TAHITI

In Tahiti, the roosters crow night and day, and you wake up to the roar of the surf breaking on the reef. If you're there during the dry season, the moderate temperatures, low humidity, and tropical trade winds create the perfect environment for the human body. People don't wear many clothes, just a couple of yards of cloth, called a *pareo*, folded and knotted in various ways. You could spend your whole life walking along a beach, searching for the perfect cowrie shell.

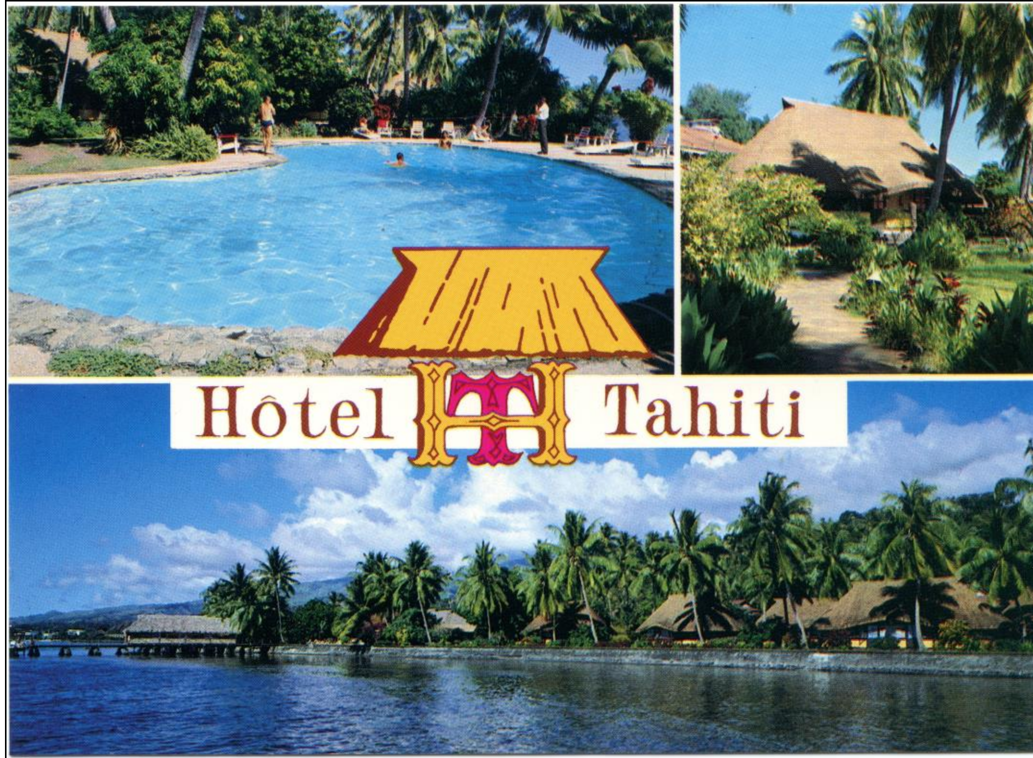
In 1984, Los Angeles hosted the summer Olympics. I went to Tahiti instead.

My friend Ann told me about the trip to Tahiti she had taken a couple of years before with a group of marine biologists led by Ed Tarvyd, a professor of zoology at Santa Monica College, and his wife Lynne, a human development specialist. A big selling point was that the Tarvyds knew Marlon Brando, so the trip included a visit to Tetiaroa, Brando's private atoll. He had bought Tetiaroa for $270,000 in 1966-1967 after starring in *Mutiny on the Bounty* and marrying Tarita Teriipaia, his Tahitian costar.

Mother was turning seventy in July 1984, so I proposed that she and I take the trip together. It was a course called "Natural History and Marine Biology of Tahiti," offered through the college as an education abroad program. The cost was $1,745, plus a $95 administrative fee. Everything included—airfare, lodging, full board except in Papeete, the capital of French Polynesia. I rushed to sign us up. We would be gone two-and-a-half weeks, August 3 to August 19.

The flight from Los Angeles on the French airline UTA left at eleven at night and arrived in Papeete at four the next morning. Most of us slept on the eight-hour flight. Our rooms at the colonial-style Hotel Tahiti weren't ready when we landed, so we went to the market to "observe human trophic consumership levels," biology-speak for "see what Tahitians eat." We rode in *le truck*, one of the island's open-air buses. I photographed piles of vegetables and fruit and bought two meters of red cloth to wrap around myself as a pareo. On the way back to the hotel, we saw chickens pecking in almost every yard.

Mother and I shared room 105 in the hotel's two-story building, decorated with lacy white railings along the verandahs. Accommodation was also available in nine thatched bungalows facing the lagoon. The hotel sat on the grounds of what was once a royal



Postcard from Hotel Tahiti, 1984

Hotel Tahiti building where Mother and I stayed

garden, the residence of Princess Takau Pomare, daughter of the last king of Tahiti. Huge hibiscus bushes grew all around, and palm trees.

Our room was only a short walk from the restaurant and the swimming pool. The restaurant had a thatched roof and a long thatched entryway. Inside, diners sat over the water, next to sliding windows that could be pulled back to give an unobstructed view of the lagoon. The eroded, saw-toothed mountain peaks on the island of Moorea loomed ten miles across the Sea of the Moon. People would sit by the swimming pool and simply gaze at the island.

Thatched entryway to Hotel Tahiti restaurant

At five o'clock that evening, after everyone was settled, we gathered at the hotel's seawall for our first lecture (remember, this was a biology course). We learned that the coconut palms (*Cocos nucifera*) around the pool were a domesticated tree and that the trees behind the hotel were traveler's palms, so called because people thought that when they saw one, water would be trapped inside.

For dinner that night I had *poisson cru à la Tahitienne*, fish marinated in coconut milk and lime juice, heaped on finely chopped lettuce and mixed with diced tomato, onion, and cucumber, with chopped egg on top of it all. I drank Hinano beer (300 francs a bottle, or about two dollars) and ate French bread with the meal. For dessert I had a piece of Camembert, a reminder that Tahiti was an official part of the *République française*. We learned, however, that the Tahitians and French generally didn't mix. A Tahitian independence movement was about five years old at the time of our visit.

