

# BONJOUR BORA BORA



Standing at the bow to escape the diesel-belching smoke stacks, I surveyed the horizon, looking for a sign of land. After 24 hours of tossing and swaying beneath a blinding tropical sun on the Tapororo III, a 240 foot Polynesian Island freighter, we were still chugging our way through the neon-blue waters of the South Pacific, headed south-east from Papeete, Tahiti some 264 kilometres away to the island of Bora Bora. The stench of unwashed bodies, urine-splattered latrines and choking diesel fumes was overpowering.

"Dolphins," someone exclaimed, pointing. Towards the stern, a school of dolphins came looping through the waves. Chirping and splashing they made their way to the bow, almost directly beneath me.

The salty sweet scent of hibiscus and frangipani told us land was near. Soon after, the twin peaks of Bora Bora, little more than a black dot sandwiched in between sea and sky could be seen. As we neared the island all passengers, tourists and locals alike, became silent, deeply inhaling the scents and hungrily viewing the sights. The now glistening moss-covered craggy peaks loomed 600 metres into the sky where each met a separate string of circular cloud. At the base spread the remainder of the island covered first by the palm trees that gave way to silver-white stretches of sand kissed by the clear blue waters of the lagoon.

In the middle of this splendour, we were let onto the dock. About 20 backpackers and a spattering of locals stumbled off the boat. Waiting along with a number of rusted European-style taxis was the bus called "Le Truk," which would ferry us to the various tourists accommodations on the island.

While on the boat I'd been reading my tattered copy of "The South Pacific Handbook," 600 pages of insider's tips on hundreds of South Pacific islands. As soon as my bags were tossed on the roof of "Le Truk" safely, I began swapping information with the others, finding out the cheapest places to stay, key place to see, what and where to eat, etc. Because travellers read different publications and meet up with people who have just come from places they are headed to, they are a wealth of information, free for the asking. Thanks to one such tip, I ended up staying at a locally run establishment called, "Chez Aime." It was perfect. For \$7 US per day (paid up front), I had my own room, complete with double bed (no bugs), a chest of drawers, a cracked mirror and no cockroaches (or none that I saw), with a combination lock

on the door. All other facilities were communal, including two outdoor bathrooms (one with a flush toilet), two showers (to be used before noon and after 5 p.m. only—the island has to ration water carefully), a kitchen with a gas stove, a cockroach infested fridge (fine for sealed containers), a chicken-wired cubby hole for each guests' dried goods and a large dining room capable of seating twenty. Hygiene was a must. Dirty dishes could not be left for any length of time or the place was quickly over run by insects the size of toy trucks.

For the first few days the sight of fist-sized land crabs threw me. Each day I dashed past a yard full of crabs on my way to the outdoor shower stall, causing shrieks of delighted laughter to echo through my landlord's home as her children watched my progress. My towel-clad body jerked and jumped past the



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crabs' outstretched claws as they zig-zagged towards me. Soon after, one of the children explained to me in Polynesian-flavored French that I was only being chased by the crabs because I was scaring them. If I just walked past them they wouldn't even move. She was right.

Once settled in Chez Aime, a group of us rented bicycles (\$US for 1/2 day) and took off to tour around the island and become familiar

often wondered if it had anything to do with the nuclear underground tests the French military have been conducting on Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls since 1966 which are located in the Tuamotu archipelago, one of the five main groups of islands that form Eastern Polynesia. Because all health and medical statistics have been kept top secret there is no way of being certain.

Bailing gave me a unique vantage point. The water was calm and sparkling, occasionally blinding as it reflected the sun's pelting rays upward. Black sea anemone, tentacles outstretched and softly undulating in the current

perched by the thousands amongst the coral polyps. We passed over a few sea slugs, which look like cylindrical doughballs, crawling slowly amongst the anemone and the purple and orange starfish sprawled lazily below.

One moment I was bailing calmly, watching a pastel blue fish nibbling at a clump of sinewy green seaweed and the next I was staring at the shiny brown tip of a shark's dorsal fin less than three feet away from our now wet and unstable-looking canoe. It was not very large, no more than three feet from snout to tail as it passed us in pursuit of unknown prey, thrashing the surface with its tail as it skimmed over the coral heads in the shallows. I can still remember the speckles of brown on its mottled belly and the wet-leather look of its steel grey back. As suddenly as it came, it went. We continued paddling towards the reef and decided to get out and scout around in the knee-deep water. Mike called Vince and I over as he stared down into the water at his leg comically. Wrapped around the bronzed skin of his ankle and suckering its way up his leg was a baby octopus. Back at their campsite we cooked it in coconut milk and feasted the night away.



with the sights. We passed the island's only town called Vaitape, complete with two banks, a church and a grocery store. About 15 minutes after we passed the entrance to the Club Med, the pavement stopped and the gravel began. For the next three hours we cycled our way along the winding, palm-lined road past squealing pigs, as we shooed away curious ducks, and became mesmerized by the flowering bushes and the softly perfumed air. On the deserted side of the island we watched as a mud-splattered foreman directed workmen to pull down trees in preparation for the next Hotel already partially completed. Although caked in mud, the mosquitos still managed to drive us crazy, musk oil and all. We welcomed the rain as it suddenly pelted down, cleaning us up and scattering mosquitos. We had planned the journey so that we would end up on the stretch of beach we had all heard so much about. Standing in the shade of a solitary palm tree I looked around, unable to speak. Stretched in front of me and extending for miles in either direction was a beach with blinding sand that blended into water so clear its edge was not detectable except by the sun's reflection. The shallows extended out as far as the eye could see. I later walked through this water out to the reef half a mile from shore never once needing to swim. I spend hours lying stretched out in inches of water experiencing again the sensation of sun against naked skin.

