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THE ROMANCE REPORT:
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HOTTEST HONEYMOON DESTINATIONS



Making a close encounter with a humpback.

T a h I t i a n dream

In the middle of the Pacific, **VAWN HIMMELSBACH** manages to befriend humpback whale, some stingrays and a local or two

W

hen Maui Ciucci tells me we're going swimming with humpback whales, I don't fully grasp what's going on.

We're in a small boat, cruising through the aquamarine lagoon around Moorea, French Polynesia, which is protected by a coral reef that encircles the island. When we head past the reef, however, the water turns deep, dark blue. This is where the whales are. I feel ready for the possibility of seeing one (which I assume is rather slim) with my camera lens zoomed out as far as possible.

But suddenly Maui is diving into the water and, with powerful strokes, swims off into the distance until he's a dot on the horizon.

This isn't a park, reserve or some other cordoned-off area with captive whales. This is the South Pacific. But Maui, a local guide with Corallina Tours, swims in these waters every day; he knows how to track whales. So when he motions for us to jump in the water, I jump in, still confused, and swim toward our intrepid guide.

I see a sliver of white far below on the ocean floor that is apparently a humpback whale. That's impressive in and of itself. But during the brief period of time it takes to readjust my snorkel mask and stick my head back underwater, the whale is breaching, right in front of me, rising to the surface a mere six metres away.

She's massive. And beautiful. I barely have time to catch my breath before she's gone, swimming off into the deep blue.

Considering I spent the previous day swimming with reef sharks and petting gentle, friendly stingrays (often referred to as the puppies of the sea), also in the wild, with guides who know how to track them, swimming with whales was the icing on a pretty big cake.

I had already been won over by the friendly locals and natural beauty of Tahiti, its jagged mountains shrouded in mist, towering over crystal-clear lagoons dotted with islets, called *motus*.

Fakarava's perfectly photogenic lagoon.





ON THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Lush living on the island of Huahine; underwater adventures off the shore of Mo'orea; giant Tiki statues from an ancient religious complex inhabit the island of Hiva Oa; book yourself time with the stingrays who live near the island of Mo'orea.



Tahiti.

The word alone evokes a sense of the exotic. The playground of the rich and famous. A bucket-list destination.

Tahiti, in fact, refers to both the island and the region; it's the largest of 118 islands and atolls (ring-shaped islands or chain of islands formed by coral) that make up French Polynesia, spread out over an area the size of Western Europe. It's also remote, situated south of Hawaii, between L.A. and Sydney. Annexed by France in 1880, Tahiti is part of the French Republic and French is the official language, though Tahitian is widely spoken.

Tahiti is meant for island-hopping, whether you're seeking all-out luxury in Bora Bora, some of the world's best scuba diving in Rangiroa or Fakarava or an authentic Polynesian experience on a hidden gem like Taha'a or Huahine. (And it's easy to island-hop with an extensive network of flights from domestic carrier Air Tahiti.)

Taha'a, however, is only accessible by boat from sister island Raiatea (the two islands are surrounded by a continuous coral reef). Dotted with *motus* in the shared lagoon, this is an ideal spot to swim with nurse sharks and stingrays.

The island itself is shaped like a flower, which suits it—lush hillsides are covered in banana and coconut groves, the scent of vanilla wafting through the air. Dubbed the “vanilla island,” 80 per cent of Tahitian vanilla is produced here.

Huahine is often referred to by locals as one of Tahiti's best-kept secrets, its ragged mountains covered in lush foliage. With only eight villages, the island offers the slow, tranquil pace of old Polynesia. Land and lagoon excursions are available, from visiting archeological ruins to exploring the underwater world of reef walls and coral gardens.

For divers, the outlying atolls offer some of the best diving in the world. Rangiroa—the largest atoll in French Polynesia and second-largest in the world—is revered for its biodiversity and exceptionally clear waters.

Rangiroa consists of 240 islets strung together over 177 kilometres, with a central lagoon dotted with *motus* and teeming with marine life. For divers, the Tiputa Pass—a pass between the inner lagoon and outer South Pacific—is considered to have one of the highest concentration of sharks in the world, including hammerhead, grey reef, whitetip and blacktip.

Fakarava is another diver's paradise—and a UNESCO-designated reserve. Shaped like a crooked rectangle, it's only 400 metres at its widest and encircles a lagoon with 72 *motus*. The Garuae Pass (on the north side) is known for its biodiversity and drift diving, while Tumakohua Pass (on the south side) is home to Shark's Hole, with lemon, whitecap and hammerhead sharks.

The Tahitians have a deep respect for the land and sea and all who inhabit it, believing in the *mana*, or life force, that connects all things. After tandem diving in Fakarava, visiting sacred archeological sites on Huahine and swimming with a humpback whale in Moorea, I'm definitely feeling the *mana*.

TAHITI ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

While Tahiti retains its allure as a once-in-a-lifetime destination, it's now a whole lot easier to get there. There are no direct flights to Papeete from Canada, but there are now more options for travellers out of San Francisco and L.A. In May, low-cost carrier **French Bee** launched service to Papeete via San Francisco. United Airlines began service out of San Francisco in October, and legacy carrier **Air Tahiti Nui**, which flies out of L.A., will start replacing its entire fleet with Dreamliners starting this November.

TAHITI ESSENTIALS

STAY

Known for over-the-top luxury in its over-the-water bungalows, Bora Bora is a bucket-list destination—and deservedly so. The island, dominated by the jagged peak of Mount Otemanu, is surrounded by an aquamarine lagoon, dotted with *motus* where the top luxury resorts are located (guests are picked up by boat from the tiny airport). The white-sand beaches here are considered some of the best in all of Tahiti.

InterContinental Bora Bora Resort & Thalasso Spa on Motu Piti Aau has added 10 new overwater bungalows to its property, each with a private infinity plunge pool (nice touch: a glass coffee table that peers into the crystal-clear waters below), as well as four new Brando Overwater Suites (the same ones found on Marlon Brando's exclusive island retreat, The Brando, accessible by private jet).

thalasso.intercontinental.com

The Conrad (formerly the Hilton) has undergone a multimillion-dollar refurbishment, reopening last year with 86 overwater bungalows, some with private infinity plunge pools, as well as 28 beach and garden villas, all with a modern, airy aesthetic by BLINK Design (think: wall-length sliding glass doors). Nestled in a private cove along the white-sand beaches of Motu To'opua, it's the ultimate spot for rest and restoration.

conradhotels3.hilton.com