



Travelogue



Freight expectations

Journey to the South Pacific aboard the Aranui, a cargo-passenger ship, and you will be among the privileged few to witness the Marquesas Islands, writes **Lindsay Vincent**

Nostalgia is big business but great sea voyages are stuck in the mists of time. Nowadays, aside from the odd, exceptional cruise, nautical dreamers can book just a handful of adventurous journeys – banana boats, oil tankers, supply vessels to remote, God-forsaken wildernesses and so forth.

And then there is the Aranui, a cargo-passenger ship that serves islands few people are aware of, let alone seen. The Marquesas Islands, the most northerly of French Polynesia's five archipelagos, where Paul Gauguin went when he tired of Tahiti, heartbeat of the Society Islands, and where he is buried.

To those who like to live the dreams of others, Aranui is the business, for its bows shadow the great navigators, whose imaginations, like Gauguin, were stirred by discovery and what they found in these remote, mysterious isles. Not just Cook, Bougainville, or de Neira, who gallantly dedicated his 1595 finding to a Spanish noble woman. But also Maoris, whose migration by outrigger canoes some 2,000 years before Columbus, saw them become the very first people to reach Polynesia – the last places on Earth to be populated and, hence, the least known.

The miracle of DNA traces Maori forebears back to Taiwan, members of a pre-Chinese, aboriginal tribe. Now, legend, linguistics and archaeological evidence identify the Marquesas as a

once key hub in their great journeys, with spokes leading to other, far-flung extremes, such as Easter Island, New Zealand and Hawaii.

Today, the Marquesas' six islands house fewer than

"Maoris were the first people to reach Polynesia – the last places on Earth to be populated"

10,000 people, and Aranui's arrival, every three weeks, is their key lifeline. Aranui 3, as nobody calls it, is custom-built for purpose, with good standards of comfort and service, unlike its predecessors, which

had little kit of modern passenger-freighters. Aranui's whale boats might still crash through surf to shore, but nowadays it's just with travellers instead

of doubling-up with freight. Once, these relics even transported Land Rovers to beaches; most cargo is now taken ashore in motor-driven lighters, often with displays of astonishing daring, skill and seamanship.

This action takes place against a coastal backdrop of over-powering tropical beauty and assertions that the landscape matches the allure of anywhere on Earth are simply not worth contesting. This is despite the negatives of mosquitoes and sand flies; and levels of heat and humidity that could wilt the least vigorous.

Still, Aranui offers a choice of journey that some, if not all, might appreciate as the voyage of a lifetime. In this instance, rather than the round, 15-day voyage from Tahiti, the preference was to fly

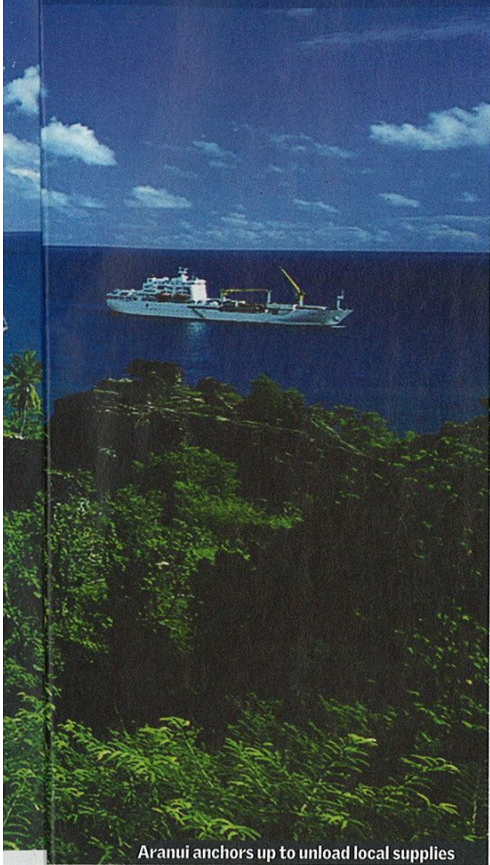
four hours to Nuka Hiva, the Marquesas administrative capital, and join Aranui for seven of its eight-day island schedule. Fewer than 10 of the 200 passengers chose this option. Better the remainder, then, the possibility of featureless days on what, in great Pacific swells, can be uninviting seas.

EPIC TALES

Immense journeys generally commence with an indelible impression. This one came



The seats may be plastic but the view is fantastic



Aranui anchors up to unload local supplies

amid mangroves in a lush valley, where Herman Melville famously jumped ship and wrote *Typee*, predecessor to *Moby-Dick*, and where a wooden landing marks embarkation. Presently, out of an eerie mist, emerges the mesmerising sight of a whale boat, its lone lookout ensuring safe navigation on an ebbing tide.

On board *Aranui*, shaking news. An administrator, a young wahine with waist-length tresses, regrets: 'We are having trouble with the Germans... childish. Please, just let them go first.' Normally, *Aranui's* passenger manifest is largely French and American.

