

Moorea's Favorite Hang-Outs for Those in the Know

By Jan Prince

This Article appears courtesy of **The Tahiti Beach Press**, our terrific local paper.

Imagine spending your vacation in a comfortable and affordable overwater bungalow on the border of Cook's Bay, where you have a picture postcard view of one of the world's most magnificent scenes.

You can recline on your sun deck and gaze at the jade velvet peaks and cathedral-shaped spires of the mountains fringing the mirror-like bay. The jagged profile of these majestic mountains rise like a shark's jaw from the sea, sometimes misted in cloud, at times brilliantly emerald hued, and as dusk approaches, somberly purple.

This lovely dream becomes a reality for those fortunate people who choose to stay at the Club Bali Hai on Moorea. Although the lodging facilities are open to the general public, many of these visitors are Vacation Time Share guests who have bought memberships in Resort & Condominium International (RCI). They come here from the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and other parts of the world, spending a week, two weeks or even a month or more.

Some of these guests may use the Club Bali Hai as a base, combining a week in Moorea with their wanderings in the remote islands and atolls of French Polynesia. They sometimes go way off the beaten tourist track to discover Maupiti, Huahine, Ahe, Mataiva, Fakarava, Tikehau, Rurutu and Raivavae, or they cruise to the Marquesas Islands, then return to Club Bali Hai to wind down before heading home.

Other folks choose to stay put, just hanging out at Club Bali Hai and reading a good book while sunbathing beside the swimming pool. Some of them may drum up enough energy to paddle a kayak or even to swim across the azure blue waters of the fjord-like bay, but most of these relaxed people will stroll to the nearest supermarket in the afternoon to buy supplies for their dinner, which they will cook in their bungalows.

You can see them walking beside the road in Pao Pao, and some of the women wear pareos everywhere they go on the island. This strip of colorful cotton cloth is cooler than normal clothes and can be tied to show off a newly acquired tan. Bare bronzed shoulders are something to be proud of in January when everyone else back home in Minnesota or Toronto is snowed under.

The Club Bali Hai became the fourth hotel in the Bali Hai empire in 1982, when the old Hotel Aimeo was taken over by the three "Boys of Bali Hai". This famous trio included Hugh Kelley, Jay Carlisle and Don "Muk" McCallum, three Californians who opened the Hotel Bali Hai on Moorea in 1962. They eventually added the Hotel Bali Hai Raiatea and Hotel Bali Hai Huahine, then the Club Bali Hai Moorea.

Hugh Kelley died in 1998 and all the other Bali Hai hotels are now just a fond memory, but the Club Bali Hai keeps getting better and better.

Jay Carlisle, one of the two remaining "Boys", emphasized that the Club Bali Hai is not a 5-star, 4-star, or even a 3-star hotel, and it's not supposed to be. "The stockholders of the Bali Hai Corporation wanted to keep the Club Bali Hai because it is a Timeshare with a few hotel rooms. On purpose it is all-Tahitian style with an all-Tahitian staff and manager," he said.

Jay added that there are outside services on the premises, such as the Blue Pineapple Snack, Avis for rental vehicles, a well-stocked Club boutique, and Hiro's Tours/What to Do on Moorea, that provides nautical excursions, sunset cruises, picnics on the motu and can arrange land tours on request. This company is owned by Hiro Kelley, son of the late Hugh Kelley.

"The idea is to provide a place where everything is offered to the visitor," Jay said, adding that they offer the best products at the best prices. The overwater bungalows at Club Bali Hai are the least expensive overwater units in Tahiti and Her Islands.

The rack rate for walk-in guests is 24.000 CFP per day, compared to prices that are almost double up to more than triple in some of the other hotels with overwater bungalows. The garden room rates are 10.000 CFP, which are less than many of the family pensions and bed and breakfast lodgings on Moorea. They also offer special Internet rates on their website, which you can check out on www.clubbalihai.com.

Visitors and locals in the know like to hang out at The Blue Pineapple, which is a friendly waterside restaurant and snack bar located on the Club Bali Hai premises beside the fresh water swimming pool and Cook's Bay. Here you can enjoy the refreshing ocean breeze while staring at the famous "Bali Hai" mountain (whose real name is Mou'a Roa or long mountain in Tahitian) and the steeply sloping pineapple fields across the bay. Matahi Hunter and his wife Virginia and their crew serve breakfast and lunch daily from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. The prices are good and the food is great. You can order fresh pineapple juice, bacon and eggs, Spanish omelets or pancakes for breakfast, and on Sunday mornings you can even sample a typical Tahitian style breakfast, complete with firifiri (Tahitian doughnuts), marinated fish with taioro (sour coconut sauce with onions), fresh grilled fish and Tahitian style coffee with vanilla and sweetened with coconut milk and sugar. For lunch Matahi serves shrimp or beef curry, fresh fish, poisson cru with coconut milk, chef's salad, tuna salad, steak, and a good selection of burgers and fries. You can also order a cold beer or glass of wine with your meal. Anyone who comes to eat at the Blue Pineapple also has access to the swimming pool, which explains the number of Tahitian children splashing in the pool, especially on weekends.

For Christmas and New Year's this past holiday season Matahi organized all-day seafood barbecues at the Blue Pineapple, complete with a live Tahitian band. This was a special treat for Club Bali Hai guests as well as the local clientele.