Me (wearing green hat) next to Hotel Tahiti pool, Moorea in distance

My mother, Alma Potter, sunning beside Hotel Tahiti pool

A mother cat with four kittens shared the hotel grounds with several other cats and a collection of small dogs, one of them a jealous Pomeranian who barked fiercely when

another dog approached his territory, which was mostly the bar and restaurant. The kittens were still nursing but in a desultory way. They seemed to be lined up sleeping at the teats instead of sucking. During dinner, to which I wore my new red pareo and a hibiscus blossom behind my left ear (I thought the flower would signify that I was unmarried—but it should have been behind the other ear), one of the dogs let out a yelp and took off across the dining room floor. He had gotten too close to the kittens and the mother cat let him know it.

For breakfast the next morning, we lingered at a table next to the open window wall and drank coffee, ate fresh papaya ("delicious" pronounced Mother) and French bread (not "toast," which was tasteless white loaf bread), and watched the fish below—angelfish, moorish idols, with their bands of black, white, and yellow, and goatfish (named for the whisker-like barbels near their mouths). The creatures in the water included sea urchins, which we had learned hide from the sun's ultraviolet rays during the day but come out about dusk to scavenge, and sea cucumbers, also known as sea slugs, although they are echinoderms, not molluscs like slugs. By now we knew that sea cucumbers ingest sand to digest the accompanying bacteria and are an indicator of water pollution. Later we learned that sea cucumbers will sometimes eviscerate when threatened, then regenerate, and that hermit crabs feed on them.

Me breakfasting in Hotel Tahiti's overwater restaurant, longboat in distance

After breakfast, I tried snorkeling for the first time, first in the swimming pool, then off the pier, clinging to the sides and to the rusty rail of the steps leading into the water. The coral reef was shallow and slippery and dropped off suddenly. I could understand after putting my mask under the water's surface for only a few minutes why so many people find snorkeling to be fascinating, even addictive.

It being Sunday, we hopped on another *le truck* and rode into town to listen to traditional Tahitian hymn-singing (*himene*) at the Evangelical French Protestant church. Tahiti is about 30 percent Protestant, 50 percent Catholic, according to Lynne. The singing was led by women, in four or five choirs. Did the great Tahitian navigators chant while they sailed thousands of miles across the open ocean? The women in the church dressed entirely in white, including white plastic straw hats. The men wore suits, but several had thongs on their feet. One of the young women had a star-shaped tattoo on the top of each foot. Children and mothers with babies came and went as restlessness or necessity dictated.

Evangelical French Protestant Church, Papeete

The minister gave the sermon in three languages—first in English, then in French, finally in Tahitian. The Tahitian version took much longer than the other two. The whole service lasted two-and-a-half hours. Tourists hung around outside, listening to the music

and taking photos of the congregation. The sanctuary's colored-glass windows opened inward, leaving much of the church open to the air.

On Monday, we went on a circle island tour of Tahiti. The bus driver stopped only at selected "tourist" stops. He drove fast by the shacks along the windward shore, where naked children hung on the outside of lean-tos and dogs stretched out on the black sand. The dogs were rarely on a leash, though we passed a construction site where a German shepherd was tied to a post. The tour bus had to honk a scratching dog off the middle of the road at one point.

Construction was evident all around the island. Much of it was to repair damage caused by the previous year's cyclone, especially on the windward side, unprotected by the reef. Many houses stood on concrete-block pilings. Boys at one construction site were pounding out corrugated tin slabs that would become roofs. We passed over stream after stream, each identified by a red-and-white sign on the bridge above it. We learned that it rains twice as much in the interior of Tahiti (120 inches a year) as along the periphery. According to my guidebook, no people live in the interior, so the water runs unpolluted into the streams. Papeete (population 35,000), we were told, means "water basket" or "basket of water."

Our first stop on the tour was One Tree Hill, which offered a view over the sea to Moorea, from Tahiti's inner reef to deeper water, then to the principal reef surrounded by light water with waves breaking on the outside. The big hotel Tamara was closed because of a strike. The workers wanted a forty-hour week instead of forty-eight hours and two days off instead of one. The owner said no and closed the hotel. The guests were trapped, couldn't get into or out of the building.

Our next stop was the black-sand beach at Pointe Vénus on Matavai Bay, where all ships used to moor, including Captain Bligh's *Bounty*. Captain James Cook observed the transit of Venus in June 1769 from here. Ed told us that the ironwood trees that served as windbreaks had been introduced from Australia. The coconut trees were banded against rats. A river debouched at the point from Orohena Mountain, which had a taboo temple on top, as yet undisturbed.

At the Gauguin Museum, we ate a picnic lunch outside, near a cannon that was lost on the reefs of Agana in 1526 by Magellan's pilot, Sebastian del Cano. We did a quick tour of the museum but spent most of our time in the famous botanical garden. The garden contained stands of bamboo plants, which Ed told us can grow three feet in one day, but only for a few days. A giant tortoise sat immobile on the grass, and a mynah bird flashed in the trees. Ed said mynahs were brought to Tahiti to eat caterpillars. A banyan tree with huge lianas (aerial roots) dominated part of the garden. The red-leafed ti, a member of the agave family, was a holy plant to the Tahitians, who used them as standard-bearers on their ships. The ti was also used as a white flag to stop fighting

among tribes. Westerners tapped the ti’s roots and made alcohol. Climbing philodendrons reached high up in the forest canopy for light. The trees on slopes surrounding the garden were part of an experimental planting program, also under way on Fiji, to grow local lumber.

