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Narrator: From Curtco Media.

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Bruce Wallin: What is the world's best hotel? Today we're going to introduce you to a private island paradise that could absolutely lay claim to that title. Stay tuned because Travel That Matters Best Hotels and Resorts series kicks off right now. Hello, everybody, and welcome to Travel That Matters. I'm your host, Bruce Wallin, and this is the podcast where we explore the world's most exceptional and meaningful travel experiences. Today, we are going to talk about a place that combines those two elements of travel about as well as any place on Earth. We're doing things a little differently today. This episode kicks off a new mini-series where we're going to showcase the world's best hotels and resorts. Now I get asked all the time what my favorite hotel is, and you know, that's a very difficult question to answer, of course. But all of my potential answers really come down to places that do things differently. You know, it's a given that the best hotels and resorts are in a great setting. They have a warm and welcoming staff, beautiful guest rooms. But the places that really stand out the most for me are the ones where the experience is something that you've never experienced before. Our focus today is one such place, but it's one with a far more interesting back story than most. I'm talking, of course, about the Brando, the highly exclusive retreat on Teti'aroa the private atoll off of Tahiti that was once owned by Marlon Brando, and today is popular with everyone from celebrities to ex U.S. presidents. Now, when we talk about travel that matters of course, a big part of that is sustainability. Whether it's environmental sustainability, cultural sustainability, all the ways that travel can make a positive impact on environments and communities. But long before most people were talking about sustainability in travel, Marlon Brando had a crazy idea about building a resort that did more good than harm. Yes, the Godfather was, believe it or not, first and foremost, an environmentalist, and his ideas laid the groundwork for what is now considered by many to be the world's finest and most sustainable resort. Today, we're going to hear from the man responsible for taking Brando's crazy ideas and actually turning them into an epic reality. His name is Richard Bailey, and he's the founder of Pacific Beachcomber, which, in addition to the Brando, runs the luxury resorts throughout French Polynesia. He's also the founder of the nonprofit Tetiaroa Society, and he has dedicated much of his life to protecting the environments and cultures in the South Pacific. After hearing from Richard, stick around because I want to hear your picks for the best resource on the planet and share a few of my own. But first, let's go to Richard, who one day more than 20 years ago got a call from French Polynesia's most famous resident.

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Richard Bailey: Marlon called me out of the blue in 1999 to find out if possibly I could give him a hand on his island. And I think what he had in mind was marketing or something. And so I took out some engineering guys ,food and beverage. We took a team over to have a look, and it really wasn't a pretty picture. He hadn't been back in a long time. And so I sent him a long memo about how, you know, we don't we take care of guests. We don't worry about if there's going to be power or water or how to handle waste. And now really the all of the things that you need to worry about on a on a remote island like Tetiaroa . He became very upset and we

didn't speak for a long time. Eventually, he called me again out of the blue and said, okay, what would you do? You're the smarty pants hotel guy. So tell me what you would do. So I said, well, Marlon, we could talk about that, I've got some ideas. And he said, no, no, tell me right now you think you know it all. And I said, no I don't know it all. But where you're going right now on the island is maybe not the right way. And eventually we, you know, that kicked off a series of meetings over five years where we tried to conceive a vision of what would work from a tourism standpoint, but would also meet his very high criteria. And the fact is, Marlon, he was maybe the world's first Earth champion. I mean, we were talking about issues that today we know in the popular vernacular is sustainability and sustainable development. These words, we didn't have these words back then, but he understood that he didn't have power, he didn't have water. He didn't know how to handle waste. He didn't know what to do with trash and how to recycle and , and are really are our common vision was about really how to harness science and technology to to solve some of these problems. And the vision that we ultimately realized was just tackling each one of these issues one by one and saying how we could do it better.

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Bruce Wallin: When the Brando finally opened in 2014, it became clear pretty quickly that Richard and Marlon had done it better. I was the editorial director at Robb Report back then, and I'd commissioned a writer named Lawrence Grobel to go to this brand new resort and cover it for our magazine. Grobel had actually been to Tetiaroa before. It was 1978, and he was visiting Marlon Brando to interview him for a story for Playboy magazine. It was right before Apocalypse Now was coming out. And Brando hadn't granted a personal interview in years, more than a decade. But Grobel spent 10 days with him on this atoll. And one of the things he wrote about was how Brando didn't want to talk about Apocalypse Now. He didn't want to talk about Hollywood. He certainly didn't want to talk about his love, life or anything like that. All he wanted to talk about was Tetiaroa, its natural beauty, the people of French Polynesia. He also wanted to talk about his plans for developing it into a resort. So when Grobel went back in 2014, he was highly skeptical that the Brando would measure up to its namesake dreams.

