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Oceania Riviera





paradise found

JANICE AND GEORGE MUCALOV

They may be specks in the vast blue Pacific, but the Polynesian islands pack a powerful punch. You can swim in Bora Bora's blue lagoon, watch whales in Maui and chug potent kava with a village chief in Fiji. And their beaches are about as close to paradise as you can get.



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Picture paradise. Chances are it looks a lot like Hawaii and the South Pacific. Islands blessed with warm azure waters, sugar white beaches, rainbow-colored reefs and unique cultural experiences like fire-walking and hula dancing. Even the names of these islands – Fiji, Bora Bora, Moorea, Kauai – conjure up images of a fantasy escape. The thing is, you can easily turn your Polynesian daydreams into reality with a cruise that sails the Pacific. More cruise lines have introduced voyages to these destinations. Several cruises even take you to two or more countries (like Hawaii and French Polynesia) on the same itinerary. We've been fortunate to cruise Fiji, Tahiti and French Polynesia, and Hawaii – here's our deck-chair report.

romantic french polynesia

EVER SINCE PAUL GAUGUIN painted Tahitian landscapes with raven-haired beauties, French Polynesia has seduced visitors with its turquoise lagoons and islands blooming with hibiscus. The 118-island nation invented deluxe overwater bungalows – which perch on stilts over the sea. Try to stay in one if you can. But cruising is often the most affordable way to see this region. As these islands ooze romance, cruises concentrating on French Polynesia (Windstar Cruises and Paul Gauguin Cruises) are couple-oriented.

The starting point is typically the port city of Papeete on the main island of Tahiti (where more than 60 per cent of the country's people live). We checked out the lively

market with fresh fish, baskets of seashells and carved wooden warriors on display. If you plan to buy black pearls on your cruise, you'll want to stop at the Robert Wan Pearl Museum to learn about the country's pearl industry. But for that true paradise feeling, you need to visit the less-developed islands.

Take Bora Bora. Author James Michener dubbed it "the most beautiful island in the world." Who can disagree? Craggy Mount Otemanu, crowned by creamy clouds, towers over the island center, while a ring of palm-studded, white-fringed motus or islets encircles Bora Bora's popsicle-blue lagoon. On a jeep excursion – bone-jarring but thrilling – we saw every tropical fruit

imaginable (from bananas to mangos) growing wild, as well as massive 20-foot cannons left behind by the Americans after WW II. On a ray feeding tour, we caressed soft stingrays swirling about us as we knelt in the lagoon.

Coral reefs around the islands teem with galaxies of rainbow-hued fish and exotic sea life, so snorkeling and diving are superb throughout. But Rangiroa is special. When conditions are right, divers and snorkelers can shoot through a pass between the ocean and lagoon in a surge of rushing water – and watch sharks (harmless to humans) devour hapless fish washed in with the tide. For more heart-pounding fun, Moorea has a great hike up to Belvedere Lookout Point.

Raiatea is where we kayaked the peaceful Faaroa River. We paddled through a sea of yellow hibiscus, fallen from the lacy canopy of foliage above, past mangroves, bamboo groves and giant ferns.

And the beaches? Well, you need only shake your towel out on any number of unspoiled white-sand motus to feel life as dreamy as it gets.

Facing page:

The cruiseship *m/s Paul Gauguin* in a tropical lagoon in Bora Bora, French Polynesia.

This page (clockwise from top): Rangiroa offers spectacular snorkeling.

Luxury overwater bungalows perch in the clear blue waters of Bora Bora.

Arearea
Paul Gauguin, 1892,
oil on canvas,
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



DAVID WALL / ALAMY



DOUGLAS PEEBLES / ALAMY

cast away in fiji

DID WE WANT A SWIG of kava from the communal half-coconut shell? Seated on woven mats, we had just watched Fijian villagers in grass skirts pound kava (a pepper plant root), still covered with dirt. Mixing the powder with water, they made Fiji's potent traditional beverage, known to put unsuspecting tourists to sleep. Hmmm.

We were attending a welcome ceremony at a remote Yasawa Island village in Fiji. It's a cultural highlight of a cruise with Blue Lagoon Cruises. Operating since 1950, the small Fijian cruise company offers comfortable barefoot-and-cutoffs cruises to unspoiled Fijian islands. Think beach barbecues, swimming, snorkeling and visiting a local Fijian village. But many villages throughout Fiji welcome you with the kava ceremony – and it's part of what makes visiting Fiji special.

