



FANTASY ISLAND
The view of the main island of Bora Bora from Nicolas Malleville and Francesca Bonato's private stretch of beach on Motu To'opua. Opposite: Pandan-leaf weaving workshops will be offered for overnight guests and day-trippers.



Paradise Found

This spring, Nicolas Malleville and Francesca Bonato will open a one-suite hotel on a private beach in French Polynesia—expanding Coqui Coqui, their hospitality brand and fragrance line, to the South Pacific.

BY JAY CHESHES PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON

NICOLAS MALLEVILLE and Francesca Bonato are bobbing in the sea clinging to their family skiff, their children—Leon, 12, Santos, 6, and Fleur, 3—all perched inside, their dog Maximus treading water beside them. The outboard motor on their boat wouldn't start this morning, and so they're castaways on their stretch of *motu* (Tahitian for "reef isle"), across the lagoon from the main island of Bora Bora. "I make perfume, but I smell like engine oil," says Malleville of his failed efforts to get the motor going, after I've crept through the shallows, collecting the family in a hired boat. Their home here will be more accessible soon. Plans to build a pier, jutting out 200 feet past the reef, were approved by local authorities a few weeks back. "It took a long time to get permission," says Malleville. "The pier will be really long and really expensive."

The Malleville-Bonato clan has been living like a 21st-century Swiss Family Robinson since moving into a pair of thatched-roof bungalows on their own private beach here in fall 2020, connected to Wi-Fi but physically cut off from the rest of the world. What they can't grow or fish themselves must be brought over by boat from across the lagoon, where the kids go to school. "When the sea is very big, the kids love it—'We're not going to school!'" says Malleville, aping his children's response to the island equivalent of a snow day.

The new pier will bring more visitors to their sliver of *motu* starting this spring, when Bonato, 42, and Malleville, 47, plan to open a one-suite hotel next to their home. Never mind the Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora, with its \$2,000-a-night overwater bungalows; Malleville and Bonato's new Motu To'opua guesthouse—open to just one family or couple at a time—will soon be one of the most exclusive accommodations in the South Pacific.

Since moving halfway across the planet from Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula to French Polynesia in 2016—living on the main island of Bora Bora initially—the couple have been setting up the new Polynesian branch of Coqui Coqui, their boho-chic fragrance and hospitality brand, which started in a stucco shack on the beach in Tulum, Mexico, almost two decades ago. With their guesthouses across the Yucatán; their perfumes, scented oils, room diffusers and candles, sold at Bergdorf Goodman in New York City and Galeries Lafayette in Paris; and their textiles, hammocks and leather goods, they helped define a new gypset (gypsy meets jet set) aesthetic and transform Tulum from sleepy backwater to the popular Brooklyn-on-the-beach it's become. "I see them as the first; they really put Tulum on the map with the fashion and global elite," says James Gardner, who opened his restaurant, Gitano, across the street from the original (now shuttered) Coqui Coqui hotel in 2013.

The Tulum site had initially been Malleville's home after he moved from his loft apartment in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where he was based as a model. In 2002 he bought the land with a childhood friend from Argentina, physiotherapist María Belén Galvani. "We talked with this crazy man; we pretended we were a couple who had just moved there," recalls Galvani. "He offered the best deal, ridiculous money." For the first year they lived in a tent on the beach, while they built a small house in local

white-coral stucco. The building was a departure from the typical wooden palapas found along the coast. When it was done, Galvani offered massages there, calling it the Coqui Coqui Day Spa (after the coconut oil products she used). Bonato, a native of Milan with a travel compulsion and an affinity for languages—she studied to be an interpreter—met Malleville there after spotting their sign on the beach on her 23rd birthday, in 2003. "I didn't wind up getting a massage," she recalls, "because we just had a coffee, and then another—we were talking all day."

