

Tahiti in your underpants

ALTHOUGH NOT BORN aboard a yacht during a two year family cruise, as his parents often boast, Rob Greenaway did spend the first six months of his life aboard a 33ft keeler that his father built in the backyard during four years of late nights. Sailing has become the family heritage and Rob has completed many ocean trips in the past 28 years - from cruising aboard the HMNZS Monowai from Auckland to Raoul Island, to crewing with a family of five aboard a 33ft steel sloop from Wellington to Fiji. Sailing aboard a luxury 51ft charter yacht in Tahiti was uncharacteristically comfortable—but he took the job anyway.

Story and pictures by ROB GREENAWAY

I have a recurring dream: rolling out of a bunk on a clear, salty morning, throwing on a white jersey with an itchy crew-neck collar, flipping over a dewy squab to find the dry side, sipping a really strong cup of tea and watching the sun dance over the champagne of a dawn sea.

Turning that into reality takes a few steps. First, find the right destination—somewhere with a little culture, history, and sea.

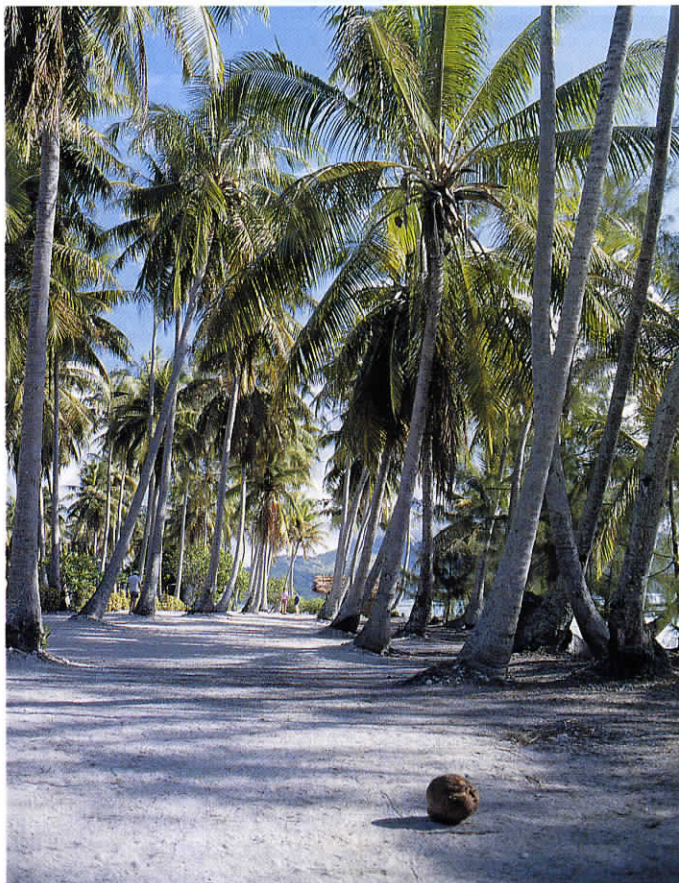
Take Tahiti. The French did. The nation annexed the Tahitian islands in the mid-1800s after a few scuffles with English missionaries (who saw Tahiti 'first'). Mind you, the English hadn't made a good first impression. Their earliest political exchange with the locals was a few volleys of musket and cannon fire for a handful of thrown stones—the traditional greeting of the 19th century explorer.

Almost two centuries later, the Tahitian islands are what a tourist brochure might describe as a unique mixture of French culture and Polynesian lifestyle. Unique, that is, besides several other Polynesian islands.

And then there's the boat. I have one main criteria for a yacht. At the least, it must have a decent toilet. What a mariner would call a functioning head. I get tired of regularly dipping tail first into the Pacific bidet (particularly in busy ports) because someone tried to flush their car keys down the boat's only loo, which is not an uncommon occurrence. A sewage holding tank would be handy too, but we're talking French environmentalism here.

And finally, the opportunity. In this case a call from the editor of *Adventure* magazine. Does anyone we know have the time to look at ATM yacht charters in Tahiti? Well, yes, one or two....

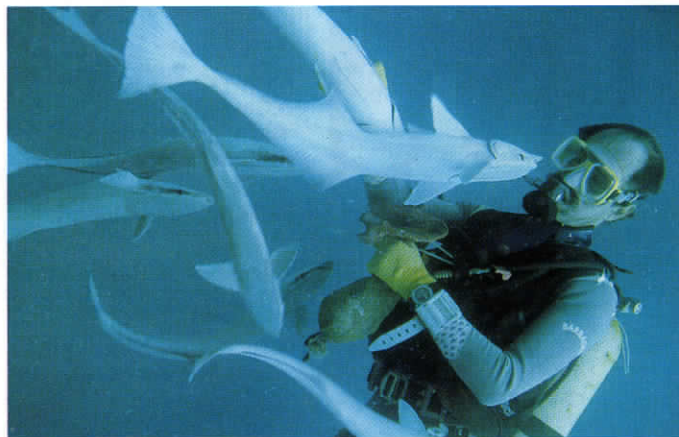
A 51ft Benetau sloop greeted us in the bay of Faaroa on the island of Raiatea in French Polynesia, with approximately one head for every 10 feet, and all of them working. That the French



If it's coconut palms you want to see—never a problem in Tahiti.



ATM's Diamond Shoat—nothing like Theroux's folding kayak.



Claude and friends enjoy lunch together.

TRAVEL FACTS

TAHITI YACHT CRUISE

TAHITI'S LEEWARD Island group lies 220 kilometres west/northwest of Papeete. Regular flights service the islands. Stardust ATM is based on the island of Raiatea. From here it is within easy sight-sailing distance to the other magical islands of Tahaa, Bora Bora and Huahine.

