

## TRAVEL

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## FRENCH POLYNESIA

## Under the Southern Cross: The Magic of the Marquesas

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McClatchy Tribune News Service

HIVA OA, Marquesas Islands — "If it's Tuesday, it must be Ua Pou," said Keith, stretched out on the adjacent mattress. One of a half-dozen passengers still bedded down on the upper deck of the Aranui 3, he pushed up on his elbows to watch the dawn skitter over the waves.

"It rained last night," he said, yawning. "Enough to cool us off. Did you get wet? I didn't remember. But I was a lot cooler than I'd been the day before."

That night had been pretty warm. Stuffy in the lounge. Stifling even, if you stuck it out in your cabin below deck. But in my heart of hearts I was dancing with glee.

At last, an honest excuse to sleep on deck as the Aranui 3 sailed away from Hiva Oa and headed back to Tahiti. Against all odds, a chance to fall sleep watching the Southern Cross turn in the heavens, bright sparks glittering in the night.

When an electrical short shut down one of the Aranui 3's compressors, cutting the flow of cool air to the lower decks, most of the 119 passengers on board chose to stay with the ship. Thirty-one accepted the captain's offer to fly back to Tahiti. But with three days at sea ahead of us, a gang of mariners — square pegs run amok — dragged their bedding off their bunks and up to the top deck.

I'd chosen this 14-night voyage to the Marquesas Archipelago, in the remote northeast corner of French Polynesia, looking for the magic that lured so many wayfarers to the South Seas. Explorers and missionaries, whalers and sailors, adventurers and romantics, few Europeans could resist the call of nature unworn, the promise of balmy nights, tropical beaches and handsome, unspoiled people.

Which was why the



UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYES OF THE GODS: Visitors check out the sacred Tikis at Teliphoa on Hiva Oa in the Marquesas Islands.

PHOTOS BY STEVE HAGGERTY/MCT

## Cruising on the Aranui 3

The Aranui 3 is 386 feet long and 58 feet wide. Cabins range from shared dormitory to standard, luxury and suites. Facilities and services include a snack bar, sundries shop, lounge, drinks bar, small swimming pool, lots of deck and lounge chairs, twice-weekly laundry service, and coin-operated washers and dryers. There's no room service or Internet access, except in several larger ports.

Cruise rates per person range from \$3,998 to \$5,275 and include meals, snacks, table wines, laundry service and onshore activities.

The Marquesas are always warm. But the dry season, March through October, is the best time to visit. The rainy months, November to February, tend to be more humid. Daily tours are conducted in English, French and German. Village maps

freighter Aranui 3, sailing out of Papeete, in Tahiti, seemed the way to go. A throwback to the commercial schooners of old, she sails twice a month, delivering cargo to otherwise isolated villages on six of the archipelago's 12 islands: Nuku Hiva, Ua Huka and Ua Pou, in the north, and Hiva Oa, Fatu Hiva and Tahuata, in the south.

And these villages are

small. In 2012, the islands' total population was 9,300; in the early 1700s, before Europeans introduced smallpox and other diseases, it was estimated at more than 100,000.

Almost from the first, the Aranui provided passenger cabins. But cargo is her mission. If it's imported to Tahiti or sold in Papeete, she'll deliver it: new cars, trucks, horses, heavy equipment,

are included. The ground is often uneven; walking shoes are essential.

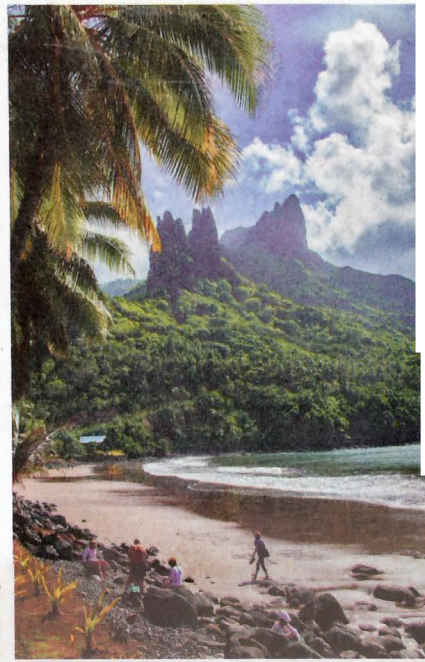
Meals are served family style, open seating, at tables for two to 16. Menus include continental fare and Polynesian dishes, often vegetables or rice with chicken, fish or goat. French table wine and bread are included. A variety of baked goods, eggs, cereals, salads and fresh fruit are available at breakfast and on request.

The Aranui sails 14-day cruises out of Papeete, on Tahiti, in French Polynesia, stopping for a half-day at Fakarava Atoll on the way to Nuku Hiva. For a shorter cruise (eight or 11 days), board in Fakarava or Nuku Hiva.

