

WHY WE CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF
TAHITI'S
BUNGALOWS

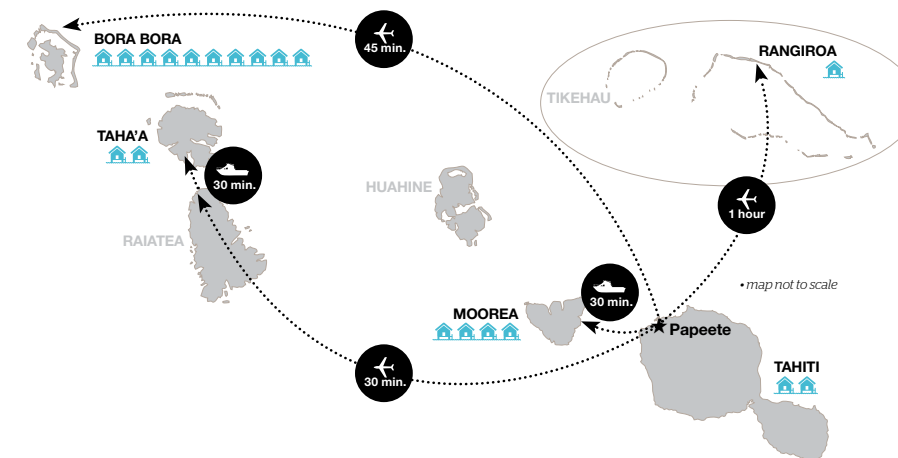
{ Start planning, or dreaming, right here }

JON WHITTLE

It was a sleepy Monday staff meeting, and *Islands* photo editor Lori Barbely had to be joking. “What if,” she started, because something so ridiculous always starts with those two words, “we go to Tahiti and test all the overwater bungalows.” Ha! Good one! But then, a week later, the page views at Islands.com started breaking records — an overwater bungalow gallery had gone live. Hmm, a bungalow test. Should we? Here’s our 30-page answer. In a first-of-its-kind Tahiti trip, Lori and staff photographer Jon Whittle, separately, spent 25 days in 19 overwater bungalows. They returned with 14 shell leis, 100 opinions and 10,000 amazing photos, only some of which are on these pages. The rest are at Islands.com, which at this moment is going off again.



JON WHITTLE



BUNGALOW HOPPING

(Nightly rates are ranges over a three-night stay in November and are subject to change.)

TAHITI

InterContinental Tahiti Close to the airport. Great transit stop for late flights or one last fling. \$366-\$815

Le Méridien For those who want an overwater experience near the civilization of the main island. \$690-\$717

MOOREA

Sofitel la Ora Beach Rooms are big. Ceilings up to the sky make them even more spacious. \$1,239-\$1,699

Hilton The exterior is the classic Tahiti picture — long boardwalks and expanses of blue water. \$673-\$729

InterContinental So green, no boardwalks. Wish I had the suite overlooking the dolphin lagoon. \$475-\$690

Pearl Smaller bungalows with a hip island vibe (and good price). Great snorkeling at the drop-off. \$492-\$600

TAHA'A

Vahine Island Three bungalows on an isolated motu keep this place under the radar. Love it. \$696-\$795

Le Taha'a Interior is among the best. Bathtub is so nice I took a self-portrait in it (not shown). \$670-\$1,173

RANGIROA

Kia Ora Resort Amazing snorkeling and at the most amazing atoll. \$1,204

BORA BORA

St. Regis Think enormous, as in oversized rooms and piles of Tahitian specialties on the buffet. \$1,104-\$13,258

Four Seasons Complimentary washer and dryer on every boardwalk. They thought of everything. \$1,015-\$3,365

Hilton Home of the only two-story overwater bungalow (it's really a villa) in the South Pacific. \$994-\$4,634

Sofitel Private Island A mix of lagoon life and high overlooks. \$1,459-\$1,743

Sofitel Marara Easiest access to mainland adventures, like jeep tours into the historic hills. \$1,117-\$1,498

InterContinental Thalasso Most epic tuna sashimi ever: The serving platter itself is made of tuna. \$785-\$1,381

Le Méridien One-of-a-kind snorkeling lagoon is teeming with turtles — a great choice for kids. \$740-\$1,259

Pearl Great family pick. Shallow water around the bungalows and lots of fish in the coral garden. \$607-\$923

InterContinental Le Moana Being on Bora Bora's main island makes money-saving market trips easy. \$607-\$861

Le Maitai Polynesia Price says you're in a hotel. Fish swimming under the couch says you're not. \$432

**Really,
This Is
a Job**



Lori Barbely
Photo editor:
6 bungalow stays;
10 days; 1 midnight
iguana encounter
on Moorea.



