

Taste buds on tour

A week in Tahiti serves up an enticing mix of French, Polynesian and Chinese cuisine against a backdrop of majestic mountains, lush foliage and brilliant blue lagoons

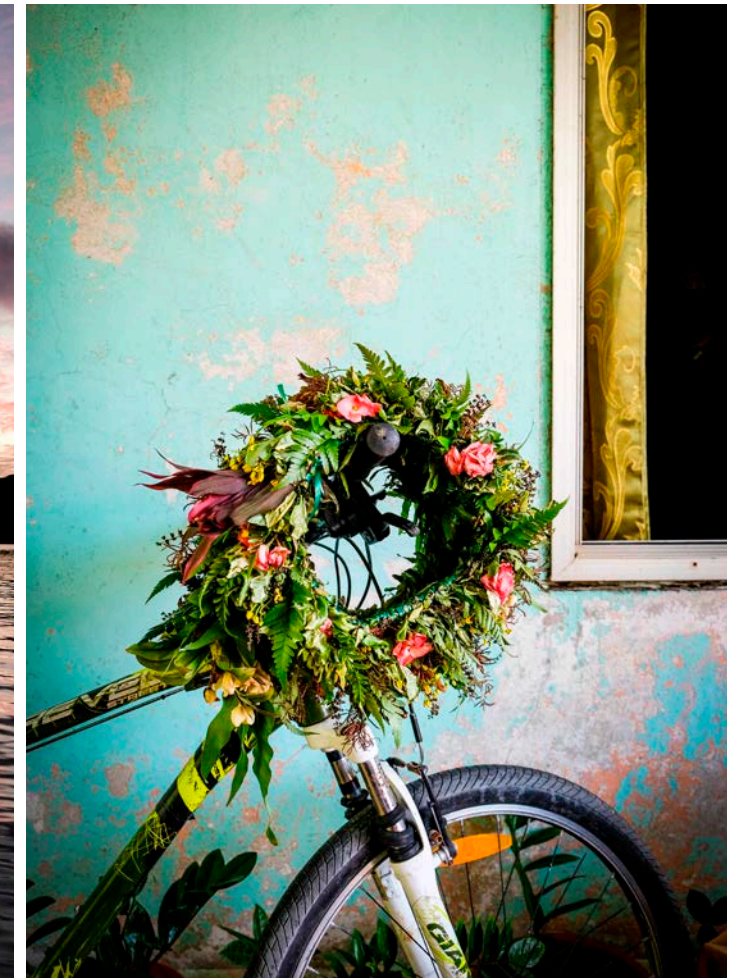
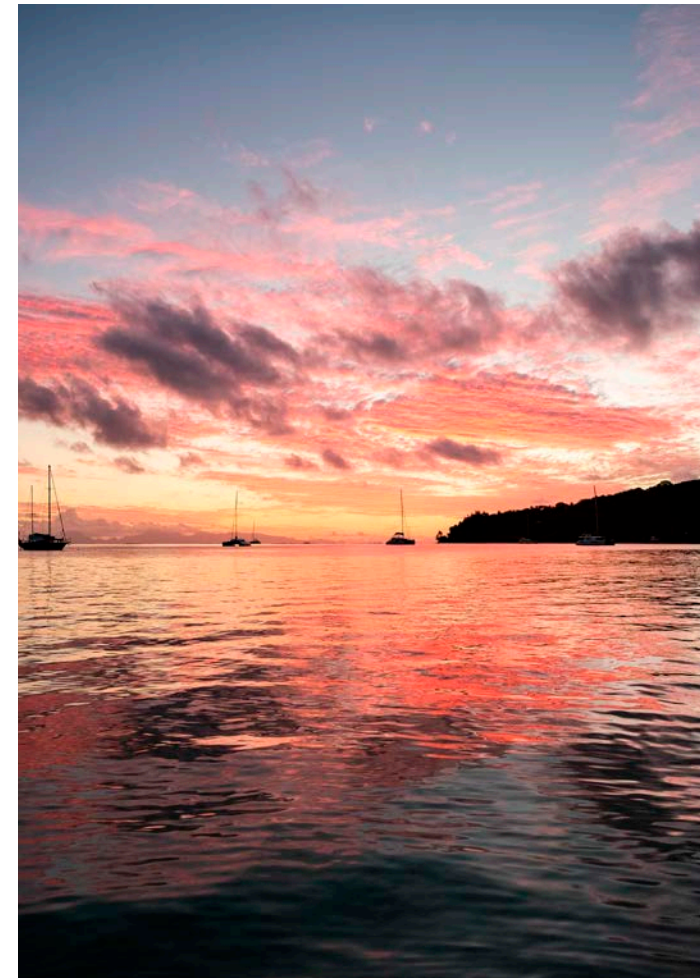
It's the unique mix of cultures which makes French Polynesia so fascinating - and the food so delicious. French is the official language of the country, but Tahitian and French greetings are common, and croissants jostle for space on the breakfast table with coconut bread and papaya.