Beach at Pointe Vénus, Matavai Bay

Back in the bus, we passed plantations of palm trees, whose coconuts are dried to produce copra. Misty mountains loomed behind, their ridges an incredibly intense green, outshining the slopes. Tahiti means “high mountains.” The guide told us that small Tahiti (Tahiti iti, a peninsula that hangs off the southeast side of Tahiti proper, or Tahiti nui) grows oranges, and that bananas are in supply all year. He said that the breadfruit just coming into season cannot be eaten raw but must be boiled, fried, or grilled.

For dinner, eighteen of us piled into another *le truck* that took us up, up, up a winding, narrow road, without guardrails, to a restaurant called the Belvédère (“beautiful view”). The plan was to watch the sunset over Moorea. The sunset was ordinary, but the companionship was special. I got to know the other people on the tour sitting near me: Richard, a teacher of English and biology at a school near Griffith Park; Richard’s wife Mary; Gina, the blonde girlfriend of Philip, who ran the Bicycle Shop cafe in Santa Monica (he became Michael Jackson’s cook in the early 1990s and testified against

Jackson in his child-molestation trial); Barbara, another blonde, and her friend Rick, who was very attentive (Barbara turned out to be deaf); Jan, a woman from Pasadena who knew quite a lot about biology and ran part of the float-building operation for the Rose Parade every year; Dwaine, who was on the tour with his brother Lester; Klaus and Angela, newlyweds from Stuttgart, Germany; and Mary, a close friend of Lynne's. Others on the tour were Jonathan, Tina, Claire, two Kathys, Andrea, Edward, Doug, Jim, Joel, and Mark—counting me, Mother, and Ed and Lynne and their young son Christopher (Topher), twenty-eight of us in all.

Our group ready to hop on *le truck*, Papeete

I ordered mahi-mahi for dinner with *pommes frites*. The food was good, and Philip kept ordering carafes of white wine for me. Back at the hotel, I went for a swim in the pool, then sat wrapped in a towel looking at the stars and moon. The night was warm and fragrant, but I eventually got cold and started back to the hotel. A young man who had been sitting by himself on the seawall followed me. He asked if I was alone: "*Vous êtes seule*?" He told me he was a soldier stationed on one of the atolls where the French were testing atom bombs. He said he might go up with the bombs. I felt sad that he was alone but I went on to the hotel.

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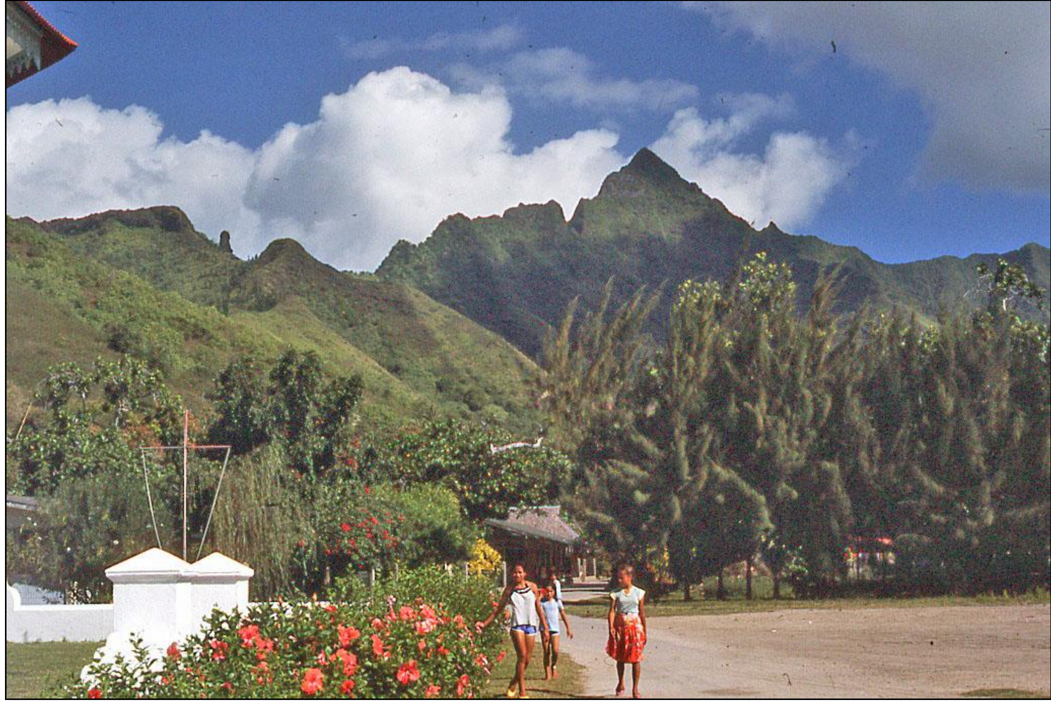
On Tuesday our group flew to Moorea (“yellow lizard,” named because of a king’s dream) and checked into the Moorea Village Hotel. Mother’s and my room (No. 36) was a thatched-roof hut called “Kokuu” set in a garden of hibiscus, bougainvillea, plumeria, papaya, oleander, coconut palms, croton, and poinsettia. As on Papeete, chickens roamed freely around the hotel grounds. One of the hens had a brood of chicks that followed her around the garden and across the sandy driveway, where groups of French boys played *boules*. We decided that they were military personnel on leave, their vacation paid for by the government. The hotel had the air of a boy scout camp because of them.

Huts at Moorea Village Hotel

At sunset, we saw a reef heron (*Egretta sacra*) and fish flying across the water to escape underwater predators. And then the full moon rose. At dinner (fresh tuna), we learned that Topher had packed a fishhead in his luggage and it had leaked all over his clothes, through the suitcase, and onto the bed. After dinner, we all walked down the moonlit road to the house of a local man named Billy, whose musicians and dancers were practicing for an appearance at the Polynesian Olympics in two weeks. The upcoming games explained the longboats we had seen racing in the lagoon the day before.

