



Holiday Guide 2001



Pearls: A Girl's Best Friend

LOCAL GEMOLOGIST MEETS THE QUEEN OF PEARLS IN TAHITI

Two weeks after the Manhattan terrorist attacks, my husband and I boarded a 7 a.m. flight to L.A. with a connecting flight to French Polynesia. The lure of the most beautiful pearls on earth overcame any fear of travel and for twenty-two days we immersed ourselves in beauty. Being a graduate gemologist and jewelry historian, I already knew the academics and history of the Queen of Pearls, Tahitian Pearls, but even I was awed of the vast array I saw.

Midway between Australia and South America lie French Polynesia's spectacular volcanic islands and coral atolls scattered across three million square miles of the Pacific Ocean, but comprising a landmass of only 245 square miles. Tourism is the number one industry in this paradise, now a popular honeymoon destination. I must confess that we too honeymooned there in 1976.

It was a different world then, with most islands having unpaved roads and the single hotel chain having to generate its own electricity on each island. The island of Tahiti was the only island with modern conveniences in 1976. Today, modern life has come to French Polynesia, and with this, a relatively new industry, Tahitian cultured pearls.

Prior to leaving the U.S. I had arranged to visit the commercial pearl farms of one of the largest producers of Tahitian cultured pearls, starting with their headquarters in Papeete. The charming French owner introduced me to the largest number of these pearls I'd ever seen. Fall is a time of harvest for the pearl farmers, and many had already brought their crop to Papeete. There were large dishpan size containers just filled with all shapes, sizes and colors of these pearls. They also showed me how they sort the pearls, and how very difficult it is to color match them for strands. Matched strands are always more expensive than mixed color strands. The

Tahitian cultured pearl is a joint production of man and nature. No two are exactly alike, and because they grow slowly, are totally at the mercy of the climate, nature and the ocean. It is impossible to mass-produce them. It can take years to put together a nearly perfect strand of large, round, color matched pearls, and they are never drilled and strung until purchased by a client. These are the most coveted and expensive of all the Tahitian cultured pearls.

Jewelry designers utilize the many shapes, sizes and colors of Tahitian cultured pearls to create interesting designs in jewelry, often mixing colors and also using other gemstones, especially diamonds. It is purely personal taste that determines the type of jewelry one wears, and with these special pearls one has a much wider choice. The classic round pearl need not be your choice. Instead many people go for the unique baroque and semi-baroque shapes, considering these more interesting. The vast colors include light dove gray, yellow-gray, blue-black, pink-gray, green-gray, light

golden bronze, dark bronze and black. The most prized colors are peacock green, aubergine purple, blue, all shades of gray, and those with surface iridescence. I saw them all, and had the rare opportunity to "play" with the most expensive of "marbles." Choosing pearls, strands and what to mix and match with them was almost heaven for me!

My next stop was a small atoll 330 miles from Tahiti. As the plane flew in, I was impressed by how narrow the doughnut shaped land was, and how crystal clear the turquoise lagoon appeared. It was dotted with what appeared to be huts on stilts and all around the huts you could see buoys in the water. The landing strip was just that – a strip with no terminal. We were staying at a newly opened hotel and it turned out to be the loveliest and most interesting of all the hotels we visited. We arranged for a private boat to take us to the commercial pearl farm. The half hour ride proved to be very interesting. Due to the clarity of the water, we were able

to see schools of brightly colored fish. We passed many of the huts I had seen from the air and our driver explained that these were each a small family owned pearl farm. He seemed most impressed that I was being permitted to visit the commercial farm. He said that they carefully guard their culturing secret and don't normally permit strangers to visit.

Not knowing what to expect, I was surprised to see only six or seven small buildings at the farm. Unlike the small farms, these buildings were attached to the shore and were in pristine condition. On the dock Polynesian workers greeted us. The French manager,

(Continued on next page)



