



COVER STORY

# True blues

In our haste to get out of Australia, many of us have overlooked what's just beside us in our dash to the other side of the globe. But it's worth remembering we don't have to go far to escape to destinations completely unlike our own; destinations that offer unique experiences we can't get on the other side of the equator.

There are about 5000 islands in the South Pacific, some barely two hours away by plane. And they're all unique; there are 2000 islands in Melanesia, the same again in Micronesia and more than 1000 in Polynesia. Some of these islands offer a wild escape into the unknown, while others offer five-star luxury among movie-star types.

Most offer something in between. There are unique animal encounters to be had in the sea, historic journeys by boat, traditional cultures to live among and one-of-a-kind natural attractions, like exploding volcanoes. I grew up here, and have spent a lifetime travelling throughout the region, but find new secrets every time I go. So take a look at the unique South Pacific experiences you can't find anywhere else.

## Sleep in an over-water bungalow in Bora Bora

When you book an overwater bungalow you need never worry if your room will have a view of the lagoon – you're sleeping right on top of it. Invented in Bora Bora 54 years ago, other countries and islands may try to



## The islands of the Pacific offer incredible experiences you won't find anywhere else. By Craig Tansley

imitate, but nothing is the same as the original. Located within resorts built on their own private island – all it takes is a leap from the back deck to be in Bora Bora's world-famous lagoon. See [marriott.com](http://marriott.com)

### Swim with humpback whales in Tonga

It's the best place on Earth to swim with whales. Between June and October thousands of humpback whales migrate to the islands of Tonga to give birth. There are operators on each of the four island groups offering the chance to swim right next to the giants of the ocean. Strict laws allow just four swimmers in the water with any whale – but you're almost guaranteed to swim with them daily, in 26 degree water, with up to 80 metres visibility. See [whalediscoveries.com](http://whalediscoveries.com)

### Swim in a Vanuatu blue hole

Nothing can prepare you for the otherworldly luminescence of Vanuatu's blue holes. Surrounded by thick forest, blue

holes can be found across the island of Espiritu Santo. When it rains, the water from the mountains flows underground into limestone streams, where it's filtered and becomes incandescent blue. One of nature's rarest wonders, you'll get to swim in blue holes all over Espiritu Santo, paying a small entrance fee for the three best known sites (Matevulu, Nanda and Ri Ri). See [vanuatu.travel](http://vanuatu.travel)

### Swim with manta rays in Fiji

Fiji is one of the best places on Earth to snorkel or dive with manta rays, which can grow up to five metres wide. You're guaranteed to swim with them between May and October in the Yasawa Islands at a spot nicknamed Manta Ray Passage. They gather in large numbers in shallow water and are curious by nature (and safe) offering visitors one of the most spectacular marine creature interactions on Earth. Book a tour and sleep close by. See [mantarayisland.com](http://mantarayisland.com)

### Walk along the edge of an erupting volcano in Vanuatu

Stand on the edge of the world's most accessible live volcano as it erupts – throwing dry lava as big as cars into the air around you. Mount Yasur, on the island of Tanna, has been erupting for hundreds of years, and expert local guides can take you close to the action. Book a day tour from Port Vila which includes flights to the island, or stay overnight and time your visit for sunset, when the lava show is at its most spectacular. See [tannavolcanotransfertours.com](http://tannavolcanotransfertours.com)

### Spot the green flash on a Rarotonga sunset bar crawl

There's no better place for sundowners in the tropics than Rarotonga's picturesque west coast. Spaced evenly along this coastline at Arorangi are the South Seas sunset bars of your imagination, think feet on the sand, live music playing, coconut trees, cocktails at happy-hour prices. Work your way between local favourites like Wilson's Bar & Restaurant, The Waterline (extra points for its tree-house vantage point) and The Shipwreck Hut. See [aroabeach.com](http://aroabeach.com)

### Ride a supply ship through French Polynesia

Take a 12-day all-inclusive adventure to one of the most remote island archipelagos on



Clockwise from main: Castaway Island, Fiji; snorkelling over a reef in Fiji; paddling the Aitutaki Lagoon, Cook Islands; preparing lunch in New Caledonia; and surfing at Cloudbreak, Fiji.



