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Under the Southern Cross: Following the magic of the Marquesas

BY ANNE Z. COOKE

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HIVA OA, Marquesas Islands - "If it's Tuesday, it must be Ua Pou," said Keith, stretched out on the adjacent mattress. One of a half-dozen passengers still asleep on the upper deck of the Aranui 3, he pushed up on his elbows to watch the dawn skitter over the waves.

"It rained last night, just enough to cool us off," he said, yawning. "Did you get wet?"

I didn't remember. But I was a lot cooler than I'd been the day before.

That night had been pretty warm. Stuffy in the lounge. Stifling even, if you stuck it out in your cabin below deck. But in my heart of hearts I was dancing with glee.

At last, an honest excuse to sleep on deck as the Aranui 3 sailed away from Hiva Oa and headed back to Tahiti. Against all odds, a chance to fall sleep watching the Southern Cross turn in the heavens, distant sparks glittering in the night.

When an electrical short shut down one of the Aranui 3's compressors, cutting cool air to the lower decks, most of the 119 passengers on board chose to stay with the ship. Thirty-one accepted the captain's offer to fly back to Tahiti. But with three days at sea ahead of us, a gang of mavericks - square pegs run amok - dragged their bedding off their bunks and up to the top deck.

I'd chosen this 14-night voyage to the Marquesas Archipelago, in the remote northeast corner of French Polynesia, looking for the magic that lured so many wayfarers to the South Seas. Explorers and missionaries, whalers and sailors, adventurers and romantics, few Europeans could resist the call of nature unvarnished, the promise of balmy nights, tropical beaches and handsome, unspoiled people.

Which was why the freighter Aranui 3, sailing out of Papeete, in Tahiti, seemed the way to go. A throwback to the commercial schooners of old, she sails twice a month, delivering cargo to isolated villages on six of the archipelago's 12 islands: Nuku Hiva, Ua Huka and Oa Pou, in the north, and Hiva Oa, Fatu Hiva and Tahuata, in the south.

And these villages are small. In 2012, the islands' total population was 9,300; in the early 1700s, before outsiders introduced smallpox and other diseases, it was estimated at more than 100,000.

Aranui also carries passengers. But cargo is her mission. If it's imported to Tahiti or sold in Papeete, she delivers it: new cars, trucks, horses, heavy equipment, furniture, fresh and canned food and villagers traveling between islands. She also brings back outgoing cargo, huge bags of copra, dried coconut meat bound for Tahiti's oil plants.



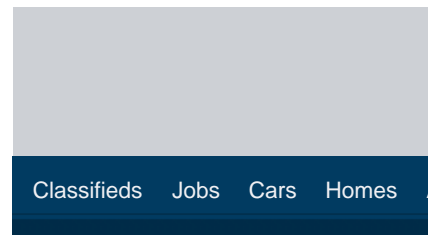
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After 53 years, you could set your watch by the Aranui. But the anticipation hasn't worn off. On the day the ship is due in port, everyone shows up. The men lounge around and talk. The women - bedecked with their finest flowers for the shoppers soon to arrive - spread out their wares at the craft market. Kids hang out, expecting a new pair of trainers, a soccer ball or a bicycle. And the passengers, leaning over the rail as the ship moves closer, are surely as fascinated as Captain Cook was when he first sailed to Hawaii.

No matter where we stopped, I could see skinny kids waving, dancing up and down, diving into the bay and climbing out to wave again. No sooner had the ship come alongside than the crew, a dozen sinewy Marquesans, dropped the first container onto the dock and the side ladder down beside it - or if we were at anchor - onto the floating barge. Pulling up at end of the dock, families driving trucks and SUVs inched slowly forward, eager for their orders.

A tall man in a straw hat stepped up to claim four shovels, a refrigerator in a huge box, a flat-screen television and a case of diapers. A woman in a sarong led away a horse we'd picked up at the previous island. Grocery store owners loaded their van with cases of canned milk, crackers, tomato sauce, catsup, cartons of cookies, bags of salt, rice and wheat flour, and packages of coffee and tea.

As a freighter passenger, your time will be your own. The Aranui doesn't set many rules. That said, the ship offers a daily schedule of pre-tour orientations and guided activities. Three full-time guides (English, French and German speakers) lead village and island tours, interpret Marquesan culture and history, decipher maps and help you locate misplaced laundry. I never saw the English language guide Jorg Nietzsche, a cultural expert, when he wasn't smiling or providing directions.