One of the best dancers was a little girl of about five, who moved her arms in and out and jerked her hips exactly like a woman. The dance was rapid and, when the couples

faced each other, with the woman moving her hips and the man vibrating his knees in and out, quite erotic. The dancers came into the audience and the men pulled all the girls out to the dance floor. They left me on the sidelines with Mother and the other older women. I was forty-two at the time and did not feel in the least elderly (but I was still wearing my hibiscus blossom over the wrong ear). Later, Ann told me the same thing had happened to her, and that she too had felt slighted.



Tahitian girls on Moorea, with the island's spectacular mountains behind

The next day, Billy took us on a tour of the island, driving on a road made of coral debris. We learned that Moorea is older than Tahiti, and that the basalt is greatly eroded. Hence the spectacular scenery, with jagged, eroded peaks sticking up like huge teeth and craters two-and-a-half miles in diameter. We stopped at a lookout point that gave us a panoramic view. The green of the hillsides seemed to vibrate.

I was sorely disappointed in my photographs, in which the hills look brown, not green. Does the sunlight near the equator have a special optical effect, making colors appear brighter to the eye than to the camera? It was probably just that I didn't use a filter. Or maybe a different film stock would have captured the green better.

Mountains of Moorea viewed from lookout point, Mt. Tohivea (3,960 feet) on left

We passed wild hibiscus bushes with yellow flowers and many kinds of trees: African tulip, tropical almond, breadfruit, mango, coconut palms, pines, pandanus (which has a pineapple-like but inedible fruit), Tahitian chestnuts. We went to a reconstructed ancient Tahitian temple, called a *marae*, where, in an annual all-male ceremony, an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old boy would be sacrificed to the gods. Three large carved wooden statues, or tikis, had been moved to the east end of the grove as an altar.

Back on the road, we saw more trees (coffee, ti, vanilla) and a cockfight pit, chickens having been introduced to Tahiti from Indonesia, which Ed reminded us is where all the chickens in the world originated.

That night, the whole crew went next door to Captain Cook's hotel and restaurant. Captain Cook anchored off Moorea in 1773 and has a bay named after him. Our hotel was nearer the spectacular Opunohu Bay, and also near Moorea's Club Med resort.

Cook's Bay from circle road, with Mt. Mouaputa ("shark tooth," 2,723 feet) looming behind

Club Med, Moorea (resort closed in 2002)

On Wednesday morning, three outriggers equipped with outboard motors took us across the lagoon to snorkel near the edge of the barrier reef. The lagoon close to the hotel was turbid, containing dead dogs and other debris. We landed on a *motu*, a coral sand island. Ed informed us that the motus are privately owned by Tahitians, who lease them out. The waters were full of algae, including *Sargassum*, named after the Portuguese word for "grape," and a common seaweed, *Turbinaria ornata*. Ed told us that neither kind of seaweed should be so dense in such a reef, meaning that it was unhealthy. Nevertheless, there were plenty of fish to see.

Jumping off elevated coral, we saw two common poisonous sea urchins, which we learned will point their spines toward a shadow (ours). Crustaceans (shrimp) live symbiotically on the spines, where they build mucus towers to catch plankton. We also saw stone fish, the most poisonous fish in the world. Their thirteen dorsal spines are hollow, like syringes, with poison sacs at the base through which they secrete poison when threatened.

Other sightings were butterfly fish, which have black at the eyes; a moray eel (the eels open their mouths as you pass—a warning); parrot fish, which are big and vividly colored, with beak-like mouths that can bite into coral, and which secrete a mucus net around themselves at night and excrete a cloud of coral out of their cloaca when surprised; and triangular trigger fish, which have Picasso-like colors and tremble with fear.

Jack London, in *The Cruise of the Snark*, described stone-fishing (*tautai-taora*), in which a group of fishermen in canoes would hit the water with stones at the same time, scaring the fish by the vibrations. The canoes would move closer, forming an ever tighter circle, so that eventually a seething mass of fish was trapped in the middle, and the men would toss them ashore.

We had a beautiful vista of the southern sky over the reef. I had brought my star map with me, and that night I identified the Southern Cross (Crux); the nearest bright star, Alpha Centauri (Rigel kentaurus); Agena (Beta Centauri); and Scorpius and its bright star, Antares. "These nights are out of this world!" Mother wrote in her notebook.

* * *

On Friday we flew the forty or so miles from Moorea to Tetiaroa ("cloudy place in the distance") in four twin-engine Air Tahiti planes, arriving about noon. In Mother's words, the view as we approached the atoll was "just like out of a storybook." A frigate bird sitting on a branch was the first thing I saw after we landed. We sat around in the open-air buildings, waiting for lunch and for our bungalows to be ready. It was rainy and quiet and felt deserted. No cars. We were the only guests.

Welcome to Tetiaroa

Scene when we arrived on Tetiaroa: young frigate bird on branch, cloudy skies over lagoon

The resort, located on motu Onetahi of the atoll, was laid out like a village. The dining hall was in the main building, along with the kitchen and a lounge—which to my disappointment had a television set. Why travel all the way to Tahiti to watch TV? The dining room was round, open on all sides, and had red-and-white-striped awnings that could be drawn over the window-openings.