Jon Whittle
Senior staff
photographer:
13 bungalow stays;
7 interisland flights;
4 sea-turtle bites.

FIRST IMPRESSION

Bungalow life became real in this very spot. Not from the air or from a distance. No, reality hit when my butt landed in a chair on my bungalow's deck at Vahine Island. Fish swam under me. Silence engulfed me. Was I floating? — JW

The Birth of Bungalows



Jay Carlisle is 78 now. Old enough to recall when Bora Bora was known as “Boring Boring” but young enough to remember how Tahiti’s first overwater bungalows came up short. He grabs two beers from behind his bar at Club Bali Hai Hotel Moorea and dives in.

“We were bachelors — myself, Hugh Kelley and Don ‘Muk’ McCallum. Among the first expats in Tahiti. We’d moved here in 1960 from Newport Beach, California. Hugh had been a defense attorney, Muk sold sporting goods, and I left a job as a securities trader. By 1967 we were running a resort on Moorea and one on Raiatea. Living the dream. Work by day. Party by night. ‘Hammered and happy,’ as Muk says. But we had a problem. Our hotel on Raiatea had no beach. But it had a beautiful reef.

“That’s when Kelley said, ‘What if we built bungalows on the reef?’ We had seen Tahitians stay in fishing huts out on the water for days. Would tourists? We built templates using water pipe. We used air hoses to mark the reef for pilings. We went into the bedrock under the coral to anchor the pipes with cement — man, were those solid. And finally we built the first three overwater bungalows. Our first guests arrived and ... the huts were too small.

“But we saw potential. Our Moorea hotel had more visitors, and great snorkeling. So we built larger bungalows there. Right away people wanted them. It was the snorkeling. That’s why the bungalows were so popular, and why we put windows in the floors (we called it ‘Tahitian TV’). We charged \$34 a night with meals. That was in 1968. Word spread. Guests like Marlon Brando (great at imitations) and Albert Finney eventually arrived. And it seemed every request was for those bungalows.

“It wasn’t long before our friends from Hotel Bora Bora came over with questions. We answered them — helping Bora Bora’s first bungalows go up in the early 1970s.

“These days, we’re into affordable overwater bungalows at Club Bali Hai Hotel (from \$250). I don’t think any of us imagined the overwater bungalows of today.”



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: ZACH STOVALL; JON WHITTLE; COURTESY JAY CARLISLE (2); DONALD MCCALLUM/GETTY IMAGES

The Tahiti Nobody Knew... Yet

1960-62

TYPICAL VANILLA FARMERS? Jay, Muk and Hugh are three of five expats on Moorea. The trio’s farm fails, so they buy a hotel from a local who secures work permits. They have no hotel experience. Hotel Bali Hai Moorea opens.



1962

LIFE MAGAZINE ENCOUNTERS A WRITER AND A PHOTOGRAPHER RETURNING HOME FROM A BOMB TEST HAPPEN UPON THE RESORT. AIRLINE STEWARDESSES ARE GUESTS. LIFE MAGAZINE RUNS STORY. TAHITI TOURISM BOOMS.



1967

FIRST OVERWATER BUNGALOWS The millions of Americans who saw the *Life* magazine article keep Hotel Bali Hai Moorea busy. Jay, Muk and Hugh take over a resort on Raiatea. It has no beach for bungalows. They improvise.



1970-present

TAHITI’S OVERWATER TYCOONS THE THREESOME, DUBBED “THE BALI HAI BOYS,” BUILD BUNGALOWS ON THREE ISLANDS. TODAY, TWO SURVIVING MEMBERS, MUK AND JAY (CENTER, RIGHT), RUN CLUB BALI HAI HOTEL MOOREA.



