

*Charting a New Course*

# FRENCH

By PETER BENCHLEY

Photographs by JODI COBB  
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHER



# POLYNESIA

*With strong arms and obliging souls, Tahitians usher ashore French vacationers after a lagoon cruise on an outrigger canoe. But hospitality has turned to hostility among many islanders for whom the burdens of French rule outweigh the blessings.*

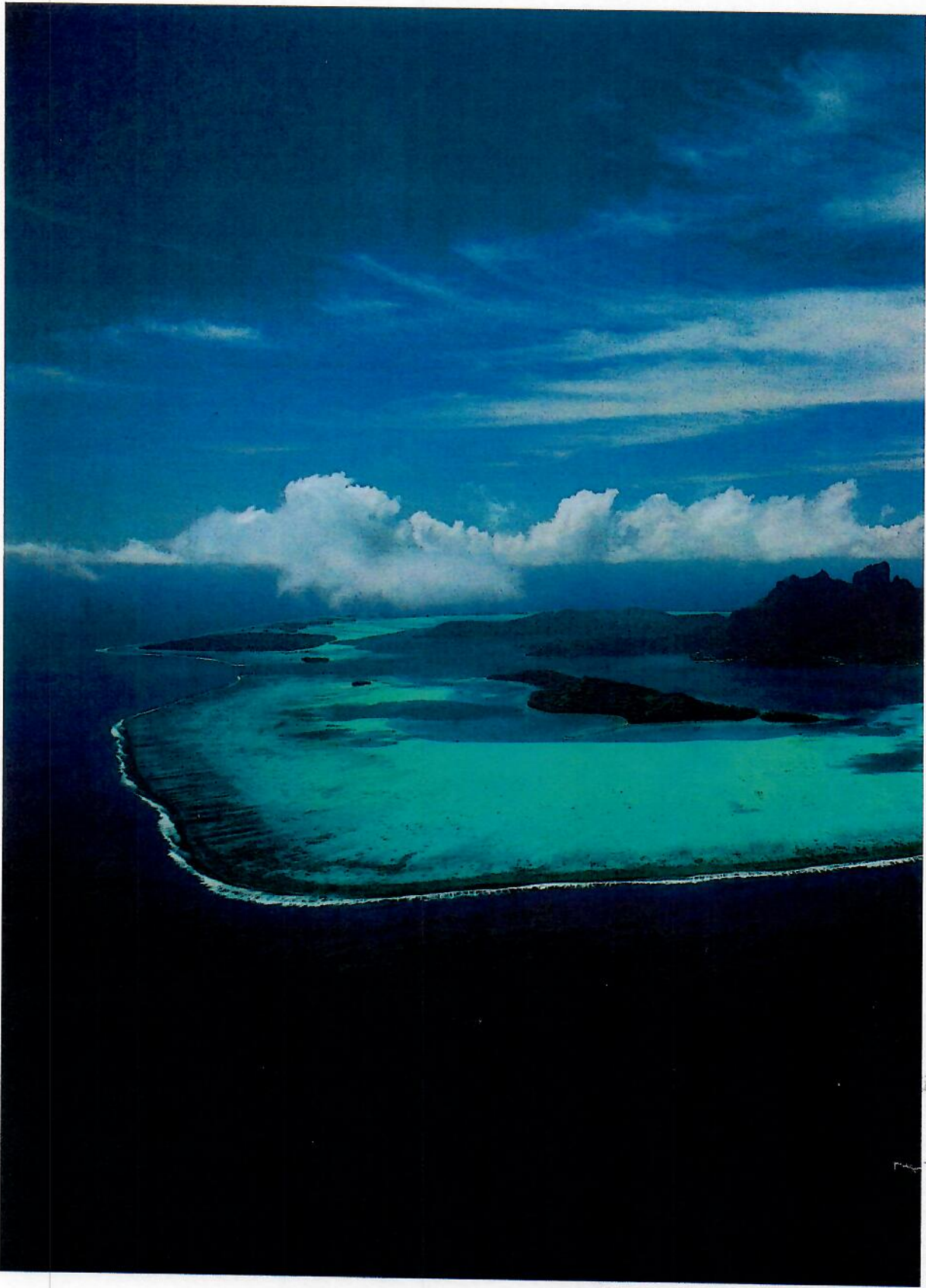




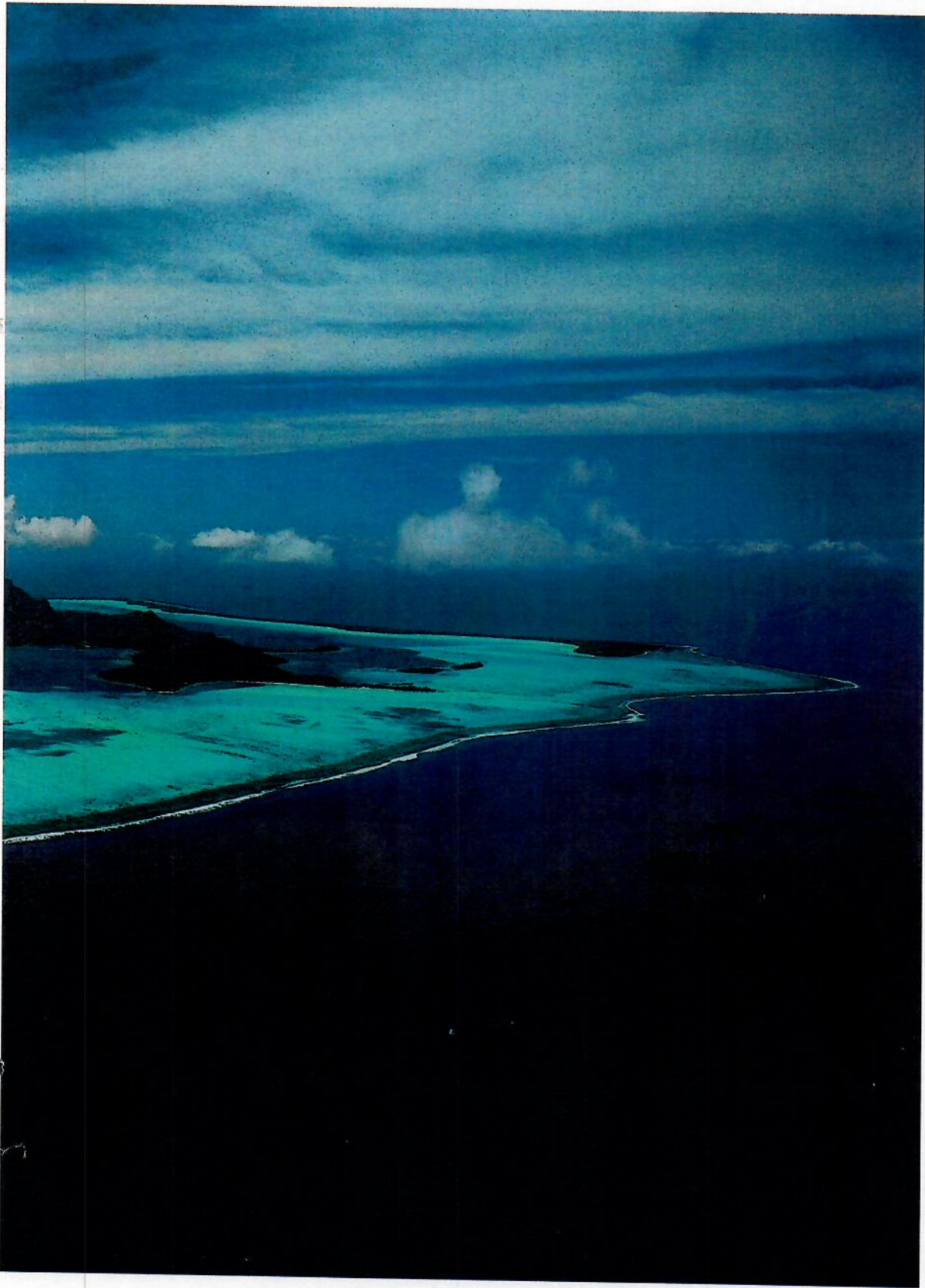
*Fueled by a Polynesian passion for dance, torch-twirling Tahitians stage a sizzling show at a beachfront resort. Nearly extinguished during the 19th century by*



*disapproving missionaries, Tahitian dancing has been rekindled by a renaissance of native culture—and by tourists' appetite for spectacle.*



*Lacy breakers lap the coral reef that rings Bora-Bora, an ancient sunken volcano 165 miles northwest of Tahiti. With sugar white beaches edging its electric-blue*



*lagoon, the island fits everyone's image of a South Seas paradise—but not everyone's pocketbook: Waterfront thatch huts go for up to \$700 a night.*

**“YOU CAN’T SEE THE SCARS,” Oscar Temaru said, “but the wounds are deep.” For a man with a reputation as a firebrand politician, Oscar seemed remarkably gentle and soft-spoken. He leaned back in his chair and parked his bare feet on the coffee table in his office in Tahiti’s working-class district of Faaa. With a sad-eyed smile, he touched his breast. “They are here.”**

It had been nearly nine months since the riots sparked by France’s unilateral decision to resume testing nuclear bombs at Mururoa Atoll, a tiny speck in the Tuamotu Archipelago, 750 miles southeast of Tahiti. By now—May 1996—most of the signs of riots had been erased. Tahiti and her sister islands of French Polynesia had buffed their tarnished image and resumed their mythic role as romantic idyll in the South Pacific.

As had happened dozens of times over hundreds of years, paradise had been threatened but not lost. And despite the wounds that festered beneath the cosmetic calm, I felt certain that these legendary islands would survive this latest time of tumult and transition.

