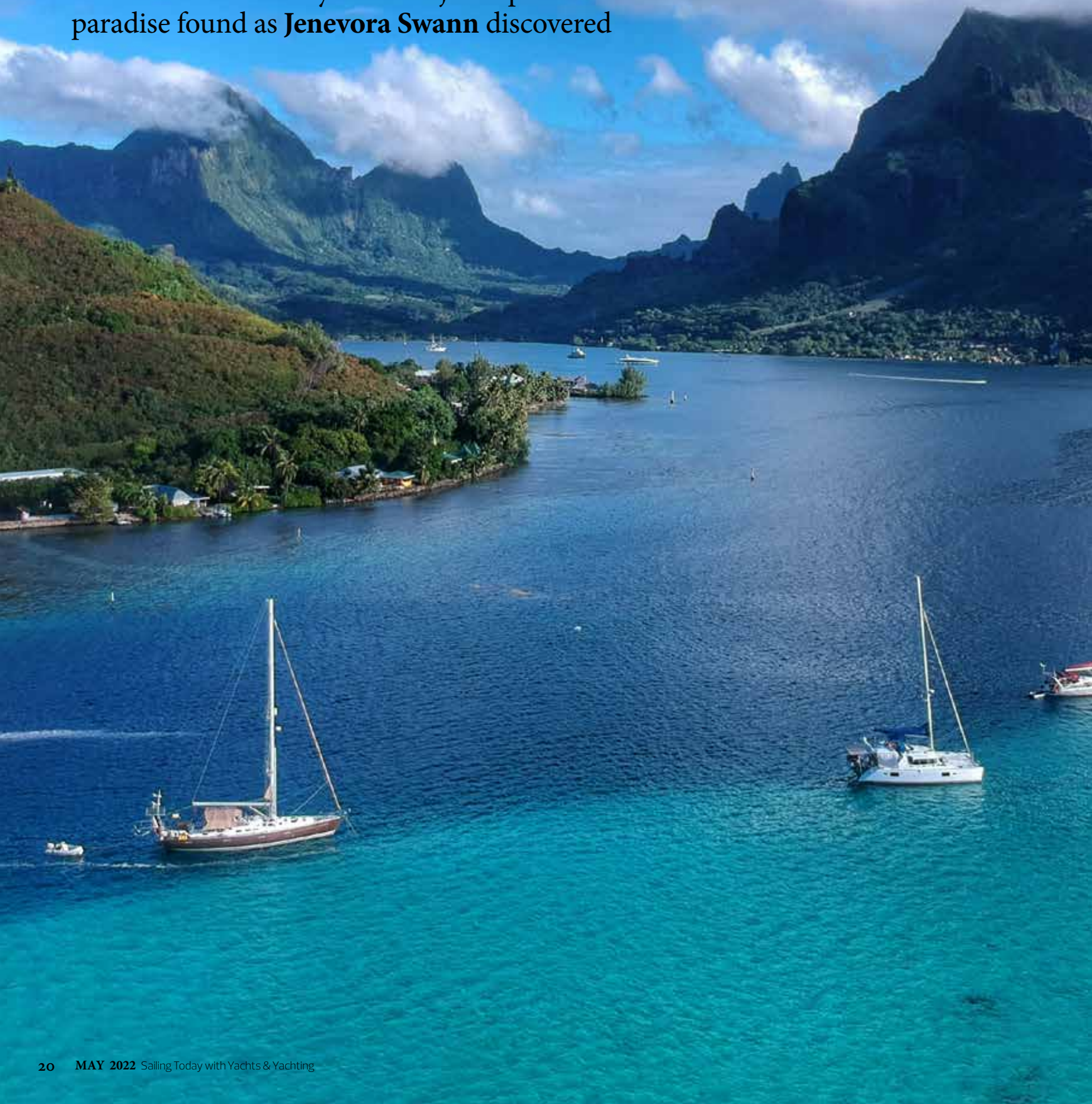


High Society

With striking mountain peaks, lush landscapes, white-sand beaches and sheltered blue lagoons the Society Islands in French Polynesia conjure up dreams of a paradise found as **Jenevora Swann** discovered





After a month at sea, sailing our Lagoon 440 catamaran from Panama across the Pacific Ocean, we were eager to explore this tropical destination. However, when we arrived in Tahiti, the heart of the Society Islands, our experience was a little out of the ordinary.