Most Amazing Room(s)

NO, IT'S A PALACE. The 3,229 square feet in the presidential suite at the Bora Bora Hilton includes a pool, two stories and a huge "well-being room." If you're here, you're already being well.

517 Square feet of deck. That's the size of a typical bungalow. There are a Jacuzzi and day bed here because, well, why leave?

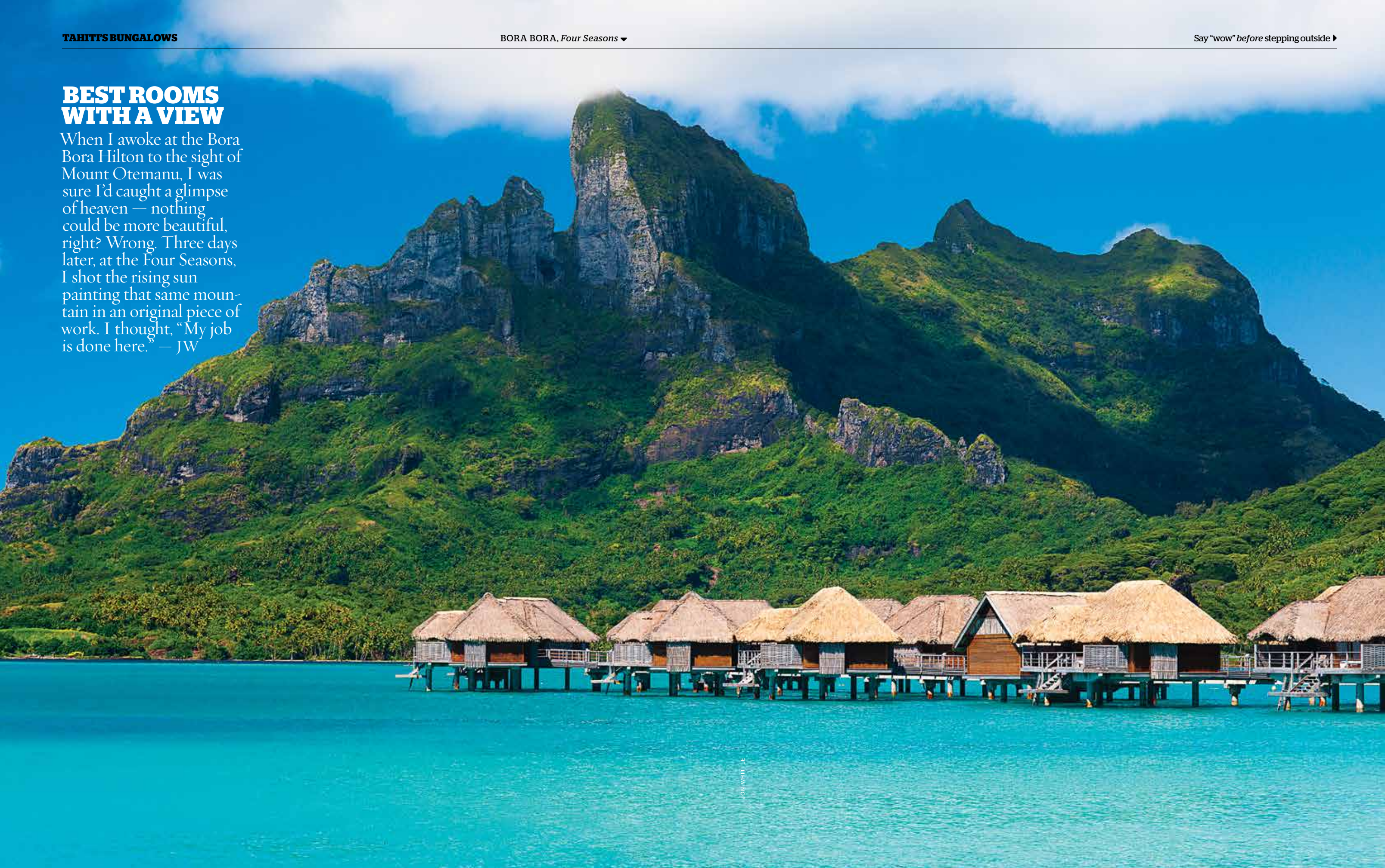
BOOKING A FEW MONTHS IN ADVANCE CAN SAVE MORE THAN A GRAND OFF THE SUITE'S RATE, BRINGING IT DOWN TO A COOL \$2,300 PER NIGHT (BEFORE TAX).



