

A journey to the Disappointment Islands

In 1765, an English explorer gave two islands a rather unfortunate name that has sheltered them from the world and preserved one of Earth's last paradises.

By Andrew Evans

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(This year, we published many inspiring and amazing stories that made us fall in love with the world – and this is one our favourites. Click [here](#) for the full list).

Lord Byron's grandfather was having a bad day.

Scurvy had taken down his crew on the HMS Dolphin, forcing them into their hammocks where they swayed in the sticky heat of the tropics as their ship listed slowly across the Pacific.

Eager to control the South Atlantic, the British Navy had tasked Admiral Byron with settling an island off the South American coast where ships could resupply, and then finding an alternative route to the East Indies. By the time he finally returned to England, he had set a record for circumnavigating the globe in less than two years; claimed the western Falkland Islands for the Crown; and nearly started a war between Great Britain and Spain in the process.

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Byron sailed away, marking his frustration onto a new map of the world by naming these atolls the ‘Islands of Disappointment’

But after rounding the tip of South America, the explorer confronted the world’s largest body of water: the endless Pacific Ocean. After a month of empty blue horizon, a tiny island appeared. Byron noted the date (Friday 7 June 1765), and joyously described the island’s “beautiful appearance – surrounded by a beach of the finest white sand – and covered with tall trees, which... formed the most delightful groves”.

The naval officer watched as his crew crawled onto the deck, “gazing at this little paradise” that was green with abundant young coconuts whose vitamin-rich meat and milk could heal their bleeding gums. Alas, Byron quickly ascertained that it was impossible to land. “I could not forbear standing close round the island with the ship,” he wrote in his daily log. With the high surf and a shallow coral shoreline that dropped starkly into the bottomless blue, there was no safe anchorage.

Then there were the natives, noted Byron, who showed up on the beach brandishing 5m-long spears. The islanders set massive signal fires to warn a neighbouring island of the impromptu invaders. “The natives ran along the shore abreast of the ship, shouting and dancing,” Byron recalled, waving their long spears as a warning.



“They would kill us... if we ventured to go on shore,” wrote Byron, who attempted one more landing in a longboat before giving up. “[They] set up one of the most hideous yells I had ever heard, pointing at the same time to their spears, and poising in their hands large stones which they took up from the beach.” The British made a go at frantic diplomacy by throwing old bread at the islanders, who refused to touch the stale food but instead waded into the water and tried to swamp the longboat.

Byron backed off and instead set sail towards the larger neighbouring island, but he again failed to anchor along the ringed coral atoll. Meanwhile, natives armed with spears and clubs followed the longboat in the surf, using “threatening gestures to prevent their landing”. Byron only convinced the islanders to back off when he shot a 9lb cannonball over their heads. Less than 20 hours after arriving, Byron sailed away, marking his frustration onto a new map of the world by naming these atolls the ‘Islands of Disappointment’. The map was published following his round-the-world journey, and the moniker has stuck ever since.

Rediscovery

I laughed out loud when I first spotted the name in Byron’s sea log during a bout of insomnia, and was instantly hooked, reading line by line through the night until dawn. The name, now commonly listed as ‘Disappointment Islands’, sounded more like the title of some back-shelf Tintin comic than a real place on Earth. But the name checked out online, pointing to Napuka and Tepoto, a pair of far-flung dots in the South Pacific, etched upon the blue surface of the Tuamotu Archipelago, the largest group of coral atolls on the planet.

