

THE IRRESISTIBLE SISTERS OF THE SOCIETY ISLANDS

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BUYING IN FRENCH POLYNESIA

Non-French Polynesian nationals who are not considered to have been residing in the region for 5-10 years must obtain an authorization permit from an official Notary of the French Polynesian government. A minimum of a US\$300,000 investment is usually required. Property must be cleared for sale and checked for “indivision” issues created by single parcels of land often having several owners. Leaseholds come with many rights and it’s worth weighting up the merits of leasehold properties against freehold option before buying.

CHOOSING YOUR PERFECT PIECE OF FRENCH POLYNESIA

By Aefa Mulholland

Marlon Brando was not the first famous visitor to fall for French Polynesia; this scatter of 118 idyllic islands that glistens across an area approximately the size of Europe has been winning overseas admirers for hundreds of years. Brando fell for the Society Islands while filming *Mutiny on the Bounty* in 1960, but the first Europeans landed in Tahiti in 1767. Captain Cook, Herman Melville, Robert Louis Stevenson, W. Somerset Maugham and James A. Michener all later took home glowing descriptions of the archipelago — one of five island chains that constitute French Polynesia — and Paul Gauguin brought the colors of its lush atolls and shimmering lagoons to life on canvas.

Consisting of 14 main islands and the islets — or motus — that ring the islands’ lagoons, the Society Islands are home to some of the world’s most desirable private island properties. There are currently just half a dozen private islands on the market in the archipelago, mostly clustered round Bora Bora in the northwest of the chain and Taha’a in the southwest.

While the islands and their surrounding lagoons share common characteristics such as perfect weather, turquoise waters, pristine sands, five-star resorts, and charming locals, the islands offer very different experiences, atmospheres, and lifestyles, offering something of a dilemma to the international island buyer. So how does a prospective private island buyer choose the right island to suit their taste and personality? Is it



possible to make the wrong choice in this picture perfect paradise?

Yes and no, says Richard Bondurant, acclaimed destination expert for Tahiti, author of *Cocktails in Tahiti*, and President of Custom Tahiti Travel.

“Bora Bora and Taha’a are ‘sister islands,’ barely 20 miles apart, but with very distinct personalities and different atmospheres. Both are mountainous islands. Both are surrounded by a coral necklace that creates magnificent beaches and breathtaking lagoons, but the difference between the two is that you go to Bora Bora if you want to be seen, photographed, and talked about. You go to Taha’a if you want to be hidden, stay secluded, and have privacy.”

According to Bondurant, Taha’a is the more “authentic and untouched” of the two islands with its lush hillsides of vanilla plantations and quiet way of life, while Bora Bora is the more famous with its dramatic central mountain peak and multi-hued turquoise lagoon.

Bondurant’s company, Custom Tahiti Travel, specializes in luxury travel to Tahiti and the islands of French Polynesia. Their services tie in seamlessly with the needs of upscale leisure travelers and prospective private island buyers exploring their options in Les Îles Sous-le-Vent, covering everything from choosing the right hotel for the duration of a stay to arranging private boat and helicopter transfers. Bondurant suggests that choosing the right hotel base for exploring is vital for both visitors and buyers-to-be. “On our initial trip to the Islands in the 90s, people said, ‘Oh, the hotels are great’ or ‘They’re all five-star, you can’t go wrong,’ but that’s not true, because just as the islands are

different, each hotel is different. More than 15 years since that first trip, we know the islands and the hotels intimately. We understand the differences that make each hotel unique and we know how to pair those differences with the individual client. People have an idea of what they’re looking for, but we find them options that are even better suited to their needs.”

Choosing the right specialist travel company can be the first step toward falling for French Polynesia — or toward buying the perfect private island. Without such expert advice, prospective buyers can find themselves on an island that just doesn’t fit. On a typical trip organized by Custom Tahiti Travel, the prospective Society Islands buyer can be whisked off on a private boat or helicopter tour to experience the flavors of the different islands, dine in a private home, enjoy a fishing excursion, and dive in waters that Bondurant describes as “arguably the best in the world.” An excellent island resource, Custom Tahiti Travel can work with prospective island buyers to coordinate an initial visit to get a taste for the area and to make sure they experience the area fully before making an island purchase.

The world of private island real estate is often fiercely competitive. With the assistance of an island matchmaker such as Richard Bondurant — with his in-depth, hands on, working knowledge of the islands and their resorts — the island buyer can be leagues ahead of the competition before they even land.



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RECOMMENDED RESORTS

Like their respective islands, resorts The St. Regis Bora Bora and Le Taha’a Island Resort & Spa have distinct atmospheres. Both ultra-luxurious, five-star, private island properties, each resort appeals to a decidedly different clientele. While you’re more likely to hear Bora Bora St. Regis mentioned in the same breath as celebrities and A-list sightings, Le Taha’a quietly amasses awards and acclaim as the #1 Ultimate Resort for Seclusion and The World’s Best Honeymoon Spot.

Le Taha’a, which opened in 2002, basks on Motu Tautau and offers incredible views of Bora Bora. Five minutes from Taha’a itself, the idyllic resort has 48 over water suites and 12 beach suites. Richard Bondurant describes Le Taha’a as “the more secret destination.” “Le Taha’a Island Resort & Spa is designed to be the most exclusive

resort in French Polynesia, and has been honored as a member of the prestigious Relais & Chateaux association,” say Christine Chevalaz, general manager of the idyllic spot. “Our unique positioning within the luxury market has afforded us the opportunity to host world-famous celebrities, dignitaries and a number of other high-profiled individuals. The island sits in the shadows of Bora Bora, away from the crowds, and is able to remain a beautiful hidden paradise in the Pacific.”

The 100-suite Bora Bora St. Regis opened in 2006 and set new standards for luxury. Tracey Fentem of Starwood Hotels says, “Our discerning guests look for genuine care and comfort combined with the refinement of the St. Regis service, accommodations and dining experiences coupled with the carefree elegance of French Polynesia.” Richard Bondurant says of the resort’s lagoon views, “The shades of blue are beyond any color palette that any artist could ever dream of.”