JON WHITTLE (3)

BEST ROOMS WITH A VIEW

When I awoke at the Bora Bora Hilton to the sight of Mount Otemanu, I was sure I'd caught a glimpse of heaven — nothing could be more beautiful, right? Wrong. Three days later, at the Four Seasons, I shot the rising sun painting that same mountain in an original piece of work. I thought, "My job is done here." — JW





Favorite Interior

I was three bungalows into my trip when I noticed a pattern: The rooms were as lovely as expected, but it was the views that wowed me the most. It made sense, since you're generally either sitting on or snorkeling off a porch. Going inside becomes rather insignificant, unless you're on a honeymoon (most people were; I definitely was not). So I wasn't prepared for the room that greeted me as I swiped my keycard at the Sofitel la Ora Beach on Moorea. Mosquito netting stre-e-e-tched from the bed up to the highest ceiling I would see on the trip. A soft chair invited me to watch fish through the floor. For the first time I actually settled inside before stepping onto the incredible porch you see here. Yeah, I could stay a while. — LB





Moving Around, Tahitian-Style

Over the course of two weeks I buckled into seven lagoon-jumping planes, but not a single van or bus. I never heard a car horn either. Transportation is different on these islands. For example:

● **OUTRIGGERS** I'd seen islanders making food deliveries on outriggers. Saw fishermen gliding in them at sunrise. So it was a peaceful treat to ride one from Le Méridien Bora Bora to a gorgeous marine sanctuary. Until the boat captain said, "Jump in." What? The water was teeming with reef sharks. But the captain was telling kids to jump in too. Turns out this is one of the most popular family excursions around all of Bora Bora. I jumped off the outrigger as told. This I would never forget.

● **BIKES** The boardwalks from the bungalows to the bars are long. By the time I arrived at Pearl Beach on Bora Bora, foot fatigue had settled in. Yeah, poor me. But think of the resort employees making the walks. Poor them. On the first morning here I saw a bike outside my room with a basket full of fresh

linens. A housekeeper smiled at me and pedaled off. Why had it taken me so long to notice the bikes, or to find out they're available to guests at many of the resorts? Lesson: Ride as the locals ride.

● **CARS** Travel here is more by water than by car. For me, after two weeks of outriggers, ferries and snorkel fins, the basic concept of driving felt weird. On the occasion when I drove my little French rental car toward Mount Otemanu, the road on Bora Bora was empty. An epic drive, yes, but I couldn't wait to get back to the bungalows and get wet.

● **WATER TAXIS** The driver of this water taxi was singing. How nice. He was also playing a Tahitian ukulele, which would be cool except that it takes two hands to play, meaning he had no hands left to steer. I had to trust his feet to direct the boat, and us, between the Bora Bora Hilton and Pearl Beach Resort. Most of the bungalows are on motus, so these boats are the preferred mode of transportation. And in at least one case, the toes have it all under control. — JW

THE BIG TRAVEL PICTURE

118 Islands make up Tahiti, spreading across 2 million square miles of ocean. The combined landmass is barely bigger than Rhode Island.

Air Tahiti offers the equivalent of rail passes for interisland flights. One of the passes allows you to travel among nine islands for about \$700.

