

Cruising the Society Islands

by Monica Frim

Photography by Dr. John Frim and Monica Frim



Monica Frim says, “Ship ahoy!” as she boards the m/s Paul Gauguin in Tahiti for a luxury cruise of the Society Islands, an archipelago in French Polynesia. Excursions to the islands and lagoons of Huahine, Bora Bora, Moorea and Tahiti take her to sacred sites, bird’s eye lookouts, coral gardens, and underwater adventures with stingrays and sharks.

Anyone who has ever fantasized about an idyllic island will experience a sense of déjà vu in French Polynesia. While hundreds of islands lie scattered on a map like tossed rice at a wedding, a handful of them have become so fabled in stories, songs and paintings that you can taste their ripeness and smell the bounty of their seas and gardens just from hearsay and renown. And when you finally arrive and see for yourself the sky-scraping mountains bursting out of satiny lagoons like razor-backed dragons with emerald tiaras, the scene is

everything you ever imagined a South Seas paradise to be complete with sandy “motus” — flat, palm-fringed coral islets that encircle the rugged volcanic islands like pearls in a necklace.

A Purpose-Built Ship



Bora Bora, Moorea and Tahiti are the mainstay stops on the cruise circuit that also includes other islands in the Society Islands group, one of five archipelagos that make up French Polynesia. Although many people refer to the Society Islands

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collectively as Tahiti, Tahiti is actually the island that most often serves as the gateway to other islands. Numerous cruise lines ply the waters, but not all ships are created equal — some are simply too large to anchor in the shallow, reef-laden lagoons.

The m/s Paul Gauguin is a luxury cruise ship designed specifically for the shallow lagoons of the South Pacific. Named after the 19th century Post-Impressionist artist (and not so noble savage of Tahiti), the ship has a capacity of only 332 passengers and some 200 crew, which gives it the lowest passenger-to-crew ratio of any luxury liner. All suites and staterooms have ocean views, ample storage space, a minibar stocked daily with both alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks at no additional cost, and most come with a private balcony. As expected, a cruise of this caliber does not come cheap. The attentive service and convenience of having everything — including all meals, tips and alcoholic beverages, even air travel from the West Coast to Papeete on Air Tahiti Nui — included in the price sweetens the package.

Flight to Paradise

With Air Tahiti Nui, the Pacific island immersion begins well before you're even airborne. From the moment you step on board, the thick,



A floating bar and welcoming serenade at Motu Mahana, Paul Gauguin Cruises' private island in Taha'a, Society Islands.



Tiny islets known as motus surround the island of Bora Bora.



Fresh coconut cocktails



The Tahitian gardenia or tiaré is the national flower of French Polynesia

tropical scent of tiaré, the white gardenia that is Tahiti's national flower, wafts throughout the predominantly sea- and sky-colored cabin. You see one... then another... and another — pinwheels of creamy petals pinned seductively behind the ears of flight attendants with satiny black hair pulled into a bun. Iridescent black pearls — Tahiti's most exquisite jewelry — stud their earlobes with black-tinged greenish-blue orbs. Already you feel as if you're in the tropics.

But it's the friendly all-inclusive service that sets Air Tahiti Nui apart from its no-frills North American counterparts. There are no additional fees for luggage, meals, drinks or headphones. All passengers, not just those in business class, get toiletry bags with socks and other amenities. It's still a long flight — 8 1/2 hours from Los Angeles to Papeete. If it weren't for the typical airplane seats, getting there would be almost as good as being there.

Islands With Personality

The Society Islands consist mostly of soaring volcanic peaks surrounded by barrier reefs that protect them from the brunt of the pummeling surf. But for all their similar landforms, the islands have distinguishing strong suits. Bora Bora's incredible lagoon is a favorite for water-based activities. Moorea's rugged interior mountains, ribboned with hiking trails and waterfalls,