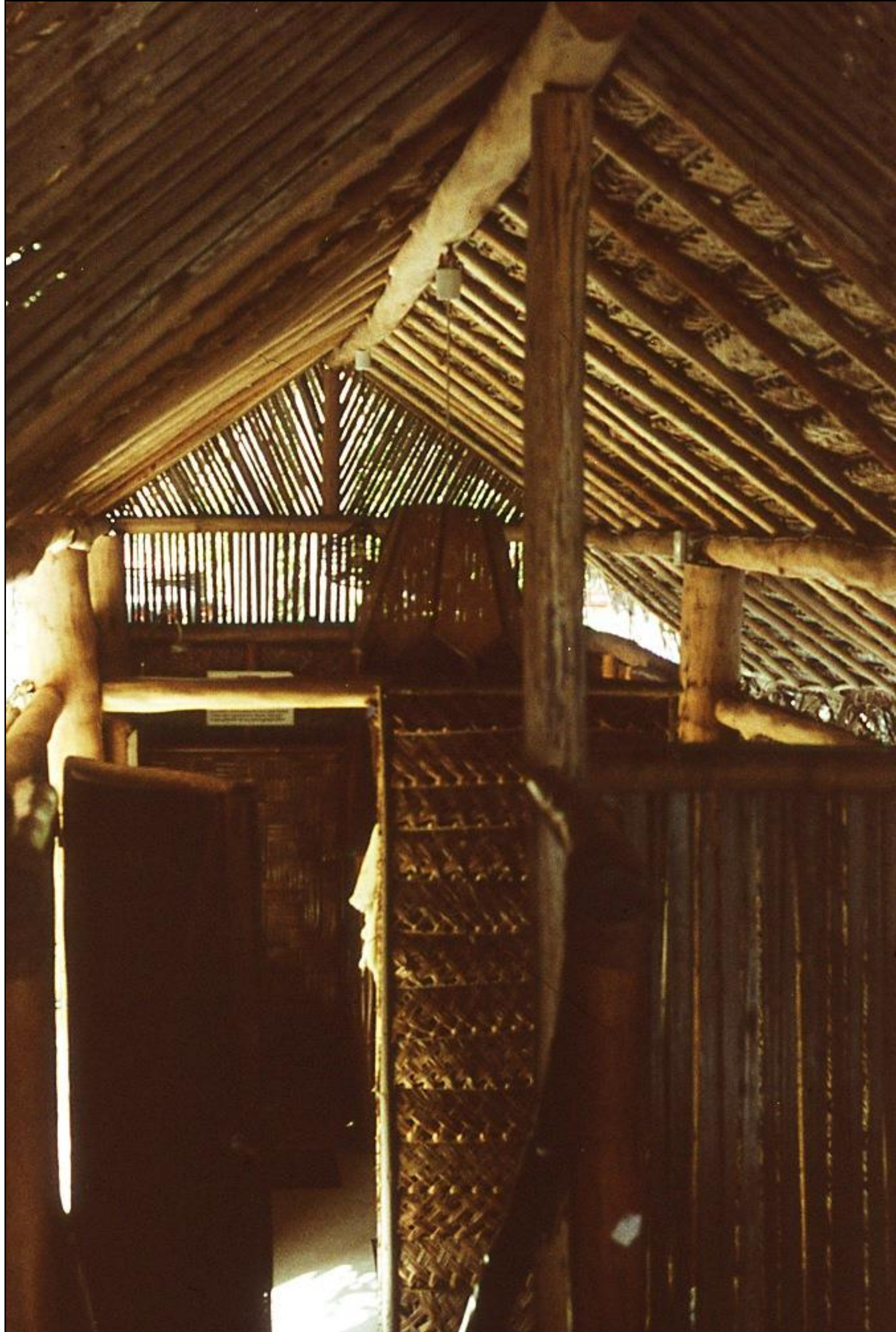
Dining hall on Tetiaroa

Pathways led through the palm trees to individual bungalows, called *fares*. Brando had used native materials from Tetiaroa and traditional construction methods throughout the resort and had done much of the building himself. The bungalows had thatched roofs and featured intricately woven ceilings, walls, and awnings that you held open with a long stick. Each bungalow had its own shower and a sink made of a giant clam shell (*Tridacna gigas*).

Mother and I were assigned a *fare* right next to the sand, with a view over the lagoon to the reef. We hung our pareos to dry on a rope that also held mosquito netting over the bed. The surf crashed on the reef night and day, sounding like jets taking off from LAX.

Exterior construction of *fare*; front section on stilts is bedroom, rear is bathroom

Mother shaking pareos out bedroom window of our *fare*



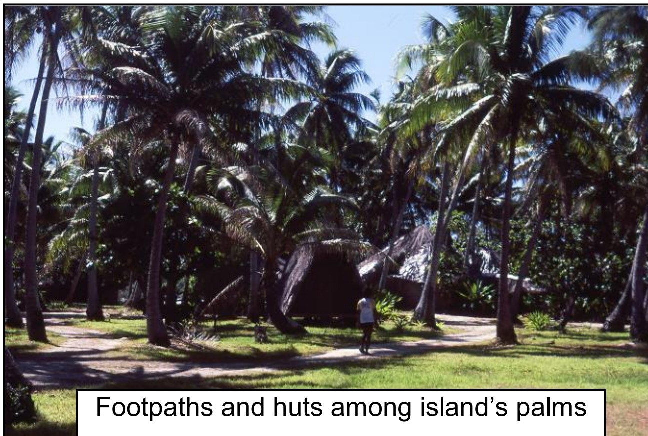
Interior of our *fare*, looking from bedroom toward bathroom: roof, ceiling, and walls are woven from coconut fronds, supporting posts are made of coconut wood

Pareos and mosquito net hanging in our *fare*

Me in pareo beside woven awning in our *fare*

View from *fare* toward lagoon and barrier reef

Because we were such a small group, only a few resort staff were on hand, including Albert, Jean-Pierre, and Juliette, the wife of Brando's manager for Tetiaroa. Our group took turns serving the meals and cleaning up afterward. Brando had hired a French chef, Jacques, from Bora-Bora to cook our meals. Apparently many chefs in France become weary of Europe and retreat to French Polynesia, so Tahiti has a good supply of French chefs.



Footpaths and huts among island's palms

Our daily schedule was breakfast at 7:30, lunch at 12:30, and dinner at 7:00. I had hoped to have fresh fish every day, but we ate traditional French cuisine on Tetiaroa. We ate so well that we ran out of bread, coffee, and chocolate. The only Tahitian food we "ate" was beer, which we also ran out of. It was served from a thatched hut (the "Dirty Old Bob" bar) on the beach, a short walk from the dining hall.

Evening gathering on beach outside “Dirty Old Bob” bar

Ed Tarvyd with Philip and Gina next to lagoon, frigate bird on its usual perch

Soon after we arrived, I walked around the motu, collecting shells. The waves were louder on the other side, closer to the reef. The receding waves tinkled over the shells like chimes.