Sightseeing drives ferry everyone over the mountains, to spectacular vista points and down to distant bays. Village walks stop at museums and churches, their interiors lavished with elaborate wood carvings. There's always time to swim in the waves or to visit the craft market and to bargain with sellers for polished wood bowls, black pearls, carved bone necklaces, decorative knives, sarongs and tapa cloth prints.

For me, it was the place names that resonated, links to the ways last century travelers saw the Marquesas. Spectacular peaks and stone tikis, soon to be posted to Facebook, had once been seen as formidable. Carved stone tikis with big heads and stumpy legs, present when warlike Marquesans decapitated their enemies, now were the sentinels of a public park.

Budding author Herman Melville, who jumped ship in Nuku Hiva, used it as the source for his first best-selling book, "Typee." Similarly inspired, writer Robert Louis Stevenson made a point of including it on his own South Seas journey. When the Aranui docked at Hiva Oa, I headed for the cemetery where painter Paul Gauguin was buried.

I was especially keen to see Fatu Hiva, where 23-year-old Thor Heyerdahl and his wife built a hut in the forest and spent a year, nearly starving. Visiting Hiva Oa, they explored the sacred me'ae site where they snapped photos of half-buried tikis, photos he later included in his book, "Fatu Hiva: Back to Nature." When the Aranui docked at Puamau Village, on Hiva Oa, we followed Heyerdahl's footsteps, visiting the same site.

Heyrdahl's photos show a pile of scattered rocks and toppled tikis, half buried among the undergrowth. The site today, cleared, reconstructed and with the tikis set upright, reveals a series of monumental stone platforms.

Daily lunches on shore, as much adventure as fuel to keep going, were set up in pleasant, open-air venues, probably community centers converted for the day. But it was at dinner on the ship where a circle of kindred spirits gradually found each other.

Elaine Juhre, from Minneapolis, whom I met in the airport in Los Angeles, was the kind of experienced world traveler you'd be fortunate to meet anywhere. Ed and Mimsy Kaegi from San Francisco and her sister Jeffrey Ann Roos soon joined the group, and with Clint, Keith, Clark and Jean-Pierre tagging along, the table for six grew to 14.

When I did finally crawl into bed on deck, it was to fresh sheets in a spartan but tidy cabin with a bathroom, desk and chair, table and enough room to turn around. I had a porthole, too, and for the first 11 days of the trip, air conditioning.

The Aranui 3 wasn't the Hokulea, the famous Polynesian outrigger canoe built to retrace the South Seas ancient migration routes. She wasn't even close to being a sailboat. But when my chance to navigate by the stars finally came, it was a mattress on deck that answered the call.

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ON BOARD: The Aranui 3 is 386 feet long and 58 feet wide. Cabins, starting at \$3,998 per person, range from shared dormitory to standard, luxury and suites. Facilities and services include a snack bar, sundries shop, lounge, drinks bar, small swimming pool, lots of deck and lounge chairs, twice-weekly laundry service and coin-operated washers and dryers. There's no room service or Internet access, except in several larger ports.

The Marquesas are always warm. But the dry season, March through October, is the best time to visit. The rainy months, November to February, tend to be more humid. . Daily tours are conducted in English, French and German. Village maps are included. The ground is often uneven; walking shoes are essential.

Meals are served family style, open seating, at tables for two to 16. Menus include continental fare and Polynesian dishes, often vegetables or rice with chicken, fish or goat. French table wine and bread is included. A variety of baked goods, eggs, cereals, salads and fresh fruit are available at breakfast and on request.

GETTING THERE: The Aranui sails 14-day cruises out of Papeete, on Tahiti, in French Polynesia, stopping for a half-day at Fakarava Atoll on the way to Nuku Hiva. For a shorter cruise (eight or 11 days), board in Fakarava or Nuku Hiva. The non-stop 8-hour flight from Los Angeles to Tahiti is the most convenient. Cruise rates per person range from \$3,998 to \$5,275 and include meals, snacks, table wines, laundry service and onshore activities.

CONTACTS: For general information go to www.aranui.com; for dates and prices go to www.itahititavel.com.



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