The question of independence from France—could it happen? might it happen? should it happen?—seeped into nearly every conversation. Among Polynesians, animosity toward what was perceived as French hegemony was, if not universal, at least pervasive. The French, meanwhile, struggled to maintain a facade of serenity: Let Hong Kong slip away from Great Britain, let the world ride a wave of decolonization; Tahiti would remain not merely French but *France*.

Some of the wounds were obvious, visible, tangible. Tourism, for example, one of the mainstays of the economy, had sagged drastically—in some cases to the point of collapse. Australians, New Zealanders, and Japanese were staying away out of protest against the nuclear tests. One hotel I visited had a staff of

140 serving 17 guests. The day after I departed, 80 staff members were laid off.

The malaise was personified by Oscar Temaru himself. Mayor of Faaa, crusader for Polynesian independence, Oscar had led his Tavini Huiraatira (Serving the People) party to stunning success in recent elections, winning 11 seats in the 41-member Territorial Assembly—not enough to snatch the reins of power from the French-backed establishment, certainly, but more than enough to make its voice heard throughout the country’s five disparate and far-flung island chains.

On all the islands, from the Marquesas in the north to the Gambiers and the Australs in the south, from Mangareva in the east to Maupiti and Bora-Bora in the west, the blue-and-white flag of independence flew on rooftops and hillsides. Such brazen defiance was a far cry from the time, only 25 years ago, when the very idea of independence was illegal, and children had their knuckles rapped for daring to speak Tahitian in school.

Why wasn’t Oscar celebrating? I wondered.

He shook his head. “I will celebrate,” he said, “when we win freedom for our people. Yes, they are beginning to learn their history; yes, they are at last permitted to speak their language. But we still have a very, very long way to go. The French have no intention of letting us go.”

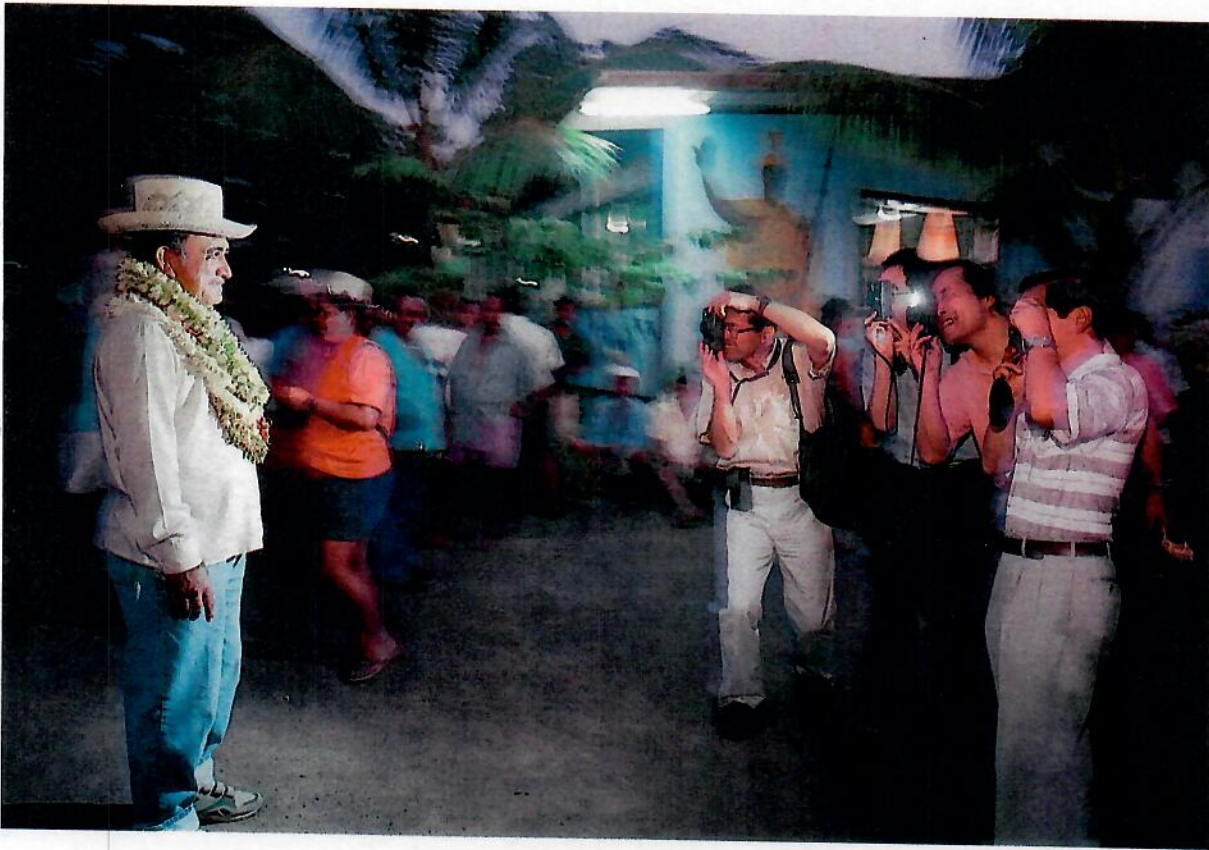
And why not? Where was the treasure in these 118 islands and atolls, most uninhabited, sheltering a grand total of 220,000 people?

“Look at the map,” Oscar said.

At first glance a map of the world reveals nothing significant about French Polynesia, which resembles a few grains of rice on a

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PETER BENCHLEY, author of novels and television documentaries about the sea, has written seven other stories for NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC. The first was Nantucket in 1970.



*Fed up with France, Oscar Temaru, at left, and his Polynesian independence party made big gains at the polls last year after French President Jacques Chirac outraged Tahitian voters (and dismayed Japanese visitors) by refusing to halt hotly protested nuclear weapons tests. "Chirac dreams of France becoming a superpower," says Temaru. "We dream of freedom, freedom, freedom."*

field of blue. But soon you realize that the impression is an illusion, created by the overwhelming size of the Pacific Ocean. French Polynesia's paltry 1,359 square miles of land-mass are scattered over one million square miles of ocean, an area as large as Western Europe. France exercises sovereignty over this entire region of the Pacific—to use, develop, and exploit as it will.

Thanks to its claim on French Polynesia and two other Pacific territories—New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna—France is the second largest presence (after the United States) in the Pacific. Clearly, the nation that has always prided itself on its past glories and has striven to maintain its present power was not about to lop off its most far-reaching arm in the name of some lofty principle like self-determination.

As Paul Roncière, the debonair French high commissioner (and expert in the art of

diplomatic euphemism), told me in his palatial office in Papeete, "Naturally, Francophonism is important to us in this crucial crossroads of the Pacific, and we have always been much more paternalistic than the British."

**O**VER THE PAST 150 YEARS French paternalism has created in Polynesia a country of wild contradictions: a semiautonomous, semidependent, semimodern, semiprimitive, semiprogressive, semireactionary land that has little regard for its past and little confidence in its future.

Relative to its neighbors, French Polynesia is rich. The annual per capita income is about \$15,500, almost three times that of Fiji. But its riches come largely from the French nuclear program. In 1995 France pumped 1.25 billion dollars into the economy, more than a third of the entire gross national product. Now that





*Churchgoers in Sunday finery sweat out a sermon with the help of handheld fans in Papeete, Tahiti, French Polynesia's steamy capital. Worshipers sit in*



*same-sex groups, blending their voices in rousing himenes—Tahitian-style hymns. So transporting is the sound, vows one hearer, “it lifts you right out of your seat.”*

the tests are over and the facilities at Mururoa are being dismantled, jobs are evaporating. Unemployment is at least 16 percent and rising, and though the French have pledged to subsidize the economy until 2006 to compensate for the loss of income, no one knows where replacement funds will be found.

Unemployment's handmaiden, of course, is crime, which is increasing every month. "We call it Tahitian socialism," a policeman on Papeete's waterfront Boulevard Pomare said with a wry smile. "You have it; I want it; I take it. Simple as that."

Because nearly everything must be imported, the cost of living is very high. Gasoline costs \$4.50 a gallon, whiskey is \$35 a bottle, coffee at a café on the Boulevard Pomare is \$3 a cup, and an automobile that costs \$25,000 on the mainland may retail in Papeete for nine million Polynesian francs, more than \$90,000.

Like other imperial powers of the 19th century, France realized that the key to loyalty lay in dependency, and it established a huge, entrenched, self-perpetuating bureaucracy that endures to this day. Of the total workforce of 79,000, half are employed in government-related jobs.

"India has 950 million people and 24 ministers," Oscar Temaru said archly. "We have 200,000 people and 14 ministers."