When I got back, Ed had a temperature of 100.8, probably from an infected finger, so Lynne gave us a lecture on Tahitian culture and history. She told us that in the past, a Tahitian's position in society depended on how close he or she was to the gods. Conflicts led to wars fought with clubs and other primitive weapons, sometimes at sea. The two strongest men, one from each side, fought to the death with war clubs. The victor then cut a hole in the middle of the man he had vanquished and wore him as a sign of victory. This unimaginable practice was described by the nineteenth-century missionary William Ellis, who traveled to the South Pacific and wrote several volumes about his experiences:

> When a man had slain his enemy, in order fully to satiate his revenge and intimidate his foes, he sometimes beat the body flat and then cut a hole with a stone battleaxe through the back and stomach, and passed his own head through the aperture as he would through the hole of his *tiputa* or poncho . . . . with the head and arms of the slain hanging down before, and the legs behind him (*Polynesian Researches, During a Residence of Nearly Six Years in the South Sea Islands*, vol. 1, 1859, p. 310).

A similar description is found in an 1877 volume by a controversial Scottish–Australian clergyman, John Dunmore Lang. I feel skeptical about these stories—they sound like rumors the Tahitians might have spread to frighten off their enemies, or foreign missionaries.

The first European to land on Tahiti was Samuel Wallis in 1767, followed a year later by the Comte de Bougaineville and in two years, by Captain Cook. Then came the missionaries, who stayed sixteen years before they converted anyone. They kept journals and began writing down the Tahitian language in order to translate the Bible. They taught the Tahitians to read, brought presses to print the Bible, and also supplied medical care. Polynesians traditionally have a sharing attitude, said Lynne. Even today, it is common for children to be given away—Lynne knew of one girl on Tahiti who had her husband give away her first two children. Lynne noted that, strangely, prostitution was increasing. Ordinarily, Tahitian women were free to go from man to man.

On Sunday we went to Bird Island (motu Tahuna iti), site of the largest nesting colony in French Polynesia. Brando had set the island aside as a bird sanctuary. Bird Island is home to noddies and boobies, and this was one of their two nesting seasons, the other being at Christmas. About half the bird population was destroyed in the April 1983 storm, when waves washed clear over the island.

We could hardly believe the color of the water!

Approaching Bird Island

Wading ashore on Bird Island

Tree full of nesting birds on Bird Island

The brown booby, which has a white belly, nests under bushes and trees or on the ground. The red-footed boobies nest on the canopy and shit on the brown boobies on the ground—a hazard of the pecking order. The red-footed boobies have brilliant red feet with webbed toes, which they use as air foils when landing. (I hadn't known that flying birds face into the wind.)

Most of the birds we saw lay only one or two eggs, usually monochromatic. We also saw terns, which are great fishers and closely related to gulls, though gulls cannot dive like terns. The white tern, which roosts in the casuarina tree, does not build a nest but lays eggs on branches. Noddies (noddy terns) are gray with a white cap. They nest under trees and lay speckled eggs, as do crested terns. All these birds are carnivorous and pisciverous (fish-eating). Land crabs, their main predators, pull the chicks into holes at night.

Brown booby nesting on ground

Red-footed booby nesting on branch

Group of red-footed boobies nesting in tree

Noddy chick in nest under tree

Exploring the beach on Bird Island

Me taking in the scene on Bird Island

Ed had other interesting information about birds to pass on. I particularly liked learning that bird brains consist of enormous amounts of white matter but little gray matter. Also that birds are very reactive to stimuli and respond much more rapidly than humans, though they're not good problem-solvers, except for Corvidae (crows). Ovulation leaves scars on the ovary, which gives a method of aging a bird.

It takes a domestic chicken about twenty-four hours to lay an egg from the time of fertilization, which is internal. The outer shell is porous, and as the chick develops, the head lies against the heart. When the heart beats, the head moves up and down, so when the chick is ready to hatch, it has strong muscles, which it uses with its egg tooth to break out of the shell. The chick is wet when it comes out, and tired (it takes a half hour to forty-five minutes for it to hatch). Some, the most advanced birds, are naked (altricial) when they hatch; others (precocial) have feathers. This type can fend for itself within two days. First feathers are called "down" feathers. When the down molts, nestlings become fledglings.

On Monday, we watched Albert make two Tahitian specialties and I wrote down the recipes, as translated by Cynthia, one of the Tahitian women. Recipe for *taiero*: Crack a few coconuts (four) and husk. Drain coconut water. Grate meat. Soak fresh crab heads (four) in sea saltwater; mash gonads and liver with bottom of drinking glass. Add crab brains, without shells, and mash. Strain liquid (liqueur) into grated coconut, add another

glass seawater, strain through hand into coconut. Mix with hands. Add one onion, sliced thin, and two cloves garlic. (Note: It can be dangerous to make this dish with shrimp because of meningitis.) Mix well, and refrigerate overnight until fermented. Recipe for *meisa*: Sea snails (raw). Crack shells, separate meat from operculum (flap that closes shell) under running water. Remove guts. Chop in halves, serve immediately.

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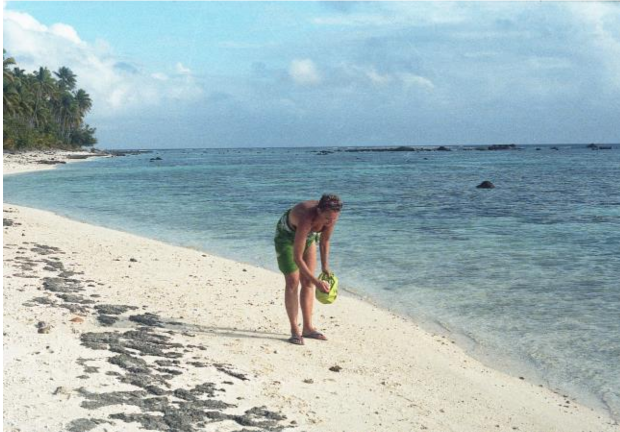
Everyone went to motu Rimatuu to see the ruins of the Williams copra plantation. The ruins consisted of concrete, rusted tin, and mosquitoes. Brando's first house, a grass shack, was on Rimatuu.

