

An aerial photograph of a tropical beach. In the foreground, a white sandy beach curves along the edge of a shallow, turquoise lagoon. A dense forest of palm trees and other tropical vegetation covers the land. Long shadows of the palm trees are cast onto the sand. In the middle ground, the water transitions from a light turquoise to a deeper blue. A line of small, thatched-roof huts on stilts is visible in the water. In the far distance, a large white cruise ship is visible on the horizon. The background features several large, green, mountainous islands under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds.

Cruising the Polynesian paradise of

Paul



Gauguin

JANICE MUCALOV

OUR COLOURFUL KAYAKS part a sea of yellow hibiscus blossoms, fallen from the lacy canopy of foliage above. We paddle by mangroves, wild guava and breadfruit trees, bamboo groves and giant ferns. Content to absorb the beauty of this gentle river of flowers, we are quiet.

The only voice is that of our French guide Hubert (and wouldn't you know it, Hubert is beautiful too) who every so often divulges intriguing nuggets of information about the surrounding tropical rainforest.

"There's a delicate white flower with five petals, *tiare apetahi*, so rare it grows nowhere else in the world except on Mt. Temehani here on the island of Raiatea," he'll say. And, "Native legend has it that all migration to the Hawaiian islands and New Zealand started from Raiatea."

We are kayaking the Faaroa River on a shore excursion from the *Paul Gauguin*. The intimate 332-guest luxury cruise ship was purpose-built to sail

year-round in French Polynesia, and Raiatea is one of the island gems visited on most itineraries.

Back at the put-in site, we jump into an open-sided "Le Truck" (typical Tahitian bus with bench seats and canopy roof). Hair flying, we speed along the winding coastal road back to the ship – just in time for a very special performance on deck.

A young troupe of local musicians and dancers has come aboard. The little girls in their palm leaf skirts, leis and coconut-shell bras are adorable. Of course, there's lots of laughter when guests picked from the audience to hula with them can't sway their hips nearly as gracefully as the children.



When the dance group leaves, we return to our mini-suite. Within minutes, our butler – who knows our minds – delivers champagne (rates include all liquor) and canapés (big shrimp and broiled cheesy mushroom caps this evening). On our balcony, we watch the sky turn from gold to fiery red to dark shades of violet, and finally a crescent moon rise from the sea.



Water waiter



It's a typical day cruising in the islands post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin journeyed to in 1891 and ultimately called home.

As of 2010, the ship (which is named after the artist who immortalized Tahitian culture in his bold canvasses of native maidens) has left Regent Seven Seas Cruises to operate under the banner of Paul Gauguin Cruises. But guests can still expect the same six-star cruise experience for which the *Paul Gauguin* is known.



Veranda suite

Indeed, the vessel sparkles like new. More than \$25 million has been devoted to buffing and polishing it since it started sailing in French Polynesia in 1998; the most recent 2009 dry-dock included a \$6 million refurbishment.