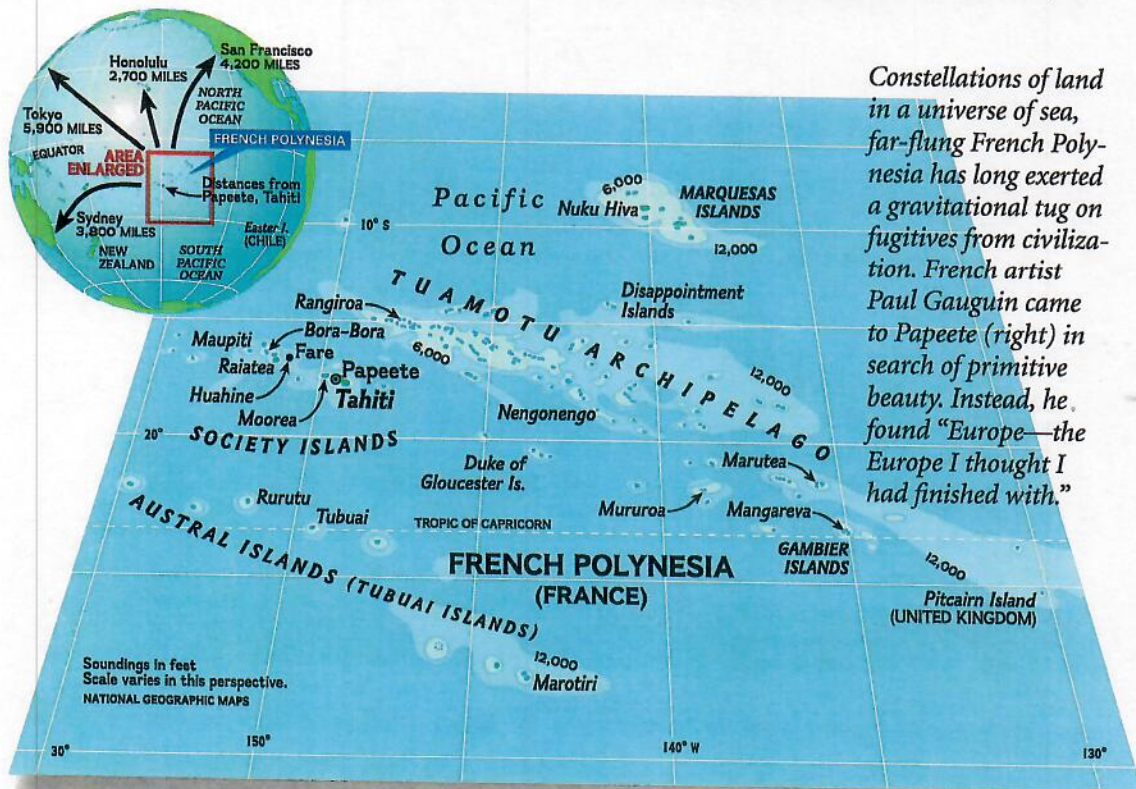
And they make a lot of money. A government minister takes home nearly \$10,000 a month, a teacher more than \$4,000 a month.

Clearly, this 50 percent of all working Polynesians is not rife with rabble-rousers ready to pitch the French out, and so whenever election time rolls around . . . voilà! . . . Tahiti votes to remain a French colony.

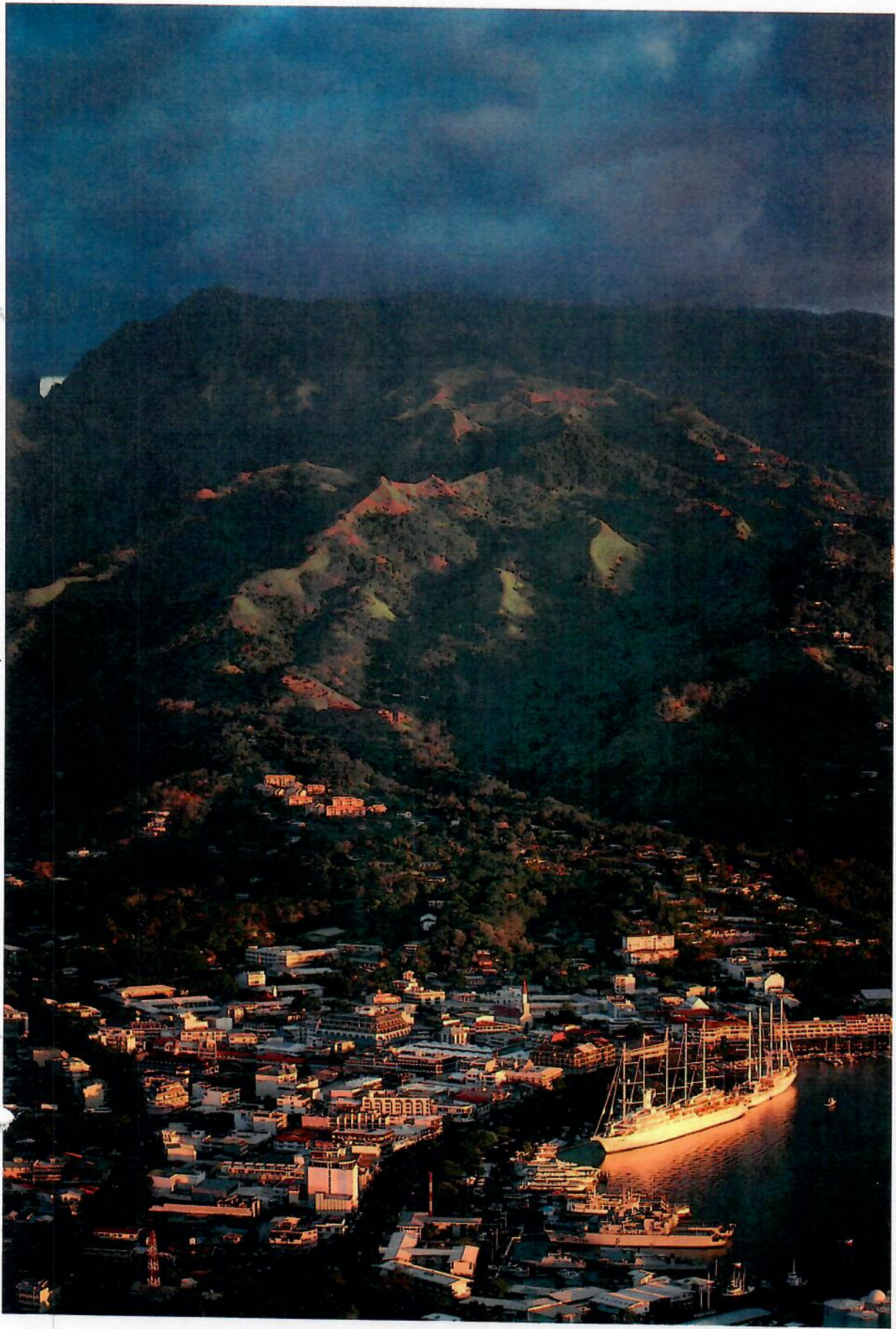
But among the rest of the population—people of every temperament and ancestry known to man, motley products of thousands of years of Pacific trade and hundreds of years of colonization—there is a contagious yearning to be free. In more than a month in the islands, I had trouble finding any working-class Polynesians not employed by the government who opposed independence.

One fine May day I docked my chartered sailboat at Huahine, 105 miles northwest of Tahiti, and wandered through the town of Fare. It was a village like most small Polynesian villages: a main street, a mom-and-pop general store run by a Chinese couple, chickens running free through every yard, scabietic dogs napping in the dust.

Sitting in the storefront office of the local branch of the independence party was a gray-haired woman who radiated serene dignity: Yvette Oopa, a descendant (by marriage) of one of Polynesia's heroes, Pouvanaa a Oopa,



*Constellations of land in a universe of sea, far-flung French Polynesia has long exerted a gravitational tug on fugitives from civilization. French artist Paul Gauguin came to Papeete (right) in search of primitive beauty. Instead, he found "Europe—the Europe I thought I had finished with."*





who in the 1950s opposed France's dominion over the islands and was sentenced to eight years in jail. Like most Polynesians, Yvette has a family tree that reads like an atlas. She is part English, part Swiss, part German, Swedish, and Danish, and part Tahitian.

Her heart, however, is pure Polynesian, and she is deeply worried about the future of her people. "We are becoming foreigners in our own country," she said. "We're taught in school that our ancestors were les Gaulois. Many young people are growing up speaking no language—a bit of Tahitian, a bit of French, a bit of English, and a lot of slang."

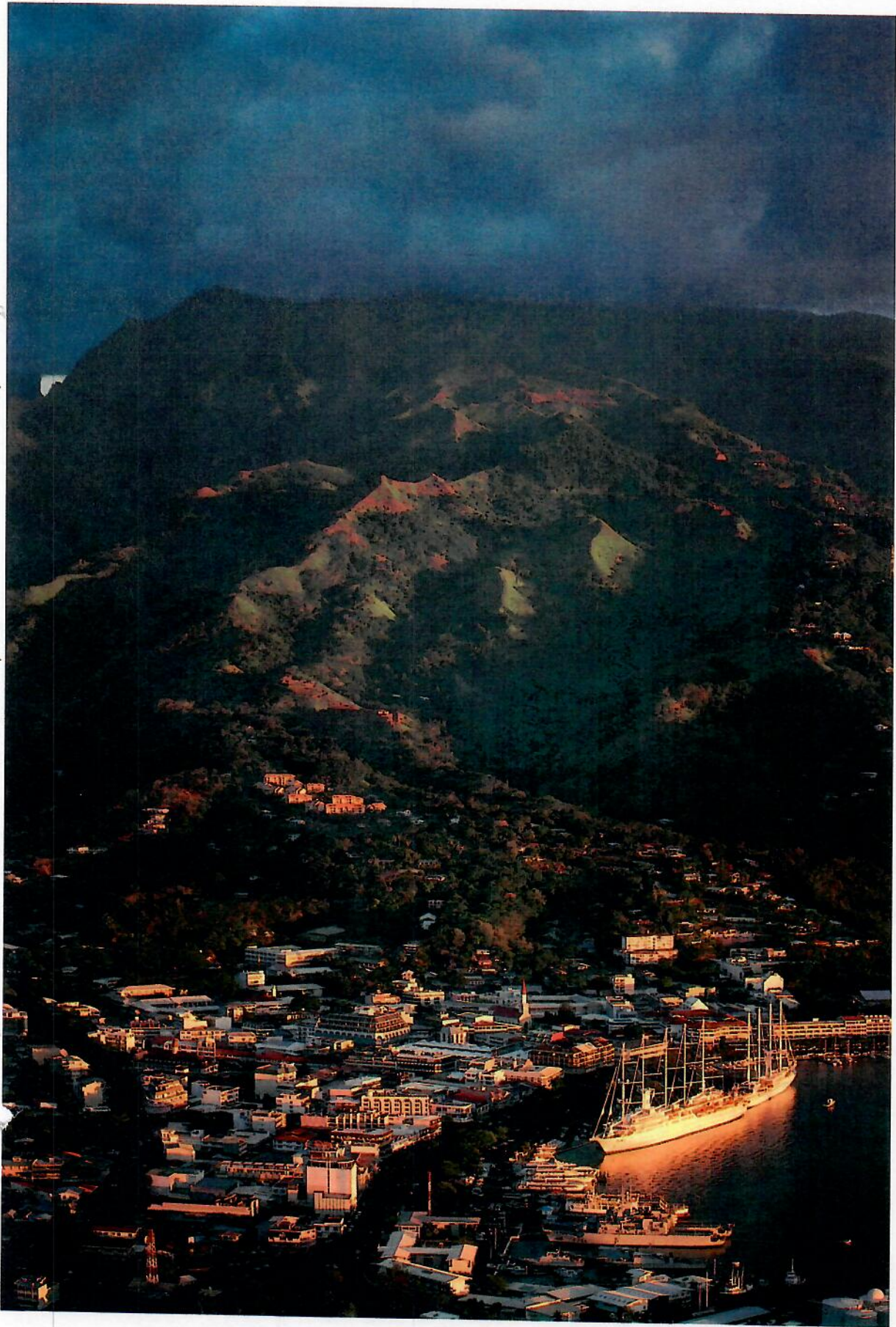
But would Polynesia be able to survive without annual infusions of French money?

