



Opunohu Bay, Moorea

Nature's masterpiece.

By Matt Taylor

“What’s Tahiti like?” It’s a question I’ve been asked numerous times, but as the editor of a travel magazine I was never able to provide a response – the journey to this famed island group had never quite materialised. But in late spring, the stars aligned. I can now say getting to Tahiti and the nearby island of Moorea was more than worth the wait.



Belvedere Lookout, Moorea



Moorea Lagoon

French Polynesia has always nurtured a certain mystique and it more than lived up to its grand reputation. The sheer beauty is something to behold, even by the most idyllic of Pacific Island standards. The people share that familiar, Pacific Island outlook – they have an appreciation of the simple things that make life meaningful – family, friends, good food and making the most of their remarkable natural environment. And complementing it all is a vibrant French influence that dates back more than 100 years.

Moorea – change of pace.

Around 180,000 people live in Tahiti and downtown Papeete is as busy as any South Pacific centre – cars and trucks ply the two lane motorways, cargo ships come and go, locals go about their business - it's a busy little town. By comparison Moorea is a completely laid-back and you feel it the moment you step off the ferry.

Moorea is home to around 18,000 people, virtually all of these residents are spread around the coastal villages – rather than the steep mountainous interior. Exploring the island is easy. There is public transport, scooters for hire and mountain bikes are popular too, but the best way to see the sights is by hiring a car – it's handy having room to pack a few supplies - beach towel, camera, water and snacks. Plus you'll appreciate the air-conditioning.

Beauty around every bend.

The drive around Moorea's coastal road is scenic to say the least. Just be sure to

keep your eyes on the road – those towering mountains and beautiful bays have a magnet-like attraction! The speed limit is 60kph, so it's illegal to rush! So take your time and simply pull over when the mood takes you.

Moorea's villages, particularly the bigger ones like Maharepa, have a variety of eateries, shops and other services. Pearls, local handicrafts, clothing stores will satisfy your retail fix. You'll see beauty therapists, places to hire bikes, and you'll even see tattoo studios with artists that can ink you with intricate, traditional Tahitian designs – possibly the ultimate souvenir.

Moorea is also home to a number of beautiful public beach reserves. Check out the palm-tree lined Taahiamanu Beach, one of the most popular on the island. It's a great spot for a cooling dip at anytime during the day, or catch the glorious sunset later on. It's a few minutes past the Hilton Moorea Resort and Spa.

Belvedere Lookout – Mt Rotui and the Bays.

It's not hard to find a scenic spot on Moorea - they're everywhere. But one of the standouts is the memorable view from the Belvedere Lookout. Two roads take you there, simply turn inland from either Opunohu Bay or Cook's Bay. As you rise up the mountainside the road starts to twist and turn around some fairly tight hairpins. Nothing dangerous, just slow down and watch out for fellow visitors coming the other way.



Hilton Moorea Resort and Spa, Moorea



Taahiamanu Beach, Moorea



Le Grand de Voile

When you reach the top you'll look straight across to the majestic peak of Mount Rotui – a triangular mass of volcanic rock that reaches 899m high (that three Sky Towers end on end). Framed on each side by the blue waters of Opunohu Bay and Cook's Bay, that's an Instagram winner right there.

If you'd like to carry on further (and are full of energy), there is a wide variety of hikes and mountain bike trails. If you are keen for the extra elevation, it's best to start early and avoid the hottest part of the day - plus the locals say you'll get the best view early. Pack sunscreen, repellent and plenty of water.

Local legend says that Gods live in Moorea's mountain peaks and when the tops are covered in cloud (which is often), it means the Gods do not want to be disturbed by humans, but when the mountains are clear it's a blessing for those who see them. I was lucky enough to be blessed.

Lagoon exploration.

"Do you want to meet my moray eel?" It was hard to know whether this was a serious question. Thus far our tour guide Wilfred had proved himself a man of many talents, but surely he was having a laugh. After all the moray eel is a ferocious predator with razor sharp teeth. Regardless, we obliged, snorkelling with Wilfred to a large piece of coral.

Next thing you know, he's dived down and comes back up with a firehose thick 6ft moray eel draped around him! And for the next 10 minutes, he continues to stroke it with his hands and wrap it around his body. And the moray was lapping it up like a playful kitten. It was quite unbelievable, but afterwards he explained that he'd had 8 pet morays over the last 20 years and although they have poor eyesight, they can tell it's him by the way he handles them!

