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HIGH PACIFIC *Clockwise from above:* Marlon Brando and future wife Tarita Teriipaia in Tahiti during the filming of *Mutiny on the Bounty*; Turtle Beach; coral heads in the lagoon; President Barack Obama; Tetiaroa, a.k.a. Brando's Island.

THE TETIAROA EXPERIMENT

THE BRANDO RESORT, ON A *TINY ISLAND* NEAR TAHITI, HAS SET ITSELF A HIGH BAR: DELIVER THE ULTIMATE IN SOUTH SEAS LUXURY AND DO RIGHT BY *PLANET EARTH*. SO FAR, SO GOOD.

By Klara Glowczewska

PHILIP FRIEDMAN/STUDIO D (COLLAGE); TIM MCKENNA (BEACH, ISLAND); PETE SOUZA/WHITE HOUSE/GETTY IMAGES (OBAMA); GREY VILLET/LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES (BRANDO AND TERIIPAIA); KLARA GLOWCZEWSKA (WALLPAPER)

Marlon Brando, who was arguably the greatest actor of his generation and who was also known for mumbling, waxed eloquent about the French Polynesian atoll of Tetiaroa, which he fell for in 1960 during the filming of *Mutiny on the Bounty* on nearby Tahiti and Moorea, describing it as "a pinch of land peeking out of the immensity of the Pacific Ocean." Why, he asked rhetorically in an unpublished document, "would a man born in Nebraska and raised in the Middle West decide…to while away years of his life [here]?" (Which he did, completing the purchase of the island in 1966 and spending long stretches on it, either alone or with family and friends, for 25 years.)

This past March, a man born in Hawaii, former president Barack Obama, chose Tetiaroa and its eponymous Brando resort, which opened quietly in 2014 (10 years to the day after Brando's

death), as a hideaway to begin writing his presidential memoir.

The Secret Service called Richard Bailey, an old friend of Brando's who is president and CEO of Pacific Beachcomber, which obtained development rights from the Brando estate and owns the resort. "The president wants to come for a month," they informed him. "Dick thought it was a joke," said Philippe Brovelli, the Brando's affable and loquacious director of operations, who was telling me the story. "And then they put Obama on the phone."

For my part, the Brando had been on my radar since it opened. I was intrigued by the mystery of its pristine farawayness. Tetiaroa and the other isles in French Polynesia's Society Islands archipelago are the bits of terra firma most distant from the world's landmasses—so distant they were the last to be settled by humans. (Those master navigators the Polynesians arrived in their outrigger canoes on Tetiaroa at the tail end of their great migration from Southeast Asia between AD 900 and 1100.) It was gorgeous remoteness itself.

There was more: The Brando had been awarded LEED Platinum certification for its carbon neutrality, the ultimate environmental accolade. And it had established a nonprofit on the island, the Tetiaroa Society, on whose advisory board sit eminent scientists and whose mandate is both to conserve, restore, and protect the atoll and to make it a model of sustainability that can be replicated elsewhere. In effect, the resort's management had conceived a think tank that was integral to its operations. As Bailey put it, "The Tetiaroa Society has become the moral authority on the island."

And now Obama, who could have gone anywhere, picked this place to jump-start the first chapter of his post-presidency. He had some fun with Bailey on that call, quipping, as Brovelli told me, "If Leo [DiCaprio] recommends a place, I listen. And if Leo has been able to come here on several different occasions with different girls and not a single photo has come out, that's where I need to go."

Privacy aside, was Obama aware, I asked Bailey, of everything the Tetiaroa team was up to? "Obama is a man who does his homework," Bailey replied. "Writing the book was his ultimate purpose, of course. But, yes, he was aware. He told me, 'I'm impressed. And I'm looking forward to visiting and learning more.'

"For me," Bailey continued, clearly moved, "this is a project of a lifetime. Once in a very rare while you get a canvas like Brando's Island on which to express yourself. So a visit from President Obama is a consecration."

It was time for some recon—both of the Brando's comforts and of its conscience.

> "ONCE IN A VERY RARE WHILE YOU GET A CANVAS LIKE BRANDO'S ISLAND ON WHICH TO EXPRESS YOURSELF. SO A VISIT FROM *PRESIDENT OBAMA* IS A CONSECRATION."

