It’s an island known as one of the best places on Earth to do nothing—besides lounge by the lagoon, sip fruity cocktails and take in the spectacular scenery. But as one adventure-seeker discovers, those who prefer a more active holiday should consider what they’re missing if they haven’t looked Leeward.

By Gemma Z. Price  Photography by Dana Neibert
I’m an unquenchable traveller, and I want more than a downtempo beach escape. I want excitement. So when I decided to venture deep into the South Pacific, I was pleasantly surprised to find Bora Bora’s volcanic landscapes and islet-ringed lagoon brimming with adventures and ‘wow’ moments.

Perched on a white seat, we descend slowly as the hydraulic platform lowers us into the waves, the warm, tropical waters gradually creeping up to our bikini tops. On Laurent’s signal, my friend Coco works the forward propulsion to get our submersible scooter clear of the pontoon and out into the open water. She turns the small steering wheel to the left and right, following our guides, until we spot the coral gardens looming ahead—tree-like elkhorn corals and cauliflower corals, dappled by shafts of sunlight piercing through the blue. Riding pillion behind her, I twist my head like an owl as a swarm of colourful fish closes in. Laurent and his fellow guide Francois point out a starfish 30 centimetres (1 foot) in diameter, a parrotfish hovering over an undulating welcome mat of hot-pink anemone, and what looks suspiciously like a shark shooting out from under a craggy outcrop and disappearing into the murk.

Upon first seeing the aquabike parked on the platform, I’d had to stifle a laugh. The snub-nosed, bubble-shaped submersible—acid yellow in colour—looks like something from the Beatles movie Yellow Submarine. But for all its cartoonish appearance, the two-seat underwater scooter, which keeps you dry from the chest up, turns out to be a great way to explore below the waves, just as Laurent had promised.

At one point, he ties a mesh bag of bread to the front of our clear Perspex hood, and instantly we’re surrounded by a cloud of black-and-white-striped damselfish, angelfish and parrotfish. I can feel them darting between us, tickling our bare legs and backs to snatch at the rapidly disappearing hunks. As we gawk at them through the aquabike bubble, the fish stare back, their dish eyes pivoting an inch from ours before they zip away. I’m feeling very glad I was wrong about Bora Bora.

When I initially considered it as a destination for my girlfriend getaway, I wasn’t convinced it was for me. I knew this tropical Leeward isle, 225 kilometres (140 miles) north-east of Tahiti in French Polynesia, would be undeniably beautiful: crescents of sheltered private beach, lush jungles adjacent to islet-ringed turquoise waters, and a delicious sense of seclusion. All of which have long proved irresistible for honeymooners. Celebs and moviemakers (think Marlon Brando’s 1962 Mutiny on the Bounty) have been ardent fans as well. But I’m an unquenchable traveller and adventurer, and I want more than a downtempo beach escape. I want excitement.
decided to venture deep into the South Pacific, with my up-for-anything travel partner, Coco, I was pleasantly surprised to find Bora Bora’s volcanic landscapes and its unique islet-ringed lagoon brimming with adventures and “wow” moments.

As soon as we’re back on dry land following our successful underwater outing, Coco and I start to survey other opportunities for excitement. We’d heard about the aquabike from another girlfriend group, a gaggle of margarita-drinking ladies we’d met in Bora Bora’s sandy-floor tiki bar-cum-restaurant Bloody Mary’s, famous in part for being a preferred haunt of visiting A-listers (although it’s quite possible that Pierce Brosnan, Goldie Hawn and the other 230 notable names engraved on the mammoth guest board were there because it’s one of the few independent bars on the island). Now we’re getting wind of another adventure—aqua safari.

This enterprise involves donning cuboid yellow-and-white helmets that keep our heads completely dry as we descend a ladder to the sandy ocean floor. My feet clad in rubbery boots, I walk in slow motion through craggy outcrops of coral and lengths of seaweed fluttering in the currents, feeling like a puppet as I carefully lift one foot and then the other, my hands buoyed and bobbing at waist level. Afterwards, a more extensive (and more traditional) underwater tour to further our relationship with the area’s colourful marine locals feels like a must. Bora Bora’s famed coral reef, which encircles the island and is accessible within 15 minutes by speedboat, has some of the best snorkelling in the world. Home to around 700 species of tropical fish, Coral Garden is our first stop, followed by a few other choice locations known to the crew.

Slipping down into the water, our guide coaxse curious moray eels from their hiding places and points out the distinctive diamond shapes of mantas and eagle rays gliding through the blue. I give chase, torpedo-like—my arms held flat against my sides, my legs kicking determinedly. But these elusive phantoms of the deep are more than a match for my fins and glide serenely out of sight. “We usually see reef sharks and blacktip reef sharks,” says our skipper, once we flop back...
This spread:
(right) Biking along verdant back roads;
(below) making leis the island way;
paddleboarding at Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora.
on board the motorised outrigger: “If you’re lucky, you may see a turtle or dolphins—but only if you’re lucky, my friends.”