Due to the onset of coronavirus, French Polynesia had closed its borders and our first month was spent in mandatory lockdown at the airport anchorage off Tahiti's capital of Pape'ete. The vistas were stunning, but sitting still after so long at sea was very frustrating. So, when restrictions eventually eased and inter-island travel was granted, we wasted no time in setting sail.

Many boats planned to backtrack to the Tuamotus – a beat against the trade winds – to see one of the archipelagos missed on the way due to the pandemic constraints. Our decision, was to take the western route and visit the rest of the Societies before French Polynesia opened to tourists.

Our exploration was blissfully devoid of people and boats. We had the rare opportunity to step back in time and see well-known islands like Mo'orea and Bora Bora in their raw tropical beauty; untainted by visitors or cruise ship passengers, authentic in every way and just being enjoyed by their residents.

While each of the islands has a distinctive character and appeal, we found nature and culture in abundance, as well as walks, hiking trails and visits to vanilla plantations and pearl farms. Underwater, the immense marine life was teaming with an assortment of whales, rays, sharks, healthy coral and a bounty of colourful fish.

Miles of fringing coral reefs surround the islands, creating an inner lagoon with a protected

swimming pool of water that comes in a pantone palette of blues. Lagoon sailing made for very easy transits between the anchorages on each island.

It didn't take long to see why the Society Islands are such a haven for multihulls and shallow draft boats. Drawing 1.3 metres, we found we could sneak our boat, Two Drifters, onto the sandbanks – sometimes with less than a foot under our keel – but it was always to secure the best anchoring spots in the clearest of water.

Where & when to visit

The Society Islands span some 450 miles and are split into two clusters comprising the Îles du Vent (Windward Islands), which includes Tahiti and Mo'orea, and the Îles Sous le Vent (Leeward Islands), with Bora Bora as the most notable.

They enjoy a year-round tropical climate, with temperatures a comfortable 24 - 30°C. The best weather is found during the dry season from May to October, although July and August are fairly windy and may be chilly when the mara'amu winds blow.

With 14 islands in the archipelago, here are our tips and suggestions for the must-see islands that are within an easy day sail of each other.

Tahiti

Tahiti's capital, Pape'ete, is full of character and colour with creative street art, countless pearl shops and a huge covered market selling hand crafts, sarongs, flowers, fruit and vegetables.

For the ultimate Tahitian experience, time a visit in with The Heiva, a festival of music, dance, cultural and sporting contests, normally held throughout July.

From a sailors' perspective, Tahiti is a great place to provision, get essential boat parts and do





crew and guest changeovers as it has an international airport. It's worth noting, if sailing from Panama, do come well-stocked as supermarkets in French Polynesia are extremely expensive, especially if buying alcohol.

Sadly, for many years, Tahiti has endured endless controversy when it comes to anchoring in its waters and there has been a constant threat of banning anchoring in favour of paid-for mooring buoy fields, which is now becoming reality. There are two good marinas, where berths are on a first-come, first-served basis.

Mo'orea

It's just a 15-nautical mile downwind sail from Tahiti to Mo'orea. In addition to a relaxed pace, Mo'orea offers great hiking opportunities across pineapple plantations and up mountain peaks, as well as surfing, kite-surfing and kayaking.

Hiring a scooter, we headed into the mountains to a lookout point to see the staggering views across to Opunohu Bay, Cook's Bay and to the 899-metre-high Mt Rotui, which lies between the two bays.



Two Drifters

**Lagoon 440 Catamaran
Owners Version 2008**

LOA: 13.61m (44.65ft)

Beam: 7.70m (25.26ft)

Draught: 1.30m (4.27ft)

The striking, craggy mountains in the centre of this lush green island, once formed the southern rim of an ancient volcanic crater.

There are many anchorages around the island, but on the north side we recommend Cook's Bay - named after Captain James Cook, who first visited the island in 1769. At the entrance, just inside the barrier reef, there's a protected lagoon with two to five-metre depths, with good swimming, snorkelling and access to shops and restaurants at Maharepa. There's deeper water inside Cook's Bay for boats with more draft, or if the reef anchorage is full.

Haapiti, on the south west coast, offers a mile-long anchorage with depths of between two to 10 metres and extremely good holding. In our catamaran, while keeping an eye on the coral heads in the water (known locally as 'bommies'), we always found a shallow spot with plenty of space around us.