For Malleville the house was a place to escape from his frenetic life as a model—shooting campaigns around the world, for Gucci, Burberry and Carolina Herrera. It soon became a crash pad for his friends. "It was an amazing energetic place," he recalls, "a lot of young people—half hippies, half gypsies—but all with money from modeling. We were living with no running water, no electricity, but you could take a taxi and go to New York in the same day. It was really utopic in a way." Jade Jagger, the first paying guest, convinced Malleville to rent out the place after stumbling on his crowd not long after the first rooms were done. "It was beautiful, simple at the beginning but beautiful," says Paola Kudacki, an Argentine fashion photographer and director who had been Malleville's roommate in New York and is one of his closest friends.

With Bonato, Malleville expanded his hospitality portfolio and launched a full fragrance line. Their guesthouses—residencias, they call them—include a 1903 townhouse in Mérida; a jungle villa in Cobá, 40 minutes inland from Tulum; and the couple's last home in Mexico, the 16th-century Meson de Malleville, in the colonial town of Valladolid, where the Yucatán fragrances are produced.

Over the years, the Tulum property grew into a six-suite hotel on an increasingly valuable piece of waterfront real estate. In June 2016, men armed with machetes stormed the building with a judge's eviction order, part of a land dispute—involving conflicting claims on original ownership—that hit 16 other businesses along the beach. The land, bordering the protected Sian Ka'an bioserve, had remained underdeveloped, before the region's tourist boom. "Tulum was very easy, a place that became overrated, overcrowded and where you could make a lot of money," says Malleville. The claim on the land was arbitrary, he says, coming 14 years after he bought the deed. He joined a group lawsuit to fight the eviction, but his heart, he says, wasn't in it. A few months after the raid, Malleville, Bonato and their two young children moved to Bora Bora, leaving behind the battle for their Tulum property, which remains closed to this day. "I said, I love Mexico, it's an amazing country, but Tulum is done for me," says Malleville.

In Tulum, the legal struggles over beachfront land that began in 2016 continue to this day. "It was a difficult time for everybody, I'm still in that time," says Alessandro Carozzino, who is still going to court to hold onto his hotel and restaurant, Posada Margherita. "Tulum is not easy if you're a normal person without political friends."

TODAY BONATO AND MALLEVILLE continue to operate Coqui Coqui across the Yucatán with a third partner, Malleville's brother-in-law, Argentine lawyer

Matías González. (In 2005, Galvani moved on to other things.) The enterprise, says González, is less a business than a "family adventure." Malleville's siblings, parents, cousins and ex-nanny have all been involved over the years. "It has to do with our Argentinian culture, where family is at the center of everyday life," says González.

From the Yucatán to French Polynesia, every property begins as a personal space. "We always do it this way: We live in a house; we kind of inhabit it ourselves," says Malleville. In French Polynesia, for now, the couple will be sleeping next door, sharing their dining room table and white-sand beach with their guests. "They're naturally living in a mood board," says Italian model Mariacarla Boscono, who was Malleville's roommate in London early in his modeling career.

Before he was discovered in 1996, while waiting tables at a pop-up restaurant in José Ignacio, Uruguay, Malleville studied industrial and graphic design in Córdoba. Growing up in the Pampas, he learned about botany from his grandparents—who ran an apothecary shop—and at his agricultural high school. Though he was raised on a ranch hundreds of miles from any coast, he's had a lifelong obsession, he says, with water and palm trees, the "only things I didn't have growing up." While still modeling, in the early days, Malleville designed gardens for private clients in between fashion shoots. "He was always restless; he understood he needed to do something more than just be a model," says Otto Santana, a former modeling agent he met in Paris in the '90s.

At Coqui Coqui, Bonato and González became Malleville's enablers, they say. "Nicolas is the creative one, Francesca has tremendous commercial skills, I'm the legal guy, the financial guy," says González.

