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MAGAZINE  
1999

Travel

5-18-99  
Dear Helen -  
I thought you would  
enjoy this article. we are  
all well. Love and Aloha,  
from George B2/225

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SIDES



*French Polynesia Revisited* / **By Kevin Keating**

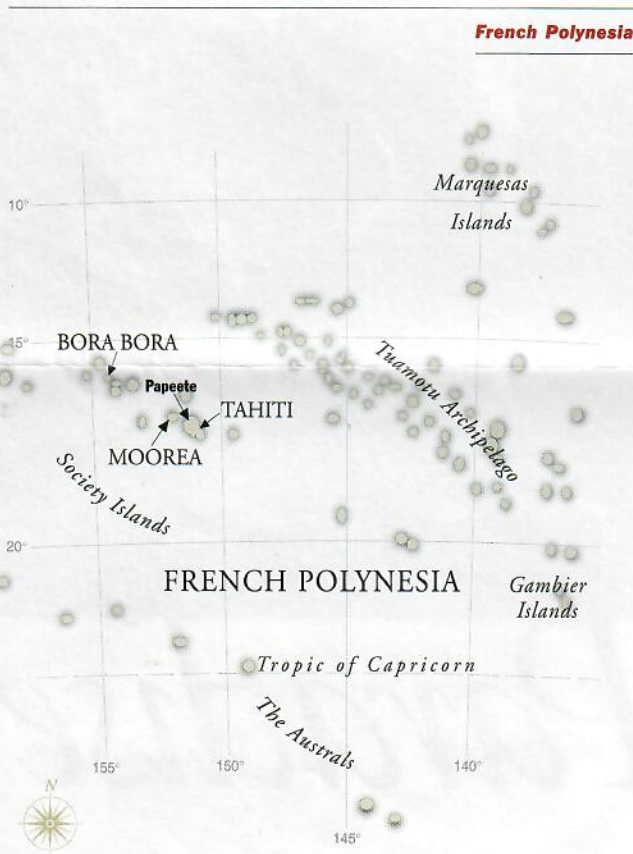
**W**HEN I WAS A BOY WITH A TATTERED LIBRARY card, the writing that originated from tropical shores was much more florid than it is today.

That's why a lot of my youth was happily misspent in the South Pacific. I came to Tahiti after reading a great deal of fiction that was written in the shade of swaying palms.

The virtuous writers of earlier years sang lyrical ballads to the charms of South Sea island maidens, yet these masters of belles-lettres claimed they were above temptation. I decided to follow in their sandy footprints and check it out.

My first trip to French Polynesia was in 1960. I boarded a tri-tailed Lockheed Constellation in Honolulu. "We can pick our altitude," the captain told me. There was no other air traffic. Nine hours later we landed on an airstrip built during World War II on the reef at Bora Bora.

In those low-flying days, Bora Bora had the only landing strip in French Polynesia. We had to wait for a big, lumbering flying boat to take us to Tahiti and her neighboring islands. Eventually, out of the popcorn clouds came a snow-white four-engine Bermuda flying boat. It flew along the gray-green background of Bora Bora's Mount Otemanu, circled to check the red-and-white striped windsock, then gently splashed down on the emerald lagoon.



We tossed our bags into an outrigger canoe and paddled out to the great floating plane as it bobbed on the pastel water.

It was a glamorous aviation age, and the flying-boat captain was a romantic figure. He had a huge handlebar mustache and wore a safari jacket with a dozen pockets. He was a reliable-looking fellow with a slight potbelly—what they call here "the colonial egg." The mark of an old timer.

The captain told me, "Last week a lawyer on his way home to Paris got this far and couldn't leave. Put his bags back on the flying boat and went back to Tahiti."

I've always had a hard time leaving these islands, too. I went to Bora Bora so often that its only hotel used to keep a ukulele for me behind the bar.

Back then I was a reporter working for Stanton Delaplane, a Pulitzer prize-winning syndicated columnist. He had signed up to write a guide to the entire Pacific basin. His plan was that he would travel around the North Pacific and I'd go south. Then we'd meet in Singapore. I'd give him my notes, and he'd polish my wooden adjectives.