Compared to the hustle

PREVIOUS PAGE
Two Drifters anchored at the entrance of Cook's Bay, Mo'orea

ABOVE LEFT
Paradise found in Tahiti

ABOVE RIGHT
Two Drifters on a mooring buoy at Hana Iti beach, Huahine

BELOW LEFT
The twin towered catholic church at Haapiti, Mo'orea

BELOW RIGHT
One of the rewards of a whale watching trip

and bustle of Cook's Bay and Opunohu Bay, Haapiti is quieter. On shore, there is a surprisingly well-stocked mini-market within a short walk of the public dock.

From our bridge, across the barrier reef, we saw occasional sightings of humpback whales; but it wasn't until we went on a whale-watching tour and got into the sea to swim with them that we got to appreciate how large and magnificent these mammals really are.

Swimming with whales

Every year from July to October, humpback whales migrate to French Polynesia, travelling 3,800 miles from the Antarctic to the warmer waters of the South Pacific Ocean. They come to mate, rest, fast and to give birth to their calves, as the Antarctic is too cold for their new-borns.

We chose to do a guided whale-watching boat tour in Mo'orea



Fact Box

Our whale watching tour was with dolphinsandwhalespiritadventure.com. It cost US\$100 per person, for a half-day boat tour, but was worth every penny.

The 'French Poly Cruisers Facebook Group' is a helpful resource for the latest updates on the islands.



with 'Dolphins And Whales Spirit Adventure', as they ensure the marine wildlife are treated with respect in their natural environment, which was especially important to us. This excursion turned out to be one of the most incredible experiences of our lives.

Spying two adult humpback whales surfacing, our guide instructed us to don masks and fins as he planned to take us swimming with them. He talked us through the essential whale etiquette, which included staying together in the water close to him, no diving down and we were not to make any loud noises or splashing as it could frighten the whales.

Once we were in the water, the tour boat quietly backed away as the whales swam over. They checked us out curiously, before putting on a 30-minute show with the male flirting

with the slightly larger female, as they surfaced, twisting, tail slapping and cavorting, before diving down only to return to do it again and again. They were so close, we could have reached out and touched them.

Being in the water with these gentle giants was not only euphoric, but humbling, as their eyes seemed to stare right into our souls. Of all the wonderful underwater encounters we have had, this has gone straight to the top.

Huahine

It's an 89-mile sail, north west from Moorea to Huahine. Some opt to do it as an overnight passage, but with lit passes at Cook's Bay and Fare and with a good easterly trade wind blowing, we found it was an easy day-trip in our catamaran, - leaving at first light and dropping anchor in Fare just before dusk.

Huahine is a lush, serene and exceptionally pretty island with many beautiful anchorages. The main town of Fare, is relaxed and chilled, with a holiday-like atmosphere. There are plenty of places to anchor close to town or further down the west coast; as well as several moorings laid, but most are without pennants.

Further south, on one of the three free government mooring buoys

ABOVE LEFT
Snorkelling in the coral gardens of Motu Tau Tau

ABOVE RIGHT
Jenevora and Fergus at the viewpoint above Taputapuatea Ra'iatea

BELOW
Two Drifters anchored off Motu Nao Nao, Ra'iatea

off Hana Iti beach, we discovered the most fabulous underwater life, rich with eagle rays and beautiful coral pinnacles. The pretty little beach is backed by coconut palm trees and never gets too crowded as its main access is via boat. Behind the beach, there's a 20-minute enjoyable hike through the forest to a road which eventually leads to the village of Haapu, a mile away.

Hiring a scooter is a great way to see the island and visit the many archaeological and cultural sites, pottery and pearl farm and the notorious sacred blue-eyed eels.

On the south west coast, at Avea Bay, there's a large anchorage with varying depths of water and good holding. Each time we visited, we edged our catamaran onto the expansive sand shelf, putting the anchor down in the shallow, azure-blue water.

From Avea Bay there are some wonderful walks across to the village of Parea as well as into the hills where the community have created a secret garden. Complete with a shaded pergola, it's a lovely place to sit and enjoy the jaw-dropping panoramic sea views.

Ra'iatea

Although separate islands, Ra'iatea and Taha'a are encircled by one fringing reef, making sailing around them extremely pleasant. At 22 miles, it's just a few hours' sail from Huahine to the pass between the two islands, giving the chance to catch some fish while heading west on a deep reach.

