

Tahiti, Bora Bora, and French Polynesian Islands Aboard a Paul Gauguin Cruise

by Camille Pepe Sperrazza

A cruise is one way to see many of the French Polynesian Islands, and you can add land stays before and after the cruise.

7/21 -

After spending two days in LA - a great way to break up the long flight from New York to Tahiti - we arrive at LAX for our midnight departure. About eight hours later, we are in Tahiti 5 am, local time. A Paul Gauguin bus picks us up, and it's less than a 5- minute ride to the Intercontinental Hotel, where we are provided with a day room, part of our Paul Gauguin package. This is wonderful as we have time to rest after the overnight flight, shower, and enjoy a buffet breakfast with everything imaginable, all included. There's plenty of time to explore the resort, and sit by the pool, too. At 3 pm, a bus takes us to the ship. Paul Gauguin cruises are all inclusive, including top-shelf liquor, bottled water, cappuccino, soda, beer, and wine; even the wonderful bottle of Bourdoux Elmo, our wine steward and bartender, recommends. The service here is impeccable. Staff members ask our names, and they remember them. There are three restaurants on board, and we dine at the French one, which is Michelin rated. I notice the glasses sparkle. No spotty tableware here.

7/22 -

We arrive on the French Polynesian island of Raiatea. Our executive chef demonstrates the carving of a huge moon fish, fresh from the ocean. This one fish will feed more than 100 people tonight. We take an island tour, visiting volcanic craters and the archaeological site of Marae, where sacrifices were made to the gods. We enjoy juicy pineapple, fresh coconut, green grapefruit, and the sweetest bananas imaginable, sliced, and presented on fresh leaves, plucked from the trees. These leaves serve as our plates, and it's all so colorful, tropical, and exotic.

7/23 -

Today we are on a cultural tour of the island of Tahaa, known for its vanilla. It's an unspoiled paradise. You won't find a McDonald's or a Starbucks here. The way the palm trees sway in the tropical breeze, reminds me of an episode of "Gilligan's Island." Our tour guide is an amazing character, always laughing and smiling. He plays his guitar, singing silly songs, as we ride a dilapidated bus along bumpy roads. He lives on the island, and grew up here, but was educated in France. He's obviously very bright, despite his laid-back attitude and casual attire of a barely buttoned floral print shirt, shorts that have seen better days, and flip flops. His unkempt hair is hardly contained in his pony tail. There's no stress on the island of Tahaa, he tells us, and he seems so incredibly happy and carefree, we believe him.

We visit a vanilla farm where we learn that the vanilla plant is a vine. As there are no bees on the island, the family that owns the farm, has to pollinate each plant by hand. If they skip one day, the entire crop is lost. When the vanilla is ripe, it turns black. This is where Tahiti

gets its vanilla, and it's used for just about everything, including flavoring rum and sugar. I buy vanilla soap. We discover how other people on the island work hand-in-hand to gather coconuts, dry them, and twice a week, representatives come to collect the coconuts, and pay the people. This coconut is used to make coconut oil for cosmetics, and we see, touch, and smell this cut coconut, drying on huge platforms. The people live very simply, and all seem happy, and are very friendly. They are proud, hard workers. There's only one hospital that services 5 of these small islands. If anyone gets sick in the middle of the night, they have to wait until morning to take a boat to the island where the hospital is. If they don't make it, it's just considered part of nature's plan. With only one hospital, there's not much medical care, but with everyone eating a steady diet of fresh fruits, and fish plucked from the unspoiled seas here, I am thinking they are probably healthier than we are. Our tour guide, a seemingly master of all trades, who serves as captain of our boat ride at one point, shucks an oyster, shows us the pearl, and explains how Tahitian pearls get their color, another process done by hand, right here on Tahaa.

Huts over the water, Bora Bora

7/24 -

The first time I ever heard of Bora Bora was when, as a kid, I saw an episode of "McHale's Navy". That's because the US Navy built bunkers here, and we get to see one. Back then, we laughed at the silly name.

