

The Birth of Bungalows



Jay Carlisle is 78 now. Old enough to recall when Bora Bora was known as “Boring Boring” but young enough to remember how Tahiti’s first overwater bungalows came up short. He grabs two beers from behind his bar at Club Bali Hai Hotel Moorea and dives in.

“We were bachelors — myself, Hugh Kelley and Don ‘Muk’ McCallum. Among the first expats in Tahiti. We’d moved here in 1960 from Newport Beach, California. Hugh had been a defense attorney, Muk sold sporting goods, and I left a job as a securities trader. By 1967 we were running a resort on Moorea and one on Raiatea. Living the dream. Work by day. Party by night. ‘Hammered and happy,’ as Muk says. But we had a problem. Our hotel on Raiatea had no beach. But it had beautiful reef.

“That’s when Kelley said, ‘What if we built bungalows on the reef?’ We had seen Tahitians stay in fishing huts out on the water for days. Would tourists? We built templates using water pipe. We used air hoses to mark the reef for pilings. We went into the bedrock under the coral to anchor the pipes with cement — man, were those solid. And finally we built the first three overwater bungalows. Our first guests arrived and ... the huts were too small.

“But we saw potential. Our Moorea hotel had more visitors, and great snorkeling. So we built larger bungalows there. Right away people wanted them. It was the snorkeling. That’s why the bungalows were so popular, and why we put windows in the floors (we called it ‘Tahitian TV’). We charged \$34 a night with meals. That was in 1968. Word spread. Guests like Marlon Brando (great at imitations) and Albert Finney eventually arrived. And it seemed every request was for those bungalows.

“It wasn’t long before our friends from Hotel Bora Bora came over with questions. We answered them — helping Bora Bora’s first bungalows go up in the early 1970s.

“These days, we’re into affordable overwater bungalows at Club Bali Hai Hotel (from \$250). I don’t think any of us imagined the overwater bungalows of today.”



1960-62

The Tahiti Nobody Knew... Yet

TYPICAL VANILLA FARMERS? Jay, Muk and Hugh are three of five expats on Moorea. The trio’s farm fails, so they buy a hotel from a local who secures work permits. They have no hotel experience. Hotel Bali Hai Moorea opens.



1962

LIFE MAGAZINE ENCOUNTER A WRITER AND A PHOTOGRAPHER RETURNING HOME FROM A BOMB TEST HAPPEN UPON THE RESORT. AIRLINE STEWARDESSES ARE GUESTS. LIFE MAGAZINE RUNS STORY. TAHITI TOURISM BOOMS.

1967

FIRST OVERWATER BUNGALOWS The millions of Americans who saw the *Life* magazine article keep Hotel Bali Hai Moorea busy. Jay, Muk and Hugh take over a resort on Raiatea. It has no beach for bungalows. They improvise.



1970-present

TAHITI’S OVERWATER TYCOONS THE THREESOME, DUBBED “THE BALI HAI BOYS,” BUILD BUNGALOWS ON THREE ISLANDS. TODAY, TWO SURVIVING MEMBERS, MUK AND JAY (CENTER, RIGHT), RUN CLUB BALI HAI HOTEL MOOREA.

