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Behind the hotel ruins: the shattered dream of luxury tourism

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Many prestigious hotels have been abandoned in Polynesia, such as the InterContinental or the Club Med in Moorea, the Tahara'a (pictured here) or the Ia Ora Beach Resort in Tahiti, the Hyatt in Bora Bora or the Sofitel in Huahine. Photo credit: TI Archives.



Tahiti, December 19, 2024 - Nearly thirty abandoned hotels dot Polynesia. A problem that the French media Brut took an interest in in a video on YouTube. Between unrealistic visions, global crises and land issues, these deserted places embody the failures of a tourism strategy focused on luxury, but disconnected from local realities.

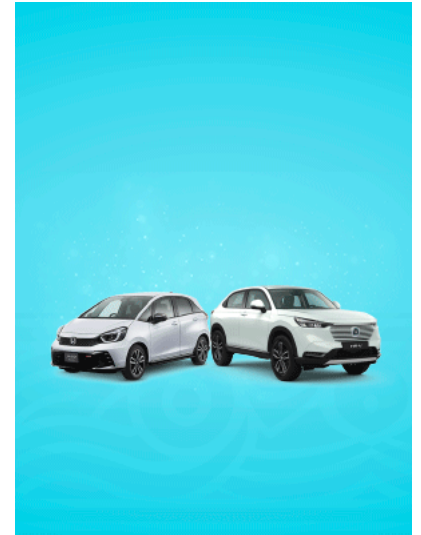
Behind the picture-postcard landscapes, Polynesia hides an intriguing paradox:

abandoned hotels, left fallow and given over, for some, to the voracity of tropical vegetation and the grip of time. These vestiges bear witness to a time when tourism seemed to be the key to economic prosperity. Today, they symbolize the failures of an ambition poorly calibrated in the face of local realities.

It is this phenomenon that the French media Brut chose to explore in a video published on YouTube. In this investigation, the focus is on prestigious establishments that are now in ruins: the InterContinental or the Club Med in Moorea, the Tahara'a or the Ia Ora Beach Resort (ex-Méridien) in Tahiti, the Hyatt in Bora Bora or the Sofitel in Huahine. Described as a " *large-scale phenomenon*" by Brut, this observation is striking: more than thirty hotels are now abandoned, thus going from " *dream to ruin*".

Excessive projects for a restricted market

In the 1980s and 1990s, the global tourism boom sparked a veritable frenzy of hotel construction in Polynesia. Investors, often foreign, bet on the potential of highly attractive destinations such as Bora Bora, Tahiti and Moorea. The result: sumptuous complexes designed for a wealthy international clientele. However, these projects were designed without a realistic analysis of the local market. Thirty years later, many of these establishments, deemed not profitable enough, have been abandoned. The reasons: prohibitive costs of stay and increased competition from other tropical paradises such as the Maldives or the Seychelles. Added to this



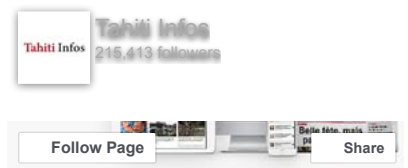
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is the territory's dependence on volatile tourist markets such as that of the United States, sensitive to economic crises and currency fluctuations.

Another problem, highlighted by Brut, lies in the joint ownership of land. Many of these hotels were built on land leased to multiple owners. However, when it came time to renew the leases, some refused, leading to the forced closure of these structures. Finally, economic and environmental crises – the 2008 recession or, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic – have weakened a sector that was already under pressure.



The Sofitel in Bora Bora has been abandoned since 2023. Photo credit: TI Archives.

Visible and invisible consequences

The impact of these abandoned hotels is both ecological, economic and societal. Some sites, such as the Hana Iti hotel in Huahine, are now swallowed up by nature. But for many others, the dilapidated buildings, with broken windows and empty swimming pools, stand out in the landscape. These places, sometimes squatted, become hotbeds of disease because of the mosquitoes that proliferate in the abandoned pools. The fire at the former Méridien last year also illustrates the vulnerability of these structures.

The environment is also paying a heavy price. Anthony Tchékémian, lecturer in geography and urban planning at the University of French Polynesia, highlights for Brut the risks of chemical leaks and contamination by old materials such as asbestos.

On the economic level, each closure represents dozens, even hundreds of jobs lost in accommodation, catering and tourism activities. Finally, the image of the destination suffers: these abandoned establishments send a signal of poor management to visitors.

Reconversion: a path strewn with pitfalls

Faced with this observation, voices are being raised to rehabilitate these abandoned structures. Some projects have seen the light of day, such as the Cook's Bay hotel in Moorea, reopened in 2021 after more than 20 years of abandonment, or the Maitai Express which reopened a few weeks ago in place of the former Prince Hinoi in Papeete. Similarly, the Sofitel Maeva Beach in Tahiti was dismantled to make it the Vairai park in Punaauia.

However, many obstacles remain: administrative burdens, insufficient funding and land complexities are holding back initiatives. The Territorial Chamber of Accounts (CTC) underlines,

in a recent report, that rehabilitating a hotel often costs more than building a new one. Furthermore, current tax incentives (tax breaks), focused on the construction of new structures, do little to encourage developers to maintain or restore hotels after the required minimum ten years of operation.

Despite everything, these conversions could embody a new tourism model, more sustainable and resilient. They call for a global reflection on the limits of a development based solely on luxury tourism. The Brut video is available on YouTube: " *What do these immense ruins hide in this overseas country?*"

Written by Thibault Segalard on Thursday, December 19, 2024 at 1:33 p.m. | Read 9133 times



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