"Absolutely," she said flatly. "Some say we would suffer under independence. I say we are suffering now under the domination of a country 20,000 kilometers away. We are just a

postbox for France, a vehicle for taxes. And look at immigration. If we stay French and if European unity goes through, any European will be able to come here, live here, work here, take our jobs. We would never survive that."

Yvette lit a cigarette and watched the smoke drift toward the ceiling. "I'm not suggesting that we become isolationist, but we must be allowed to preserve our traditions and our culture, and that will be hard even without the French. Television is ruining us. The evenings used to be times when parents would pass along the stories, the wisdom, the lore. Not anymore." She paused. "All we ask is to be permitted to be ourselves, live our lives, determine our own fate."

Similar demands have fallen on deaf ears since 1842, when France snatched Tahiti and its islands from the careless British and arbitrarily declared them a French protectorate.





*Showing his colors, French Polynesia's President Gaston Flosse wears the French tricolor while reviewing troops parading through downtown Papeete on Bastille Day. While French military spending has floated Tahiti's economy for the past 30 years, French influence has swamped Tahitian culture. "We are losing our language," laments one native. "That's our soul."*

After a three-year war of independence Queen Pomare IV reluctantly accepted the protectorate. In 1880 the queen's son and heir, the preposterous son Pomare V, "sold" the islands for a pension of a mere 5,000 francs a month, and France's hegemony was complete. (Pomare V is buried in the Arue district of Tahiti, in a tomb topped by what looks suspiciously like a bottle of his beverage of choice, Benedictine.)

Polynesia's relations with France have never been placid, and the islands have always had vocal champions ready to castigate the French as greedy oppressors. In February 1903 Paul Gauguin, who had retreated from civilization to a sanctuary in the Marquesas, wrote bitterly to the colonial inspectors: "This hypocritical consideration of liberty, equality, fraternity under a French flag becomes a remarkable irony when applied to this disgusting spectacle of humanity who are no more than the flesh

from which all kinds of contributions are extracted by the arbitrary gendarme."

A few months later the great painter was dead, unaware (and probably uncaring) that his work would endure as a representation of all that is wondrous and beautiful and magical about the islands of the South Seas.

**B**Y MID-20TH CENTURY Tahiti had become embedded in the human consciousness as a synonym for romance and remoteness, and writers were scouring the language for adjectives that would do the islands justice.

"There it is!" James Michener wrote in 1951. "Vast, insignificant Polynesia, ruled badly by many different nations, victimized by all kinds of robbers. It is not rich. Its people seem to have few causes to be happy. It is a backwash in the world's eddies, yet these trivial islands have imposed on history the most lasting vision of the earthly paradise. Why?"

Simplicity is one answer. Quandaries seem to lose their urgency in Polynesia, as if blown away by the sweet Pacific breezes.

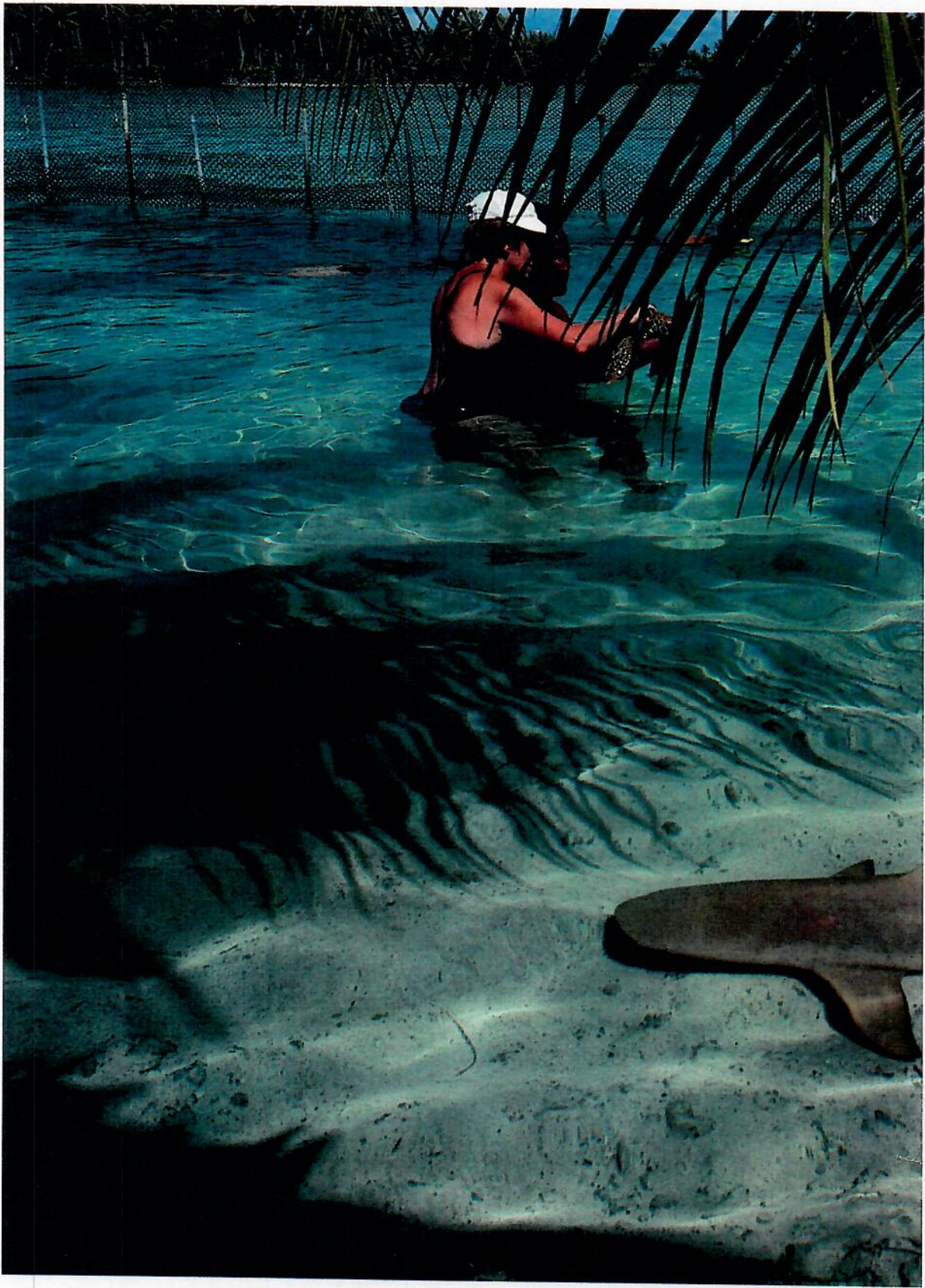
Fecundity is another. Food grows on trees and swims in the sea. Particularly in the out islands a person can live by his wits.

Beauty is a third. Nowhere on earth can one so quickly overdose on breathtaking gorgeousness.

And then there are the people. Answering his own question, Michener continued: "Without these remarkable people, the island [Tahiti] would be nothing. With them, it is a carnival. They are generous, courageous and comic. They wake each morning to a fresh day that has forgiven the previous day's outrages."

They are also hospitable, affectionate, and frank. On a plane headed southeast to the remote Gambier Islands, I found myself seated beside a stunning young woman—blondish brown hair, honey-colored skin, flawless features—who greeted me in fluent Parisian French. Her name was Heiata Roomataroa, and as we talked, I discovered that she was living testimony to the generosity (and biological good sense) of Polynesians.

Her father was from the Austral Islands, far to the southwest of Tahiti, where an age-old Polynesian custom was followed with particular diligence. As far back as the 18th century, she told me, there was fear of inbreeding, and



*Close encounters: Visitors at the Lagoonarium on Bora-Bora share a fenced pool with turtles, rays, and more than a dozen blacktip sharks. Fed amply and often by*





*caretakers, the nonchalant sharks help dispel irrational fears. "It's a great way to demythologize these animals," says one swimmer.*



so whenever a foreigner would arrive, he was offered a woman—usually a chief's wife or daughter—in hopes of adding new blood to the community.

