

# Ticket to

Luxury cruising in French Polynesia aboard the m/s *Paul Gauguin*



# Paradise

Story by Ming Tappin

Photos courtesy of Paul Gauguin Cruises



Y

ou know that oldie from Eddie Money: "I've got two tickets to paradise. Won't you pack your bags, we'll leave tonight." I wonder if he was thinking about going to French Polynesia when he recorded the hit song about taking his girlfriend on vacation. Let's face it: When most people think of paradise, they usually conjure images of turquoise seas, endless blue sky and powdery white sand beaches on a faraway island. And when it comes to paradise, you can't get any better than French Polynesia.

Except, of course, when you arrive there on the m/s *Paul Gauguin*.

Although the 100-plus island groups usually appear at the very edge of world maps, as if they'll fall off the end of the earth, French Polynesia isn't as far as you may think. To reach the port of Papeete on the island of Tahiti, a nonstop flight from Los Angeles only takes eight and a half hours, or, as my friend likes to say: "It's just two cocktails past Hawaii." It's even in the same time zone as Hawaii, but the similarities end there. These South Pacific isles get the same number of visitors in one year that Hawaii gets in one month. So if you're looking to escape the crowds and tourist traps, French Polynesia is definitely the place to be.

My itinerary was a 14-night cruise aboard the *Paul Gauguin*, sailing from Papeete through the Society Islands, the Tuamotus and the Marquesas — three of the five island groups that make up French Polynesia



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## Onboard amenities

The *Paul Gauguin*, aptly named after the French post-Impressionist who drew inspiration from these islands, is purpose-built to sail the Polynesian waters. With a shallow draft and a U-shaped hull, the *Gauguin* can anchor close to shore, bringing her guests to the islands within minutes. Her ample, open decks allow for maximum enjoyment of dramatic sailaways and blazing sunsets.

To allow easy access to French Polynesia's colorful lagoons, a watersports marina unfolds from the ship's stern for guests to enjoy complimentary toys, such as kayaks, windsurf boards and stand-up paddleboards. Complimentary snorkeling gear is also available for use during the cruise. PADI-certified divers can choose from a myriad of excursions at each port, and a certification program is available on-board.

All accommodations have ocean views, and 70 percent of the staterooms have private verandas for admiring the breathtaking scenery. Two onboard restaurants and a casual open-air grill serve delicious meals, including locally-caught seafood. Continental and regional fare prevails, but a partnership with Michelin-starred French Chef Jean-Pierre Vigato also brings a fusion of French cuisine and local ingredients. There's also complimentary room service if you can't tear yourself away from your private veranda.

## First-rate service

Everyone on-board could not get over the congenial and intuitive service, and how genuine the crewmembers were. "I'm seriously concerned," said my friend at the breakfast buffet halfway through the cruise. "I don't know how I'll manage to take my cereal to the table by myself when I get home. They never let me carry anything!" We shared a good laugh, and sure enough, later that day at afternoon tea we saw a 6-foot-tall man walking to his table as a waiter carried his tiny bowl of ice cream for him. Surely he could have managed the feat himself, but on-board the *Paul Gauguin*, the staff wouldn't have it any other way.

Outstanding service like this is what makes the *Gauguin* so special. With 217 crewmembers serving a maximum of 332 guests, the staff truly got to know our likes and wishes. After meeting me on the first day, all crewmembers addressed me by name for the next two weeks. They had an incredible memory for everything. I couldn't name the wonderful wine I enjoyed at dinner several nights previous, but my wine steward, Adrian, remembered and poured it for me again.

Speaking of libations, all beverages on-board the *Paul Gauguin* are included. Feel like a glass of champagne at sailaway, an iced cappuccino while poolside, a soda with lunch or a glass of wine with dinner? It's yours for the asking. Each stateroom fridge is stocked with sodas, bottled water and beer, and is replenished daily.

## Soak up the culture

Our days at sea were peaceful and lazy. A leisurely breakfast, a visit to the spa or a dip in the pool preceded lounging on-deck with a cold drink in the afternoon. For those seeking enrichment, there were lectures, documentary films, and Polynesian arts and crafts. On our trip, there was an art professor who specialized in the artwork of Paul Gauguin; she delivered several lectures about the life and works of the artist whose final resting place we were about to visit.

Evening entertainment featured authentic performances by local artists; however, they were not kitschy luaus you've likely seen in Hawaii. We enjoyed traditional Polynesian warrior dances where the performers belted out war cries accompanied by thunderous drums carved from native wood and wrapped with animal skins. In between numbers, young girls provided vocal introductions through harmonized melodies. The Otea followed, with fast rhythmic drumming and mesmerizing hip shaking by women wearing elaborate headdresses and traditional skirts made of hibiscus bark.

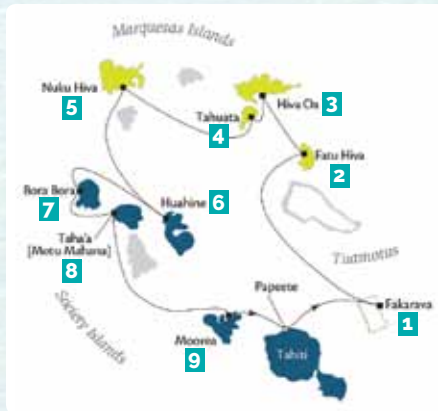
The ship's social hosts, Les Gauguins and Les Gauguines, added to the South Pacific vibe on-board. This group of young men and women all hail from French Polynesia, and their sole job is to interact with guests and share their history and culture through storytelling, music and dance. In addition, a dedicated space on-board showcases French Polynesian culture through a display of wood carvings, sculptures and artifacts.

