

PASS DIVING IN REMOTE ATOLLS?

OR SHARK ENCOUNTERS IN THE ROMANTIC HIGH ISLANDS?

BUCKY MCMAHON VISITS FIVE UNFORGETTABLE ISLANDS

AND REPORTS ON THE BEST OF THE BEST.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROD KLEIN

# Downtime

IN TAHITI  
AND ITS  
SISTER  
ISLANDS

I wasn't stalking Yessi and Jeanny—honest—I just kept bumping into the honeymooners on various dive boats and at resorts where I seemed to be the sole solo traveler in all the South Seas. French Polynesia is about the size of Western Europe, but when you subtract all the water it's a pretty small world, and now here we were meeting again at the Sheraton Moorea Lagoon Resort, me lolling in the pool and the couple lunching poolside. Jeanny, a free-diver by avocation who'd brought his giant fins, was dark-haired and slim; Yessi voluptuously curvy with golden hair. As newlyweds and novice scuba divers they felt doubly blessed by paradise. Indeed, it was another perfect day, with the sort of cloudscape over the lagoon that kept nudging you toward your camera bag.

Taking the  
plunge in Bora  
Bora's fabled  
azure waters.

“We missed you on the dive this morning,” Yessi said.

I told them I was confined to the shallow end because I was flying home that night, and asked about their dive.

“It was kind of a scary shark feeding,” Jeanny said. “Remember how yesterday the one big shark just grabbed the bait and took off with it? Well, today there were four huge lemon sharks and they all wanted that tuna head bad. They really went at it, too. I like seeing ’em up close, but this was too close.”

“Damn!” I said. “I miss all the good shark fights.”

They invited me to join them, and in a few minutes we’d cleared up some near misses and almost-meetings in our sometimes overlapping itineraries. I’d arrived at Bora Bora just after a big storm, but Yessi and Jeanny had borne the brunt of it, diving in six-foot-plus seas. “That’s where I got this huge bruise,” she said. “I don’t think anybody went on the second dive.” We’d all stayed at the posh Bora Bora Nui Resort: How’d they like that? They both sighed:

“Oh, it was *sooo* nice!” They’d bumped into Reba McEntire (Yessi’s a big fan), and inadvertently ran up a huge charge when they rearranged the automatic mini-bar to stash a carton of juice.

We’d shared the launch from the resort to the airport. “I was the guy pacing the dock wondering what was taking you so long to check out.”

“That was you, wasn’t it?” they said. “But what about you? What did you like the most?”

I’d been on a whirlwind tour, five islands in 15 days, generally surrounded by young lovebirds, most of whom didn’t speak English. By the middle of the trip through honeymoon heaven I’d started noticing strange couples underwater—a battered-looking parrotfish teamed with a sleek jack, like an old prizefighter and his trophy wife, and a trumpetfish and grouper, an inseparable pair that followed me for one whole dive. At any rate, I was fizzing like a shaken champagne bottle, ready to bend an ear. So since you asked ...



Le Marché, the central Papeete market, sells everything from fresh produce and local crafts to prized black pearls.

Napoleon wrasse cruised below us. Tahiti’s outer underwater wall is of a grandeur to match the mountainous landscape, so I wasn’t surprised to hear that the best diving is in the deep blue deco zone, from 130 to 170 feet.

The bulk of the business, though, on resort row, is beginners, and we did our second tank at a gem of an intro site inside the reef, the Aquarium, where two small boats and a plane lie at 30 feet on white sand amid clumps of mushroom and brain coral. As we poked about, feisty sergeant majors rushed out to nip at our neoprene, and clownfish defended their wavering anemone niches. Gwenaleon spotted a perfectly camouflaged stonefish, like a lump of coral and algae with eyes and a grumpy disposition. A permanent ticker-tape parade of tropicals fluttered above the coral, and the light!—the hallucinatory clarity! Looking up, you saw cumulus clouds and the pinks and creams of the coral in a double reflection on the surface.