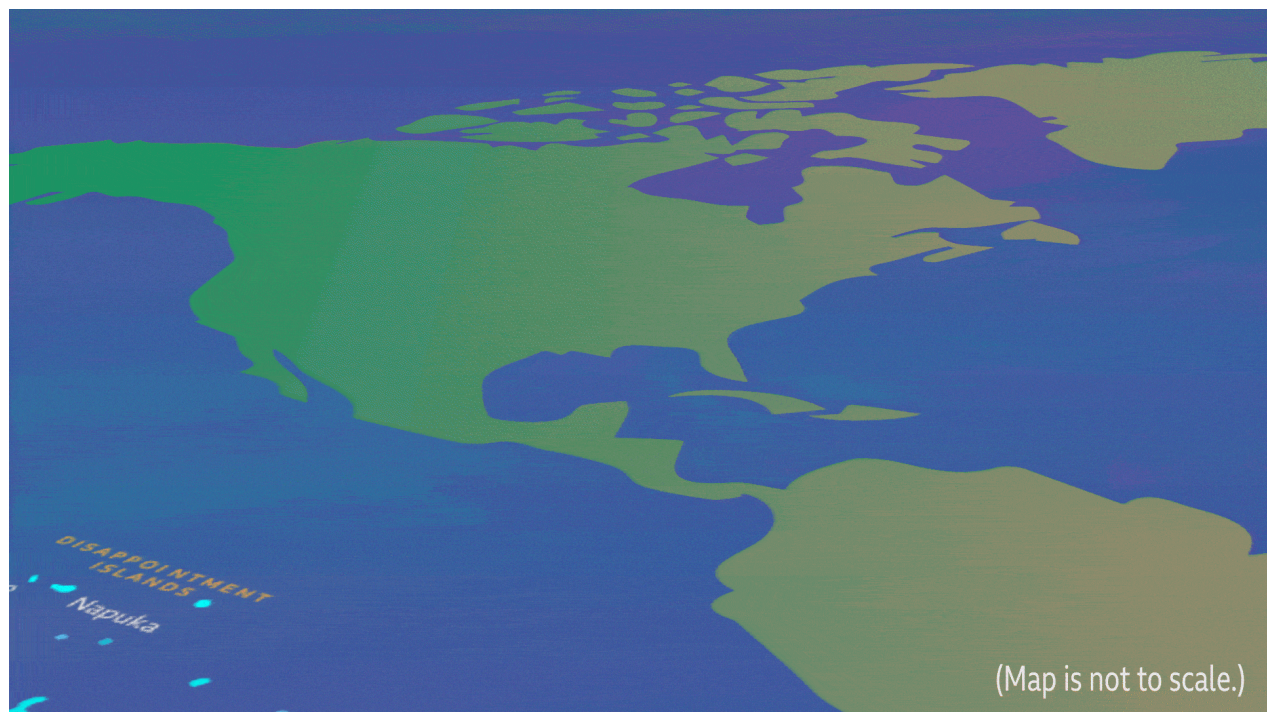
Peering down on Google Earth, the smaller of the two Disappointment Islands resembled a single-cell organism floating alone in the ocean. Measuring just 4 sq km, Tepoto is one of the smallest of the 118 islands and atolls that comprise French Polynesia. This green teardrop banded by sandy beach upon a deep blue ribbon is also the tiny island where Byron failed to land. Could I get there, and would I be disappointed, too?

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No hotels, no restaurants, no tourist industry – it sounded like paradise to me

And yet, 254 years after Byron’s attempt, the Disappointment Islands still proved difficult to access. Flights to the larger atoll of Napuka are not even listed on Air Tahiti’s international website. I spent three weeks making cold calls before I got hold of an agent.

“You can fly to Napuka in February,” she explained in French, “but then you have to stay a full month.” And so I travelled in the better weather of May, when scheduled flights still gave me a minimum eight-day stay. Located nearly 1,000km from Tahiti’s capital, Papeete, Napuka is one of the most isolated islands in French Polynesia, and a quick stop on a larger circular air route. Once I stepped off the plane, I would have to stay.



“You should arrange a place to stay beforehand,” my friend Celeste Brash recommended. She had never been to Napuka, but as the author of Lonely Planet’s Tahiti & French Polynesia guidebook, she spoke from personal experience: “Those really remote atolls in the Tuamotus don’t really know what to do when visitors show up.”

