

GENTRY

# DESTINATIONS

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Located in a private cove on Motu To'opua—a small islet located off the coast of Bora Bora—newly reimagined Conrad Bora Bora Nui faces out toward the open ocean. At over half a mile, its secluded beach is the longest white sand beach in Bora Bora.

PHOTO: CONRAD BORA BORA NUI



BY CORRY COOK

# TRUE BLUE

Undoubtedly the most celebrated island in the South Pacific, Bora Bora is French Polynesia's leading lady. Secluded, tropical, and lush, her splendor is unrivaled and her fame legendary.

With my bum on the side of the boat and my toes flirting with the warm water below, my initial fear evolved into paralysis. The seawater was so crystal clear I could see straight through to the lagoon's bottom, making for unobstructed views of countless sharks circling under and around our boat. "I am freaking out!" I managed to squeal. "Oh, come on," my husband teased from below. "What happened to that 'I am woman hear me roar' attitude you had just a few minutes ago?"

Truth be told, he was right. I'd been feeling rather invincible. After five glorious days in the exquisite care of the Conrad Bora Bora Nui, I was glowing from the inside out. My body felt replenished and my soul, supercharged. Even my notoriously pale skin had started to shine with a warm Tahitian glow. That all changed a bit when the boat's engine stopped. I heard the sound of the anchor drop and there was a faint smell of blood in the air. As heavenly visions of my Bora Bora bliss flashed through my mind, I thought: "Well, at least my last few days on Earth were some of the best days of my life."



PHOTOS THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: CONRAD BORA BORA NUI



Conrad Bora Bora's Nui is home to Bora Bora's only two-story, two-bedroom, over-water bungalows with an upstairs sun deck and indoor sauna. The epic over-water villas feature sweeping ocean views, complete with a wall-to-wall sliding door leading to your private sun deck and catamaran net for lounging, plunge pool, and direct access to the stunning blue waters below.





## HEAVEN, CAN'T WAIT

Once you see the Conrad Bora Bora Nui, it is impossible not to be forever enamored. Tucked away in a cove of white sand and black lava rock, the resort dazzles on a small islet floating between Bora Bora's mainland and coral reef. After an impressive multi-million-dollar renovation, the former Hilton reopened in April 2017 and stands today as the singular Conrad property in French Polynesia.

From the day my husband and I arrived, we were in awe of the Conrad Bora Bora Nui's breathtaking mountain peaks, turquoise lagoon, and 86 luxuriant Overwater Villas that somehow look even more spectacular in person than in pictures. Our villa had everything we ever dreamed of: a king-size bed, a dining table, and a sitting area, plus wall-to-wall sliding glass doors that led to an expansive deck with lounge chairs, an outdoor shower, and direct access to the crystal blue lagoon. With its Polynesian-inspired décor and completely unrestricted views of the horizon, the private waterside balcony was our own haven. We lounged together in our catamaran nets, watching the golden sunsets above and fish decorated with every color of the rainbow swimming below.

Recently, the property debuted a first in the region: French Polynesia's only two-story overwater bungalows—the stylish and spacious Presidential Villas. Each features two bedrooms, three bathrooms, two dressing rooms, and a living room, as well as mesmerizing sunset views from the private outdoor living area, which boasts its own personal pool, whirlpool, and sundeck. It's no wonder these precious hideaways are booked through the new year.

## A MILLION SHADES OF BLUE

The sea around the Conrad Bora Bora Nui is both figuratively and literally a clear blue heaven on earth. The ocean represents the complete lifecycle to the Tahitians, and they have a masterful and respectful relationship with it. Traditional outrigger canoes, surfing, and sailing are part of everyday life on the stunning crystal-clear blue water.

With such a mystical connection in the air, it seems entirely possible that a higher power might have invented the color blue and all its hues in Bora Bora. Cyan blue. Turquoise blue. Electric blue. Deep sky blue. After just a few days of drop-dead-gorgeous colors, it's impossible to remember them all.

Conrad Bora Bora's Experience Specialists are extremely efficient and effective at connecting each guest to his or her own unique modes of experiencing the natural splendor in every direction. We were encouraged to do as much or as little as we liked—from canoeing to paddle boarding to soaring over the sea on a paraglider.



PHOTO: CORRY COOK



PHOTO: CONRAD BORA BORA NUI



PHOTO: CONRAD BORA BORA NUI



PHOTO: CONRAD BORA BORA NUI

During the day, it's see-and-be-seen at the stunning 3,280 square-foot infinity sunset pool and swim-up Tarava Pool Bar. In the evening, the stylish Upa Upa Lounge and its see-through glass floor reveals the lagoon's coral reefs and endless tropical fish. A jet-ski ride around the resort provides adventure and relaxation in equal measure.

With my husband's love for speed, I found myself one afternoon sitting on the back of a jet ski holding onto his waist for dear life. Flying across the water, Bora Bora's huge *motu* (reef islets) possess stunning white sandy beaches that are perfectly lined with coconut trees. We soared across the velvet blues of deep water to the softer hues of the lagoon and around the island, populated as it is with multi-colored fish and corals.