Stan's book, *Pacific Pathways*, was eventually written, even though my contribution came in late. And wet. I often tried but somehow just couldn't find the energy to leave my pandanus mat by the crystal-clear lagoon. I was haunted by Bora Bora's sun-swept coral beaches. When ambition struck, I'd swim with designer fish.

The isles of the Southern Seas have always been portrayed as romantic dream destinations where men from more socially restrictive cultures found a kind of sexual freedom that was considered shocking back home. Indeed, a lot of passionate propaganda has made it appear that, for men, the South Sea islands are a paradise full of languorous tropical ladies with jasmine blossoms in their hair and mischief on their minds.

Nobody has touched on the opportunities for the foreign female, but it works both ways. At least that's what a woman from the United States told me on Bora Bora. The Tahiti Tourist Board thinks there ought to be more writing about the scenic attractions. I asked the American woman about that. She said she had spent a week touring the islands with her new boyfriend, a handsome Tahitian. "The scenery," she said, "was grand."

I don't know if romance is a contributing factor, but last year the islands of Tahiti welcomed 189,000 visitors from around the world. It may be thanks to the juicy writings of Melville and Loti, plus Gauguin's paintings of hothouse, tropical women.

These sunny days, thanks to jet planes and packaged tours, Papeete, Tahiti's capital, has become a bustling village. There are stoplights all over town and (may the Polynesian gods

Photography by Gian Paolo Barbieri



THE LAST *Paradise*

1999

forgive them) parking meters. There's a freeway to the airport complete with morning and evening traffic jams.

It may be progress, but it's a different Tahiti than it was in the lively days that I remember. When I first saw Papeete, it was 10 blocks of sandy street. The main ornament was Quinn's waterfront saloon—the raunchiest deadfall in the Pacific.

Quinn's had a bamboo front and several dozen bicycles parked beside banana trees. The clientele was barefoot, and the place was packed to the rafters with sailors and whalers and spirited Tahitians.

These days, to get a taste of the old days—and you can—you must travel to sandy shores a bit away from the tourist trails. In French Polynesia there are 118 islands in five archipelagos: the Society Islands, the Australs, the Marquesas, the Tuamotu Atolls, and the Gambier Islands. From Tahiti there are planes and sailing ships to all the distant island groups where you can still find lonely beaches without a footprint.

On a recent trip, I flew to Tahiti from Los Angeles and was entertained by a charming young woman from the South Pacific. "Is all well in Paradise?" I asked.

She thought so. But old-timers in the South Seas say you should have seen it "in the good old days." Sailors have been saying this ever since 1788, when the original cast of *Mutiny on the Bounty* dropped an anchor into Tahiti's Matavai Bay.

I dropped anchor in the swimming pool of Hotel Le Meridien in Tahiti's Punaauia district. During the 8 a.m. morning rush hour, I discovered it took close to 45 minutes for a taxi to negotiate the nine miles into the heart of town. I decided to head for quieter isles.

Moorea, 11 miles from Tahiti across the Sea of the Moon, competes with Bora Bora for the title of the world's loveliest island. Seen in the misty distance, they're both like movie sets. As a matter of fact they *are* movie sets. Filmmakers have been coming here since 1912, when Gaston Méliès put *Song of the South Seas* on the silver screen. There have been three film versions of the *Bounty* story. Today, there seems to be a movie crew behind every plumeria bush.

From Tahiti, the shuttle to Moorea used to be a rusty copra schooner loaded with chickens, pigs, and guitar-strumming locals. It was a lively crossing. Today, fast catamarans whisk us across the rolling swells of open ocean in about 35 minutes. A humpback whale flipped the white underside of his tail at me as he dove for the deep. Word is that—more and more often—the once elusive whales have been spotted returning to Moorea's bays during mating season.

The name *Moorea* means "Yellow Lizard." It was the name taken by a warrior clan on the island who later buried

the war club and merged with the Pomare kings of Tahiti. Moorea gave us the *Lory-Lory* dance. It predated the hip-swinging *tamure* and was the sexiest of all the Polynesian revels. It made men of the world such as Wallis, Bougainville, and Bligh blush. Not surprisingly, missionaries eventually banned the Lory-Lory. Anyone observed dancing "indecently" was fined \$4 and forced to clear 300 feet of road.

In Moorea, you might say the road to good intentions was paved with romance.

