

Chasing the DREAM

Kia Abdullah discovers whether French Polynesia really can live up to the hype

I had prepared myself for disappointment. After all, how could French Polynesia possibly live up to the ideal? Yes, it had pristine beaches and crystal clear waters but could it really be much better than the Maldives or Fiji or St Kitts and Nevis, or any of the many exotic locations I've covered for Asian Bride?

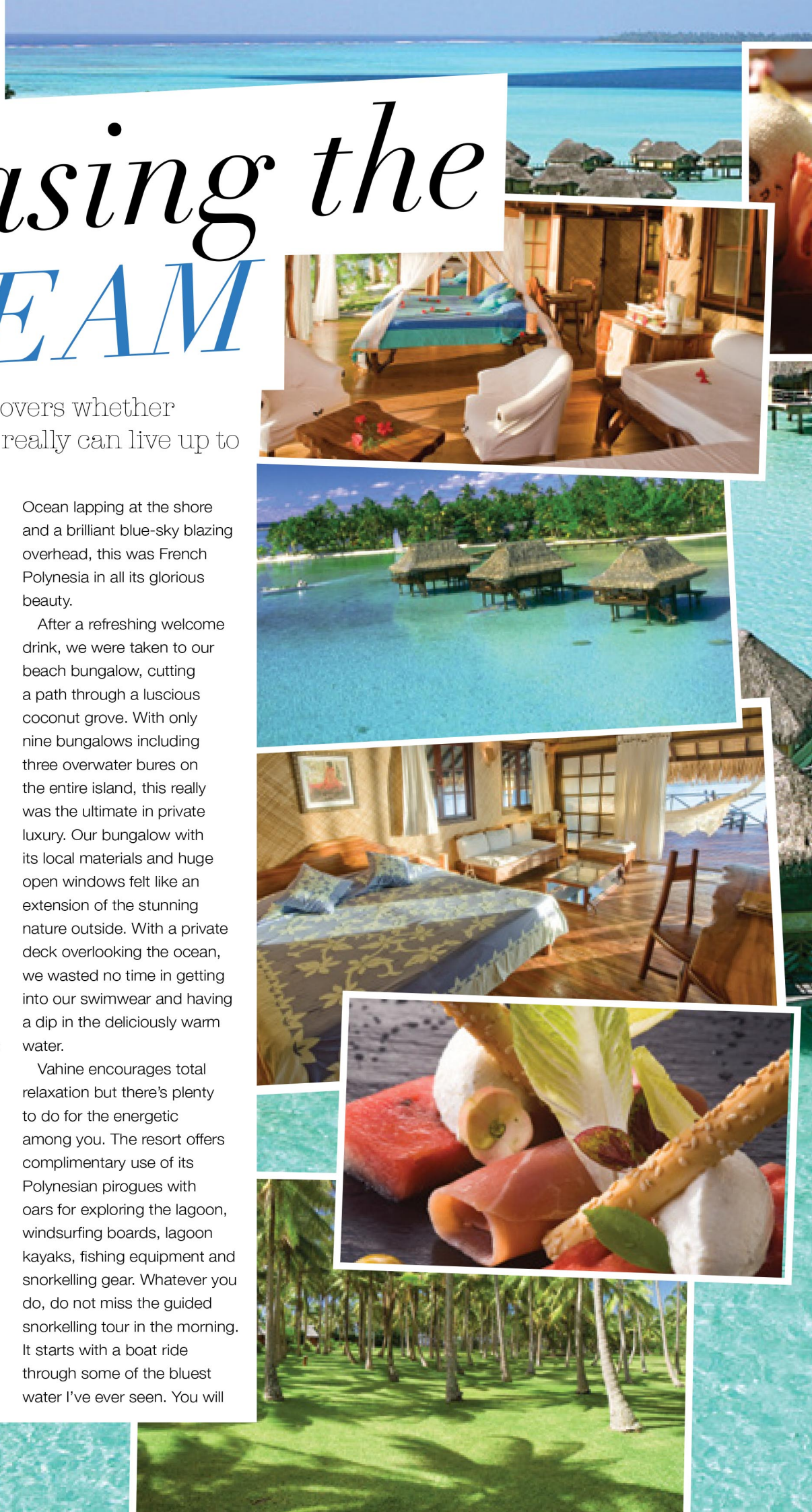
As I touched down in Papeete, it seemed that I was right. Tahiti's capital is full of roads, dusty buildings and even a McDonald's. An island paradise it is not. Thankfully we weren't staying there for long, instead flying to nearby Raiatea and transferring to the private island resort of Vahine (vahine-island.com). This tiny island was full of promise. With all the beauty of Bora Bora but none of the tourist traffic, it seemed like the perfect place to sample French Polynesia at its secluded best.