## FIVE OTHER CLASSIC SOUTH PACIFIC EXPERIENCES

### Swim with spinner dolphins

Moorea in French Polynesia is one of the best places on Earth to swim with these creatures. Part of a Marine Mammal Sanctuary, dolphins gather in the passages and the water beyond the lagoon year-round, offering an almost guaranteed chance to swim among the ocean's most gregarious creatures. See [moorea-ocean-adventures.com](http://moorea-ocean-adventures.com)

### Take a waterfall 'crawl'

Head to Upolu, Samoa's main island. Hire a car and work your way through the island's mountainous hinterland where you'll find a waterfall around almost every bend. Some – like Papapaitai Falls – thunder down 100 metres below you, but others like Togaitogiga Falls have crystal-clear rock pools to swim in.

### Experience French culture

Who needs Europe, when it's on our doorstep? Fly two hours to Noumea in New Caledonia and experience French melded with local Kanak culture. You can eat snails, washed down with champagne, in a seaside French restaurant, then shop at a French boutique store. French Polynesia also offers Francophiles a slice of Europe in the South Pacific.

### Join in a Sunday church service

It's not about the religion, it's about the singing. All churches throughout the South Pacific welcome tourists. Watch as locals turn up dressed to the nines despite the heat, then stick around for the snacks. Visitors are often invited to stay and eat.

### Hire a scooter

All South Pacific islands have scenic roads and slow speed limits, making them perfect for first-time scooter riders. Your Australian driver's licence will often suffice, although in some nations a quick riding test is compulsory. Driving a car around the South Pacific just isn't the same; you'll miss the smells, and the tiny off-roads leading into local's lives.

Earth, the Marquesas Islands, on board one of the world's last dual-purpose passenger and supply ships, Aranui 5. See what inspired former residents like Paul Gauguin and Herman Melville as you travel between tiny communities, hike mountain ranges and discover ancient Polynesian artefacts in forests as the crew unload cargo. You'll also visit French Polynesia's most revered islands, Bora Bora and Rangiroa. See [aranui.com](http://aranui.com)

### Play on the world's most pristine lagoon in the Cook Islands

Aitutaki is only 17 square kilometres, but its lagoon is more than four times bigger. Shaped like an equilateral triangle with 12-kilometre sides, it houses 14 tiny islands, and all but one is entirely uninhabited. Take a lagoon cruise and see how the concept for *Survivor* came about (the BBC series, *Shipwrecked*, was filmed here in 2000 and TV producer Mark Burnett conceived *Survivor* from that series). It's here that you will also find world's best bone fishing and world's best kite-surfing, and stay overnight in a hut on a deserted island. See [cookislands.travel](http://cookislands.travel)

### Sample the world's most distinctive Indian food

Fiji offers the most unusual Indian cuisine on the planet. More than 40 per cent of Fiji's population is of Indian descent (Indian

workers were sent here in the late 1800s and early 1900s to work on sugarcane plantations) which has led to the emergence of a unique Indo-Fijian cuisine. Fiji mixes traditional Polynesian cuisine using ingredients like taro, breadfruit and cassava with traditional Indian curries and masalas to create its very own food style.

### Charter your own yacht in New Caledonia

Home to one of the world's largest sailing lagoons (more than 23,000 square kilometres) and protected by the world's second-biggest barrier reef, New Caledonia is considered the safest place in the world to charter your own yacht. There are over 140 islands to explore here. What's more, you can do it in style: stock up on French gourmet food and wine in its capital, Noumea. Dozens of charter yacht companies offer all sizes of charter yachts. See [charterworld.com.au](http://charterworld.com.au)

### Splurge on your own island resort in Fiji

Nowhere on Earth does private island resorts quite like Fiji. In an island group comprising 333 tropical islands, there's every chance to find your own - they are not just the domain of movie stars like Mel Gibson (who owns Mago Island). Many are for hire for exclusive use that aren't as expensive as you might think, with room for

just you and your family (or friends). Or stay with a handful of other guests on exclusive private island retreats like COMO Luacala Island or Kokomo Island Resort. See [fijiislands.com.au](http://fijiislands.com.au)