Heiata knew her parents, of course, and her grandparents, but beyond that generation she had no idea of her ancestry. She had French blood, she thought, and possibly German, and her dark eyes may have come from a Jewish forebear who was seduced sometime in the 19th century.

It is generally held that fewer than 20 percent of the people throughout the islands have pure Polynesian ancestry, and that number drops every year. Often within families, siblings bear no resemblance to one another, as different genes dominate from child to child. My guide, Joel Hart—an affable bear of a man wont to weigh himself on airport luggage scales in search of a sympathetic reading of

less than 265 pounds—was the product of parents who were English, Polynesian, and German. He married a Chinese woman, and their four children look as if each came from a different continent.

A delightful consequence of this ethnic olio is that French Polynesia is almost completely free of racism. There are island rivalries, naturally, because human beings are compelled to feel superior to somebody. Society Islanders purvey jokes about dummies from the Tuamotus; residents of Maupiti are derided as drunks, Rurutuans from the Australs as yokels, Marquesans as pugnacious thugs. But bloodlines and skin color are never an issue.

What is an issue, however, is the Tahitians' unanimously held perception—nay, conviction—that they are treated as second-class citizens in their own land, that in everything from jobs to permits to opportunity and



*Chanted harmonies and scented coconut oil prepare a guest for a Tahitian-style marriage rite at Tiki Village, on Moorea, where native culture is packaged for tourist consumption. With tourism now its main hope for economic self-reliance, French Polynesia must nearly triple its 170,000 visitors a year. One tactic: Attract some of the seven million vacationers Hawaii hosts annually.*

income, French people are given preference over Polynesians, that the government in Paris has imposed not only its will but also its culture upon a people whose sophisticated civilization was flourishing in these islands long before there was a France.

**A** FEW MILES OUTSIDE PAPEETE is a complex of low buildings that houses the country's only comprehensive collection of cultural artifacts: the Museum of Tahiti and Its Islands. I had heard that its archaeologist, Raymond Teriieroo Graffe, was a dedicated guardian of Polynesia's past, and I drove out to see him.

Bearded and densely tattooed, Raymond has an advanced degree in archaeology from the Sorbonne. He spent his early years working as an interpreter. Then, as he saw new

generations arising in utter ignorance of their culture, he became a crusader for its preservation and its renaissance.

"The Europeans claim they discovered Polynesia," he said, sitting in his simple office, clad only in a wraparound skirt. "But by the time the English arrived in 1767, we had been here for 2,000 years." He laughed. "I think a good question is, who discovered whom?"

The museum, Raymond said, had another name, which he preferred. "Our name for it is the 'cave with many mouths talking' because it tells the tales of Polynesia and its people."

Those tales include feats of open-ocean navigation never since duplicated and still not fully understood by modern man. The earliest settlers, who arrived at about the time of Christ, are generally thought to have come from Southeast Asia, and somehow they made their way across thousands of miles of trackless sea, guided by stars and currents and clouds and birds. From Raiatea, seven fabled canoes set out to colonize what became known as the Polynesian triangle, marked by Hawaii in the north, New Zealand in the south, and Easter Island in the east, a realm said to belong to the great god Oro.

Because in Raymond's childhood it was forbidden to speak Tahitian, he learned the language on the sly. Now he is a member of a commission charged with revising the language to keep pace with the modern world. Tahitian has only 13 letters and relies heavily on tone and inflection, so the task involves combining existing words in ways that create new concepts. The Tahitian word for "computer," for instance, translates literally as "the machine with the electronic brain."

Raymond struggles to keep Tahitian culture alive in other ways too. For the past 15 years he has studied Polynesian tattoos, and the ones that adorn his body tell two stories: the history of Polynesia and his own journey as a man. "These triangles," he said, pointing to his torso, "represent the triangle of all Polynesia. The designs on my ears signify royal descent. I am of the Pomares."

I noticed that the fingers on his left hand were tattooed while his right hand was bare.

"I lost my wife in 1991," he explained. "These are the tikis of mourning. In the old days, through a man's tattoos you could read his life, where he came from, what he had

been through. They are not just decorations.”

Nowadays, more and more young people are visiting traditional tattoo artists and having themselves adorned with symbols of their culture, which pleases Raymond. “The more people take pride in their culture,” he said, “the more they will want independence.”

**I**F INDEPENDENCE seemed to dominate most conversations in Tahiti, the farther afield I roamed the more it faded into the background. On some islands other issues were more pressing.

Ten miles northwest of Tahiti, a 20-minute hovercraft-ferry ride across the Sea of the Moon, lies Moorea, the island Michener described as too beautiful to describe. One of the high islands, like Tahiti, with verdant mountains soaring steeply from the sea, Moorea is suffering from rampant development. Land prices had soared to 20,000 francs per square meter (roughly \$800,000 an acre) as Tahitians fled the congestion, crime, and pollution of Papeete for what was fast becoming the capital's primary suburb. Locals were fighting a developer's plans to build yet another huge tourist hotel.

Scientists at a Moorea research station were deeply concerned about the increase in coral bleaching throughout the region. Caused by a rise in water temperature, bleaching is a stress reaction that can presage the death of coral reefs. Without the protection of the surrounding reefs, many of the islands of Polynesia would disappear.

In Bora-Bora, the picture-postcard tropical paradise with its crystalline lagoon surrounding cloud-covered volcanic peaks, overdevelopment was causing severe economic angst. Too many hotels with too many rooms were squabbling over too few tourists. Prices were dropping, employees were being laid off, unemployment was rising, and municipal services were vanishing. The public wharf, built to be the gateway to Bora-Bora's earthly delights, had been vandalized into a shambles; visitors were greeted not by strolling musicians but by broken glass and graffiti.

On other islands technology was threatening traditions and altering people's relationship with the sea. Fishing, which for millennia had been a prime source of jobs, food, and revenue, was under severe stress. As is the case

*Metal roofs have replaced palm thatch, but Laundromats have yet to appear in the Marquesas, French Polynesia's most remote and disadvantaged archipelago. Material expectations will rise, however, now that islanders have a new window on the world: satellite television. "Now our young people want the same things as young people everywhere," complains a local official. "So they leave."*



in much of the world, skyrocketing demand and new, efficient locating and harvesting gear have damaged fish stocks, inshore and off. The high cost of boats and fuel has forced many independent fishermen out of business.

But, as if in confirmation of the myth of Eden, as one resource has diminished, another has sprung up. Over the past decade a small private industry has grown to a point where it is now the third largest money machine in the colony, behind only French largesse and tourism: the seeding, growing, harvesting, polishing, mounting, exporting, and retailing of black pearls. Also known as South Sea pearls, in 1996 these exquisite fruits of the sea provided the islands with 5,000 jobs and 140 million dollars in revenue (see following article).

There are 500 pearl farms in all of Polynesia; some are tiny one-man operations tucked into remote lagoons. But fully half



of all the pearls produced come from eight farms in three lagoons owned by one man, Robert Wan, the founder, chief, and presiding genius of Tahiti Perles.

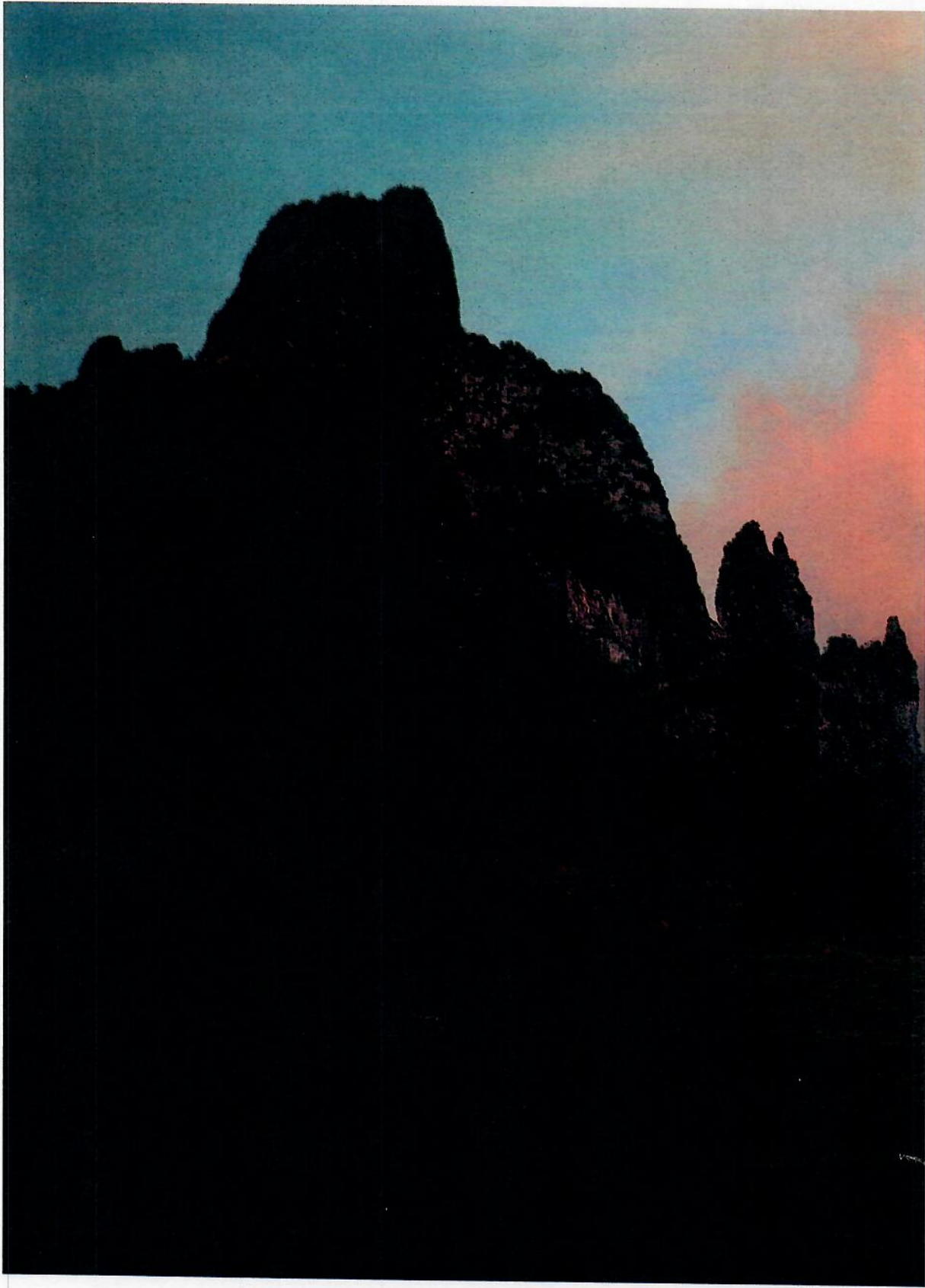
Two of Mr. Wan's lagoons are in the Tuamotus—Nengonengo and Marutea—and the third is on Mangareva in the Gambiers. He invited photographer David Doubilet and me to Marutea to see how pearls are born.