For general information, go to [www.aranui.com](http://www.aranui.com); for dates and prices, go to [www.itahititavel.com](http://www.itahititavel.com).

furniture, fresh and canned food, paper towels and villagers traveling between islands. She also loads outgoing cargo, mostly huge bags of copra, dried coconut meat bound for oil processing plants in Tahiti.

The ship has been on the route for 53 years; you could set your watch by her arrival. But the excitement hasn't worn off. On the day the ship is due in port, everyone



LARGEST OF THE ISLANDS: Visitors can explore nearly empty beaches on Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas.

shows up. The men lounge around and talk. The women — bedecked with their finest flowers for shoppers soon to arrive — spread out their wares at the dockside craft market. Kids hang out, hoping for a new pair of trainers, a soccer ball or a bicycle. And the passengers, leaning over the rail as the ship moves closer, are surely as fascinated as Captain Cook was the first time he sailed close to shore in Hawaii.

No matter where we stopped, I could see skinny kids waving, dancing up and down, diving into the bay and climbing out to wave again. No sooner had the ship come alongside than the crew, a dozen sinewy Marquesans, dropped the first container onto the dock and the side ladder down beside it — or if we were at anchor — onto the floating barge. Pulling up at end of the dock, families driving trucks and SUVs inched slowly forward, eager for their orders.

A tall man in a straw hat stepped up to claim four shovels, a refrigerator in a huge box, a flat-screen television and a case of diapers. A woman in a sarong led away a horse we'd picked up at the previous island. Grocery store owners loaded their van with cases of canned milk, crackers, tomato sauce, catsup, cartons of cookies, bags of salt, rice and wheat flour, and packages of coffee and tea.

As a freighter passenger, your time will be your own. The Aranui doesn't set many rules. That said, the ship provides a daily schedule of pre-tour orientations and guided shore activities. Three full-time guides (English, French and German speakers) lead village and island tours, interpret Marquesan culture and history, decipher maps and help you locate misplaced laundry. I never saw our English-language guide, Jorg Nietzsche, a cultural expert, when he wasn't smiling, providing directions or helping to locate lost laundry.

Sightseeing tours ferry everyone over the mountains, to ridge-top vista points and down to secluded bays. Village walks explore local museums and visit churches, remarkable for locally-crafted wood pulpits and carvings. There's always time to swim in the waves or to wander through craft markets, where sellers are willing to bargain for polished wood bowls, black pearls, carved bone necklaces, decorative knives, sarongs and tapa cloth prints.

And like music on the wind, it was the island's place names that resonated, each a touchstone to the ways last century's travelers saw the Marquesas. The steep peaks and deep forests they'd seen as hostile and forbidding were photo ops for us, images to be posted to

Facebook and sent to distant friends. Carved stone Tikis with big heads and stumpy legs, god-figures that watched while warlike Marquesans decapitated their enemies, now stood sentinel at public parks and archeological sites.

Sometime-sailor the young Herman Melville, who jumped ship in Nuku Hiva, used it as the source for his first best-selling book, *Typee*. Inspired by Melville's tale, writer Robert Louis Stevenson made a point of including Nuku Hiva on his own South Seas journey. When the Aranui docked at Hiva Oa, where Paul Gauguin spent the last years of his life, most of us passengers made a beeline for the cemetery on the hill to visit his gravesite.

Having just read Thor Heyerdahl's book *Fatu Hiva: Back To Nature*, I wanted to see the place where the 23-year-old archeologist and his wife built a hut in the forest and spent a year, at one point nearly starving. Sailing with a local fisherman across to neighboring Hiva Oa, they explored an overgrown *me'ae* site and snapped photos of toppled sacrificial stones and carved stone Tikis, buried in the undergrowth.

When we docked at Puaumu Village, on Hiva Oa, we were able to follow Heyerdahl's footsteps up the hill. There, cleared of underbrush and restored, are the same stone terraces, now rebuilt and the Tikis set upright.

Daily lunches on shore, both an adventure and fuel to keep going, were served in open-air venues, probably community centers converted for the day. But it was at leisurely dinners on ship where a circle of kindred spirits found each other and formed fast ties.

Elaine Juhre, from Minneapolis, whom I met in the Los Angeles airport, was the kind of easy-going, experienced world traveler you hope to meet on your adventures. Ed and Mimsy Kaegi from San Francisco and her sister Jeffrey Ann Roos soon joined the group, and with Clint, Keith, Clark and Jean-Pierre finding their way to our end of the dining room, the table for six grew to 14.

On the nights when I crawled into bed in my cabin, it was between deliciously fresh sheets in a spartan but tidy space with a bathroom, desk and chair and table. I had a porthole, too, and for the first 11 days of the trip, air conditioning.

The Aranui 3 wasn't a wind-powered schooner, nor the Hokulea, the famous Polynesian outrigger canoe built to retrace the South Seas ancient migration routes. Not even close. But when my chance to navigate by the stars finally came, it was a mattress on deck that answered the call.