

A Polynesian woman wades near *Paul Gauguin's* private islet, Motu Mahana.

*A cruise on the Paul Gauguin
offers the ultimate getaway*

LANDFALLS IN PARADISE





LEFT: Graceful palms overhang Bora Bora's tranquil shores.

RIGHT: The *Paul Gauguin* anchors off Bora Bora; Les Gauguines sing Tahitian songs on Motu Mahana.



STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES AND MARY LOVE

For the person who can regain an innocent nerve and a tolerance for repetition...for those who can endure a natural beauty that is soaring and massive and vivid to the point of disbelief...the Pacific is endlessly intriguing.

—Eugene Burdick, *The Blue of Capricorn*

Having read books such as Thor Heyerdahl's *Kon-Tiki*, Herman Melville's *Typee* and others at a young age, we'd dreamed for years of visiting French Polynesia—five island groups located midway between California and New Zealand that, for many, are the ultimate “escapist” destination.

The question was always “how” but never “if” we'd make a visit. Should we become stowaways on a freighter, convince the skipper of a yacht to take us on as crew—or find another way to get there?

The answer became obvious when we discovered the *Paul Gauguin*—the *only* cruise ship offering year-round itineraries in French Polynesia. Several of our friends had already made repeat cruises on the ship. Their enthusiastic reports—plus the fact that the ship consistently appears on *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine's list of the world's Top 20 Small Cruise Ships—convinced us we couldn't go wrong.

We booked a seven-day cruise among French Polynesia's Society Islands, which included Tahiti, Moorea, Bora Bora, Raiatea, Taha'a and the cruise line's small, private island, Motu Mahana.

As it turned out, the *Paul Gauguin* was ideal. Built to cruise the shallow waters of French Polynesia, it takes guests to lagoons inaccessible to larger ships, overnighting at calm anchorages with stunning scenery. An attentive crew—pampering just 330 guests—provided first-class service.



Like a strand of Tahitian pearls, luxury bungalows extend over the blue waters inside Moorea's barrier reef.





On Bora Bora, children play in the clear water beneath Mount Otemanu, an extinct volcano.

RIGHT: Bora Bora's highest peak is 2,385 feet above sea level.



The ship's casual, elegant ambience and activities ranging from land excursions to water sports (snorkeling, scuba diving, kayaking and more) appealed to travelers of all ages, not just retirees. Families with young children and couples celebrating a special anniversary seemed to enjoy themselves as much as honeymooners on a romantic getaway. No sedentary cruise crowd here...instead, active people looking for a compelling mix of fun, relaxation and adventure.

Everywhere the ship anchored, we were lulled by that timeless music—the surf crashing upon the outer reefs that protect Polynesia's quiet lagoons. Author James Michener's words came to mind: "Of the tropic sounds, none can compare with the thunder of surf upon the distant reef, where the coral halts the vast waves in full flight so that they writhe into the air like monstrous horses along the rim of a Greek bowl, neighing and thrashing their forefeet."

An overnight cruise from Tahiti took us to the island of Raiatea, the religious center of ancient Polynesia. A pearl farm visit—which included a presentation on growing pearls and, of course, some shopping—preceded a leisurely trip in an outrigger canoe up the Faaroa River, Polynesia's only navigable inland waterway. Gliding through dense palm and bamboo groves, we observed ancient *maraes* (open-air temples with low walls made of stacked stones and chunks of coral), where tribes once worshipped and made sacrifices to their gods.

One of the more remarkable excursions was a forest hike in Moorea's Opunohu Valley with archaeologist Mark Eddowes, a widely acknowledged expert on Polynesia. As we walked through a rainforest as enchanting as any in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, he identified trees from which,

A sailboat leaves Moorea's Opunohu Bay. In the background is Mount Mouaroa, also called the "Shark's Tooth."





ABOVE: Schools of reef fish, like these Sergeant Majors, are plentiful in the waters around Bora Bora. RIGHT: Outrigger canoe racing is a popular sport in Polynesia. Here, a young man surfs the wake behind one of the *Paul Gauguin's* tenders.

in earlier times, outrigger canoes were made, provided vivid descriptions of the rituals of ancient Polynesians and took us to recently excavated *maraes*.

A barbecue on Motu Mahana, the cruise line's private island, would have satisfied a Polynesian chief and his subjects. An enormous outdoor buffet, set up in record time by the ship's crew, accompanied fine wines, cocktails and live Polynesian music. After lunch, should we snorkel on a nearby reef, paddle a kayak across the lagoon...or simply chill out with another superpotent rum cocktail or oversized dessert under a coconut tree? Such were the choices in paradise!

But the *Paul Gauguin* always occupied center stage. Three restaurants consistently served sophisticated, healthy cuisine. One restaurant featured dishes by Chef Jean-Pierre Vigato, *chef-propietaire* of the world-renowned, two-star Michelin-rated Parisian restaurant, Apicius. Between meals and excursions ashore, the ship's award-winning spa, with facials, body wraps and signature Polynesian massages, offered yet another way to find nirvana.

Each day, lecturers provided informative talks on topics ranging from Polynesian history to Pacific marine life and Tahitian pearls. Les Gauguines, a troupe of lovely Tahitian women who served as shipboard hostesses, entertainers and informants about local culture—clothing, mu-

sic instruments, dancing, handicrafts and more—added genuine, Polynesian hospitality to all activities. A dance performance onboard by O Tahiti E, Tahiti's top music and dance group, provided a hip-gyrating, drum-thumping finale to our week at sea.

Our last evening, we cruised at twilight from Moorea toward Tahiti. A mile offshore, we looked back into Opunohu Bay and Cook's Bay, two of the South Pacific's iconic settings. Mountain peaks rose toward wispy clouds, tinted crimson by the setting sun. To the east, a full moon looked over the sea and two outrigger canoes slicing through the surf.

French Polynesia's mountains, lagoons and native people were as lovely and alluring as the images that had haunted our imaginations for decades. Now, the question had become: How soon can we return? ➤

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information, go to pgcruises.com and view our mini-documentary at charlestonstyleanddesign.com. We suggest extending your stay on the island of Moorea at the Intercontinental Moorea Resort & Spa (tahiti.intercontinental.com), a short ferry ride from Tahiti.

Charles and Mary Love are journalists, photographers and filmmakers based in the Southeast. Website: imagyn.com