Today, Bora Bora is a luxurious high-end destination. The water - oh, that water - the most vivid crystal clear shades of blue, turquoise, and vibrant hues of uncompromised clarity. Ribbons of this pure color stretch across the sea. It's so



stunningly beautiful, my eyes tear. I am privileged to be here, arguably the most beautiful place on earth. We opt for "The Day at the Beach" tour, at the Intercontinental Hotel, and take a tender to land, then a taxi, and yet another boat to arrive at the Intercontinental, built on a motu - a small piece of beach, surrounded by the bluest waters. This resort is gorgeous. The beach is designed so that no matter where you are, you face the iconic volcanic mountain that identifies Bora Bora. I take dozens and dozens of photos, as each time a cloud passes or the rays of the sun shine differently, this mountain transforms, creating a view more magnificent than the previous one. One can spend the day staring in awe at its strength and beauty, and this is what we do. Over-the-water huts dot the horizon. We enjoy a two-course lunch on the beach, and the staff is so accommodating, taking true joy in serving us, sharing knowledge about the resort and Bora Bora. Nothing is a problem. You can get anything you like. There's no stress here on Bora Bora, they tell us. We believe them.

July 25 -

It's our second day in Bora Bora, and we tour the island. One of our stops includes a village shop where a woman demonstrates how colorful pareos are created, by hand, in about 15 minutes. A very basic white piece of cotton cloth is twisted, and dipped in colorful paint. Then, it is laid on a table to dry in the sun, secured by rocks. Linoleum cutouts are places on top so that pictures and the name "Bora Bora" become dried into the designs. There are about 100 ways to tie a pareo, we're told, and here I learn a new one, that involves creating armholes, so the pareo can be worn like an open sweater. I'm sold. I buy one with the most gorgeous shades of blue, to remind me of the color of the ocean here. A woman ties it, and I am wearing my pareo all day.

7/26 -

We wake up to another majestic, mountainous view from our balcony stateroom. We are in Moorea, and the sun reflects on the water like thin, shimmering slivers of glass. We spend the morning pool side, and because our ship is anchored in the lagoon, it spins ever so slowly, allowing our view to change constantly. There are people from all over the world aboard this sailing - many come from enormous wealth and privilege - but we are all mesmerized by the surroundings, agreeing that we are fortunate to partake in such exotic beauty.

Later, on our tour, we learn that one of the high peaks we are viewing is Bali Hai, named by writer James Michener. It's Polynesian Night aboard the ship, and women from the islands bring flowers galore, teaching guests how to make handmade leis, from fresh flowers. The Polynesians have a flair for taking the simplest leaf, piece of cloth, or coconut, and creating something beautiful from it. We see evidence of this everywhere. Aboard the ship, there's always Polynesian music in the air. In the evening, guests are invited to view the stars from the top deck. The sky sparkles. An officer has a powerful telescope, and we take turns viewing the planet, Saturn, seeing its distinctive ring.

July 27th -

Our second day in Moorea, and we're poolside aboard the ship, watching that majestic panoramic view, as we spin slowly in the lagoon. We are still humbled by its strength and beauty, and spend the day talking with other passengers about everything and anything - one of the joys of cruising. Some random thoughts: One advantage of being in the French Polynesia is that it is 6 hours behind New York time, so if I go to bed around 10 pm, local time, I fall asleep instantly as my internal clock thinks it's much later. I wake up at 5 am, refreshed, ready to tour, and feel great all day, having gotten more sleep than I would normally get at home. In Europe, it's the opposite, as they are 6 hours ahead of us, so I often have difficulty falling asleep, and then have to wake up when my internal clock tells me it's really the middle of the night.

We see numerous roosters roaming around on these islands, so we often hear the sounds of "cock-a-doodle-do". In Bora Bora, there was one rooster right near us, howling, and from a great distance, we could hear the sound of another rooster responding. On the islands, there

are no cemeteries. The dead are buried in the back or front yards of their homes, and we see these memorials as we tour. This is our last night aboard the ship, and we set sail, and pull into Tahiti in the evening. I immediately smell a barbecue and hear singing. There are lots of people gathered in the area, so after dinner, we get off the ship to investigate. A festive event takes place in Papeete on the last Friday of every month. There are trucks from which vendors are selling food, and huge, thick steaks being grilled. Men and women are dressed in exotic costume, singing, dancing, and shaking their bottoms feverishly, for crowds of people that have gathered, most of whom are locals, but there are some tourists as well.