There is a frisson to seeing Tetiaroa for the first time from the air. (All visitors to the Brando arrive via an Air Tetiaroa 14-seater that takes off from a deluxe little terminal at the airport in Papeete, Tahiti, 30 miles away, and lands 20 minutes later at the Brando's doorstep on Tetiaroa's only runway—swaying palm trees, leis made with buds of tiaré flowers, and 3,800 solar panels awaiting.) What is commonly referred to as Brando's Island is not, as I noticed, a single island at all. Atolls rarely are. Rather, it consists of 12 flat islets, or *motus*, totaling two square miles; they are covered in vegetation and ringed with white beaches, and they frame a turquoise lagoon—the faint outline of an ancient volcano's sunken caldera. The lagoon is so bright that Tetiaroa is clearly visible against the royal blue of the Pacific in a photograph taken from space, and the atoll is completely surrounded by a barrier reef against which the ocean waves pound. (One lands on a 0.3-square-mile *motu* called Onetahi, where Brando in his time built a few simple dwellings and where the resort, which the movie star long wanted to develop, now stands. The other *motus* are uninhabited nature preserves.) Brando's take on his idyllic retreat was this: "Tetiaroa is beautiful beyond my capacity to describe. It is really beyond the capacity of cinematography to translate. One could say that Tetiaroa is the tincture of the South Seas."

"Do you hear the silence?" asked Jean-Philippe Gaud, the Brando's head concierge, as he was showing us around our villa minutes after our arrival. (I went with a South Seas–obsessed friend from Manhattan.) There are 35 beach-facing villas at the Brando, elegant one- and two-bedroom wood and palm frond constructions arranged in a loose L along Onetahi's Mermaid and Turtle bays, and enveloped, for charm and additional privacy, in vegetation (no exposed over-water bungalows here). I was taking in the luxuries—everything one would expect in an all-inclusive property starting at $3,500 a night with a staff of 220: vast bath and dressing area, media room (with extra bed), outdoor deck and dining area, small private pool, chaise longues, stacks of soft rolled-up beach towels, and two bikes by the front door for getting about the *motu*.

"But do you hear it?" Gaud repeated, as if wanting to make sure we were experiencing the grander luxury: the sheer extraordinariness of where we were, barely above sea level (at 13 square miles total, Tetiaroa seems more imprint than island) in the midst of the largest and deepest ocean on earth. I stepped outside onto the pale, raked sand. A breeze scattered little white Tahitian gardenias—the fragrance of Tetiaroa. A hermit crab skittered sideways on some errand, carrying its borrowed shell on its back. The lagoon water, still and ethereally translucent, glowed aqua in the morning sun.

When I focused, I *could* hear it. In the distance waves were breaking against the barrier reef—a line of white foam was visible some 300 yards away—and the sound that reached us was not precisely silence but a low, hypnotic, planetary hum.

Brando, by his own avowal, mostly did nothing on Tetiaroa. "After a few weeks the island's slower rhythms sink in," he told an interviewer in 1978, "and I sit here like a whale." I did just that for several hours of each of my four days on the island. My preferred spot: the lagoon shallows off Mermaid Bay near the Brando's laid-

SO TETIAROA
Clockwise from top left: Johnny Depp; Obama with Alban Perret (*left*) and the Brando's owner, Richard Bailey, at the Tetiaroa Society; a double pirogue off Papeete, 1950s; denizens of the lagoon; Leonardo DiCaprio (in Bora Bora); Pippa Middleton and James Matthews on their Brando honeymoon. *Center:* Dinner dancing.

back, sandy "center" (two restaurants, including Michelin-starred Parisian chef Guy Martin's Les Mutinés; main pool; water sports facilities; boutique; and the convivial Bob's Bar, named for an island buddy of Brando's). My preferred position: motionless on my elbows, in an effortless, floating plank.

And then, each day, I set forth with Thierry Sommers, the resort's senior naturalist, on expeditions of historical and natural discovery around Onetahi and by boat to some of the other *motus*. All of them, in keeping with Brando's vision of tourism with a higher purpose, are managed by the Tetiaroa Society. (The actor dreamed of a resort that would function as an "ecological model…a marine reserve…[and] a place for all manner of scientific research." As Bailey said to me of his friend, "This was not just an actor with an island. He was much more than that.")