Preparing coconut cocktails
on Motu Mahana



Matira Point on the
island of Bora Bora

Cruising the Society Islands



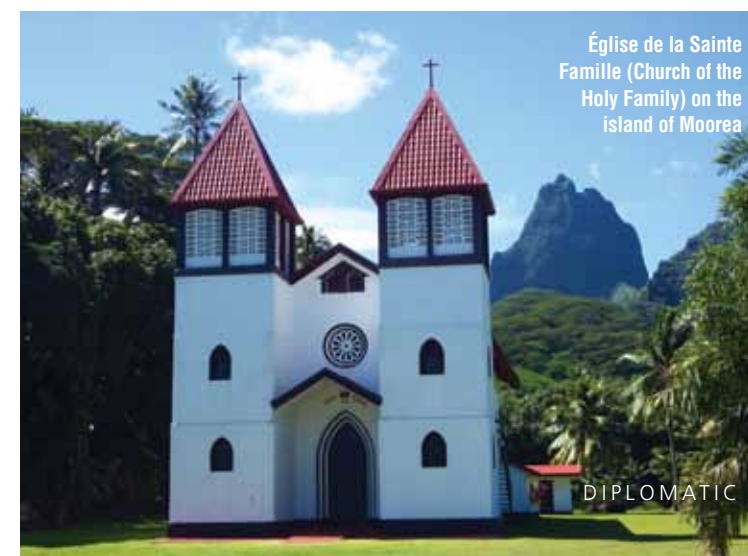
hold sway for land-based activities. Tahiti has a noisy, traffic-choked six-lane highway running through its most populous city (Papeete), yet Tahaa remains a quiet backwater known mostly for vanilla plantations and a girdle of sandy, white motus. Huahine is perhaps the newest island to develop a tourist following, yet the most diverse in terms of culture.

Huahine

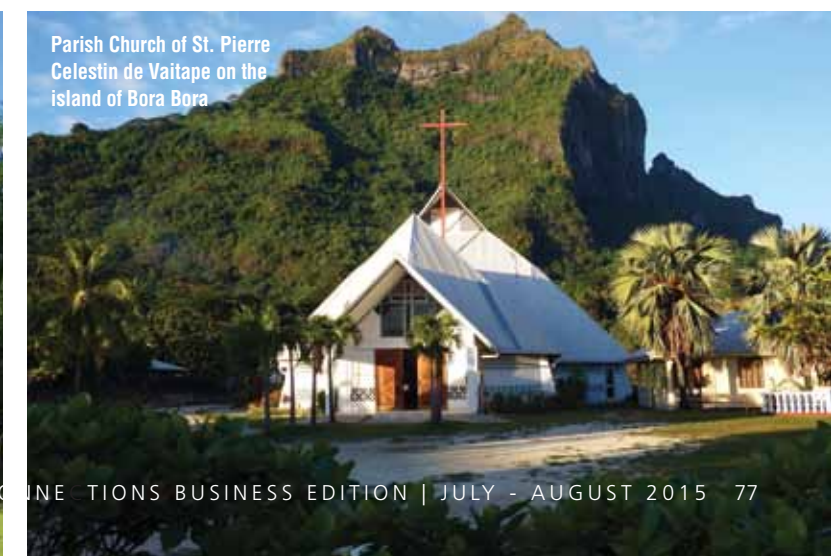
We approached Huahine, the first island on our cruise itinerary, in the nacreous luster of early morning when its

volcanic hillsides spread like thick black tentacles atop a tinny sea. Then, like a Polaroid print developing before our eyes, the colors sharpened into mountains of green, the various shades overlapping like leaves in a salad, while the surrounding lagoon bled with all the blues of a Pantone color guide.

Huahine is arguably the most authentic island of the archipelago, shaped by myths and legends that still linger. Its marae (stone temples) and stone fish traps are the best-preserved archaeological sites in all of the Society Islands, and its sacred blue-eyed eels are still venerated by villagers who feed them



Église de la Sainte
Famille (Church of the
Holy Family) on the
island of Moorea



Parish Church of St. Pierre
Celestin de Vaitape on the
island of Bora Bora

bits of fish as their reward for having brought clean water to the village. Although the island is a latecomer to the jet-setter bandwagon, its white sandy beaches and surrounding lagoon make for snorkeling and diving experiences that rival those on other islands. And it's one of the best places to pick up Polynesian souvenirs such as black pearls (at the island's only pearl farm), "pareos" (a wraparound cloth that can be worn in many configurations) and "tifaifai" (appliquéd quilts).

