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The magic of the Marquesas

December 31, 2013, 7:01 am | Anne Z. Cooke | AAP

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

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

I don't remember. But I'm a lot cooler than I was yesterday. That had been 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.

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 dragged their bedding 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, unspoilt 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 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.

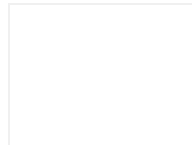
These villages are small. In 2012, the islands' total population was 9300; in the early 1700s, before outsiders introduced smallpox and other diseases, it was estimated at more than 100,000.

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 travelling between islands. She also brings back outgoing cargo, huge bags of copra, dried coconut meat bound for Tahiti's oil plants.

After 53 years, you could set your watch by the Aranui. But the anticipation hasn't worn off. When 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 or a bicycle.



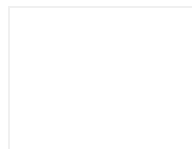
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And the passengers, leaning over the rail as the ship moves closer, are surely as fascinated as Captain Cook was when he first sailed to Hawaii.

No matter where we stop, I see skinny kids waving, dancing up and down, diving into the bay and climbing out to wave again. As soon as the ship comes alongside the crew, a dozen sinewy Marquesans, drop the first container onto the dock and the side ladder down beside it - or if we are at anchor - onto the floating barge. Pulling up at end of the dock, families driving trucks and SUVs inch slowly forward, eager for their orders.

A tall man in a straw hat steps up to claim four shovels, a refrigerator in a huge box, a flat-screen television and a case of nappies. A woman in a sarong leads away a horse. Grocery store owners load their vans with cases of canned milk, crackers, tomato sauce, bags of salt, rice and wheat flour, and packets of coffee and tea.

As a freighter passenger, your time is your own. The Aranui doesn't set many rules, but 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, or to visit the craft market and bargain with sellers for polished wood bowls, black pearls, carved bone necklaces, decorative knives, sarongs and tapa cloth prints.

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

Budding author Herman Melville, who jumped ship in Nuku Hiva, used it as the source for his first bestseller, *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 head for the cemetery where painter Paul Gauguin was buried.

I'm 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 docks at Puamau Village, on Hiva Oa, we follow Heyerdahl's footsteps, visiting the same site.

Heyrdahl's photos showed 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 are set up in pleasant, open-air venues, But it's over dinner on the ship that a circle of kindred spirits gradually find each other: our table of six gradually grows to 14.

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

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

IF YOU GO:

ON BOARD: The Aranui 3 is 117 metres long and 17.6 metres wide. Cabins, starting at \$US3998 (\$A4524.93) 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.

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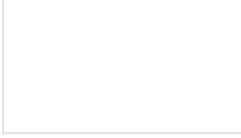
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Meals are served family style, open seating, at tables for two to 16. Menus include continental fare and Polynesian dishes, often vegetables or rice with chicken, fish or goat. French table wine and bread is included. A variety of baked goods, eggs, 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. Cruise rates per person start at \$US3998 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.itahititravel.com.

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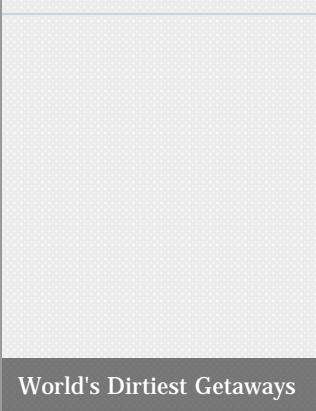
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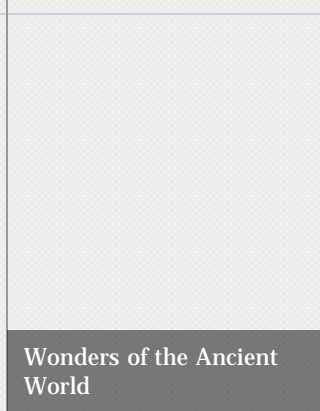
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