

# French Polynesia



Bungalows at Bora Bora Lagoon Resort.

## On the trail of Paul Gauguin

Paul Gauguin left a legacy of fine art which has earned him worldwide admiration and fame. Unfortunately, this recognition came too late, as he died in poverty in the Marquesas Islands in 1903. Yet his magnificent paintings of the native people of French Polynesia live on in the hearts of people everywhere.

I have always admired Gauguin's work, so it was a thrill for me to be invited to travel to the South Pacific by Radisson (now Regent) Seven Seas Cruises. My 7-night cruise on the *Paul Gauguin* would visit Tahiti, where the artist painted for many years, and a separate post-cruise trip offered a tour of the Marquesas Islands, where the artist spent his final years and was buried.

In addition, I had the opportunity to visit other places in the Society Islands, including Raiatea, Taha'a (and Regent's private Motu Mahana), Bora Bora and Moorea. Gauguin's legacy is honored in all of those beautiful tropical islands, and though it has been over 100 years since his death, his legend continues to grow — along with the prices for his art.

### Raiatea

The September weather was warm and beautiful in Raiatea on the first morning of my *Paul Gauguin* cruise. I stepped out onto my balcony and felt the soft tropical breezes and watched the palms swaying above the aqua sea. We were docked at Tumaraa, where I joined some of my fellow passengers for a bus tour of the island, with its population of only 12,000. Most of the people we met spoke French, with English as their second language.

We drove along a 2-lane coastal road, visiting botanical gardens and enjoying views of the sea. Looking out to sea, we could see many small islands, or *motus*.



The *Paul Gauguin*, as seen from a helicopter, anchored near Moorea.

We also toured the inner island, crossing on a small road through a tropical jungle. The bus groaned as we went uphill through large ferns and bamboos, which we learned were used to make furniture and fish baskets.

Back along the coast road, we passed a lagoon which glimmered in shades of deep blue and light aqua. Little square buildings built over the water turned out to be black-pearl farms. We also saw bread boxes beside the road where customers could leave money and help themselves to loaves of freshly baked bread.

It began to rain lightly as we passed flower farms and several vanilla plantations. The sprinkles turned into a downpour as we drove by four spectacular waterfalls.

Our tour ended at Marae Taputapuatea, where human sacrifices were once made, the last being in 1822. Near a large church, local people were playing a game called *petanque*, which looked like bocce ball.



A life-size replica of the famous artist stands outside the Boutique Gauguin in Bora Bora.

## *Pat Arrigoni, Contributing Editor*

### **Bora Bora and Moorea**

The next day we arrived in Bora Bora, and I was able to take a helicopter tour of the island. It was like being in a dream — everything was so beautiful in the early morning mist. Surrounded by other motus, the tiny island below was dominated by a 2,300-foot-high mountain covered in tropical green forest, with aqua lagoons and rocky reefs located in

the outer area of what was once a volcanic crater.

In the afternoon, I took a 1½-hour glass-bottom boat tour. The old wooden boat had no cushions and six pieces of glass fitted into the bottom. Captain Frank Sachsse swam under the boat and fed the fish to create a frenzy of activity. We saw bullethead parrotfish, black sea cucumbers, white goatfish, yellow butterflyfish



and corals of all colors. A moray eel swam by, in addition to a blue-spotted grouper and several eagle and bat rays.

The next two days were spent in Moorea, where I took another helicopter tour, a boat ride to see dolphins and a 3-hour island tour. I was able to sit in a front seat on this helicopter ride to shoot photos through an open window and found the scenery as beautiful as that on Bora Bora, though this island was much larger.

We looked down at a 3,600-foot-high mountain, lush valleys, waterfalls and colorful coral lying beneath the surface of the water. A special thrill was seeing spinner and bottlenose dolphins and whales swim by.



Entertainers on board the *Paul Gauguin*.

The boat we took to see the dolphins in the afternoon carried 31 passengers. It had very hard seats but did have a roof to shelter us from the sun. We learned a lot about dolphins and whales on our journey but, alas,

did not see any.

On our tour of Moorea the next day, we traveled along a 2-lane road that circled the island and went up to the mountaintops. Though most of the 7,000 people on the island live by the ocean, many own land in the mountains.

We saw a variety of trees, including avocado, ironwood, chestnut, flame tree, teak, banyan, pineapple, papaya and breadfruit, as well as hibiscus flowers and bougainvillea plants, which added color to this scenic island.

We stopped to view Cook's Bay from Belvedere Lookout Point — 2,500 feet high and crowded with tourists enjoying the view. Our final stop was in the town of Haapiti, where everyone went souvenir shopping before returning the next day to Papeete, Tahiti.