No hotels, no restaurants, no tourist industry – it sounded like paradise to me. This was my ultimate desire as a traveller: to show up unannounced like those ailing British sailors, open to the naked fate of true exploration. I opted out of scurvy and long months at sea in favour of the 18-hour flight to Tahiti from Washington DC, measured out in cups of fresh pineapple juice poured by flight attendants wearing floral prints. After a night in Papeete, I boarded a two-hour prop plane to Napuka.

Journey

For the first hour, I watched the empty ocean far below me. The blue intensity astonished me as much as the immensity of the water. Polynesia is believed to be one of the last areas on Earth settled by humans, and that ancient people sailed across this void in narrow canoes from places like Indonesia and the

Philippines seemed nearly impossible. Resting my forehead against the vibrating window, I studied the leathery surface of the mid-morning Pacific, basking in that rare moment when stark geographic truths confront you: Polynesia is more ocean than anything else.

Faint white rings of coral atolls appeared – *les îles basses*, or ‘low islands’ of the Tuamotus. We dropped in tight circles and landed on the atoll of Fakarava, where at least half the 20 passengers departed. Ten minutes later we were back in the air, hovering over an even longer stretch of blue.

Another hour passed before I recognised tiny Tepoto – alone in the ocean, single and miniscule, exactly like on my computer screen back home. The plane veered right and the larger atoll of Napuka filled my oval window view, like a turquoise boomerang encircling a long necklace of white coral islets. Right before we landed, I saw a flash of metal rooftops and green palm groves, a few dirt roads and a pointed church steeple.

As the doors opened, thick, hot air saturated the plane and I dashed across the tarmac and into the shade of the Napuka Airport – a small, open-air shelter just off the runway, stacked with luggage and cargo. It seemed as if the whole island had come to meet the plane – the first flight to land in weeks. Families rushed towards us and flung fragrant flower leis around the necks of loved ones. As the lone foreigner, I stood apart, awkwardly watching the ritual of welcome, already feeling invasive and uncomfortable. Though I had travelled 12,000km, a great divide remained. I did not belong in this scene, and everybody there knew it.

“Are you here on holiday?” a younger man asked me in French, heaving a duffle bag into the shade.

I smiled and shrugged. “*Oui.*” It was easier than explaining how late-night Googling and reading the diary of an 18th-Century sea captain had led me to embark on this indulgent quest.

We chatted. His name was Jack, and he and his colleague Evarii were electronic technicians from Tahiti, servicing all the tsunami warning sirens in French Polynesia. They had come to repair the siren on Tepoto, which is only accessible by boat from Napuka, and like me, they would have to stay eight days before the next flight back. But why had I come? Jack asked me. Where would I stay? Did I understand that there were no 'services' on Napuka?

Evarii seemed annoyed by my presence.

"Do you do this often?" he asked. "Just show up in a place without any plans?" Before I could tell him yes, in fact, this was my favourite way to travel, Jack intervened.

"I'll talk to *la mairesse*. We'll figure something out."

As if stepping out of a Gauguin painting, a woman soon approached me with a flowing bright skirt and a wide straw hat pinned with flowers that shaded her face. Her name was Marina and as *tavana* ('mayor', in Tahitian) of the 300-person atoll, she oversees everything that happens on Napuka, including every flight that lands at the airport.

"Why did you not contact us to let us know you were coming?" *tavana* Marina asked me. "We have made no arrangements!" I fumbled an unconvincing response, saying that I didn't want to be a burden.

"Do you want to visit Tepoto?" *tavana* Marina asked, because a boat had already been organised for the technicians. Yes, I wanted to visit Tepoto. That was Byron's first elusive island, and aside from the once-a-month supply boat, there was no way to reach it. I jumped at the chance.

"Come with us," said Jack, smiling. Evarii huffed.

"You know there's no water over there!" Evarii mentioned as he looked over

my meagre luggage. I knew. I had practically memorised the Wikipedia entry: 'These islands are arid, and are not especially conducive to human habitation'. I had a few litres of water in my bag, but it was barely enough for one day, let alone a week.

