

Paradise Islands
Gleaming pearls of the Pacific

Hollywood's favourite hideout

PARADISE ISLANDS

By RACHAEL OAKES-ASH

Brando, Goldie, Pierce, Keanu and Denzel: Bora Bora may have two names but it attracts those who need only one.

Since US Navy officer James Michener, stationed on Bora Bora in World War II, put pen to paper to create *Tales Of The South Pacific*, this island has mesmerised all who can afford to step upon its shores.

Few islands can compete with Bora Bora for romance. The lagoon that surrounds the tombstone cliffs of Mt Otemanu looks like God has dropped a bottle of blue Curacao into a bowl of milk and let it stir itself.

Take a dip in these waters and you'll float from ice blue to aqua to turquoise within moments.

Put your head under and the real magic begins. Manta rays that glide by while their relatives, the stingrays, get friendly. Like labradors, they

jostle each other to be the first for affection, their puppy-like eyes seeming to plead "Pick me, pick me!" as they rub up against the tourists waist-deep in the water.

To be cuddled by a stingray is a disturbing yet addictive sensation — once you get past the myth that their tail will always sting. Instead, it feels like rough coral. But it's their body they want patted.

Be warned — stingrays may have no teeth but their suction rivals that of a vacuum cleaner ... one inhale and you can lose your hand for a moment.

Take some bread under with you and you'll soon discover a tornado of colour, fins and gills. The lagoon's 500 species of fish love freshly baked baguettes. Striped zebra fish and multi-coloured parrot fish are bold when it comes to carbs.

Sharks, on the other hand,

prefer tuna served up with a blood sauce. Bora Bora natives, knowing the small black-tipped reef sharks wouldn't hurt a fly, use buckets of bait to attract the sharks that play with the minds of tourists from land-locked territories.

Australians like to pretend we've seen it all before. "That's not a shark!" we say mockingly, until one invades our personal space and we're the first back in the boat.

Half a day in the lagoon and you understand why Marlon Brando bought a bungalow here, despite owning his own island further north; why Dino De Laurentiis chose the island for the set of his film *Hurricane*; and why so many US Marines here in the war went AWOL.

But paradise doesn't come cheap when you're on an island a mere 10km long, 4km wide and 260km from the trade of Tahiti.



Simply breathtaking:
(Above, left and facing page)
The beauty of the island and
its inhabitants

Cover: The stunning colour
of a Bora Bora lagoon
Picture: photolibrary.com

It's all about supply and demand: you want it, they've got it, and there's no competition.

There are more than 6000 inhabitants on Bora Bora where the average islander's income is \$US2500 tax-free per month. Most residents spend their money on shopping trips to Hawaii, returning with shiny new 4WDs even though the island's road system consists of one main road a kilometre long.

No income tax means purchases can be taxed anything from 80 to 400 per cent. It's no surprise to find in Guinness World Records the Bora Bora supermarket under "most expensive rent per square metre". A browse of the supermarket reveals a box of Betty Crocker cake mix for \$A15 — which may explain the lack of gateaux on restaurant menus.

Much of Bora Bora is priceless. The lagoon is a gift from the island to tourists who merely have to step off the beach to experience its joy. An islander's smile costs nothing and sunset on the ocean is free. Open the door of your over-water bungalow however and the same free water outside takes on a millionaire's price range when viewed through the glass floor of a five-star resort.

The theory is that once you reach paradise you won't care what you pay to stay there.

It's not an island for the single at heart or in status. Most visitors are honeymooners. Bars close by midnight, even the island's Club Med. The local celebrity hangout, Bloody Mary's, serves up tasty shellfish and shooters on the sand, with waterfall bathrooms to wash up

in; but they still close their doors at the witching hour.

The French language of love is spoken by all the islanders, and provides the perfect soundtrack for couples still basking in the glow of recent matrimony.

The British fought the French for Tahiti for two centuries. The French won when Tahiti's King Pomare V gifted his territories to France in return for military protection from the British in 1880.

As a single, I found myself thinking: "Why should smug just-marrieds have the only access to what is clearly heaven on Earth?"

Now I just have to find a groom and a bank loan.

The writer was a guest of Air Tahiti Nui and Accor Hotels.

FACT FILE

GETTING THERE: Air Tahiti Nui (www.airtahitiniui.com) flies direct from Sydney to Papeete. **PACKAGE:** Talpacific Holidays has five nights at the Novotel Bora Bora plus 2 nights at the

Radisson at Papeete from \$2225 pp twin share, from Sydney. Guests at three-star Novotel Bora Bora (below) can enjoy all the facilities of five-star Sofitel Motu Bora Bora's private island and

neighbouring Sofitel Marara Resort. Details: 1300 665 737, www.talpacific.com.au

CAR RENTAL: To hire an SUV or moped see Europcar on www.europcar.com.au

SHARK AND RAY FEEDING TOURS: Moana Tours offer half-day water safaris on www.moanatours.com