At times the combination of French, Polynesian and also Chinese influences can lead to unexpected outcomes - the casse-croûte chow mein, for example, is a local speciality consisting of a baguette

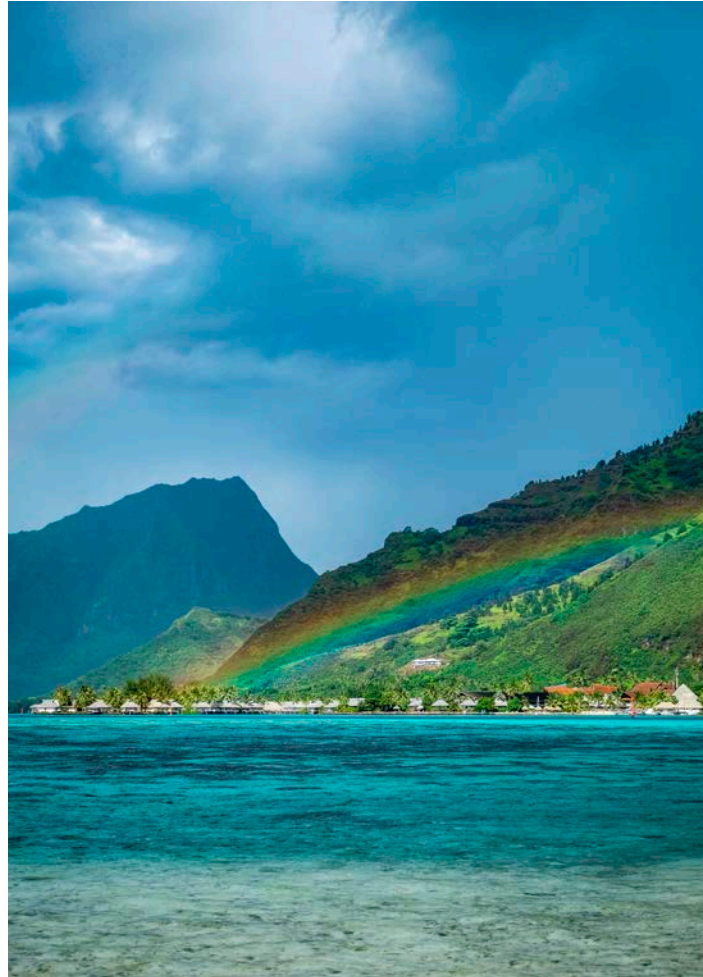
filled with Chinese noodles. We get the chance to try this carbs-on-carbs concoction, along with 'pai banane and ananas' (banana and pineapple pie), at the snack outlet of Golden Lake, the only Chinese restaurant on the island of Mo'orea.

We're on a Tama'a Street Food Tour (tama'a means 'to eat') run by Mo'orea Food Adventures, which was launched by chef Heimata Hall earlier this year. Born and raised on Mo'orea, to an American father and Tahitian mother, Heimata left to study business in San Francisco and then went to culinary school in Hawaii before eventually

Remote romance Sunsets are spectacular in French Polynesia, from boutique hotel Fenua Matai'oa in Mo'orea (above) and Relais Mahana resort on Huahine (opposite, top). Visitors can buy crafts, vanilla and more at a Huahine vanilla farm. Poisson cru is a local speciality (bottom right).



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“The scenery is stunning, with dramatic mountains and the clearest, most turquoise lagoons”

returning home to show tourists the best dining spots hidden away on his island.

His mission is to fill us up – after tucking in to chow mein baguettes, we check out the streetside delights of Allo Pizza (where Italy meets French Polynesia), nibble dumplings served with mustard at Chinese bakery Snack Rotui, try po’e, a dessert of guava and banana in coconut milk, at local favourite Moz Cafe, and sample freshly roasted mape (aka the Tahitian chestnut) on the side of the road.

As if we haven’t eaten enough already, for dinner we taste our way through Le Mayflower’s menu, a restaurant close to Fenua Mata’i’oa, the boutique hotel where we are staying. The tarte au citron we have for dessert is to die for. The Tahitian pastries are as good as any in France and we devour them whenever possible – at dinner, afternoon tea and of course breakfast when we enjoy our daily croissants with pineapple, guava and banana jam.

Fenua Mata’i’oa specialises in picturesque platters to start the day. As well as croissants, pains au chocolat and other pastries and fresh bread, there’s pineapple, grapefruit and papaya, plus a cooked breakfast if you so desire, all accompanied by spectacular floral arrangements, lagoon views, and the watchful gaze of the many resident cats.

