



Introducing... *Tere Moana*

Gary Buchanan runs the rule over the second ship in the niche Paul Gauguin Cruises fleet



Mark Twain once said: "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do." My bucket list is full of places I want to visit before cashing in my traveller's cheques at the great bureau de change in the sky and, this summer, I encountered a voyage that was nothing less than an epiphany.

By pure happenstance I found myself cruising part of Europe that had previously escaped my radar on board a vessel that

turned out to be an unexpected revelation. The cruise through the Ionian Sea, past the Aeolian Islands to the Gulf of Naples visited ports of such iridescent beauty they are almost impervious to description.

In similar vein, the bijou *Tere Moana* proved an avatar of modernity, practicality and brio. This 90-passenger craft was suffused with *mise-en-scène* elements that created an intimate stealth style and underscored how, as so often with the very best travel, the journey amplifies the destination.

The Ship

My first encounter with this 3,504-ton ship was in the port of Piraeus. Amongst the charivari of leviathans, this sleek white hull with broad turquoise stripe highlighting the superstructure looked for all the world like it belonged in a James Bond movie.

But, as I soon discovered, it has more in common with Doctor Who. For, indeed, this vessel is a veritable Tardis – perhaps even an Avatardis? How so many features and trappings found on Seabourn and Silversea ships exist on such a petite vessel is astounding.

Passenger facilities are spread across five decks. There's a **Grand Salon** and **Piano Bar**; **L'Etoile Restaurant**; **Verandah Restaurant**; pool bar; small spa and gym; library and internet centre; boutique; swimming pool; and plenty of sunloungers with umbrellas across two open decks.

A lift accesses all levels except the top deck. The elegant accommodation includes 37 ocean view staterooms (194sq ft) and eight balcony staterooms (298sq ft). Each has king-size bed; spacious wardrobe; flat-screen television; DVD/CD player; Sony personal

docking system; and figure-of-eight bathroom with shower and L'Occitane unguents.

It became immediately obvious that parent company Paul Gauguin Cruises is a line that eschews the norm and offers its guests an entirely new *modus vivendi*. Just three hours after setting sail, we approached the Corinth Canal as the sun began its descent.

On the top deck, a welcome cocktail party segued into a barbecue of fresh lobster, grilled Sea Bream and succulent

steaks. The sheer-sided walls of the canal provided a surreal backdrop as the sky darkened from glowing shades of rose to tangerine and then deep red. It was a perfect precursor to a week of enlightenment.

I was dubious about what to expect aboard this eclectic vessel that Paul Gauguin introduced at the end of 2012. The forums of Cruise Critic had been almost damning in their condemnation of the food as well as highlighting many technical issues, particularly the air-conditioning system.

“This is the BEST SMALL SHIP IN THE WORLD,” the Captain asserted. “We have a unique opportunity to infuse special elements that deliver WELL ABOVE EXPECTATION.”

FROM FRANCE TO TAHITI

Nelson Trindade worked on the *Paul Gauguin* in Tahiti for two months before heading up the hotel team that oversaw the conversion of *Le Levant*.

Formerly of French line Compagnie du Ponant, the ship was built at Saint-Malo in 1998.

The seven-week refurbishment was undertaken at the Lisnave Shipyard in Lisbon and included extensive work on all public spaces as well as a technical and engine refit.

Tere Moana – Tahitian for Ocean Traveller – was christened in Marigot, St Martin, French West Indies, last December by Mireille Bailey, wife of the chairman of Paul Gauguin Cruises.



My experience was so much at odds with these comments that I sought an interview with the Hotel Director rather than head off for an excursion to Delphi from the port of *Itea*. The Oracle might have prophesied in the nearby Temple of Apollo, but I wanted to hear what Nelson Trindade had to say.

The Portuguese-born Hotel Director was both charismatic and dynamic. Since gaining a degree in Tourism and Hotel Management at Bordeaux, he has worked at the prestigious Connaught Hotel in London, Pierre Kaufman's venerable Tante Claire restaurant and the celebrated temple of gastronomy, Chez Max.

He then chose a career at sea with Cunard and Windstar before heading to Renaissance Cruises. One of his most impressive credentials is being part of the team that introduced 'Freestyle Dining' to NCL. Before joining Paul Gauguin, he was Food & Beverage Director, and latterly Hotel Director, at Disney Cruise Line.

During our frank discussion, he admitted there had been initial teething troubles with the vessel and pointed out, with the benefit of hindsight, launching in such an unusual destination was not the most practical option. However, he stressed the company now uses Intersupply Shipstores BV of Rotterdam for its weekly victualing. He also highlighted that all meat is from the US and lamb from New Zealand.

In many ports, he takes the Executive Chef to local markets for fresh fruit, vegetables, seafood, cheeses and local

specialities. With more than 30 top-quality olive oils in La Veranda Restaurant, this is no idle boast. During my week on board I could find no substantiation for the vitriolic criticism heaped on *Tere Moana*.

The Cruise

The Ionian Islands are a drowned mountain range running from the bottom of the Adriatic to the Peloponnese. With its amphitheatrical setting, *Váthy* – the largest village in Ithaca – is one of the largest natural harbours in the world.

I spent a relaxing morning wandering past tiled-roofed white houses that line the port where fishing boats bobbed in the soporific heat. My thoughts turned to reverie in this reputed setting for Homer's epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

After lunch we navigated this pattern of islands heading for *Cephalonia*, the locale for Louis de Bernières' best-selling tragic-comedy *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. As we approached the impossibly-pretty village of Fiskardo by Zodiac, my camera lens was filled with the image of roses, carnations, geraniums, antirrhinums, valerian and bougainvillea merging into a torrent of pointillist colour.