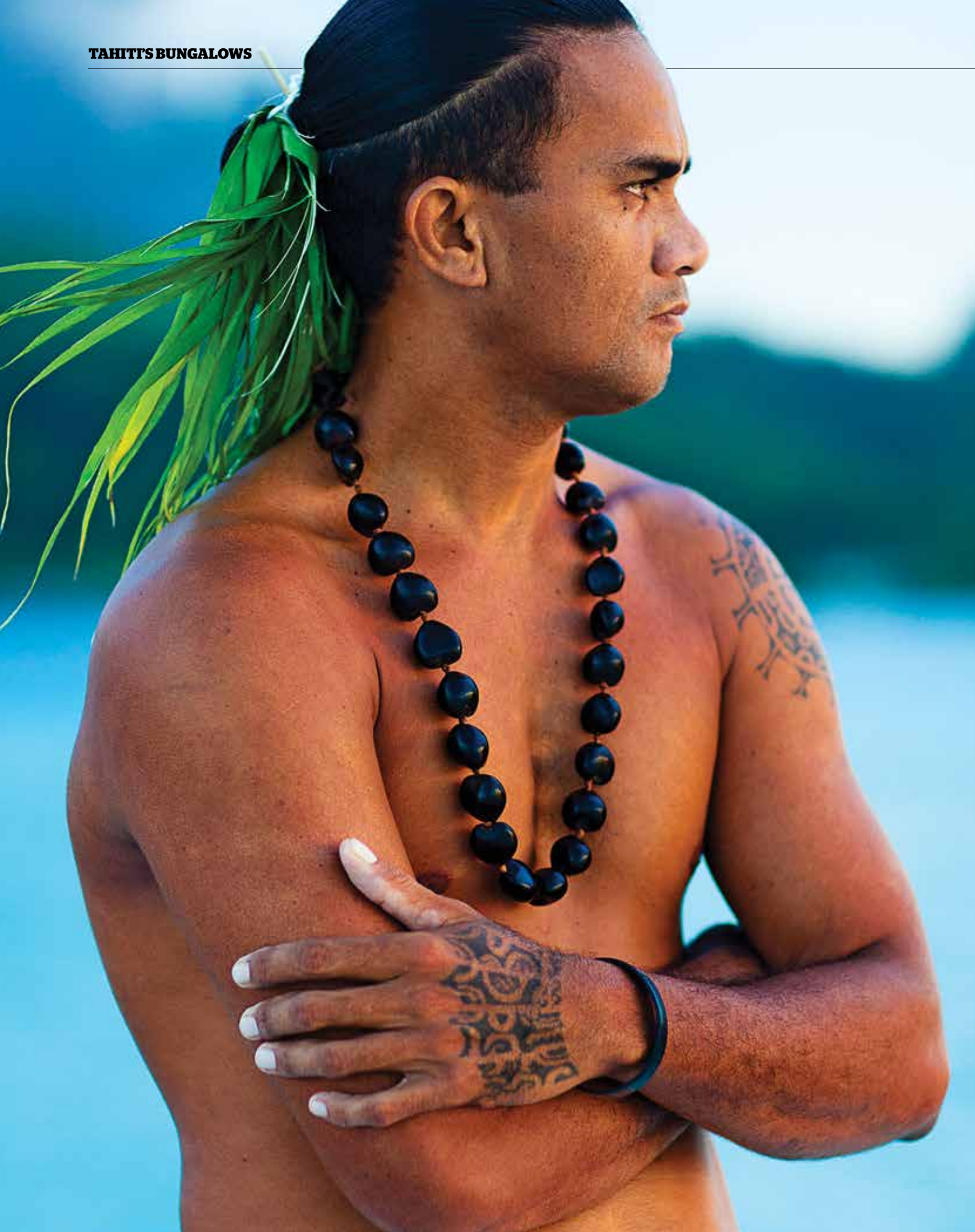
10 Nights is the average stay on the islands for North American travelers, with half the nights in bungalows. People from France stay for 29 nights.

Bora Bora is the most popular in the island chain. A typical itinerary would be five nights on Bora Bora, three on Moorea and two on Tahiti.



Most Sensitive

It didn't hurt, but I had to tattle. A teenage sea turtle was trying to take my toe. "Oh, she likes to play," said one of the turtle doctors standing nearby at Le Méridien's private lagoon. She spoke as if breaking up a spat between toddlers in the bathtub. I dove back in. Snorkeling throughout Tahiti is serious fun, meaning it's more than a recess activity. It's a way for Tahitians to showcase how they take great care of the ocean and everything in it — and visitors are expected to do the same. At Pearl Beach on Bora Bora, marine biologists are using electric currents to stimulate coral reef growth. Here at Le Méridien, a percentage of every guest's bill helps rehabilitate sick or wounded sea turtles. My toes bear a testimonial to the program: It's working. — JW



FRIENDLIEST STAFF

SIX

Languages spoken by the Le Moana staff: English, French, Spanish, German, Japanese and Italian. All in one tone: cheerful.

