

TAHITI 2009

As many of our trips do, this one started out with something in the mail. It was from Regent Cruise Lines, bombing the price of an 11 day Tahiti cruise by 71%! The cruise also went to two other island groups we had not visited on our last trip to Tahiti. I mentioned it to Kathy, who said she thought we would go there for our 5th anniversary.

Tahiti has a special place in my heart, as it was the first trip I had taken with Kathy, and she had wanted to go to Tahiti since she was 17. Well, we have sort of a full dance card this year, but the deal was too good to pass up. Kathy was still hesitant, but I put the CD of South Pacific on, and it started off with

"Bali Ha'i may call you,
Any night, any day,
In your heart, you'll hear it call you:
"Come away...Come away."

She laughed and said I was being unfair, but gladly gave in.

When I called our travel agent, she said this was the last year for the Paul Gauguin, as it was being taken off the line. It turns out we could not have taken it for our fifth anniversary after all.

We went on line and ordered our shore excursions, and waited for our documents. After we received them, we called the travel agent to see if they had assigned us a cabin, as we were just guaranteed a window cabin as a minimum. We hoped to get upgraded one level to get a balcony, and the travel agent said she would call and get back to us. When she called us, she was very excited, as we were not just upgraded, but moved up 4 levels to a butler suite, which would have cost considerably more! Needless to say, Kathy and I were excited too!

LAX

We were picked up at 8:30 AM, even though our flight does not leave until 1 PM. It is a small price to pay for living in what I call "God's Country". The trip down to the airport was not too bad, and we went to the desk to get our seats.

We had an 8 and ½ hour flight, which was not too bad, and arrived at about 6:30 local time. We went through customs and immigration and were taken to the ship. Many of the passengers were with Vantage Tours, which put them up at a nice hotel for a few days, so they were already on board. We had the opportunity to do that, but would definitely not have gotten the upgrade!!

The first thing we did was to take a picture of the suite before we spread our stuff around. The next thing we did was to order room service- prosciutto and melon, shrimp cocktail, and stone crab claws.



RANGIROA

Rangiroa is in the Tuamotu Islands, and features a huge lagoon. The lagoon is so large all of the island of Tahiti could fit inside! There are a number of openings in the reef, a few large enough for our ship to sail through. According to the port talk, there was really nothing to see in the little village near the ship, so we passed on going ashore.

We opted for a drift snorkeling excursion, which we thought would be fun. I had done it in Mexico, and it was a very easy swim. Well, this was a whole different type of drifting! We were taken outside the reef, and were to drift in with the tide. The problem was that as the water is forced through the opening in the reef, it speeds up! In other words this was NOT a leisurely drift with the current. We all jumped in the water, and our guide had us hold hands with each other, and drift through the reef with him. On the first pass, I had held Kathy's hand on one side, and that was fine. On the second pass, however, Kathy was on the other side of the guide and the man holding her hand had a problem with his mask. He kept letting go of her hand, and she was worried about being swept away by the tide, as she was on the end. By all rights the man should have gotten back in the boat, however, Kathy opted to return to the boat.

We were then taken to a protected area in the lagoon that teemed with all kinds of fish.



HIVA OA

Hiva Oa is in the Marquesas, and is the island on which Paul Gauguin is buried. The village of Puamau features the largest stone sculptures in the Marquesas. We docked at Atuona, and noticed a small island off to one side. It was shaped like a whale, and ancient stories told of the whale god being put there.



We were welcomed by a local group at the pier before we set out.



We were very fortunate to have Mark Eddowes, a cultural anthropologist along to discuss the history and culture of the island. One sad note was there were whole valleys on the island that were deserted. The population at one time was about 30,000, but is now about 1,000. With the coming of the whaling ships, the population suffered from diseases they had no immunity to, such as measles and TB. More devastating were venereal diseases that left many of the women sterile.

We were first taken to a large marae or ceremonial site made from black volcanic stones. There was a large signboard that showed how it must have looked originally.

