

Ready - Set - Sail in French Polynesia Part 3

Tahiti: Big Waves, Sting Rays & Honeymoon Destinations!

By Laura Bijnsdorp

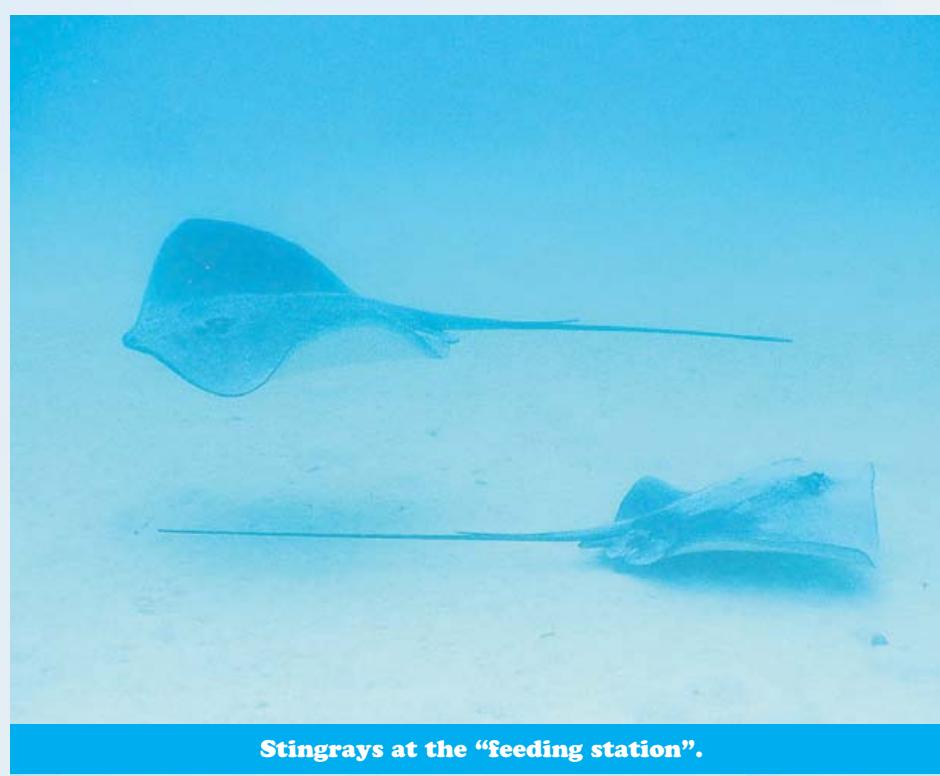
I woke up and climbed out of my bed. The rest of the boat was still asleep. I walked up the four steps leading from the saloon to the cockpit and – for the first time in months – instead of taking the dinghy, kayaking or swimming to land, I just took one small step onto a wooden dock. We were docked in Tahiti, probably the most famous of the islands in this region. It is also the economic, cultural and political centre of French Polynesia. Looking at the islands, I saw the high mountains formed from volcanic activity. Since Panama City, which was about two months ago, we had not seen much civilization. As beautiful as the Galapagos, Marquesas and Atolls were, I was happy to be in a place with a bit more city-life!

To my surprise, three crew-members from another cruising boat called *Seachange* strolled towards our boat. David, Diego and Fernanda had sailed from the Galapagos to Tahiti. Everyone was happy to see them and soon after, we didn't have six, but nine people sleeping on the boat.

It was decided it was time for a camping/road trip. The next morning, we rented two small cars and proceeded to drive



Surf's up at Tahiti!



Stingrays at the "feeding station".



Food stands in the centre of Papeete.

halfway around the island, which was a lot more ground to cover than we had expected. After a few lookout points and waterfalls, the sun was already starting to set. Just then, we passed a pretty area, with a wooden table and old metal BBQ. Not knowing if we would find another spot anytime soon, we decided to ask around if we could use the space, which was obviously privately owned. The family who turned out to own the place was very friendly and told us to make ourselves at home.

While Maria and I pitched our tent, the boys looked for firewood. Sausages and chicken were put on the BBQ, potatoes and bread seasoned with garlic and wrapped in foil were put in the fire. As we waited for the food to heat up, the boys pointed out the big waves breaking in the distance. Tahiti is of course also famous for its surfing waves, and the wave we were looking at was the biggest and most popular, according to our Galapagan friends, called Teahupo'o. As we enjoyed our BBQ dinner, we watched the insane cavernous barrels explode over the reef.

The next few days were spent surfing, provisioning and enjoying the busier town life of Tahiti, our favourite part turned out to be the square of food-trucks in Papeete, the main city, serving a strange assortment of pancakes, Chinese and seafood.

With a boatful of people, we sailed to Moorea the next morning. In my opinion, it is a lot prettier than Tahiti it-

self. From above, the shape of the island vaguely resembles a heart. The island was formed as a volcano 1.5 to 2.5 million years ago, the result of a geologic hotspot in the mantle under the oceanic plate that formed the whole of the Society Archipelago.