FAMILY IS A BIG deal here. So much so, I mistook a local as the mother of a kid who was snorkeling. The staff had arranged the babysitter. Family satisfaction is a tall task. Grade: A+

HELLO, JON! I WAS AMAZED THAT EVERYONE REMEMBERED MY NAME, WHICH IS MORE THAN I CAN SAY FOR MY WIFE WHEN I CAME HOME AFTER 15 DAYS. — JW



JON WHITTLE (2)

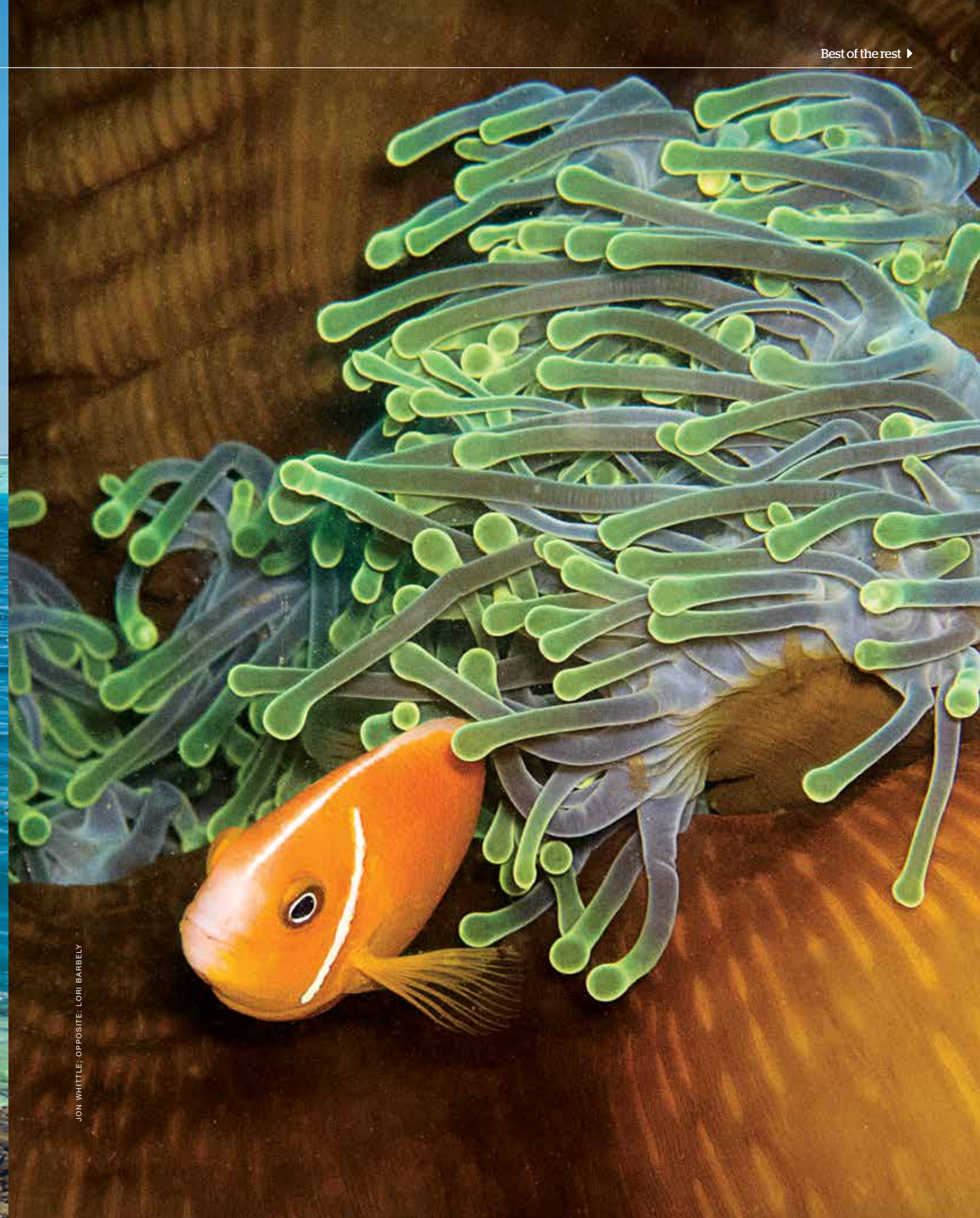
MOST GENEROUS

Some bungalows are the size of dorm rooms (as if it matters in the South Pacific). So when I first saw a hallway, sitting room and huge bathroom in my bungalow at the St. Regis, I thought they'd mistakenly booked me into the owner's suite. Nope, it was standard. "I need you here," I texted my wife. "All the pets too." — JW



