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A row of traditional Tahitian huts with thatched roofs, built on stilts over water. The scene is captured at sunset, with a warm orange and yellow glow in the sky and water. The huts are silhouetted against the bright light, and their reflections are visible in the calm water below.

Tahitian pearl

Tahiti looks nice, darling. And the most exquisite Tahitian island of all is Bora Bora, the honeymooners' heaven. Who could quibble about taxes in paradise?

STORY Alice Aldridge

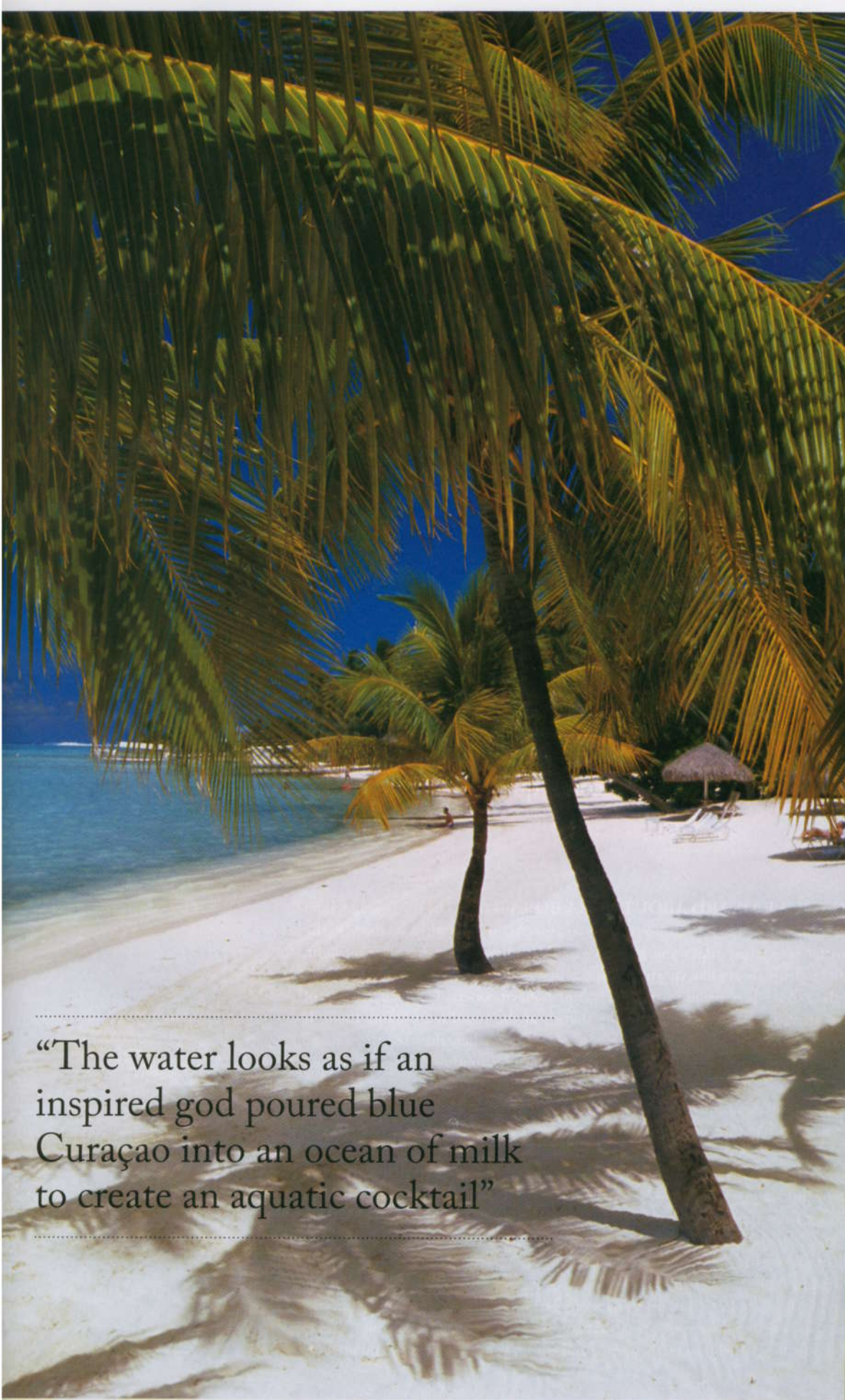
EVERYTHING YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT BORA BORA is true. The magical brochure photos don't even come close to the spectrum of blues and greens on offer when it comes to the real thing. No matter how many times you see the island's famous lagoon, in whatever light, from boat or from land, it's always like viewing it for the first time.

It's true that Bora Bora is a paradise for lovers and honeymooners. Coupled critters of the human variety arrive here two by two, inhaling sharply at the visual feast before them. If it weren't for the snorkels attached to their masks, they'd drown when they see the aquatic wonderland below and gasp again. If you're a solo traveller, consider another destination, or you might well feel like the bridesmaid at someone else's wedding.

The rumours about cost are also true. It can be expensive. A packet of cake mix in the local supermarket goes for \$A15, to give an example, but if you have time to choose a packet mix (let alone bake a cake) on your honeymoon, you may want to get a refund on the wedding.