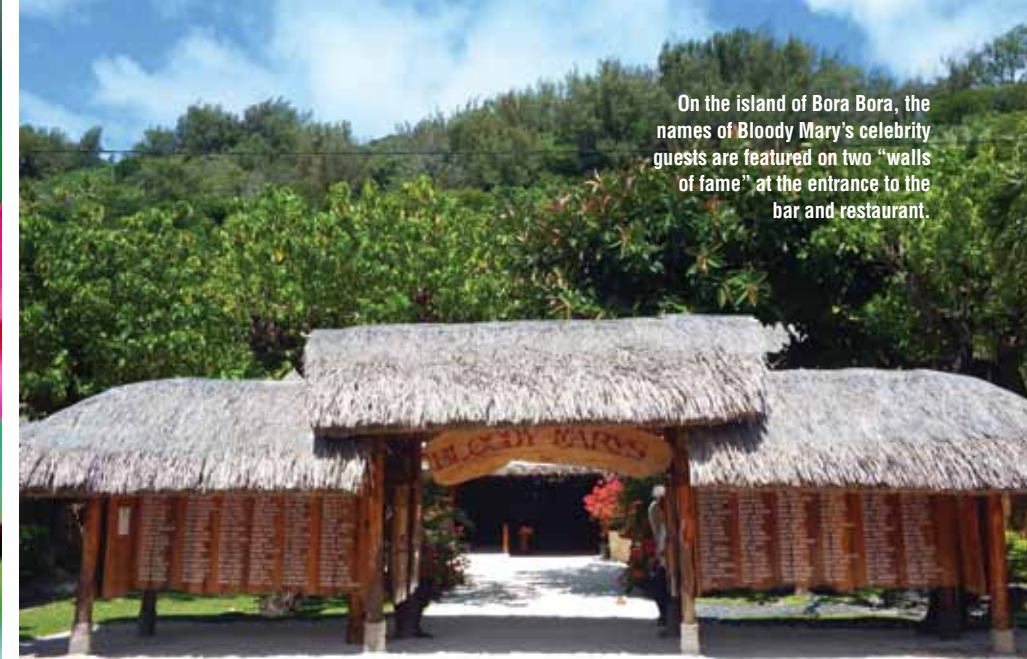
Bora Bora

But if Huahine prevails in culture and tradition, Bora Bora comes closest to the stereotypical vision of an idyllic South Seas paradise. It has been written about in endless purple prose, yet no cliché can adequately describe that first glimpse from a ship when Otemanu and Pahia, Bora Bora's highest peaks, rise like pincers out of a luminescent lagoon. Dappled sunlight and puffy clouds dance textured shadows over the mountains and sprinkle the surrounding lagoon in jewel-like shades of blue: aquamarine, sapphire, beryl, cobalt and turquoise depending on the depth of the water. Bora Bora really is as beautiful as they say.

It was on Bora Bora that Marlon Brando fell in love dur-

ing the filming of the 1961 movie, "Mutiny on the Bounty," then married Tarita Teriipaia, his 19-year-old co-star. While the marriage didn't last, Bora Bora's renown as, arguably, the most romantic island in the world did. "South Pacific," the musical that Rodgers and Hammerstein based loosely on James Michener's novel "Tales of the South Pacific," also furthered the island's romantic image, although its fictional Bali Hai was not in Bora Bora, as some people believe, but in Moorea. No matter. Bora Bora's famous Bloody Mary's Restaurant & Bar still manages to capitalize on the film and musical by displaying the names of some 230 celebrities who have dined or performed there on two walls of fame at the entrance to the thatched roof, sandy-floored restaurant.

I have always maintained that travels to exotic places should be opportunities for new experiences. Although Bora Bora's wide barrier reef provides a variety of snorkeling and boating excursions that include close-up experiences with sharks, stingrays and coral gardens, it was a company called Aquabike Adventure that literally propelled me into a new undertaking. Sitting on an underwater scooter, my husband John and I descended into the glassy depths of the lagoon. The seafloor rose as the sky closed like a bubble of molten



On the island of Bora Bora, the names of Bloody Mary's celebrity guests are featured on two "walls of fame" at the entrance to the bar and restaurant.

glass over our heads — as if an inverted bowl had trapped us, from the shoulders up, in its air bubble.