Sommers wears his dark hair in a ponytail and sports intriguing abstract tattoos, an ancient Polynesian art form, on his chest and back. He visited regularly with Obama when the president was here. "Thierry grabbed him by the heart," as Brovelli put it. About their almost daily conversations Sommers is mum; only once did he casually note, as we sailed past a section of Mermaid Bay, "We call that bit there Obamaville." (Which stands to reason: Behind the tall palms lay the Brando's only three-bedroom compound.)

On Onetahi, just minutes from the Brando's reception area, Sommers showed me the remnants of a small, 200-year-old Polynesian temple constructed of black lava stones from Tahiti; Tetiaroa was for centuries after its first settlement a sort of lightly inhabited suburb (some 90 archaeological sites have been identified). Later, Tahiti's leading clans (and in the 18th and 19th centuries its first and last royal dynasty) used the *motus* as a private retreat. "It was a natural spa for them," Sommers said. "They brought in food, came with their entire retinue, and they stayed a long time. They liked it so much," he said with a laugh, "they made it *tapu*. That's Polynesian for *taboo*: No one else could come here." (Though some managed, including, in the 1790s, the mutineers from the HMS Bounty, who made runs from Tahiti both to lie low and, contemporaneous records suggest, to partake of Tetiaroa's pleasures.)

On the boat Sommers scanned the lagoon for green sea turtles. I had never seen a large marine turtle, so slow and ungainly on land, moving freely in open water, as swift as our boat, nimble, turning and changing direction on a dime—grace in animation. "Tetiaroa is the largest nesting site for these animals in all of French Polynesia's 118 islands," Sommers said. "The Tetiaroa Society is monitoring their breeding and migratory patterns."

We skirt *motu* Tahuna Iti (a.k.a. Bird Island), an ornithological reserve. It is home to 10 species of seabird, four of which nest on the ground. Walking on the *motu* is forbidden, and, like the other islets, it is regularly monitored for intruders by Tetiaroa Society rangers. "Quick, you need a proper camera!" Sommers exclaimed, pointing at something I could barely make out in the sand. "That's a bristle-thighed curlew! A bird from *Alaska*!" One of the Tetiaroa Society's projects is improving bird and crab habitats throughout the atoll by eradicating rats (which are not indigenous, having arrived by boat). White terns flutter high in the canopy of *motu* Reiono's giant indigenous cabbage trees (*Pisonia grandis*). Sommers is a fan: "Their leaves compost well. The wood is tender. It makes the soil rich and dark. And they don't exist anymore in the Seychelles or the Maldives—wiped out by the non-endemic coconut palms. But we're protecting them here."

HANDS ON ***Clockwise from above:*** **Obama in the "wet lab" at the Tetiaroa Society ecostation; a one-bedroom villa; the "bird's nest" treatment room at the resort's Polynesian spa.**

We snorkeled for hours near the barrier reef. "Reefs," Sommers reminded us, "are the rainforests of the sea," comprising less than 1 percent of the surface area of the oceans yet supporting 25 percent of the earth's marine biodiversity. And 50 percent of them are now endangered. "There's a team from the University of Washington here studying ocean acidification and its effect on the reefs," Sommers said, always keen to make the connection between the beauty we were seeing and the efforts being made to save it. We navigated around huge coral heads, amid myriad voluptuously colored and named fish: lemonpeel angelfish, peacock damselfish, ornate butterflyfish. "Did you see the world under there?" one fellow passenger (an agent from William Morris in New York) asked after we returned to the boat, speaking, it seemed, to no one in particular. "One *needs* this. In the city I forget to even look at the sky."

SAVE TETIAROA, SAVE THE PLANET, reads the ambitious sign on one of the buildings of the Tetiaroa Society's ecostation, which is located, together with the staff quarters and all the installations that earned the resort its LEED Platinum certification, in what the Brando staff refers to broadly as the "back of house."

"Yes, you do have to build a little city to make a place sustainable," observed Alban Perret, the Brando's sustainable development coordinator, who was taking me around. It's all just a short bike (or golf cart) ride from the resort's guest quarters. (By bike, I heard, was how Obama arrived for his visit, and subsequent dinner, with the staff.) "Look," Bailey told me, "we have provided everything for the luxury experience. This is not ecotourism as it's usually understood. We are not asking people to sacrifice anything, or to do anything they don't want to. But we also built a resort that is carbon neutral. If you're interested you can see how these things work—and if enough people see these things, maybe that will change something."