On the ride back to my hotel, the driver, a young Tahitian who serves in the French

Army reserve, said he liked Papeete all right, though rush hour could come to a standstill. No, what he really liked was to get away to

the Tuamotus. “Fakarava! That’s the life.” I said I was headed there tomorrow, as a matter of fact. High five, brother! ■

## Fakarava

### UNDERWATER THRILL RIDE

**IN OLD TAHITI THE TUAMOTU ATOLLS**, far off and hard to find, peeking up just a few yards above sea level, were places of mystery and legend. It is still an hour’s flight over blank sea from Tahiti before the smaller atolls appear below like a paisley print. Fakarava is a long, skinny lasso of sand and palms corralling a five-mile-wide lagoon. With each change of tide the sea pulses in or out of two main passes, at each end of the atoll, and the current, always powerful, often fierce enough to rip your mask off, draws masses of fish that thrive on the chaos.

Pass diving, I was about to find out, is its own sport. During the pre-dive briefing on the dock, conducted in French by the amiable Serge Howald, who, with wife Carine, is the proprietor of Fakarava Diving Center, I kept hearing the word “turble,” which sounded like “trouble.” Fellow diver Marc, from Tasmania by way of Montreal, translated: “He says stay out of the cloudy water or you’ll be swept out to sea and never seen again.”

Now you’re talking! During the 20-minute jaunt out to Garuae Pass, Marc regaled me with tales of Tazzy, cold-water diving at its best and shellfish feasting of the finest. He was somewhat dismissive of these warm Polynesian dives as too easy and less interesting. That opinion was about to be revised. When we reached the pass, some 1,500 meters wide between

two pincers of island, the surface was rucking and haystacking with the outgoing tide, but about to go slack. Carine, at the wheel, steered us outside the pass and out of the current, into an eddy, a site called Te Ava Nui, or Infinite Channel. Serge, Marc and I backrolled off the pontoon sides.

The dive began with a mystery: tiny, bright flecks wafting downward like bits of mica. I reached out to touch one and it flicked off like a light bulb and vanished. Never seen anything like it. I was soon distracted by bigger game, a 200-pound grouper sculling slowly along the bottom. It seemed to have a whole entourage of smaller fish in tow—hell, an entire ecosystem. I nicknamed it Queen Pomare. Then Serge gave a sudden squawk, fingers to mask: Look! We were joined by a pod of dolphins, which accompanied our descent partway, including a mother and pup swimming belly to belly.

We’d dropped to 70 feet, onto a mountain of vibrant coral, but were slowly approaching the “turble” and the pass itself, a broad slope of rubble shattered by the forces of tide. Here the fish schooled in long columns, parallel or perpendicular

## Tahiti

### A GREEN CASTLE AND PLUNGING WALLS

**TAHITI?** Loved the energy of the place, especially the open-air market, where you really feel the Chinese influence. And just little things, like the cafés and newsstands, where I counted half a dozen magazines devoted to pit bulls and rottweilers, the old warrior spirit coming out through big-headed dogs. The landscape, of course, is pure eye candy, and the best way to see it is from the water. It’s a big island, and I’m sure there are terrific sites only the live-aboards go to, but you can hardly fault the dive ops around Papeete if they don’t want to spend the gas. Not with that wall right outside the Marina Taina.

I hopped on a little boat loaded to the gunwales with two couples of Japanese honeymooners, trois *jeunes filles* and their *petits amis*, plus three crew. Still, we stopped for a surfer making the quarter-mile paddle out to Taapuna Pass. Minutes later, he flashed us the *shaka* sign and dolphined overboard to join the crew at the break—a dangerous-looking barrel that jacked up out of nowhere and cracked onto nearly bare reef. That wave said a lot about the geography we’d be diving. Tahiti is a great green castle surrounded by a shallow moat of a lagoon, and then—*zoom!*—the abyss.

We tied to a buoy at the aptly named La Faille—the Drop-off—where divemaster Gwenaleon apologized for the vis, which would not be so great due to recent rains. “Maybe 100 feet, I think.”