Up next? We learn that Bora Bora’s outer ring of reef and motu (small reef islets) makes its calm lagoon waters ideal for exploration by kayak or paddleboard, and private boat tours abound. You can book a 23-foot Jeanneau Cup-Camarat 715WA motorboat, a trimaran, a catamaran, a pontoon boat or an aluminium Quintrex boat perfect for a small group, and most excursions include a picnic on a private beach. Coco and I decide on a morning Hobie Cat cruise around the island, including a beach feast of poisson cru, French Polynesia’s de facto national dish of fresh raw tuna marinated with lime juice and mixed with sliced onion, parsley and creamy coconut milk, washed down with a flute (OK, three flutes) of Veuve Clicquot.

Following these watery excursions, we discover that Bora Bora’s volcanic landscapes, richly carpeted in plantations and jungle, form another prime playground for adventure. So we set off on an ATV tour (Land Rovers are available as well) around the island’s 32-kilometre (20-mile) coastal road, stopping to explore its many lookouts. Our brick-red 400cc recreational ATV, also known as a quad bike, makes short work of rocky trails and shingle-clad slopes. And, in case there’s any question: It’s really fun to drive.

First, we ascend Pahonu Hill for views of the natural harbour and the swaths of sand at Matira Beach, where we can just discern the outlines of a couple playing a game of bat and ball against the backdrop of neighbour Motu To’opua. Then we head to the Fa’anui Valley, passing through small villages of thatched-roof pastel houses ringed by vibrant bromeliad, hibiscus and bird-of-paradise blooms. Women peeling breadfruit, the island’s starchy staple, wave as we go by. At the Amanahune Bay lookout, we stop to examine rock formations that were once inside the caldera of Bora Bora.

Although the island’s cultural history is less well-known than its natural beauty, many historical relics can be found. At Fare Opu, a 15th- or 16th-century royal marae—a communal or sacred monument in Polynesian societies—Coco and I follow in the footsteps of the past.

THE JEWEL OF THE SOUTH SEAS: BORA BORA

Bora Bora is just 1.5 hours by plane from Papeete, the capital of French Polynesia, which makes it easy to visit on a short break from Tahiti or to add on an extension to a Tahiti or Cook Islands island-hopping trip. This is the best island holiday if you’re looking for the ultimate island escape with the perfect combination of laid-back island living and luxury island resort life.

One of the best things to do in Bora Bora is to experience the island’s natural beauty. From kayaking and paddleboarding to scuba diving and snorkelling, there are plenty of activities to choose from. If you’re looking for a more relaxed experience, you can enjoy a massage or spa treatment at one of the island’s luxury resorts.

BORA BORA | Island Orientation
of ancient tribal leaders, imagining the rituals and ceremonies performed here long ago. Of Bora Bora’s original 42 marae (about 13 ruins remain), Fare Opu was the largest. Only a few structures and roughly etched petroglyphs depicting turtles, held sacred by ancient Polynesians, have survived. But these artefacts are enough to inspire the thrill of standing in a place where important moments have occurred across centuries.

I saved the biggest thrill, though, for last. Shark feeding has long been popular around Bora Bora, and many local operators happily offer to take us to the spots where they hand-feed chunks of fish to large numbers of lemon and blacktip reef sharks. Adventurous streak notwithstanding, I get the willies at the idea of being a few metres away from a feeding frenzy, so I opt for a purely observational excursion. Even so, there’s something about sliding down into cooler, deeper water and being surrounded by dozens of these sleek, mysterious animals that makes my breath catch in my throat.

Immediately, I spot a large lemon shark below. Three metres (10 feet) long, she meanders slowly through the depths, striped continuously by the black and grey bodies of reef sharks cruising above her. As I take a deep breath and dive down, I see another and another. Coco and I are enmeshed within a sliding grid of curving muscular bodies.

Suddenly, one shark breaks towards us, and a single thought leaps to mind: “It’s coming straight for me!” But as I kick upwards to gulp for air, one of the Polynesian guides dives down to embrace the shark’s dorsal fin. The creature lances downwards again, its passenger in tow. The diver catches a ride for a few moments before slowly turning to join us back up top. I remember that the Tahitians have a long-standing relationship with their environment and the animals within it.

“Ia orana!” he says in greeting, beaming from ear to ear, as he breaks the surface. Green tattoos extend along his back and legs, merging with an emerald-hued sarong. I can only stutter in reply. I climb out, onto the boat, and though my knees are knocking, I’m exhilarated by the experience. You only live once, right? On the cruise back towards a restorative coconut-rum cocktail and volcanic-stone massage, I’m grateful I’ve had the chance to spend part of my turn on Bora Bora. ■