This was just one of the highlights of a thoroughly enjoyable day on Moorea's crystal lagoon waters with Moorea Miti Tours. We had the chance to swim with blacktip sharks – "if you're scared just pretend their black tip dolphins," Wilfred said with yet another infectious laugh. They were indeed harmless and so were the big black stingrays that swam around us without a care in the world.

We called into a picture postcard motu (islet) for a delicious barbeque lunch. This time Wilfred gave us a coconut-husking lesson, showed us the spot to crack them open and then proceeded to scrape the inside and used the raw ingredients to make the local raw fish dish of poisson cru. An absolutely mouth-watering entrée!

Moorea Miti Tours full day experience was easily one of the most enjoyable tours I've been on. The towering mountains and serene waters provide the spectacular backdrop, and Wilfred's insights about local history and culture were fascinating too. As was coming face-to-face with a number of marine creatures in their natural habitat. In short, it's a must-do and personally, I'd ask to get on Wilfred's boat!

Roadside eats.

From fruit stands stacked with fresh pineapple to cosy creperies and funky waterfront cafes – Moorea has plenty of choice when it comes to food. And most of them sit right on the main coastal road, so you can just pull up and sample their fare.

La Grand Voile

On the outskirts of Maharepa town you'll find La Grand Voile, a small eatery that whips up delicious crepes and fresh fruit smoothies. They also sell icy cold Hinano beer, which is thoroughly refreshing on a hot Moorea afternoon. Take a seat outside (under the shade), have a tasty snack and watch the world go by. If you're travelling with kids, there's a small playground too.

Moorea Beach Cafe

Right on the water, it's hard to imagine a better spot to enjoy a bottle of bubbles over lunch, dinner (or breakfast for that matter). You can literally dip your toes in the lagoon from your table! They offer a delectable café menu – try the Wasabi Crusted Seared Tuna and creamy mash potatoes.

Plus they do pizzas, burgers from 11.30am till 5pm and they have a kids menu too. You'll find this humming spot in Maharepa - you can't miss the yellow Veuve Clicquot flags waving in the breeze.

Restaurant Tiahura

When I asked a local chef to recommend a place to eat, he thought for a few seconds then suggested Restaurant Tiahura. "You like seafood? It has the best on the island," he said. Indeed seafood is king here and they do it well – tuna, mahi mahi, shrimp, octopus – grilled, seared, made into curries, salads and poke. You can't go wrong and it has a nice, homely feel too. You'll see the sign in Tiahura town.

Snack Mahana

Another spot serving the freshest of fish. Sitting on the grass, next to the water, it is relaxed dining, like eating in a friend's back yard. If you're planning a visit, be sure to go early, as the quality of the food means it's not uncommon for them to sell out before closing time!

Ferry to Moorea – a quick hop.

One of the things that make Moorea so attractive (apart from the scenery), is the ease which you can get there. Tahiti's main port is in downtown Papeete, and you'll find the passenger terminal right off the main road. A full schedule of ferries run between Tahiti and Moorea's main wharf at Vaiare. It's a quick journey – depending on the vessel you're looking at 30 to 45 minutes, i.e. it's over in a flash. If the sun is out take a seat on the top 'sun' deck. You'll get the best views - while you work on your Tahiti tan.

Places to stay.

Manava Suite Resort Tahiti, Tahiti

When you check into Manava Suite Resort on the island of Tahiti, its best qualities remain hidden. But stroll down the covered walkway towards the lagoon and you'll see why this resort is a favourite stopover for both visitors heading to the outer islands, and those going no further than Tahiti. The setting is picture postcard, with silky smooth lagoon waters and views across to Moorea and its mountainous peaks.

There's a recently upgraded infinity pool area with spacious decks – so you can find your own quiet spot and watch the vaka paddlers go by. There's even a sheltered man-made bay where guests can snorkel to 'their hearts content'. Inside, the rooms are comfortable and have the added convenience of a kitchenette – anyone for a fresh baked croissant with melted French cheese? Yes please! Plus the resort has all the other facilities you'd expect, including two restaurants, two bars and the Manea Spa.

Hilton Moorea Resort and Spa, Moorea

On arrival, I walked past the resort's lovely pool and wondered why only a handful of guests were swimming in it. After strolling a little further I had my answer. Staying at Hilton Moorea is all about the glorious beach and the translucent lagoon waters. And why wouldn't you make the most of these spectacular natural surroundings.