Down we went: four... six... eight... 10 feet... yet our heads stayed dry. We could breathe normally and talk to each other as easily as if we had been riding on land thanks to dive tanks that provided a continuous airflow. Above us the lagoon splintered into mesmerizing patterns of refracted blue sunlight. Below, banks of corals shaped like florets, brains and spongy knobs lived a symbiotic life with clams, crustaceans and fish. John steered the Aquabike through coral canyons guided by the mimed directions of a SCUBA diver out front. I occasionally stuck my hand out the side so the diver could hand me an array of items: a starfish, an empty clam with both shells still joined and bread to feed the fish. Hundreds of black- and white-striped sergeant majors swarmed like prisoners on a rampage, pulling at the mushy bread with nips that tickled my fingers. When there was nothing left in my hand, they moved en masse to the front window to which the diver had attached more bread. The curtain of fish was almost impenetrable. We could barely see where we were going.

Back on land we launched into a circle-island tour, from the main city of Vaitape past stands of taro and breadfruit and hotel resorts tucked into tiny inlets. We passed maraes, somewhat less imposing than the ones on Huahine, a river that trickled over concrete stairs, Matira Beach and several lookouts that provided expansive views of the motus with their ubiquitous over-water bungalows. Mount Otemanu loomed like a sentinel over every part of the island.

At one point, our Marquesan guide, Teva, veered from the paved road, bouncing the Land Rover over bumps and troughs in the hillside. My teeth practically rattled like castanets. In this thick tropical jungle, the ruts in the road could have swallowed

a small truck. We stopped at a plateau with views in one direction of Motu Toopua and Motu Tevairoa at either end of a string of tiny uninhabited motus that, from this height, looked like a necklace of black pearls on a patterned blue shawl. And there, in the middle of the lagoon was our ship, the Paul Gauguin, floating like a tiny white gel capsule in a bowl of Blue Curaçao. In the opposite direction, the views over Vaitape and the Teavanui Pass were just as dramatic. But Teva had brought us here to show us something that didn't quite match the universal



You don't need to be a certified diver or even a swimmer to drive an underwater scooter with Aquabike Adventure on the island of Bora Bora.

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Swimming with stingrays tame enough to pet on the island of Moorea.

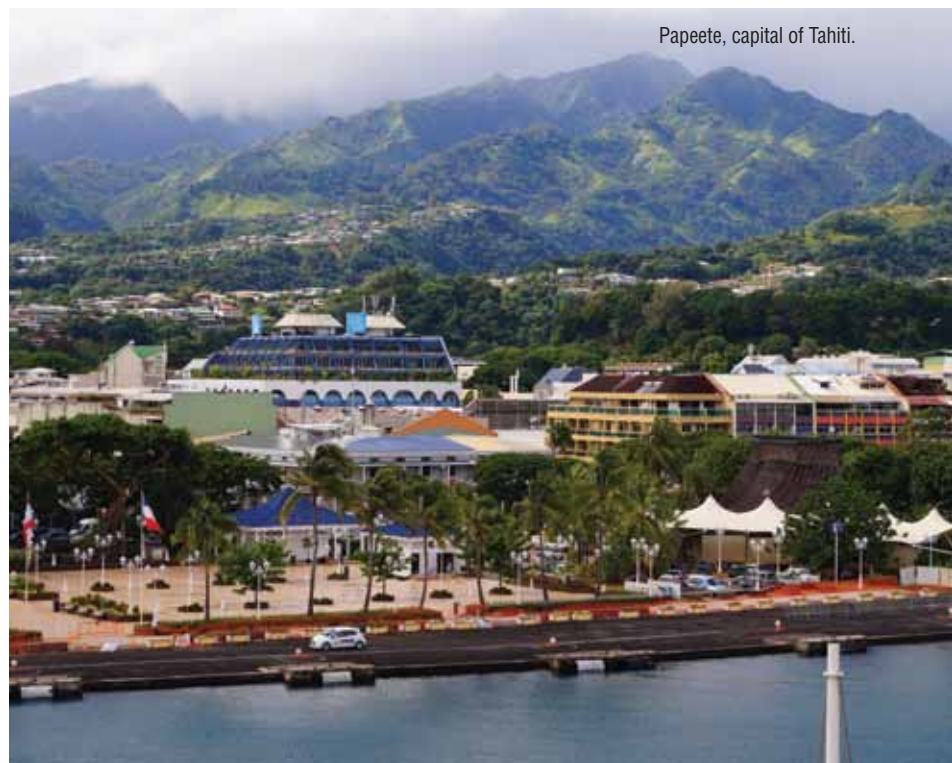


Overwater bungalows on
Motu Toopua, Bora Bora.

image of paradise — two cannons (out of eight on the island left over from World War II when the United States developed Bora Bora as a military supply base) poked through the foliage out over the lagoon. Interestingly they had never been fired in battle.

