



Paul Gauguin in the SOUTH PACIFIC

THE FIVE STAR M/S PAUL GAUGUIN IS
NAMED AFTER THE POST-IMPRESSIONIST
PAINTER WHO VIVIDLY IMMORTALIZED
TAHITIAN CULTURE IN HIS BOLD CANVASSES.

GEORGE AND JANICE MUCALOV



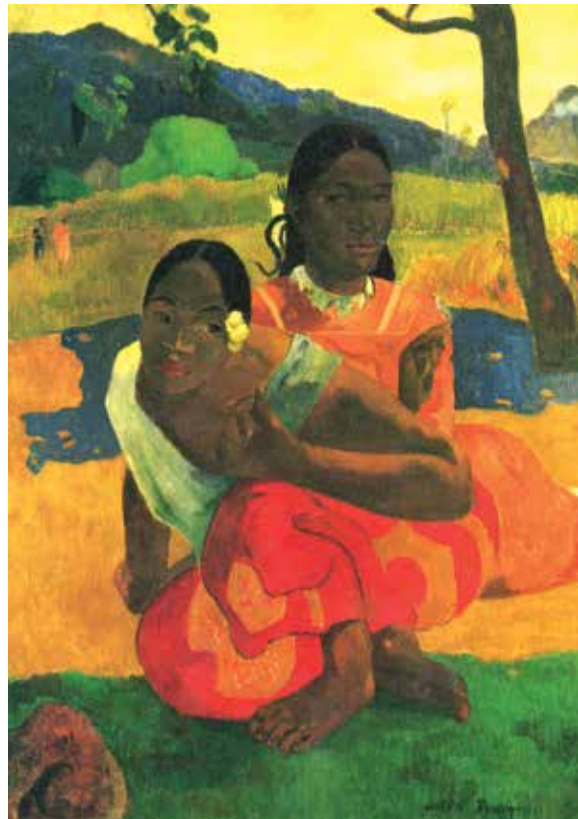
CRUISING THE SOUTH PACIFIC

OUR COLORFUL KAYAKS part a sea of yellow hibiscus blossoms as 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 Faaroa River in Raiatea 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 vehicle with bench seats and canopy roof). Hair flying, we speed along the winding coastal road back to the ship.



SC PHOTOS / ALAMY

AND THEN IT'S TIME to board *The Gauguin* for our 10-night voyage. 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.



IT'S A TYPICAL DAY cruising in the islands post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin journeyed to in 1891 and ultimately called home. The ship (which is named after the artist who immortalized Tahitian culture in his bold canvasses of native maidens) has been operating under the banner of Paul Gauguin Cruises since 2010 and offers guests a fabulous five-star experience.

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 snorkeling lagoon, two pools and 30 acres of gardens. The next morning, we check out the market – a bustling and fun scene.



GEORGE MUCALOV

Clockwise from above:

InterContinental Tahiti Resort in Papeete

Quand te maries-tu?
by Paul Gauguin
1892 Oil on canvas

Outrigger canoe in the lagoon on the island of Huahine

Enjoying the warm waters of Motu Mahana in Taha'a

A view of Mount Mouaroa from Moorea's Belvedere Lookout

Snorkeling in Rangiroa

Kayaking the Faaroa River in Raiatea



JESSICA BALLANTYNE

RAIATEA IS NEXT, followed by a day of cruising. The time at sea allows guests enrolled in the ship's scuba training program to practice 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. 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.



*The 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 maitais, and several *Gauguines* strum guitars in the shade. Several watersports are offered too. We swim in the bathtub-warm water and snorkel. Other guests try sailing dinghies and paddle around the motu in canoes.*

