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Originally published Saturday, March 8, 2014 at 7:04 PM

Sailing away on a freighter in French Polynesia

A 14-day cruise aboard a cargo vessel takes travelers to the remote Marquesas Islands.

By [Anne Z. Cooke](#)

McClatchy-Tribune News Service

"If it's Tuesday, it must be Ua Pou," joked Keith, stretched out on the adjacent mattress. Among a handful of passengers still asleep on the upper deck of the Aranui 3, he pushed up on his elbows to watch the dawn skitter over the South Pacific's waves as the ship sailed amid the Marquesas Islands.

"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 ship's 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 South Pacific island of Hiva Oa and headed back to Tahiti. Against all odds, a chance to fall sleep watching the Southern Cross turn in the heavens, distant stars 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 the freighter cruise 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, the rest of us dragged bedding off our bunks and up to the top deck.

I'd chosen this 14-night voyage to the Marquesas Islands, a remote part of already-remote French

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STEVE HAGGERTY / MCT

The Aranui takes cargo, and passengers, to the South Pacific's Marquesas Islands.

If you go

Freighter cruise

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 the Marquesas Islands. Shorter cruises also are available.

Cruise rates per person range from \$3,998 to \$5,275 and include meals, snacks, table wines, laundry service and onshore activities.

More info

For general information go to toaranui.com; for dates and prices, see tahitiittravel.com.

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Polynesia, looking for the magic of lush nature, tropical beaches and local culture that lured so many adventurers and explorers through the centuries to the South Seas.

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, it sails twice a month, delivering cargo to isolated villages on some of the archipelago's 12 islands: Nuku Hiva, Ua Huka and Ua 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 its mission. If it's imported to Tahiti or sold in Papeete, the freighter delivers it: new cars, trucks, horses, heavy equipment, furniture, fresh and canned food, and villagers traveling between islands. It 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. On the day the ship is due in port, the locals show 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. 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 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. Pulling up at the end of the dock in trucks and SUVs, families inched 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 vans with cases of canned milk, crackers, tomato sauce, 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.

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 woodcarvings. There's always time to swim in the waves or to visit the craft market. And to watch the stars, from a mattress on the deck of the Aranui 3.

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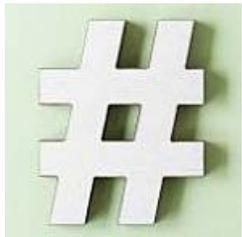
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