

# Freighter

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## Touring Turku



# Adventure in the South Pacific

**S**INCE I retired five years ago my wife and I decided to visit those parts of the world that we had not previously experienced and especially to do those things that needed a little more time, especially as we now had more of it.

I had heard about freighter cruises so I sent for the Strand Travel brochure to see what was available. The *Aranui 3* and its South Pacific itinerary caught my eye and we decided to build a holiday around it.

We knew from previous experience that if we were to travel such a long distance we need to be away for at least six weeks to fully enjoy the experience and not feel rushed. Therefore we needed to do more than the sixteen-day *Aranui* voyage.

The weather was the next consideration and a little internet research told us that June was a good time to go as it was the start of the dry season. We did learn from people that we met while in French Polynesia, who had visited previously, that it was the right decision as rough seas and strong winds may accompany the rain in the wet season.

We then had to decide what else we should do while we were there and we came across the Princess Cruise on the *Tahitian Princess* around the Society and Cook Islands, also sailing from Papeete which both fitted in with the *Aranui* sailing dates and visited a totally different group of islands over a ten-day period. We always like to have a few days to properly get over the tiredness of long distance air travel and also not to rush home at the end of a cruise so our plan came together.

Five days on Tahiti; the ten-day Princess Cruise; five days on Moorea which is only 30 minutes by fast ferry from Tahiti; and an over-water bungalow with part glass floor is as close to paradise as we have been. Then 16 days on the *Aranui 3* and five days to top things off at the Beachcomber Intercontinental Resort in Papeete before flying home.

Air New Zealand provided our flights as they had a special offer business class fare from London Heathrow via Los Angeles to Tahiti: ideal for such a long flight.

We joined the *Aranui 3* which was docked in Papeete's commercial harbour on June 16 feeling that we already knew a little about French Polynesia

and ready to learn some more.

Boarding could not have been simpler. We handed our bags to a member of the crew on the jetty, walked up the gangway, showed our tickets to the receptionist, received our keys and were shown up to our cabin, with our bags arriving shortly after.

We had chosen a suite because it had a small balcony which proved to be a real asset as the place to dry our daily washing much more than it was a place to sit. Laundry on the *Aranui* worked on a rota system deck by deck which meant every fourth day hence; our preference was to do it ourselves daily.

The accommodation seemed compact compared with the *Tahitian Princess* but this was a freighter and in reality we had everything we needed for the voyage. Double bed (which we found hard but resolved the problem by putting two blankets under the bottom sheet), sofa, bathroom, fridge, safe and sufficient storage space for our clothes and luggage. There was also a television which did have a very limited choice of channels, but we were not there to watch TV.

The first evening we had a briefing in the comfortable lounge, which became the daily pattern of the cruise, which told us there were 100 passengers on board, with an extra 20 joining in the Marquesas and a full load of cargo.

**Carole and Eric**

**Dancer** decided to visit a part of the world they had not seen.

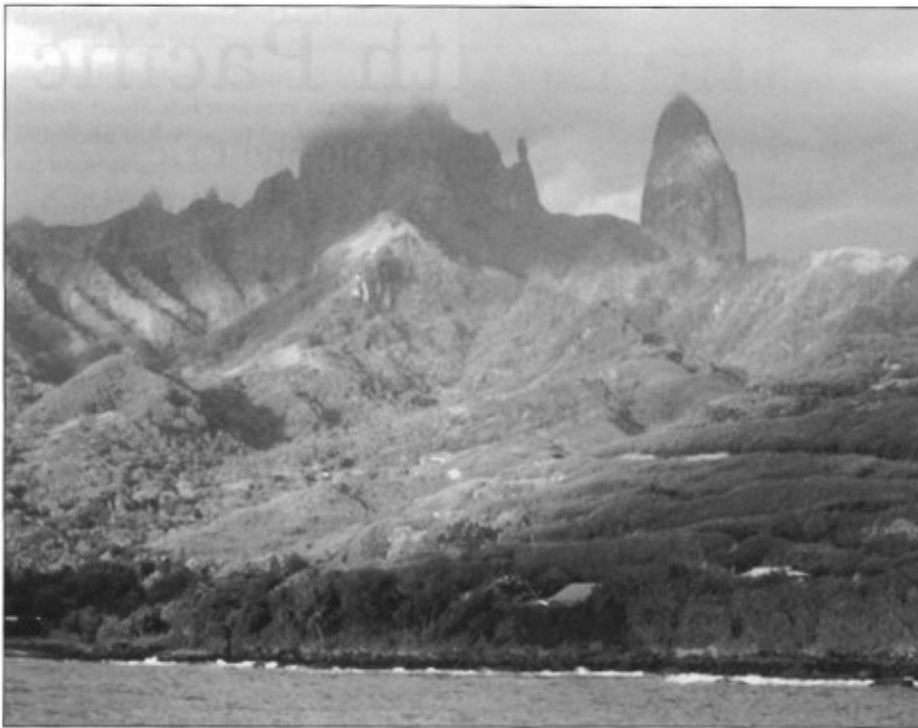
They chose the *Aranui* as part of their South Pacific voyage

We had watched earlier the incredible ballet of freight being loaded by the ship's two cranes and the co-ordination and skill of the crew a joy to behold. Cars, trucks, drums of diesel, boats, building materials, shipping containers, food, domestic appliances; the variety was endless. In fact the loading continued until almost midnight, with every available cargo deck space being filled.