In the evening Club Bali Hai guests have the option of dining in their rooms or going out to the local restaurants. There is a good choice of restaurants and snacks within easy walking distance and some of the restaurants also provide free pick-up service for dinner. Jay said that the management pushes those places that hired the employees who were working for the Hotel Bali Hai when it closed on January 31, 2001.

The Club Bali has 44 air-conditioned units that include 13 overwater bungalows, 6 beach front bungalows, 5 garden rooms and 20 rooms in a two-story colonial style building. Most of the rooms in the two-story building have kitchenettes and they all have coffee machines. There are no kitchens in the 5 garden rooms. The overwater and beach bungalows are Polynesian in decor, with a bedroom, separate kitchen/dining area and terrace facing the spectacular scenery. The floors and bathrooms are tiled and there are plenty of mirrors in the bedroom and bathroom. These units are furnished with a ceiling fan, a queen size bed in the bedroom and a twin bed in the living room, with a door in between for a little privacy, although the wall does not extend all the way to the ceiling. The kitchen contains a stove and oven, as well as a microwave and coffee/tea making facilities. The windows are screened, but not the sliding door leading to the sundeck. All the bathrooms have hot water showers.

In addition to the fresh water pool with a rock waterfall, there is also good swimming in Cook's Bay, starting from your bungalow or from the small white sand beaches. The Club Bali Hai also offers their guests free use of the tennis court, a book exchange and CNN television in the reception area. There is also an entertainment program three evenings a week.

The land crab races held at 6 p.m. each Monday night attract the "big gamblers" who bet a minimum of 100 CFP on the crab of their choice. Each Monday afternoon one of the Tahitian maintenance workers catches 12 tupa crabs, who live in holes in the ground not far from the edge of the lagoon. Four crabs are entered in each of the three races held, and the crowd gets quite noisy when the race begins. Some of the crabs come out running, while others go backwards or crawl over into the next lane on top of other crabs. Some of the guests slap the sides of the long wooden box that serves as the race course, while others bring out their video and cameras to record this exciting action.

On Tuesdays at 6 p.m. Rosalie comes out of the Club boutique in front of the reception area and teaches guests how to wear the pareo. Rosalie, who is from the Marquesas Islands, used to make the best margaritas on Moorea when she worked as a bartender at the Club Bali Hai bar. When Muk and Jay closed the bar in April 2002, Rosalie gave a big sigh of relief and happily took her big smile and friendly manner to the front of the property to work in the air conditioned bar. If you don't bring your pareo with you for this free demonstration, Rosalie always has a few extra ones guests can use while learning some of the dozens of ways of tying this versatile garment.

Each Wednesday evening at 6 p.m. is a highlight of the week, when a Tahitian dance group performs on the lawn beside the bay. This spectacular event is especially appreciated by those romantic souls who have succumbed to the siren call of the sensual South Seas.

The setting is right out of a Hollywood movie, complete with brooding mountains crowned with a majestic headdress of fleecy cumulous clouds of snowy white, upon which the infinite colors of the sunset play. The haunting sounds of the Polynesian songs fill the air as the costumed Tahitians perform their traditional dances on the soft green grass.

You are enraptured by the perfume of their floral leis and head crowns, even as your eyes follow the flight of a family of white fairy terns as they return to the tops of the coconut palms after a day of fishing. The Club Bali Hai charges an entrance fee of 500 CFP per person for the dance show if you are not a registered guest.

Another form of free entertainment takes place each evening at 5:30 p.m., except on Wednesdays when the dance show is presented. This most unusual event is called "Happy Hour with Muk". Guests bring their own booze and join Muk McCallum at the tables in the vicinity of the Blue Pineapple, which closes at 3 p.m.

Along with Jay Carlisle, who will be 71 this year, Muk, 75, is one of the two remaining Bali Hai Boys, and his specialty is "talking story", recounting the good old days of the 1960s, when the three young bachelors arrived from California to buy a vanilla farm in Moorea, and how they ended up running hotels instead and chasing the local vahines. Muk's memory is clear and his stories can be hilarious. Even though some of the return guests have heard Muk's tales over and over, they still join him for Happy Hour and listen attentively.

Rose Tetuamahuta is the pretty and efficient Tahitian manager of Club Bali Hai. She is from Moorea and heads a staff of Tahitians, many of whom have worked for the Bali Hai hotels since the first one opened.

"Rose has been at the Club Bali Hai for the past 18 years," Jay Carlisle said, "and I consider it an honor that she works for the company."

Prior to joining the Club Bali Hai team Rose was a receptionist at the Hotel Moorea Lagoon. At Club Bali Hai she has worked as bookkeeper, in reservations and she ran the restaurant before it closed. Rose always takes time to give personal attention to her guests, answering individual questions in her calm, caring manner. Jay said that whenever there is a special project to be done around the property, Rose will remain at the side of the worker, talking him through it as he gets the work done, giving the employee confidence that he can do it and do it right.

This attitude of caring is one of the main reasons guests feel at home at Club Bali Hai. Jay, Muk and Rose set the example for the employees to follow, and everyone who works here extends the welcoming Polynesian hospitality to visitors that has made a good reputation for Tahiti and Her Islands throughout the world. That's the best reason of all to come to Club Bali Hai and the Blue Pineapple and hang out yourself!