

cruise

T R A V E L L E R

The voyage of a lifetime

SUMMER 2004 £2.95

WIN

A fantastic Caribbean
cruise for two

GOLDEN DAYS
Dazzling fall
foliage cruises

**WALTZING ON
WATER**
Drifting down
the Danube

SOUTH AMERICA
Iguanas and
antiquities

South Pacific

DISCOVER THE
MARQUESAS
ISLANDS

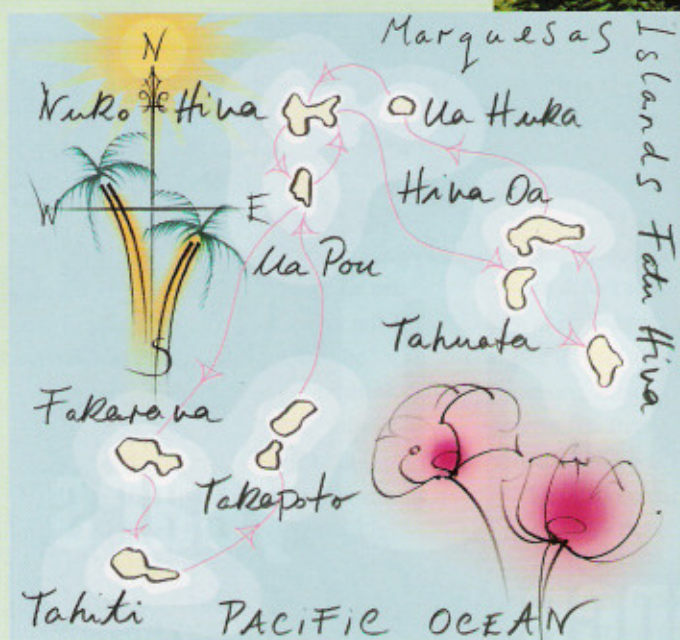
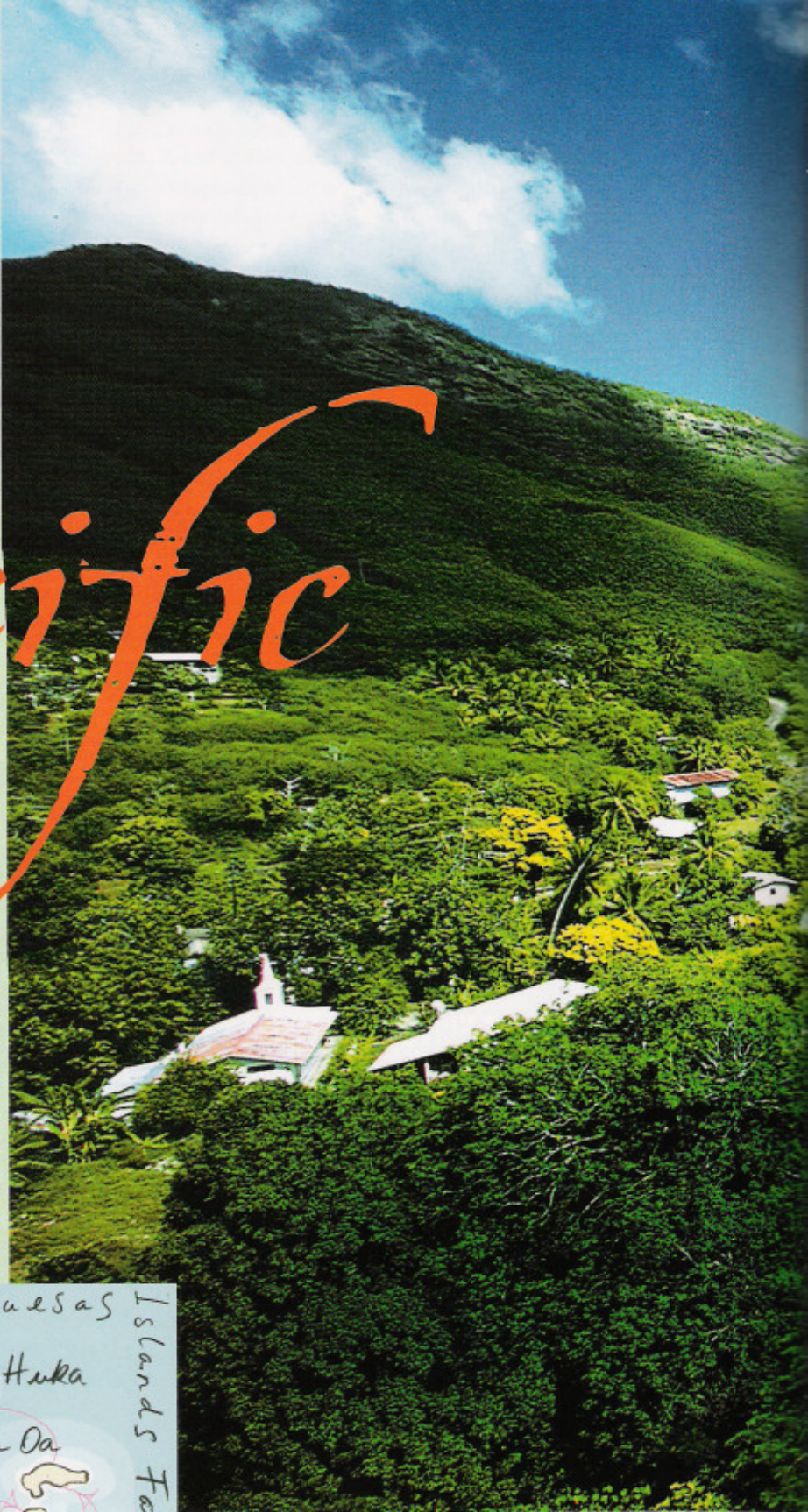


