



# TAHITIAN DREAMS

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**As I sit on the balcony of my hotel room with my Tahitian holiday almost at an end, I'm hypnotised by the sound of the ocean waves crashing on the coral reef. It sounds like a thunderstorm yet the sun is shining, the sky is clear and water is crystal clear. A loud knock on the door jolts me out of my daze and draws my attention to the two bikes on the balcony that need to be packed down before our trip home. Thanks for the memories Tahiti...**

**W**e flew into Papeete Airport in Tahiti on a Saturday night at 10 pm. The temperature was a balmy 28 degrees and I looked at the six other Kiwis in our group who were here for La Ronde Tahitienne cycle race the following Sunday and smiled. We had a week of cycling and tourism activities ahead of us on Tahiti and Moorea Island. Bliss!

The event organisers, the Velo Club of Tahiti, welcomed us at the airport with traditional leis. The club has 30 members who ride every Sunday and occasionally on Wednesdays. French Polynesia has nine cycling clubs in total ranging from 10 to 30 members. There are also a number of triathlon clubs. The idea behind La Ronde Tahitienne is to promote cycling in French Polynesia and to encourage tourists to combine a cycling holiday with the wonderful selection of tourist activities on this tropical island.

The other Kiwis on tour with us were Dave Winter and Carol Gilbertson from Auckland, Don and Debbie Weston from the Tron and Jo and Frank Geoghegan from the Onslow Tarbabies in Wellington. We were also joined by Ricardo Gomez from Chile, two riders from Hong Kong and five from France including Henri Sannier. Henri is the French version of Phil Liggett, the voice of cycling. He is a well-known TV sports host and cycling commentator in France and

was the event ambassador. The final member of our group was Karen Hendrie, our very own Subscriptions Manager for NZRC.

Our Tahitian trip was the tropical holiday of your dreams with the added bonus of plenty of cycling and an organised race to finish. Just how keen they are on their cycling on the island was evident from the get go when members of the Velo Club who were dropping us to our hotels around midnight, invited us to their Sunday morning bunch ride at 7am!

That was too much of an ask for some of us who were looking forward to a lie-in but two of our crew Frank and Jo, were keen to get some island miles in their legs and dragged themselves out of bed. The rest of us waited until Monday for our first taste of cycling in Tahiti.

Monday morning and it was mid-20's and muggy. As I was about to stretch my legs around the Velodrome in the village of Pirae before our reconnaissance ride of the La Ronde Tahitienne course, I noticed my rear derailleur cable had snapped. It was a public holiday but thanks to Stephaine from the Velo club, Roger the club Treasurer, his scooter shop and his scooter mechanic, I was soon back on the road. Roger refused to take any money for the repairs or parts and this set





the tone for the entire week where the club dedicated themselves to looking after us. They drove us to ferries and airports, repaired our bikes and advised us on the best tourist activities.

At last I was on my way chasing the bunch ahead of me who had passed me while my bike was being repaired. I was cycling into a head wind in the heat of the day with no clue where I was going. I followed the road ahead of me and of course later found out there's really only one road that goes around the entire island.

Within 5 or 6 kms I passed my hotel and tackled the only really major climb of the race, known as Tahara'a Pass. It's just over 1km but steep enough (getting up to 10% in parts) to keep you honest in the heat and humidity. After that I was treated to mostly flat riding with the sea to the left of me and green tropical forest on the other side. I passed through many small villages with fruit stalls on the side of the road and after 24km I met the bunch with the rest of my Kiwi companions riding back towards me.

We rode back to town at a good clip with the wind at our backs. When we hit the short climb coming back into town it was tougher than I remembered as my overheated body was still yet to acclimatise. I was looking forward to spending the rest of the day cooling down in the pool but took a moment to remind myself how special it was to be riding with cyclists from other countries in such a beautiful part of the world. Some of us couldn't understand each other but it didn't matter. Our common bond was cycling.

Tuesday dawned as another stunner and after an early start for a press conference we headed to the Island of Moorea via the Aremiti ferry which was 45 minutes away. We had been told that Moorea was the real French Polynesia with stunning white sand beaches and aqua blue crystal clear lagoons. The first things you notice as you approach the island are the green mountains towering straight out of the sea with mist shrouding their volcanic peaks. There's very little flat land but just enough for the road that circumnavigates the island and the few villages and resorts along the coast. The great thing about Moorea is that you get a taste of the true Polynesian

island experience. It's not nearly as commercialised as other islands so you see locals living right on the waterfront of a beautiful lagoon in modest dwellings.

Our first stop was swapping two wheels for four as we rode in convoy on quad bikes to explore the pineapple plantations, mountains and craters of Moorea. Moorea means yellow lizard and we saw plenty at our hotel; they even shared our room with us. The next day we all met at the Kaveka Hotel (which is owned by a Kiwi) for a ride around the island, all 63km of it. Benoit Rivals the President of the Velo Club advised us that part of the road was so bad we'd need mountain bikes to do it, so instead we opted for a 30km out and 30km back ride.

We set off in early morning heat back towards the port where we'd arrived on the ferry the previous day. Cycling past white sandy beaches lined with coconut palms and banana trees and an aqua blue lagoon that goes on forever is an image I'll treasure forever. Our group of 20 riders from France, Chile, New Zealand and some locals shared smiles, high fives and pats on the back as we passed resorts, villages and schools where children would hang over the fence and wave at us. We got some strange looks from locals as we flashed past in our Lycra in the heat of the morning and dodged pot holes or as Frank described them, 'the Grand Canyons of Moorea.'