We flew in one of the three large planes Mr. Wan maintains to ferry his pearls and his 400 workers back and forth between Tahiti and his atolls. After a three-hour flight we arrived at Marutea. From the air it looked barren and barely inhabited. Like most of the low islands of Polynesia, it is 95 percent water, 5 percent land—a ring of sand and coral enclosing a lagoon. A few white buildings stood amid sheltering palms in two small communities on opposite sides of the tranquil lagoon.

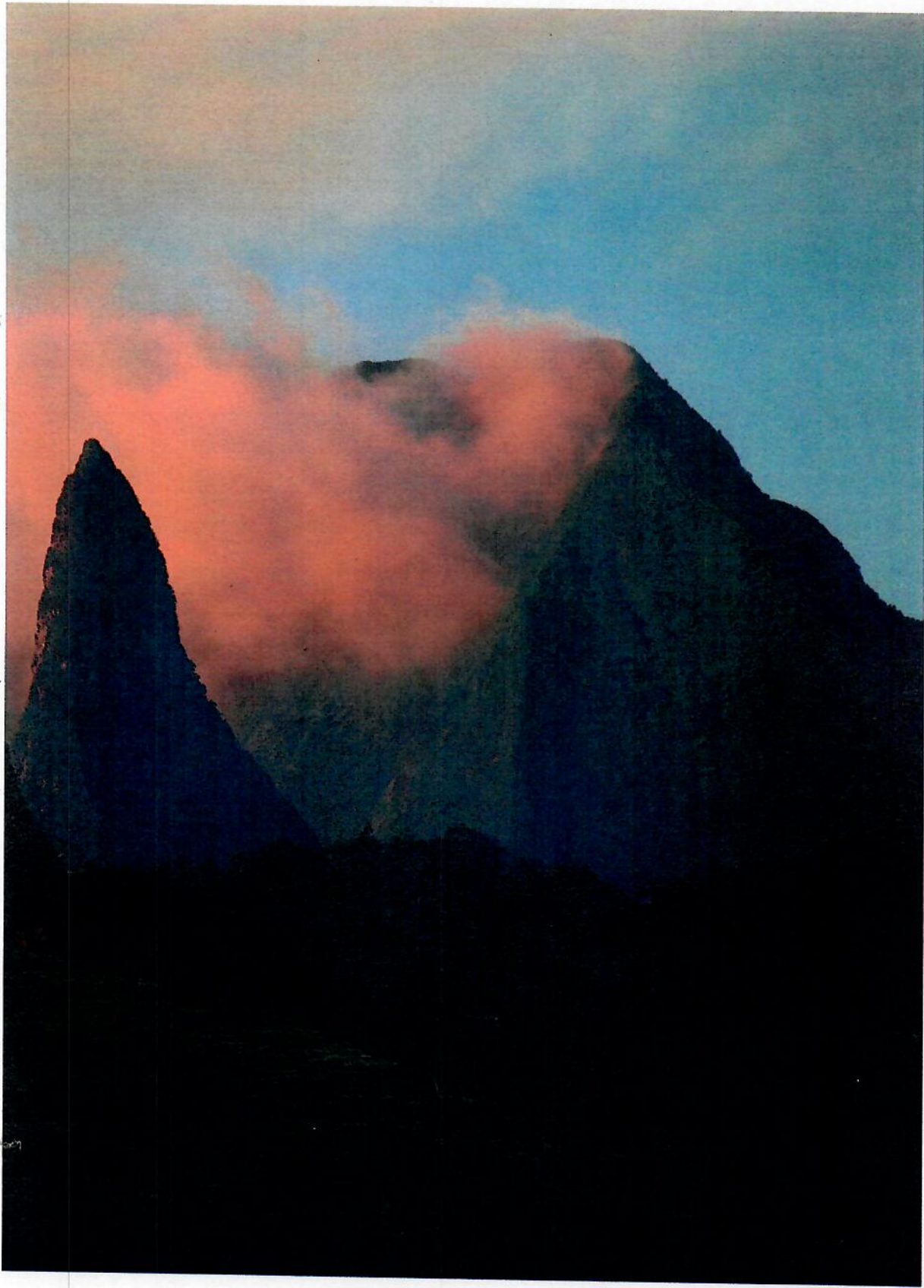
*French Polynesia*

Mr. Wan greeted us at the airstrip. Fit and amiable, he shepherded us toward the dock and explained that the image of tranquillity was somewhat illusory. Beneath the placid blue waters of the lagoon, man and nature were busy collaborating to create beauty. Millions of black-lipped oysters hung in mesh panels, nourished by tidal flow, the pearls within growing microscopically every day.

While David prepared his camera gear for a dive, Mr. Wan took me into the sorting room, where scores of trays held countless pearls—so many that they looked like mammoth servings of Brobdingnagian caviar. I had heard that “black pearl” was a misnomer, and now I saw why. Not one of them was truly black. Some were gray, some purplish; some tended toward green, some toward a champagne yellow. And some, when Mr. Wan held them to the light, gave off a rainbow luster.



*Parisians escape to Tahiti. Tahitians escape to neighboring Moorea, whose shark-toothed volcanic skyline and quieter living beckon just across the Sea*



*of the Moon. Yet like other suburbs where serenity forever moves one more  
exit from town, Moorea is suffering growing pains.*



"Now look," Mr. Wan said with a smile. He reached for a small plastic bag and poured into my palm a single pearl—perfectly round, richly, lustrously hued, and the size of a cherry. "You're holding in your hand the largest round black pearl in the world."

It had just come from one of his lagoons and was a total surprise. No one, he explained, had ever cultured a black pearl that large. "So many things have to go right: the nucleus, the grafting of the nucleus into the oyster, the growing. And then, month after month, to have layer after layer be perfect!"

The pearl weighed almost half an ounce and measured 21 millimeters—nearly an inch—in diameter. So rare was the pearl that it had been given a name: the Robert Wan.

Before I left Marutea, I told Mr. Wan that I had heard his business was so successful that his three islands could survive on their own

as an independent country. Since many people on other islands had been lobbying to secede from France, I wondered if he harbored any such ambitions.

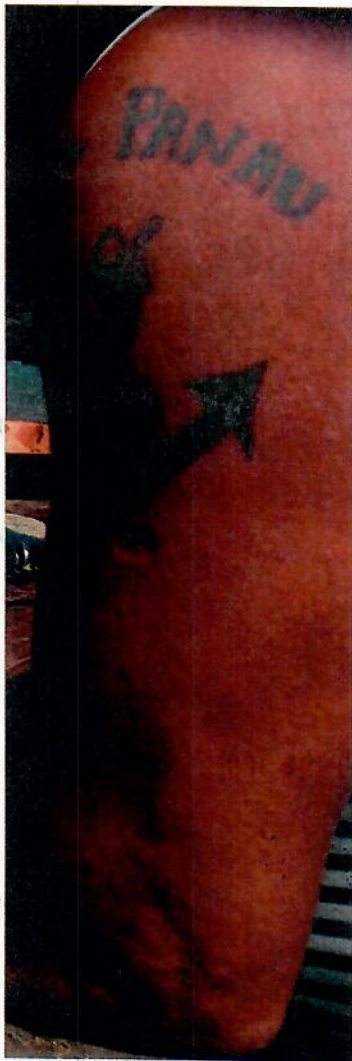
"Never," he insisted. "I'm Tahitian. We're Tahitian. And as for independence for Tahiti, it would be a disaster. How would we survive? Who would pay to educate our children, care for our sick, pave our roads?"

But France, I reminded him, had declared its intention to withdraw its financing. What would save Tahiti when the well of French wealth ran dry?

"Tourism can save us," he said. "It's the only thing. If we got 500,000 tourists a year, we could make it on our own."