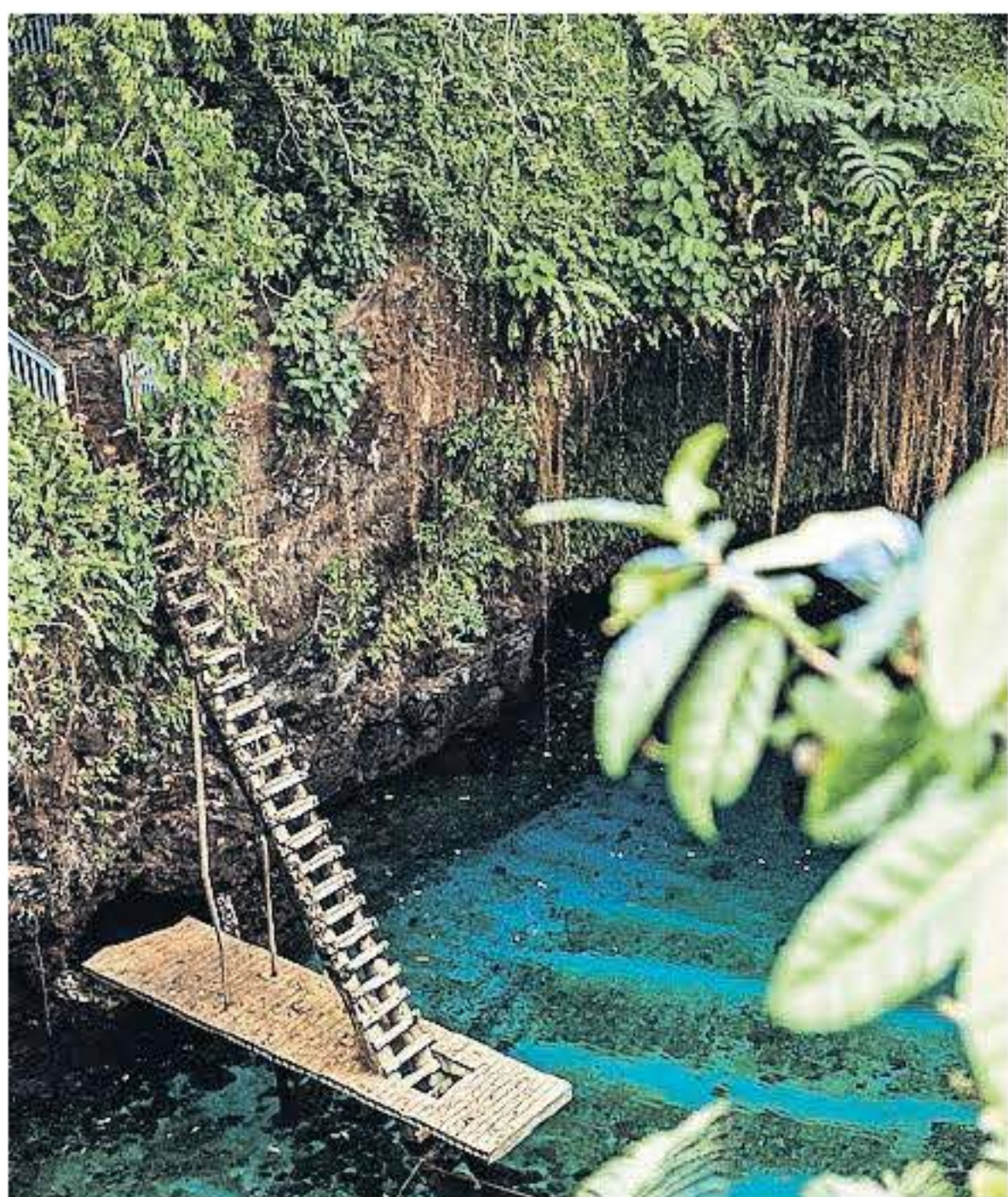
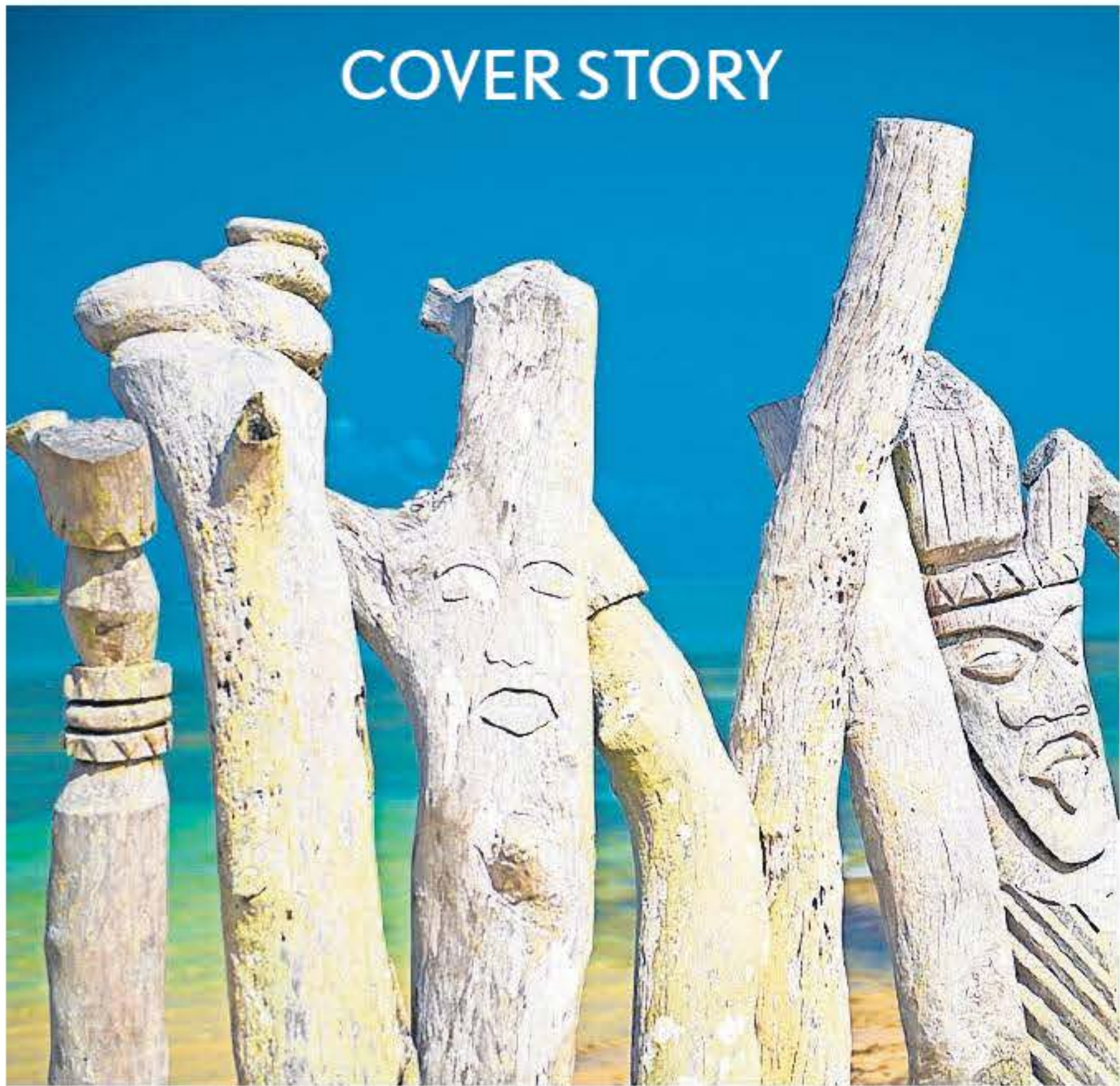
### See whales just metres off the reef