Opportunities to bask in liquid luxury were everywhere. Embracing the resort's laid-back lifestyle, we spent joyous days dipping into its impressive 3,300-square-foot beachfront infinity sunset pool and sipping tropical libations at the Tarava Pool Swim-Up. Occasional bursts of energy found their outlet in the resort's complimentary bicycles, snorkel gear, kayaks, and paddleboats nearby. This could be defined as the center of the romantic universe.



PHOTO: CONRAD BORA BORA NUI



## BIG, BRIGHT, BEAUTIFUL STARS ABOVE

As beautiful as Bora Bora is by day, it is also stunning at night, so don't forget to look up. Bora Bora is considered one of the three best places on Earth to view the Southern Hemisphere stars; minimal pollution allows for near-perfect clarity. Being in the middle of the ocean and looking at the reflection of the moonlight over the water is a unique experience you don't want to miss. It was impossible not to notice how brightly the stars shone in the sky, like diamonds in sheer darkness.

Just a five-minute boat ride from the resort, Motu Tapu is Conrad Bora Bora Nui's own private island, ideal for private picnic lunches, intimate beach weddings, or romantic dinners, as well as large-scale events. There is surreal, and then there is the luxury travel abyss—my husband and I spent the afternoon alone on our private island soaking up the sun, snorkeling, and taking long walks holding hands. Just at the right moment, our Conrad Bora Bora Nui hosts arrived to cook an epic lobster/steak feast. What began as an intimate day for two soon evolved into a spectacular evening celebration

with plenty of storytelling, local libations, and memories made.

As the sun set, bursts of red, orange, and yellow took over what was the pristine blue skies of the day. Soon the Tahitian night sky revealed itself to us, and our hosts told old stories and legends of the Tahitian people, explaining how they used the stars to navigate their way throughout the great Pacific Ocean (Moana Nui). With the knowledge of this ancient wisdom, they were able to explore the entire Pacific long before the "modern" Western sailors started navigating. As the night progressed, we all took turns spotting the Milky Way and countless other unique star alignments that seemed brighter and more memorable than ever.



PHOTOS: CONRAD BORA BORA NUI

Perched on a lush tropical hillside with stunning lagoon and Pacific Ocean views, the Hina Spa dazzles with its open-air treatment bungalows built for two. Nestled between the resort's shimmering pool and the white sandy beach, Tamure Restaurant (right) serves innovative Mediterranean and Polynesian cuisine.





The resort's private boat tour with stops to snorkel and watch sharks, rays and multi-colored tropical is not to be missed.



PHOTOS: TAHITI TOURISME

## WHAT LIES BENEATH

Out of the 350 species of sharks known worldwide, 19 of them can be observed in the waters of French Polynesia, which is a perfect place to encounter them. It's also the ideal place to remove some of the myths and misconceptions surrounding sharks—if you actually live to tell about the education. As each glorious day passed on our trip, I knew I had been inching closer to this incredible lagoon eco-tour and those sharp teeth and dorsal fins. When the moment arrived, I felt delirious with fear.

The most popular Bora Bora experience for marine-life fans is a tour around the island to watch sharks and rays feeding. Our tour thus far was a delight of sights and sounds, including lively ukulele playing and slow motoring past pristine white beaches and palm-lined motu without another soul in sight.

On our private voyage, our enthusiastic hosts encouraged us to jump in and snorkel amongst the marine life such as lemon sharks, black-tip sharks, dolphins, manta rays, leopard rays, sea turtles, various species of tropical fish, and occasionally, a hump-back whale or two. I found myself waist-deep in water, delighted to be surrounded by countless rays—touching them, feeding them, and the like, taking great care to avoid contact with their razor-sharp and potentially deadly tails. Feeling invincible after that personal victory, I felt elated at the thought of sharing the same water as Bora Bora's legendary sharks.

However, the sight of blood and dorsal fins in the water was an unexpected development that required some adjustment time. Much to my dismay, chumming is not a form of person-to-person bonding. Chumming is the practice of luring various animals, usually fish such as sharks, using “chum”—bait consisting of fish parts, bone, and blood—which attracts fish, particularly sharks, owing to their keen sense of smell. As our guides continued chumming into the water, dozens and dozens of black-tipped reef sharks sliced through the water around the boat and wrestled each other for those tasty bits.

Eventually, a guide managed to fit me with a mask and fins, his big, reassuring smile a constant. Careful not to draw too much attention, I slid myself gently into the water and grabbed onto my husband's hand tighter than ever. My confidence grew until I felt bold, and even triumphant, as sharks swam around us in every direction without incident. My body seemed electrified; a strange combination of fear and elation was coursing through my veins. One of our guides dove down to the ocean floor, holding his breath for minutes and with such beauty and strength. We soon realized he meant to draw our attention to the enormous lemon sharks below. These stocky and powerful creatures lay resting on the sea floor beneath us, harmless yet ominous.

The experience was one I'll carry with me always. Like the Conrad Bora Bora itself, once seen, it can never be forgotten. ♦