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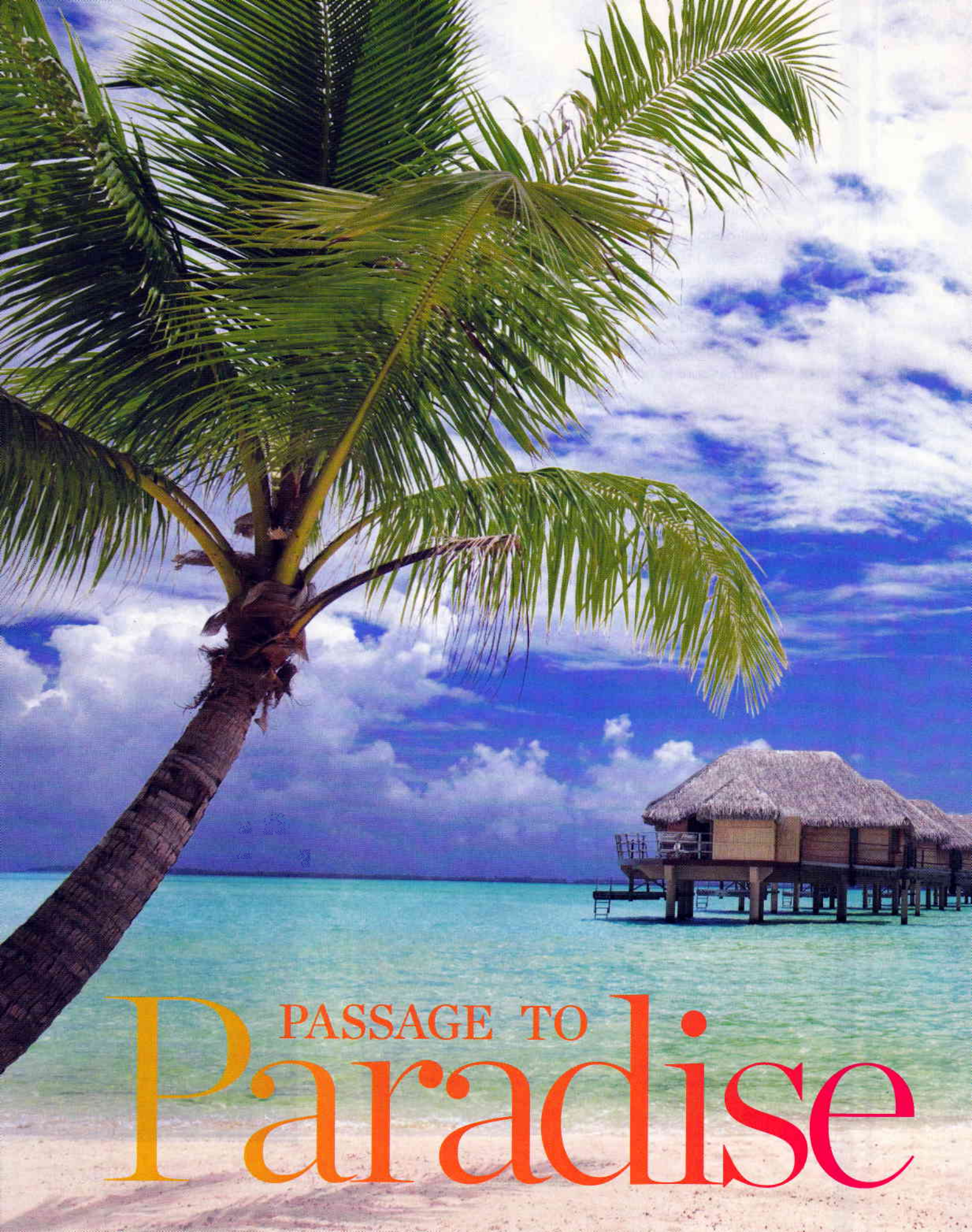
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PASSAGE TO
Paradise

Le Taha'a Island Resort & Spa incorporates local materials into its design for an authentic experience.

