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A VOYAGE IN FRENCH POLYNESIA

Part II

"God created my country, garland of multiple islands, with delicate fragrances linked in an everlasting braid"

- lines from Tahiti Nui, the unofficial French Polynesian national anthem

(Aboard the Paul Gauguin off the coast of Riatea)

The Love Boat was 20,000 tons, the larger Royal Caribbean Cruise ships are 70,000 tons, the world's largest ship, and the Grand Princess will be launched at 101,000 tons. Yet, the 18,800-ton Paul Gauguin seems to be a perfect fit. It's the difference between a Ferrari and a Ford truck. Our cabin is framed in dark, polished woods. The artwork is Polynesian, the bathrobes are fresh and comfortable, and the marble bathroom has a combination tub shower that is a testament to the French shipyard's ingenuity. Sliding glass doors open to a private balcony. Minibars are always stocked with soft drinks and free bottles of liquor await all guests. Tipping is not permitted and fine French wines are served with lunch and dinner.

Entertainment aboard small ships is, well it's better than listening to an Al Gore speech, but not by much. Our British cruise director sang some acceptable standards and our guest illusionist would have really drawn some heavy applause had he created the illusion of having more talent. Bombing on a ship is difficult because you always run into your audience over a drink the next afternoon.

The ship's dining room operated at a level of efficiency that is rare on land these days, let alone at sea. The Veranda restaurant, with floor to ceiling windows overlooking the sea, served "Taste of" dinners highlighting the cuisine's of France and Italy. These menus allowed diners to taste several appetizers, entrees and desserts, a continuous parade of fine food served with panache.

The E'toile, was a bit larger and operated as a continental restaurant, although the menu was eclectic enough to include Indian curries and Indonesian rice dishes. Service was generally excellent. One party of six arrived in the dining room at a time when all of the larger tables were occupied. The suave Italian maitre'd invited them up to the cigar and cognac bar above the restaurant, offered to buy them drinks, and promised to come get them when he had set up a nice table. That was typical of the on-board service.

The water sports platform on the lower deck seemed under-utilized but wind surfing and water-skiing were always available off the back of the ship.

Our doctor was a young, rather beautiful French woman who was adept at discovering various "inflatiiiiionnnnes". She had a cabinet filled with ointments for any number of shipboard maladies, remedies that had lyrical French names that went way beyond Vick's Vaporub. Every day, at about noon, she would make her "rounds", strolling the upper decks in her crisp white uniform, blonde

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hair flowing in the slight breeze, looking over her minions, for any sign of an undetected infmatiiionnnnn. Meanwhile, one of the guests, a rather well credentiled orthopedic surgeon, was looking over the small leg ailments that some of the passengers brought to his friendly attention. Since he had operated on several of the Chicago Bulls, I felt perfectly content having him look at my knee. But I still went to get my ointment from the ship's doctor.

(Bora Bora)

We had stayed at Bora Bora for three nights before the cruise. Now we returned for an overnight in the safety of the lagoon harbor for a day and a half of further exploration. The highlight was an unadvertised private island.

While the Caribbean cruise lines are running about the Caribbean frantically searching for some available spit of land that isn't being used as a storage base by Miami drug runners, the folks at Radisson Seven Seas had downplayed the private island thing. But it is a *raison'd'tre* to take this cruise, because the possibility exists to visit several in one week.

It is hard to describe the scene. Imagine a safe anchor in the turquoise water with deep emerald green valleys and hillsides, punctuated with tiny harbors and small boats. The eastern portion of the island is dominated by a craggy basaltic mountain seemingly surrounded by small puff circles of Q-tip clouds.

We boarded our tender for the brief ride out to the motu, or private atoll. As we approached, we could see the snorkelers walking out and then gently lowering themselves head first in the water, not more than 50 feet off shore. This was no ordinary private island stop. The motu was enclosed within the lagoon, providing clear, clean water and abundant sea life. There were no rocks as we waded ashore, met first by one of the ships waiters holding chilled glasses of champagne on a tray as he stood in the water greeting arriving guests,

I was on the island for all of three minutes when two of our friends, Don and Pat, challenged us to competitive kayaking. Reluctantly, I agreed to leave my perch on the beach to don a lifevest and, along with Angela to go for a little kayaking in the smooth water. But Dona and Pat view kayaks, bananaboats, and nearly any form of water transportation, as an opportunity to demonstrate skills acquired after many years at bumpercar tracks. This was still far safer, I rationalized, than the shark feeding that had occurred hours earlier.

Shark feeding is one of those activities that you simply have to do when visiting these islands. Here's the way it works. The lead diver or tour guide, carries a huge fish carcass, usually tuna, in a tightly wrapped plastic bag. You head out by boat to a spot in the lagoon where the *repas desrequins* takes place. Ropes are strung up and the leader positions himself in the water, clutching the plastic bag tight to his chest, making certain that the group is properly aligned, holding on to the guide ropes and sufficiently back from where the food will be unleashed. When all is ready, about the time you're wondering why you've signed up for this ridiculous idea of fun, the bag is opened and a feeding frenzy begins, like a well-choreographed dance. Generally, white-tipped reef sharks are

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the first to arrive and that's good, because they do not attack humans. But you really can't be absolutely certain if the smell of blood won't attract larger Grey or black-tipped sharks – or worse. As the feeding progresses, there are so many fish feeding that the lead diver may be hidden from view from the rest of the group. Finally, the diver discards what remains of the carcass, joins the other members of the group and leads them back to the boat. All this fun costs \$50 per person. It isn't necessary to tip the sharks.

(Moorea)

Cook's Bay, the harbor in Moorea is, simply stated, the most beautiful place I have ever anchored on a ship. We are "at rest" in a long, narrow body of that same lustrous, clear, blue-green water surrounded on three sides by jagged mountains that are said to form the walls of Moorea. The tallest of these peaks is Mouaroa, the mountain Michener used as the model for his mythical Bali Hai.

One of the Bali Hai "Boys" was sitting around the pool at the Bali Hai hotel swapping stories. He is one of three friends, who arrived on the island from California in 1961 and purchased a rather run-down hotel. Most of their early guests were stranded airline employees. The "boys" turned out to be innovative hoteliers, and developed the over-the-water bungalow concept. They also imported fresh food, built large vegetable gardens, and eventually started a chicken farm that fed the locals, their hotel guests, and some of the international airlines requiring meal service. Now, the group owns a number of local hotels and not an inconsiderable amount of local land.

Angela and I took a jeep ride into the central valleys of the island. The vegetation is so lush that it was literally possible to reach out from our jeep to grab mangos, papayas, and bananas from the trees. We came to a stream where our guide shed his shirt and ran into the cool spring water, a pool of comfort amid the tropical fruit trees that lined the soft mud path passable only by four wheel drive.

On the way back to our ship, we passed another inlet where Brando's Mutiny on the Bounty filmed its harbor scenes. Further along the beach, we met a local artist who overlooks the view while carving large stones with interpretations of Polynesian life. He will place his unsold stones offshore, creating an underwater museum. He may or may not make any money but that is never the point in Polynesia. And he seemed a happier man than most.

French Polynesia is not a land of luxurious hotels and tour buses filled with camera-toting tourists. For many, it will be, as it was for me, Paradise found. And Moorea is its crown jewel.

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