

TRAVEL FRENCH POLYNESIA

# Peak relaxation

Cruising on your own skippered catamaran is the best way to explore the beautiful South Pacific, writes **Craig Tansley**.

*“Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things you didn’t do than those you did. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from safe harbour. Catch the wind in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.” – Mark Twain*

A curious contentment comes from shrinking your entire world down to a 47-foot piece of fibreglass adrift on a calm blue sea. Some seek this kind of peace on an island, but then a catamaran is much smaller, and with far fewer intruders. Though, truth be told, I feel more cockiness then contentment as I take my first step aboard my skippered catamaran. But who wouldn’t feel at least a smidgeon of smugness bobbing on top of all this blue South Pacific, with a meal of just-reeled-in Wahoo sashimi – and a bottle of chilled French chenin blanc – waiting on the stern deck.

I’m aboard the good ship Chappe – a luxury catamaran offering hot showers and queen-sized beds, which feels as homely as a lagoon-side villa – for a sailing charter through French Polynesia’s Society Islands.

This trip will take me through one of the world’s prettiest sailing regions, from the lesser-known (but no less picturesque) islands of Huahine, Ra’iatea and Taha’a to the fabled lagoon of the world’s most romanticised island, Bora Bora.

No sailing experience is necessary, though you’re more than welcome to lend a hand; cooking and dishes duties are the domain of your host, Mahlai.

The advantage of a catamaran for those with questionable sea legs is that cats never lean – so apart from the rhythmic heave-ho of the sea that you’ll soon get used to, living aboard Chappe is hardly like stowing away on Cook’s Endeavour.

It’s the freedom granted to the sailor that differentiates any boat charter from a standard holiday: think of Chappe as a hotel room that moves with you across the sea. From the moment we leave Huahine’s tiny port town of Fale, we’re free to roam where the wind takes us.

With lunch barely digested, I leap from the back deck, then float in the warm, turquoise lagoon; every stop at anchor will bring with it unlimited floating time.

We set sail round Huahine’s mountainous west coast, anchoring in time to catch a sunset of burning orange that fades quickly to mauve, revealing the scratchy, ghostly outlines of Ra’iatea and Taha’a on the horizon. When the light dims entirely, beaming planets shine on down, auroras of tiny stars sparkle and stars catapult across the entire sky –

nowhere offers the view of the Pacific’s night skies like the deck of a darkened cat. And I doubt a holidaymaker could find the kind of peaceful silence that arrives with dawn anywhere but at anchor in a still lagoon. I wake with the sunrise, barely opening my eyes before I ease myself into the warm sea and swim to shore. Early mornings are always my favourite time in Polynesia; long before the sun starts to sting, and I can walk along deserted beaches and into tiny villages that smell of all those things Polynesian: the musk of overripe coconuts, the sweet fragrance of pawpaw and the lingering odour from backyard burn-offs (Polynesians have a penchant for cleanliness that borders on obsessive).

There are land excursions to choose from on these islands, should you wish; locals will take you in small, personalised groups to their favourite places. But each

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time I leave Chappe, I find myself longing to return; to swim off her back deck, to read, or just to sit and stare from the aft deck at the sheer magnitude of the mountains in these tiny islands, and how drastically they career down into lagoons.

When the breeze suits best, we sail westward to Ra’iatea and Taha’a, the wind behind us, our sails luffing, and the sea the colour and consistency of ink. As I take the wheel, a humpback breaches to port and flying fish skim across our path.

“There is nothing like lying flat on your back on the deck alone except for the helmsman at the wheel, silence except for the lapping of the sea ... at that time you can be equal to Ulysses,” Errol Flynn theorised. We enter Ra’iatea and Taha’a’s gigantic shared lagoon through a narrow pass in the reef. We reach the safety of one of the Pacific’s largest, and most stunning, lagoons – but while 80 per cent of visitors to French Polynesia will see Bora Bora’s famous lagoon, only a few thousand of the more adventurous travellers venture here each year.

On each side of Chappe, Ra’iatea and Taha’a’s towering billiard-table-green mountains – some more than a kilometre high – are shrouded in the only clouds I’ll



see all voyage, before they drop away to hundreds of hidden, uninhabited valleys.

Taha’a is a quiet place, there are no cities, nor sprawling resorts. In fact, there are barely any supermarkets; locals tie red ribbons outside their houses when they need the grocery truck to stop. Few of Taha’a’s residents work in tourism as they do 40 kilometres away in Bora Bora. Here they’re mostly subsistence farmers or tend to Taha’a’s world’s-finest vanilla beans.

We sail to a motu (tiny islet) a kilometre north of Taha’a. I swim off the kind of perfect white, sandy beach you can only find in Polynesia, then use the swift current to snorkel through an intricate

Main and above right, at anchor on Bora Bora lagoon. Above left, life on board. Far right, kayaking off the cat. PHOTOS: CRAIG TANSLEY

coral corridor where hundreds of yellow, green, purple, blue and orange reef fish drift with me. Moray eels fix me with steely stares from within coral heads.

At sunset, we take Chappé’s tender to Motu Tau Tau’s isolated Le Taha’a Island Resort, and dine under a billion stars on an outdoor verandah built around the trunk of a giant banyan tree.

But it’s Bora Bora that’s the star of these Society Islands: I can feel its magnetic pull from the moment I first see it across the ocean off Taha’a. As we set sail and it looms closer, I will the breeze to fill our sails and push us faster. There’s nothing like seeing Bora Bora from the deck of



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