Best Snorkeling

Let's be honest here: Snorkeling in Tahiti is good, *really* good. It's what mountain climbing is to Nepal. Most resorts include masks and fins with the towels and soaps. So the simple fact that the Moorea Pearl stood out among the others is a high compliment. Waking up goes something like this: Jump off the porch. Adjust mask. Look under the bungalow at rich coral. Lose count of the number of fish species swimming around (the resort claims 75 species are here). Swim a few feet out from the porch. Watch the sea bottom drop 30 feet. Ogle turtles, dolphins and rays — hey, they're coming to play. Snorkeling at the Hilton and InterContinental on Moorea was world-class, but the water around the Pearl was out of this world. — LB



The Best of Everything Else

● **MOST BLATANT COMFORT** It's pretty common for the resorts to have dress codes, which is why Jon and Lori called room service more than usual. On the flip side, the most casual staff attire observed had to be on the guy who paddled outriggers and blew conch shells at the InterContinental Thalasso (bottom, far right). The headband and scarf above his neck were pretty much what he wore around his waist.

● **HARDEST TO BELIEVE** Lori insists she didn't touch the massage table at the Sofitel on Moorea (bottom, near right). "I would assume it's the best outdoor spa, partly because of the cold-water plunge pool." She did seem really relaxed that day on Skype.

● **THE "OTHER" WATER VIEW** Could there be a more underappreciated amenity anywhere than a swimming pool in Bora Bora? Every lagoon *is* a pool. Still, the pool at the InterContinental Thalasso (top, near right) got Jon's attention because the infinity setup spills into water of the exact same color. So even though it isn't the biggest pool on the islands, it is a perfect fit.

● **BEST MAKEUP MEAL** Jon ate the local specialty, poisson cru, eight times. His favorite was served in a halved coconut at the Four Seasons on Bora Bora (top, far right). "I'm pretty sure it nicely countered the bacon I ate for breakfast at every single resort."

● **MOST SOBERING BAR** The Miki Miki bar at Le Méridien Bora Bora is made to look like the bow of a ship full of booze. It's almost tempting to stick to chocolate milk so the views of the amazing white-sand beach and Mount Otemanu are not impaired. Almost.

● **LIFE-CHANGING BATHTUB** "I'm a shower guy," says Jon, "but the tub at Le Taha'a sucked me in. It's like being swallowed into the hull of a stout outrigger, lined in varnished wood. I wound up taking a self-portrait in a tub for the first time in my life. Fully clothed."

● **SAFEST SPOT** A "lagoonarium" is as common at these resorts as a lake is in Minnesota. It's a shallow and protected lagoon suited for anyone who wants to snorkel without going into open water. In other words, ideal for kids ... or *Islands* photographers.

ANONYMOUS CONFESSIONS

Outreach Salt air does something amazing to dinner rolls. But that isn't why I stole 16 of them. I was giving them to the fish under my bungalows.

Guest Relations The first four times I was asked to join a Tahitian dance, I refused. The next two times I caved (with my camera locked into "off" mode).

Forced Diet I'm told the poisson cru was fabulous. Same with the coco breads and coco puddings. Problem for me in Tahiti: I don't like coconut.

Yikes! That was me when pricing the bungalows (see page 25). After living in them, my response became "Whoa!" (see every preceding page).



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JON WHITTLE (3); LORI BARBEY

MY #1 BUNGALOW ...

