

# The Drake

FOR THOSE WHO FISH



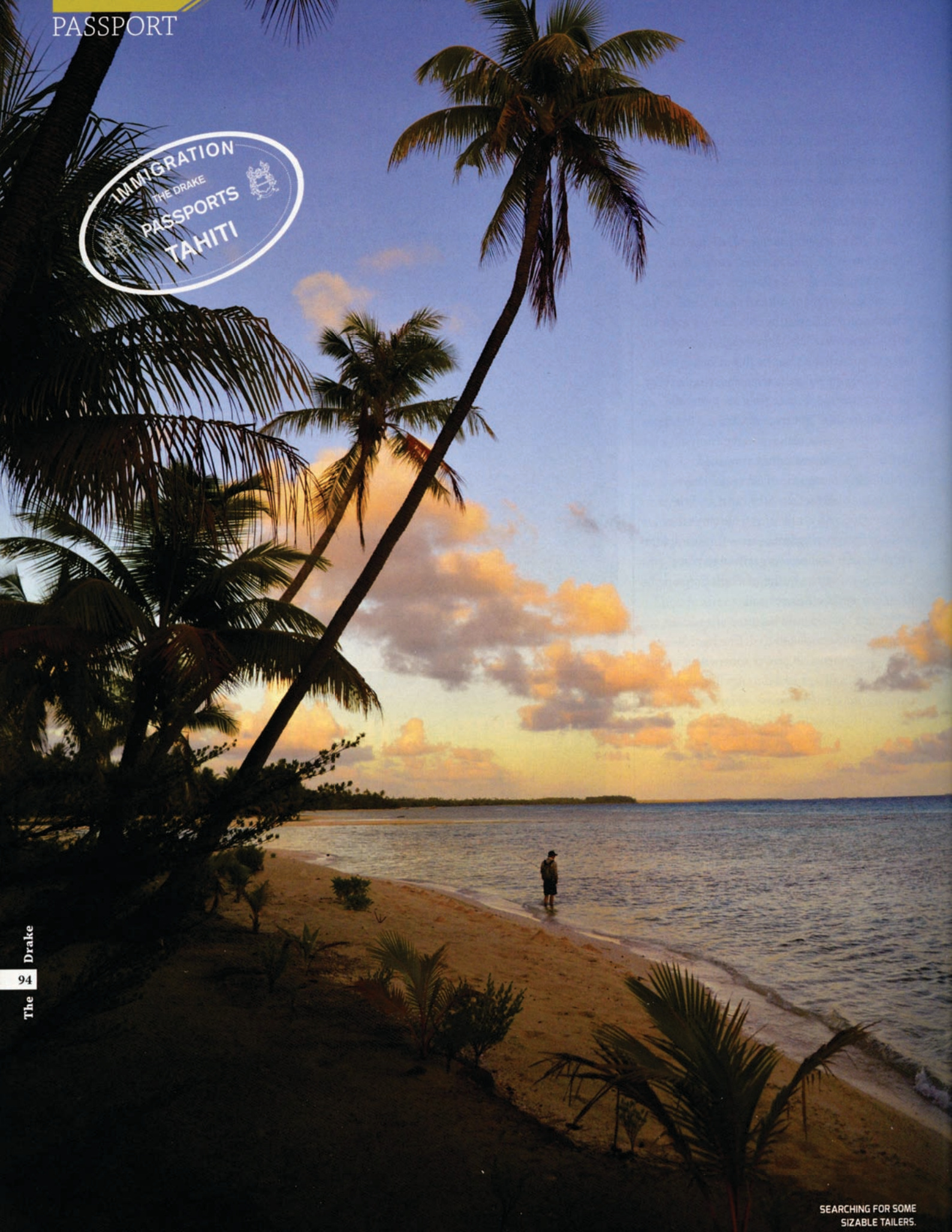
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**PLUS:** The Madison, The Skeena, The Ausable, The Elk, The Yakima, The Sandy, The Gallatin, Idaho grizzlies, Michigan mayflies, Alaska humpies, Alabama crawdads, Central Park bluegills, Tahiti bonefish, Florida snook, Mexican permit, riverside music, and a dozen new fish!