For those staying in an overwater bungalow, it's just a matter of opening the sliding doors, walking down a few steps to the 'bathing platform' and jumping on in. It's almost as if the water has a magical pull – just one more swim and then another!

On land, the resort also offers everything you could want. The three restaurants serve up delicious fare – fine dining at Arii Vahine, casual beachfront dining at the Rotui Grill, and my personal favourite, the overwater Toatea Creperie which serves savoury and sweet crepes with the added dimension of nightly visits by blacktip sharks and stingrays swirling underneath you. Visiting couples can also dine in private at various picturesque locations around the resort, the beach and overwater setting being the most popular choice.

If you feel like some pampering, place yourself in the hands of the ladies at the Moorea Lagoon Spa. They are massage specialists who will tailor a style of treatment according to what your mind and body needs. If you feel like being a little more active, you can play tennis, hit the gym or hire some push bikes and go on a cycling adventure. And when you're back at the resort – plunge back into those crystal clear waters.



Moorea Beach Cafe



Manava Suite Resort Tahiti, Tahiti



Point Venus, Papeete



Sofitel Tahiti La Ora Beach Resort, Tahiti

Sometimes you can walk in a resort and feel hemmed in by buildings and people, but the Sofitel Tahiti La Ora Beach Resort is quite the opposite. Indeed, what strikes you first is the resort's lovely wide open spaces. Here, you have 'room to breathe'.

From the resort's main building, winding paths lead you down to meticulously maintained gardens and a wide lawn. There's plenty of room to find a quiet spot to relax. If you feel like a cooling dip, there's an equally spacious sand bottom pool. Or you can simply stroll to the beach, where you'll find a stretch of white sand and calm blue waters – the private reserve of resort guests.

On top of the relaxed ambiance, the resort has all the facilities and features you would expect in a quality property. Well-appointed rooms with open air decks that look out across the Punaauia Lagoon. A selection of luxurious overwater bungalows and some first class dining and live entertainment. It's all you could want.

Tahiti Pearl Beach Resort, Tahiti

While many of Tahiti's larger resorts sit on the southern side of the Papeete, Tahiti Pearl Beach Resort lies in the other direction. The setting on the fine black sands of Lafayette Beach is unique and equally spectacular. The beach itself is popular with local families who pack picnics and make the most of this picturesque spot.

If you'd prefer pool to beach, the resort has a fine example that offers panoramic ocean views and easy access to its Hiti Mahana Restaurant and Bay Bar. Grab some freshly made poisson cru and a cold Hinano beer and you'll be set. Plus, keep an eye out for the cut-price cocktails at Happy Hour.

The hotel puts on live entertainment on Saturdays, and should you need to pop into downtown Papeete, the resort runs a twice-daily shuttle - it's 10-15 minutes drive depending on traffic.

Learn to surf in Tahiti.

Tahiti is world-famous for its death-defying surfbreak Teahupoo – the venue for the annual World Surf League event that brings the world's top professional surfers to the island. The shallow reef and other reefs like it, can give advanced surfers the ride (or thrashing) of their lives. But what's less well-known is that Tahiti also has some much more forgiving sand-bottom beachbreak waves on the northern side of the island.

This is where Julien Miremont, the owner and 'head coach' of the Taie Fa'ahe'e Surf School spends most of his days. Not a bad lifestyle! While many of his students are local school kids in the early stages of their surf journey, Julien also teaches overseas visitors who want their first taste of surfing.

"Although surfing is one of those things that takes a lifetime to master, getting some basic techniques and wave knowledge right at start will make the learning process easier and more enjoyable. It's also about getting out there, spending time in the water and having someone who can help you build your confidence," says Julien.

Although the reef breaks on the east side of Tahiti are out-of-bounds for beginners, Julien also offers a personal surf guide service to experienced surfers who want to push their limits. With all these spots sitting out on the fringing reef, boat access is required, which makes a guide almost essential for first-timers. So Julien uses his vast local knowledge to get surfers to the right spot safely and then coaches them in the water, so they can catch the ultimate Tahitian ride. 



Sunset at Moorea Hilton resort and Spa



Taie Fa'ahe'e Surf School

Islandtime explored the beautiful islands of Tahiti and Moorea with the support of Tahiti Tourisme. Discover more at www.tahititourisme.nz

THE ISLANDS of
TAHITI

The Tahitian Dream.