The choice is from a pristine fleet of 30 charter vessels ranging in size from 36' to 52' and including the luxury Privilege 43' and 48' Catamarans (providing for 2-12 people sailing together).

A bareboat sailing holiday in Tahiti's Leeward Islands starts from \$1885.00 pp for 8 nights Tahiti, based on 6 people sailing together. This is all inclusive of airfares from Auckland, vessel, transfers and hotel accommodation. You don't have to be a sailor—a skipper is an optional extra.

For further information contact:
Sail Connections Ltd,
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AUCKLAND

enjoy their luxury is highlighted by the presence of six showers. Which leaves just enough space for five cabins, a dining room (saloon in boat-speak), galley, one cook and one skipper. Welcome to ATM's Diamond Shoal, the Tardis of sailing ships. Nothing like Paul Theroux's folding kayak, but then he spent longer than a week in Tahiti while paddling the Happy Isles of Oceania and was very depressed about having been dumped by his wife, which would make deprivation seem more appropriate.

You don't need to be depressed to visit Tahiti. However, if you're thinking of staying ashore you'll need a deep pocket, filled with CPFs—French Pacific Francs. Tahiti's economy is closely linked to the French mainland, which means when you put on a smear of sunscreen from your NZ\$29 bottle of factor 15, you stay in the sun for as long as possible. And make sure you get the exposure right on every frame of your NZ\$30 roll of Kodacolor Gold. Suck every degree of coolness from the

ice in your NZ\$7 glass of mango juice, before it melts and devalues. Tahitians pay no income tax and in return rely heavily on imports from France. Imports from anywhere other than France incur heavy duties.

To save a few dollars, take to the Harpic blue of the French Polynesian sea, partly insulated from French economics by a Stardust ATM booking office based in Auckland. If you want to swim with mantarays and haven't recently helped sell any of our state assets, then yacht charter is



Tahiti comes in any colour as long as it's blue.

perhaps one of the few relatively cheap ways to experience that unique mixture of Paris and Papeete.

Flying Air New Zealand from Auckland to board an 11m ATM yacht with six others for ten days will set each of you back about \$2000.

An extra \$50 per day each gets you provisioned. You can even get someone to cook all that food for another \$170 per day (shared). Another \$230 per day lands you with a suntanned skipper with all the

right calluses in all the right places.

But you're not thinking about all that thirty metres below the surface. Dive tanks are hireable on shore. Underwater there's an extroverted Frenchman feeding perfectly good tuna to a silver battleship of a barracuda. Apparently these marine pitchforks have difficulty distinguishing sushi from fingers, so I'm keeping mine hooked into my weightbelt. Until I can't help but point out that several Volkswagon/frisbee hybrids—looking suspiciously like mantarays—are moving in to block out the thin, blue sunlight.

Another benefit gained from remaining at thirty metres is that French extroverts cannot speak underwater. They wait until making the death run back to the yacht club before over-flowing like a ruptured air tank.

Claude, my diving and driving companion was gushing. "Did you see Mary?" he françaised. "She'll be giving us very many little mantas very soon." Mary the manta was pregnant. How Claude could tell was beyond me, but he probably used the same system of observation that allowed him to overtake on blind corners.

Claude is typical of many of the tour operators in French Polynesia. The European French, by virtue of birth and colonisation, are also honorary Tahitians. When the Champs Elysees loses its lus-

tre, there is nothing to discourage them from shifting south to the warmth of Polynesia—after what a Californian or Coromandalian might call a lifestyle decision—and, say, growing vanilla, or showing tourists how to grow vanilla.

Which is what's so good about sailing. Yacht charter (we'll leave yacht ownership for a few years) allows that opportunity to pick and choose the absolute delights of some foreign port.

On the island of Tahaa we bounce along back roads to check out flock trees, scarred dogs and scuttling roadside crabs. The four wheel drive is a poor substitute for a mountain bike which would make all the right, quiet noises as it glided over the damp coral road. A local calls us over to share in her crop of small bananas and sweet mangoes. "Iaorana" is the greeting. "Kia ora" should be the reply, but I aim at the French "bonjour".

It's a bad choice and she holds my handshake with a weak grin, waiting for a better response. The Tahitian culture is strong and rich, and a few houses keep flying a flag of Tahitian independence, although national elections support French rule.

A little local language would go a long way to turning the handshake into a real welcome, but she loads us with fruit all the same and waves, "parahi oe." We

smile back an "au revoir" and shuffle back to sea.

Too many opportunities, too little time. Bora Bora's volcanic peak remains unclimbed. The jungle treks are missed and Paul Gauguin's museum is unvisited. The real Tahitians glide by on their Vespas and we never get to know more than what we read.

Still, there's no better way of greeting a new land than from the ocean, taking time to prepare for a casual landing and the right salutation. Lonely volcanic peaks grow slowly on the horizon, as does the look of relief on the face of the navigator. The boat is a thin sliver of fibreglass between us and the ocean, and when we really get into sailing, we begin to wish the boat wasn't there at all. Just us, the sea, that circling frigate bird and that reliable marine head.

Good sailing is simple sailing, and all the more pleasant when it can be done in nothing but one's underpants. It is a process that earths the soul of the static electricity of stress—as a Californian might say (or a French person living in Tahiti, which is a similar beast). Add coconuts and foreign ice-cream and sailing is a little more romantic. Multiply it by mantarays, tuna muscling through warm, orange sunsets and the Tahitian culture, and it's an adventure—albeit rather relaxing. ❖