

South Pacific Vacation – Day 1 – Thursday March 1st – Arrival in Tahiti

We wake this morning, after our enjoyable five day visit with friends and family in California, at the Best Western Plus Suites hotel near the Los Angeles airport. Marie, Kal, Marcia and I (Jim) go down to the breakfast room where we meet Peggy and Dick. They had flown in last night from North Carolina. Peggy and Dick are old acquaintances of Marcia and I from our days living in Dayton, Ohio and they are close friends of Marie and Kal. Peggy and Dick cruised aboard the *Paul Gauguin* in French Polynesia on a seven day cruise four years ago and it is due to their stories and urgings that the four of us are joining them on their return trip.

We now go to the airport and have an easy time checking our bags and clearing ticketing and security. We board our plane for a “close to on time” takeoff a little after 1 PM. We are flying on the airline of French Polynesia, Air Tahiti Nui, on a relatively new Air Bus A340-300 jumbo jet (2-4-2 seating). The plane is only about 60% full.



We will be flying for about 8-1/2 hours, a total of 4100 miles, from Los Angeles to Papeete, the capital of Tahiti. The map to the left shows the route (almost.....actually it shows the route to the Cook Islands....Tahiti, as shown, is a little to the east of the Cook Islands).

Tahiti is actually further east than the Hawaiian Islands so the time change from California is only two hours. French Polynesia is 5 hours behind East Coast time. We will be well south of the equator and expect daily high temperatures of 89 degrees and low averages of 72. It's their summer, and we are told to expect consistently high humidity (85%) and occasional fast moving rain showers.

French Polynesia is an “overseas country” of France. It is made up of several groups of Polynesian Islands (130 islands in total) the most famous and populous of them being Tahiti. French Polynesia covers

965,255 square miles but only 1622 square miles is land. Population is 267,000. 67% of the population is “pure” Polynesian, 7% are Polynesians with a little European or Asian blood, 12% are European (mostly French), 9% are mixed Polynesian and European, and 5% are Asians (mainly Chinese).



Our flight is uneventful. The service is good, food very good, and our economy seats rather comfortable. We fly over a mostly cloud covered Pacific Ocean and land in Papeete at 8 PM. We are delighted to see clear skies and many stars. The temperature is 80 degrees.

We all have purchased a vacation package from the Paul Gauguin Cruise Line which includes our flights to and from Los Angeles, a two night pre-cruise stay at the Intercontinental Resort in Tahiti, 11 night cruise (all inclusive including drinks, meals and tips), a day room at the Radisson Hotel after the cruise, and all transfers. So, after we

rather quickly clear passport control, collect our bags and clear customs, we are met by young ladies representing the *Paul Gauguin* who give us each flower leis and direct us to a motor coach for transfer to the Intercontinental. Everyone boards the motor coach....but wait, where are Marie and Kal? They finally board and we learn that Marie's luggage never made it from LA! Hard to believe they lost her bag on a 60% full direct flight.

