

TRAVEL

Editor: Paul Smith > Telephone: 250-380-5240 > Email: features@timescolonist.com

■ RICK STEVES, D11

Harbour-to-harbour ferry offers smooth ride

PAUL SMITH
Times Colonist Travel Editor

About 15 minutes into the maiden voyage of the V2V Empress foot passenger ferry from Victoria to Vancouver, a remarkable sight appeared on the starboard side: a young woman carrying a bottle of wine.

OK, so it was actually the starboard aisle on the inside of the ship and the young woman in question was a crew member on the boat, not some drunken sailor's illusion.

Still, it was a rare sight on a passenger sailing across the pond: alcohol. In this case, a bottle of Sandhill Pinot Grigio that, at a reasonable \$7 a glass (and with a rather generous pour), was a welcome companion on what turned out to be a relaxing, scenic and comfortable 3 1/2 hour tour from Victoria's Inner Harbour to Coal Harbour in Vancouver.

The ferry, operated by V2V Vacations and owned by Brisbane, Australia-based Riverside Marine, had slipped out of its berth at the Steamship Terminal building a couple of minutes after its scheduled 2 p.m. departure last Saturday on its inaugural trip to Vancouver, after having made the voyage from Vancouver to Victoria earlier in the day.

The ferry arrived in Vancouver slightly ahead of schedule and, after a short delay disembarking, passengers began filing out just ahead of the scheduled 5:30 p.m. arrival time.

Although the ship seats 254 passengers, fewer than 50 souls had ventured out on the maiden voyage to Vancouver. Most of those were in the lower deck, Premium Comfort seats, which were being offered at \$60 one way as part of a first-time promotion (regular one-way fare will be \$120). Some passengers were scattered through First Class (\$199 one way with a three-course meal), while the upper-deck Royal Class seats (\$254 with a three-course meal), were virtually empty on this day.

My friend and I had facing window seats in Premium Class. The leather chairs were comfortable and the windows offered ample views. The table, which features wooden topographic outlines of Vancouver Island, Metro Vancouver and the Salish Sea, had room to spread out reading material, a computer (there is free onboard Wi-Fi) and food and beverages, which were available at the nearby snack counter.

If you want to go outside, the ship offers two decks: a smaller, sheltered one and a larger one topside.

The weather was sunny and mild and seas calm as the ferry set sail, although we encountered some light chop as the ship motored past the Ogden Point breakwater and into the Juan de Fuca Strait.

> See VANCOUVER, page D8



Brunch, lunch or a swim: Life is easy at Aitutaki Lagoon Resort on Aitutaki Island in the Cook Islands.
PHOTOS BY STEVE HAGGERTY, TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

COOK ISLANDS

South Pacific trip serves easy-going slice of life

ANNE Z. COOKE
Tribune News Service

AVARUA, Rarotonga, Cook Islands

It was a quiet afternoon on Rarotonga, in the Cook Islands, when Lydia Nga got the news. Overnight her homeland, 15 Polynesian islands west of Tahiti, a paradise smaller than Detroit, had grown exponentially, reborn as a 1.8-million-square-kilometre nation.

But it wasn't the islands that grew. In 1982, the Third United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea ruled that coastal nations had jurisdiction over an "exclusive economic zone," defined as a 320-kilometre stretch of ocean measured from the shoreline. Most countries welcomed the idea. But for a tiny nation like the Cooks, population 15,000, it was a Cinderella promise.

Fast forward 35 years to last August and our first visit to Rarotonga, the main island, lured by the thought of shimmering blue lagoons, gentle breezes, home-town smiles and fewer tourist visits per year than Florida's Disneyworld gets in two days.

"And how about that economic zone, the one the guidebook described?" asked my husband. Had success spoiled Rarotonga's Polynesian charms?

Not really, according to my friend Kathy, who stays up on these things. "The last time we looked, the Cooks were like Hawaii in the 1960s, 50 years behind everybody else," she said. (I knew what she was thinking: If it doesn't have a spa, it isn't luxury.) "Ask around, see what people say and let me know," she added.



Strolling before breakfast on popular Muri Beach, with motu (islet) Taakoka and the outer reef at rear, on Rarotonga.

As our overnight flight from Los Angeles descended over a clutch of green volcanic peaks, my first view of the lagoon, its sandy shoreline, scattered roofs and rows of palms was reassuring. I figured we'd greet the dawn with a stroll along the beach, cool off in the lagoon, maybe even snorkel near the outer reef, where the coral clumps into mounds.