Expert gemologist Karen Adler in Tahiti



Holiday Guide 2001

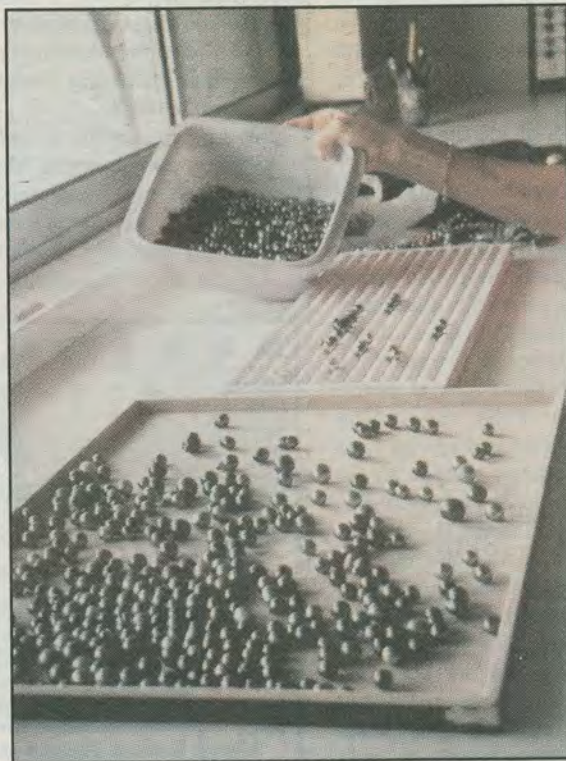


Pearls (Continued from previous page)

Keko, arrived and seemed to be suspicious of us, informing me that the owner had "ordered" him to show me everything. We boarded another boat and went out to see the bivalve mollusk, *Pinctada margaritifera* in its many stages of growth. We followed a bright orange rope, stopping every so often at buoys to haul up dangling lines with tiny baby mollusks in mesh bags. Keko explained that these babies, called spat, are checked and cleaned regularly and at one year of age are ready to be separated. They have their shell drilled, a wire is attached, and they are returned to the lagoon in a flat basket suspended on a line attached to the long main rope and the spot marked by a buoy. There are multiple long orange ropes, one for each stage of the mollusk's life. These ropes can be as long as one mile and they have hundreds of lines with growing mollusks suspended from them. I might add, that tight security (men with machine guns) protects the waters of this farm. I got the impression that they

were thieves!

At two years of age the creature is ready to be nucleated



A table full of Tahitian pearls

themselves to the shells.

After two years the mollusk is ready to be checked for

for the first of three times. This procedure takes place back at the main building. Workers carefully pry open the bivalve, insert a wooden wedge and pass it on to the special nucleating technicians. They place the animal in a special holder, opening its shells to about two inches. A shell bead is carefully chosen based on the size of the animal and with a sterile scalpel, a small incision is made into the gonad. A tiny piece of mantle tissue from a sacrificed mollusk is inserted along with the bead and the creature moves on to a worker who attaches it along with many others to a line. These lines are then taken back out to the lagoon and attached to the rope for two-year olds. Divers regularly inspect the lines of the cultured mollusks, removing any diseased or dead creatures. Fish within the lagoon serve a very useful purpose by eating most parasites that attach

pearls. This is a very tense time since man does not know how nature has performed until the mollusk is actually opened. Stringent criteria are used to determine what will be accepted for sale as a Tahitian cultured pearl. Only 5% of all enucleations result in pearls, and only 3% will be fine enough to be sold. Only 1% will be considered round in shape, all others being out of round, semi-baroque and baroque. Sometimes when the mollusk ejects the shell bead after nucleation, an all nacre irregular shaped pearl forms, called a keshi pearl.

Following the opening and removal process, the mollusk is nucleated for a second time, returned to the water for another two years, harvested and then nucleated one final time. There is a high mortality rate for the mollusks whether it is caused by the water itself or from the nucleating surgery. That, coupled with the actual numbers of cultured pearls that are suitable for the market, make this an extremely expensive proposition. I saw pearls that were probably be used in low cost jewelry. The French Polynesian government will not permit poor quality cultured pearls to ever reach the market. When we bid farewell to our host it was with gratitude for the outstanding day and rare opportunity we had experienced.

We visited many islands on this trip and purchased for import Tahitian cultured pearls on most of them. However, the days spent handling thousands of these luminous gems of nature and the sea left me with what I think will be a life long love affair. I can hardly wait to go back to fill future customers' Tahitian culture pearl orders!

Karen J. Adler, Graduate Gemologist and Jewelry Historian, is owner of GEMS of the PAST in East Hampton. (631) 324-GEMS