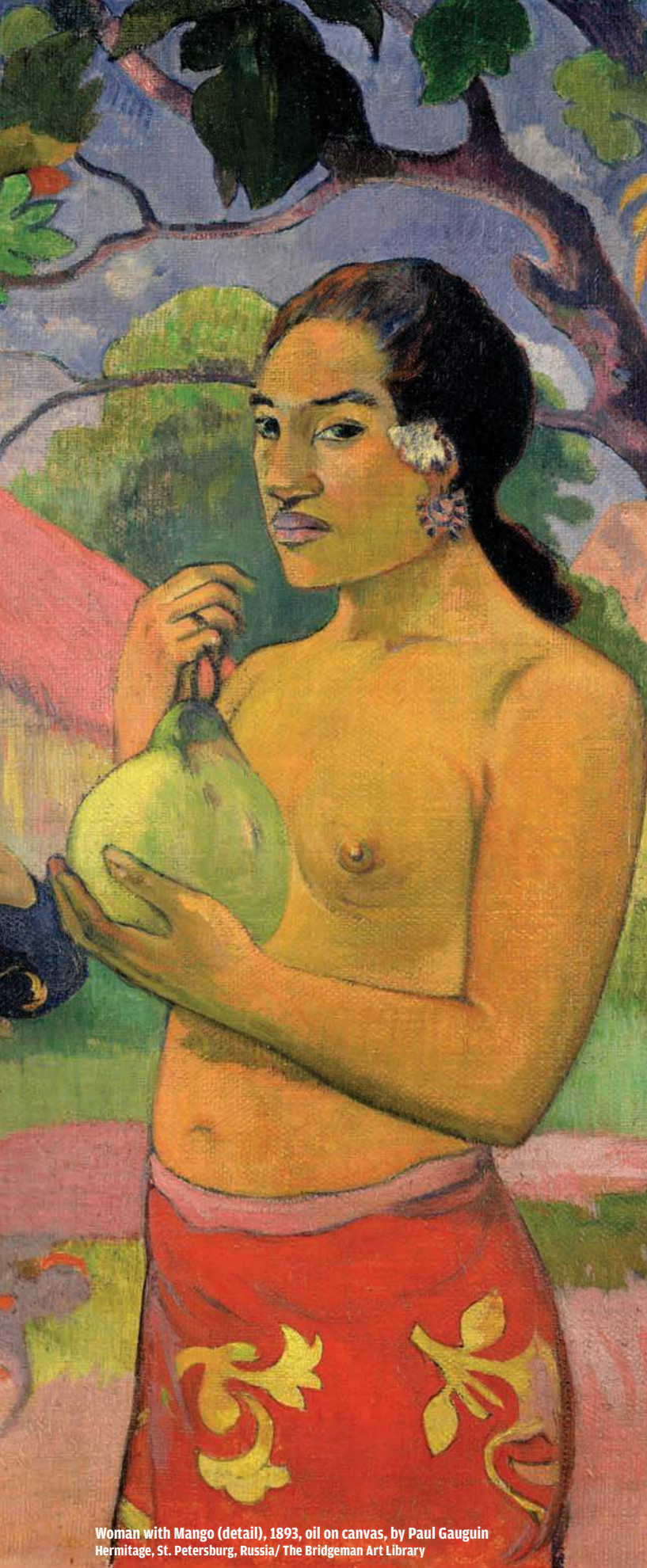
Some 70 percent of staterooms and suites have balconies. Decked out with plush new ruby red carpeting, royal blue furnishings and loads of cherry wood drawers, they exude a rich feel. Black-and-white sketches of historical Polynesian scenes adorn the walls, and in our mini-suite, there's a stone sculpture displayed on a spotlight glass shelf. Best of all, the beds are super comfy, with pillowtop mattresses, white feather duvets and European linens. And thick heavy doors ensure a soundproof room for a good night's sleep.

Itineraries range from seven to 15 nights. Several new cruises for 2010 add various combinations of the Cook Islands, New Zealand, Fiji and Tonga to the classic French Polynesian island mix.

The starting point is typically Papeete on the main island of Tahiti. After flying in, we overnight at the InterContinental Tahiti Resort – perhaps the island's top hotel, with renovated rooms overlooking a snorkelling lagoon, two pools and 30 acres of gardens. The next morning, we check out the market. Fresh fish, baskets of seashells, orchid arrangements, French pastries, carved wooden warriors, tropical fruits, scented soaps – the scene is bustling and fun. Before long, it's time to board the *Paul Gauguin* for our 10-night voyage.



We're greeted by a lovely group of eight smiling Tahitians dressed in pareos, with flowers tucked into their flowing black hair. They are Les Gauguines. Talented hostesses who live onboard, they sing, dance, play ukuleles and tell stories – adding a uniquely Polynesian flavour to each cruise.



Woman with Mango (detail), 1893, oil on canvas, by Paul Gauguin
Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia/ The Bridgeman Art Library

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Our first stop is Huahine. Gauguin should have painted it. With emerald mountains rising above sand-fringed bays of brilliant blue water, it's an artist's vision. It's also untouched by tourism. The only town, Fare, is no more than a handful of very sleepy shops near a small dock. No matter that our ship is anchored with eager guests prepared to infuse the place with cash, it's Sunday, and the 4,480 inhabitants have better things to do than sell souvenirs or rent out motor scooters. (If I lived on Huahine, I'd be swimming or tending my garden or chatting with family under the shade of an acacia tree too.)

That nixes our plan of a scenic drive on the mostly non-paved road around the two islands, connected by a small bridge, that comprise Huahine. Instead, we wander to a quiet beach, mollified by the idea of lying lazily in the sun.

