

FASHIONABLE TRAVEL

BY MICHAEL SHULMAN

PEARLS OF WISDOM FROM FRENCH POLYNESIA

Discover the Secrets Behind These Much Sought-After Gems of the Sea

Recently, I traveled to French Polynesia and received a crash course on everything I could ever wish to know about the *Poe Rava* (Tahitian for “black pearl”). While on this rather luxurious fact-finding mission, I cruised the atolls and inlets of Bora Bora and two of its neighboring islands aboard a yacht, experienced five-star luxury at one of the most sumptuous resorts in the Pacific, and got a topnotch education to boot.

Travel from the U.S. to Tahiti is best accomplished on Air Tahiti Nui, whose newly launched non-stop service from New York or Los Angeles to Papeete is delightful, boasting top-drawer service, flight attendants who look as though they were contestants in the Miss Tahiti pageant, full-reclining sleeper seats in first class, and food that is excellent even by non-airplane standards.

Next, I boarded the *Ti'a Moana*, one of two sister yachts that make up Bora Bora Cruises Nomade Yachting line. The vessel offers sumptuous appointments, attentive service, meticulous attention to detail, and delicious food—perhaps that's why A-listers such as Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen regularly rent it for private excursions. We stopped at a different atoll (or “motu”) on Bora Bora, Ta'a and Raitea every day, wherein guests could partake in massages on the white-sand beaches, feed baby sharks and rays, drink at a floating bar and kayak up a river to a spectacular inland botanical garden.

I also checked out the Bora Bora Nui resort, a member of Starwood Resort's Luxury Collection that claims the largest and most luxuriously decorated over-the-water bungalows in the South Pacific. The staff is very attentive, and



Clockwise from top: The Bora Bora Nui resort is surrounded by majestic mountains and crystal-clear waters; Robert Wan's stunning choker vividly displays the various hues of the Tahitian pearl; a luxurious over-water suite at the Bora Bora Nui.

The Bora Bora Nui has the most luxuriously decorated over-the-water bungalows.

you can jump into the lukewarm water from the dock that juts straight out from your private bungalow or feed the fish through the section of your floor constructed from Plexiglas that lifts for just such a purpose. Relaxed and feeling the sway of the Polynesian island rhythm, I was ready for my education in pearls.

Prized for centuries by royalty, the aristocracy and

the seriously wealthy, the noble Tahitian pearl has finally come out of its proverbial shell. This celebrated gem has graced some of history's most exclusive necks, fingers, ears and heads, including those of Catherine the Great of Russia, Elizabeth I of England and the Empress Eugénie of France, who were among the first women to ornament themselves with these rare treasures. In the Middle Ages, many European nations even decreed that their use was restricted solely to members of the aris-

PEARLS OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC

ocracy. But nowadays, pearls are available to anyone with the coins to spend. Jewelers such as Harry Winston, de Grisogono, Mauboussin, Cartier, Buccellati, Van Cleef & Arpels, Fred and Damiani all frequently work the Tahitian pearl into their designs. Tiffany & Co. has even branched out with a line of pearl boutiques called Iridesse, now with six locations (including one in Boca Raton at Town Center), and has plans for more than 20 within the next five years.

Still, it's important to understand the mythic qualities and allure of this luminescent jewel: Coveted throughout the ages and around the world, the pearl, a product of nature, is often seen as a gift from the gods. According to Polynesian lore, Tane—the god of harmony and beauty—received Tahitian pearls, which were the first examples of light, from the Creator.

Infatuation with the fascinating gem reached the art world, too. A visit to any of the world's great museums will unveil repeated use of the pearl in works by such great masters as Rembrandt, Rubens and Dali. And Jan Vermeer's *Girl With a Pearl Earring* portrays a large, pear-shaped, semibaroque Tahitian pearl suspended from the ear of its subject (in spite of the ivory South Sea pearl erroneously gracing Scarlett Johansson's lobe in 2003's film of the same name).

These magnificent gems owe their amazing colors to the black-lipped pinctada *margaritifera* oysters cultivated in the lagoons and atolls surrounding the islands of French Polynesia. It's important to note that when speaking of Tahitian pearls we mean cultured pearls, which are classified according to color, shape, size, luster and surface quality. While Tahitian pearls are referred to en masse as black, in reality they run a full gamut of colors, with a primary body color and one or more overtone colors. The spectrum of the Tahitian pearl runs from peacock (greenish black), silver and Tahitian gold (golden black) to the more exotic—and therefore more valuable—hues of lavender (midnight blue) and cherry (dark burgundy).

Tahitian pearls come in four general shapes: Round and semi-round pearls have less than two percent variation from the diameter, or between two percent and five percent variation from the diameter,

French Polynesia is the world's second-largest exporter of cultured pearls.

490 Ocean Drive March 2006



Clockwise from top left: The six-foot-in-diameter chandelier hanging in pearl emperor Robert Wan's house boasts about 3,000 pearls; the Tahitian circle pearl is highly sought-after by many contemporary jewelers; Angelina Jolie wearing the fabled Tahitian pearl.

button, pear or oval; baroque pearls are those with irregular shapes; and circle, or ringed, pearls have more than one third of their surface covered with streaks or rings that run perpendicular to the axis of revolution.

Pearls are also measured by size, according to the gem's smallest diameter, and typically range from eight millimeters to 14 millimeters. Occasionally, they run even larger: World-record-sized Tahitian pearls boasting 21- to 27-millimeter diameters broken down by category are on display at the Robert Wan Museum of the Pearl in Papeete, French Polynesia's capital.

As exacting as this classification process seems, Tahitian pearls were noticeably unclassified before two defining moments in their history. In 1976, the Gemological Institute of America (GIA) officially recognized the natural color of Tahiti's cultured pearls. Then in 1989, the International Confederation of Jewelry, Silverware, Diamonds, Pearls and Stones agreed to officially identify the gem as the "Tahiti cultured pearl." And cultured they are. The five-step farming process includes collecting, breeding, grafting, culturing and harvesting. Of every 1,000 oysters that make it to the

respectively; semibaroque pearls are fairly symmetrical but have at least one axis of revolution and can be subcategorized as drop,

grafting stage, only 250 pearls with any commercial value will emerge, and just 20 of these will be considered perfect.

French Polynesia is the world's second-largest exporter of cultured pearls—behind only Japan, which should be no surprise considering that it was Kichimatsu Mikimoto who first harvested cultured pearls and then patented his techniques (in 1905 and 1908, respectively). Later, the man now known as Tahiti's pearl emperor—Robert Wan—would study under Mikimoto and sell his entire first harvest to the jewelry pioneer. Today, Wan is responsible for more than 40 percent of the exported pearls, routinely holding annual auctions in Kobe and Hong Kong. During my fact-finding mission, Wan invited me to his home for dinner, and I was amazed at the luxurious ways in which he has surrounded himself with his bounty: Every utensil sports a 10-millimeter black pearl at its base, and a roughly six-foot-in-diameter chandelier hanging from his living-room ceiling is comprised of approximately 3,000 pearls.

Of course, Tahitian pearls are generally meant to be worn, and that means caring for the ebony jewels is of the utmost importance, particularly since they easily scratch—they register just three out of 10 on the hardness scale. So always store your pearls alone in a soft jewel sack and avoid contact with cleaning fluids, perfumes or anything corrosive or acidic. A pearl can also crack if kept too long in a sealed plastic bag or locked in a safe.

In the sage words of my mother, "Pearls should be the last thing you put on and the first thing you take off." I just hate it when she's right. 📌