The people of Moorea wore garments made from the bark of the paper mulberry, which had the interesting quality of disintegrating in seawater. So missionaries banned surfing, too. It was this kind of hasty, narrow, and injudicious thinking that made the locals want to throw an occasional parson into the cook pot.

In the days when only serious sailors cruised the South Pacific, Moorea had only one bed-and-breakfast for visitors—a dirt-floored, mosquito-plagued collection of huts called the One Chicken Hotel. Colorful. But unsanitary. It was loosely operated by three now-legendary musketeers from the United States—Jay Carlisle, Hugh Kelly, and Muk McCallum.

Jay, Hugh, and Muk arm-wrestled the French bureaucracy for the right to open a proper hotel there in the 1960s. Paris wouldn't issue permits. The red tape was long and sticky, but they were patient. Eventually they received approval for a small hotel they called "Bali Hai." Now the Bali Hai Group is a popular chain of island hotels with over-water bungalows and manicured gardens.

It takes no effort to start a garden in paradise. Everywhere you look there's a riot of flowery color: The fragrant white-and-gold *tiare Tahiti*—the true gardenia—grows everywhere. Red croton, hibiscus, bougainvillaea, lotus, poinsettia, frangipani, ylang-ylang, and oleander are splashed along the roads and hillsides and present a perfumed picture. The soil is incredibly productive. Drop a seed and jump out of the way. Even the fence posts sprout greenery.

Vanilla production is an important source of island income. There is shrimp farming and commercial fishing. Tour guides ferry groups around in helicopters, Land Rovers, and glass-bottomed boats. Seeing all this work going on exhausted me. I decided just to lie around soaking up the sun. Just like a yellow lizard.

I kept busy doing nothing for three days but returned to Tahiti to catch up with the *M/S Paul Gauguin*, a new vessel operated by Radisson Seven Seas Cruises. She flies the flag of France and sails on seven-day cruises to the leeward Îles Sous le Vent, "The Islands Under the Wind"—Huahine, Raiatea,

Taha'a, and Bora Bora. She then cruises to the windward islands of Moorea and Tahiti. She sails each Saturday from Tahiti, her home port. The crew is made up of people from 20 nations. The vessel carries only 320 passengers, most of whom come from North America and Europe.

When I woke up one morning, the ship was cutting a white wake as she sailed between the islands of Huahine and Raiatea. Social scientists argue about which island was the

the dining rooms, put on a Tahitian fashion show by the swimming pool, and, when the mood strikes them, wander through the public rooms playing ukuleles.

"There is no question that Huahine has more *marae*—altars and ancestral shrines," a girl named Tehani told me. "They were sometimes used for human sacrifice."

A whole village has been uncovered. Experts believe it was thriving in A.D. 650. In about 1100 a hurricane or tidal



original center of Tahitian culture and religion, about which was the jumping-off place for the great migrations to New Zealand and Hawaii.

Some say Huahine. Others say Raiatea. Most of the pool-side passengers onboard the ship say, "Who cares?"

Eight young Tahitian girls are part of the crew as featured entertainers. Collectively they are called Les Gauguines. They sing and dance, act as hostesses on shore excursions and in

wave buried the village in mud, leaving a perfectly preserved Polynesian Pompeii. Archaeologists insist Huahine is *the* island for discovering artifacts. They dig up ancient bone fishhooks and put them under the microscope. All over the Pacific they'll tell you that the best fishhooks were fashioned out of human bones.

Tehani insisted that wave riders go to Huahine for the finest surfing in French Polynesia. "And in our island streams,"

she said, "we have a species of very rare blue-eyed eels."

I didn't see any blue-eyed eels, but Huahine is peppered with stone tikis. Tahitians say stone tikis are bad luck. "They walk at night ... bring plenty trouble," a fisherman told me. (He was using a steel fishhook, thank heavens.)

Years ago, when the manager of a local hotel decorated the garden with a stone tiki, all the help quit. Superstition was that strong. So the hotel hired a *tabua*, a native priest, to

I met Smith in Tahiti in 1962 when he was writing that book. On one island we shared a rented car. The seashell on the key chain was carved with the warning: "Do not park under the coconut trees, *s'il vous plait*."

A falling coconut can do a lot of damage to a car's bodywork. If one hits you on the head, it's good night, sweetheart. Tahitians say "coconuts have eyes, look out for people." They rarely hear of anyone being conked by a falling coconut.



chain the tiki while he mumbled ancient incantations.

