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A South Sea seduction

Stupendous skies and dreamy islands - it's no wonder Gauguin was smitten by the Marquesas, says Nigel Tisdall

(Filed: 26/08/2003)

► South Pacific basics

In the tiny churchyard of Hakahetau, I can hear an elderly American tourist groaning. "Oh! Wow! Mmm . . ." he cries, and it is not clear whether he is making love or dropping dead in this idyllic corner of the South Pacific.



South Sea idyll: Bora Bora in French Polynesia

Creeping through the bougainvillea, I soon see the reason for Jack's joy - he is gorging on a luscious fleshy mango scrunped from a towering tree in this remote Catholic outpost on the island of Ua Pou. As he buries his face in its orange pap like a happy schoolboy, Jack coos with pleasure. "Oh! That's darn good..."

I can understand his ecstasy, though we are hardly going hungry on this voyage of a lifetime. Sailing aboard Aranui 3, "a freighter to paradise" that zig-zags through the impossibly far-flung Marquesas islands in French Polynesia, the cuisine is robustly Gallic.

Asparagus, magret de canard and crème brûlée vie with seductive tastes from the South Seas such as moonfish with vanilla sauce. Although the ship can accommodate 200 passengers, there are only 70 booked on my trip, yet we are still served three courses with wine for lunch and dinner, with everybody politely fighting for the one lettuce leaf the chef provides as garnish.

That's pretty good for a working ship, but then Aranui 3, launched last March, is a rare find - a cargo vessel with cruise-ship comforts. Here you get all the works - comfortable en-suite cabins, lectures, shore excursions, enthusiastic guides, even a swimming pool - but none of the pretensions. Captain Mapuhi Taputu comes to dinner in a T-shirt and shorts, while the locals in steerage sit on deck singing Polynesian tunes backed by a guitar, ukelele and contrabass made with a broom handle and plastic bin.

And while we sail far away from the rest of the world, looking up in awe at the stupendous, star-filled skies and diligently reading tales of the great explorers who came before us, the crew work their butts off delivering cars, cement and Skippy peanut butter to a cluster of wildly beautiful islands still barely touched by tourism.

Nearly 900 miles north-east of Tahiti, the 15 islands of the Marquesas represent the outer reaches of the South Pacific cosmos. It is not just the mangoes that get you swooning, but the whole scenic package.

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Rising to 3,300ft, their steep volcanic peaks are blanketed with thick forests that confine village life to narrow valleys and beaches fringed with a waving green sea of coconut palms. Once peopled with club-carrying cannibals tattooed from head to toe, this was Mars for the 19th-century adventurer.

In 1842, Herman Melville jumped ship on the island of Nuka Hiva, his experiences inspiring his first best-selling novel, *Typee*. Forty-six years later, Robert Louis Stevenson sailed in with pen at the ready, followed by Jack London in 1911.

The visitor who really put the Marquesas on the map, though, was Paul Gauguin. A hundred years ago, the unrivalled illustrator of the South Seas fantasy died on the distant island of Hiva Oa at the age of 54, the culmination of a life of escalating rejections.

Once a successful stockbroker and family man, Gauguin turned into a serial ditcher. Wife, children, France, friends, agents, Van Gogh - all were abandoned when he landed on Tahiti in 1891 sporting long flowing hair and a cowboy hat.

Thirteen years later he was dead, and a century on his art reigns supreme. Much of this reputation rests on the richly coloured and symbolic works painted in his "Studio in the Tropics". Come October, when a blockbuster exhibition in Paris will bring together his South Seas oeuvre as never before, his sanctification by the conventional world he so loathed will be complete.

For Gauguin fans drawn to follow the painter's trail, the good news is that the South Pacific is still bursting with colour. Its dreamy islands and lucid waters simply quiver with beauty. When I flew into Tahiti and looked across to the graph-like peaks of neighbouring Moorea for the first time, I was as stunned as he was. "The mountains stood out in strong black upon the blazing sky," Gauguin noted, "all those crests like ancient battlemented castles."

Today Tahiti and the Marquesas are part of the vast constellation of islands known as French Polynesia, where the supermarkets are piled high with snails, brie and the latest copies of Paris Match. Stepping out of one with a baguette and some vin rouge for a picnic on my hotel balcony (this paradise does not come cheap), I was amazed to find that the entire sky had turned as pink as candy floss. It was just another incredible sunset, but I felt like getting down on my knees and praying. The French, meanwhile, just carried on shopping, puffing cigarettes and driving like madmen.

