

Sailing through FRENCH POLYNESIA

By Jason Mills

Tahiti, Bora Bora, Moorea: Perhaps no other names call to the heart of an island seeker like those of French Polynesia.





TAHITI BAY ©JASON MILLS



ENTERING THE ISLAND OF TAHA'A LOOKING OUT TOWARDS BORA BORA IN THE DISTANCE ©JASON MILLS

There's something about approaching an island by a ship that calls to the heart of an explorer – it's the excitement, the anticipation of what is to come, the revealing of exotic treasures.

The *MS Paul Gauguin* cruise ship is a mid-sized ship and, aside from being unpretentiously luxurious, it is one of the few all-inclusive ships in the world that provides every creature comfort you could hope for, all the while exploring the most beautiful islands in the world.

Because of the shallow draft, the ship can get close to each island, anchoring in ideal locations, embraced by emerald islands in crystal clear South Pacific waters.

FIRST STOP: TAHITI

There is nothing quite like experiencing your first day in Tahiti. This exotic island and its capital Papeete, with its international flair, shopping, nightlife, rainforests and smiling locals provide the perfect welcome to this enchanting string of islands.

Here, I stayed in a tranquil resort facing the island of Moorea; the first evening was spent watching the sunset over the South Pacific. Every shade of pink, purple and red as was on display as the warm breeze carried the scent of exotic flowers and the palm trees swayed. Tahiti, with all its wonders, was the first indication of what was to come on this South Pacific adventure – and I knew I was in for a treat.

DREAM-LIKE BORA BORA

There is a reason that Bora Bora is voted the most beautiful island in the world. Like a statuesque monument, Bora Bora is encircled by a blue lagoon of a million shades, picture-perfect white sand beaches and swaying palm forests.

Our group arrived in Bora Bora at night on the *Gauguin*. In the morning light, the magic of this island was revealed by the rising sun while we ate breakfast on our veranda. So many island dreamers wait for this moment – laying eyes on Bora Bora as the sun graces the island. What was being revealed to me was Mother Nature's masterpiece. It is impossible for Bora Bora to disappoint.

As the sun rose on our first morning in Bora Bora, the warm light revealed the majestic landscapes of Mount Otemanu, the palm forests and the azure lagoon. If you've ever dreamt of Bora Bora, I assure it is even more alluring and captivating in person.

SAILING INTO MOOREA

Someone had once said to me that the Paul Gauguin Cruises' ship is worth taking just for the way it enters Cook's Bay in Moorea. They were right. Sailing into Moorea during the morning light enhances its other-worldly appearance. As the sunlight shifted, the island came to life, revealing new shapes and silhouettes of the jagged cliffs and roaring sea.

On a tour of the island, I truly fell in love with Moorea. Verdant valleys, abundant rainforests, flourishing gardens of flowers and fruits abound. Every aspect of Moorea is dramatic, dazzling and enticing. No two vantage points are the same.

It is said that nowhere on earth can *mana*, the life force that connects all living things, be felt stronger than in French Polynesia.



PRIVATE ESCAPE: MOTU MAHANA

Paul Gauguin Cruises has its very own *motu* (island) on the outer rim of the lagoon. For anyone who's ever longed to feel like a castaway (with all the modern luxuries) look no further than Motu Mahana. This is truly an island paradise.

Whatever you've imagined about French Polynesia, I assure you they are even more beautiful in person. Looking back on my experience, the most magical moments are the ones where I simply took it all in. Lounging on the sun deck with each island as my backdrop, reading the books that guided me here, and coming full circle with my lifelong dream of submersing myself in this region of the world.

It is said that nowhere on earth can *mana*, the life force that connects all living things, be felt stronger than in French Polynesia. *Mana* is something that touches each person that visits this tropical paradise and can stay with you for life if you allow it. It's in the rain, sun, flora, fauna, wind and the sea. It exudes from every person you meet on the islands, and now I know it's in me.



LOOKING OUT TOWARDS MOOREA FROM TAHITI



ONBOARD DANCERS



PAUL GAUGUIN'S PRIVATE ESCAPE, MOTU MAHANA