The stone icon was then set in concrete to make sure it wasn't taking moonlight strolls. All this put the stone tiki in neutral, according to the hotel help, and only then were they willing to come back to work.

Wooden tikis are OK, even though most are relentlessly anatomically correct, as humorist H. Allen Smith pointed out in his book *Two Thirds of a Coconut Tree*.

When the *M/S Paul Gauguin* anchored off the island of Raiatea, passengers went ashore to see the famed local fire-walkers. How do they keep from roasting their toes? Nobody could tell me. True religion, perhaps.

There is a rare flower that grows only on Raiatea. It is the white *tiare apetabi* found only on Mount Temehani. A romantic legend says the blossom's five petals represent the fingers of a young maiden who lacked royal blood, so a Tahitian

prince refused to marry her. At dawn these petals open with an eerie popping sound—the echo, they say, of her breaking heart. (Cynics say it is the sound of her knuckles rapping the princeling on the head.)

Passengers have told the cruise line that Moorea and Bora Bora are the islands they like best, so the ship lingers for two days at both islands. It gives folks enough leisure time to take a number of shore excursions.

They sign up for bumpy four-wheel drive trips through the interior of the islands, where high lookouts offer spectacular views. They go on scuba and snorkeling excursions and expeditions where the fearless can stand in waist-deep water and feed harmless (they are told) sharks.

A lagoonful of ink has been spilled to print James Michener's accurate observation that Bora Bora is the most beautiful of all the world's islands. It is certainly my favorite.

In the mid-1960s, my late wife and I went to Bora Bora on our honeymoon. She was lucky enough to see a lot of this world, and Bora Bora was her favorite place, too.

One of the maids told my wife all about the Polynesian language of flowers—a highly practical approach to romance.

"Behind the left ear, one is taken," she said. "Behind the right ear"—she touched the hibiscus delicately—"one seeks."

**A local woman told my wife about the Polynesian language of flowers—a highly practical approach to romance. "Behind the left ear, one is taken," she said. "Behind the right ear"—she touched the hibiscus delicately—"one seeks." Her smile was brilliant enough to bleach rock.**

Her smile was brilliant enough to bleach rock.

Men wear the aromatic tiare Tahiti blossom. Its "follow me" fragrance is superior to the best designer aftershave.

The people have only to shift the flowers as they shift their inclinations.

Our only inclination was to do little but hang around our little grass shack. And occasionally to swim in the Bora Bora lagoon. Which we did. (This lethargy is called Polynesian Paralysis, a symptom experienced by many visitors.)

Last year, when I revisited my favorite island, I moved into the new, exclusive (and expensive) Bora Bora Lagoon Resort.

My little grass shack was a handsome bungalow built on stilts over the lagoon. The resort is on the small island of Toopua, only a five-minute ride in a speedboat to Vaitape, Bora Bora's main village.

My room was an explosion of flowers. All the furniture was smothered in scarlet hibiscuses. I had to gently disperse a mountain of blossoms just to find space to sit down.

The closets were stocked with snorkeling gear, and when I tried it out above the coral heads, talented and fanciful fish produced synchronized swimming shows all day long.

Later, I discovered that the top slid open on my glass coffee table so I could feed the fish that came to entertain under my nearly floating house. There was even a colorful chart to help identify the sea critters. You can turn on a light under the deck to attract the fish that work nights.

The "Do Not Disturb" sign simply reads "*cbut*," the French word for "hush." I flipped it to the hush position and spent an inordinate amount of time throwing crumbs to the fishes in an effort to avoid real work.

I wondered—do Polynesians suffer from stress? I checked the phone books on several islands. Looked to see if there were any practicing psychiatrists listed in the yellow pages.

I asked a desk clerk. He gave me the look bankers reserve for out-of-town checks. "Are you crazy?" he said. "There are medical specialties of many kinds," he said, "but not a working shrink that I know of. You go to a *tahua* for that—a Tahitian priest who practices the old ways." (The same man you hire to tame stone tikis.)