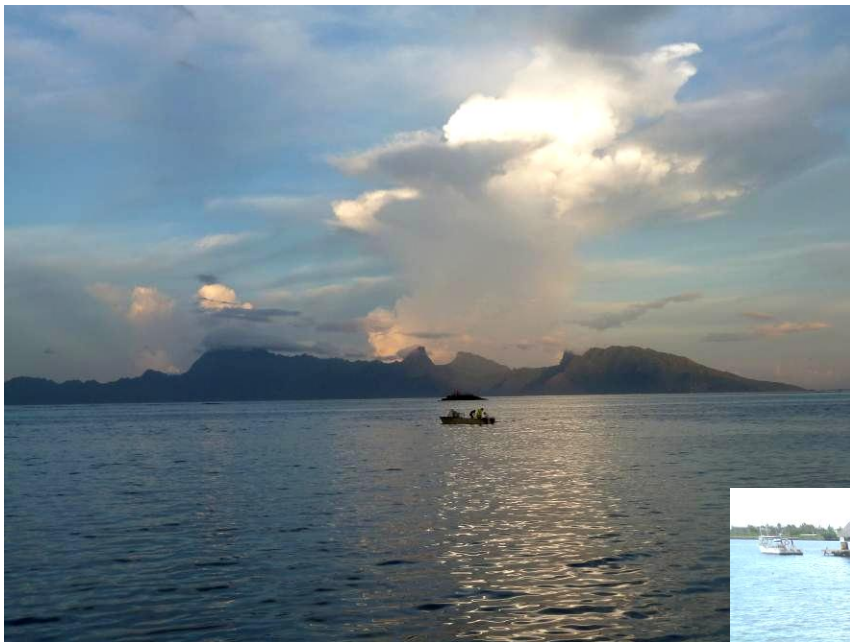


We quickly check in at the IC Tahiti. Peggy and Dick have opted for a “Panoramic Room” with a view of the island of Moorea, 20 miles away, while we four have each “splurged” and secured an “Overwater Bungalow” for our two night stay. After finding our rooms, the four of us meet at the resort’s outdoor lounge to review the day’s events. Marie is in good spirits, hoping that her luggage shows up on tomorrow night’s flight. If not, the airline has promised to chase us from island to island until they get it to her! Ah yes.....this reminds us of 2005 when their luggage didn’t make it to Zurich and we were several days into our travels through the Alps before it showed up. We’ve learned if a travel hiccup is going to happen it will have their name on it.



South Pacific Vacation – Day 2 – Friday March 2nd - Tahiti

We wake up after the first of our two nights at the Intercontinental Resort in Tahiti and meet Peggy, Dick, Marie and Kal for breakfast at the resort’s open air main restaurant. We are delighted to see that Marie is wearing a fresh outfit and learn that she now has her missing luggage! Apparently a passenger on the plane had taken Marie’s bag by mistake and had it delivered to another hotel. When the mistake was discovered arrangements were made to have it delivered to Marie’s room at about 11:30 PM last night.



Marie, Kal, Marcia and I are really enjoying our unique “overwater bungalows” (in the picture above, Marie and Kal’s is the very top one, at the 12 o’clock position, and Marcia and mine is the third from the left at the bottom, at the 6 o’clock position). They really are out over the water and quite large, about 450 square feet inside and beautifully appointed. Each has a large deck with table, chairs and two loungers and offers direct views of the beautiful island of Moorea across a 20 mile strait.

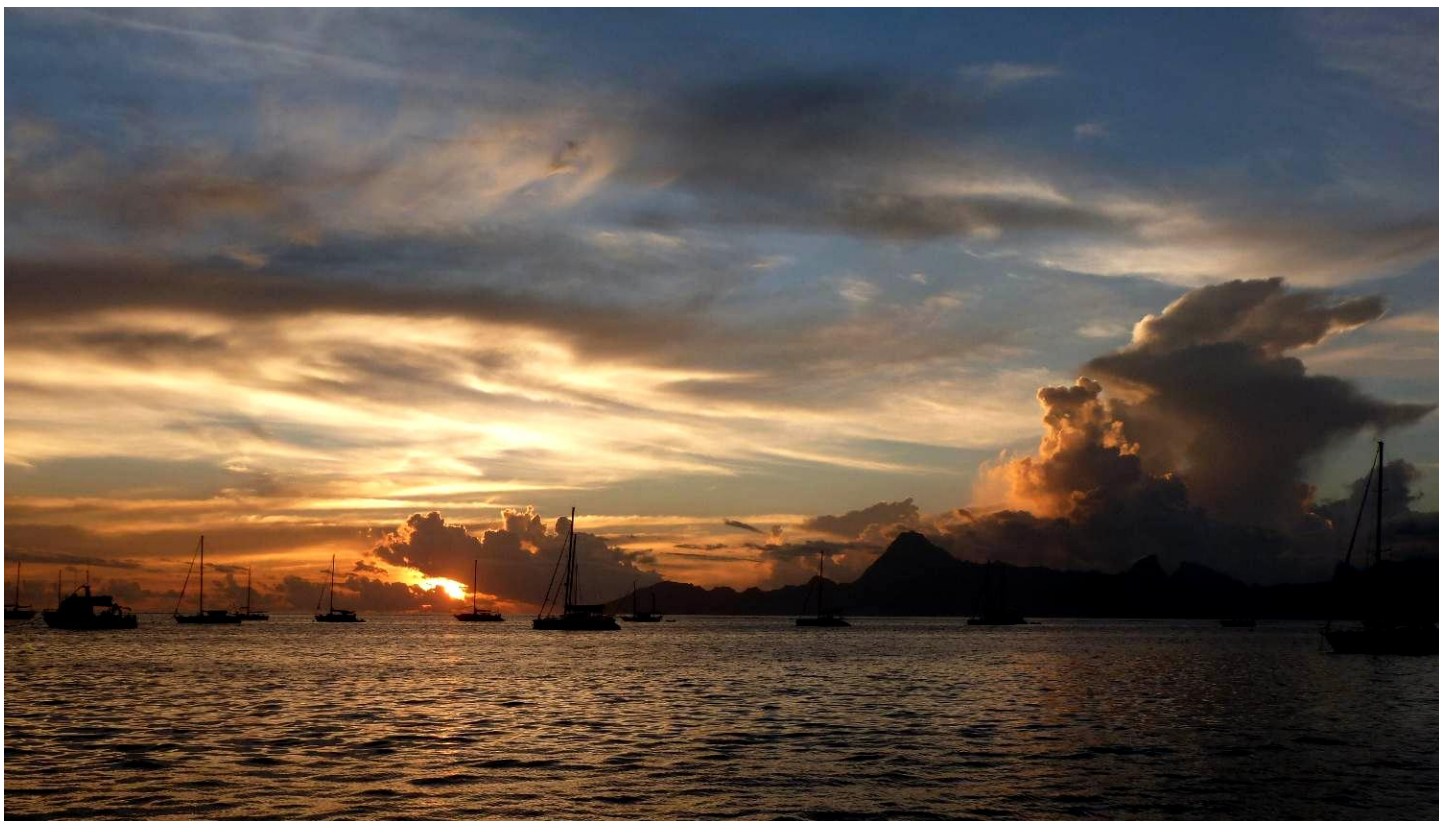
Each deck has a set of stairs leading to a small lower deck that’s right on the water. This allows you to easily enter the ocean for a swim. The ocean water feels like bath water; it must be 80 degrees. The resort features a huge “infinity” pool (on the left in the above photo), a smaller infinity pool with a swim up bar (12 o’clock in the photo), and a huge salt water “lagoonarium” stocked with local tropical fish that you can snorkel in (the large pool with the island in the photo).