Moorea

Paradise means different things to different people, which is why Moorea competes with Bora Bora as a favored port of call among cruise ships and with Tahiti as a place to live. Many people who work in Tahiti live on the island of Moorea. Incredibly, it can take less time to get to Papeete by ferry than by car. Moreover, life on Moorea is quieter. For tourists, Moorea's serrated peaks rival those of Bora Bora but are somewhat more accessible. A good, paved road takes you past three maraes to the famed Belve-



Papeete, capital of Tahiti.

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dere on the ridge of a caldera 1,000 feet below the summit of Mount Tohivea. From this lookout the sweeping views over Mount Rotui flanked by Cook's Bay and Opunohu Bay on either side are breathtaking.

While Moorea's green pinnacles and deep-dish valleys appeal to the senses, the island's heaving lagoon hints of adventure. Snorkelling with sharks and stingrays was just the ticket to stir the serotonin without spiking the adrenaline. As we rode the motorboat that would take us to the snorkel site, the sun was turning the water's burnished sheen from zinc to layers of blue. The term "50 shades of blue" came to mind as yellow-green shorelines turned to strips of turquoise, aquamarine, sapphire and lapis lazuli — glistening in the sunshine like the precious and semi-precious jewels their colors evoked. In places the change in color was as abrupt as a crisply folded sheet of paper. Elsewhere the hues mingled and swirled like magnifications of blue agate marbles.

I was attracted to the sea as much as I was afraid of it. I had seen stingrays before, even touched them, but always with some apprehension. I could never think of sharks exclu-

sive of the movie "Jaws." It took me a few minutes to realize that these rays, though big as table tops, were playful as kittens and just as soft. I half expected them to purr as they rubbed against my thighs and shoulders like cats claiming ownership. I felt a bit more trepidation snorkeling face to face with the sharks. Although I had been assured that reef sharks don't bite, I questioned whether the sharks knew that.

Tahitian Wrap-Up

Back on board the Paul Gauguin, I gathered my memories of islands and entertainment. Wiggling coastlines, viney jungle trails, gardens perfumed with the syrupy scent of red ginger and white-petal edtiaré, melony sunbeams, claw-like peaks, sugary sand, rainbow-hued fish and flowery coral gardens swirled with snippets of shipboard pastimes. I recalled the sumptuous meals in the ship's three restaurants; lectures by the likes of environmentalist Jean-Michel Cousteau, anthropologist Mark Eddowes and international art dealer Laurance Rudzinoff; evening entertainment by Polynesian song and dance troupes, international musical luminaries



Polynesian entertainers aboard the m/s Paul Gauguin.

Courtesy of Frank Lloyd Trust. Photographer: Tim Long



Overwater bungalows of the Sofitel Resort on the island of Moorea.



and the ship's very own "Gauguins" and "Gauguines" — Polynesian entertainers who also serve as greeters and instructors for various Tahitian crafts and demonstrations throughout the cruise. I packed them into the chambers of my mind, much like my cruise wear into my suitcase. We'd be leaving our shipboard home the next morning and I needed my memories accessible.

I needn't have worried. Tahiti, the grand matriarch of the Society Islands, perfectly summed up the next day all I had seen and experienced. While exploring the grounds of the InterContinental Tahiti Resort & Spa, I discovered the resort was a microcosm of French Polynesia with miniature pineapple and vanilla plantations, an herb garden, a turtle pond, a lagoonarium for guests to snorkel among corals and tropical fish, even a small man-made coral island for two.

Tahiti wasn't so much a destination — although the cruise included a wonderful historical tour of Papeete's environs — as a reprieve: a place to process the vacation, allow it to percolate and seep into your psyche before returning home. ■

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