Soaking up the culture is one thing, but most people also bring home memories of French Polynesia





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## Cruise with Paul Gauguin

The *Paul Gauguin* sails year-round in French Polynesia from Papeete, with seven-night sailings to the Society Islands; 10- and 11-night sailings, which also include the Tuamotus or the Cook Islands; and 14-night sailings visiting the Marquesas. Sailings for 2018 and 2019 are available for reservations. In 2019, there will be two special, one-time sailings to Tonga and Fiji.

Fares include round-trip economy flights from Los Angeles, airport transfers, all onboard meals and beverages, daily activities, nightly entertainment, watersports equipment, and gratuities to onboard staff.

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by way of a black pearl (or two). Carrying an exclusive collection of black pearl jewelry from Hinerava of Tahiti, La Boutique attracts daily visitors, including myself, who pine for the elaborate designs.

And of course, there was tea time every day, where we had our afternoon fix of finger sandwiches, pastries, cakes, and said bowls of ice cream delivered to the table by our dotting waiters.

We all came for days ashore. Our first stop was **Fakarava (1)**, a necklace of coral rising from the ocean in the Tuamotu archipelago. Designated as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, the atoll is a haven for snorkeling and diving with impossibly clear waters. Our excursion took us to two snorkeling spots where we swam amongst fish of all shapes, color and sizes. At our lunch stop on a deserted beach appropriately named the Blue Lagoon, we feasted on fire-roasted chicken, fish kabobs and sausages. We chowed down island-style, sitting on wooden benches, mooring buoys and fallen coconuts. None of us wanted to leave. But the highlight of our cruise awaited.

## Exploring the Marquesas

After a blissful day at sea, we arrived at the Marquesas. Rising out of the pounding South Pacific surf, the dramatic cliffs carpeted in lush forests were a sight to behold. The islands we visited have names as unusual as they are remote: **Fatu Hiva (2)**, **Hiva Oa (3)**, **Tahuata (4)** and **Nuku Hiva (5)**. Each time we stepped off our launch, we were greeted by what seemed like the entire village, with mamas, papas and children in grass skirts performing traditional songs and dances. We were treated as honored visitors, not money-toting tourists. Life is at its simplest here. Residents subsist by farming, raising livestock and making crafts. There is no traffic, no rush, no stress.

As most of the islands have no beaches due to high cliffs, excursions were typically 4x4 tours and scenic drives. In Fatu Hiva and Tahuata, I hiked in the hot sun and humid air amongst crowing roosters, clucking chickens and chirping birds. At every turn, I passed mango, papaya and guava trees dripping with ripe fruit. In Hiva Oa, everyone visited Paul Gauguin's grave, located underneath a fragrant plumeria tree high upon a hill overlooking the ocean. At Nuku Hiva — the administrative capital of the Marquesas — some hiked to the Survivor Season 4 base camp, and the daring went scuba diving with hammerhead sharks.

## Time in the Society Islands

Our second week was spent in the Society Islands. In **Huahine (6)**, four of us squeezed into a rental car to explore the island. Famous for its Polynesian marae — open-air archaeological sites dotting the roadside — the “Garden Island” also offers up spectacular coral reefs for snorkeling and diving. Most interesting are the blue-eyed eels that reside in Faie village, and ancient fish traps made of stacked stones that are still in use today.

**Bora Bora (7)** is no doubt the quintessential image of French Polynesia. The jagged pinnacle of Mount Otemanu surrounded by a brilliant turquoise lagoon is a sight for sore eyes. This is a playground for the rich, with luxury resorts and overwater bungalows commanding exorbitant rates — another good reason to arrive on the *Paul Gauguin*, where everything is included.

Our snorkeling excursion took us in search of manta and eagle rays (both successful), plus a stop at a colorful coral garden. There was enough time after lunch to zip over to the *Gauguin's* exclusive private beach, where there's nothing but a few coconut trees and a crewmember with a cooler full of beer, soda and water. I waded out 30 feet from shore, still in knee-deep water, sat down in the bath-temperature water and soaked up paradise. An afternoon shower passes by, but who cares? I'm already in the water and I have an ice-cold beer.

Just off the coast of Taha'a is **Motu Mahana (8)** — *Paul Gauguin's* private island, accessible only to the ship's privileged guests. This was a day to swim, snorkel and kayak, or take a tour to visit a vanilla farm; however, after a few eventful days in a row, I was less inclined. I simply lazed in the comfort of my sun lounger with a cocktail-filled coconut in hand. The only interruption to my day was a beachside massage, followed by a barbecue lunch of ribs, chicken, sausages, burgers and all the fixings (and yes, I had to try them all). Afterward, I soaked in that bath-temperature water again, listening to Les Gauguins and Les Gauguines serenading us with their ukuleles. And just as my coconut drink ran dry, my Adrian magically appeared alongside with his palm frond-covered floating bar to top me up.

On our last day in **Moorea (9)**, there were plenty of excursions to explore above and below the waterline, but we chose to rent a car to go hiking with two friends we had met on-board. The rugged trail took us to a spectacular viewpoint. Afterward, we drove to the Belvedere Lookout for more photo-ops. The view overlooking Cook's Bay and Opunohu Bay with the sharp peak of Mount Rotui in the middle is not to be missed. Car rentals in the Society Islands are easy to arrange, and driving is on the right. Rates are high, so it's best to share with a few traveling companions. Be prepared to drive a stick shift or pay a lot more for an automatic.

At the end of our two blissful weeks, we all agreed without a doubt: French Polynesia is pure paradise and a cruise aboard the *Paul Gauguin* is your ticket there. ★