But Nga, my email contact in the tourist office, now known affectionately as Auntie Lydia, had a request. So before bolting for the lagoon, we paid a visit to Ocean Specialist Kevin Iro to hear about the Marae Moana Marine Park conservation project, and to learn why an in-depth survey of every fold and ripple within the Cook's 1.8-million-square kilometres is long overdue.

"Marae Moana means ocean domain," said Iro, an athletic fig-

ure in shorts, ushering us and a half-dozen high school kids into a cramped lecture room with rows of desks, its only decor a large TV screen for presentations and a half-dozen back-lit photos of tropical fish and coral.

"The ocean domain is a mindset, an idea," he said, putting a chart on the screen. "It's a shift in the way we see ourselves." Not as separate islands, he said, but as a single marine nation. As the owner of vast, still untapped resources, the government needed to appoint a task force to head the project.

It was also time for a just-caught, grilled fish sandwich at one of Rarotonga's many ocean-side cafés, where picnic-table seating guarantees conversation. And so began our education.

> See BIKE, page D9



TRAVEL NOTES

Golf course on Maui plans upgrade

WAILUKU, Hawaii — Kaanapali Golf Course on Maui's west coast plans to modernize buildings dating from the 1960s, *The Maui News* says.

The property currently includes two 18-hole championship golf courses. Developers want to create a 27-hole championship course and a nine-hole, par-3 course.

Other plans include constructing a 136-room boutique hotel; adding 80,000 square feet of retail space; and developing 56 oceanfront condominiums and 100 to 200 multifamily ocean-view residences.

— The Associated Press

End in sight for Hearst pool job

SAN SIMEON, California — Visitors to Hearst Castle on California's central coast should be able to see its extravagant Neptune Pool full of water this year.

State parks official Dan Falat says restoration of the 1.35-million-litre pool should be complete by late summer or fall. The pool was drained in 2014 and repairs have been underway for more than a year.

— The Associated Press

Mayor pitches aerial tram

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti has floated the possibility of building an aerial tram to the Hollywood sign.

Leron Gubler, CEO of the Hollywood Chamber of commerce, said the idea has been around for at least two decades, but was largely viewed as a pipe dream.

But the recent closure of a gate leading to the sign has brought new discussion of ways to make the landmark accessible.

— The Associated Press



DESTINATIONS

Cancun	31
Hong Kong	27
Honolulu	28
London	18
Paris	20
Madrid	21
New York City	11
Rome	26
Sydney	18



On Aitutaki Island, Cook Islands: Calm and as clear, Aitutaki Lagoon is the stuff of dreams. Protected from wind and waves but continuously refreshed by the ocean spill-over, a lagoon's unique ecosystem nurtures birds, fish, crabs, clams, mollusks, coral and every other marine organism, including people. STEVE HAGGERTY, TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

FROM PAGE D7

Bike tours explore coast, historic inland track

If our table mates happened to be islanders on a lunch break, they described the Cooks' historic connection with New Zealand, where almost everyone has relatives and yearly visits are the norm.

When it's time for college, ambitious students generally go to New Zealand or Australia.

At the Moorings Café, we learned that New Zealand's Maoris originally came from Rarotonga.

Facing a fight with a rival clan, they loaded up their ocean-going canoes — vakas — and pushed off for parts unknown.

And raw sea slugs? They are a favourite snack.

At Charlie's Café, I was thrilled to be sitting with people speaking Cook Island Maori, one of the few Polynesian languages still in common use.

A required subject in school, it lives on despite colonial rule, a minor role in the Second World War, tourism and even cell-phones.

Curious about the rest of Rarotonga, we decided to rent mountain bikes to explore the 32-kilometre-long circle-island road, "a good way to get your bearings," according to my guidebook.

We could have raced, but it was much more fun to poke along, stop at vista points, look for craft shops and wave at friendly motorcycle riders.

It was so energizing, in fact, that we joined a second guided ride with Dave and Tami Furnell, owners of Storytellers Eco Cycle Tours, a local outfitter.

With rain threatening and 11 of us geared up and ready, we headed for the inland road, the historic, 1,000-year-old "ara metua," a grassy, gravelly track built at the base of the volcanoes.

Following Tami among the farm fields, we discovered why restaurant food was so fresh. Away from the coast, it was all produce: taro (the edible leaf variety), salad greens and tomatoes, pumpkins and red peppers, onions and bananas, and orchards growing limes, oranges, papaya, star fruit and noni.

Stopping beside the nonis, prized as a health tonic and mosquito repellent, Tami pulled off a couple of soft smelly fruits, broke them into pieces and to a chorus of "yuck, icky, sticky" and gales of laughter, dared us to rub them over our necks, arms and legs.