I came to love boardwalks and floor windows during my 10-day hut crawl. There was neither at the InterContinental on Moorea. But the resort still rose to the top of my bungalow list for what there is:

- 1. Nothing fake.** The bungalows are built on sandbars. Little bridges connect them, but otherwise you're walking on paths (not Trex).
- 2. Privacy.** Because the foundation is a sandbar, palm trees and other exotic foliage grow between the bungalows. What neighbors?
- 3. Marine life.** I'm a sucker for sea turtles, and the resort's sea turtle sanctuary was receiving 80 baby turtles the day after I departed.
- 4. Local connections.** While I was here, two groups of kids from local schools came to learn about the dolphins and the turtle center.
- 5. Sunset.** The porch is made for watching the sun go down. I was sitting in a chair at 6:07 p.m. to do exactly that. — LB



... AND MY #1

By the time I reached this dot of an island off the larger dot of Taha'a, bungalows had become a blur of thatch and porch ladders. My stay on Vahine would make 11 bungalows in 12 days (a fact dug up from my notes a week later). As soon as the boat landed and I stepped onto Vahine, though, I knew this place, good or bad, would stand out. I didn't hear a conch shell. Didn't see a golf cart or a buffet. And over the lagoon were just three lonely bungalows. From the States, Tahiti seems 50 light years away (though the eight-hour flight from Los Angeles isn't as long as you might have thought). Vahine seems another 50 light years away from all of Tahiti. It's where the blur stopped, and everything stood still for me. — JW

JON WHITTLE

BEST BUNGALOW
PHOTOS EVER
[islands.com/
bungalows](https://islands.com/bungalows)



SEND US YOUR CAMERA-PHONE PHOTOS AND
WIN A TRIP HERE!
Go to islands.com/facebook

COURTESY LIKULIKU (2); COURTESY GOLDEN PALM TREE

Why Aren't There More Bungalows?

You likely know Steve Anstey's view of bungalows. The *Islands* cover pictured below was photographed near his office at Likuliku Lagoon Resort. Poor guy. As the resort's GM, he helped create that view six years ago, erecting Fiji's first and only bungalows. Yes, Fiji's *only*, even today. So we asked him: Why aren't there more overwater offerings in Fiji, or worldwide?



"The simple answer: Overwater bungalows are costly and location-specific. They have to be built on atolls or in lagoons with flat seabeds surrounded by reefs. The flat seabeds provide a base for building. The coral reefs provide protection from the currents. Bungalows also tend to be built where tides and cyclones are minimal.

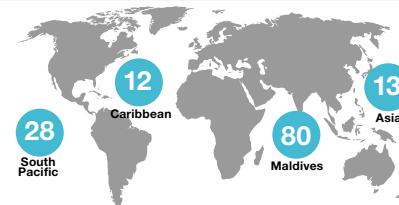
"There are also economic challenges. Environmental impact studies need to be done. Building materials and machinery need to be barged in. Services like water, electricity, gas and sewerage need to run underneath the boardwalks back to land. The environmental issues are enormous.

"So are the building obstacles. It took three very costly tries before our first structural girders struck bedrock. I once received a call from a nearby resort GM asking if we'd lost some mahogany window frames, as he'd noticed on his morning walk that ours were on his beach. A barge carrying our supplies had sunk. Nobody was hurt. But opening an overwater resort on a remote island isn't for the faint of heart.

"The upkeep costs are considerable too. We refurbish our bungalows inside and out annually. Their exposure to the elements demands it. All internal and external walls are painted and stained. All wooden decks are sanded. Thatching is replaced. All of it's done while hanging off a building where you don't want to drop or pollute anything.

"We probably over-engineered our bungalows in Fiji, which has greater tidal variances than other locales. That likely has inhibited overwater offerings in the region. But I'm sure more will come. All I know is I can't imagine our lagoon without them."

Overwater Offerings: by the Numbers



WHY BUILD HERE? FAVORABLE TIDES AND WEATHER ARE FOUND NEAR THE EQUATOR. THE WEBSITE OVERWATER BUNGALOWS.NET LISTS 137 OVERWATER ACCOMMODATIONS WORLDWIDE, INCLUDING ONE IN SWITZERLAND!

58%
of the world's overwater bungalows are in the Maldives.



OVERWATER COVERS A double-digit boost in *Islands*' newsstand sales occurs whenever an overwater bungalow is pictured. A former *Islands* publisher declared, "All we have to do to sell more issues is put Bora Bora's bungalows on the cover."



NICE VIEW, EH? THE GOLDEN PALM TREE RESORT IN MALAYSIA OFFERS 392 OVERWATER VILLAS, MAKING IT THE LARGEST OVERWATER STRUCTURE IN THE WORLD. BUNGALOWS MAY LACK TAHITI'S VIEWS, BUT THEY START AT \$106.