"We can share," Jack said. We drove in the back of Tavana Marina's pickup truck to the short cement dock, where a small metal skiff was hanging by steel cables from a front-loading tractor. I helped load the tiny boat with supplies, including a massive cooler of drinking water the technicians had checked as cargo from Tahiti. In a flash, the front loader dropped the skiff into the water, and two drivers jerked the outboard motors to life. The three of us hopped inside, and with a burst of engine, broke through the surf.

Arrival

Out past the reef, the sea was calm with a light swell that rapidly pushed us north-west from Napuka towards the vague horizon. Aside from the wind, the only sound was the buzzing of twin outboard motors that carried our tiny party out into the heart of the ocean. In all my travels and ocean crossings, I had never felt this vulnerable on the water. I was seated on a boat the size of a kitchen table, floating atop the bluest and emptiest part of the globe without a speck of land in sight. The fringe of palms on Napuka had disappeared behind us, and for a solid 10 minutes, the blank horizon met my gaze from every direction, blue upon blue.

And yet I felt an inherent trust towards my Polynesian crewmates. I had dropped my life into their hands and watched as they read the changing currents like road signs. Their eyes focused on the horizon and their fingers twitched the angle of the motor by half an inch, this way and that, steering us towards the invisible target of an island so tiny you could miss it and not even know.

"No GPS!" cried Evarii, shouting over the engine. He nodded to the drivers and tapped the side of his head. "They just know where to go."

Twenty minutes and 10km later, a thin green stripe of land pushed up from the water, followed by the white coral beach against the blue-green surf. After another 20 minutes, the island came into full view: coconut palms waving left and right, just as Byron had seen so long ago.

Unlike the admiral, I landed successfully on Tepoto. In time with the rising and falling waves, I hopped onto the short dock and watched another front loader pluck the boat right out from the sea. It made perfect sense that an 18th-Century British tall ship would fail to find harbour here. The island was nothing more than a sharp and shallow reef that dropped off starkly into the dark blue depths, just as Byron had described.

“Welcome to Tepoto,” a man in his late 30s said as he shook my salty hand and introduced himself as Severo, the island’s one and only policeman and the son of tavana Marina back on Napuka. She had called to tell him that I was arriving, and now a party of islanders was coming out to greet us. At the helm was a woman wrapped in a purple muumuu who dropped a string of white Tahitian gardenias around my neck, dousing me in a honey-vanilla perfume.

“*Bienvenue*,” she said, kissing me on both cheeks and introducing herself as Louana.

“*Maururu*,” I replied in Tahitian. Thank you.

Louana was the tavana of Tepoto, and she led us up from the beach, past the leaning palms to the single row of pastel bungalows that lined the island’s only street, paved with crushed coral stone.

“Have you ever seen a four-headed coconut tree?” a young boy asked me in French, running alongside me.

“No, I have not,” I answered.

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Have you ever seen a four-headed coconut tree?

“We have one,” an older boy piped in. “It’s a coconut tree... with four heads!”

I struggled to follow the excited rush of voices that came at me, each one a weird puzzle piece of information concerning this remarkable four-headed coconut tree – how nature made it *comme ça* – and how originally the trunk was split into seven heads, but those extra three broke off in a typhoon long ago. Several islanders offered to show me the arboreal wonder.

Two hours after dropping into the Disappointment Islands without water or plans, I had a place to stay with the visiting technicians in a peeling-pink shack with plywood walls and cut-out squares for windows. Red-orange curtains printed with white hibiscus flowers flapped in the breeze as I sat sweating on the bed, adjusting to the 38C heat. Not only had I landed in Tepoto, but I had been welcomed.

Tepoto

Minutes later, Severo buzzed by on his scooter with lunch cooked by his wife Tutapu: pan-fried snapper with rice, peas and coconut bread. The fish had been caught that morning and was more delicious than any I had ever eaten in a restaurant.

While we ate, Severo sussed me out. As the island policeman, his job was to keep the peace and look after the welfare of the few dozen inhabitants, he explained.