Since no visit would be complete without a couple days on neighboring Aitutaki (eye-too-TOCK-kee), world-famous for its lagoon, we flew over, checked into an over-water cabin at the Aitutaki Lagoon Resort and booked a lagoon cruise with Tere (pronounced "Terry"), owner of Te King Lagoon Cruises.

Piling into Tere's 12-passenger

boat, we sped south across the lagoon, rounding the motus (islets), searching for coral gardens and stopping to snorkel.

And after you've spent a morning in the heart of one of these shimmering turquoise aquariums — lakes within a coral reef — you can't help but marvel.

Protected from wind and waves but continuously refreshed by the ocean spill-over, a lagoon's unique ecosystem nurtures birds, fish, crabs, clams, mollusks, coral and every other marine organism, including people.

And while we gazed around us, literally in awe, Tere peppered us with Maori legends, celebrity anecdotes and marine biology.

After a stop at One Foot Island — where "been there, loved it" passport stamps are issued — and a grilled chicken picnic, we headed back.

On our last evening, we squeezed in one of the twice-a-month dinners served at the Plantation House, the colonial home of former restaurant owner Louis Enoka.

Dinner here, prepared by Chef Minar Henderson for 20 to 26 guests and served twice a month only, offers not just a blend of island-grown ingredients but an evening with islanders for whom cultural traditions and 21st-century science go hand-in-hand.

Finding an empty chair, I was boggle-eyed to find I was sitting next to the prime minister, Henry Puna, who studied law in New Zealand and Australia before turning to politics.

With dishes guaranteed to encourage conversation — everything from prawns with lemon-grass to coconut-flavoured rice and couscous with kaffir lime — we managed to cover pearl farming on Manihiki, the search for rare-earth minerals and the importance of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (which U.S. President Donald Trump has abandoned).

He reminisced about the evening he hosted U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, whom he found to be delightful, intelligent and informed.

But it was the pan-seared mahi mahi with ginger and garlic that added a somber note.

"Your president doesn't believe in clean energy," he said. But, we agreed, global warming is creating rising seas, threatening atolls like Aitutaki.

"Yes, we're worried," said Puna, "but we're doing our part. Right now, 50 per cent of the islands' electric power comes from solar installations. By 2020, the Cook Islands will be 100 per cent solar."

If only the rest of us could say that.



A half-day ride on Rarotonga with Storytellers Eco Cycle Tours wraps up with a tropical shower. TNS



Auntie Lydia, with the Tourism Office, wears the traditional flower "ei," first cousin to a Hawaiian lei. STEVE HAGGERTY, TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE



An Aitutaki Lagoon tour boat. At One Foot Island, "been there, loved it" passport stamps are issued. FRANK WINKLER

THE NITTY-GRITTY ON THE COOK ISLANDS

Weather: The best time to visit is during North America's summer, June through September, when it's warm and dry. December through March, the rainy season, is hotter and more humid. Shoulder months — April, May October and November — are variable.

Getting around: You may not need to rent a car. Most activities, cafés and beaches are close enough to go by bicycle. For longer explorations, check out outfitters such as Tik e-tours (tik-etours.com) and Storytellers Eco Cycle Tours (storytellers.co.ck).

Flight: Air New Zealand and Air Canada fly to Rarotonga from Vancouver.

Cook Islands Tourism: At cookislands.travel. For dinner reservations at the Plantation House, email iliving@oyster.net.ck.

Lodging: Small hotels and family-run inns offering comfortable, affordable lodging are posted online or listed on Cook Islands tourism sites.

Rustic, thatched cottages at the two four-star Pacific Resorts, one on Rarotonga and one on Aitutaki, offer full amenities, luxuriant landscaping, a restaurant, bar and swimming pool.

Some units have a kitchenette. Rates vary according to date, size, and ocean or garden views. Book early; Pacific Resorts are a favorite with frequent travellers.

The Aitutaki property has additional hotel rooms in the adjacent building. For details, go to pacificresort.com.

Lodging at the Aitutaki Lagoon Resort, the only resort on a small motu, ranges from modest self-catering cabins to spacious and attractively furnished cottages. Ten over-water bungalows have lagoon-access outside decks, lagoon-access steps, outdoor showers, large bathrooms with double sinks and a kitchenette corner.

The main lodge has a restaurant and adjacent pool; seclusion and lagoon access are its outstanding features.

Rarotonga now has several five-star properties, some with spas. Look for Rumours Luxury Villas & Spa, Te Manava Luxury Villas & Spa and Nautilus Resort, all on Muri Beach, on Rarotonga's southeast coast.