As we pulled up to the jetty at Vahine Island, my cynicism melted in the breeze. Here I was, jaded travel writer who had seemingly seen it all, grinning like a fool. Vahine was calm, quiet and intimate with beautiful natural structures that put my city girl energy at ease. With the gentle Pacific

Ocean lapping at the shore and a brilliant blue-sky blazing overhead, this was French Polynesia in all its glorious beauty.

After a refreshing welcome drink, we were taken to our beach bungalow, cutting a path through a luscious coconut grove. With only nine bungalows including three overwater bures on the entire island, this really was the ultimate in private luxury. Our bungalow with its local materials and huge open windows felt like an extension of the stunning nature outside. With a private deck overlooking the ocean, we wasted no time in getting into our swimwear and having a dip in the deliciously warm water.

Vahine encourages total relaxation but there's plenty to do for the energetic among you. The resort offers complimentary use of its Polynesian pirogues with oars for exploring the lagoon, windsurfing boards, lagoon kayaks, fishing equipment and snorkelling gear. Whatever you do, do not miss the guided snorkelling tour in the morning. It starts with a boat ride through some of the bluest water I've ever seen. You will





“HERE I WAS, JADED TRAVEL WRITER WHO HAD SEEMINGLY SEEN IT ALL, GRINNING LIKE A FOOL”



then spend an hour exploring stunning coral reef and a variety of marine life in the warm Polynesian sun.

There is also a number of paid activities that can be organised by the Vahine team including scuba diving, helicopter flights to Bora Bora and deep sea fishing. There are plans to open a spa on-site but in the mean time, you can book a luxurious afternoon massage on the deck of your bungalow, in the coconut grove or on the beach – just let the team know. Of course, that's not where the luxuries end. The cuisine on Vahine is beyond gourmet. From elaborate fare for sophisticated palates (foie gras and baby octopus) to good old hearty soul food (the best mushroom risotto I've ever had!), Vahine's chefs will delight you.

Our three days there were filled with indulgence and before we knew it, it was time to move on. We were keen to try another outlying island, far from the traffic of famed Bora Bora. We chose Relais & Châteaux's Le Taha'a Island Resort & Spa off the coast of Taha'a (letahaa.com). This time we opted for an overwater bure, the ultimate in honeymoon indulgence. With steps leading straight into the ocean, a bright and airy bedroom and a luxury

bath, it once again proved that French Polynesia lived up to the legend.

Le Taha'a has a considerably larger capacity than Vahine, so doesn't feel quite as tucked away as the smaller resort – but it does make up for it with added choice. There are three restaurants including The Ohiri, its top-tier gourmet restaurant offering creative French Polynesian fusion cuisine complemented by a selection of wines handpicked by their sommelier. Reservations are essential so make sure you book beforehand. Meanwhile, Le Spa offers a range of luxury treatments including a signature full body massage with essentials oils of your choosing – simply divine.

Le Taha'a also offers a range of complimentary activities from paddle boards to snorkelling gear. The pièce de résistance, however, is its very own coral garden offering some of the best snorkelling you'll ever enjoy. The garden has a natural drift so once you walk to the correct spot, you can simply rest in the water and let the tide do the hard work, leaving you to enjoy the scores of stunning fish and colourful coral.

In the evenings, the resort offers a range of entertainment including traditional

Tahitian dance as well as a breathtaking fire show. Of course, if you'd rather spend your evenings in the seclusion of your bure, you can opt for in-room or on-balcony dining. Just ask the staff and they'll be happy to oblige.

As I watched the stars emerge that first night at Le Taha'a, I realised that I wasn't yet too jaded to be truly stunned. I wasn't inured to shocking beauty and personal service with a smile. I was wrong about French Polynesia: it did live up to the ideal. Effortlessly and exceedingly, it lived up to the ideal.

THE ESSENTIALS

• Flights

skyscanner.net

• Accommodation

Vahine Island Private Island Resort

e: manager@vahine-island.com

w: vahine-island.com

Le Taha'a Island Resort & Spa

e: resa@letahaa.com

w: letahaa.com