

THE FLIP SIDE OF MOOREA – By Stephanie Jackson

A Polynesian island of contrasting cultures

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The ferry sped across the choppy Sea of Moons, foam churning from its bow like a dense layer of freshly whipped meringue spread atop an intense navy blue ocean that changed abruptly to turquoise. Beyond a sprawling coral lagoon, jagged emerald cloaked peaks pierced the silver clouds hovering listlessly above the French Polynesian island of Moorea.

At Moorea Camping a jumble of tents and hammocks lay scattered among the trees, and simple palm roofed cabins threw long streaks of shadow across sand and water. Ski boats hurtled past: jet skis ripped the lagoon's calm waters; topless bathers sizzled under hot skies; and scrawny chickens, outnumbering sea birds, scavenged on the beach for discarded scraps.

I lunched at a small French restaurant, but the chicken salad, little more than a bowl of dry lettuce for which I forfeited an exorbitant \$14, left me still ravenous, optimistically searching for some marinated caterpillar secreted beneath the mountain of leaves to invigorate a monotonous meal with a dash of protein. With a glass of fruit juice or a milk shake costing \$6, and a basic hamburger \$12, now was an appropriate time to initiate a long overdue dieting regime.

The island's famed black pearls, exquisite jewellery, and designer beach wear lay well beyond my limited budget. So too did the possibility of a close encounter of the dolphin kind at the Beachcomber Parkroyal Hotel where \$100 buys 15 minutes in the pool's crystal water where dolphins, the stars of the show, demonstrate their astounding agility, grace, speed, and obvious intelligence as free-loading landside onlookers watch the display, wallets still intact.

Initial impressions of Moorea left me saddened by what was so conspicuously an artificial environment, merely another cloned European imitation of paradise.

The night air, with its delicate floral aroma, was full of sounds – the sounds of effervescent waves, glittering in the moonlight, breaking over the outer reef; of mysterious splashing in the dark, secretive waters of the lagoon; of loud Yankee drawls; of a guitarist emulating the mournful tones of some 60s dirge; and of a harsh Australian voice advising the world that “Fourex is shit mate!”

Morning came early to me while hammock and tent dwellers snored on. I waded reflectively in the lagoon's coral studded waters before the anticipated hordes of sun worshippers began to invade the silence, but peace exploded in an instant of mayhem. A dog barked; a Yankee drawl spurted obscenities from a sleeping huddle on the sand; and the young Australian drowsily reiterated her late night philosophy. “Yeah, mate! Fourex is real shit.”

Perhaps I was in danger of degenerating into a tourist snob, but Moorea was not as I had dreamt it would be. There were no mellow Polynesian voices and harmonious music blending with the sounds of the sea, only the invasive barbarity of an alien world. But Derek, an affable tour operator with contagious laughter and passion, showed me the true face of Moorea, the raw beauty of a paradise far superior to the artificial Eden portrayed in glossy surreal brochures.

As we drove along the 70km avenue encircling the island Derek's eyes flicked repetitiously from the road, admiring - without, he insisted, any adulterous allusions - enchanting Polynesian women in skimpy tops and flowing floral skirts, flowers complimenting their raven hair, innocently seductive sirens gliding ethereally by on bikes and scooters. He smiled too at the young, muscular men with complex traditional tattoos, and the grossly obese islanders who wear their excessive bulk as a sign of prestige not of embarrassment, for here obesity is an indication of having attained a desirable quality of life that provides adequate food without requiring excessive work.

Of the island's 11,000 residents 70 percent are Tahitians, many of whom retain some elements of a traditional lifestyle. Fishermen paddle outrigger canoes beyond the lagoon to the productive deep ocean, fishing with hand-made nets and bamboo rods. Simple beach-side shacks and homes in secluded narrow valleys lie concealed among a riotous jumble of hibiscus, frangipani, bougainvillea, and golden alamanda, their scream of tumultuous colour barely diminished by the welcome shade of coconut palms and majestic breadfruit trees.

The breadfruit, the cause of Captain Bligh's downfall following the mutiny on the Bounty, remains a valued asset, with a seedling ritually planted at the birth of each child to ensure a continuing food supply.

The sweet fragrance of tiare - the Tahitian gardenia - floods across basaltic slopes at the base of volcanic cliffs where unattended gardens rapidly revert to wild ones. Coffee trees burst through a tangled web of passionfruit and vanilla vines; pineapples and taro, dwarfed by bananas, breadfruit and bamboo, sprout at the edge of a forest where once cultivated gardens and nature's seemingly chaotic one soon become indistinguishable.

Nature has provided an abundance of resources indispensable in the traditional Polynesian culture. Coconut trees provide timber, material for roofing, mats and baskets, food, drink, oil, and copra. The stalks of banana leaves secrete an antiseptic sap; lantana flowers serve as an herbal tea to cure fevers; and a seemingly insignificant shrub is reputed to have miraculous properties for the treatment of diabetes and cancer.

From Le Belvedere lookout, at the base of Moorea's highest mountain - the 1,207 metre high Tohiea - deep forested valleys spear down to the base of the sacred mountain Rotui, the centre of an ancient volcano, which separates stunning twin bays - Opunohu Bay, where Cook had landed in 1769, and Cook Bay where he hadn't. The latter, the site of numerous hotels, was named only as a political manoeuvre.

Returning to the coast we dined at an inconspicuous restaurant with palm frond roof, white sand floor, and cool breezes drifting through its open sides. Bananas and breadfruit, baked in banana leaves over heated rocks in an earthen oven, and then fried were sweet and crisp and deliciously addictive. And raw tuna, steeped in a tangy sauce was surprisingly enjoyable.

Pink clouds of approaching sunset glinted in the calm waters of the lagoon as I returned to the camping ground. Coconuts sprouted at the water's edge and a hermit crab, in its shell retreat, scurried across the warm sand, as I dragged a hired kayak across the beach. Tiny colourful fish darted frenetically among coral crevices, and gaping clams, curious serpentine anemones and thick, black sea cucumbers lay motionless on the seabed as evening waves crashed over the reef. But beyond the more conspicuous elements of Moorea, beyond sea, sand and sun lies a land dramatically different yet equally appealing.