Viti Levu is the main island, home to Suva. This colonial capital is a popular Fijian port-of-call for bigger vessels cruising the



TIM GRAHAM / ALAMY

South Pacific (such as some Princess and Celebrity ships). The Fiji Museum there contains exhibits from Fiji's cannibalistic past. You can see the boots of an unfortunate missionary who was killed and eaten, as well as the rudder from Captain Bligh's HMS Bounty (where the legendary mutiny occurred). At Pacific Harbour, an hour drive away, you can watch the famous firewalkers tread barefoot on red-hot coals at the Arts Village.

Off the west coast, Denarau Island is a shopping and resort hub connected by bridge to Viti Levu. Its picturesque port and marina bustles with cafés, boutiques, restaurants and adventure tour offices. Sailboats for day cruises to the nearby Mamanuca Islands also take off from Port Denarau. With white sand beaches and coral reefs thriving with candy-colored fish, the Mamanucas are perfect for living out your Robinson Crusoe fantasies for a day.

This page (clockwise from above):

Tropical resort in Fiji's Mamanuca Islands.

Hand carved Tiki statues.

Fijian villagers prepare the potent Kava drink at a traditional welcome ceremony.

Facing page:

Snorkeling in Blue Lagoon, Sawa-i-Lau, Yasawa islands, Fiji. The 1980 movie *Blue Lagoon* was filmed here.





MARIDAV / SHUTTERSTOCK



DEBORAH KOLB / SHUTTERSTOCK



CHAD EHLERS / ALAMY



say aloha to hawaii

DROOL-WORTHY SHOPPING at Waikiki. Whale watching. Golfing on oceanview championship fairways. Festive luaus with hula dancers. And an incredible live volcano. Say aloha to Hawaii! More cosmopolitan and urbanized than Fiji and French Polynesia, the Hawaiian islands have something for everyone. There are more fun things for kids to do too, so Hawaii is a better option for a family cruise (try Norwegian, Princess and Royal Caribbean).

Hawaii cruises often start or end in Honolulu, the state capital on Oahu. The top attraction – and most poignant – is Pearl Harbor, where a film shows the 1941 attack and a boat trip takes you to the wreck of the USS Arizona battleship. Fancy catching a wave instead? The “Waikiki Beach Boys” introduced surfing to the world back in the 1920s; today, Waikiki Beach is still one of the best spots in Hawaii to learn to surf. Or you could surf the stores at Ala Moana, the world’s largest outdoor shopping center.

Over on the Big Island of Hawaii, a visit to Volcanoes National Park is a must. Standing at the rim of the Kilauea Caldera, we saw clouds of smoke and steam spewing out of the enormous (over two miles in diameter) grey-black depression. The moon-like landscape constantly changes because the volcano is active, so you might see red lava flowing when you visit. Kids (and adults) like walking through the cool dark tunnel of the Thurston Lava Tube – it feels like you’re inside the belly of some giant prehistoric monster.

Blossoming with bougainvillea and birds-of-paradise, Kauai is nicknamed the “garden isle.” And it’s the place for a helicopter ride to view the spectacular Na Pali coast and the jungle scenery where King Kong and Jurassic Park were filmed (choose a “no doors” chopper for thrills and great pics).

Maui is best for whale watching. In winter, thousands of humpbacks migrate from Alaska to Maui to mate and give birth. You’re pretty well guaranteed to see

PHOTO COURTESY NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE



their barnacle-covered backs on a whale watching tour – they may even breach just feet away from you! Some boats have hydrophones so you can listen to their whale songs too.

These islands also have dream courses for golfers (the PGA and LPGA host many events here), Hawaiian luaus (try the pit-roasted suckling pig) and beaches galore. ■

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Facing page:
Kauai’s spectacular Na Pali coast.

This page (clockwise from top left):

Molten volcanic lava at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.

Hawaiian girl wearing a lei.

Honolulu’s Waikiki Beach with Diamond Head in the distance.

Norwegian Cruise Line’s *Pride of America* cruises year round in Hawaii.