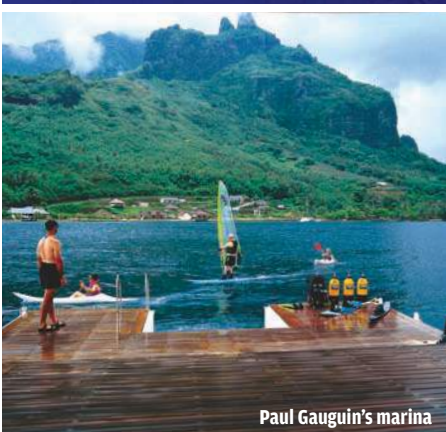
Raiatea is next, followed by a day of cruising. The time at sea allows guests enrolled in the ship's scuba training program to practise dive exercises in the pool. An onboard team of dive masters offers both PADI certification for novices and advanced instruction, and scuba diving, which is available in every port, is popular with many guests. A retractable watersports marina at the stern makes it easy to suit up in the ship's gear and zoom off in Zodiacs to dive sites.

Rangiroa, in particular, is noted for some of the world's best diving and snorkelling. When conditions are right, divers and snorkellers can shoot through a narrow pass between the ocean and lagoon in a surge of rushing water – and watch a wall of sharks devour hapless fish washed in with the tide. Unfortunately, the current is going the wrong way for us to experience this exhilarating dive. But we see Hawksbill turtles tear loose chunks of coral with their beaks, and a huge bottlenose dolphin – one of many commonly seen surfing the waves at the entrance to the lagoon – buzzes by in front of our masks. After, we toast our underwater adventures with a local Hinano beer at Rangiroa's sole bar (a shack by the wharf), where we watch a metre-long moray eel snake by.

A pleasant rhythm to our days sets in; work back home and the Canadian cold are forgotten. Some nights, we dine at Le Verandah, the French specialty restaurant (no extra charge, but reservations required). There's a set menu – perhaps caviar, foie gras, escargot, or shrimp with tomato confit and roasted garlic foam to start. Entrées might include sautéed scallops on black truffle potato purée and



Huahine Island



Paul Gauguin's marina



Kayaking the Faaroa River in Raiatea



grilled shitake mushrooms, or roast duck breast with bitter chocolate and orange sauce. It's all superb and accompanied by a large choice of complimentary premium wines. Mid-cruise, the menu changes. No chance of food boredom here!

Other nights, we dine at L'Etoile, the ship's main restaurant. Usually we get a table for two, but one night we're asked, "Do you want to meet new friends?" We're seated at a shared table for six with a young honeymoon couple from Toronto and Bill (from Idaho), who is celebrating his 80th birthday on this cruise with his wife. Somewhat surprisingly, given the diversity in ages, we all get along famously and it's a very convivial evening.

By day five, we reach Bora Bora. Author James Michener dubbed it "the most beautiful island in the world." Who can disagree? A necklace of palm-studded motus (tiny islets) encircles its gin-clear turquoise lagoon. Tropical valleys blossom with scarlet hibiscus. And for drama, the craggy black peak of Mount Otemanu, crowned by creamy clouds, towers over the island centre.

The *Paul Gauguin* dispatches flat-bottom tenders to its exclusive beach concession on an idyllic motu with powdery white sand. A complimentary bar in a thatched roof hut serves mai tais, and several *Les Gauguines* strum guitars in the shade. Some watersports are offered too. We swim in the bathtub-warm water and snorkel (I love the comical Napoleon fish with their oversize lips and big head bumps). Other guests try sailing dinghies and paddle around the motu in plastic canoes.

Because we're anchored for two days off Bora Bora, we're also able to explore the island's interior on a jeep safari the following day. It's an exciting bone-jarring ride on rutted dirt tracks – we get a workout just hanging on to the roll bars. We see wild fruits from bananas to mangos, check out massive 20-foot cannons left behind by the Americans after WW II, and admire sweeping views of the Pacific from hilltop vantage points. A visit to a black pearl farm caps off the excursion. Ahead of us is Taha'a and the heart-shaped island of Moorea – then it's back to Papeete. We try not to think of that as we sit on our balcony, sipping our ritual evening champagne and watching another Gauguinesque sunset paint the sky. 🌺

To learn more about Paul Gauguin Cruises, visit www.cruiseandtravellifestyles.com