After breakfast Dick secures six comfortable loungers with beach towels and we spend most of the day relaxing by the pool. Occasionally we take a walk around the resort's beautifully landscaped grounds or go for a swim. The weather is great; clear skies with a few clouds and temperatures in the upper 80's. We find this to be a welcomed break between our "grueling" schedule in Southern California and tomorrow, when we will board the *Paul Gauguin* in the afternoon and start our 11 day cruise.

Our resort's main restaurant is tied up tonight with their weekend Polynesian Show and we don't really want to pay to see it (we figure we will get plenty of "free" Polynesian entertainment on our cruise), so Kal and Dick have researched to find a local restaurant for dinner. The six of us meet at 5:15 PM and take a local taxi into Papeete, braving the rush hour traffic and we are delivered to the "Pink Coconut". We are seated at an outside table and have fantastic views of the sun setting next to the island of Moorea across the strait from Tahiti. The food is good and the service very Polynesian (i.e., a little slow)! Tomorrow we start our cruise!





South Pacific Vacation – Day 3 – Saturday March 3rd – Tahiti and Boarding the *Paul Gauguin*

I'm up early this morning and I am sitting on our bungalow's deck writing up yesterday's trip journal and watching the sun rise over Tahiti. This is a routine that I look forward to continuing after we board our cruise ship, the *Paul Gauguin* later today, as we all have reserved cabins with balconies.

We have learned that the *Paul Gauguin* was constructed at the St. Nazaire ship yard in France in 1998 and specifically designed for cruising in the shallow waters around the islands in French Polynesia. It has 9 decks and is 513 feet long, 71 feet wide and has a relatively shallow draft of 17 feet. It has 160 cabins with a capacity of 330 passengers. The crew numbers 211. A retractable watersports

platform aft at sea level allows for windsurfing, waterskiing, and kayaking when the ship is anchored. It spent most of January in dry dock in Brisbane, Australia where it underwent a 7 million dollar refurbishment. The cruise is "all inclusive" meaning that we do not have to pay for any food or drink and no tipping is required. We do have to pay for some of the optional shore excursions, but our travel agent has arranged for a \$400 "ship board credit" for each couple which will help pay for the excursions and other incidentals like internet service and laundry.



After breakfast at our Tahiti resort we pack up and check out of our rooms at 11 AM. We really enjoyed our overwater bungalows; a really unique experience. We spend the next few hours chatting before the motor coaches arrive and transport us to the docks where we board the *Paul Gauguin* at 3PM. What a beautiful ship and friendly crew! Our balcony cabins are roomy and quite excellent.

Time for a little socializing before the life boat drill at 5:30 PM (seems like all passengers are taking this seriously after the Costa Concordia fiasco), then a great five course dinner. We sit at a table for six, and we have so much fun we fear no one will want to sit near to us from now on! After dinner we dance to the great music of the ship's three man band, Siglo. They can play everything. Then we're off to bed. The *Paul Gauguin* set sail at midnight to our first stop, the island of Hauhine. This is going to be an amazing cruise!