OK, you’ve got mile-high Mount Orohena off the port bow, a gently rolling swell of the prettiest hue, 82-degree air temp and about 80 in the drink. One-hundred-foot vis sounded survivable. We backrolled in and began a leisurely kick at 60 feet along the steep intricate wall, pocked with catacombs of coral and dark overhangs full of snapper. A school of blue racers zipped by, individuals turning sideways to send semaphores of light, while a brute of a



Underwater, Tahiti features densely packed parades of reef fish and colorful coral formations.

to the bottom—durgon, surgeon, paddle-tail snapper, with a couple dozen reef and white-tip sharks, bronze-tinted in the penetrating sunlight, just cruising, working crowd control. One big barracuda came close and showed his teeth, a fishing lure dangling from his jaw.

We rode the changing tide up the slope and into the lagoon, to a coral garden. There were valleys there, which were power places, concentrations of swirling reef sharks, anaconda-sized green eels and

Napoleon wrasses, and parrotfish taking vicious chomps out of the coral. We ended in a garden of grouper, some wanting their chins scratched, and everywhere you looked a bigger one pouting.

We broke the surface beaming at each other. Marc said the dive was “top 10 of all time!” True, it was terrific—and typical. Fakarava was unforgettable, so placid on the surface—one road, one tiny village, the only sound the wind in the palms—yet so wild underwater. ■

nurse sharks. Sometimes, Emanuel said, you’ve just got to fly on by. Far worse than missing the trench, though, can happen if the current gets the better of you. The divemaster told me about three divers who drifted with the outgoing tide. They were down to 500 psi when a sudden down draft caught them and whisked them to 300 feet. They survived by kicking to the side, out of the current—but barely. Far better to be swept into the lagoon, or *moana tea* (the peaceful ocean), rather than *moana uri* (the wild one).

We came back that afternoon to the *moana uri*, on the slack tide, for a shark feed of a sort I’d never seen. With Emanuel and me hovering at 50 feet, Victor gunned the inflatable outboard engine—*rrr! rrr!*—a familiar dinner bell for the sharks of Rangiroa. Though the dive site, L’Angle (the Angle), was just a few hundred feet off the atoll, we were in several thousand feet of water—essentially bottomless, and of a dizzying baby blue, like a Hollywood blue screen. And here came the special effects! As Victor tossed the bait overboard—a parsimonious bit of fish and generous portions of white coral rocks—the first sharks arrived, making high-speed passes. The rocks looked like food, and the sharks, white-tips, black-tips and gray reefs, zoomed in for the chomp. You could almost see the disappointment in their body language: Damn! Fooled again. A few couldn’t believe their ampullae of Lorenzini and bit the rocks anyway. But there were just

enough smelly fish in the falling mix to draw a serious crowd.

In minutes there were 40 or 50 sharks all around us, and I mean *all* around us—high above, far below and every point in between. I looked straight down and gawked at a shark streaking up at me—the weirdest perspective yet, just a brilliant crescent moon of white, like flying dentures with fins. That’s a sight I’ll never forget, but it’s definitely not the last thing you want to see.

No, the last thing to see on Rangiroa is the sunset at Tiputa Pass. I wandered down

## Rangiroa

### SHARKS UNLIMITED

“YOU SEE SHARKS IN FAKARAVA?” my dive guru, Emanuel, asked me. “How many you see?” Sure, I told him, about 20 at a time. “Prepare to see 200!”

Actually, Serge had already briefed me on Faka vs. Rangi diving. Garuae Pass had been 1,500 meters wide; Rangiroa’s Tiputa Pass was a real squeeze at about 200 meters—hence more concentrated, more sharks, more fish at once, and also more people, more divers. For some reason, though, Emanuel and Victor, the boat driver, and I had Tiputa Pass to ourselves. Again, getting to the site was a snap, 10 minutes max from the dock on the world’s second-largest lagoon. Again it was a white-water situation on the surface, this time with even more impressive waves, like a big, wild river. We motored a little way out to sea then dropped straight down into the incoming current.

