



the art of awakening

Tahiti and sister island Moorea serve as muses to many people, igniting in them a desire to meld life with art. Bring your watercolors and look to the land for inspiration.



text and watercolors by MARY HEIBNER photos by MACDUFF EVERTON





six a glistening bud from the wild ginger plant. "The natives used it as a conditioner for their hair." He squeezed it from the stem toward the bud as if it were a tube of paste, and a viscous liquid streamed into my palm. I stroked my braid with the sap, feeling as if it melded me into this landscape.

Continuing up the valley, we sighted a streak of pure power, the Vaiharuru waterfall. Kevin translated the name for me: "The Noisy One," he said, "or — as we prefer — the Singing One." I stepped out of the car and into the rainforest where hundreds of waterfalls polish the igneous rock to a sheen.

They range from thick and powerful surges to gossamer threads of white that come and go with the rains, and they emphasize the scale and height of the ridges that surrounded us. I was in a deep green bowl splashed with white, watching Gauguin's palette come to life.

Back in the truck, we navigated past dams, waterfalls and the Papenoo River. Colors mixed before my eyes, from gray to green to swirling browns and indigos. Some of the waterfalls were now caramel colored, heavy with soil from the rains. In moments, clouds wiped away whole mountainsides, only to reveal a razor-edged peak rising from the mist.

I had expected the classic blue waters of Tahiti, but now I realized that Tahiti begins here at its fertile, volcanic center. This is the abode of fearsome gods and fecund earth. This is what the painter had been grappling with.

Kevin switched out of four-wheel drive before we joined the main road. Mud-streaked and smiling, I combed out my ginger-sap braid and my hair felt like silk.

Back at my hotel, I made some small watercolors. From my heart, colors poured down like rivers, churning and gouging the paper, gleaming in every possible hue of the island. My pictures seemed paltry in the wake of such a vivid experience. Yet I hoped that these sketches would act as talismans, sources I could turn to later while in the solitude of my studio to connect to the power I felt while in Tahiti.

ALTHOUGH I FIRST LEARNED OF FRENCH POLYNESIA through the work of European artists and writers, all around me were instances of native Polynesian art, the most ancient of all perhaps being the art of *tatau*, or tattooing. My guide, Kevin, had shown me six tattoos he had acquired over time at significant moments in his life. Polynesians, once the world's greatest navigators, traveled light: Their history, clan and personal narratives were symbolized on the most ephemeral of parchments — their own skin. They sailed the Pacific in hand-hewn, double-hulled canoes; the (continued on page 116)

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TAHITI This island was Gauguin's jumping-off point for his South Pacific adventures. Visit the Musée Gauguin in Papeete to learn about the French artist's life on the island and view some original pieces of his work. Admission is \$6; 011-689-57-10-58. The over-water bungalows at the InterContinental Resort Tahiti are built to resemble traditional *fare* (Polynesian houses), and they have private terraces and direct lagoon access. Visit the "lagoonarium," the resort's closed-off natural lagoon-aquarium, home to over 200 species of marine life. Rates from \$335. tahiti.intercontinental.com

MOOREA Moorea's lagoon is home to spinner dolphins and pilot whales. Search for them on a Dolphin & Whale Watching Expeditions eco-tour led by marine biologist Dr. Michael Poole and his research team. Explore the lagoon with a snorkel and cool off with a drink of pamplemousse (similar to grapefruit juice) before returning to shore. Rates are around \$82 per person; tours available on Mondays and Thursdays. dwhmichaelpoole.com. After your stay at the Moorea Pearl Resort & Spa, you may return home with a tasty new recipe for their ceviche-like *poisson cru* (the poolside bar holds cooking lessons on Wednesdays) or even a tattoo (a Polynesian tattoo artist sets up a poolside booth every day but Sunday). Rates from \$284; peelirscrits.com. James, the *tatau* artist whom the author visited, is located at Moorea Tattoo in Haapiti-Vareai. mooreatattoo.com

DETAILS FLY to Papeete, Tahiti, on Air Tahiti Nui. airtahitiniui.com **EXPLORE** Papeete's open-air market for cultural immersion and shopping nirvana. **TOUR** Tahiti on a four-wheel-drive with Tahiti Safari Expedition. Rates from \$5. tahiti-safari.com **HOP** between islands on Air Tahiti. airtahiti.zero.com **READ** *Noa Noa: The Tahiti Journal of Paul Gauguin*, illustrated with his woodblock prints. **PERUSE** author Mary Heebner's art Edward Cella Art + Architecture. edwardcella.com **SEND** French Pacific France. US=88.89XPF **LEARN MORE** tahiti-tourisme.com.

BORA-BORA Take a trip of a lifetime to Bora-Bora, only 30 minutes away on Air Tahiti; \$375 round trip. For a splurge, book at Bora Bora Nui, on a motu off the southwest coast. Rates from \$690; boraboranui.com. A low-priced alternative is Chez Nono. Accommodations are basic but the location is prime, on Matira Beach. Rates from \$61; 011-689-67-71-35. Or sign on for a two-island package. Spend three nights at the InterContinental Resort & Spa Moorea and three nights at the Novotel Bora Bora Beach Resort. Rates from \$2,250 per person, including airfare from Los Angeles, domestic air and transfers. happyvacations.com



Don't trip over the magic roots at the Harrison W. Smith Botanical Gardens. Opposite Throughout the Society Islands, life is art. Clockwise from top left: Island flowers create a vibrant *noa noa*, or scented, ocean of color in a blue pearl; Mary Heebner's watercolor study; a tattoo design; traditional Polynesian *tatau* artist James Samuela.