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Richard Bailey: Yeah, I remember Larry's visit. In fact, Larry and I spoke on the phone and he said, I'm coming down. Bruce is asking me to come down and see your place, but I got to tell you I know what Marlon wanted. I was a little bit defensive. I said, yeah, Larry, I think I know what he wanted to sell. Come on down we'll compare notes. Marlon had, he had an idea not just for technology and a vision for his island, but he had a he had an idea of what experience visitors should have on his island. And he imagined a kind of a symbiosis where the beauty and the and the highly preserved nature of the place attracts people. But in visiting, you not only don't have a negative impact on that beauty or on that cultural authenticity of the Polynesian people, you actually have a positive impact and you create a positive feedback loop for sort of a virtuous cycle where just by being here, you're contributing to the preservation of the site to the preservation of Polynesian culture and to maintaining the beauty of the place. So the idea of tourism being not only not a neutral or negative factor, but being actually a positive factor. For example, when we first sat down, we talked about energy and he said, I don't want to have

any fossil fuel on the island. And so I said, well, Marlon, that's great, but forget about air conditioning because that takes way too much energy. And he said, no, no. Go see this guy in Hawaii, Dr. John Craven at the National Energy Lab in Kona, and he'll show you how we're going to do that. So we built the world's first seawater air conditioning system and then for electricity, we have solar, which is our main source of electricity. And we have battery storage. So we're able to go about 20 hours a day without using any kind of thermal production. For thermal production, we use coconut oil, which is a perfectly legitimate fuel. Plants absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere in their growth cycle, and that CO2 is released during combustion, so it's a carbon neutral fuel. So basically, when you come to the Brando, your carbon footprint during your stay from an energy standpoint is zero.

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Bruce Wallin: Instead of being disappointed, Grobel called the resort a masterpiece, and of course, it has been receiving a similarly effusive accolades ever since. So what is it about the Brando that makes it so special? It starts with the arrival.

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Richard Bailey: We run a little airline called Air Tetiaroa, and we have twin turbo prop aircraft that hold 15 passengers. And we have our little private lounge and so you're whisked away from the busyness of the international airport to our little lounge and actually you're your brand of experience starts in our lounge because there we have information, we have videos and we have a nice, calm, quiet place to gather yourself for the experience that is about to come. The flight itself is 15 minutes. So as soon as you take off from Tahiti, you can basically see Tetiaroa on the horizon. The reef barrier is pretty effective for ocean craft, and so the only way to get here is by air. So you disembark and you're greeted by some musicians and dancers, and you're going to go directly to your villa. And within 25 minutes from having left the lounge in Papeete, you're on the beach ready to sip your first Mai Tai.

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Bruce Wallin: We're going to take a quick break, and we'll be right back to talk more about the Brando.

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[Ad Break]

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Bruce Wallin: Welcome back to Travel That Matters where Richard Bailey is telling us all about the guest experience at the Brando.

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Richard Bailey: So we have obviously we have snorkeling galore. We have the whales, we have the sea turtles. If you've never been during the hatching season, we have sea turtles that are actually hatching. The hatchlings are crawling out of their nests right in front of your villa. And this is for many of our guests, especially those with children, this is a transformative experience.

This is something that they'll remember forever. We have kayak tours on the lagoon. We have picnics. I mean, this this this entire atoll, except for the built environment that we have here on this one motu, this one islet. The atoll is composed of 12 islets, which we call motus in Tahitian, and only one of them has any construction. All of the others are a sanctuary. We have jungle walks basically on the other motus to look at the giant coconut crabs and flora and fauna of these islands. We have visits to some of the archeological sites. We have picnics on remote motus where there's just nothing. I mean, today getting to a place where there's nothing, where you don't see anybody is a luxury. We have green tours. We have an amazing spa. We have these treatment rooms that are up in the tree canopy and there's a lot to do.

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Bruce Wallin: One thing you won't find at the Brando overwater bungalows. Yes, the guest rooms on stilts that sit over turquoise lagoons that are pretty much synonymous with Tahiti and Bora Bora do not exist at the Brando. Why? Well, that's the way Marlon wanted it.

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Richard Bailey: Another issue that Marlon and I discussed very early on, I mean, I build resorts, and if you do what I do, you dream of having a place like Tetiaroa as a canvas to express yourself on. I told Marlon the first time we sat down that we have to build overwater bungalows. We're going to build overwater bungalows over here. We're going to build them over there. You've got this amazing lagoon we're going to build overwater bungalows everywhere. And he said, no, we are not. That's wrong. We're actually not going to build any guests at our resort should be able to walk around this island without encountering any obstruction, physical or visual. And we don't want them to have to cross any kind of walkway or have their view obstructed by these bungalows out on the horizon. And he said, anyway, they're not that private. When you're in your overwater bungalow, that's not so private. You can wave to the guy that's on the overwater bungalow right next to you. His point was that everything should be blended into the landscaping, into the nature. We set everything back more than 35 meters from the beach. So when you're on your terrace in your villa, somebody walking along the beach, they don't see you. They don't invade your privacy.