Rather than take the island tour that visited the village of Assos with its Venetian fortress, I wandered past colourful *caïques* nudging several *psarotavernes* (fish restaurants) where villagers and visitors alike sat at *café*s drinking strong black Greek coffee and taking in the action, such as there was.

That afternoon, as we began a westerly navigation for Sicily, our amiable Croatian



captain informed us he had revised our schedule for the forthcoming days and added a call at Capri; this was met with universal approval by the Americans, Canadians, Australians and Brits on board.

Later that night, I was invited to his table in a prime position on the aft deck of the Verandah Restaurant. Captain Rajko Zupan had been in command of the *Paul Gauguin* in Tahiti from 2004 until 2012; prior to that he had been with Ocean Cruise Lines as well as serving on the *Marco Polo*.

His cogent views about *Tere Moana* left no one in any doubt. “This is the best small ship in the world,” he asserted. “We have a unique opportunity to infuse special elements that deliver well above expectation.”

“We can achieve an intrinsic style of hospitality thanks to our highly professional crew. Our itineraries are unlike any other cruise company and we are still fine-tuning them to ensure we offer charming ports that other small ships never visit.”



I would certainly concur that this idiosyncratic vessel offers a warm cocoon of panache and style and took me to destinations I have never visited during my 20-year career as a cruise writer.

The following afternoon the anchor was dropped in the shadow of Taormina, superbly sited on terraced hills. From the port of **Giardini Naxos**, I joined an excursion to Viagrande on the slopes of Mount Etna.

We were welcomed into the home of Eleonora Consoli, a renowned cook and gastronomic journalist, who showed us how to create famous Sicilian recipes using local vegetables and citrus fruits of varying aromas. The lunch that followed on the terrace was a pantheon of dishes both simple and sensational.

The culinary theme continued that afternoon when I visited Executive Chef Roy in the galley. With an impressive background at some of the finest hotels in India, this unassuming chef has been at sea for more than seven years.

"Fresh ingredients are the mainstay of our menus," he says. "At almost every port I visit markets for local produce and I'm happy to take guests with me. I'm not constrained by the protocols of larger cruise companies and have complete freedom to implement regional specialities within my menus."

Chef Roy is also inspired by the culinary creations of Jean-Pierre Vigato, Chef Propriétaire of the two-star Michelin-rated Apicius Restaurant in Paris who is a consultant to Paul Gauguin Cruises and finds time to sail aboard *Tere Moana*.

Roy takes up the story. "I trained in his restaurant for two months this year and I now have a good appreciation of European flavours and the subtle application of spices. Each evening, several items on our menu in L'Etoile Restaurant showcase an array of tempting specialities, expertly



prepared by my team of eight chefs."

Islands allow us to establish an idealised world separated just enough from reality to confer upon them a sense of the different. Nowhere is this more appropriate than on **Lipari**, the largest of the Aeolian Islands, a volcanic chain in the Tyrrhenian Sea. As I stepped off the local tender on to terra firma at the harbour, I was enveloped in delicate seduction.

Along the wharf, fishermen mended nets, scraped barnacles from pastel-hued boats and engaged in hand-flailing discourse. A few steps away, other Italians, bronzed and bedecked, slouched over pavement café tables, punctuating conversations with identical sweeping gestures. Little else moved in the searing heat.

Next morning, **Capri** hove into view. For more than half a century, the beautiful and the rich have played out their glamorous lives on these four square rocky miles. Practically car-less, Capri could have been designed by an Italian couture house specifically for long weekends. But, away from the rat-pack in La Piazzetta, the hypnotic air is heady with citrus, pine and jasmine.


A few years ago I had dined on the terrace at the Grand Hotel Quisisana surrounded by vainglorious fashionistas

beneath an inky jewelled sky, but on this occasion dinner in L'Etoile Restaurant on board beckoned.

From the extensive menu, I selected three Apicius Restaurant specialities: Green Asparagus Salad with Mascarpone Quenelle perfumed with White Truffle; Tuna in Three Preparations, Cucumber and Candied Ginger; Steamed Loup de Mer with Provençal Vegetable-Stuffed Cannelloni, Olive Oil and Rock Salt. I finished with selections from one of the most impressive cheese trolleys I've ever seen at sea.

Before heading to **Sorrento** the following morning, I luxuriated in a Lomi Lomi ancient Polynesian massage designed to promote relaxation, as well as an Algo Éclat facial in the Deep Nature Spa.

I was so relaxed I was impervious to the outer world. Not even the mêlée of Lambrettas in the Piazza Tasso disturbed me as I sipped an espresso watching Italian signore with palomino manes and Euroyacht tans quaffing Campari surrounded by designer shopping bags.

I had consigned any disappointment Mark Twain might have cautioned against to the deep. Aboard *Tere Moana*, less is more. 

TERE MOANA FACTFILE

Built: 1998 (as *Le Levant*);
refurbished 2012
Tonnage: 3,504
Length: 330ft
Beam: 46ft
Draft: 11.5ft

Speed: 14 knots
Passengers: 90
Crew: 54
Passenger decks: 5
Registry: Bahamas



ITINERARIES: autumn, Mediterranean, transatlantic; winter, Caribbean; spring, summer, transatlantic, Mediterranean.

MORE INFO: from the UK, call +1 425 440 6171; in the US, 1800 848 6172; or visit www.pgcruiises.com.