Ra'iatea is the charter capital, playing host to Sunsail, Moorings and Dream Yacht Charter. It's also extremely good for provisioning, with three supermarkets and a large covered fruit and vegetable market found at the main town of Uturoa.

In addition to hiking, the island offers many activities. Our favourites included taking a





dinghy ride up Faaroa River - the only navigable river in French Polynesia - to visit the botanical gardens; and a trip to Maraé Taputapuátea, a very impressive UNESCO World Heritage Site that dates back to the 14th century.

Taha'a

Taha'a was blissfully quiet. Sometimes we were the only boat in an anchorage, with just the sound of the surf pounding against the reef, the fragrant scent of flowers and aromatic vanilla in the air and the occasional turtle, sting ray and black tip reef shark for company.

Anchoring off Motu Tau Tau on the west coast; we again edged onto the white sand for the best spot. This motu is famous for its shallow coral garden with a myriad of friendly fish and vibrant healthy coral.

On Taha'a we found plenty to explore with vanilla plantations, pearl farms and rum distilleries, all just a short dinghy ride from the various anchorages.

We also discovered a slice of South Seas tropical paradise at La Pirogue Api. This boutique hotel, set on Motu Moute - its own private island - is surrounded by coral reef. There's plenty of anchoring space and a couple of mooring buoys, and sailors are given a very warm welcome. Their restaurant was also one of the finest in Polynesia.

Bora Bora

I was very excited to visit Bora Bora, which regularly wins awards for being a romantic haven and it's easy to see why when you take in the striking mountainous backdrop, coupled with a mesmerising lagoon that reflects the blue sky and shimmers in the sunlight.

An easy downwind sail from Taha'a, we made the 21-mile journey in a little over three hours. Anchoring is now almost entirely forbidden in Bora Bora, but it does have 100 buoys in place, spread out across seven designated mooring areas which, at US\$30 a night is expensive, but worth it.

When we visited, we were one of the first tourists to arrive after lockdown, so were very lucky to see Bora Bora stripped right back; chilled-out, relaxed and at its best. The locals were out in force enjoying paddling around their island in pirogues (outrigger canoes).

We sailed north around the island to Bora Bora's famed blue lagoon at Taurere Bay. Here, the water is gin clear and the sea colours are pinch-me-beautiful, ranging from the hint of blue diamond to stunning Bombay Sapphire.

Maupiti

Saving the best till last, just 27-miles west is Maupiti. This charming island is often referred to as Bora Bora's

ABOVE LEFT
Maupiti viewed from above

ABOVE RIGHT
Maupiti - Catamarans anchored at Manta Point, Motu Pitiahe Maupiti

BELOW LEFT
Paddleboarding across the lagoon at Bora Bora

BELOW RIGHT
Chill out time at Bora Bora



Jenevora Swann and her husband Fergus Dunipace have been liveaboards on their catamaran Two Drifters since 2014. They sailed around Europe before crossing the Atlantic to explore the Caribbean, USA, South and Central America. They are now sailing in the South Pacific. www.Facebook.com/TwoDriftersTravel / www.twodrifterstravel.com

discreet little sister, and it has a well-earned reputation among sailors for being difficult to navigate through the pass, but the rewards are magnificent once inside the lagoon.

Timing arrival here is essential as the narrow pass is exposed to the wind and swell at a slight angle. With any more than two metres of swell running, the waves can break clean across the entrance making it untenable. Slack water is normally around midday, but arriving with enough time to return to Bora Bora if you can't get in is important.

Also, coming well-provisioned is a good idea as supplies are limited on the island and the weather may not allow you to leave when planned - as we found out!

With just 1,200 residents, the people of Maupiti were some of the friendliest we have ever met on our travels.

There are two great anchorages, one by the town and the other at Motu Pitiahe. Each morning, like clockwork, the huge manta rays congregate at the same coral head in the lagoon, known as a cleaning station. As the manta rays serenely float around without a care in the world, their bodies, that can span eight feet, are cleaned and groomed by fish that feed on parasites, algae and debris.

It was on Maupiti that we enjoyed our first real taste of Polynesian lifestyle; at a beach party, which was full of fun, local colour and customs.

While a live band sung their hearts out, we enjoyed a lunch of local delicacies, followed by Polynesian dancing, basket-weaving, weightlifting and coconut opening. It was all very 'South Pacific' and we simply loved it - and the amazing island of Maupiti.

