

COVER STORY

# *Beyond* **TAHITI**

A bay on Nuku Hiva,  
the capital island of  
the Marquesas Islands.

**Aranui Cruises, a one-ship cruise line, visits remote destinations in the South Pacific. How it operates makes its sailings as unusual as where they visit.**

**ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY ARNIE WEISSMANN**



## How is the Aranui 5 unlike any other cruise ship?

### Let me count the ways:

- It is also a cargo freighter.
- There are no waterslides, rock climbing walls, themed bars, racetracks, ice skating rinks, standup comedians, Starbucks, art sales or discos. The ship is not the destination.
- Complimentary ukulele lessons!
- The crew is welcome to mix with guests in public areas when not on duty.
- There is only one restaurant, and it is not a specialty restaurant. Breakfast is buffet, and there's a set menu for lunch and dinner. As I used to tell my children, you get what you get and you don't get upset.
- The captain wears a T-shirt and shorts when making presentations.
- Marquesan crew outnumber other nationalities 17-to-1.
- South Pacific islands make up the majority of every itinerary.

### How is it similar to other cruise ships?

- As with Virgin Voyages, there is an onboard tattoo studio. Unlike Virgin, the artist does only authentic Polynesian designs comprising sacred iconography, tailored to an individual's personality.
- There is a swimming pool.
- There's a fitness center and masseuse.
- There's an onboard shop.

I'm sure there are other similarities and dissimilarities, but you get the idea. This year is the 40th anniversary of the company that operates one of the world's most distinctive cruise operations. To book a cabin on the Aranui 5 means you're heading either to the remote Austral Islands (about 400 miles south of Tahiti), the Marquesas Islands (900 miles north of Tahiti), the Gambier group (about 1,000 miles southeast of Tahiti), Pitcairn Island (about 1,350 miles southeast of Tahiti) or the Tuamotu Archipelago (the farthest of which is 1,500 miles from Tahiti).

## CULTURAL IMMERSION

Most Aranui 5 guests opt for the Marquesas, where the culture, weather, topography and variety contribute to an accessible and engaging experience. It is among the destinations in the world that are best seen by ship, but unlike many others in that category — Antarctica or the Galapagos, for instance — cultural immersion is as important a benefit as the destination's pristine natural environment.

And the immersion is onboard as well as onshore. In addition to ukulele lessons, dance and cooking instruction is offered. The Marquesan staff is more than happy to share its culture.

At each of our arrivals at the six inhabited Marquesas Islands (total population: 9,000), we were greeted with enthusiasm that reflected both local custom and practical considerations. The Aranui 5 is, to most Marquesans, primarily a supply ship.

See **ARANUI** on Page 10

**Left, the Aranui 5: cargo ship fore, cruise ship aft. Middle, passengers were offered ukulele lessons as the ship moved from island to island. Right, dancers on Nuku Hiva, beneath a sacred banyan tree.**





## ARANUI

*Continued from Page 9*

During our port calls, the ship's two forward cranes were kept busy. First, freight was unloaded: Cement, sugar and outrigger canoes were among the cargo on our sailing. (I was told that on previous voyages, a helicopter and a horse were transported.) As morning turns to afternoon, the cranes begin lifting crates onboard, filled with copra, fruit and crafts destined for other islands on the route.

I would not have predicted that pausing to watch the loading and unloading of freight would become part of my daily routine.

One thing that separates a trip to the Marquesas from a visit to the Society Islands (e.g., Tahiti, Bora Bora and Moorea) is the relative absence of time spent in the water. There were a few opportunities for a dip in the Pacific, but excursions were overwhelmingly land-based, and the beaches were not particularly attractive.

### A TRAVEL ADVISOR WEIGHS IN

Travel advisor Mary Kraemer of Masterpiece Travels was also aboard my sailing. She had become a French Polynesia specialist just before Covid and leaned into the specialty during the pandemic because, in part, French Polynesia became an attractive alternative to Hawaii, which didn't open until later.

She hasn't yet sent anyone sailing on the Aranui 5 and was onboard to better acquaint herself with the experience. "It's such a niche thing that I think it's really important to understand it before you start booking people on it," she said. "It's not your typical cruise experience. The crew is wonderful; the accommodations are comfortable, but they're not posh.

"It's run differently," she continued. "The bar is open sometimes. It's in the cruise category, but atypical in almost every regard. You can't call it an adventure cruise because adrenaline junkies would be going nuts. The couple I was having breakfast with were talking about how they haven't been in the ocean in a week, except in Tahiti before boarding the ship."

She summed up what she saw as its primary attractions: "I think that if you are genuinely interested in cultural immersion and learning about the history of these islands and seeing unspoiled areas, this is the place you want to come. If you think you've been everywhere and seen everything, you haven't seen this."