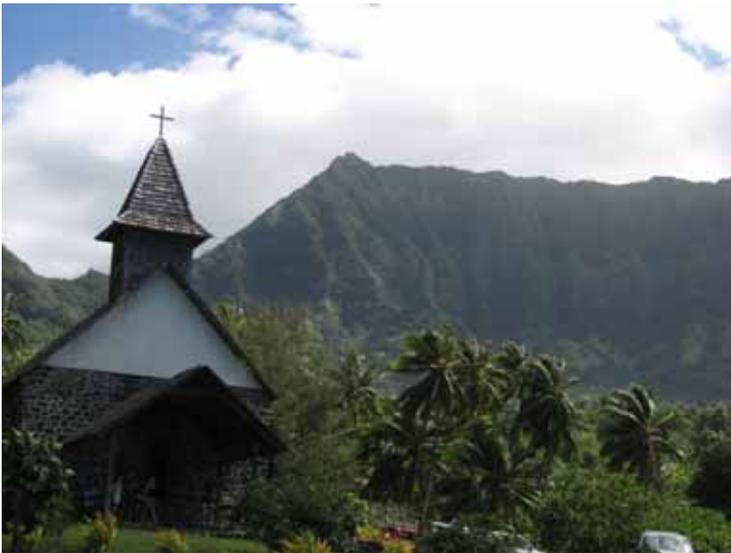


The site was quite interesting, and Mark explained the meaning and the rituals that went on at the site. Mark is a fantastic lecturer, and we attended one of his lectures on board that lasted 2 hours. Kathy went to the on-line Cruise Board to look for comments on our ship, and one person commented that Mark had a lecture that was scheduled for 45 minutes. He spoke for 2 hours, and nobody got up to leave! He described the various parts of the stone tiki, and how the left side had a channel to let water or blood run into the ground to fertilize it. The local beliefs were that the mountains were male gods and the earth was female.

Also, he described how the people would sacrifice captured enemies and eat parts of them to show their superiority. According to Mark, it has only been 3 generations since the practice stopped!



We were then taken to a local Catholic church that was quite interesting in the way local beliefs were blended with Catholicism.



When we got back to the ship, a troupe of local dancers performed some of the ceremonial dances for us. One of the dancers was a young boy, who was really cute trying to dance with the men.



We were treated to a beautiful tropical sunset as we left the island that evening.



NUKU HIVA

Nuku Hiva is also in the Marquesas, and has 3 beautiful bays. Herman Melville stayed here 3 weeks, and used the experience for his novel "Typee". We drove up a steep road lined with lush vegetation on our way to Taipivi Valley. The views were spectacular!



We stopped at an overlook of the third bay that has a stela or stone column, but there was no carving on it. The bay was rectangular, reminiscent of Megan's Bay on Saint Thomas in the Virgin Islands. Mark said at the height of the whaling period, there may have been more than 50 ships in the bay!



From there we descended into Taipivi Valley, and there was an open air pavilion selling native crafts. I purchased a small tiki for our curio cabinet. Our driver was quite an entrepreneur; besides driving, he owned a snack bar and a small plot of land he farmed, among other things



On the way back to the pier, we stopped at the island's main church, and Mark introduced us to the archbishop of the Marquesas.



BORA BORA

It is the quintessential Pacific Paradise. The lagoon is constantly refreshed by the waves breaking over the reef. The island is dominated by Mount Otemanu, which has a sacred cave in its side.



The water color is spectacular, going from deep water dark blue, to shallow water light blue. There were hotels where the rooms were built out over the water, and each hut had its own little ladder to go boating or snorkeling. The only catch is they cost \$1600 per night!



We took an excursion called Stingray Ballet and Snorkeling. We were taken by small boat to a sandbank where the stingrays hung out. It was very pleasant snorkeling in 4 or 5 feet of water instead of deep water. The guide chummed the water, and we were amazed at the number of stingrays that showed up! I got to feed one, and it just sort of sucked the fish out of my hand. The chumming also attracted small fish and some reef sharks. In the picture you can see rays at the bottom and sharks at the top! This is the second time that Kathy got to swim with the sharks. The funniest thing that happened was one sting ray actually swam up on Kathy's chest like it was nursing!



TAHA'A

This is a private island we visit. There is a BBQ lunch and bar offered just for the passengers, and there is a crewman towing a floating bar so you do not even have to get out of the water.