“It’s very tranquil here,” he said. “No real problems.” But now I had shown up and he kept looking into my eyes, as if trying to read my intentions. “I can’t remember the last time we had a visitor. Not for as long as I’ve been here –

over 20 years now.”

In fact, Severo said that no-one could recall the last time a non-Polynesian had come to Tepoto – certainly not in their lifetimes. Then, he told me that what I had read on Wikipedia was wrong: there weren't 62 residents on the island, but closer to 40 now, 13 of which were children under the age of 12.

“Young people leave,” he explained. Once they turn 12, the French government sends them to boarding school in Hao, another atoll in the Tuamotu Archipelago 390km away. For high school, teenagers go to the main island of Tahiti. Severo had grown up on Napuka and returned there after high school, then married a girl from Tepoto and moved here.

“What will you do while you're here?” Severo asked.

“Explore,” I answered, though I had made no real plans. I had not really thought past the possibility of getting here. Now that I had actually made it, the coming days confronted me. “Wait until it's cooler,” he advised.

I dozed through the hot, humid afternoon and heard no other sounds except my own slow breathing that seemed to follow the rhythm of the whispering surf and listing palms. At 16:00, I followed the sound of a tinkling bell across the road, where most of the islanders sat on outdoor benches facing a shrine covered in garlands of flowers and chains of seashells. A musician played a guitar in one corner while the island's nurse stood up and led the congregation in a strong and harmonious hymn.

Still singing, a woman moved to one side, offering to share her bench with me. The Catholic mass lasted a full hour, rotating through chants and readings and hymns – all in Tahitian. Afterwards, the lady explained that this was the holy week of pilgrimage when islanders gathered twice a day before the Virgin Mary, the angelic figurine at the centre of the elaborate floral decor.

“We are lucky here on Tepoto,” she said. “There is no war. No crime.” There

were no real problems at all, she mused, lighting a hand-rolled cigarette. She also told me there was no running water or internet, and very limited electricity. Tepoto received its first solar panels and electric power in 1995, and a mobile phone tower within the last five years.

“Have you ever seen a four-headed coconut tree?” she asked me, point blank.

“No, I have not.”

“We have one here, maybe the only one in the world,” she said with an air of mystery before saying goodbye and returning to her bungalow to untangle a hairy pig tied by one leg to a palm tree.

Night fell fast and the stars blew me away. I gawked upwards from the empty beach as if catching the night sky for the first time, the Milky Way scrawled like a diagonal swath of pink gauze.

The bell woke me before dawn, calling believers to another Catholic mass. This time I opted out and walked to the end of the one road, past the fanning palms and out to the coral shoreline. The sun rose behind me and lit up the sea like silver. I continued southwards, walking the length of the 2.6km island and admiring the tidal pools that housed tiny worlds of maroon-speckled crabs and green fish. Blue-eyed clams lay cemented in the rust-coloured coral and seabirds soared overhead.

Massive white-stone crosses marked the cardinal points of the island, while the windward stretch of beach showed a collage of remnants that had floated in from the outside world: a whisky bottle; Chinese pharmaceuticals; a cracked CD case; a bottle of Japanese salad dressing; and a barnacled tennis shoe. I considered the long journey of the driftwood that now rested on this bit of shore. Where had it come from – Asia, the Americas or New Zealand? Tepoto was like some forgotten punctuation mark between all three.

In three decades of travelling, I had never encountered such a raw and solitary place. The empty beaches and silent palm groves seemed timeless, as though a mirage of Byron's ship still hovered somewhere off in the warm, salty breeze. I had seen this island depicted on old atlases and my grandfather's globe and had somehow transported myself here – and yet, even my own footprints seemed implausible, as if I had stepped from my own reality into some far-flung dream state.

Within days, I fell into the forced simplicity of the island: sleeping under a single cotton sheet; sipping instant coffee made using rainwater drained from the roof; eating raw clams; and then exploring every short footpath on the island. I bathed with a dipper of water from the rain barrel. Under the shade of trees and front porch roofs, I talked with the islanders and listened to their stories. At times I grew painfully thirsty, but kept silent, never asking for a drink. Yet somehow, the islanders always knew, sending their kids to gather fresh coconuts and then chopping them open and urging me to hydrate. I offered to pay and was always refused. In fact, I only handled money once, to pay Severo for my room and board.