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Bruce Wallin: Guests at the Brando stay in one of 35 villas, each with its own private beach area and plunge pool, which is one of the many reasons the Brando has become so popular with guests eager for an escape from prying eyes. But privacy has long been paramount on Tetiaroa, which was a private retreat for Tahitian royalty for centuries. Today, in addition to the Brando, the atoll is home to a local community that is core to the resort experience and is yet another example of how Richard and Marlon thought differently

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Richard Bailey: Just by being here we have finally finished surveying most of the island, and we've uncovered over 100 points of sites of archaeological interest on the atoll. The atoll of Tetiaroa was the exclusive retreat for Tahitian kings for hundreds of years. And we know this by studying the archaeology that we found and the logbooks of the early explorers like Captain

Cook and Captain Bougainville are replete with references to Tetiaroa. And in fact, in Captain Cook's second voyage he had to wait at anchor in Tahiti for three months for the King to come back from Tetiaroa before he could designate the place where the marines would go ashore and set up their fort. The community on Tetiaroa is the one that we built, which is perhaps the greatest challenge of our project. And not only did we had to build a greenfield development on a remote off the grid resort with neutral carbon impact and a laboratory and so forth and so on. We have a tremendous social experiment because we have a hundred and eighty workers living here, and you know, what do they do in their off time? They need to have a life here. And it's like when I first sat down with Marlon, he said, we're going to build a beautiful resort. And I said, no, don't think that way. We have to build a community. If we don't build a community, we will fail. And probably the thing that I'm most proud of today is the shared values of all of our staff, all of our employees. I mean if you can talk to anybody on this island and they will have something to tell you about how special it is and and their role in helping to protect it.

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Bruce Wallin: Protecting the atoll and the environment at large is a primary focus of the Tetiaroa Society. Guests at the Brando have the opportunity to interact with the organization's scientists and experience the research firsthand. And for Richard, his wish is that the Tetiaroa Society's research has implications far beyond the Brando.

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Richard Bailey: We established Tetiaroa Society, which is a platform, it's a laboratory, you know, with sleeping accommodations for visiting scientists. We don't do research ourselves, but we invite scientists who come from all over the world studying a wide variety of subjects from things involving climate change, such as ocean acidity to species populations and coral and fish and coconut crabs and sharks and you name it. So guests are able to wander over and see what the scientists are working on. They can go out and actually gather data with the scientists if they want and learn something. And at the same time, by staying at the Brando, the Brando is a, financially sponsors the laboratory. And so we have this tight relationship between tourism and science to help perpetuate the beauty of the of the place and Tahitian culture. Obviously, we need to protect the oceans if we're going to have any impact on climate change. And conversely, we have to correct climate change if we want to protect the oceans. So it's a systemic problem. And out here in the middle of the Pacific, I mean, Tahitians didn't cause climate change, but they're going to pay the price. And out in the big oceans where we are as opposed to along continental coastlines, this is the real canary in the mine. This is where when things start happening here, then we really do have to worry. As Tehotu Brando, Marlin's son, once said, save Tetiaroa, save the world. If we can't save one island, how are we ever going to save the world? So our approach is actually microcosmic. Our approach is to start with Tetiaroa society. If we can make Tetiaroa a model of how to do things to effect change, then perhaps and that's a baby step toward solving the larger, bigger problems.

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Bruce Wallin: Solving the world's problems at one of the world's best resorts. It does not get much better than that. And that's what Travel That Matters is all about.

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Narrator: And now for the Wallin wrap up.

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Bruce Wallin: Wow, what a way to kick off our new miniseries about the world's best hotels and resorts, the Brando, Richard Bailey. So great having him on the show. Now I have to admit I've never been to the Brando, but I have been to a lot of great places that I would put in that category one of the world's best hotels and resorts. I'm thinking about, you know, safari lodges in Africa, Duba Plains or Salinda Camp, adventure lodges in South America, like the Explora camps or Tierra. Of course, I'm also a sucker for wonderful beach resorts, just like everybody else. Las Alamandas, which is just down the road from me here and on Mexico's Pacific coast. But I don't want to just hear about my choices. I want to hear yours. What are the places that you love? What are your favorite hotels, resorts? It can be a classic city property, a private island resort. Whatever it is, I want to know what do you love? What type of resort do you seek out and what do you think we should feature on future episodes of Travel That Matters? Shoot me an email at Bruce@curtco.com. You can send an audio file. You can send text, whatever it is, I want to hear from you and hear what places you love most. We'd like to thank Richard Bailey for joining us today on Travel That Matters. For more information about the Brando, the Tetiaroa Society and his other projects, please check out our show notes or visit Curtco.com. The show was produced for Curtco Media by AJ Moseley and Darra Stone, Music by Joey Salvia I'm Bruce Wallin, and we'll see you down the road.

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Narrator: Curtco Media. Media for your mind.