The business was in its infancy when Malleville and Bonato were first a couple. "I understood Nico couldn't do everything by himself; he was still flying everywhere every day, still in the thick of his modeling career," she says. "Coqui Coqui was a dream, still a baby growing. I started building the reservations system, set up the boutique. We [added] some textiles, started doing better labels, certification. I have a very practical side. I'm very handy."

Malleville is a "modern man from another time," as Kudacki describes him. He collects homes like some people collect cars, says Kudacki. "Every place he feels attracted [to] or seduced by—he has this crazy passion about places—he kind of needs to have a piece of that place," she says. He finds inspiration in the historic biographies and anthropological texts that he often scatters around his properties for guests to discover.

BORA BORA CAN SEEM a clichéd vision of paradise with its honeymoon hideaways, resort breakfast buffets, tiki cocktails and Polynesian dinner revues. Malleville and Bonato came in search of another place, a nostalgic Bora Bora, from the 1960s and '70s, when Marlon Brando and Brigitte Bardot were

FAMILY RETREAT
Clockwise from top left: Malleville, Bonato and family on board their skiff; the lounge, which features historic photos on the walls and a black pearl shell chandelier from the shuttered Bora Bora Lagoon Resort & Spa; local seashells will be transformed into jewelry at workshops; the lounge with an original sign from the Hotel Bora Bora.



HOME AWAY FROM HOME
The sitting room in the guest suite is almost exactly as it would have been at the Hotel Bora Bora, from the furniture to the wall art. Opposite: Malleville and Bonato's sliver of paradise.



**DREAM
DESTINATION**

A staircase from the beach leads to the guest suite inside a former Hotel Bora Bora bungalow, installed around an existing palm tree. Opposite: The guest suite bedroom features an original bed from the Hotel Bora Bora, topped with linens from the new Coqui Coqui Bora Bora textile collection.



fixtures and a single resort dominated, the Hotel Bora Bora, opened by a group of American investors in 1961. Purchased by Aman Resorts in 1988, it was still going strong when Malleville visited Bora Bora for the first time in the late '90s, a stop on an around-the-world tour financed by his modeling agent in London. Though he stayed at a campsite, spending \$50 a night to pitch a tent, he visited the Hotel Bora Bora for drinks. “The place was like a paradise on the most amazing beach you can imagine,” recalls Kudacki, who joined him on the trip.

The hotel, which shut down in 2008, continued to capture Malleville’s imagination when he returned to the atoll on a working vacation with his extended family in 2014, already scouting, he says, for the “next extension of Coqui Coqui.” He visited the mothballed hotel, where everything was for sale, hoping, he says, to buy a few plates. He walked away with three guest bungalows and their contents, all a bit worse for wear. Before the trip was over, he’d found a place he might put them, a slice of jungle along the main island’s volcanic slope. “We ended up falling in love with Polynesia and came back with a piece of land in the luggage,” says González, who was along for the trip.

Malleville envisioned a personal sanctuary and a new beachhead for Coqui Coqui around an olfactory garden, the bungalows transplanted to terraces among Polynesian flowers and grasses grown for a new fragrance line. He knew the views would be magnificent. He didn’t seem worried by the logistics of pulling it off. “Nico is full fantasy; that’s the allure,” says production designer Colin Donahue, who was in Bora Bora when Malleville bought the land. “That’s always been my attraction to him—to the fantasy he continues to chase and create.”

In 2016, following the death of his father and the loss of the Coqui Coqui Tulum Axchilatlan, that dream of a South Pacific garden drove Malleville and family to French Polynesia. “No one really wanted to move here with me,” he says, of his wife and kids, “because we were in an amazing comfort zone, living large in the Yucatán, and we came here with nothing.”

They found a vacation rental across from the beach just below their undeveloped jungle strip. They commissioned geological studies and drew up site plans that included an outdoor elevator and glamping tents. And they began developing Coqui Coqui’s new fragrance line, sourcing coconut oil they mixed with *tiaré* flowers to produce their own *monoi*, Tahiti’s most emblematic scent. “The whole first year here we were experimenting with new scents,” says Bonato.