Funny enough, it was the first island along our trip that we actually did not go on land as we had plenty to do in the water. The boys went surfing daily, we kayaked around and had big dinners and parties with our temporary new crew and other cruisers. But the best part was the stingrays!

During the day, many stingrays swam underneath our boat, while they were normally harder to see and to find. The flattened bodies of stingrays allow them to effectively conceal themselves in their environment. Because their eyes are on top of their bodies and their mouths on the undersides, stingrays cannot see their prey; instead, they use smell and electroreceptors similar to those of sharks.

Stingrays feed primarily on mollusks, crustaceans and occasionally on small fish. Some stingrays' mouths contain two powerful, shell-crushing plates, while other species only have sucking mouth-parts. Most stingrays have one or more barbed stingers on the tail, which are used exclusively in self-defence. Stingrays do not aggressively attack humans, though stings do normally occur if a ray is accidentally stepped on. Fatal stings

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The last night with our big group of crew and friends in Moorea.

are very rare, but can happen, famously including Steve Irwin.

In the Caribbean, for example, the Cayman Islands, people have the chance to feed these stingrays. Many Tahitian islands also regularly offer guests the chance to "feed the stingrays and sharks." This consists of taking a boat to the outer lagoon reefs, then standing in waist-high water while habituated stingrays swarm around, pressing right up against tourists, seeking food from their hands or what was tossed into the water.

We had heard that this was also possible on Moorea and wondered if we should go to check it out. Some of us being divers ourselves knew that the first rule is: "Don't EVER touch or feed the wildlife!" We decided to check it out nonetheless. A half-hour dinghy ride later, we saw a tour boat just about leaving. Assuming that was the right spot, we tied the dinghy to a mooring and jumped in the water.

Almost immediately, a few stingrays surrounded us; reef-sharks in the distance also became curious. The

stingrays became braver and slid their silky bodies around our feet, stomachs and even our chests, hoping for some food. I would be lying if I said I didn't enjoy the attention of the rays, although unnatural, and understood why it was such a popular tourist attraction.

Then another two tourist boats turned up, and six jet skis without slowing down sped over the stingray site and tied up. All of the sudden, what was first a seemingly peaceful encounter, turned into a true tourist attraction with more than 50 people in the water. Tour operators held onto stingrays, kids squealed as they chased them in the water and large numbers of fish were fed. At that point, we all felt guilty for being there.

On the one hand, we really enjoyed spending time with the stingrays, and getting too close to them. The attraction adds to the local economies and prevents exploitation and removal of the larger species. However, it has also been proven that this activity can alter animal behaviour, population levels, aggression, dependence upon and habituation to human contact, as well as malnourishment and disease (Altering Stingray Behavior

& Physiology? –2006).

In the end, we just had to realize that, although the encounter was enjoyable for us, the negative effects it has on the stingrays were not worth it. Tours like those are just selfish pleasure, and we will appreciate seeing them truly in the wild from now on.

It had been an active few days. We said goodbye to our three Galapagos and sailed to Bora Bora, destination for many celebrities.

Within an hour of mooring, a boat passed and we clearly heard a lady yell: "That's that Budget Marine boat! They are sailing around the world!" Imagine that! The news of our trip had spread amongst other cruisers!

Bora Bora truly was what you see in destination wedding magazines. I always thought Mullet Bay at times resembled swimming in a pool, but the water in Bora Bora actually looked exactly like one! Today, the island's economy is driven almost

solely by tourism, just like St. Maarten. Over the last few years, several resorts have been built on *motus* (small islands) surrounding the lagoon. Yet the resorts are much nicer than our 10-storey concrete buildings.

Some 30 years ago, Hotel Bora Bora built the first over-the-water bungalows on stilts over the lagoon and, today, over-water bungalows are a standard feature of most Bora Bora resorts. The quality of those bungalows ranges from comparably cheap, basic accommodations to very luxurious and expensive places to stay.

Most of the tourist destinations are aqua-centric and public transport on the island is non-existent. Rental bicycles are the recommended methods of transport, which is just what we decided to do! It was time for a bike-ride around the island!

I've noticed that I assume all islands are just as small or smaller than St. Maarten (since most of them aren't as developed) and I am always wrong! A self-estimated three-hour bike ride turned

into an eight-hour one, with some fun stops on the way. Besides the many Chinese shops we stopped at for a beer or ice cream, we ended up at the famous Bloody-Mary's bar.

The bar is known to have had many celebrities dine there: Johnny Depp, Colin Farrell, Sean Penn, Diana Ross among others. That day, the celebrities were replaced by elderly cruise ship tourists, though. We had an amazing burger at the roadside and, after being told many times that we were almost there, we finally made it back to our boat a few hours later! With sore crotches, we had a last crew-drink on shore and headed off to Tonga!

We want to thank Budget Marine, the Caribbean's Leading Chandlery, for its support along the way. Although we are far from home, we know we can count on them to help us out! Follow our trip at www.readysetsailnow.com or www.facebook.com/readysetsail for more pictures, videos and information.



Don't drink and drive!