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IMMIGRATION  
THE DRAKE  
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TAHITI





THE BASECAMP:  
MOTU TETA RESORT

## South Pacific Unplugged

French Polynesia's Tuamotu Archipelago. WORDS BY GEOFF MUELLER, PHOTOS BY KAT MUELLER

UGO ANGALY, a gargantuan Polynesian man, picks me out of the Rangiroa baggage lineup and throws a ring of flowers around my neck. No dancing. No ukulele serenade. Just straight to the business of hauling roller duffels onto the boat for a ride into remote South Pacific bonefish territory. After an hour-and-a-half run we arrive at Motu Teta—a private island on a mostly uninhabited sliver of crushed coral. It's flawless: Palm trees. Manicured gardens. Traditional thatched-roof accommodations. And a serene bay with resident bones, blacktip sharks, and a pet moray eel named Princess Yvonne.

The Motu Teta vibe perfectly fits author James Michener's descriptions in *Tales of the South Pacific*: "Reefs upon which waves broke into spray, and inner lagoons, lovely beyond description... the full moon rising behind the volcanoes, and the waiting. The waiting. The timeless, repetitive waiting."

Michener never mentions bonefish. But in the 2008 film, *The Search, Tahiti*, by New Zealand-based Gin Clear Media, a group of anglers travel to the Tuamotus, get swarmed by bugs, and explore the lagoons. Specific islands and flats aren't named, but the movie gives a good glimpse of what's available: sizeable tailers within sight-casting range. And what isn't: people and contemporary amenities. Randall

Kaufmann's classic book, *Bonefishing!*, adds this in-depth report: "Visitors to the Tahiti atolls should consider packing a fly rod." But it was a 24-year-old Basalt, Colorado, fishing guide named Raphael Fasi, who showed me *why*.

Fasi has been visiting and fishing Rangiroa for the past three years. "I didn't know what bonefish really looked like underwater because I'd only seen pictures of them," he says. "Then I started walking around the island and seeing big tails. I've been exploring it ever since."

Fasi's family runs the place where we're staying on the eastern edge of the lagoon, near a massive flat called Pink Sands. Pre-trip, he relayed promising fishing reports via email, including crooked, out-of-focus selfies because he fishes alone. Despite the questionable photos, and the fact that Fasi hadn't seen a flat much beyond his Polynesian front porch, we booked flights to the Tuamotus—and kept expectations grounded.

WHEN SEAFARERS FIRST AIMED COMPASSES toward Polynesia, they departed scurvy-ridden ships to find swinging hips and topless women. Over time, authors like Michener and Herman Melville helped paint a picture of a mythical, sometimes dangerous, sex-charged South Seas. Melville lived among cannibals on the Marquesas for three weeks. He was never



SCANNING FOR SHARKS

eaten, but fell in lust with a nubile native. Marlon Brando did the same in contemporary times, traveling to Tahiti in the 1960s to film *Mutiny on the Bounty*, and marrying his Tahitian co-star Tarita Teriipaia.

Polynesia includes more than 1,000 islands scattered over the central and southern Pacific Ocean, bookended by Hawaii to the northeast and New Zealand to the southwest. French Polynesia is best known for Tahiti—part of the Leeward and Windward islands that form the Society Archipelago. The Tuamotus, Gambiers, Marquesas, and Australs are the island groups that make up the remainder of this semi-autonomous country—one that still receives large cash infusions from France, its former owner.

The Tuamotu Archipelago consists of 77 coral atolls, spanning more than 900 miles. From the island of Tahiti the closest of the Tuamotus sit approximately 190 miles to the north. Rangiroa is the largest atoll in the chain. On Google Maps it looks like a skeletal blip of ribs, femurs, and clavicles, encircling one of the world's largest, fish-rich saltwater lagoons.

THERE'S NO CELL SERVICE ON RANGIROA, and nowhere to check

e-mail. The island runs on generator power that turns off every night around 9. Blackout is enhanced by an upside down big dipper and hibernating hermit crabs crawling out of their shells, one spindly leg at a time. We close our eyes to the distant thunder of crashing surf.