Fish is the star attraction at lunch and dinner in Tahiti, served in a variety of ways – grilled tuna or swordfish with taro or uru (breadfruit) chips; barbecued kebabs with pineapple and capsicum; salty tuna carpaccio; poisson cru (raw fish with coconut milk). If you don’t feel like fish, you can head to vegan chef Evy Hirshon’s home on the island of Tahiti, where she serves ‘poisson’ cru with eggplant instead, alongside a rainbow of fresh produce (read more about Evy on page 114).

But it’s not just food that people visit these islands for. You’ve seen the pictures – the scenery is

Underwater world Maiiau Taina (above) runs Captain Taina tours on Mo’orea, where snorkelling with turtles, stingrays and sharks are highlights, along with giant clam harvesting, a barbecue lunch and poisson cru demonstration. **Opposite** A vegan lunch served by chef Evy Hirshon includes baked bananas, breadfruit chips and an eggplant variation of poisson cru (top left). Coral Gardeners founder Titouan Bernicot (top right) is making waves in ocean conservation at just 21 years of age.



stunning, with dramatic mountains and the clearest turquoise waters. And then there are the Instagram shots of stingrays gliding over people, sharks circling in the background.

We get the chance to experience this thrill for ourselves on a snorkelling tour with Captain Taina. Maiau Taina has been guiding tourists around Mo'orea's lagoons for 16 years and is passionate about looking after the ocean and its inhabitants.

She rescues turtles and releases them in the protected marine reserve near her land, and spends hours cleaning the nearby sacred underwater sculptures, all the better for visitor viewing. After showing us the sights in her glass-bottomed boat, she whips up a delicious barbecue lunch before teaching us how to make poisson cru and harvest giant clams.

Titouan Bernicot is another Mo'orea local working to protect his island home. The 21-year-old grew up on a remote pearl farm and is happiest when fishing, diving or surfing. After witnessing bleached coral for the first time, Titouan decided to do something to help preserve the reefs. His non-profit organisation, Coral Gardeners, was

launched three years ago from his parents' home. By replanting dead pieces of coral onto nursery tables, then successfully transplanting them onto damaged reefs in collaboration with local scientists, the NGO is slowly bringing life back to the reefs. Titouan now travels the world raising awareness of reef preservation, and is about to launch a Hawaiian chapter of Coral Gardeners. He has a new office in Mo'orea with a dozen fulltime staff, where tourists can adopt a piece of coral or plant their own (they've had 3000 coral adoptions so far, with a 90% transplant success rate).

There are five archipelagoes, and 118 islands, in French Polynesia, and we spend the majority of our time in Mo'orea, a 45-minute ferry ride from the main island of Tahiti. While Tahiti, Bora Bora and Mo'orea have a number of international resorts, many of the smaller islands are more charmingly laid-back. Huahine, north-west of Mo'orea and a 40-minute flight from Tahiti, where we spend two nights later in the week, has a magical, far-away feeling, with winding roads draped in a canopy of trees. Said to be named for the pregnant lady that the island's Mount Tavaiura's ridges resemble, Huahine

Island degustation Casse-croûte chow mein, a noodle-filled baguette, and mape, a local 'chestnut' sold here by Marie-Claire Teiho, are just some of the delights sampled on a Mo'orea Food Adventures tour, run by Heimata Hall (opposite top). Fresh fish, pineapple and cream make a unique pizza topping at Allo Pizza, another stop on the tour, followed by Moz Cafe for poisson cru (opposite, top right) and Snack Rotui for dumplings.

Opposite, bottom Huahine is best explored on a four-wheel drive trip with Poe Island Tour, which stops at historic maraes (second from bottom).





"We segue from the ocean to dinner, eating barefoot in the sand with a spectacular view of Avea Bay"

is actually made up of two islands connected by the bridge over Mārō'ē bay.

The best way to explore Huahine is to take a four-wheel drive tour, such as Poe Island Tour, and mission up, down and around the island. Local woman Poerava Amo Lamberty - Poe for short - is full of knowledge and laughter, and brings the history and traditions of Huahine alive. We visit historic maraes, get a bit too close for comfort to giant blue-eyed sacred eels, check out a vanilla plantation and pearl farm, then off-road along the beach. In the afternoon, we head to Poe's house, where her cousin cooks up local delicacies, including vanilla-infused fish - vanilla is one of the country's most famous exports and features in many savoury and sweet dishes - and raw fish 'Poe style', before teaching us how to make leis, husk coconuts and perform the art of 'ori Tahiti (Tahitian dance), which we discover is best left to the experts.

Tropical road trip Huahine, known as the garden of Eden, is covered in lush foliage, and offers a slower pace of life than some of Tahiti's bigger islands. A day trip with Poe Island Tour will take you around the two connected islands, and include visits to a pearl farm and a coconut husking demonstration. The view from the Relais Mahana hotel, top right, is stunning at sunset.