### The ship

The *Paul Gauguin*, built in 1997, had a capacity for 320 passengers during my cruise. (This number rose to 330 after a \$6-million refurbishment of the ship in January 2006.) All staterooms and suites had ocean views, as did my 249-square-foot Veranda Stateroom, which included a queen-size bed. My stateroom also contained a mini-bar, a balcony with chairs and a table, and a TV with preselected movies, area lectures and documentaries about Paul Gauguin. Other amenities included big fluffy white towels, a cotton robe and slippers.

The *Paul Gauguin* offered three restaurants and allowed passengers to sit wherever they chose. L'Etoile featured French cuisine with a Polynesian accent. It also included a Chef's Recommendation and a Well-Being Menu for calorie counters. I selected mainly fish dishes and especially enjoyed the grilled yellowfin tuna, salmon, wahoo, Dover sole and marinated shrimp.

Lunch was served in the dining room or at a buffet near the pool on the top deck, an area that was transformed into Le Grill at night. From a recent update, I have learned that the menu for the third restaurant, La Veranda, has been redesigned for healthy eating by the chefs of Le Cordon Bleu of Paris and includes

### Getting there

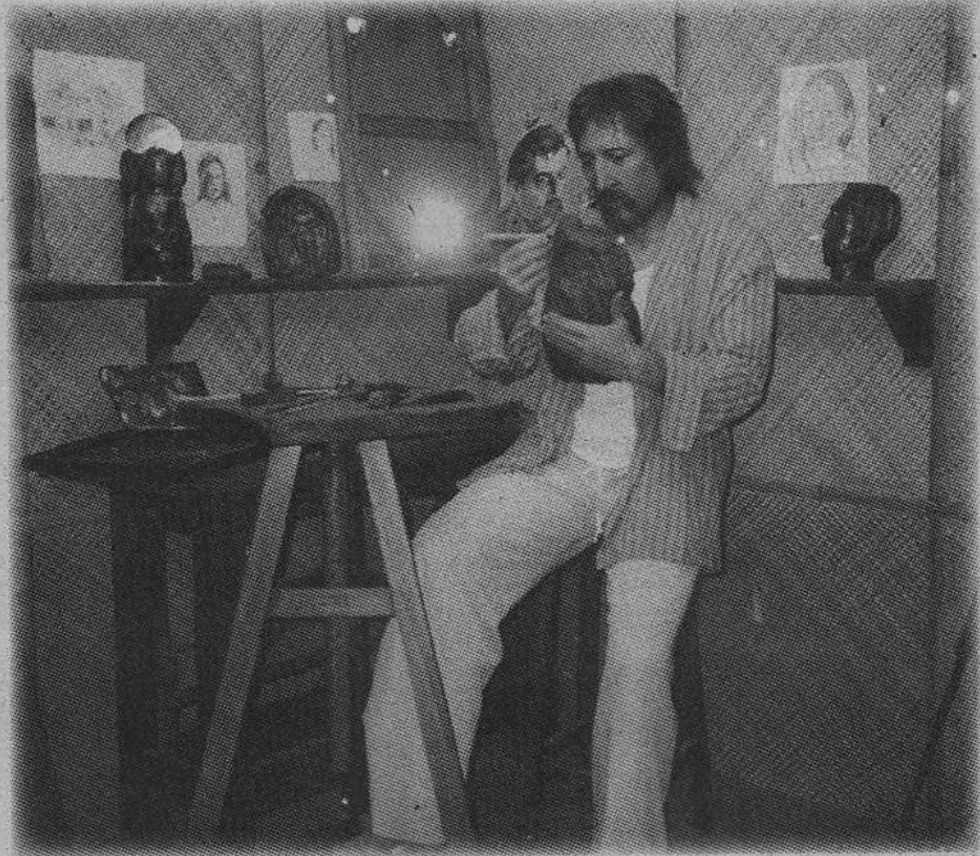
I purchased a business-class seat (\$600 one way) on Air Tahiti Nui (phone 877/824-4846, [www.airtahitinui-usa.com](http://www.airtahitinui-usa.com)), which was roomy and had an individual TV screen with a selection of films. The flight attendants were very helpful.

lighter sauces and vegetarian options. Wine is still offered at lunch and dinner at no extra charge in all of the restaurants.

Excursions offered on the cruise included kayaking, scuba diving and snorkeling, or you could stay on board and enjoy the swimming pool, spa, fitness center or boutique. On one day, everyone went to a motu for swimming and a beach barbecue. This motu was typical of all of the islands we visited, with golden sand, aqua water, swaying palms, cooling breezes and tropical coral reefs.