July 28th -

In the morning, we go ashore again, to shop at the public market. I see just about everything I bought on the islands for much less money here. The same vanilla soap I bought on the farm is a third of the price here. I buy more bars of soap, more coconut oil, and bracelets made from shells, to give as gifts. I also buy a unique straw-type pocketbook and a colorful red floral pareo. Our cruise is over, but the Paul Gauguin line continues to think of everything possible to make the vacation far superior to an ordinary cruise. We have breakfast, and lunch on board - anything we like, including cocktails, and the service continues to be impeccable. As we depart the ship for the last time, the Polynesian musicians are playing their ukeles at the gang plank, singing a farewell song. It's such a sweet sendoff. Our cruise director, a guy named Michael Shapiro, originally from New York City, is also there to personally say goodbye, and see that all goes well. Then, because our hut over the water at the Intercontinental won't be ready until the afternoon, our transfer includes a complimentary island tour of Tahiti. We see a magnificent water fall, tour the home of writer James Norman Hall, who wrote the book, Mutiny on the Bounty, and also go to the bay where Captain James Cook arrived in Tahiti. There's a lighthouse here, created by writer Robert Lewis Stevenson's dad, and this is the bay where the real Mutiny on the Bounty took place. We pass our first McDonald's as Papeete, Tahiti is much more built up than the other islands. From our tour bus, a small island, in the middle of the ocean, is pointed out to us. Our tour guide tells us that this dot of land is the inspiration for the television program, "Gilligan's Island," and is what's shown in the opening credits. No wonder I've been reminded of the show this entire trip.

After the tour, one group is dropped off at the Radisson for its complimentary day rooms before the late flight home. Others, like us, who have a post stay in Tahiti, are brought to the Intercontinental. Our hut sits over the water, and the bed is a half-canopy. It faces the floor-to-ceiling glass doors where the view of the ocean beckons. Out here, we have a deck, with table, chairs, and lounge chairs. There's a ladder that we can climb down, straight into the sea. The resort is setting up for a huge outdoor extravaganza, called a Mini Heive, and because it all takes place near our hut, we can attend for half price. It's a magnificent feast, filled with fish galore, including cold lobster and shrimp served many different ways. There's ceviche in coconut milk, a huge pig, goat, sushi, salads, and root vegetables. Desserts are over the top, including a chocolate fountain. The chocolate ice cream is the tastiest I can remember. There's a Polynesian show that goes on for more than three hours - coconut tree climbing, flame spinning, singing, dancing, all in exotic costume. It's a real authentic experience, attended by guests and locals.

7/29 -

A full day to enjoy the resort. Poolside and at breakfast, we bump into passengers from the ship. While lounging, I order a drink, served inside a real, cut coconut. It's garnished with cut flowers and pineapples, so inviting. The bottom has a carved face on it, so I am thinking it may have been on display at last night's event. We've learned that one of the hazards of island life is falling coconuts. On one of the tours, we were told a German tourist was killed when a coconut fell on his head. My coconut cup is uncompromisingly strong. I can't even scrape a piece of the fresh coconut off. It seems a shame to waste it.

7/30 -

Our last day in paradise. Although our flight isn't until 10 pm, our Paul Gauguin package allows us to stay in our hut all day and evening. What a convenience. We soak up the sun in the morning, then take the shuttle bus into the city of Papeete. We quickly discover that there's not much to see. There's a few shops open near the public market; otherwise it's practically a ghost town. We are back at the hotel in time for Happy Hour, and with our drinks, we're served a small dish of olives, mixed with cut coconut, and fresh lime. Unique and tasty. We watch another gorgeous sunset before heading back to the hut to shower and pack for the journey home.

For more information or to book a trip, [contact](#) "Commodore" Camille today.

This article was accurate when it was written, but everything in life changes. Enjoy the journey!

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