

TRAVEL TAHITI

MAKING WAVES

Deep in the South Pacific, **DUNCAN MADDEN** finds one of Mother Nature's wonders and watches the world's best pro surfers challenge her for glory



PHOTOGRAPHY by Patrick Meeks

SOMETIMES, LIFE IS strange. Today is one such time. After 30 hours travelling from London to Paris to Los Angeles to Pape'ete and on to the south Tahitian peninsular at Teahupo'o, I find myself sitting in a sleepless daze under the shade of a gazebo while a party unfurls around me.

I'm trying to engage in conversation with a warm-faced elderly gent seated next to me, sporting a flower garland almost as big as he is, alert blue eyes peering out from under the peak of a simple white cap with the word 'President' inscribed on it in gold stitching. But in my befuddled state my A-level French is suffering, so my native guide Manoa leans in to lend a much-needed hand.

"Who was that?" I ask after my brief, hesitating encounter. "The president of French Polynesia," my companion replies. "Did you not see his hat?"

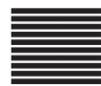
Before I can think up a suitably dry retort, a hand is tugging at my own and I'm whisked on stage by a Tahitian vision of beauty – all grass skirt and flowers in her hair – to engage in some ritual hip shaking, much to the amusement of the onlooking crowd.

That crowd consists of much of the French Polynesian government, the most powerful men in the ASP (the Association of Surfing Professionals, this year renamed the World Surf League), and a scattering of some of the best surfers in the world, including the popular local legend Michel Bourez.

I'm at a loss. Although I've just flown 10,000 miles to watch the best surfers do battle with what has fast become the most infamous wave on the global surf tour, this initiation was not how I expected to introduce myself. Humiliation over, I retire back to the shaded anonymity of the gazebo and wait out the rest of the opening ceremony in red-faced fatigue.

Running from March to December and taking in 11 stops through eight countries often remotely dotted around the globe, the World Surf League is perhaps the most glamorous, most gruelling sporting series in the world. But from the legendary barrels of Pipeline on Hawaii's North Shore to the pounding beach breaks of Hossegor in southwest France, it is this tiny island deep ►

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► in the South Pacific that's found fame as the most prestigious event of them all.

For that, there's one reason alone – Teahupo'o. Pronounced Cho-Po and widely referred to as 'Chopes', this monstrous terror of a wave set against the unfettered beauty of Mother Nature's finest scenery is an extraordinary, almost unimaginable thing. Pneumatic and beguiling in equal measure, Chopes is a wave that rears up to 20 feet in size from an almost still ocean and unloads an untameable fury of power into water inches deep and spread thin over a razor-sharp reef. It's a wave that has claimed more than one hedonist's life in recent years – indeed, the word Teahupo'o loosely translates as 'place of skulls' or 'to sever the head'.

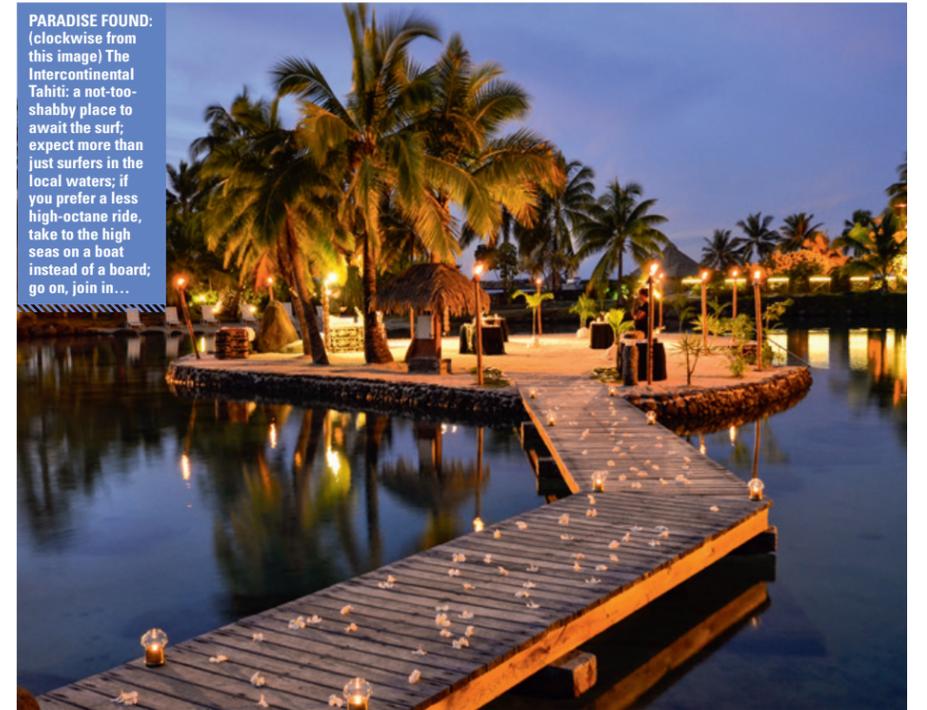
As with every surf event, we find ourselves at the mercy of the waves and with only a small swell running, competition is put on hold for the day. I gratefully retreat back to the plush Intercontinental Resort Tahiti, an hour's drive north along the glorious coast, and sleep.