A couple is walking away from the camera on a long, elevated wooden pier that extends over clear, turquoise water. The pier is supported by numerous wooden posts. The woman is wearing a bright orange dress, and the man is wearing a light blue shirt and khaki pants. In the background, there are several thatched-roof buildings and distant mountains under a bright blue sky filled with fluffy white clouds.

A couple travels through French Polynesia
in search of island-influenced spa traditions,
serenity, and the perfect sunset. BY ERIC HISS

It was quite possibly one of the most beautiful things we had ever seen.

And to think we almost missed it. My girlfriend and I had been told of a place to witness an epic sunset in the South Pacific, and we vowed to catch an evening performance before we left. But the weather on Taha'a, a small gem of an island across the channel from Bora Bora in French Polynesia, had been uncooperative. Sudden showers, wind, and clouds—although interspersed with periods of glorious sunshine and rainbows—had stymied us on our quest. By our last day on Taha'a, the sunset stakes had grown sky high.

Not that we had come thousands of miles from California solely for a sunset, but we were determined to make activities like sunset-watching the focus of our week. Deadlines, road rage, and microwaved meals were to give way to aimless strolls on the beach, backstrokes in the lagoon, and a quest to learn more about the ancient wellness practices of Polynesian (or Maohi) culture, which have influenced treatments around the world.

Traditional therapies in French Polynesia date back more than 2,000 years and rely heavily on the abundant natural ingredients found throughout these scattered islands, which cover an area about half the size of Europe. Being some of history's greatest navigators, Polynesians carried their healing practices and botanicals with them throughout the vast Polynesian Triangle, including the far-flung islands of New Zealand, Samoa, and Hawaii.

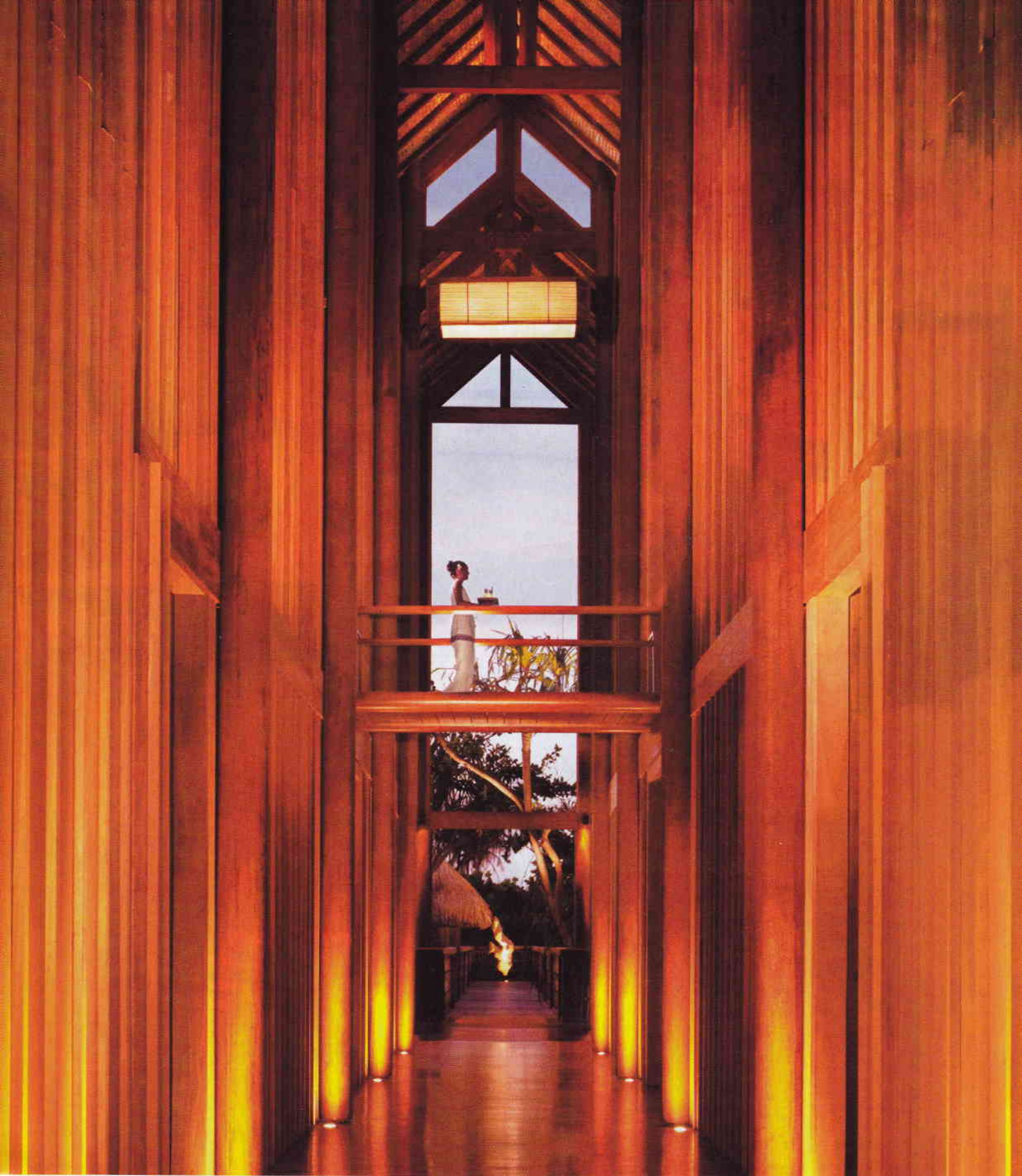
BORA BORA WAS OUR FIRST STOP, and we didn't have to look very hard to discover one of the most important resources in the Polynesian wellness canon: towering coconut palms, which are everywhere. A virtual supermarket in the sky,