Kraemer is in Travel Planners International, which is part of Signature Travel Network, and although Aranui Cruises isn't a preferred supplier, she can book through Pleasant Holidays, which is the largest source of guests for Aranui.

I asked Kraemer whether she thought clients who were accustomed to traveling in luxury might be willing to look at Aranui because it conveyed a different type of bragging rights: a visit to a destination that, in all likelihood, none of their friends have been to.

"As long as the expectation is set in advance, definitely," she said. "I think this is a great second trip to French Polynesia. If your first exposure is Tahiti, Moorea or Bora Bora and you loved it, and you want to come back and go deeper, this is the place to come."

### THE EXPERIENCE

In a time when it seems like every other travel article talks about overtourism, the Marquesas are the antidote. Paul Gauguin Cruises and Windstar Cruises also visit some of the islands regularly, though less frequently

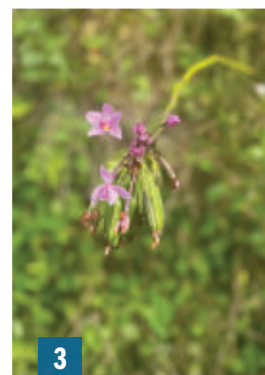
*See ARANUI on Page 12*



1



2



3

1) The "skyline" of Ua Pou includes peaks over 4,000 feet, the highest in the Marquesas. 2) Performers danced, sang, posed for photos and then disembarked before the ship departed Papeete, Tahiti, on Day 1 of the voyage. 3) A wild orchid on Fatu Hiva.



**GRAND CENTURY CRUISES**  
A DESTINATION OF TRUE LEISURE



**TRAVEL WEEKLY  
MAGELLAN AWARDS**  
WINNERS ANNOUNCED  
CENTURY CRUISES  
HANDING THE BEST IN THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY

# Legends of China

with a Yangtze River Cruise

**14-Day Fam Trip**

Agent Rate **\$1999USD/PP** with International Flight Included.








CST#2142480-40

**626-666-6999** or **1(805)609-6090** | [booking@centuryrivercruises.com](mailto:booking@centuryrivercruises.com) | 2956 E Colorado Blvd Ste 120, Pasadena, CA 91107



## ARANUI

*Continued from Page 10*

than the Aranui 5; the islands also appear on some National Geographic-Lindblad Expeditions and Holland America Line itineraries.

The Aranui 5 was, on my sailing, the only ship calling at each island when we were there, though there was a scattering of yachts in most of the harbors. Visiting all six inhabited islands gave passengers a sense of the commonalities and the differences among them. Similarities included a love of music and art, though how those manifested varied from island to island. Everywhere we went, local bands performed, their pleasure apparently as much in the joy of playing together as in entertaining visitors. Musicians were of every age and gender; I'm sure I was not alone in marveling at the depth of ukulele, guitar, washtub bass and vocal talent in every small village where we stopped.

Love of music was apparent on the ship, as well; crew would sometimes play and sing in the bar in the evenings.

Missionaries had brought Christianity to the islands, and after a long period in which traditional beliefs were suppressed, they allowed expressions of local culture to blend into the religion. I visited churches and cemeteries on each of the islands that intermingled local tradition with Christian sacraments.

There were multiple highlights, but two really stood out. The first was on Nuku Hiva, the capital island of the Marquesas. We went in four-wheel-drive pickups to a site where a local dance troupe appeared under the largest banyan tree I have ever seen. This was not simply a performance — the emotion and energy were tied to sacred ancient traditions, and it was riveting. Afterward, we walked into the forest behind the tree to see petroglyphs.

The other standout was a nine-mile walk along the road connecting Omoa and Hanavave, the only two villages in the most remote island, Fatu Hiva. The villages are each in the caldera of the volcanoes that formed the island.

Those who chose this excursion walked at their own pace, and as a result, most of the time I could see no one in front and no one behind. One felt alone in an incredibly beautiful area where there were no buildings, no electric lines, no traffic, nothing but unspoiled nature. It was as if one had discovered a national park no one else had yet heard about.

While those two experiences were the standouts, there was no shortage of other unique, absorbing experiences. The crafts that each island excels at were impressive. Some developed an expertise in bone carving (the work of one artist who was manning a crafts table on Tahuata has been displayed in the Louvre). On Fatu Hiva, a local plant is pounded into paperlike sheets that artists use as a canvas.

A note about crafts: Some of the islands have an ATM, others don't. If interested in local crafts, be sure to carry a fair amount of local money along to each stop. The ship will change money if you run low.

Each island has unique geologic characteristics. All are volcanic, and while most are lush, the leeward side of Ua Pou is arid. It is no less interesting than the others, and an optional excursion on that island included a tour that ended with a visit to the mayor of the town of Hakahetau.