The Lagoon Resort further reduced my stress by staging an elegant picnic, Bora Bora-style. An umbrella-topped table and four chairs were plopped right down in two feet of crystal water. The table was dressed with fine linen and sterling silver. The warm lagoon lapped at our knees, and the sandy sea bottom was soft as baby powder. Hearts-of-palm salad was on the table, champagne was cooling, and tuna steaks and shrimp were on the barbecue. Decadent, truly decadent. But splendid!

Evenings, soft island music spills from the dining room into the velvet night. The Hiro bar is named for the Polynesian god of thieves. His larcenous legend is all about his effort to lasso and steal this little island of Toopua and has nothing to do with the drink prices.

Again, I found it very difficult to leave Bora Bora, but real life called. With sadness, I reluctantly hung my swimsuit on the deck to dry and forced myself to board a plane and fly the 150 miles back to Tahiti.

Le Retro is the fashionable open-air restaurant on the Boulevard Pomare where I sat and watched the people of Papeete go by. The coffee is dark French roast, caressed with a hint of vanilla bean. The croissants are freshly baked. The rich butter is from the Normandy coast of France.

Sleek ladies in expensive dresses from Paris browse the shop windows, and young French sailors walk by wearing starched white shorts.

From the waterfront come the wonderful cooking smells of *les roulettes*, Tahiti's rolling restaurants. They are ornately painted vans whose owners prop open the sides, pull out their striped awnings, fire up the stoves, and serve inexpensive, excellent food. You can select roast pork from one van, grilled chicken or steak from another. Wander along, and you'll be offered stir-fry, chow mein, curry, and flaming crepes. Raw fish with lime, *poisson cru*, is the local delicacy. It is fragrant and flavorful.

Motorbikes, tiny Renault cars, and the colorful public transport called Le Truck speed down the street. It's a scene from a South Seas novel.

Did I find the changes in the Tahitian Isles to be dramatic? You bet. The chrome-and-glass-and-steel hotels may be decorated in the island style, but the new efficiency is certainly un-Tahitian. The entertainment is professionally polished, and the tourist activities are highly organized.

Yet, you'll be glad to know, Tahiti and other nearby islands have not been turned into Polynesian theme parks. Not yet, anyway.

Romance is still strong in the island air. The beauty of these islands, with their candy-colored lagoons and fiery-red sunsets, is timeless. These faraway places should be shared with someone you love.

The new hotels are slick and clean. The food is quite good. And you can always slip away to a quiet beach to hide from the sellers of cultivated (and opulent) black pearls.

For a simpler, secluded island lifestyle, well, you can still wander on to the remote archipelagoes of French Polynesia. You may find accommodations a bit primitive, yet the distant

palm-green shores look today as Tahiti did to James Norman Hall when he and Charles Bernard Nordhoff were crafting their story about the mutiny on the *Bounty*.

Hall is buried on Tahiti facing Matavai Bay, where Bligh first ordered the HMS *Bounty*'s anchor dropped. A bronze plaque is inscribed with a poem Hall wrote:

*Look to the Northward, stranger  
Just over the hillside, there  
Have you in your travels seen  
A land more passing fair?*

While I was thinking this over, I planned to borrow a cup of passionate verbs from the local witch doctor and turn out some florid writing of my own about romance in the South Sea Isles.

I put a tiare Tahiti blossom behind my ear, ordered a frosty can of Hinano beer, and watched all the friendly Tahitians sashay by.

A young and beautiful island girl walked my way, and I gave her a sultry look. It missed. But when it hit the lagoon, it sizzled.

Unfortunately, not a single chief's daughter came by to give me a long, slow wink. It's enough to make a South Seas writer throw his pencil into a pastel pool.

**Details, Details, Details /** In the United States, the Tahiti Tourisme Office offers information from its main office at 300 Continental Boulevard, Suite 160, El Segundo, CA 90245. Tel: 800-365-4949.