they provide shelter, food, water, and medicine. Coconuts, or *baari*, are naturally dried on large beds in the sun, then pressed to produce a pure organic oil that is vital for both daily life and special-occasion cultural rituals.

Then there is tiare Tahiti, or Tahitian gardenia. Perhaps no other botanical element is as pervasive and symbolic here as this small, white, fragrant bloom. Married together, refined coconut oil and tiare create *monoi*, which in Tahitian means "sweet-scented oil." During our stay, whenever I asked about traditional and contemporary Tahitian therapies, *monoi* always came up. From coconut farmers on the back roads of Taha'a to spa managers in gleaming five-star settings, everyone stressed that *monoi* is absolutely elemental to Polynesian wellness. So important is *monoi* to the Tahitian identity and economy that *Monoï de Tahiti* was the first Tahitian product to earn an appellation of origin designation, nearly 20 years ago.

We had our first experience with *monoi* on this trip at Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora, which opened in September 2008 and is the latest resort to be built on Bora Bora's famed lagoon. After a tour of the lagoon via Jet Ski, it was time for some relaxation at the spa. We walked the footpaths ribboned by lush pandanus and tropical flowers to the vaulting, hardwood





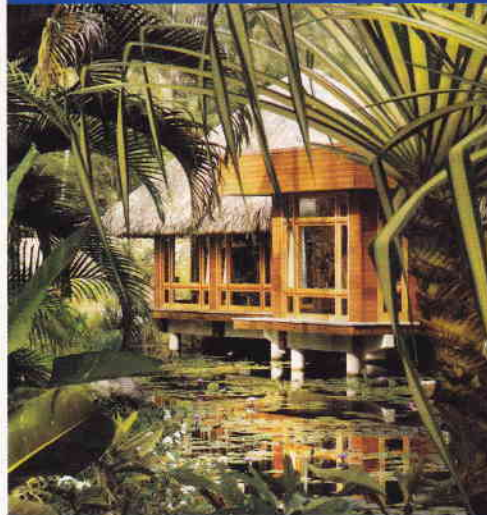
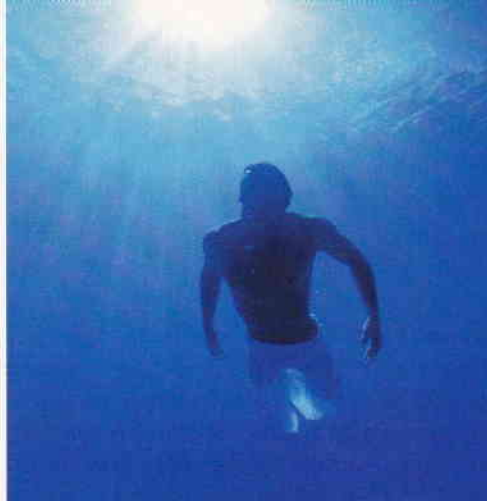
I felt as if we had arrived at a cathedral of wellness.