One attraction that many aboard were drawn to is a cemetery on Hiva Oa where the artist Paul Gauguin and the Belgian singer Jacques Brel are buried within a dozen yards of one another. A short walk away are museums honoring both.

See **ARANUI** on Page 14



1) A musician on Ua Huka near the entrance of a local crafts market. 2) A woman on Fatu Hiva pounds the inner bark of a shrub to make tapa cloth, which local artists use as a canvas. 3) Two women string leis outside a church on Ua Huka. 4) A lei adorns a carving of Jesus Christ in a Catholic mission on Nuka Hiva. 5) The nine-mile walk connecting Omoa and Hanavave, the only two villages on Fatu Hiva, offered varied and stunning vistas. 6) Pascal Erhel Hatuuku, a Marquesan who is one of the ship's guides, and Yveline Hikutini, the mayor of Hakahetau on Ua Pou. 7) Artist Paul Gauguin's grave on Hiva Oa.



## ARANUI

Continued from Page 12

### PARTICULARS

Aranui 5 miscellanea: The ship's capacity is between 170 and 230 passengers, depending on cabin occupancy, though there were only 162 guests (nine of whom got tattoos) on my 11-night sailing this past May.

There are two free laundry days, though socks and underwear are not accepted.

Most island roads are paved or otherwise in good shape. We encountered pigs, goats and horses on the roads.

The islands are so beautiful that I fear I'll face accusations of being heavy-handed on the color saturation scale when editing the photos. Not every view, everywhere, is a knockout, but the volcanic nature of the islands guarantees the terrain was endlessly interesting and, for the most part, spectacularly green.

The Marquesan language is different from that spoken on the Society Islands and has variations even within the Marquesas island group. While you may have learned to say hello and thank you in Tahitian, you'll need to relearn them in the Marquesas.

Most passengers got up early to watch the docking at Ua Huka — and for good reason. It's the most unusual moorage I've ever witnessed, beginning with manned barges being lifted off the ship by crane and the crew securing the ship with ropes on opposite sides of a canyon bay. Just as they finish, the sun begins to rise high enough to cast the area in soft light, bringing out multiple hues on the canyon walls.

If interested in hitting all the remote destinations Aranui Cruises offers, you'll want to join the Tiki Club loyalty program.

All itineraries begin and end in Papeete, Tahiti. (Disclosures: Air Tahiti Nui provided nonstop service for me from Los Angeles, and Aranui Cruises hosted my cruise.)

### AND, ARANOA

The Aranui 1 launched in 1981 as, primarily, a supply ship, with cabins for only 12 passengers. I spoke to one passenger on my sailing who had been on the Aranui 2 and said that there were only about 40 passengers. Another passenger, who was on the Aranui 3, noted the food has improved considerably for the Aranui 5. (There was no Aranui 4 — the company's ethnic-Chinese owners view four as an unlucky number.)

Next up: The Aranoa, scheduled to be completed toward the end of 2025. The ship will hold more passengers and be more luxe, with larger cabins and a better stabilizer. (As far as I could tell, the Aranui 5 had no stabilizer, though the seas on my voyage were fairly calm. I'm told that, in certain seasons, that is not always the case.)

Building the ship with more cabins may make the experience feel a little less exclusive, but if the company maintains the same level of cultural sensitivity and immersion I experienced on the Aranui 5, I doubt anyone will complain.

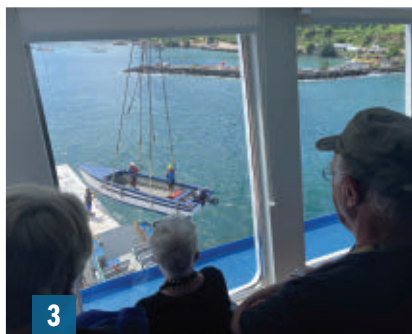
Cruise and tour companies have made great strides in connecting with local communities, but the relationship Aranui Cruises has built with Marquesans is unlike anything I've previously seen. Islanders and crew are of one community and often literally know one another, and the company makes efforts to support local craftspeople and performers on their own terms. It's a formula that can't be easily duplicated and is yet another bullet point in the list of ways that a sailing on Aranui Cruises differs from any other cruise experience.



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8

1) The Aranui 5 moored horizontally across a canyon bay on Ua Huka as the sun rose. 2) A young man brings his catch home, up a path on Hiva Oa. 3) Passengers often took a seat in the lounge to watch the ship load and unload cargo. 4) Passenger Thierry Bory shows off the tattoo he had inked aboard the ship. 5) Boys fishing off a rock on Tahuata; the Aranui 5 is in the background. 6) An enormous tiki, Tuhiva, on Nuku Hiva. 7) Passengers who took Marquesas dance lessons on the voyage perform on the final evening of the trip. 8) Passengers throw flowers in the water as they depart Ua Huka, the last island visited in the Marquesas.