The islanders pay no income tax, instead relying on tourists to do it for them. The average Bora Bora resident earns the equivalent of \$A3300 per month and seems to spend much of it on automobiles, to judge from the convoy of shiny new 4WDs lining the island's one road. With only one way to go, left or right, it seems these trucks are more for show than transport.

The main industry is tourism, and visitors can be taxed anything from 80 to 400 per cent for food, drink and trinkets. Which is why it's best to book and pay for your hotel and breakfast up front (and feed up big on the buffet). But just think, every franc you spend goes towards another mag wheel. It's all good fun and once you've reached paradise, you won't care what you spend to stay there. Locals know this, which is why they smile and ensure your holiday is memorable. ▶



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REEF ENCOUNTER: enjoy some deep relaxation under a shady palm tree (far left) or sample the delights of three Accor properties (left, top to bottom).

It's less than an hour's flight from Papeete, the Tahitian capital on the main island, to the first dramatic sight of Bora Bora. Mount Otemanu, an ancient volcano, juts high into the sky, with dramatic basalt cliffs that drop down to the inhabitable land that forms the coastline.

A mere 10 kilometres long and just four kilometres wide, the island can be explored in a day by bicycle. That is, of course, if you're feeling inclined to move from your overwater deck. I suppose you could always pay someone else to do the exploring for you.

The lagoon surrounding the island is a many-layered metropolis of marine life. Protected by a barrier reef and dotted with *motus*, or small sand islands, the water looks as if an inspired god poured blue Curaçao into an ocean of milk to create an aquatic cocktail. All you need is the umbrella (to protect you from the midday sun).

And all you need to do to meet some colourful locals is wade into the water. Stingrays are the friendliest, flocking to tourists standing in the lagoon. Like labradors they knock each other and jostle to be the first to claim your attention, their puppy-like eyes pleading "Pick me, pick me!" To be cuddled by a sting ray is a disturbing yet addictive sensation, though be warned: they may have no teeth but their suction rivals that of a Dyson.

The reef sharks are just as friendly, at least when they're hungry, and some resorts and tours tempt them closer with a bucket of freshly chopped tuna. Best to stay on the other side of the feeding rope when these guys nosh. They won't attack and are probably far more scared of you than the other way round, but don't put my theory to the test.

You can take your pick from the rest of the aquatic crew, including moray eels, barracudas, carrangues, parrotfish, soldier fish, butterfly fish and their

various relatives. Feed them some bread and they'll become your new best friends, wrapping you in a tornado of coloured fins and glistening scales.

Just as the sea creatures fight for bread, the world has fought for this corner of the globe. The main island of Tahiti was claimed by both the British and the French in the 18th century. There followed a century of fighting and rivalry before Tahiti's King Pomare V finally ceded his territories to France in 1880, for military protection from the British. Eight years later Bora Bora was also annexed to France.

In 1957 all the islands of Tahiti became known as French Polynesia. The islands have enjoyed autonomy since 1984, and now elect their own president, yet they still celebrate Bastille Day on July 14 every year, and Bora Bora puts on a particularly good show. The Lord Mayor, Miss Bora Bora and other luminaries gather with locals in the sandy square of Vaitape, the main village. It can be a lengthy ceremony but it's worth waiting for the fruit-carrying race: buff young men in loincloths run around the town carrying kilos of fruit on bamboo shoulder poles.

Bastille is a good time to be in Bora Bora as it comes during the annual Heiva festival, marked by Polynesian dancing, markets and displays every night. Drums are pounded, men's strength is tested and beauty queens vie for honours. But the island never forgets its honeymoon reputation, closing down at midnight so all good loved-up couples can retire to the overwater bungalows for which this island is known.

Come midnight, the singles on the island, of which there are few, can most likely be found at Bloody Mary's, the celebrity hangout where Sharon Stone and other famous faces have been spotted. Rumour has it that the singles eat cake. Just remember to bring your own packet mix. ■



FACT FILE

WHERE TO STAY

Guests of the lagoonside **Novotel Bora Bora** (top two photos, left) can also enjoy the facilities of the neighbouring **Sofitel Marara** with its infinity pool and day spa (centre), as well as the private beaches and reefs of the **Sofitel Motu Bora Bora** across the lagoon (bottom two photos). Package deals, including meals, ensure guests are not stung by high taxes.

WHERE TO GO

Bora Bora Lagoonarium: to swim with rays and feed sharks.

Bloody Mary's Restaurant:

for the exotic, just-caught seafood in a traditional Polynesian atmosphere. **Bora Bora Yacht Club:** a funky place to indulge in sweet coconut drinks.

WHEN TO GO

April to August offers visitors pleasant weather with lower humidity. Avoid the wet season, December to March.

MORE INFO

Visit the official tourism site at www.tahiti-tourisme.com.au

LOCATION

French Polynesia is in the South Pacific, about halfway between Australia and California. Bora Bora is about a 45-minute flight from the main island of Tahiti.

FLOWERY COMPLIMENTS

(above right): Sofitel staff lay on a warm greeting for guests during the month-long Heiva festival, a national celebration of customs and costumes.