The beach stretched for miles ending at the Hotel Bora Bora, where international dignitaries have been known to haunt the halls. On certain nights, the Hotel hosts a local Polynesian dance troupe who tell the story of the islands, combining hula-like swaying with the more aggressive knee-clapping, arm-swinging, pelvis-thrusting traditional dances that originated in the Society Islands to which Bora Bora belongs.

One night after hitching a ride (the accepted way to travel) with the dance troupe back to Chez Aime, my friends and I found ourselves in my hotel room suddenly hungry. Without thinking, I turned on the light and saw not one or two, but what must have been dozens of plum-sized, spindle-legged, startled cockroaches everywhere. Less than four inches from the light switch was a spider the size of my outstretched hand in the process of calmly devouring a cockroach on the hairs at the mouth of the spider held us all transfixed. We were so taken watching him watch us, the room cleared of cockroaches without our noticing.

Some days later I explored the local coral reef with two Australians in a leaky canoe. For some strange reason, the coral of Bora Bora, or some other reason, seemed dead. Unlike the all that I saw of it, seemed dead. Unlike the vivid reds, oranges and purples that I found in Australia and the Caribbean, here I saw only lime green and pale ivory, not a healthy sign. I

## Tips on Travelling in Bora Bora

While backpacking I make it a policy to avoid eating in restaurants . . . a luxury I cannot afford. Shopping at the local food markets (even though you pay the tourist rate as opposed to the local rate) is an excellent way to become familiar with the customs and foods the area has to offer. During my stay on Bora Bora, I survived quite happily on dried cereal, fruit and gorp (good ole raisins and peanuts bought in Toronto before I left), eggs, cheese, fish, french sticks (40€US a loaf), coconuts, powdered orange juice, milk and tea.

Upon arrival in Papeete, Tahiti (you must land here first) I would suggest you go to the Sunday morning market (take Le Truk). It starts sometime soon after 4:30 a.m. and ends shortly after sunrise. Fruits, vegetables and fish can be bought (haggled for) if your command of French is good. If not, prepare to pay more. Bear in mind that Papeete on the whole is outrageously expensive and will put a serious dent in any cost-conscious traveller's budget.

The key word to know in French Polynesia, most especially on Bora Bora is "bonjour," which means 'good day,' or 'hello.' Everywhere you go, anyone you meet will greet you with a friendly "bonjour," as they continue on their way.

It's important as a traveller to remember that in the eyes of the locals and in the eyes of other travellers, you represent the country you came from. Actions speak louder than words, especially if you don't understand the language being spoken. Showing disrespect for the environment, regardless of how 'insignificant' the action, is the fault of many travellers and locals alike. I remember standing on the dock where we left the Tapororo III days before, talking with another traveller. As we turned to leave, she nonchalantly tossed her coke can into the water behind us. When I asked her why she didn't just put it in the trash bin only steps away, she looked at me as if I'd lost my mind. "What harm . . . one can?" she said shaking her head.

Travelling light is the key to successful long-term backpacking, especially in the tropics. The less you bring, the less you have to carry and the less likely you are to be robbed. As a rule of thumb I've found, if your backpack is full, you're bringing twice what you need.

Of the things you'll need to know, remember carrying your passport, travellers cheques, large bills, identification originals and airline tickets in a skin-coloured cotton money belt around your waist, although at first bulky and uncomfortable, will assure you of its safety. I can attest to the difficulties that can arise after a theft. Also, Canadians can visit the islands of French Polynesia for either 30 days with no visa or three months with a visa and extensions of stay up to six months possible after you arrive. The hot humid season in Eastern Polynesia runs from November to April, with other times in the year slightly cooler and drier.

I am often asked how I could possibly afford to travel through the South Pacific . . . who was paying the shot. Travelling need not be an expensive habit if everything is well planned and you don't mind 'roughing it' for a while.

If you plan to do any travelling in the South Pacific, and you're on a limited budget, it is in your best interest to go to more than one island, using somewhere like New Zealand, Australia, Japan or Thailand as a turn around point (the furthest point by airline in your journey). Once you've researched the areas that interest you and you have a detailed outline of where you'd like to go, how you'd like to get there, how long you'd like to stay, and the actual time of the year you'd like to go, take your findings to a number of travel agencies and compare results.

Choose a travel agency that specializes in either the South Pacific or trips for backpackers and/or trekkers. Start reading publications like *Great Expeditions*, a Canadian Adventure and Travel Magazine (Box 46499, Station G, Vancouver, B.C. V6R 4G7) which prints articles written by travellers the world over. Keep in mind that the most important phase of your trip that will ensure its success or spell its failure is the amount of planning you do before you leave.

If you've always dreamed of getting away to some far off tropical paradise, to trek through the wilds, to snorkel through coral heads and swim amongst multi-coloured fishes, to lie on a still-warm beach as the sun lights the waters a dazzling flame of colour before disappearing, then it could be that you were meant to visit this still oh-so-tropical paradise.