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THE LAST PLANE OUT – MORE TAIL WINDS FROM THE SOUTH PACIFIC

“I saw it first from an airplane. On the horizon there was a speck that became a tall, blunt mountain with cliffs dropping sheer into the sea. And about the base of the mountain, narrow fingers of land shot out, forming magnificent bays, while about the whole was thrown a coral ring of absolute perfection . . . That was Bora Bora from aloft. When you stepped upon it the dream expanded.”

- James Michener

(Bora Bora – French Polynesia)

The rain continued to pound us with increasing ferocity as we woke up on our final morning in Bora Bora. Today was the day we were scheduled to take a launch from the lagoon to the airfield for our flight back to Papeete where our ship would be waiting complete with a branch of the Paris' famed Carita Spa.

But as we awoke to see if our room was yet floating alongside some reef, we saw that the weather had not let up.. Thankfully, I had taken to the water within minutes of checking into our bungalow at the Hotel Bora Bora two days earlier. I got into a bathing suit as quickly as I could, that first day, and ran out to the lagoon to lie in pools of clear water. I hadn't considered that I might doze off since I had been traveling for the past twenty hours. It only took a moment, but in that moment I had drifted over a huge ledge of coral. Instinctively I threw my hands down to keep myself from getting impaled on the coral and pushed myself away. In the process, I sliced every finger of my hand as well as my leg. I began swimming back to shore trying to calculate just how long it actually takes a Grey shark to pick up the scent of blood. All I could think about was the headline in the Naperville Sun "Turen devoured by sharks during first five minutes on Bora". In what section, I wondered, would the folks at the Sun place the story? I decided that it would probably appear in the food section, along with the recipes for low-fat butter cookies.

Angela's reaction, when I returned to shore, was a simple "the Band-Aids are in the brown bag". I guess I wasn't injured that badly.

We have dined well, thus far in Polynesia. This is the primary reason to visit French infested islands. That, and the fact that they tend to be among the prettiest places on the planet. Our first night, we enjoyed a buffet at the hotel, clearly the island's best restaurant. The restaurant overlooks the lagoons on three sides and local musicians and dancers provided a nice backdrop to the tuna sashimi, crab salad, oysters, clams, lamb carved to order etc. It was romantic, it was gentle, the sea breezes were blowing through the dining room and the stars were twinkling above. It took about forty-five minutes for our wine to arrive – but such is service in this part of the world. And after all, where did we have to go? There are no televisions at the Hotel Bora Bora.

Then the rains came, the beginning of cyclonic activity that created havoc on several of the islands we were to visit. Yesterday afternoon, several of us gathered in the main lobby meal. This is necessary on the islands, because the few restaurants get booked up quite early. One of the nice things about making a reservation is that the

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restaurants offer complimentary pick-up service from the leading hotels. There are really two good choices on Bora Bora. The Bamboo House is an open building made entirely of varnished, split bamboo with hanging Japanese lanterns. There is a large billboard outside that lists some of the movie stars that have dined there. The “stars” ranged from Roger Moore to Red Buttons. There were a few European beauty contest winners and the obligatory rock stars that can be easily picked out from the photographs because of their propensity to dine out in the black of night wearing Raybans during dinner.

We decided to skip the Bamboo House, opting instead for Polynesia’s most famous restaurant, Bloody Mary’s.

This is an American restaurant operation housed in a huge wood hut with a sand floor. It is covered by a thatched roof with ceiling fans and dried bamboo stalks. The butcher-block tables are well spaced and the seats are actually palm tree trunks that have been cut into stools. There is no cushioning, which is a clever technique that results in tables that change quickly.

This place had an even larger celebrity bulletin board out front than the Bamboo House and it appeared that 007 managed to get around quite a bit. Once inside, we were promptly greeted by an American host who spoke to us from behind an open display case of fresh fish and steak. He introduced us to the chef; a large local who seemed a bit intense as he watched over several orders of grilled fish at once.

The deal here is that you order your dinner before being seated, dealing directly with the chef. Appetizers of marinated grilled fishkabobs and tiger shrimp basted in white wine and butter were good choices. The entrees were divided based on their home address – there were pink Onaga and Hapu, the Tahitian version of Sea Bass, Wahoo and Yellow-fin Tuna, all of which live outside the lagoon. From inside the lagoon area we chose blue-tinged parrotfish and the unusual unicorn, looking like a miniature swordfish.

The fish was quite delicious, although not as good as the hype, and I did like sticking my feet in sand while enjoying dinner. But there were some small flies that had discovered the restaurant and the stools started becoming uncomfortable about five minutes into the meal. Perhaps worst of all, the Bloody Marys weren’t very good. There was no celery salt on the rim.

That was last night. Now it’s early morning and we have to get from Bora Bora to the island with the airstrip. The rain is landing on the roof in bursts, sheets of rain that are starting to form pockets of water on the sand leading to the lagoon. What will happen, we are wondering, if we can’t get to the ship? Perhaps it will mean a night in Papeete followed by a flight the next day. But will the planes be flying tomorrow and will the ship itinerary remain intact. We are already starting to hear stories of destruction on some of the islands.

Just then I heard laughter, a kind of private laughter that carried across the lagoon. Peering out the front of our bungalow in the rain, I saw that two members of our group, John and Judy had climbed out of their over-the-water bungalow and were swimming. That’s when I knew that everything would be all right. Laughter in the face of danger is exactly the right approach.

The news from the front desk was encouraging. Air Tahiti had called to say that they were still intending to fly despite hurricane force winds and cyclonic activity. At the very least, we would be flying a small prop in winds that were stronger than any experienced in these islands since 1983.

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The seas were not that rough as we boarded the boat from the hotel Dock. Two nights earlier, we had walked out here after dinner and dropped small pieces of French bread into the water, watching as the lights shone on an underwater ballet formed by Emperor Angelfish, Six-barred Wrasse, Raccoon Butterflyfish, and a few Moorish Idols.

When we arrived at the airport the rain had let up but the winds were howling. The story seemed to be that we would be able to fly out "when the plane landed". Several Tahitian men were strumming guitars and singing in the airport lounge, an open-air affair that had a boat deck on one side and a runway on the other.

After about an hour of waiting, watching the palm trees sway in the gusty wind, we heard the sound of engines in the distance. As it rolled to a stop in front of the small terminal we anxiously watched the deplaning passengers to see if they were green. They were quiet, perhaps saddened by the news that they were arriving in Paradise at a time when Paradise was under attack. Slowly, we began filing out to the tarmac. Our plane was one of the smaller version, twin-prop ATR's. How would it do in seventy-mile-an-hour winds we wondered?

Take-off was slightly bumpy but the scenery is so astounding from the air that one hardly notices. We were pushing above the clouds, clearly we would be flying at a much higher altitude than our flight out from Papeete several days ago. Twenty minutes into the flight, the pilot actually turned off the seat-belt sign. Was this a demonstration of French machismo? Elegantly, the small plane waded its way between the layers of cloud, banking here, engines humming there, a delicate dance above the churning Pacific. Then, almost without warning, the sunlight broke through the clouds and we all stole glances at one another. That was an omen. The storm front was behind us. Ahead of us was a one-week cruise to the islands of French Polynesia aboard the new cruise ship, the Paul Gauguin.

It was only later that we learned that Bora Bora had been hit again, with rooftops all over the island suffering damage in the rampaging storm. Air Tahiti had cancelled all services. We had, indeed, made the last plane out.

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