Inevitably things have changed - but not as much as I feared. Out in the countryside, you still see the familiar dogs, horses, exotic fruits and languid women that are such a feature of Gauguin's paintings. In this centenary year, everyone is cashing in on the great man. From boxes of Noa-Noa pineapple cookies to conference suites and luxury cruise ships, the name and art of Paul Gauguin are everywhere.

As one local pop song put it, if he came back to Tahiti now he would certainly take off - which is why a 16-day voyage on Aranui 3 is so appealing. While some visitors fly here just to sit around in high-class resorts listening to musicians in flowery shirts play *Strangers In the Night*, the real Polynesia is out there on the high seas.

It took Gauguin five days to sail from Tahiti to the Marquesas. We did it in three, chugging through the palm-ringed atolls of the Tuamotu archipelago, where the horizon is a trail of cartoon desert islands. This being a working ship, we had been warned that schedules might change (they did) and that the trips ashore by whaleboat could be sportif (they were).

Although there are now air connections too, the Aranui has long been a lifeline for the 8,000 inhabitants of the Marquesas, nosing round the islands like a bee visiting a bank of flowers. In some places, such as Hanaiapa's Bay on Hiva Oa, the ship only calls three or four times a year, and our arrival was always a cause for celebration. Out came the garlands of flowers, platters of fruit and singing schoolchildren, and we felt a bit like the Queen and Prince Philip visiting some distant corner of the Commonwealth - except that everything is resolutely French. Though they did say

non to the euro, the Marquesas remain a tropical home for standard-issue yellow Postes boxes, earnest games of petanque and tubby Polynesian gendarmes sporting shorts and jelly shoes.

Blessed with beautiful weather, bountiful nature and French subsidies, life here looks very good to the passing traveller. Much of our time was spent unloading blue barrels used for collecting noni, a yellowish fruit that smells disgusting and tastes foul but which has nevertheless become the basis of a health supplement being marketed in the United States by Mormons, with great success.

While the crew sweated and toiled on the quayside, we layabout passengers were taken on sightseeing excursions that are all part of the ticket. Up into the mountains of Nuka Hiva by four-wheel-drive for a picnic. Down into the valley of Taipivai to find ancient marae (sacred sites) buried in the jungle. Over to the beach for songs, dances and a barbecue under the taro trees.

While the Aranui visits six islands, Gauguin only made it to one, Hiva Oa, where his simple grave in Atuona is - as famous graves often are - something of an anticlimax. The artist had been aiming for Fatu Hiva, the wildest and most remote of the inhabited Marquesas, but was distracted en route.

Even now, this most southerly island has an intoxicating allure for travellers. In 1937 a young Thor Heyerdahl lived here for a year, trying to lead the simple life as the world moved to war, and Fatu Hiva was the island that most excited everybody on board.

In a way, it is good Gauguin didn't make it here. Spared global fame and with only 600 islanders split between two coastal settlements, Fatu Hiva has a raw, end-of-the-world feel which we savoured on a 10-mile hike, climbing up from sea-level to 2,500ft, then back down to the other side of the island. Its interior still has deep, thickly forested green valleys that have never been fully explored, while life in the tiny village of Hanavave seemed as blissful as you could hope for.

As we sat in the sunshine, relaxing after our five-hour walk with garlands of flowers round our necks and lissom Polynesian girls plying us with papayas, mangoes and cups of coconut milk, it was abundantly clear that an escape to the South Seas is still as seductive as ever. "I am losing any sense of days and hours, of good and bad," Gauguin wrote. "Everything is beautiful, everything is good." One hundred years on, it still is.

Further information

The Gauguin-Tahiti exhibition is at the Grand Palais, 3 avenue du General-Eisenhower, Paris (0033 1 4413 1730; www.rmn.fr/galeriesnationalesdugrandpalais), October 3 2003-January 19 2004; closed Mon. David Sweetman's 600-page biography Paul Gauguin - a complete life (Sceptre) is essential shipboard reading - track a copy down at www.usedbooksearch.co.uk. The Lure of Tahiti, edited by A Grove Day (Mutual Publishing, available locally), is an anthology of travel writing by visitors such as Cook, Darwin, Melville and Rupert Brooke.

Further information from Tahiti Tourisme (020 7222 7282; www.tahiti-tourisme.pf).