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Marquesas Islands, in remote corner of French Polynesia, show their magic on 14-day freighter voyage

By Anne Z. Cooke • MCT News Service 12:01 A.M. MARCH 16, 2014

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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 dragged their bedding off their bunks and up to the top deck.

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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, many Europeans couldn't 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.

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.

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