structure that sits at the center of this private islet. An attendant greeted us with that heart-melting smile Polynesians seem to possess, and as I looked up at the 72-foot ceiling, I felt as if we had arrived at a cathedral of wellness. We chose a couples treatment called the Kahaia Haven Ritual, named after an indigenous tree with many healing properties and a fragrant bloom that will be featured in a new Four Seasons spa line set to be introduced at year's end.

The treatment was a multi-step affair that began with a floral footbath, which left us time to get over the cool-factor of the Kahaia Spa Suite's transparent overwater floors. Next, we experienced a modern interpretation of Tahitian traditions and elements: an Espa body polish with ground apricot kernel and aloe to which the spa had added black pearl powder and local vanilla; a deeply soothing couples hot stone massage (called *ofai* here) with volcanic basalt rocks; and a sybaritic finish worthy of Tahitian royalty—side-by-side coconut milk baths with lagoon views.

THE NEXT DAY, we made our way to Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort & Spa, and over a lunch of *poisson cru*—a sort of local ceviche dressed with lime, coconut milk, and veggies—we learned more about Tahitian traditions and techniques from Anthony and Kamala Nayeli, an American couple who co-manage the resort's Manea Spa. They both stressed the responsibility they feel to preserve the local heritage, even within the boundaries of a modern luxury resort. "Rather than a fourteen-thousand-dollar pedi chair, we have tradition," says Anthony. "When you're in our spa, you're in Polynesia." In fact, what drew us to Manea Spa in the first place was a rumor that it offered that most traditional of Polynesian art forms, the tattoo.

Not only was the rumor true, but we were in luck—their tattoo artist, a boldly marked Marquesan named Matatiki, was on site and scheduled to work on Kamala. To mark the birth of her second son, she was receiving a discreet addition to an existing tattoo above her left ear. There would be no flames or big red hearts;



LEFT, FROM TOP: Treatments at InterContinental Bora Bora's spa incorporate minerals found far below the ocean's surface; the spa at Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort is surrounded by a lily pond. OPPOSITE: With its sky-high A-frame ceiling and golden light, the spa at Four Seasons Bora Bora feels like a temple.

traditional artists, called *tabua'a tatau*, work only in black ink and stick to classic themes like stylized animal and plant motifs.

Although we ultimately opted not to get tattooed, we decided this was the place to get another very traditional treatment, the *taurumi*, or Tahitian massage. Reminiscent of Hawaii's lomilomi, *taurumi* incorporates long, flowing strokes and kneading motions to release knots in the body, free subtle energies, and impart overall balance. My Polynesian therapist integrated a silky monoi to loosen every big-city bind I had, and as we exited the spa through its lush gardens; open breezeways; and natural elements of woven pandanus, kahu wood, and lava rock, I decided tradition was in good hands there.