Because South Pacific islands like the Cook Islands, Niue, French Polynesia and Samoa were created by volcanic activity, the sea floor slopes deeply immediately beyond the reef, meaning humpback whales come closer to shore than anywhere else in the world. Whales migrate past all South Pacific islands, so gather where the fringing reef is closest to shore and watch them pass by closer than you would on a boat tour in Australia. Better yet, sit back at an iconic seaside bar like Trader Jacks (in Rarotonga), and watch them breach. See [traderjacks.co.ck](http://traderjacks.co.ck)

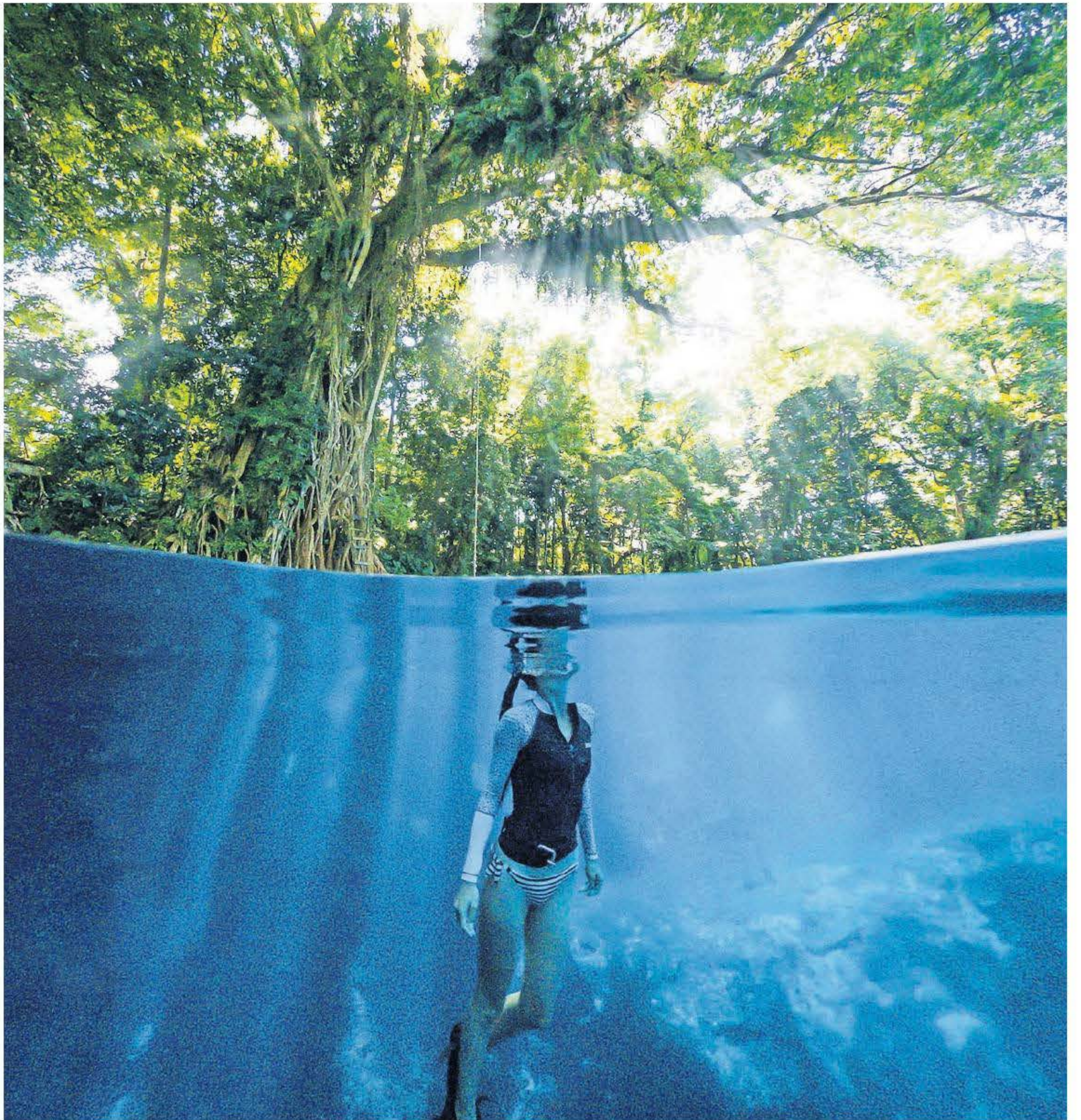
### Experience Polynesian culture at its most traditional in Samoa

Samoans are regarded as living the most traditional of all Polynesian lifestyles. Known as Fa'a Samoa, many locals still live in wall-less huts in traditional villages ruled by chiefs. Guests can experience their traditional ways by joining village tours run by most resorts, even joining in on Sunday feasts by helping cook food in *umu* (earth ovens). Samoan custom and culture is more than 3000 years old. ▶

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Clockwise from left: Dive right in – the Sua Ocean Trench, Samoa; totems at a Kanak village in New Caledonia; and swimming in Vanuatu's Matevulu Blue Hole.



