

More Mo'orea: Jeep Safari in French Polynesia

By Patti Morrow
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The open-air “safari” jeep bucked hard on the vertical jungle path on Mo’orea, a small island in French Polynesia. I banged into the side of the 4x4, which was better than being hurled over the enclosure and down the mountain, only inches from the path. I use the word “path” loosely; it soon gave way to two dirt tracks, and not well-worn at that.

Clasping white-knuckled onto the grab bar, I looked at the woman on the bench seat across from me. A tourist from Japan, she did not speak my English; her fearful eyes locked on mine, and then spontaneous, internationally-recognized grins escaped from both of us, followed by whoops and hollers from our group. Someone yelled, “yee-ha!” It may or may not have been me.

“I call this “Magic Mountain,” yelled our guide Patrick over the grind of tires spinning on gravel. I could see his point, having ridden the namesake rollercoaster. “You will love the view at the top,” he said. I already loved what views I could steal along the bumpy ride – lush tropical flora and the ocean beyond.

But when we came to a stop, there was no view to be seen. “It’s just a short hike to the top,” said Patrick. So under the punishing midday 90-degree sun, I made the trek to the top, hot and sweaty. About halfway up, I heard someone curse. It may or may not have been me.

Oh, the view! Spread out in splendid panorama, I could see at least half the coast of Mo’orea. Looking down past the uneven mountain overhangs that eventually tumbled into the shallow surf, the sea spread out in swirling patterns of cerulean blue, aquamarine, and several shades of gray, held in place by an offshore coral reef.

Yes, the kidney-jarring, sweat-laden journey was worth this dramatic vista.

Sandwiched between my three days in Tahiti and three days in Bora Bora, I had just one day to explore this less popular but no less beautiful heart-shaped island of Mo’orea. Hooking up with local Patrick at Albert Transport for a tour of the island had been a good choice.



Patrick drove from one end of the island to the other, inland through the thick jungle to the Belvedere Lookout where I got a bird's eye view of one of the South Pacific's most iconic scenes – the rugged volcanic Mt. Rotuni resting between two famous bays. To the right, the blue-lapis water, black-sand beach and the dramatic craggy backdrop of Cook's Bay, named after Captain James Cook; to the left, Opunohu Bay, where Captain Bligh and HMS Bounty landed and the setting for the acclaimed novel, Mutiny on the Bounty. After this tempting view, we descended and I was able to squish my toes into the beaches on both bays.



Jus De Fruits De Mo'orea was our next stop, a local distillery near Cook's Bay, for a (or several) free sample of their special tropical liquors. The Vahine Coco Crème was much to my liking – smooth, slightly sweet with just a small bite. I didn't find out until I returned home that they don't export it. Wish I had bought an extra bottle.

An obligatory visit to the stone marae temples that the ancient Polynesians held sacred was not very impressive, though I did show due respect. I freely admit to being an ancient ruins snob – having seen the likes of the Giza, Tikal, Chichen Itza and Teotihuacan pyramids, Stonehenge, the Acropolis, the Coliseum, and Ayutthaya, I'm not easy to impress.

One thing that did grab my attention, though, was the "lipstick fruit" found on the temple grounds. This spiny red fruit has hard red seeds that are used as a spice, an industrial dye, and historically for body paint. "If you rub the seeds with your fingers and touch your lips, it will stain like lipstick," said Patrick. Interesting concept, filed away for future research.

On the way back to the ferry, we passed some overwater bungalows lazily resting over brilliant turquoise water, arguably one of the most beautiful beach scenes in the world.

The late afternoon ferry took me back to Tahiti before heading off to Bora Bora in the morning. But I did not say goodbye to Mo'orea just yet.... I settled into the lounge chair on my hotel balcony and enjoyed one last the sunset over Mo'orea in the distance.