Next we explored an entirely different take on Polynesian-inspired well-being. Arriving at Deep Ocean Spa at InterContinental Bora Bora, I was struck by the hypermodernity on display. Yes, there are pandanus roofs and stacked-stone walls, but there is also glinting stainless steel, sleek finishes, and ultramodern equipment like dry flotation beds. "Tahiti 2.0," I thought to

BOOK IT

Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort & Spa, Manea Spa, Bora Bora, +(689) 605385, pearlresorts.com; doubles from \$708, 50-minute massage from \$147

Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora, The Spa, Bora Bora, (800) 819-5053, fourseasons.com; doubles from \$950, 60-minute massage from \$200

InterContinental Bora Bora Resort & Thalasso Spa, Deep Ocean Spa by Algotherm, Bora Bora, +(689) 607600, ichtelsgroup.com; doubles from \$1,041, 50-minute massage from \$177

Le Taha'a Island Resort & Spa, Relais & Chateaux, Manea Spa, Le Taha'a, +(689) 608400, letahaa.com; doubles from \$1,122, 50-minute massage from \$154

Ti'a Moana, departs Bora Bora every Monday morning and returns Sunday afternoons, boraboracruises.com; singles from \$12,113 all inclusive

myself. But what really sets the spa apart and gives it an almost science-fiction approach to wellness is reflected in its name. Instead of using monoi or crushed pearls, this spa finds its inspiration more than a half-mile below the ocean's surface, where a tube system is used to extract deep ocean water that is beyond the reach of contaminants. This pure seawater, featuring essentially the same mineral composition as human plasma, is integrated into multiple treatments and Algotherm's Destination Bora Bora products. Curious, we opted for the signature Bora Bora Deep Blue Massage. Although I'm certain the products applied were beneficial, it was the therapist's very skillful and human touch that made it such a memorable treatment.

SEDUCTIVE AS BORA BORA WAS, our plans also included visits to some neighboring islands renowned for their quiet serenity. We could have made the journeys by twin-engine plane, but since we were in no hurry, we chose to go by boat—although calling the *Ti'a Moana* cruise vessel a “boat” is a vast understatement. Not a fan of big cruise ships, I was swayed by the fact that *Ti'a Moana* has only 18 cabins and two suites and that its smaller size (226 feet) means it can sail to islands no big cruiser could reach, such as our first destination, Huahine. Stepping aboard, the feeling was more luxury yacht than cruise ship. Owned by Tahitians, *Ti'a Moana* features everything from traditional artifacts like stone carvings and towering tikis to a phenomenal French chef and two top-deck Jacuzzis. The international staff was incredibly welcoming and efficient, but unfortunately the onboard therapist wasn't available, so the spa treatment had to wait. When we learned the staff could also arrange a massage on one of the isolated beaches, we vowed to return. For that day, however, we were content with paddleboarding over crystal-clear reefs and hiking jungle trails.

The next morning, we disembarked from *Ti'a Moana* on the flower-shaped island of Taha'a. Perched on the tranquil lagoon side of the Tautau islet, or *motu*, was our new home,



Le Taha'a Island Resort & Spa, a five-star property where Tahitian traditions prevail. Elements like Marquesan stone, coconut wood, and an enormous kahaia tree sprouting from the lobby (which is designed like a Polynesian canoe house) are testaments to the hotel's cultural focus.

Where we were most aware of the local connection, however, was in the intimate, open-air spa set back from the property amid a grove of coconut palms. We spent a morning chatting with spa director Terii Salmon about Tahitian wellness and the appeal of this isolated motu and learned that Taha'a is called the Vanilla Island due to its many family-owned plantations, which supply high-quality vanilla to customers around the world. We also discussed the many other local ingredients used here in treatments: sea-green tamanu oil, ground coconut, honey, and, of course, monoi. But he was most passionate about his therapists, all Polynesian. “A spa menu is like a recipe; anyone can follow it,” he said. “Really, the most special ingredient is the energy of the therapist. We like to think ours are the guardians of our culture.”

It was later that day that we found ourselves racing the sun to the wild side of the motu to catch the sunset. We were winded but exhilarated as we arrived at the lava shore just in time. Most of the clouds had cleared, but a few remained anchored on the distant peaks of Bora Bora. Slowly, the sun surrendered to a dark sea, shimmering like an ocean of black pearls. At that moment, Tahiti revealed itself to us, giving us a small blessing for our journey home. □



Water is the focus at InterContinental Bora Bora Resort & Thalasso Spa. BELOW and OPPOSITE: Manea Spa's authentic massages and side-by-side soaking tubs are ideal for couples.

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