Lifeboat drill was at 1830 with dinner at 1930. I don't know what time we sailed as we were asleep.

The food on board was always the menu of the day; if it doesn't appeal there is always bread and cheese, but tonight it was seafood cocktail with grapefruit, grilled mahi-mahi with grilled tomatoes and green beans wrapped in bacon and chocolate pud-





ding with raspberry coulis. Wine is included in the cruise price and was in abundant supply. Our only complaint was that the red wine was always too cold but we were told that it is the only way it would keep in the tropical heat.

All meals are in the only dining room with open seating and with tables varying in size from four to eight which provided the opportunity to meet fellow travellers.

On our voyage half the passengers were French and they always wanted to sit together in the same places which was a bore but the other half were made up of Americans, Australians, another English couple besides ourselves and a few French Polynesians who mixed much more easily. For part of the voyage we had the owner on board and this added to the interest of the conversations.

As the cruise progressed we found much of the food not to our taste.

Breakfast was always fine: buffet style with fresh fruit and juice, freshly baked bread and croissants, hot pancakes, tea and coffee with egg and bacon to order if you had a huge appetite, and some did.

But the other meals gave us a challenge, with the cuisine difficult to describe: rather tasteless, always too much sauce and the desserts with too many calories when fresh fruit, which we did get when we asked for it, was much more to our liking. But looking at other peoples plates many seemed more enthusiastic than us.

Over the 16 days we first sailed

northeast from Papeete to Takapoto in the Tuamotu Islands and then on to the Marquesas with our first landfall on the island of Ua Pou visiting Hakahetau and Hakahau.

Then followed a series of shorter sailings around the Marquesas visiting Nuku Hiva, Hiva Oa, Fatu Hiva, Hiva Oa a second time but three different ports, Ua Huka, three more ports on Nuku Hiva going back to Ua Poa and then back to Tahiti calling at Fakarava in the Tuamotos on the way.

In all of this there were only three full days at sea, one of which was challenging to those without good sea legs, with the remainder full of opportunity to explore the towns and villages either on your own or as part of the tours organised by the *Aranui* and included in the price of the voyage.

We chose a mixture as on some of the smaller islands one hundred people coming ashore together seemed too large a group and for us compromised the absolute peace and tranquillity which we enjoy.

Almost all the islands had spectacular scenery with volcanic outcrops rising vertically with lush vegetation clinging on adding to the drama, and a continuously changing dramatic picture as you sailed past. Sunsets were such a joy, everyone different with the sun and clouds painting a new masterpiece each evening.

It became our standard practice to sit on the top deck each evening, with red wine which we had brought up from our cabin now at the correct tem-

perature, some snacks from the ship's shop, and the warm breeze in our hair and to watch the sun go down with such immense glory.

Every morning, as there was totally free access, I went to the bridge to look at the chart to see where we were, and to speak with the Captain or First Mate and get a personal briefing about the day.

The professionalism of the crew was outstanding. Some of the harbours we visited were tiny and the *Aranui* had to manoeuvre in extremely close proximity to many small boats and every time without the slightest mishap.

Excursions ashore were always interesting. Sometimes we were tied up to a jetty and could walk down the gangway and at other times we were firmly assisted into the *Aranui's* wooden whaleboats by the strong crew for the transfer ashore with occasionally a wet landing shoreside.

All the islanders were welcoming and often with the distinctive ukulele music and dance, the bronzed, tattooed men with their haka-style performance with vigorous drum accompaniment and the gracious grass-skirted girls swaying rhythmically, all so special to that part of the world.

Their local handicrafts are unique and of high quality and you will be compelled to buy not through any sales pressure but just because you want it.

Sadly for us we saw how the western world is influencing the way of life: many of the important historic artefacts are now in the major museums of

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the world; satellite dishes can be seen perched on top of primitive housing and four-wheel drive vehicles are the much-coveted status symbol even on islands with no roads or filling stations; and there is no escaping mobile telephones which work everywhere.

That said, it does allow the islands and islanders to communicate in what is still a remote area of the world. It is

important to say that we never felt unsafe at anytime during our stay, no matter where we went. The *Aranui* provides guides who give a daily lecture about the next island to be visited, its culture and key features and as the guides are different on each cruise the quality does vary. One of our two seemed to need reminding each day that half the passengers spoke English

as their first language, not French, but it was French Polynesia.

There is no doubt that the *Aranui* provides a very interesting experience and although tourism is important and is being developed you can easily find great peace, tranquillity and beauty especially once you leave the hustle and bustle of Papeete.

The waters are clear and warm with a multitude of colourful fish, ideal for swimming and snorkelling. Yes it is humid and hot, you do need a hat during the day and the strong sun calls for sun block rather than sun cream and some of the islands do have annoying insects called no-nos which you cannot see but you certainly know when you have been bitten because of the blister that forms rapidly. All of which we avoided by a regular application of insect spray. The only person I saw with a serious bite was the ship's doctor and he should have known better.

If you are considering the *Aranui*, their online brochure tells you accurately what you get but do not compare it with a regular cruise ship because it is a working cargo ship that carries passengers and is so very different.

As we left the Marquesas we followed the tradition of throwing our colourful floral leis into the water to give the sign that we will return. You never know, but without doubt we will take another freighter cruise. □