The Intercontinental Tahiti is the epitome of a picture-postcard South Pacific resort. While the rooms and over-water villas are simply, cleanly furnished and lovely in a faded, floral way, it's the 32 acres of tropical gardens that make it something really special. My morning stroll to breakfast reveals two huge pools, one fringed with man-made beach and wet bar, the other abutting a saltwater lagoon where guests can swim safely alongside inquisitive tropical sea life. I share my breakfast with the fearless local birds, swooping in to pick up crumbs and keeping guests amused and on their toes in equal measure.

With the comp on hold I hop in my hire car for a day's exploration. First stop is the capital, Pape'ete – a curious mix of unmistakably French architecture set against the wild, run-down aesthetic that typifies so many of these South Pacific idylls. Wide boulevards bordered by colonial-style lamps and boardwalks circumnavigate the city, encircling shabby corrugated metal hotels, haphazard shopping malls, markets and dingy bars promising fine dining and cheap beer. Oddly deserted thanks to it being a national holiday, I find myself disquieted by the empty streets ►

Both pneumatic and beguiling, Chopes is a wave that rears up to 20 feet from a still ocean

PARADISE FOUND: (clockwise from this image) The Intercontinental Tahiti: a not-too-shabby place to await the surf; expect more than just surfers in the local waters; if you prefer a less high-octane ride, take to the high seas on a boat instead of a board; go on, join in...



ISLAND ADVENTURES: When the surf's 'down', there's the option to make like Robinson Crusoe and explore Tahiti's verdant, mountainous landscape. Give us a wave from the top...



► and lack of traffic. My only companions – a ragtag bunch of (I assume) wild dogs who trail behind me – are seemingly disinterested but clearly have nothing better to do.

A few miles up the coast I find everyone. And I mean everyone – the entire island seemingly come together at Venus Point, an idyllic sandy peninsula and traditional gathering place for locals to relax in an epic natural playground. Named by Captain Cook on his first visit to the islands in 1769 after he sighted Venus passing overhead, and a century later a place of sanctuary for Robert Louis Stevenson of *Treasure Island* fame, I bump into Manoa and his family and spend a couple of hours enjoying Tahitian hospitality at its finest – beer and barbecues on the beach. Tour the

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world and the scenery may change, but the best things in life stay exactly the same.

I spend the next few days in anticipation of (and hopeful for) waves, killing time exploring. I venture inland as far as I'm able, hiking vertiginous paths to craggy hilltops hidden deep in the jungle canopy, wash away the sweat of my exertions in a hundred unnamed beaches and coves along the never-ending western coastline, and chat idly to friendly local surfers huddled on beaches keeping a collective watchful eye on the horizon.

On my second-to-last day the swell finally arrives. Up before dawn, I race the hour south and arrive at the end of the road just in time to catch a ride on local big-wave surfer Tikanui Smith's boat so we can watch the action from a truly up-close-and-personal perspective.

It's the biggest swell ever seen at this annual competition and the atmosphere in the water is electric with excitement and palpable with fear. Seeing this kind of natural power from so close is surreal and disconcerting. But I needn't have worried – Tikanui grew up surfing these waves and knows them better than most. The previous season he'd ridden one of the biggest waves ever seen here and is

reassuringly lackadaisical as he hugs our tiny boat toward the imposing lineup.

We float for hours, dodging giant surf and watching the world's best outrun waves of impossible ferocity. Huge barrels are ridden, seemingly unsurvivable wipeouts survived, reputations made and a world champion uncovered in Brazil's Gabriel Medina.

It's a fitting end to a gladiatorial contest held in once-in-a-lifetime conditions. I step back onto dry land with my sea legs still on and wobble unsteadily to my car. Ahead of me I think about the long, long flight home, then turn back to see Tikanui grabbing his surfboard and racing back out into the maelstrom, and I instantly know which journey I'd rather be taking. ■

Duncan flew with Air Tahiti Nui, the national carrier to French Polynesia with departures from Paris, Los Angeles, Tokyo and Auckland to Tahiti with connecting flights available from London with Virgin Atlantic. An economy class return fare from London to Pape'ete, Tahiti via LAX starts from £1,450 including taxes. 0844 482 1675, AIRTAHITINUI.CO.UK.

For more information on The Islands of Tahiti, tour operator package deals and special offers check out TAHITI-TOURISME.CO.UK