PLUS: Cruise memorabilia • Athens • Transatlantic bargains • Reader reviews

Lost worlds of the

Pacific

Rob Woodburn explores the remote Marquesas islands on the working ship, Aranui



Aranui 3 is an essential supply-line to the more remote islands

The islands of the Marquesas are among the Earth's most remote landfalls. They languish under a tropical sun in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, some 900 miles north of Tahiti, only 10 degrees south of the Equator.

These distant horizons are easy to visit by cruise ship. The rewards of the voyage are rich and magnificent. The Marquesas are a worthy once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Exploring these islands does involve a dollop of daring. Passengers aboard the good ship *Aranui*, which cruises regularly



between the six inhabited islands of the archipelago, occasionally need to step boldly forth, alighting from a whaling boat that's being tossed on heaving swells to scramble up wet, slippery steps to the safety of dry land. Such exertions posed no problem for Teresa, a sprightly 73-year-old from Sacramento. Husband Dick, dry of wit and a professed landlubber, made his own leap of faith from boat and shore, his arms gripped firmly by a swarthy sailor, legs dangling momentarily inches above the surging sea. Age definitely need not weary thee...

The archipelago's islands, 13 in all, are volcanic up-thrusts rising spectacularly from the ocean to vertiginous heights. The scale and drama of landscape is primordial. Vegetation-smothered slopes climax in cloud-shrouded, craggy peaks crowned in weather-worn needles of black rock. Coastlines have stalwart cliffs battered by surging waves and washed by strong and treacherous currents. There are few swimming beaches in the Marquesas but many splendid natural harbours, deep inlets and bays.

Since the 2001 screening of the TV programme *Survivor*

Marquesas, this far-flung patch of French Polynesia has witnessed a splurge in tourism. But the freighter has long been the islanders' umbilical cord to the outside world. The original *Aranui* started serving the Marquesas in 1959 and later began carrying a handful of intrepid paying passengers. The ship, now in its third incarnation, takes 200 passengers, has air-conditioned cabins and provides full board in French-Polynesian style on regular 16-day voyages from Papeete.

The main mission of *Aranui* remains the transport of goods. She carries tractors, pumps and assorted machinery, building materials, food and drink, medical supplies and other items vital to the 8,000 people living in the Marquesas.

Off-loading at rudimentary wharves or via whaleboat from offshore anchorages, she takes on copra, the dried coconut meat used in the production of soaps and oils, as well as innumerable blue barrels filled with noni fruit. Plucked from an indigenous shrub, the fruit is an esteemed therapeutic ingredient in the American alternative health market.

The cruise formula is simple. We sailed between islands at night, awakening to ever more inspiring views. After a hearty breakfast and while the crew beavered away with the ship's cargo, we made highly informative, guided, day-long island excursions to significant archaeological sites and villages.

On my cruise, *Aranui* carried only 80 passengers, which felt an ideal complement, particularly when visiting villages where we outnumbered the inhabitants. My fellow passengers were nearly all either French or American, most in their 40s and older, all seasoned travellers, lively and inquiring.

Although a hard-working freighter, *Aranui* provides essential comforts for its leisure passengers, albeit with few frills beyond the cabins, dining and lounge areas. There are no lifts, but only five decks to negotiate. Stairs are bare steel, walls painted an industrial white, bulkhead doors are stiff and heavy.