With its striking ocean-blue and aqua-tattoo livery, the new Air Tahiti Nui Dreamliners stand out before they have even taken off. The recent upgrade means the airline can now boast one of the most up-to-date fleets on the planet. Inside, passengers enjoy all these modern comforts – extra space, large hi-resolution screens, WiFi (you can text your friends and make them jealous). These features are complimented by a selection of quality food and beverages – like flavoursome French reds. Air Tahiti Nui fly three-times a week from Papeete to Auckland with additional codeshare flights taking the total capacity to five-times a week. A great way to arrive, and a nice way to say goodbye.



The course that Jack built.

Moorea has so many natural attractions it's almost a bit random to think the island is also home to a premium, championship golf course designed by living legend Jack Nicklaus. Jack has designed close to 300 courses around the world, but the Moorea Green Pearl Golf Course remains the only one in the South Pacific.

Among those 300 or so, I doubt whether Jack had a more striking canvas to work with. Sitting aside the clear lagoon waters of Tamae Bay, the course is set over two distinct landscapes. The 'oceanside' holes include the whole front nine and four holes of the back nine. While the terrain is gently undulating, the presence of Jack's fairway bunkers makes each hole a challenge.

The highlight being the Par 4 7th hole. It has fairway bunkers all the way along the right hand side, and a green which is a matter of metres from the white sand beach and lagoon waters. Looking out across the ocean makes for a stunning view, but it actually gets better.

The five 'mountainside' holes in the middle of the back nine, provide a real challenge for amateurs and pros alike. Elevated tees drop down into tight fairways lined with tropical foliage and rocky outcrops. You need to stay straight or pay the penalty. Regardless of your score, the views on the mountain hole are exceptional.

Like the island itself, the club has a relaxed feel. Visiting golfers are always welcome and while the course can be busy on the weekends (when golfers from Tahiti pop over for a round), during the week you'll be able to get on the course without any trouble. Just call or email ahead to check if the club is running a tournament or club day. And if they are, why not join in and meet some local players.

If you don't fancy carting all your golf gear to Tahiti, the club has a well-equipped pro shop with quality Titleist hire clubs, golf buggys and everything else you could want.

You may even like to get a lesson from local pro Laurentt Davin. The French native has been living in Moorea for seven years and he's done a lot of work building a local junior programme, as well as encouraging local adults to make the most of this fine course.

To top it all off, the clubhouse is home to an excellent restaurant, that use fresh ingredients, carefully prepared with dedication and attention to detail – think shrimps, seared tuna and succulent steaks. And of course there's a full bar serving (much-needed) post-round beverages.

Tahiti International Golf Open

The Tahiti International Golf Open has history that dates back 34 years and in late September it was played at Moorea Green Pearl Golf Course.

Sanctioned by the Australian PGA, the 2019 tournament offered a prize pool of AUS\$125,000, which attracted a group of 46 professionals from Australia, New Zealand, Europe as well as local players who were keen to test their mettle against the visiting pros.

"We love this tournament and I can tell you the players love coming here too. From a golfing perspective they really enjoy playing the Jack Nicklaus layout, it's a challenging but a fair test of golfing ability and the maintenance team have got the greens in championship condition," said David Barker, State Manager for the Australian PGA.

"The visiting professionals also love making the most of this beautiful island. Some come early and bring their families with them. And those who aren't playing the following week, quite often stay in Moorea for a few days longer too. And because we tee off early to avoid the hottest part of the day, the players have the afternoon and evenings free to see the sights."

"The tournament also provides a fantastic opportunity for up-and-coming Tahitian golfers to play in a fully sanctioned professional event – the experience is extremely valuable, especially for those who aspire to be fulltime professionals," he said.

Running the tournament in Pro-Am format also allows your average club player to participate. On the Monday, 110 amateurs ranging from single figure golfers up to 24 handicappers, paired up with the professionals and a fantastic day was had by all. Then the pros carried on for the four the next days alongside the top local amateurs.

After four rounds of play, two Australians, Jamie Arnold and Jay McKenzie, were tied for the lead and it came down to a dramatic sudden death play off.

On the first playoff hole, both players rolled in 30-foot birdie putts to keep their chances alive. On the second hole, Mackenzie hit his approach shot to eight foot and sunk the birdie putt, leaving Arnold a 40-foot putt to keep himself in the tournament. And indeed, Arnold's putter stayed hot, draining the monster the putt. On the third playoff hole, Arnold managed a regulation par, which enough to give him the sought-after title and first prize cheque of AUS\$25,000.