Before going to this private island, we took another drift snorkeling excursion. Again, the emphasis was the word "drift". The description in the literature is as follows: "You will disembark the boat for a walk across a small uninhabited islet. After reaching the other side, you will commence your snorkeling session. The guide will lead you as the current carries you through the shallow lagoon on the way back to the boat".

Well, that was the way it was supposed to be. As the water was forced between the two islets, it picked up speed! It was like being shot out of a fire hose! There was a main channel that was mostly free of coral, and some narrower side channels.

I missed the instruction to kick hard and get to the main channel, so I had to negotiate one of the side channels filled with coral. We were moving so fast that taking pictures of anything was out of the question. I managed to negotiate the channel with some minor coral rash, which got treated later on the island. Kathy was in the main channel, but still had to dodge through the gaps in the coral. Finally, she rolled over on her back (she floats like a cork), and let the current carry her back to the boat.

When we got back to the boat, our guide commented that it was the swiftest he had seen the water run in the 10 years he had been doing the tour-Thanks a lot!

Kathy's comments: "Drift Snorkeling.... now doesn't that sound placid and serene? Wrong. For those of us old enough to remember "E ticket" rides, this was it, or a better description might be...white water rafting without the benefit of a boat or paddles. Looking at fish was out of the question because both of us were traveling much too fast, and the fish had the agility I lacked in avoiding the coral with hair splitting decisions. With our senior citizen status, I'm proud we did this and lived to tell the tale....would I ever do it again? Not a chance.

After our ordeal we were dropped off at the private island that the ship has for lunch and a couple of pina colodas. We relaxed for a while, and I took out a kayak and paddled around the island.



MOOREA

This is a beautiful island, cloaked in lush greenery and surrounded by blue waters. It has a number of mountains, including one with a very pointed peak! They also have the over the water bungalows, and just as expensive!



This morning, we had ordered lox and bagels for breakfast. We were discussing the best way to put the little round capers on the bagel, as they would just roll off, when Kathy had a great idea! She put the capers on the plate, spread the cream cheese on the bagel half, then turned it upside down and squished the capers into the cream cheese! What a genius!

Our excursion to day was a catamaran sail and snorkel on a 43 foot catamaran. We did a sunset sail on this ship 2 years ago and enjoyed it thoroughly. We sailed outside the reef and to the other bay on the island. We anchored and snorkeled for a while, and I was looking for 2 large tiki heads that were on the ocean floor. I finally found them, and got pictures with my underwater camera. The water was a little choppy, so we cut the snorkeling short.



After we returned to the pier, we looked at some of the tents that were set up with jewelry and souvenirs. We found a lady selling very unique jewelry made from silver and fossilized mammoth tusks. There was a beautiful pendant of 2 angel fish that both of us were attracted to, and I told Kathy I would buy it for her. I then said, but of course you need the matching earrings! We struck a deal, but my credit card was on the ship!

I caught the next tender back, ran from deck 3 to deck 8, and back down to deck 3 to catch the same tender. The tender was so full of people coming back for lunch that I had to wait to get on the tender! I got back to the pier, and closed the deal. The pieces are absolutely beautiful and unique, and Kathy is thrilled with them.

PAPEETE

We spent our last night on the ship, and were taken to the Regent hotel the next day to await our late evening flight home. We were put up in a 2 story suite, which was quite nice. We watched some old movies on the only English channel available, and then at the appointed time, met the bus to take us to the airport. We went upstairs where it was less crowded, and the fans were closer as there was no air conditioning.

We asked for aisle and window seats, but the only ones available did not recline. So we opted for 2 seats in the center. Fortunately, there was an empty seat next to us, and the lady on the other aisle was from our cruise.

We arrived in Los Angeles, went through customs and immigration, and were met by our driver to bring us home. We have enough time to do our laundry and get ready for our next trip in 3 weeks!

In summary, it was a fantastic trip. Going back on the Paul Gauguin was sort of like coming home again, as we were now quite familiar with the ship.

We got to see some islands and cultures we had not seen before, and had some adventures we are not likely to repeat!

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