### Tahiti

After a magnificent week on the



**A figure of Paul Gauguin creating a sculpture is on exhibit at the Pearl Museum in Papeete.**

*Paul Gauguin*, we disembarked in Papeete, Tahiti, and went to visit the Paul Gauguin Museum, located near the artist's former home in Mataiea, on the west coast of Tahiti. Opened in 1965, the museum has three small buildings showing displays related to the artist, plus a gift shop. I was especially interested in the photos and charts explaining Paul Gauguin's genealogy and a huge map illustrating his worldwide travels.

Though Gauguin's original works are scattered around the world, the



museum does have a few black-and-white sketches and a fascinating clay pot he made plus colorful reproductions of his important paintings.

After three days in Tahiti, I flew to the Marquesas Islands to visit the place where Paul Gauguin lived out his final years.

### Planning a visit

Regent Seven Seas offers cruise packages on the *Paul Gauguin* that include hotels and post-cruise tours. A 7-night cruise in 2006, leaving from Papeete and sailing around the Society Islands and including Raiatea, Taha'a, Bora Bora and Moorea, runs from \$1,795 to \$2,195 per person, based

on double occupancy and depending on departure date and cabin category. An extended lineup of 9-, 10- and 14-night sailings reaching the Marquesas, Tuamotus, Australs and Cook islands is available several times throughout the year. Airfare



**Breakfast on a private deck aboard the *Paul Gauguin* in Bora Bora.**

is additional, and nonstop Tahiti departures are available from New York (JFK) and Los Angeles.

For more information, contact Regent Seven Seas Cruises (Fort Lauderdale, FL; 800/285-1835, [www.rssc.com](http://www.rssc.com)).

An alternative option for sailing around the Society Islands is the two Bora Bora Cruises yachts, the

*Ti'a Moana* and the *Tu Moana*. The itinerary includes Bora Bora (The Romantic Island), Taha'a (The Vanilla Island), Raiatea (The Sacred Island) and Huahine (Garden of Eden).

I traveled as a guest for a couple of days on the 30-stateroom *Ti'a Moana* and found it delightful and quite luxurious. The 2006 price for a 6-night/7-day cruise is \$5,300 (an advance-purchase discount is available), which includes all excursions, food, wine and liquor. Sample excursions include an afternoon tea, Polynesian style (at a floating table in the lagoon), and a film shown on a private motu.

Note: there are no elevators connecting the ship's five decks.

For information, contact Bora Bora Cruises (Papeete; 800/780-4014, [www.boraboracruises.com](http://www.boraboracruises.com)).

Bora Bora Cruises has a partnership agreement with Orient Express Hotels, offering visitors a stay at the luxury Orient Express **Bora Bora Lagoon Resort** before or after a cruise aboard one of their yachts. (E-mail [bbcinfo@oeh.com](mailto:bbcinfo@oeh.com) for more info.) The resort offers 23 motu-style bungalows with thatch roofs (€455, or \$555), or you can stay in one of the 44 bungalows built over the water (€695, or \$848).

The resort offers all the usual watersports plus tennis, volleyball and deep-sea fishing, and it has a luxurious new "treetop" spa called *Maru*. During my stay, I was impressed by the tropical Polynesian architecture and gardens, which were landscaped with pools, waterfalls and lovely col-

orful flowers. A special entertainment production is performed on Saturday nights featuring Tahitian dancers and the famous male fire dancers.

For more information on the resort, contact Bora Bora Lagoon Resort & Spa (phone 800/860-4095 [reservations] or 011 689 60 4000, [www.borabora.lagoon.com](http://www.borabora.lagoon.com)).

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**Right: Tourist guide Frida Peterano stops at the grave of Paul Gauguin on Hiva Oa Island in the Marquesas.**



**Community experiment** Two men from the U.K. are leasing a Fijian island in a 3-year community living experiment involving the Internet and up to 5,000 people from around the world who will take turns living on the island, 100 at a time.

Each member will spend from seven to 21 nights on the island. Absent members, using an Internet link, will vote on what the community should build, plant, etc. The plan is to help local development projects without negatively impacting the environment. The 200-acre island has no electricity or fresh water supplies.

A week's stay is part of a one-year membership, which costs \$220; two weeks in two years costs \$440, and three in three, \$660. The fee covers meals but not airfare. Hundreds have signed up already online. For info on Tribewanted, visit [www.tribewanted.com](http://www.tribewanted.com).