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IN SEARCH OF THE WORLD'S ONLY CORAL TERROIR AND OTHER PLEASURES

HINANO, the most popular locally made beer in Tahiti, is as famous for its logo - a curvy vahine kneeling under a coconut palm - as its suds. But I have to admit that I'd never heard of Vin de Tahiti until I walked into my hotel room at the Sofitel Tahiti Maeva Beach Resort in Papeete. Chilling in an ice bucket on the table was a honey-coloured white wine boasting a world first. "This aromatic wine comes from the only coral terroir on Earth" claimed the label in English and French.

The wines of Burgundy and Bordeaux have nothing to fear but the story of winemaking in French Polynesia is one of those quirky, man-with-a-dream tales that gladden the hearts of wine lovers. Local entrepreneur Daniel Auroy justifies his crazy idea of trying to grow vines in a region with no cold season or latency period by claiming that he was fed up paying for imported French wines. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the

Papeete en route to the world-famous islands of Moorea and Bora Bora, but it's worth extending an overnight stay to check out the \$US25.7 million facelift the capital of French Polynesia has undergone in the past five years.

A good plan is to spend an afternoon at the Paul Gauguin Art Museum, which is low on masterpieces and high on texts and artefacts from the French painter's much-publicised stay in Tahiti. Foodies can also while away time at Le Marche, the central produce market, then move on to an early-evening meal at Les Roulottes, a gaggle of mobile diners in Vaiete Square serving inexpensive pizzas and Chinese and Tahitian food. If you feel the need for something more upmarket, book a table at the Pink Coconut. The best tables are located on the terrace, surrounded by a marina crammed with millions of dollars' worth of yachts.

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first vines being brought from Europe, and it was no easy road to hoe. Following several years of research and testing, Rangiroa, a small atoll 355km from the main island of Tahiti, turned out to have the best growing conditions, thanks to its coral soils and salty sea breezes. The coconut grove setting helps, too, as the palm fronds wave over the three varietals - carignan, black muscat and italia - used to make the winery's five wines - a red, a rose, a dry white, a mellow white and a coral white.

If you're really keen to explore one of the wine world's oddities, you can visit Rangiroa for a guided tour and tasting. I preferred to stay put in Papeete, though, sipping champagne at the outdoor bar overlooking the beach at the Maeva Beach Resort. Most people wing in and out of

As we boarded the high-speed ferry to Moorea, it was hard not to think of James Michener's comment that the island was "a monument to the prodigal beauty of nature". The jagged peak of Mount Rotui, between Oponohu and Cook's Bay, is the source of many Tahitian legends. A mellow mood was heightened when I checked into my over-water bungalow at the Sofitel Moorea la Ora Beach Resort. If you can resist the temptation to just flake out and stare out at the straight-on ocean view from this thatched hut-on-stilts, you can rent a bike or car to explore Moorea's bays, waterfalls and mountains, go scuba diving or horse riding or set off on 4WD safaris of the interior.

Honeymooners form such a major wedge of the tourist market to Bora Bora that they might as well hang a sign saying

'Newlyweds Preferred' at the airport. Once we arrived at the Sofitel Bora Bora Marara Beach and Private Island, it became abundantly clear that my love object for the duration was another large over-water bungalow that allows you to slip into the clear, warm water directly from your ocean-front verandah from dawn to dusk.

"You have to come to Bora Bora at least once in your life, if only to swim with the sharks," said the French waiter who served our nightly mai tais. While logic tells you that there are only a few types of shark that are partial to human flesh, the sight of several circling a boat waiting for you to jump into the water is unnerving at first. The sharks were appeased with sardine-like fish and were positively sedate when the first daredevils dived in among them.

Some energetic types hike up the 727m-high slopes of the twin volcanic peaks at the centre of Bora Bora - Pahia and Otemanu. But we climbed aboard a 4WD for the ride up to Bora Bora's highest point. It was a rough one, too, on rutted tracks that add a real touch of adventure to the experience. The volcanic dreamscape of jungle-clad vegetation dipping down to the lagoon often described as the most beautiful on Earth, studded with tiny inlets where two people could disappear for the day, was certainly worth the bone-rattling journey. And we weren't even wearing Vin de Tahiti rose-coloured glasses.

Getting there: There are many great deals to French Polynesia. A top contender is the 10-day Sofitel Resorts 3 Island Combo offered by Coral Seas and Air Tahiti Nui. Priced from \$3389 per person, twin share, the package includes three nights each at the Sofitel Tahiti Maeva Beach in Papeete, the Sofitel Moorea la Ora in Moorea and the Sofitel Bora Bora Marara Beach and Private Island. Also included are return economy airfares, ex-Sydney, with Air Tahiti Nui and all domestic flights. See www.airtahitinui.com.au and www.tahitnow.com.au.