News that a foreigner had landed and was staying in the pink bungalow near the dock drifted across the tiny island. Occasionally, a few people stopped by in the evening to say hello, offer me a tour of the island or to ask me earnest questions. "How many houses do you have you in your town?". "Are you a Christian?". At times when I went off to explore, I caught glimpses of watchful eyes, peering at me through the palm fronds. They knew I was under the policeman's care but remained on alert. I reacted by living with total transparency, down to my underwear drying on the clothesline.

When it grew too warm, I swam in the ocean, the islanders watching from shore. Wearing goggles, I caught the flash of colour and life that swam beneath the waves – pastel fish whose scales matched the row of humble houses on Tepoto. Mounds of spiky coral glowed neon-like, healthy and unbroken, spared from the careless destruction of men.

Perhaps Byron's disappointment had sheltered this place from the rest of the world, preserving it to this day. I'd seen the bleached and broken coral reefs of Bora Bora and Tahiti, where too much love has ruined the natural paradise that first put Polynesia on the tourist map. But here, halfway between the Marquesas and the main Tuamotu island groups, Tepoto has remained comparatively unblemished. I felt lucky to glimpse the vibrant and teeming underwater life, knowing that millions of tourists would visit the rest of Polynesia and never see this kind of virgin reef.

Nor would they ever see the four-headed coconut tree. After days of anticipation, I received a personal invitation from three schoolboys – Tuata, Tearoha and Sylvain – who escorted me to the mayor's office where the technicians were finishing up their work on the tsunami warning signal.

A stumpy tractor with a wide shovel (the island's only vehicle) had been dispatched for our adventure. Sylvain's father André drove, while I rode inside the shovel with the technicians. In all, there were eight of us clinging to the tractor as we manoeuvred and bumped our way into the dense coconut grove at the island's centre.

Coconuts are the only cash crop on Tepoto, and as we pushed through the forest, I noticed small piles of halved coconuts, thick with hairy husks, drying in the sun. The oily white flesh, called copra, earns a fixed rate of 140 local francs (about £1) per kilogram, and is carried away once a month aboard a supply ship. Every islander has the right to collect and sell copra for cash, but André explained that the coconut trees had begun to die. A small invasive beetle was killing them, he said, making the leaves fall off and leaving bare, toothpick trunks poking into the air.

After 20 minutes driving through the grove, the tractor stopped and the engine cut. I looked up and there it was, skinny and circumspect, barely noticeable except for the four branches that spun out from its base. The long fronds waved back in the wind.

“It’s the four-headed coconut tree!” Tearoha shouted like a carnival barker. I stood in awe at the oddity before us and wondered how it came to be. By now I had heard the story from nearly every human on the island, how there had been seven branches, but three had broken off in the last major typhoon. The men began to recall different storms that had flattened the forest of trees in hours, and how the old people could predict a typhoon just from watching the birds. In the past, the islanders latched themselves to coconut palms to keep from being blown away by the gale-force winds. Now they had a siren triggered automatically from hundreds of kilometres away and the stone church to protect them.

We took the long way back to the village, continuing first to the southern tip of the island. André pointed towards Napuka in the east, and standing on land instead of crouching in a boat, I could barely see it over the waves. A baby black-tipped reef shark hunted in the shallows, zipping after the schools of smaller fish.

We followed the beach around towards the pink sunset, and I caught sight of my own footprints from days before – the only footprints on that side of the island. Just like Byron had marked his disappointment on a map of the world, I had left my own impressions in the sand of Tepoto. Another tide and my trail would be erased and redrawn with the winding trails of seabirds and coconut crabs.

André stopped the tractor in front of his turquoise bungalow and leaned against a palm trunk. With a few swift chops of his machete, he hacked down fresh coconuts for all of us and handed me a whole litre of coconut water.