We looked for shells instead of visiting the brackish lake in the interior. Several people snorkeled on the sand offshore and found auger snails in coral, orange, and sand colors. Also mitre shells.

Disembarking on Rimatuu

On the beach at Rimatuu, headed toward ruins



On the way back, a squall blew up and we passed through a curtain of rain. We all got chilled. Dwaine said my liver-colored feet and lips could mean hypothermia and I had better get into a hot shower. Fortunately, each bungalow had its own *chauffage*, a hot-water heater that heats the water as you use it. I warmed up in time for dinner, another of Jacques's fine French meals—onion soup, roast meat, tomatoes with garlic and parsley. After dinner, we watched a delayed broadcast of the closing Olympics ceremonies from Los Angeles. We were all exhausted and went to bed at 8:30.

Mother and I gathering shells on Rimatuu

On Tuesday, we went to motu Hiraanae to observe nesting frigate birds, boobies, and terns. When seen on land, frigate birds usually signify bad weather. One female frigate flew off the nest and into the tree break behind her nesting tree, giving a fine display of her great wingspan. She seemed to catch her wing on a branch. Several of us walked over and watched her displaying on a rock and hopping along the ground, seemingly unable to take off and fly. We went away, thinking she would do better if we weren't around to frighten her.

I went back a few minutes later. She had moved along the ground, then ran to cover under a small bush, where her huge wings caught in the sharp branches, her head in a kind of sling. I checked once again, then I went away to walk across the barrier reef, looking for shells, which were scarce. When I checked back on the frigate bird, she was not on the ground. The nesting tree had two brown booby nests below and a frigate nest in the upper branches. Perhaps her injury was feigned, to lead us away from her young. When I went back the second time, she was gesturing with her throat, silently vibrating her gular area, which we had learned was a means of dissipating heat. Some of us saw a male displaying his red pouch.

Frigate birds in nesting tree and in flight, motu Hiraanae

Frigate bird coming in for a landing, motu Hiraanae

On Wednesday morning we went to motu Tiaruanu to look for one of the most fascinating crabs in the world, the coconut (*Birgus latro*)—perhaps the most delicious crab in the world, we were told. The crabs feed on coconuts. Tahitians catch them by turning off all the lights, then banging coconuts together. The noise attracts the crabs. When they hear rustling, the men turn on the lights and gather the crabs into sacks.

Coconut crab

This was the most beautiful day so far. During the night the wind had shifted to the north, and the weather cleared from the previous night's storm and high winds to yield a day of dry, soft air and blue skies. We could see Tahiti on the horizon from the airstrip while we waited to board the motorboats, and Moorea when we got close to Tiraruanu.

View of Moorea from Tiraruanu

On the beach at Tiaruanu, with one of Juliette's daughters ready to jump off boat

Juliette’s daughter after wading ashore on Tiaruanu

Three dogs went with us: Agnes, a part dachshund, who belonged to Marlon Brando’s daughter Cheyenne; Ignis, a full-blooded dachshund who took turns sleeping in our huts and amused us by digging for water; and Cici, whose coat looked part Australian shepherd but whose face displayed a lot of terrier.

I walked slowly along the beach, looking for shells, until the others had gone inland. I followed their footprints into the jungle. The jungle floor was covered with fallen palm fronds, coconuts, and other rotting debris. Spider webs hung everywhere. Mother said Albert made a palm-frond switch to clear the spiders ahead of her group.

When I got tired of wandering around the jungle looking for crabs, I went back to the beach. A beautiful pool in the coral was perfect for bathing, so I took off my shoes and went in. After a while other people started to gather. Jonathan and one of the Tahitian men had captured a live coconut crab, of the most beautiful blue color—not too old, but old enough to be on land. After nearly 300 days of gestation the female crab lays her eggs in the lagoon, where the young go through several developmental stages before venturing on land to compete for food with the adults.

Jonathan's blue coconut crab

Mark came running up, his left leg dripping blood. He had slashed himself with a machete while hacking his way through the jungle. He told me later that Albert felt guilty about it. We loaded up the boats, only to discover that Juliette and one of her daughters weren't back yet. Our boat was carrying Mark, and we had to be on time for lunch, since Jacques was baking the jackfish (giant trevally) Lynne had caught the day before on the boat trip back from motu Hiraanae, so we left first. The fish was delicious, tasting like trout but sweeter. Jacques had prepared it with tomato and onion garnish.

Lynne's giant trevally (*Caranx ignobilis,* family Carangidae)—known as *uruati* to Tahitians

The day remained fine and dry, though cloudy in the afternoon, and we were treated to a sunset that grew more beautiful as the light faded. Venus was bright, and the Milky Way was brilliant. I identified Vega, Delphinus, the Corona Australis, Serpens, and Altair in the northern sky. A few people came down for a star party. Lester left when I told him we couldn't see Pisces. We had fresh pepper steak and crème caramel for dinner, then early to bed.

I made pets of three hermit crabs, who lived in a water glass with sand and algae-covered coral and shells. They clinked against the glass during the night. That morning I saw a group of little hermit crabs eating something on the beach, which on inspection appeared to be a piece of apple, so I brought some of it home for mine. I washed the crabs out in seawater twice a day.

We spent most of Thursday on Reiono, the farthest motu on the atoll. Because of the storms, the recent high tides, and its nearness to the reef, the island was piled with coral debris, with many cowrie shells washed up in it. We motored over in our usual two boats, Albert and Jean-Pierre the boatmen. Also as usual, we got wet from the spray in the deep part of the lagoon. The water was shallow and treacherous with coral heads near the island, so Jean-Pierre drove slow. We could see both Tahiti and Moorea from Reiono.