When daylight comes, good bonefishing is in sight. Literally. We awake to a tailing fish on a coral flat that we can see from our bed. Rangiroa

is made up of numerous small islands Polynesians refer to as *motus*. On their coral edges, where big ocean beats up on little ocean, there's a landing strip, coconut farms, two major flats, and more than 300 inlets, or *hoas*. Not technically a flat, *hoas* have wadeable water along their inner edges, where you can trek down one side and up the other without

having to cross its deep-water center. Bonefish frequent this skinny water, along with plenty of sharks.

Exploring our mini-*motu* at pre-dawn, with a spawning shrimp tethered to a 9-weight, no more tails are found. So we go back and have breakfast—piles of cheese and croissants—and map out a plan. The Pink Sands are about a half-hour run from the outpost, where Fasi has been sticking fish prior to our arrival. Beneath the dock we spot a mega-bone, wide-shouldered and hovering in about six feet of water.

**"THE FLATS ARE TEEMING WITH BLACKTIPS AND LEMON SHARKS. WE SPREAD OUT AND MARCH ONTO THEIR DINNER PLATE."**



TOP: UGO ANGALY AT THE HELM.  
BOTTOM: TAHITI'S LOCAL SWILL.



BRIE-RAISED BONEFISH.

Several casts are made before the fish spooks away.

At the other end of the dock is Fasi's "flats skiff"—a 23-foot tri-toon with no casting deck or poling platform. But it's equipped to party, with plush seating for beer guzzling westerners. The swill of choice, indigenous Hinano beer, tastes like the tropics: light, airy, and sweet. And with a Tahitian princess stuck on its sweaty exterior, it has a way better label than Bud. With Hinanos in hand, the tri-toon gets us to where we're going: secluded flats teeming with blacktips and a handful of lemon sharks. Tourists target both Blue Lagoon and Pink Sands flats just for this shark spectacle. Guides chum up the fish and clients feed them buckets of blood and guts. They seem to be habituated to our presence, anticipating the meal of all meals. We spread out and march onto their dinner plate.

Tailing bones press up against shallow edges, where palm trees jut skyward. And in the knee- to waist-deep water, singles and doubles cruise in and out of view. At midday we're met with high sun, prevailing easterly winds, and disappearing fish. But Fasi's eyes are good and we hook a few more. Back at the ranch, resident blacktips are waiting on the innards of two bluefin trevally we'll cook for dinner. With wire tippet Albright knotted to an 80-pound leader, we fire off into the darkness. Sharks burn line toward dock pylons and their skin feels like sandpaper when we tail them on the beach. This becomes the evening ritual for the next few nights. Sharks. Cocktails. Fish dinner. Sleep.

During daylight hours, DIY wading is the bonefishing way. Angaly,

a Polynesian native who lives on Motu Teta seasonally with his wife/chef extraordinaire Celine, takes clients on excursions. And Fasi has ambitions to run bonefish-specific trips in the future. Angaly plays guide on day two and has me casting to everything that swims: jacks, snapper, and the occasional bone. The first fish is a large single that speeds toward deep water, then hauls ass even faster when a couple blacktips race onto the scene. The bonefish takes its final gurgle of salt and explodes in the shark's maw, while I reel in a lonely, fly-less leader.

At Rangiroa we see more singles and doubles than large schools, and most days we hook about a half-dozen apiece. They're fish in the 4-to 6-pound range and not shy to eat a fly. But it's the big one under the dock I want. Fasi has caught several battleship fish in and around this *motu* oasis, and on our last day we forgo the pink and run 15-minutes south to explore the *hoas*.

Fasi beaches the boat, kicks out an anchor, and wanders shallow. I stick to the deep-water edge and soon we're chasing three bones. The last one is larger, with a tail throwing salt spray left and right as it buries its nose into the crusty bottom. It follows my fly within feet of where I'm standing and I farm my shrimp directly from its hungry lips. So I make a Hail Mary, drop it back in, and he eats.

It's a beautiful specimen, like it was raised proper on brie, pastries, and good Polynesian living. Fish in hand, I can't help but think that the waiting—that "timeless, repetitive waiting"—was worth it. 🐟