“We may not have water,” said André, “but we can always drink coconuts.”

That night, André, Severo and some of the other men of Tepoto gathered outside our pink house to drink beer and talk fishing. They spoke a mix of French, Tahitian and the local Tuamotuan language of Paumotu. I strained to

fully understand their epic tales of catching bonito by the hundreds – the same bonito I had been served that day for lunch, raw, but with chopped onions and coconut milk.

“Here, a gift,” said Joseph, a fisherman who handed me a handmade lure that he used to catch bonito. The sharpened metal hook was decorated with a carved mother-of-pearl spinner and a wild pig’s tail. In return, I gave him my goggles.

This was a tiny solar-powered island without internet, cars or Starbucks. The technicians and I were the only outside influence, and I tried to make it count. During my last two days on Tepoto I taught Tuata and Tearoha how to play chess. The elementary school had a chessboard, but none of the children knew how to play. After hours of instruction, I had them play against one another. That night, Evarii challenged me to a game and we played into the evening. One by one, the Tahitian technician killed my pieces until only my tall white king remained, chased in circles by the black king and bishop.

“Checkmate,” Evarii said.

“No, wait,” Jack intervened in French. “*C’est la nulle.*” It was a draw. Neither of us had won. My plastic king was destined to wander the board aimlessly, and Evarii would never have the satisfaction of killing me. He went off to sulk in the last sunset I saw on Tepoto, when the sky lit up blue and green, then peach, rose and orange. Wood smoke scented the air and shooting stars lit the night. Jack played the ukulele, singing lovelorn Polynesian songs along with our hosts until well past midnight.

Napuka

The next morning, the men launched the boat into the surf, lowering it with the tractor and plopping it into the turquoise shallow at just the right moment. Severo’s in-laws came with us. From time to time, they liked to visit family on

Napuka.

“You are welcome anytime,” said tavana Louana, dropping a string of polished cowrie shells around my neck.

“Yes, come stay with us again,” said Severo, adding another necklace. André and the other islanders came and added their own hand-strung necklaces. By the time I climbed into the wobbling boat, my head bowed forward with the weight of shells around my neck. Five minutes later, Tepoto was nothing more than a whisper of green on the blue ocean.

I spent three more days on Napuka, adjusting to the sudden noise and crowds of this 200-person metropolis. Severo’s mother-in-law had warned me, “On Tepoto, we don’t lock our doors, but on Napuka, we lock them.” Two hundred people were too many to trust, and unlike Tepoto, there were cars and at least three streets including the road to the airport.

Whether he was assigned or volunteered, the island’s fireman became my escort on Napuka. His name was tattooed across his muscled chest – Marama – and within an hour of landing, he had me knee-deep in the lagoon while he cracked open a live clam.

“Eat it,” he said. “You need to taste how good our clams are.”

I reached into the shell and pulled at the cool, gelatinous animal. Then I plopped it in my mouth, squishing down and biting through the salty and slimy flesh.

“More. You left the best part,” Marama said. I cleaned out the shell and then slurped the juice like an oyster. Marama beamed. Was this some kind of test?

“Most foreigners would never agree to eat a raw clam like you did,” Marama said. “But this is our culture. This is how we survive out here. You showed that you respect us.”

I did respect them, but on Tepoto, I had also been eating clams for every meal – raw, pickled, cooked and curried. I never foraged on my own; to take anything from the island would be stealing, I thought. The islanders enforced their own quotas, but shared whatever they pulled from the sea with me.

Marama told me he was on the Napuka island council that regulated the gathering of clams and coconuts. When there was no other food to be had, there would always be clams, and it was his job to maintain a sustainable population of both clams and coconuts.

“How did you hear about Napuka?” Marama asked me, as we walked back towards town. I told him that I had read about the islands in a very old book.

“Byron?” asked Marama with a smirk.

“Yes,” I answered. “Byron came here in 1765.”

“You know,” said Marama, “the people here are not very happy with Byron. He called us ‘The Islands of Disappointment’, right?” He laughed, “I wish people knew the truth about this place. You really have to know the people to understand.”

