

THIS MONTH: Under the sea in Bora Bora and Fiji's exclusive enclave



Islet yourself go:
St Regis' private huts stud the atoll shallows, with views of the Pacific and the jungled mountains of Bora Bora behind



Castaway days Sun-soaked atolls, crystal skies and pure lagoons: welcome to Bora Bora

Polynesia. Let its syllables roll over your tongue and transport you to the South Pacific: glittering lagoons and white sand atolls; dark-haired sirens with almond eyes, clad in garlands of gardenia. In a world of disappointment, Polynesia, specifically the island of Bora Bora, smashes expectations and has the power to restore you to some kind of faith.

Though you may be tempted not to move from your well-buttled day bed, it's not simply a place for lotus eating. A javelin's throw from shore is an underwater world as impressive as the one above sea level. Bora Bora is one of the best places in the world to see big-game fish, manta rays and sharks.

The archipelago of French Polynesia is 118 islands, volcanic outcrops scattered across an area the size of western Europe on the empty blue backside of the globe. Bora Bora is the postcard money shot (a literal money shot, though its expense may be a blessing, as it wards away the crowds that can drown Tahiti). Flying

in, I admire the island's concentric circles: the iconic square-topped mountains, the turquoise lagoon, in turn circled by a string of *motu* – islets which form the atoll that breaks the rollers coming in from the Pacific Ocean.

There is only one passage through the atoll into the lagoon. During WWII this appealed to the Americans, who were easily able to defend it (the island was turned into a military base during Operation Bobcat). Today it is a joy for divers. Like a watery safari, the underwater pass gathers marine life into one spot and its gentle current makes a marvellous drift dive.

As we set off on the boat, spirits are high. The water around us bleeds from opal green through cobalt to navy as we approach the Teavenui Pass. In the thinnest of short wet suits I tumble backwards overboard. The water is clear, soft, delicious. With childish pleasure I follow the tanned legs of Delphine, our French dive ☺

On the piste
Party boy to the royals Guy Pelly takes his club, Public London, to the slopes this season. Pelly promises Switzerland's Public Verbier will be more casual, but expect the infamous photo booth and dressing-up box to make the trip. *verbier.public.uk.com*





Blue ray: A vibrant safari beneath the surface, the seas off Bora Bora are home to mantas, sharks and tropical fish

brightly striped “Nemos” – orange clownfish – flutter eagerly; a sea turtle flaps past. I reach out to an octopus, its bulbous head the brown of oxtail soup. It flings its tentacles around me and I wrench my arm away, astonished by its grip.

Then Delphine takes me by the elbow, and mimes a dorsal fin.

At once we're overtaken by sinuous, Spielberg shapes. Lemon shark. Ten-feet long, perfect sharks. Heady – part with fear, part with excitement – I crane my neck to follow one, admiring the gills that are sliced into his side, the dagger teeth under his blunt nose. I turn; two more are snaking towards me from a different direction. It is impossible, thrilling, how close we are to these reclusive, petrol-grey creatures. They are barely an arm's length away.

Then, with their jack-knife motion, they are gone.

As we are drawn through the pass more sharks surround us: sometimes more lemon sharks, travelling in an entourage, led by clouds of silver pilot fish; sometimes smaller, skittish blacktip reef sharks. Each time it is a gift.

We come up elated. Delphine takes out a knife and cuts me a slice of sweet, fresh

leader, along the sloping coral wall. Its mingled blues and purples are alive with anemones. Spotted moray eels emerge ugly from the rocks;

pineapple. “You liked that?” she asks, not needing an answer.

Of the various dive sites at Bora Bora, Fafa Piti requires the least effort (none whatsoever). The lagoon is not deep here, a mere 60 feet in some places, and has scant current. Against the action of the pass, this experience is like an aquatic IMAX.

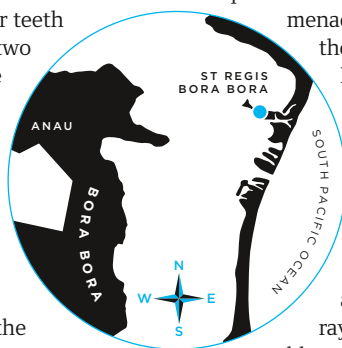
Delphine warns us against sudden movements. A stealthy group, we start along the reef. Barely are we down when the first manta ray descends on us. A marvellous juggernaut, great wings powering him silently on, whip tail straight out behind.

I hang in the water, watching. He is colossal. His wingspan is three metres, the same as a condor, but he is weightless, banking effortlessly in the murk. Another comes past, and another, in determined procession. Where the sharks had

menace, the rays are otherworldly; the billow of their wings recalls Darth Vader's cloak.

The reef at Fafa Piti is a feeding station, a sort of subaqua car wash, where little cleaner wrasse come to pick debris from the gill rakers of these manta mother ships. For an hour, we watch the rays and the symbiotic electric-blue wrasse nuzzling them

until finally our air runs out. Mount Otemanu claws the sky behind us; the burnt evening sun casts chiaroscuro light and shade over its peaks and furrows. The whole experience feels unreal, a wonderland. Rebecca Newman



St Regis Bora Bora



The St Regis Bora Bora is a **lesson in excess**. The largest resort in the region, its spa alone is 13,000 square feet of indulgence, a Never Never Land of **coconut milk baths**, terraced yoga decks and Balinese masseuses teamed up to deliver your four-handed treatment. On arrival you're given a map, should you get lost between the helipad, the **jet-ski club**, the tennis courts, the choice of cocktail stations...

The villas are expanses of wood and glass, holes punched through the floor lit up by the iridescent sea beneath. The baths are gargantuan, **the sun decks big enough to hold a party**. They are, however, hobbit holes compared with the Royal Estate Villa – three pavilions clustered in a palatial retreat with its own spa and beach.

The hotel attracts Hollywood. Nicole



Kidman and **Charlize Theron** dig it. Christopher Nolan booked in for a month. James Cameron likes it so much he rented it as a family home and office, converting one villa into a studio from where he and his team made *Avatar*'s extended edition.

If you feel the urge, there's a **hefty yacht** available for charter. But you'll surely only wish to switch off. Dive in the morning, then join the taut young lovers bronzing by the pool. Kick back in a hammock with a piña colada or raise a glass of white Burgundy to the skills of **Jean-Georges Vongerichten**, the acclaimed Manhattan restaurateur who oversees the hotel's Lagoon restaurant.

As an escape, it is unparalleled. Paul Gauguin ditched his career as a stockbroker to run away to Polynesia. Follow his example. RN



GO INFO Rebecca Newman travelled to Bora Bora with the help of Tahiti Tourisme. Rooms at the St Regis Bora Bora start from £780 per person per night. She flew with Air Tahiti Nui, from Paris via London to Tahiti (fares from £2285), and on to Bora Bora with Air Tahiti (fares from £142). tahiti-tourisme.co.uk; stregis.com/borabora; airtahitiniui.co.uk; airtahiti.aero