I had heard the same promise from High Commissioner Paul Roncière, but I was skeptical. Half a million visitors a year, an average of 10,000 a week, would nearly triple current





*Whetting knives and appetites, Marquesan fishermen indulge their taste for fresh tuna. Unlike many Tahitians who yearn to break with France, most Marquesans feel greater loyalty to Paris than to Papeete. "France is a solid partner, a strong ally," says one loyalist. "We don't have the resources to stand on our own."*

figures. True, that would still be only about 7 percent of the number of tourists who inundate Hawaii, but wouldn't their presence alter the very nature of the place they had traveled so far to enjoy?

**O**NE ATOLL in the northern Tuamotus beckons scuba divers from around the world: Rangiroa, whose lagoon, 48 miles long by 15 wide, is the second largest on earth (only Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands is bigger). All Tahiti could fit within it, and it is its own world, fed by the ocean but distinct from it, with its own ecosystem and its own rhythms.

The atoll is a necklace of 240 motus—islets more or less connected around the lagoon. Only two passes are open to the ocean, and the rush of water in and out of the immense

lagoon can give a diver the ride of his life.

Tiputa Pass, the steeper of the two, cuts the low landmass in a slice about 440 yards wide, and as David Doubilet, diving instructor Yves Lefevre, and I approached in our inflatable boat, the rushing water tossed seas that towered over us. When we were a few hundred feet outside the pass, the boatman put the motor in neutral. David hefted two cameras; I carried a third; Yves took a fourth. In his other hand Yves carried a covered bucket of stinking fish.

"Follow me," Yves said, "as fast as you can. Ready? Go!"

At once we flung ourselves backward off the sides of the inflatable. Before we could clear our masks, gray reef sharks were on us—quick, curious, unafraid, darting around us like a pack of wild dogs.

Yves held the bucket of fish to his chest and kicked as hard as he could for the bottom—a dim gray mountainside that loomed below. As we followed him down into the gloom, I glimpsed schools of jacks and barracuda. In the deepening darkness the sharks that cruised beside us became ghostly outriders.

At 115 feet Yves ducked under an overhang—a small cave barely big enough for the three of us but fine protection on three sides. Here we could not be blindsided by any shark whose inquisitiveness crossed the line to aggression. By now, leakage from the bucket had released a spoor, and sharks in numbers beyond counting circled before the cave, waiting.

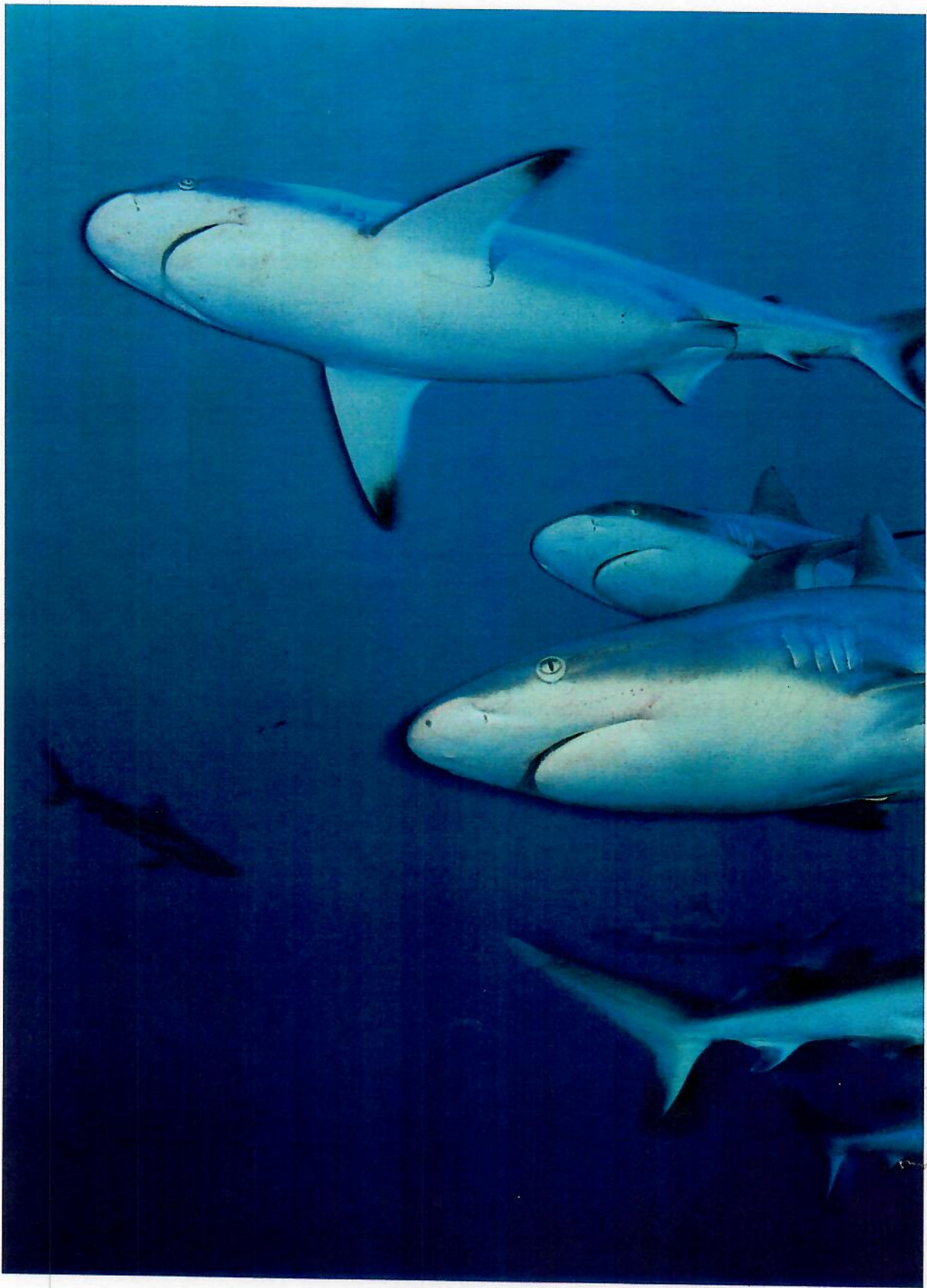
When David's cameras were ready, he signaled Yves. Yves pushed the bucket of fish a few feet out of the cave, checked behind him to make sure no sharks were waiting in ambush, and yanked the top off the bucket.

The ocean exploded.

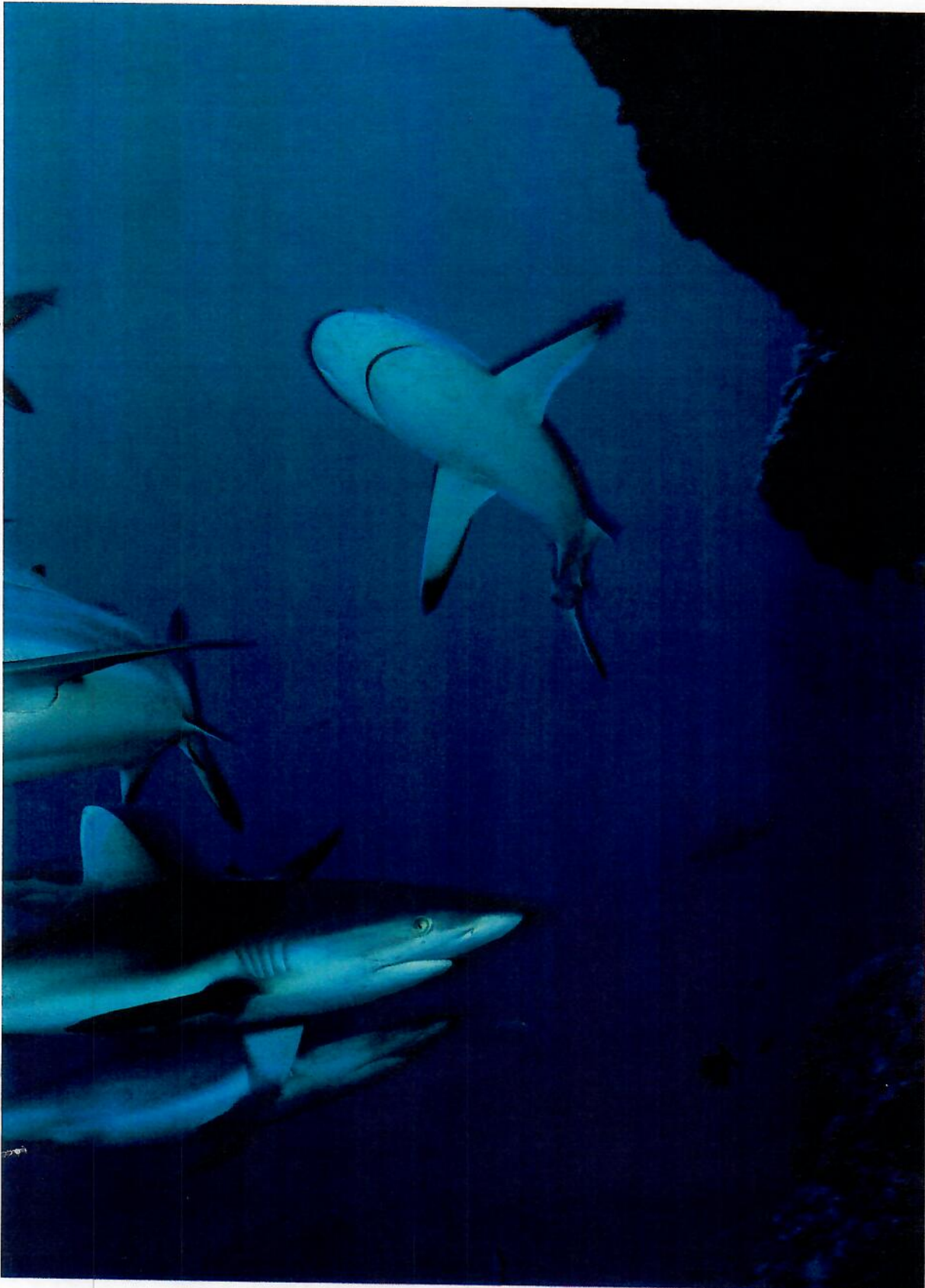
Sharks swarmed like enraged bees—dozens of them, scores perhaps—snapping and biting and twisting and tearing, their bodies torqued in impossible contortions, their motile jaws extended, their eyes partly covered by nictitating membranes that gave them the look of murderous cats. They were a tightly wrapped ball of frenzy.