For starters, Perret guided me to the below-sea-level concrete bunker that houses the resort's SWAC—an ominous-sounding acronym that stands for Sea Water Air Conditioning, an innovative technology that could, if applied wherever possible and at scale, help mitigate global warming. There are just a handful of such systems operating successfully in the world, and this is only the second in Polynesia. SWAC cools the resort buildings with cold seawater, eliminating entirely the use of hydrofluorocarbons, refrigerant chemicals that are thousands of times more damaging than carbon dioxide and are chief contributors to global warming and rising sea levels. What's more, as Perret explained, "traditional air conditioning would use up 60 percent of the Brando's electrical output. SWAC saves 90 percent of that. It cost $12 million to build. We'll recoup in 10 years."

"WE WANT TO *PROTECT ONE ISLAND.* WE WANT TO EXPORT OUR MODEL. AND, ULTIMATELY, WE WANT TO HOLD AN ANNUAL CONFERENCE HERE, A SMALL DAVOS."

Seawater cold enough to cool the entire Brando complex comes from the ocean beyond the barrier reef. What we see of an atoll—the magical blue, white, and green ringlet of lagoon and *motus*—is less than 1 percent of its geological structure. There is ancient reef for hundreds of feet below, and, beneath that, thousands of feet of volcanic base that stretches to the seafloor, which in the Pacific is on average 14,500 feet down. And, baby, it's cold down there.

In the SWAC's main chamber, which bristles with pipes and valves, I put my hand against a large pipe and recoil with surprise. "It's 3 degrees Celsius," Perret said. Immersion in water below 40 degrees Fahrenheit (4 degrees Celsius) is harrowingly painful, even life-threatening. "That's what ocean water feels like six-tenths of a mile below the surface. This pipe comes from out there beyond the reef, crosses into the lagoon, and comes in here. We don't have to pump it—the pressure of the deep ocean forces the water into the pipe. And it helps that this installation is below sea level. The cold seawater gets piped into one of these two heat exchangers." He points to two large tanks. "Each has freshwater on one side, seawater on the other, with a titanium plate in the middle. The saltwater cools the titanium plate, which in turn cools the freshwater, which is in a closed loop and flows continuously through guestrooms and elsewhere. The saltwater, meantime, gets piped back into the ocean. *Et voilà*—sustainable air conditioning."

Perret's tour continued. A giant septic system cleans wastewater without chemicals and puts it to use for irrigation. A desalination plant provides freshwater for taps and showers. Rainwater is collected, treated, and used for pools and laundry. The solar panels lining the airstrip produce 70 percent of the Brando's electricity; the rest is produced by generators that run not on fossil fuels but on coconut oil produced in French Polynesia and therefore good for the local economy. The trash collection center packages and ships garbage to Tahiti for recycling. (A dock has been built to transfer things and people from one side of the reef to the other.) The composting station processes all leftover food within 24 hours, and the compost is used in the organic garden. Sixty-five beehives produce 20 to 40 pounds of honey every month, which is served at the resort and sold in the boutique.

"I've lived on these islands for 25 years," said Frank Murphy, a UC Berkeley–trained scientist and executive director of the Tetiaroa Society, "and I know what it takes to build things around here. This is the dream of ecotourism. What they have done, in this remote site, is remarkable."

As are the modern, compact facilities of the Tetiaroa Society itself, which were built at the same time as the resort (and whose programs are now partly funded by it, by interested guests, and by other donors). The ecostation's "wet lab" has aquariums with piped-in seawater, including, thanks to the SWAC, water from deep in the ocean. "I believe we are one of the few labs in the world with constant access to this," Murphy said proudly. Deep ocean water is critical to the study of acidification, one of the projects Obama was briefed on when he was here. The "dry lab" has workstations and lab equipment. There is housing, as well, for up to 18 visiting scientists. "They come from all over the world," Murphy said.