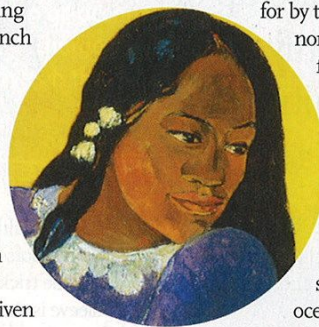
As the French and Americans tell it, the Germans got wind of a Frankfurt newspaper report, alleging inadequate quantities of food at breakfast. So it proved, as the Teutons queued early doors, 6.30am, to pile their plates with everything in sight. This gluttony cleared the buffet, and an uneasy stand-off is now in place. Top-drawer, chin-up Americans, including a former nuclear submariner and an Alaskan trawler owner who once captained a US Navy ice-breaker, ride above such behaviour, finding it all highly amusing.

But further angered by not being permitted to fully use their own tour guide the Germans remain sullen. Revenge or no, this minority is not having a nice time.

A great shame since no people on Earth make melody with ukuleles

like Polynesians, and, after dinner, the crew belt out happiness for the good-humoured of a steamy bar-room. Overhead, moody Mars and a brilliant Venus, shining with the intensity of a Boeing landing light, assume opposite positions in a spectacular night sky. Below, barracudas use the lights of the ship to snare the slow and the small.

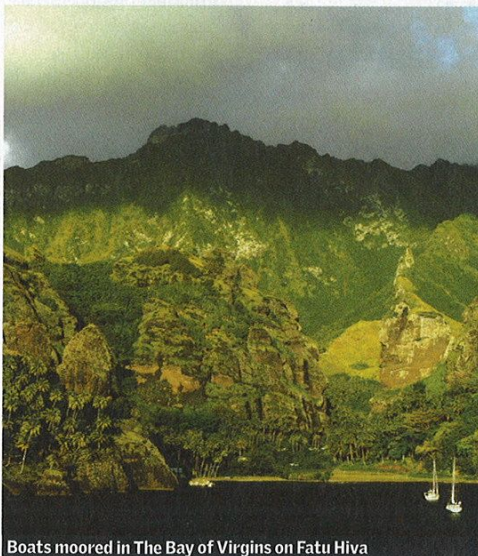
Polynesians regard the Marquesas as the land of men, and many of the crew are of a stature that might make Jonah Lomu, All Blacks hero, blink. Several of these fearsome sailors, some with shaven, even tattooed heads, thighs like tug boats and medicine ball muscles, stand serene and aloof, awaiting adventure. Girls from the French provinces, some with the French regional military, emerge from shadows. On deck, the ship's doctor, on a gratis passage in exchange for sick-bay duties, furtively slopes away with a boat boy. He is about 18. She, a Belgian glamour-puss in her 40s. Not only men, it seems, can be driven mad by the South Pacific.



Paul Gauguin's *Woman with a Mango* (detail)

TREASURE ISLANDS

Aranui visits every island, and, on occasion, two or more ports on the same one. Each is a treasure; all are different; none is surrounded by reef. One, *Ua Huka*, could have been transported from the Aegean, its mostly barren landscape and plunging cliffs home to wild horses as well as feral goats. Another, *Fatu Hiva*, is the lushest, the most remote; to visit is a privilege generally available only to



Boats moored in The Bay of Virgins on *Fatu Hiva*


trans-Pacific yachtsmen. The anchorage, in the Bay of Virgins, marks their first westward stop. Cruise ships never reach this stunning bay, which cannot be said of *Hiva Oa*, Paul Gauguin's island, and easily the most commercial in the group.

Gauguin, whose memory is not to all tastes, is the prop. His plain grave, covered by a frangipani tree, overlooked by a towering rock that would be *Sugar Loaf* mountain if it grew up, has spawned an industry, and a snootiness to rival anything in Paris. Local merchants even have weekend homes in a botanical Eden on the other side of the island, reached by narrow, cement roads, paid for by the EU. The Marquesas want none of the independence malarkey found in Tahiti.

The best bit comes when leaving, at sunset. Beneath a theatrical sky of violet, red and gold, two shaven skulls, commanding a barge driven by twin, screaming outboards, spend 40 minutes turning the ship from its berth to the open ocean. The American Navy veterans gasp in admiration. Finally, as *Aranui* heads to sea, an onboard crane lifts the barge back on deck.

While *Aranui's* administrators ensure jam-packed, rewarding excursions, many might still rue the shortness of time on shore. Time, on the other hand, is something the locals have in plenty; and they let you know this.

The upside, and there is plenty, is a relentless flow of things you'll probably never see or experience again. The haunting, welcome wail of a wahine, alone on a rock, awaiting the whale boat; a church service, where the stained-glass, brown Jesus is worshipped with the help of drums, guitars and ukuleles; feasts from earth ovens; joyous songs of greeting from children; flowers the size of satellite dishes; fabulous, inexpensive, wooden artefacts; the ship, its crew, their exotic milieu. And much else.

Perhaps the highlight comes in *Nuku Hiva*, where mysterious archaeological sites indicate a lost, advanced civilisation that had imposing houses, community and sporting events; sacrificial rites and rituals that could have been learned from the Mayans, in distant South America. Who is to say they were not? 

Lindsay travelled with Air New Zealand, London to Tahiti from £941 (airnewzealand.co.uk) and Tahiti Tourisme (tahiti-tourisme.co.uk). The 12-day *Aranui* voyage from €2,910, inclusive meals and excursions (aranui.com).