“I know,” I said. “And now that I’ve been here, I know that Byron was wrong.”

Indeed, it seemed impossible to feel disappointed in the scene that enveloped me at that moment. The sky seemed Photoshopped with evenly-spaced clouds, and the lagoon glowed the colour of California swimming pools. Twenty metre-high coconut palms danced slowly, and I had just made a new friend who would take me fishing the next day and then swimming at his favourite beach. He would introduce me to dozens of new friends, including Maoake Tuhoe, one of the oldest men on the island, who claimed I was the first foreigner he remembers coming to Napuka since, “those Peruvians

passed by in that boat.”

Upon further questioning, I discovered ‘those Peruvians’ were, in fact, a group of **explorers aboard a raft** led by Norwegian Thor Heyerdahl in 1947 that washed up in the Tuamotus 72 years ago.

Marama would be there on the day I left, gifting me a necklace he had strung with large, fragrant flowers and kissing me on both cheeks like a brother. And I would leave him my favourite cowboy hat, the one that kept me from getting burned in the scorching South Pacific sun. He wore it as he waved to me on the plane.

Back

It took a day of island hopping to get back to Tahiti, where I felt overwhelmed by everything: the traffic, the streetlights, the tourists and even the hot running water in my hotel bathtub. I had filled notebooks and hard drives with words and images from Napuka to Tepoto and back again, but I wanted a more professional opinion.

“The Byron story is the only recorded account we have in which the Europeans arrived, yet failed to make contact with the natives,” said Jean Kapé, who grew up on Napuka and now serves as director of Tahiti’s **l’Académie Paumotu**, which is dedicated to preserving the language, culture and environment of the Tuamotu Islands. I had met Kapé’s brother in Napuka, and he had connected the two of us.

Responding to Byron’s sense of disappointment, Kapé said: “If someone from somewhere else gives their opinion about a place, it’s already false, because that opinion is only based on what they know.”

Byron’s unsuccessful landing represents the ultimate missed connection – a spark of static that failed to ignite. And yet, his failure may have spared Napuka the same fate as many islands in the South Pacific.

“Napuka [and Tepoto] are the last places where you can witness the original vegetation of the Tuamotu islands,” Kapé said. The Paumotu language, which is only still spoken by an estimated 6,000 people, is also alive there, along with their customs – one of which is unbridled hospitality towards the rare visitors they receive from nearby islands.

“[Welcoming others] is sacred to Polynesians. It is the soul of all humanity,” Kapé said. “But too often with history, foreigners are the ones holding the pen, hence a name like ‘The Disappointment Islands.’ But even Napuka and Tepoto are just nicknames. The islands’ real names tell a much fuller story of the place you just visited.”

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I cannot pretend to fully understand, or worse, attempt to convey such a beautiful and complex history

We talked for hours, Kapé and I. Over and over, he tried to explain the islands’ many Polynesian names, like Te Puka Runga, “The Tree Where the Sun Rises” (Napuka); and Te Puka Raro, “The Tree Where the Sun Sets” (Tepoto), deciphering the complex dialect and the multiple hidden meanings behind each name. It encompassed centuries of stories that stretch back to the original inhabitants and their worldview when their universe was nothing more than the two islands, the surrounding ocean and the big sun that moved

overhead.

I listened carefully and took notes, but I cannot pretend to fully understand, or worse, attempt to convey such a beautiful and complex history with my own words. Rather than repeat Byron’s mistake of trying to name them from my limited understanding, I will keep silent – not from disappointment or neglect or laziness, but out of respect for this little piece of the world, unknown to so many, even in French Polynesia.

I thanked Kapé for his generous time and shook his hand. Then he gave me a lift back into the centre of Papeete, where throngs of French and American

tourists dug through racks of floral print shirts and souvenir tribal tattoos.

“I forgot to ask,” Kapé said as I opened the door of his car. “On Tepoto, did they show you the four-headed coconut tree?”

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