Cabin space is restricted enough to require that you stow all bags out of sight. My standard A deck cabin had two bunks either side of a fixed porthole, a writing desk with chair, and en-suite shower and toilet. Pleasant indeed if travelling alone, an intimate fit for two. More spacious options exist among the 85 cabins, including a dozen 'deluxe' and 10 suites, each with balcony.

There's a pool and ample rear deck space for reading and sunbathing. The top deck is popular for early morning viewing and exercise. Evening entertainment at the deck bar is the ship's band; guitar, ukulele and tub-thumper bass with soulful island songs well suited to starry tropical nights and moonlight buffets.

Each evening we had a briefing about the next day's activities. The earliest signs of settlement in French Polynesia are found in the Marquesas and ancient sites of worship, called marae, were cornerstones of our excursions. A tiki is an ancient carved stone figure representing a departed spirit. Pregnant with age and intent, most lie hidden beneath rampant vegetation. Some more important marae have been cleared, exposing elaborate stone platforms and tikis, some still standing. One such site is Meae Ipona, near Pumao on Hiva Oa's north coast. The overgrown, terraced temple ground contains several sculptural fragments and magnificent standing tiki, the largest in the Marquesas. One is eight feet tall.

On Nuku Hiva, the largest island, we visited the modern



From top: Dramatic volcanic scenery; the ship hard at work unloading cargo; local child





Essentials

Tonnage 3,800

Passengers 203

Age of ship Two years

Aranui 3 sails 16 times a year between Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands on itineraries lasting 16 days. Thirteen of the voyages have a guest lecturer aboard. Voyage prices are per person, double occupancy and include three meals a day with French wines, guided land excursions, picnics and meals on shore (some excursions cost extra). A standard A cabin costs from €3264 per person via www.aranui.com but air-inclusive packages can be booked through Transpacific Holidays, tel. 01293 567 722, www.transpacific.co.uk; Tailormade Travel tel. 0845 456 8050, www.tailor-made.co.uk; and Talpacific Holidays, tel. 020 8288 8400, www.talpacific.com. For more information, tel. 020 7222 7282 or visit www.tahiti-tourisme.pf.

cathedral in Taiohae and the local market before driving to the Taipivai Valley where, in 1842, author Herman Melville lived for a while. He wrote *Typee* based on experiences there.

Hiva Oa is where artist Paul Gauguin died a century ago. He's buried under a shady frangipani tree in Calvary Cemetery, on the hill above the town of Atuona. Belgian *chanteur* Jacques Brel, who died in 1978, is buried nearby. Brel's buffeted airplane stands beside the Atuona museum-gallery, a building that's filled with freshly painted Gauguin copies. There are no original Gauguins in the Marquesas. They'd have rotted in the humidity.

Fatu Hiva's 500 islanders have neither TVs nor telephones. They produce perfumed oils, wood carvings and fine quality tapa cloth from beaten bark. We made a 10-mile hike along a road linking the villages of Omoa and Hanavave. It followed the ridgeline above deep ravines choked with riotous growth and seen against a hazy backdrop of ragged peaks. Hours later, we gazed at Hanavave, the Bay of Virgins, bathed in the luminous yellow light of a tropical sunset.

Next stop was Tahuata, a tiny island south of Hiva Oa. This was the first Marquesan landfall for Europeans. Spanish adventurer Alvaro de Mendana arrived in 1595. Captain James Cook followed in 1774. In Vaitahu village, we enjoyed some colourful local dancing and were fascinated by the small museum's collection of rare old black-and-white photographs. No one was brave enough to undergo a tattoo by the village's master artist. Instead, there was a brisk trade in bone carvings.

Captain Mapuhi Taputu also dropped anchor off Hapatoni, north of Vaitahu, visited only a few times each year. Our arrival caused much celebration and wooden bowls, sandalwood necklaces, pendants of nut or bone swiftly exchanged hands.

Aranui pays each village per visit and, in some instances, supplies food for modest feasts. At other times we tucked into meals at local restaurants where menus ranged from lobster and freshwater shrimps to sweet and sour pork or goat curry.

An *Aranui* cruise offers a sense of genuine discovery without the rigours of a true expedition. Every day brings adventure and the occasional small challenge. The ship's industrious work routine, the bonhomie quickly forged between crew and passengers and a glorious sense of being somewhere special make the Marquesas an obvious choice for the inquisitive cruiser. 📷

Above: Translucent water Below: Paul Gauguin's grave; the ship's unconventional tenders.