Picnicking on Reiono among coral debris and damaged coconut palms

The island had suffered much damage from the previous year's cyclone. Many of the coconut palms were dead but standing upright, their tops blown right off. Others had been uprooted and lay bleaching on the shore. We saw four or five snags far out in the lagoon. We walked around the island, heads down, looking for shells. Jean-Pierre gave me a nice brown cowrie. I found three or four big cowries and picked up pieces of colored coral for friends' aquariums. Angela, the German girl, gathered only pink coral, more than enough to make a necklace in remembrance of her Tahitian honeymoon.

A night dive on the reef was planned for after dinner. I intended just to stargaze but went along after all. Albert had to push the boat most of the way because the water was shallow, with coral hazards, and it was hard to see with only flashlights and a kerosene lantern. Those who went in the water—Doug, Pierre, Mary, Ed, Lester, Rick—got cold but also found a crab and some nice shells. Juliette picked crabs off the reef. On our way back, the moon rose. In our *fare*, I found Mother asleep with the lights on.

Friday was our last full day on Tetiaroa. Most of the group went to the reef. It was very calm. Even Mary, who ordinarily wore a float to swim, went over the reef. She said the coral was beautiful and large colorful fish swam in the deep waters. Mother and I stayed on the island. I did a couple of sketches of the *fares* from the outside, then we walked around Onetahi.

The water was more beautiful than it had been the entire trip, and the tide was out, exposing sand along all the beaches. We stopped near the reef and swam in a shallow, sandy area that contained almost no sea cucumbers. After our swim, we continued around the island. On the windward side, the waves were spiral-shaped and the beach had more, even finer sand than on the other side. As we walked toward the airstrip, a beautiful trochus shell washed up on a wave.

We spent the afternoon with the rest of the group cleaning and mashing young coconut meat, which was to be cooked between gardenia leaves over an open fire. The divers had gathered coral debris off a small motu that the cyclone had denuded of trees (they reported new sprouts at the rate of about one per square yard). The coral would act as heating tiles or bricks.

We mixed the mash with flour, sugar, and vanilla, then about four o'clock, when the fire had burned down, everybody placed a pat between two leaves and then onto the fire. When done, the "bread" had the consistency and character of a dry pudding. No one except Topher, who asked for thirds, liked the concoction very much.

Waiting for coconut meat "bread" cooked over hot coral

At dinner, we drank a 500-franc Bordeaux and Mary and Mark laughed hysterically, giving our table a good time, since we all had to laugh, too. After Mary told us the tale of "Soap, soap, soap"—I have no memory of what the story was about—Mother and I retired to our *fare* and packed our shells into empty plastic water bottles. Then I went out to the beach to look at the sky. The cloud cover had cleared, as it often did after sunset.

We had kitchen duty for our last breakfast and had to have our suitcases ready by seven o'clock. I woke early and walked to the beach to watch the sunrise and take a photo. Kathy was already there, down by the double palm trees near the bar, with Ignis, the dachshund, who barked at me. I tried to shush her at a distance, but she kept on.

Later, it turned out that Lynne had just kicked the dog out of their bungalow. Ignis had an amazing ability to completely relax. We had many a chuckle at Ignis zonked out with her feet in the air and her head

lolling to the side. She didn't move when someone would pick her up, just hung there like a cat being exhibited in a show.

We raced through breakfast, and I did the dishes by myself. Four planes were coming from Papeete, the first due at 8:45. Each plane had room for eight people. They landed and took off from the same direction, which meant they circled the island on arrival. One brought a British film crew that planned to spend the day on Tetiaroa working on a documentary.

Farewell, Tetiaroa

After a bumpy takeoff from the Tetiaroa airstrip, the plane flew us over Moorea and back to Papeete. "The view of the lagoon waters is breathtaking from the air," wrote Mother. In Papeete, we spent our last night at the Hotel Tahiti and photographed the famous sunset over Moorea. A Tahitian wedding reception was taking place while we enjoyed a buffet dinner, featuring crab, in the restaurant overlooking the lagoon. After dinner, we went to the bar for a mai-tai and a chat with other members of the group before heading off to bed.

Our plane back to Los Angeles left at nine the next morning. As we flew over Tetiaroa, we said goodbye to "our" airstrip one last time. Tetiaroa is the only place I've ever cried on leaving.

Sunset over Moorea, act 1

Sunset over Moorea, act 2

Sunset over Moorea, grand finale

Two months later at my house in Los Angeles, Claude and Pierre, the last of the hermit crabs I had smuggled home from Tetiaroa, both climbed out of their shells and died. Marlon Brando died in 2004. In his autobiography (*Songs My Mother Taught Me*, 1994), Brando says, “If I have my way, Teti’aroa will remain forever a place that reminds Tahitians of who they are and what they were centuries ago . . . .” Brando’s original will had put Tetiaroa in a trust to preserve it for posterity, but in 2002 he made a new will that contained no provision for Tetiaroa, and two weeks before his death, he designated new executors. In 2005, the executors sold the atoll for $2 million to a hotel developer. The original executors protested that Brando’s will had not provided for Tetiaroa because he trusted them to preserve it. A luxury eco-resort called The Brando opened on Tetiaroa in July 2014, with rates starting at $4,000 a night for a private villa with pool.

On Papeete, the old Hotel Tahiti was torn down in the late 1990s and a modern, air-conditioned Sheraton was built in its place. It closed, then was replaced with a four-star Hilton, which closed in 2010. According to online photos, guests could still enjoy the view toward Moorea and dine in a restaurant overhanging the water. But the bungalows had gone, the new buildings extended right next to the highway between the airport and town, and almost nothing remained of Princess Takau’s garden.

* * *

Dedicated to the memory of Ed Tarvyd (January 14, 1939 – October 24, 2015).

Ed at work on motu Hiraanae, teaching about marine life (on the rock is a crown-of-thorns starfish, *Acanthaster planci*)