In the Yucatán Bonato had worked with local artisans on textiles, leather bags and traditional rebozo scarves. In Bora Bora she reworked vintage island patterns into a new collection of pareos and home linens. In June 2017 she opened a small shop near their rented home, “the first flag of Coqui Coqui Bora Bora,” where the new textiles and Polynesian fragrances both debuted. The garden project, meanwhile, was getting off to a slow start. Plans for the elevator and tents were both stalled, contending with local opposition, budget issues and building regulations. “I got a little bit megalomaniac,” says Malleville of his ambitious plans for the mountain site.

As he began to scale back his original vision, he



found a second plot he couldn’t resist, 13,000 square feet on the beach, on Motu To’opua, with a view of the mountain from across the lagoon. In October 2020, a few months after Tahiti’s first pandemic lockdown, his family of five settled into a pair of Hotel Bora Bora bungalows there, transported by barge and rebuilt on pillars above the beach.

Soon they were transferring their hospitality and retail plans from mountain to motu; though their original shop closed in 2020, a version of the garden is still in the works. Being isolated during the off-and-on lockdowns of Bora Bora’s pandemic response allowed time to polish their new vision. They live with their children in one bungalow, above the new Coqui Coqui textile and jewelry shop. They say the second bungalow will open to guests above a communal dining room and a lounge area filled with seashells and coral formations displayed in upcycled hotel bedside tables. (The last of three bungalows purchased is still destined for the mountain site.) Another small structure houses Coqui Coqui’s new fragrance showroom, featuring the full line of Polynesian scents.

The furniture throughout the property, which they’ve christened Motu Déjà Vu Residence by Coqui Coqui, was almost entirely sourced from Bora Bora’s many shuttered or newly renovated resorts. An original sign from the Hotel Bora Bora hangs in the lounge across from an oversize chandelier made from shingled black pearl shells, purchased from the defunct Bora Bora Lagoon Resort & Spa.

The guest suite is almost exactly as it would have been at the Hotel Bora Bora, from bathtub to bed frames, wood blinds to wall art. “Here I didn’t do creativity,” says Malleville on a tour of the space. “Absolutely everything was original; there’s not one piece of furniture that doesn’t belong.”

Behind the bungalows he’s planted fields of vetiver grass and *tiaré* flowers, components in the new

fragrances. A new export lab on Moorea—a French Polynesian island where the family might move next—will start shipping the collection to the U.S. in 2023. As in Mexico, guests here will choose their own olfactory adventure—the hospitality operates in service of the fragrance brand. “When people check in at Coqui Coqui, we give you almost half the rate in retail accessories,” says Malleville. “You choose your own fragrance, your own bath oil. You really are the art director of your own experience.”

Day-trippers, shuttled to the motu from nearby resorts, will come for shopping and for arts and crafts workshops, learning to make pandan-leaf baskets, seashell necklaces and flower crowns.

Meanwhile, across the lagoon, the metamorphosis from jungle to garden still has a long way to go. Though the biggest trees have already been cleared out to the top—1,000 feet above sea level—recent rains have left a thick tangle of new branches and vines. The last bungalow from the Hotel Bora Bora is a pile of boards, stacked under a tarp where the property starts. Malleville hopes to rebuild it as an “atelier of inspiration,” among vetiver grass and frangipani flowers. The vague outline of a crisscrossing path traverses the slope, up to a volcanic stone retaining wall. “I know every single type of plant here,” says Malleville, surveying the wild gardenias and papaya trees on a treacherous climb to the top.

Even as work on the garden continues, he’s already looking to what comes next. “I’m not going to stay here forever,” he says. Another garden, in Italy, overlooking the Mediterranean near the border with France, has been a work in progress for years—promising a new fragrance palette. Another project, in the mountains of Argentina, is part of the long-term plan. “Nico has had this dream, since the beginning,” says his wife, “of a few different landscapes that inspired him in life.” ●