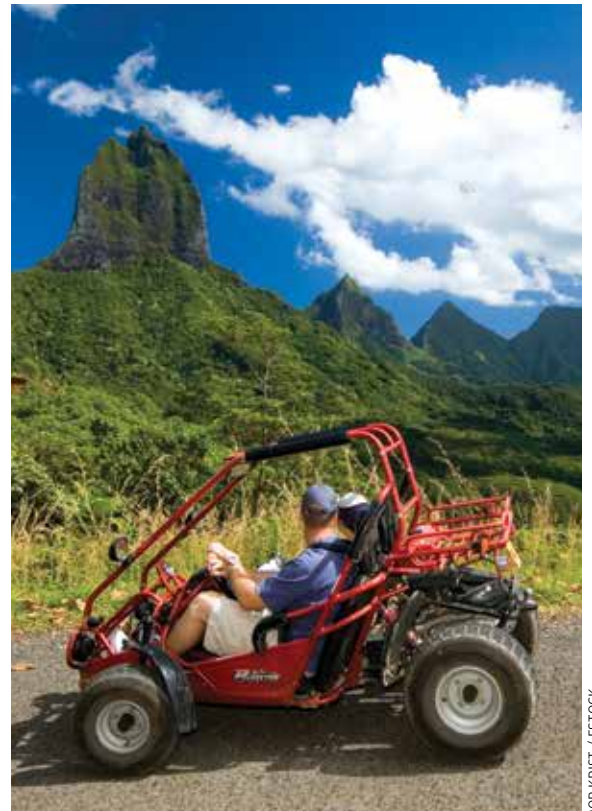


RANGIROA, IN PARTICULAR, is noted for some of the world's best diving and snorkeling. When conditions are right, divers and snorkelers can shoot through a narrow pass between the ocean and lagoon in a surge of rushing water—and watch a wall of sharks devour hapless fish washed in with the tide. Unfortunately, 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.

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 center.

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 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 Gauguin-esque sunset paint the sky.



BOB KRIST / ESTOCK

ONBOARD THE GAUGUIN



The ship sparkles like new. In the last three years more than \$13 million has been devoted to buffing and polishing it.



Balcony stateroom

SOME 70 PER CENT OF STATEROOMS and suites have balconies. Decked out with plush new carpeting and décor, charming furnishings and loads of cherry wood drawers, they exude a calm and lovely feel. The sense is light and airy and colors of sand, stone, soft blue and sea-foam green highlight the idyllic beauty around us. Best of all, the beds are super comfy, with pillowtop mattresses, white feather duvets and European linens.

SHIP FACTS

- › 332 guests; 166 staterooms
- › Crew to guest ratio of 1 to 1.5
- › All staterooms have ocean view accommodations, nearly 70% with balconies
- › Built in 1997, underwent a multimillion-dollar renovation in December 2011
- › Ship's registry: Bahamas
- › Gross Tonnage of 19,200; overall length 513 feet, beam (width) 71 feet; cruising speed of 18 knots

ITINERARY

A selection of 7, 10, 11 and 14 day year-round itineraries of Tahiti, French Polynesia including Cook and Society Islands; highlights include Bora Bora, Moorea, the Marquesas and Tuamotus.

ALL-INCLUSIVE FARES AND ONBOARD AMENITIES

- › All onboard gratuities included
- › Complimentary beverages including fine wines and premium spirits
- › Butler service included in categories B and above, plus in-suite bar setup and SoundDock® for iPod®
- › In-suite minibar replenished daily with soft drinks, beer, and bottled water
- › State-of-the-art retractable Watersports Marina offering complimentary kayaking and windsurfing
- › Onboard dive program
- › Onboard lecture program
- › Luxurious onboard spa and fitness center
- › Two elegant restaurants and one pool-side grill, all with open-seating dining, lounge and disco, casino and piano bar plus full entertainment program onboard
- › Well-being and vegetarian selections and special dietetic menus upon request
- › WiFi hotspots throughout the ship
- › Complimentary 24-hour room service and in-room dining plus complimentary in-room movie channels and movies available



We're greeted by a lovely group of 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 flavor to each cruise.



La Veranda



L'Etoile



SOME NIGHTS, we dine at La Veranda, the French specialty restaurant (no extra charge, but reservations required). One can dine inside or outside here and 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 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 (open for dinner only) which is absolutely gorgeous and has also been recently updated.

THE IDYLIC AND crystal clear Polynesian waters are irresistible and *The Gauguin's* smaller size allows us to maneuver into lagoons and anchorages where larger ships cannot go. We love the retractable watersports marina where we and our fellow guests can swim, hop on a windsurfer, snorkel or launch a kayak. And for divers it's a breeze to climb into one of the Zodiacs and head off for an adventure. Speaking of diving, the *m/s Paul Gauguin* is the only luxury ship in French Polynesia to offer PADI certification onboard. Classes are offered at all levels, from snorkeling to advanced SCUBA diving techniques, supervised by the ship's own staff of PADI dive masters. ■

