

The Province

TRAVEL

travel@sunprovince.com

BRANDO'S DREAM

STAR'S VISION LIVES ON AT TETIAROA

World-renowned atoll brings
peace and science together

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An eco-luxury eco-contender



The Brando, on Tetiaroa, is on the Motu Onetahi. — TIM MCKENNA

New playground for the posh meets 'university of the sea' at Tahitian sanctuary, The Brando

Shannon Melnyk
SPECIAL TO THE SUNDAY PROVINCE

It defies the descriptive clichés, photographs and chatter, and supersedes all that I have heard. After a 20-minute flight from Tahiti's capital, Papeete, I am hovering high over an atoll and its ancient coral cathedrals in French Polynesian waters.

I peer down on Marlon Brando's dream. Literally.

The famed private island the reclusive actor discovered in the 1960s while filming *Mutiny on the Bounty* is a short runway away, and I'm astounded by its ethereal grace.

There lies Tetiaroa and her uninhabited ring of emerald islets cushioned by countless shades of blue atop a living reef, a quiet allegory of the past, the present, and, I learn, a curious future.

Brando, who eschewed Hollywood's Mulholland Drive for this Polynesian paradise and way of life, might have been ahead of his time in his vision to conserve the 12 motus that have been part of Tahitian lore for more than 4,000 years.

"If I have my way," Brando once said, "Tetiaroa will remain forever a place that reminds Tahitians of what they are and what they were centuries ago."

The past

Hundreds of years ago, the atoll was a retreat for Tahitian high chiefs.

Tetiaroa became a sanctuary, a place for peace talks and a utopia for frivolity. Young prince ma'ohis held archery competitions and ravishing, raven-haired vahines were fattened up with bread fruit pudding and plied with skin-lightening elixirs made from beach pea vines.

Marae temples that still exist on the islets today are remnants of what the Tahitians considered sacred sites.

The dream

A hedonist's delight, a peaceful retreat and an unspoiled Eden; Brando not only wanted Tetiaroa's future to echo its past — he insisted it could be a self-sustaining atoll and a model to the rest of the planet for research, education and conservation.

In 1999, he shared this vision with friend and Tahiti hotelier Richard Bailey, and together they conceived the world's first post-carbon resort.

A decade after the actor's death, Tetiaroa has indeed become a luxury playground for the well-heeled, but more true to Brando's dream, prec-

edent-setting innovative technology has achieved both a negligible carbon footprint and created a "university of the sea" with a wealth of opportunities for the scientific community.

Luxury unplugged

"Marlon felt technology was the solution to many of the Earth's problems", Bailey says. "We're trying to walk the walk, here."

Walking the walk means going beyond being the eco-buzz word of the moment.

It seems everyone with celebrity cache is cashing in on ecotourism.

Leonardo DiCaprio, now known to be developing his own sustainable island off Belize, was recently nosing around his fellow actor's namesake and seemingly impressed by what he saw.

"DiCaprio and his friends took about 14 hours of film here", Bailey muses.

"He had better not be stealing all my ideas."

Indeed, sustainability lip service is nowhere in sight once you see the colossal operation behind the serenity of the pandanus and coconut trees that blend seamlessly with the 35-villa all-inclusive resort.

Tetiaroa is in contention for becoming the first campus resort in the world to obtain LEED Platinum certification.

The Brando is powered by coconut biofuel and 2,500 solar panels. Cutting-edge flow batteries are used to store solar energy power. Their waste water is filtered and used for irrigation.

They of course recycle, compost and have their own garden and honey farm. Transportation is by bicycle or sun-powered electric club carts.

All impressive, but overshadowed, when I am shown where the air conditioning comes from: it's called the SWAC — an idea generated by Brando himself — short for Sea Water Air Conditioning. Guests are cooled by ocean depths of more than a kilometre and a half deep using only a pump and no electricity.

It's a \$6.5-million US engineering marvel and the only system of its kind in the world to operate at this commercial level next to a smaller version Bailey implemented in a resort on Bora Bora.

What's even more fascinating: While guests are staying cool, scientists in the Ecostation on the other side of the beach are using the same system for groundbreaking and globally significant studies.



Villa luxury at The Brando, a colossal operation behind the serenity of the pandanus and coconut trees that blend seamlessly with the Tahitian all-inclusive resort. — TIM MCKENNA

University of the sea

On this patch of paradise, and what will likely be the most poignant contribution to Brando's legacy — is the Ecostation, which serves as the heart of the non-profit Tetiaroa Society.

The society was formed to support the conservation of the coral atoll, be a provider of education for the preservation of Polynesian culture, history and way of life — and a hub for global scientific research.

As a result, a world-class calibre of scientists is participating in efforts to address ocean acidification, turtle and bird preservation, mosquito control and biocoding in this complex tropical ecosystem.

Organizations funding these studies are diverse, ranging from individual donors to the cosmetic company Biotherm, who are supporting an initiative to replenish marine life.

Thanks to the Sea Water Air Conditioning System, the Ecostation offers an opportunity unique to any other lab in the world — access to a treasure of species from more than a thousand and half kilometres deep.

An unexpected spinoff of the Ecostation is the rare opportunity for guests to witness environmental



Biologist Hannah Stewart from Vancouver heads up The Brando's Ecostation in Tahiti for the Tetiaroa Society. — SHANNON MELNYK

science in action. Many eco-resorts have naturalists give them tours and talks, but The Brando offers one better in offering the chance to interact with these scientists and get an understanding of today's issues beyond the media stories they read. It's a special opportunity not lost on the guests here.

Asked what Marlon Brando would

make of his beloved Tetiaroa today, his friend and partner Bailey says, "He wouldn't have agreed to use his name, but would have understood the choice. He'd probably laugh and say he was just joking about the whole thing. But deep down, I think he'd be very pleased."

thebrando.com
tetiaraosociety.org

Vancouver biologist in Brando's paradise

Hanna Stewart picks up an alien-like black specimen from the freezer in the Tetiaroa Society's Ecostation, a quick bike ride from the luxury villas of The Brando. "This," she happily announces, "is a guy we recently found in the Sea Water Air Conditioning pipes."

Stewart is a Vancouver marine biologist a long way away from her home in the city's west end, now acting as a volunteer interim manager of the station working with technology nowhere else in the world. She has done work in international waters before, but it's the first time she has attempted an offshore trip on a sailboat she calls Roxy.

Stewart and her partner sailed from Coal Harbour to the Society Islands in 44 days straight, living what she described as a life on the slant — battling intense swells, with currents causing them to almost miss French Polynesia entirely, all without satellite Internet.

She looks fondly upon the journey, saying she kept busy working the boat, swimming, cooking, drawing and studying plankton.

She's also excited about her newest adventure in the unique eco-luxury setting of Tetiaroa.

"The Ecostation offers a new model entirely", she says, "and I'm impressed with the potential it has with the stewardship, the science, the conservation and education in a real way. The Brando is putting its money where its mouth is in its sustainability credentials and support of the Tetiaroa Society, and it's an incredible opportunity to be part of projects conducted by world-class scientists."

Stewart doesn't know when she will be sailing back into town, but is for now content with the azure waters of the atoll and her role to help further the society's studies. "I love the ocean and discovering her secrets," she says.