we ordered cocktails, shed our sandals, and buried our feet in the white sand floor. The house specialty drink, is, you guessed it, a Bloody Mary.

All too soon, we were headed back to Tahiti, where we spent the last of our French Polynesian francs, the local currency, and had our most bargain-priced meal at Les Roulettes, an open-air dining area near the waterfront where about two dozen food-truck vendors prepare a variety of inexpensive international dishes. We had Chinese stir-fry at Chez Mamy, then returned to our hotel for a few hours' sleep before our early morning flight.



Snorkel the shallow reefs within the lagoon, which are teeming with colorful fish.

Special to the Star-Telegram/Debra Dunning Brouillette

(the main agricultural product of Moorea) and tastings of jams and liqueurs made from island-grown fruit were highlights of our half-day tour.

Many of the excursions offered on all the islands involve getting up-close-and-personal with creatures in the sea. On the way to our group's stingray-feeding excursion, we were told small blacktip reef sharks would most likely crash our party for a few leftovers. We emerged with all our fingers and toes and happily snapped photos of the sharks and rays that allowed us to enter their watery world. By all means, book this excursion, which also includes snorkeling with colorful reef fish.

Into the blue lagoon

As soon as we boarded our 45-minute flight from Moorea to Bora Bora on Air Tahiti, someone suggested I sit on the left side to get the best views and photos. Since seeing that aerial photo years ago, I wanted to try to photograph myself from this unique vantage point. When it came into view, I instantly recognized the 18-mile-long necklace of islets called motus, containing its protected lagoon and barrier reef that surround the main island, and the mountain, Ote Manu, which rises as the focal point of the mainland. If you go, try to grab a left-side window seat.

Bora Bora is, indisputably, one of the most beautiful islands on earth, which makes it even harder to believe that for the early Polynesians it was a place of exile for outcasts. It is no longer a place to be banished, but to banish oneself — to totally unplug from civilization.

Much of the rest of our self-banishment in Bora Bora, beyond our day on the private islet, was spent in or near the blue lagoon. We slipped into it from our overwater bungalows for morning sea baths and snorkeled its coral reefs on lagoon safari excursions. One day, while the rest of our group fed the stingrays, I went diving with sharks.

I had scuba dived throughout the Caribbean since 1992 and couldn't leave Bora Bora without spending time below the surface of the deeper blue

French Polynesia



If you go

Here are some of the basics about French Polynesia: ■ Tahiti enjoys a fairly even year-round climate with daytime temperatures around 82-91 degrees. Located below the equator, the seasons are the reverse of ours in the Northern Hemisphere. From November to March it is warmer, with higher humidity and more rain; from April to October, it's cooler and drier.

■ Tahiti, Moorea and Bora Bora are islands in the Leeward group of the Society Islands of French Polynesia, an overseas territory of France in the Pacific Ocean. Nearly 70 percent of the estimated population of 287,000 lives on the island of Tahiti.

■ It's common to put a tiare blossom (Tahiti's national flower) behind one's ear — left side if you're taken, right if you're looking.

■ Voltage: Hotels use either 110 or 220 volts, depending on the location. A converter/adaptor is often required for appliances you bring, including computers.

■ In-room wireless Internet access is available at most resorts, usually for an additional fee. Free Internet access is normally available in the hotel's business center.

Special packages

Package prices including airfare from Los Angeles have helped bring these dreamy islands into financial reach for more of us than ever, with specials starting at about \$1,500 a person. A *Bachelorette* Romantic Getaway package was advertised recently online at \$2,799 per person. Check out these websites for more information and packages:

■ Tahiti Tourism: www.tahititourism.com

■ Air Tahiti Nui: www.airtahitiniui-usa.com

■ Hilton Bora Bora Nui: www.Hilton.com/Bora-Bora-nui

■ Hilton Moorea Lagoon: www.Hilton.com/Moorea-lagoon

■ South Pacific Management — Manava Resort (Tahiti) and Pearl Resorts (Moorea and Bora Bora): www.spmhotels.com

■ Paul Gauguin Cruises: www.pgcruises.com

Land tours

Marama Tours, Tahiti: (e-mail) transport1@maramatours.pf
Torea Nui Tours, Moorea: (e-mail) enttoreanui@mail.pf

Shopping

■ Be sure and shop for Tahitian black pearls. They range widely in pricing, size, shape and colors. Robert Wan, who pioneered the local industry in the 1960s, operates shops in several hotels on Tahiti, Moorea and Bora Bora. Or find inexpensive black pearls at the local markets.

■ Also shop for handcrafts, *pareos*, scented coconut oils, wood-carved tikis, mother-of-pearl carvings, artwork and fruit jams.



Hilton Bora Bora's "Day in Paradise" excursion on Motu Tapu includes beverage service.

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Pineapple is the island of Moorea's main agricultural product, but other tropical fruits are plentiful, too.

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