**Surf the planet's best wave in Fiji**

The South Pacific is a surfer's paradise – with world-class waves breaking in Samoa, the Solomon Islands and French Polynesia. But the most consistent can be found in Fiji. Unlike Hawaii, you can surf year-round, though the most consistent swells arrive between April and October. A series of barrier reefs provide the perfect setting for waves across Fiji, but no wave breaks more consistently than Cloudbreak, on the barrier reef south of the Mamanuca Islands. Considered the world's best wave, stay on your own island resort beside it. See [namotu.islandfiji.com](http://namotu.islandfiji.com)

**Swim in the world's most unusual swimming pool in Samoa**

The only way in is via a 30-metre-high ladder that drops into one of two sinkholes connected by a lava tube to the ocean. Climb down to a platform and dive into the world's best swimming pool, To Sua Ocean Trench. Surrounded by lush vegetation in the middle of a lava field, the water is remarkably turquoise. For extra thrills, have a local

guide you through the lava tube out to the ocean, holding your breath along the way.

**Watch the world's first bungy jumpers leap in Vanuatu**

Take a day trip from Port Vila aboard a small plane to Pentecost Island to watch the planet's first bungy jumpers leap to earth to bless their annual yam harvest. Villagers jump as far as 30 metres from towers constructed of local timber and connected by vines which break their fall. First documented by David Attenborough in the 1950s, the practice inspired bungy jumping. You'll have a front-row seat to the action. See [airtaxivanuatu.com](http://airtaxivanuatu.com)

**Live like a Kanak in New Caledonia**

Unique to New Caledonia, experience local Kanak culture by sleeping in a traditional hut in a Kanak village. Almost half of the country's residents still live in clan communities. Book a home stay to experience their traditional way of life, offering rare insight into Melanesian culture. Or just take part in traditional tribal

festivals held along the picturesque Loyalty Island group (home to cruising hot-spot, Lifou Island). And don't miss the Tijibaou Cultural Centre, just outside Noumea, for a history of Kanak culture. See [newcaledonia.travel/au](http://newcaledonia.travel/au)

**Go where great artists and writers went before you**

Scottish novelist Robert Louis Stevenson was so besotted with the South Pacific, he chose to live and die here. Visit his grave and estate behind Apia in Samoa. The same goes with French artist, Paul Gauguin: visit his grave on remote Hiva Oa in the Marquesas in French Polynesia. US literary giant James A Michener based his novel, *Tales Of The South Pacific* (which became the musical, *South Pacific*) primarily on his time in Vanuatu. And the list goes on: Somerset Maugham, Jack London, Herman Melville – all South Pacific tragics.

**Dive World War II wrecks in the Solomon Islands**

With 992 islands surrounded by colourful

coral reefs, little development, tough fishing laws allowing marine life to flourish and a whole ocean bed of wrecked planes, ships and other vehicles left over from World War II, the Solomon Islands are one of the best places to dive in the world. Most dive sites are easily accessible, water visibility goes up to 90 metres and there are small-scale dive resorts sprinkled throughout. There are also few other divers about. See [padi.com](http://padi.com)

**Dance on stage at a Polynesian Island Night**

No other traditional music and dance performance compares to a Polynesian Island Night. Polynesian music is fast and furious, driven by six sets of traditional drums beating in unison to provide the tempo for dancers in costumes made of coconut leaves and shells. Most resorts in the Cook Islands hold Polynesian Island Nights weekly, with traditional *umu kai* (earth oven) feasts. The show culminates with lucky (or maybe unlucky?) guests taken on stage to dance. See [enjoycookislands.com](http://enjoycookislands.com)

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