The bucket rose up in the water and spun, throwing off a cloud of blood. Sharks charged it, and it disappeared in a flurry of bodies.

A shark grabbed one of David's strobes and worried it, as a dog worries a bone. Another shark opened its mouth, turned toward me,



*Lured heart-stoppingly close by the scent of bait, gray reef sharks—as well as tiger, mako, blacktip, and others—are themselves the lures that draw divers to the*



DAVID DOUBILET

*sapphire lagoon of Rangiroa in the Tuamotus. Sharks by the hundreds gather along a narrow gap in the reef for twice-daily banquets delivered by the tides.*

and lunged, trying to force its way between David and me. I struck it with the heel of my hand, and it sped away.

And then it was over. In an instant they were gone. A few lingered in the distance, calmly resuming their routine patrol.

The bucket, scratched and torn, rolled lazily on a bed of coral. Yves fetched it, and on his signal we pushed off. The current grabbed us and shoved us along like a hurricane wind. We were helpless, creatures of the current, unable to stop, change direction, or go back.

I checked my dive computer and saw it flashing at me: "Decompress!" it fairly shouted. "Decompress! Decompress!"

We had stayed too long, too deep.

I waved to get Yves's attention and pointed at my computer. He made the OK sign.

Swell, I thought, it's OK with him.

What was OK with him? That we were all doomed to die? That the best we could hope for was to survive as gnarled as a pretzel from the dreaded bends?

But Yves had been here before. As we rode the current into the pass, he knew to rise gradually . . . first to 80 feet, then to 60, 40, 20. Now the messages flashed on my computer were less frantic, merely urging me to spend some quality time at 10 feet if I ever wanted to see my children again.

**W**HEN AT LAST WE were safely in the boat—alive, unbiten, and unbent—I looked back at the boisterous sea churning in the pass and thought of a sailor who had taken a similar trip more than two centuries ago.

On Captain James Cook's third voyage to the South Seas in 1777, one of Cook's midshipmen, James Trevenen, had been ordered to navigate a pass into a lagoon. The pass was narrow, the sea was rough, the water was shallow, the bottom was rocky. But what really bothered Trevenen was . . . well, let him tell it.

"On every side of us," he wrote in his journal, "swam sharks innumerable, and so voracious that they bit our oars and rudder, and I actually stuck my hanger [saber] into the back of one while he had the rudder in his teeth."

Although the voyages of Captain Cook and his predecessor, Samuel Wallis, had effects on Polynesia more cataclysmic and long lasting

*Polynesian dancer John Taha embodies the romance of Tahiti for American writer Kate Hall, whose grandfather James Norman Hall co-authored the 1932 South Seas classic, Mutiny on the Bounty. As French Polynesia explores a new chapter in its history, the question now becomes: Will its native people win back the freedom to write their own story?*



than any event before or since, few artifacts are left to remind you that the explorers ever set foot on the islands. On Tahiti's Point Venus, named for Cook's observation of the transit of the planet in June of 1769, there is a stone memorial . . . unimpressive, ill cared for, and inaccurately placed. Otherwise, the only echoes of Cook's momentous visits are the names of bays and points of land that he and his crew bestowed on these exotic shores.

"There's no history left," Nancy Hall Rutgers told me one day as we stood on her patio overlooking Matavai Bay in Tahiti, where Cook first landed and the *Bounty* later anchored. "It's all gone. There's the Gauguin Museum and a statue of [French novelist] Pierre Loti somewhere, but that's it. No history!"

More than most, Nancy knows the shame of the obliteration of Polynesia's history, for she is a living legacy of Tahiti's past. She is the



daughter of a half-Tahitian mother and an American father who spent his most productive years—and died and is buried—in Tahiti: James Norman Hall, co-author of the *Bounty* trilogy (*Mutiny on the Bounty*, *Men Against the Sea*, and *Pitcairn's Island*) and other novels.

For a decade Nancy and her husband, Nick, encouraged—implored—the government in Papeete to fulfill a legislative mandate and restore her father's classic colonial house on the waterfront in Arue as a museum. The government has finally agreed, but for years the house sat vandalized, trashed, painted with obscene and satanic graffiti—a sad relic of gentler times.

"It makes my heart sick," Nancy said, "to know that Tahiti . . . *my* Tahiti . . . is gone."

But is it gone? Or is it, as many people believe (and I am one), merely in transition? It has endured, after all, for more than two

millennia, through wars, conquest, disease, and the onslaught of modern civilization.

On my last day in the hills over Matavai Bay, I awoke, as always, to raucous cockcrow and watched the sunrise tint the sky pink over Point Venus. Then I turned, as always, to the west, to the gray-green silhouette of Moorea. As the first rays of the dawn sun struck the spume of Moorea's reef, a rainbow formed in halo over the Sea of the Moon. As always.

It lasted only a moment, an evanescent thing, but reliable.

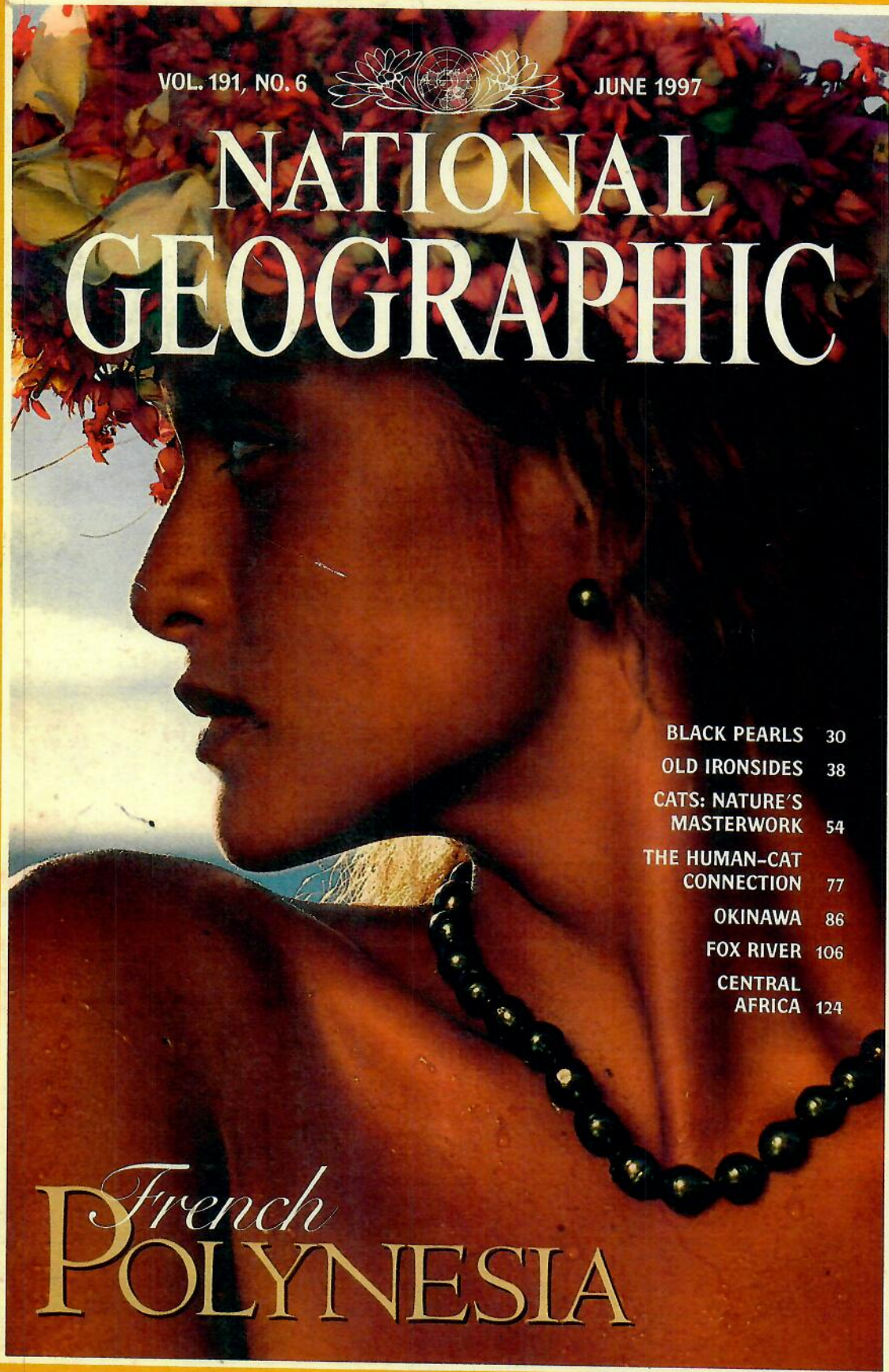
I recalled something written by Charles Clerke, Captain Cook's favorite lieutenant, on his departure from Polynesia, and decided to adopt it as my own: "Tis with some reluctance I bid adieu to these happy isles, where I've spent very many happy days. . . . In short, in my opinion, they are as pleasant and happy spots as the world contains." □

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**POLYNESIA**

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