

je tile leads to the hotel's Main Lobby.

Mauna Lani Bay Hotel photo

PAPEETE, Tahiti — The jet from Los Angeles landed at dawn.

Even at that hour, the airport was crowded with welcomers. Floral leis sweetened the moist air and clouds scudded toward Moorea, wrapping themselves around its awesome peaks.

Familiar faces smiled. One isn't easily forgotten in Tahiti, even though it's been a long time since the last visit. Papeete grows but the islanders refuse to be corrupted. Only a few miles outside town one encounters a Tahiti as peaceful as the day the volcanoes ended their fury.

This is the old Tahiti, and so, after checking into my hotel, I rented one of those cracker boxes the Tahitians call cars and drove around the island. Twenty miles west of Papeete, in the village of Papara, I stopped at a restaurant run by a Frenchman and his wife.

The Frenchman stood at my table. "Quiet day," he said, "very quiet."

"Where is everyone?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Off fishing and napping."

"Sleeping at noon?"

He smiled. "Nothing changes in Tahiti. The more the tourists come, the more the Tahitians remain the same, relaxed."

He handed me his card: "Nuutere Restaurant-Bar." Except for the Frenchman's place, one suspects that little has changed in the village of Papara since the first jet invaded Tahiti, which was more than 20 years ago. There is just the Frenchman's restaurant and an 18-hole

Tahitian who used to work at Disney World and is in the process of producing a pro-am golf classic.

"Got lots of friends coming from the U.S.," he said enthusiastically, "especially Las Vegas and Florida."

But mightn't success spoil the little village, I suggested?

Hopu shook his head. "No," he smiled, "the people of Papara are too content. Yes, sir, too content."

Still, this is the island of the swells and the cognoscente. Only they remain back in Papeete where the action is. They fly in from the United States, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, checking into hotels such as the Maeva, the Tahara'a and the Beachcomber.

At seven stories, the Maeva remains the tallest hotel in Tahiti. It is nearly as tall as a coconut tree. I mention this because they broke the old rule when they opened it back in the late '60s. Until then, nothing was supposed to be taller than two-thirds of a coconut tree.

At the opposite end of Papeete, other vacationers seek shelter at Hotel Tahara'a, overlooking a splendid bay and a lovely black-sand beach. As Tahiti's famous upside-down hotel, the Tahara'a features a lobby overhead with 10 levels of rooms terraced down the hillside beneath it.

In between the Maeva and the Tahara'a, the Tahiti Beachcomber is the sybarite's special sand bar. With 200 rooms and 17 over-water bungalows, it is the first choice of the cognos-

installed in the bungalows have breakfast delivered by outrigger canoes and there is a deck where they may dive directly into the lagoon.

For romantics, the Beachcomber provides a special seven-night package that features everything from flowers to French champagne. Couples are met at the airport with leis. Afterward, they are driven in a sleek limousine to the Beachcomber, where they are met by a trio that serenades them on their stroll to the over-water bungalow.

It's a package that features the works. Even Tahitian dancers. It also features a pretty hefty price tag. Called the "ultimate romance," it peaks out at \$1,598 for the week and that doesn't include the airfare.

Meanwhile, ordinary rooms are equipped with coffee makers and mini-bars that are stocked with both soft drinks and booze. Mercedes cabs call at the door, where bellmen garbed in pareus wear garlands of flowers in their hair.

Much the same romantic nonsense is discovered at Club Bali Hai on Moorea. Only Club Bali Hai is not to be confused with Hotel Bali Hai on the same island.

Club Bali Hai is the former Ameo Hotel on Cook's Bay, which is being renovated in a multimillion-dollar program and sold as a time-share retreat. Meanwhile, it still operates as a hotel with rates ranging from \$50 to \$120 a day.

Just next door, a dozen thatched bungalows have been unveiled at the new Te Anua-nua Resort for as little as \$55 a

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A couple paddles an c in Papeete.

day. Still, compared with Hering's enclave of 1 units, these prices are s

Hering, who sailed Switzerland to Tahiti ago, provides one- and room cottages with and baths for as little day, this for up to three

I found Monsieur Hering coffee from a cen on the terrace of his h faces the sacred peaks

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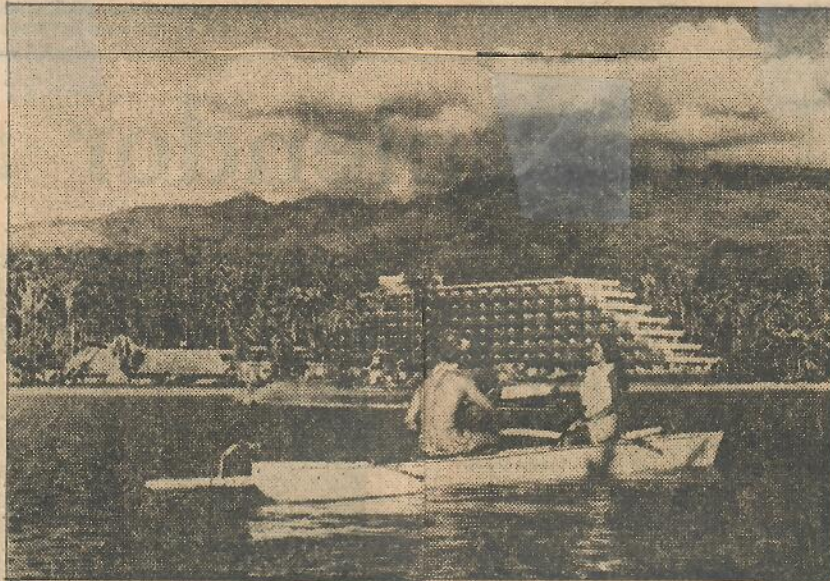
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A couple paddles an outrigger in front of the Maeva Beach Hotel in Papeete.

day. Still, compared with Albert Hering's enclave of 15 hillside units, these prices are shocking.

Hering, who sailed from Switzerland to Tahiti 57 years ago, provides one- and two-bedroom cottages with kitchens and baths for as little as \$20 a day, this for up to three guests.

I found Monsieur Hering sipping coffee from a cereal bowl on the terrace of his home that faces the sacred peaks of Mou

Roa, Tamaru Tofa and Maua Puta.

"You wonder why I never returned home?" he asked, gesturing toward the scene before him.

Although 70 years old, his enthusiasm for life belies his age. He calls his retreat Chez Albert and it is the best buy in French Polynesia.

He is an eccentric who discourages guests from remaining

longer than one month. And should one write for a reservation, chances are splendid that there will be no reply. If a deposit is enclosed and a unit is available, Monsieur Hering will make the necessary notation in his ledger. Otherwise, the guests will hear nothing. While he won't reply to letters, he will answer the telephone. Dial the international operator and ask for 61276 on the island of Moorea.

A renegade, he ran off to Tahiti those long years ago, was hypnotized by its beauty and elected to remain a lifetime.

Likewise content is Paulette Vienot, the best-known Tahitian in all of French Polynesia. She's a blonde with blue eyes (French father, German-Tahitian mother) whose grandfather arrived in 1898 on a sailing ship from Europe and refused to go home.

Besides her Tahiti Nui travel agency, Paulette Vienot rents cars, owns a fleet of buses and leads a dance troupe on tours abroad. It all began with one old clunker and a single employee, herself.

The Tahiti she recalls as a girl featured kerosene lamps, a few bicycles and even fewer cars.

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