In addition to the team from the University of Washington studying acidification, researchers from Duke University are modeling the flow of water in the lagoon. The rat eradication program is being conducted by experts from New Zealand and Mexico. A scientist from Oxford University is studying the effect of climate change on sections of the *motus*' old forest. "And we are the only resort in the world," Murphy added, "with a successful chemical-free mosquito abatement program." Entomologists from the Louis-Malardé Institute in Papeete have pioneered on Onetahi a technique that in one year has rid the islet of the disease-carrying pests using neither chemicals nor genetic engineering. (Male mosquitos are sterilized with a natural bacterium called wolbachia and the population crashes.) Obama met with the team working on this project, too. "We are now spreading the technique to other *motus* in Tetiaroa," Murphy said, "and our long-term plans include other islands."

And there's more, notably a Berkeley-affiliated project to create a 4-D model of the entire island, Tetiaroa IDEA, that, Murphy said, "is still a way off but will eventually help us predict what will happen if, say, sea levels rise one meter. The [CONTINUED ON PAGE 189]

THE TETIAROA EXPERIMENT

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 165] idea is to develop a model on a small, simple island like this and then scale it up to more complex sites." (Because of its extreme isolation, Tetiaroa has relatively low biodiversity on land.) "This should have applications for many other places in the world, alas: San Francisco, New Orleans, Florida."

Murphy was gathering a head of steam. "Yes, we want to protect one island. Yes, we want to export our model of private and nonprofit partnership between a hotel and a research center.

"And what we ultimately want to do—because ocean conservation is both critical and not well understood, and because atolls are the canaries in the coal mine of climate change—is to convene an annual conference here at the Brando. Like a small Davos. Get industrialists and philanthropists and scientists and futurists together. We have only 35 villas for now; it would have to be small. But that can be a good thing. When we met President Obama, that was the one thing we hoped he would go away with."

Back on Mermaid Bay, on my last night on Tetiaroa, I was sitting at Bob's Bar with Silvio Bion, the Brando's charming general manager (he comes from New Caledonia, an island group 3,000 miles west of here), sipping my last Tahitian take on a piña colada (sweeter pineapple I have never tasted). The moon was lustrous over the lagoon. "Don't forget," Bion said as we talked, "these Pacific islands have power." But he refused to elaborate. It haunted me.

Later I recalled T.S. Eliot's poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, in which Prufrock—a representative of modern man, in the throes of alienation, insecurity, and loneliness, against a backdrop of soulless urban life and social turmoil—allows: "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each./I do not think that they will sing to me." In Tetiaroa he might have thought otherwise. As Marlon Brando himself once said, "If the mermaids can't sing for me here, Christ, they never will." «

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Town & Country (ISSN 0040-9952) [incorporating Connoisseur] is published monthly with combined June/July and December/January issues by Hearst Communications Inc., 300 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019 U.S.A. Steven R. Swartz, President and Chief Executive Officer; William R. Hearst III, Chairman; Frank A. Bennack Jr., Executive Vice Chairman; Catherine A. Bostron, Secretary. Hearst Magazines Division: David Carey, President; John A. Rohan Jr., Senior Vice President, Finance. Periodicals postage paid at NY, NY, and additional entry post offices. Canada Post International Publications mail product (Canadian distribution) sales agreement No. 40012499. Editorial and Advertising Offices: 300 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019-3797. Subscription prices: United States and possessions: $30 for one year. Canada and all other countries: Add $24 for each year. Subscription services: Town & Country will, upon receipt of a complete subscription order, undertake fulfillment of that order so as to provide the first copy for delivery by the Postal Service or alternate carrier within 4–6 weeks. For customer service, changes of address, and subscription orders, log on to service.townandcountrymag.com or write to Customer Service Department, Town & Country, P.O. Box 6000, Harlan, IA 51593. From time to time, we make our subscriber list available to companies who sell goods and services by mail that we believe would interest our readers. If you would rather not receive such offers via postal mail, please send your current mailing label or exact copy to Mail Preference Service, P.O. Box 6000, Harlan, IA 51593. You can also visit preferences.hearstmags.com to manage your preferences and opt out of receiving marketing offers by e-mail. Town & Country is not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts or art. None will be returned unless accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Canada BN NBR 10231 0943 RT. POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS (see DMM 707.4.12.5). NONPOSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: Send address corrections to Town & Country, P.O. Box 6000, Harlan, IA 51593. Printed in the U.S.A.

VOL. 171 NUMBER 5439 OCTOBER 2017
ESTABLISHED 1846 INCORPORATING CONNOISSEUR