Emanuel had not exaggerated. It was a Serengeti of sharks down there—a dream or a nightmare, depending on your attitude toward the family *Carcharimidae*. This swirling convention revolved right in the teeth of the current at the narrowest part of the pass. Above them in more orderly files hung battalions of barracuda, and of course prey fish swarmed everywhere as well, as if jotted in by a tireless artist, all trying to fin the straight and narrow and make it through to tomorrow. In all, an awesome display of wildlife.

Later, Emanuel called it a light current day—a mere three knots—and near the end of the dive we easily dropped down into a sandy trench that was a like a bunkhouse for resting

Black-tip sharks are star attractions of French Polynesia’s waters.



Over-water bungalows offer unbeatable views of Otemanu, Bora Bora’s iconic peak.

## Bora Bora & Moorea

### THE HIGH ISLANDS

MY FRIENDS YESSI AND JEANNY knew these islands as well as I did. We reminisced about Bora Bora’s incomparably exotic mountain, Otemanu, always looking raffish with a scarf of clouds, and the most glorious lagoon in the whole of the South Seas. Diving Bora Bora was easygoing, on gently sloping coral banks outside the main pass, Teavanui. We saw our first lemon sharks there, 1,000-pound brutes with blunt, fierce-looking mugs, a presence on every dive.

After the atolls, Bora Bora seemed practically urbane. Following its famous role as a U.S. arms depot in World War II, Double B found itself with a good airstrip and a jump on the tourism business. It has the most resorts of any French Polynesian island, but then again it deserves them. The combination of land, sea and sky is pure performance art, which is why it’s also an artists’ colony. I walked clear around it, rubbernecking the whole way.

Favorite Bora Bora dives? We all gave raves to the slow drift through the pass, where rocky walls abutted a sand floor and were home to some of the biggest anemones I’ve ever seen. We were hoping to see spotted eagle rays, and we found them, stacked formations facing into the current, utterly immobile like a squadron of hang gliders riding an endless updraft. Yessi called it “a spiritual experience.”

“So, Bora Bora or Moorea?” I asked.

Jeanny squinted out at the lagoon from the shade of our umbrella. Hard to fault the beauty of Cook’s Bay, the soaring mountains. And those lemon shark feeds were outstanding, how the big beasts prowled, cautious, calculating, and then pounced on the bait. The divemasters always carried canisters of fish food, which was a show in itself, drawing a constant cloud of pugnacious snapper and jacks, and clingy remoras insinuating themselves under and over and in between. Topside, the pace seemed pokier on Moorea than on Bora Bora. With its high-speed ferry, Moorea is becoming a commuter island for Tahiti, but it still has a big-island, small-town feel.

Jeanny finally had to give the nod to Bora Bora. “I don’t know, something about the color of the water,” he said. “Like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

“Fakarava or Rangiroa?” they asked, tossing the ball back.

“You can’t choose. You’ve got to come back and do both,” I said. I surely hoped to. But after two weeks of romantic islands, sexy native dance shows and all those couples, I was a lovesick puppy. Time to go home to my wife. ■

SD



Spotfin lionfish are often tucked into crevices on Tahiti’s reefs.

to the end of the road and, as usual, there was a ripping current as the water poured out of the lagoon: Class III whitewater if my kayaking calculations are correct. Suddenly a bottlenose dolphin burst out of the back of a wave and barrel-rolled in the air, sunlight gleaming on its sleek physique. A small crowd of fellow sun-worshippers cheered. What athleticism! The water churned again, two more dorsal fins ripping through a wave, exploding into the air. Hoorah! It was a whole pod of surfing porpoises, including a baby, and they all ripped. I believe that show plays every evening. ■

GET THERE

➤ For more information on Tahiti and Her Sister Islands, turn to In Depth, page 91, section 2.