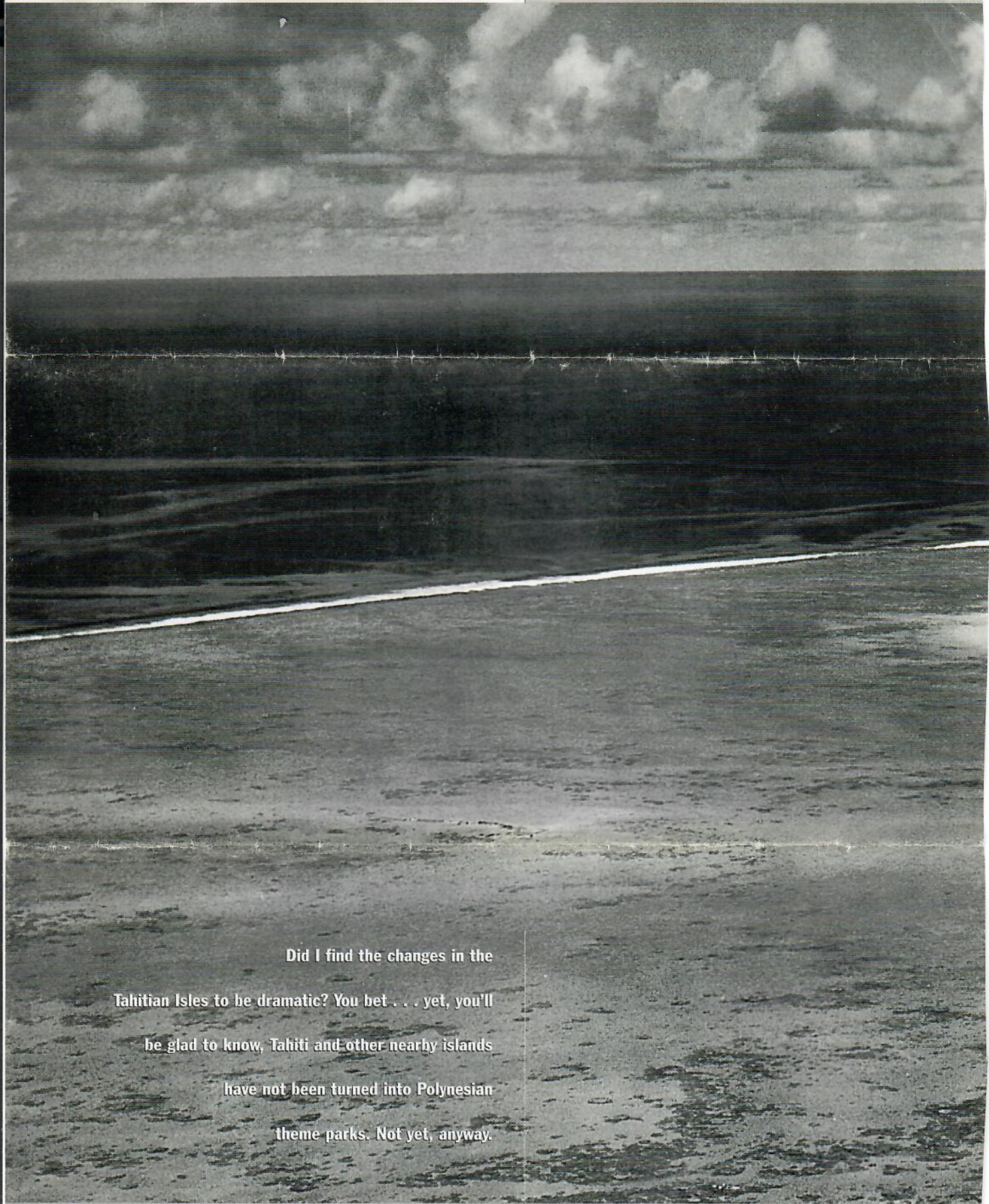
Tahiti Tourisme also has offices in Paris, Frankfurt, Milan, Santiago, Melbourne, Auckland, Tokyo, Osaka, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Seoul, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Singapore, Taipei, and New Delhi.

Through 1999, the cruise ship M/S *Paul Gauguin* offers seven-night sailings with prices starting at \$2,895 per person. Favorable roundtrip air/sea packages are available with prices depending on carrier and gateway. Tel: 800-285-1835.

From Tahiti, Air Tahiti has frequent out-island flights. There are more than a dozen charter boat companies, or you can buy a ticket on the *Aranui Freighter*, a combination cargo and passenger ship that sails to the faraway isles—three weeks is about the minimum run. /END/

**Kevin Keating** is an award-winning writer who was one of the first journalists to visit Tahiti when piston planes pioneered the routes to French Polynesia. He has filed stories from the South Seas for four decades and travels there so often that he buys sunblock by the gallon. He lives on a floating home in Sausalito, California.





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