The road is in need of some serious repair. It's very smooth, not coarse chip like home but in parts, and especially riding in a bunch it's hard to dodge all of the craters. Dave Winter, a sprightly 68-year-old from Auckland's North Shore – who took up cycling four years ago after he was forced to give up running because of a dodgy knee – punctured three times. But no one worried about having to wait for him. Each time we stopped it was at an idyllic spot and the rest of us found some shade under a tree and enjoyed the views.

The drivers in French Polynesia are incredibly courteous to cyclists, so much so it's almost embarrassing as many times they would just sit behind us and wait for a safe place to pass. Frank commented to me that in New Zealand we would have dropped to single file formation to let traffic past.



Our hosts leading the peloton never saw the need to pull over and the cars sat patiently behind us, never blasted their horn or gestured in anger. Close to the end of our ride we stopped for yet another puncture at the top of a hill overlooking a beautiful resort with bungalows over the water. Our support van pulled up and out jumped Roger with an arm full of fresh coconuts already husked with straws for drinking. There's nothing better than drinking nature's electrolyte in Tahiti!

At the end of our ride the temperature neared 35 degrees as we reached the Rotui Pineapple Factory where we were met by the director of the facility. Jean Michel Momot had cold juices, pineapple wine and a raw fish meal with rice and salad to satisfy our thirst and hunger. All the pineapples are sourced from the Moorea plantations known as the Queen Tahiti Pineapples and are very sweet and juicy. An interesting fact - pineapples actually grow in a low bush – one per year per plant – and not on trees as a lot of people think.

On Thursday we took a break from our bikes and boarded a catamaran in Cook's Bay, named after Captain James Cook who actually never visited the bay. It was the next one over he sailed into, but the cartographer mixed them up on the map. Our guide for the day was Siki, a dude with long matted dreadlocks who reminded me of a Tahitienne Bob Marley.

Our first stop was a sand bank in the lagoon to dive into the turquoise water to feed stingrays and swim with reef sharks. It was a little nerve-wracking but still a thrilling experience! Then we carried on to a small Motu (island) and in the shade of coconut palms, banana trees and exotic plants Siki, with some help from Jo, prepared the traditional Polynesian meal of Poisson Cru (raw fish with coconut milk and lime). We spent the afternoon drinking the local beer (Hinano), tropical punch, snorkelling and participating in hilarious traditional Polynesian activities with the Kiwis always at the centre of Siki's crude humour!!

After three unforgettable days on Moorea it was back to the mainland to prepare for the race two days later. Race day dawned to a tropical thunderstorm. It was another early start as we had to be at the Fautaua Velodrome in Pirae Village at 6.30am. The ride to the Velodrome was only 5km but I wasn't that fussed about riding in the torrential rain. As I set off it slowly improved and the rain finally stopped as I rolled in the gate.

Drenched but warm I met up with the others at the Velodrome which was built in 1952 and before that was a horse racing track. It's not quite the same standard as the Avantidrome but it had a heap of history and it was a cool place to start and end the ride.

Some of us, like me, were there to ride for fun but others like Don Weston who rides with the Hamilton and Te Awamutu clubs and has a sharp Taupo time to his name looked a little more serious. Of course, he wasn't about to admit that to anyone.

Paulo, another super-helpful member of the Velo Club, told me that they had a total of 497 entries over the three race categories, a record for the event's five-year history. Paulo and his wife Claudie are originally from France and left 30 years ago on their sailing boat. After two years travelling around the world they eventually ended up on the island of Huahine where the people were so friendly and the islands so beautiful they decided to leave everything behind and stay.

After speeches and presentations from officials and the event patron, Henri Sannier we formed up on the start line. I saw Don, Frank and Jo trying to work their way through the crowd to the front of the

starting gantry. After a traditional Tahitian cultural performance, the ribbon, made of local fragrant flowers, was cut and we were off (well the people at the front of the peloton were).

What happened over the next 5 or 6 kms was complete chaos as riders on very narrow roads with tight corners and roundabouts jostled for position. The peloton surged and slowed and then surged again. There were several crashes and much shouting in French but anyone who fell jumped back on their bikes without complaining. For those of us at the back our approach was to sit back and keep safe. Don's approach up the front, as he told us later, was to 'just hammer it!'

There were three event options - La Ronde Recreation (15kms), Little Ronde (55kms) and the Grande Ronde (110kms) all starting at the Pirae Velodrome and heading along the north coast, then down the east coast turning until the various halfway points and returning to the velodrome the same way. The 55km and 110km both had the arduous ascent of the Tahara'a Pass near the beginning and at the end. Other than that most of the course was flat with the odd climb thrown in.

The end of the 110km race was an exciting finish with the first 10 riders entering the velodrome in two closely bunched groups. Manarii Laurent won the sprint to the line to claim the title in a time of 2h 35m. The second group of riders included our very own Don Weston who finished seventh overall and second in

his age group (50 years plus) in a time of 2h 36m.

Don told me later that after the 45km mark 'it was all on with teams and individuals trying to break away then on the way back as the pace increased we started to lose more riders on every hill'. On the Tahara'a Pass Don gave it a good nudge and the leading bunch splintered leaving only about 10 riders. As they descended the hill the hammer dropped and they raced the last 5km to the finish line.

Don wasn't the only Kiwi to make the podium. Carol Gilbertson won the 55km women's 50 years plus category and Jo Geoghegan won the 110km women's 50 years plus. A good effort all round considering we were there on holiday. Everyone agreed it was a fantastic week with the perfect mix of cycling and tourism activities. The people we shared the experience with may have come from different countries and cultures and we didn't share a common language but our shared passion was cycling and we left with many new friends. The Kiwis all agreed that they would love to come back and I wouldn't be surprised if we see Frank and Jo back soon with a crew from the Onslow Tarbabies.

With thanks to Velo Club Tahiti, Air TahitiNui and Tahiti Tourism  
[www.larondetahitienne.com](http://www.larondetahitienne.com)