South Pacific Vacation – Day 4 – Sunday March 4th - Huahine



At 7 AM this morning, after cruising 96 nautical miles, the *Paul Gauguin* approaches the island of Huahine. Following a tip I had picked up on the Cruise Critic internet forum I have found the “secret viewing balcony” at the bow of the ship on deck eight and we watch in amazement as our ship navigates the narrow channel through a reef into beautiful natural harbor surrounded by “jungle” covered mountains. We set anchor in Maroe Bay with Mt. Turi towering above us at 2200 feet.



We have learned that Huahine covers 29 square miles and has a population of only 6000. Captain Cook was the first European to visit Huahine in 1769 and the island was the last to be taken over by France, falling to them in 1897 after a

long series of skirmishes and negotiations. We are told that this may be the most “authentic” Polynesian island that we see due to the lack of cities and industry. The people are said to be most friendly.

Tomorrow we are scheduled to spend all day at sea traveling 540 nautical miles southeast to the Cook Islands. At 9:30 AM the Captain addresses us via the ship’s PA system and says that the weather is poor in the Cook Islands and he is afraid that the ocean swells there would prevent the crew from tendering us to the islands of Aitutaki and Rorotonga. He is changing our Itinerary so that we will spend the next five days in French Polynesia and then sail to the Cook Islands on March 8th when the weather is expected to be better. We will still see all of the same islands as scheduled, but in a different order. The weather here is great. The seas are extremely calm and we detected only a gentle rocking motion when we were cruising last night. The weather is hot and sunny.

In the morning we go down to the marina platform at the rear of the ship where we are fitted for our snorkeling gear; fins, mask, snorkel, and a floatation vest. We will keep these for the rest of the cruise.



Marcia and I have signed up for an optional shore excursion, the “Huahine Safari Expedition”. After lunch we board the ship’s tender which is quite nice. It has a capacity of about 100 people and you can sit on the exposed top deck for great views. We motor to shore and board our vehicle which is a four wheel drive truck with bench seat along the back sides for eight people. An open air canopy is above our heads. We meet our driver/guide, Jose, who proves to be excellent. He’s a local and says he has been doing this tour for 25 years. I ask him how he learned such good English (as French is the commonly spoken language here) and he says from his guests. He claims to have learned six languages this way!



For the next 3-1/2 hours we travel the whole island on paved and dirt roads with many stops for pictures and exploration. Highlights include a drive on a beach past pounding surf with a stop to collect sea shells, feeding the four foot long blue eyed eels in Faie, a boat ride to a floating pearl farm, and a stop at a high lookout to take photos of the *Paul Gauguin* at anchor below us. Jose explains to us all of the unique vegetation that we are seeing.

We meet Peggy, Dick, Marie and Kal for refreshments at 6 PM, then another great five course dinner in the main dining room. Although the ship is said to be full, with 330 passengers, nothing ever seems crowded. We will sail overnight seventy nautical miles to the “jewel of French Polynesia”, Bora Bora, where we will spend two days!



South Pacific Vacation – Day 5 – Monday March 5th – Bora Bora



Overnight the *Paul Gauguin* cruises about 50 nautical miles from the island of Huahine to Bora Bora. When we wake up we find that our ship has navigated the one channel through the reefs and is anchored in the beautiful Bay of Faanui. 2600 foot high Mt. Otemanu towers above us. We will spend two full days at Bora Bora.



The *Paul Gauguin* maintains a private white sand beach on Bora Bora with a snack shack. A few of the Gauguines (eight young Polynesian ladies that are always present on the ship offering entertainment and organizing activities) will be there. The snorkeling is said to be great. At 10:15 AM Peggy, Dick, Marie, Kal, Marcia and I board a tender for a 20 minute ride from our ship to the private beach. This is not the large tender we rode in yesterday, but a smaller 50 person one with a flat bottom to allow it to dock near the beach. The beach and the views are excellent. We enjoy trying out our snorkeling gear for the first time; we see many fish and

the water is really like “bath water”... it has to be somewhere in the 80 degree range. The tender runs every hour, and at 11:35 AM Peggy and Dick board the tender to return to the ship; we remaining four choose to stay another hour. Just after they leave, it starts to rain and falls quite heavily for the next 40 minutes! It’s a warm rain and we enjoy huddling under a small tarp with fellow passengers and getting to know them all. At 12:35 PM we catch the tender back to the ship and enjoy lunch. Weather for the rest of the day is sunny and hot.



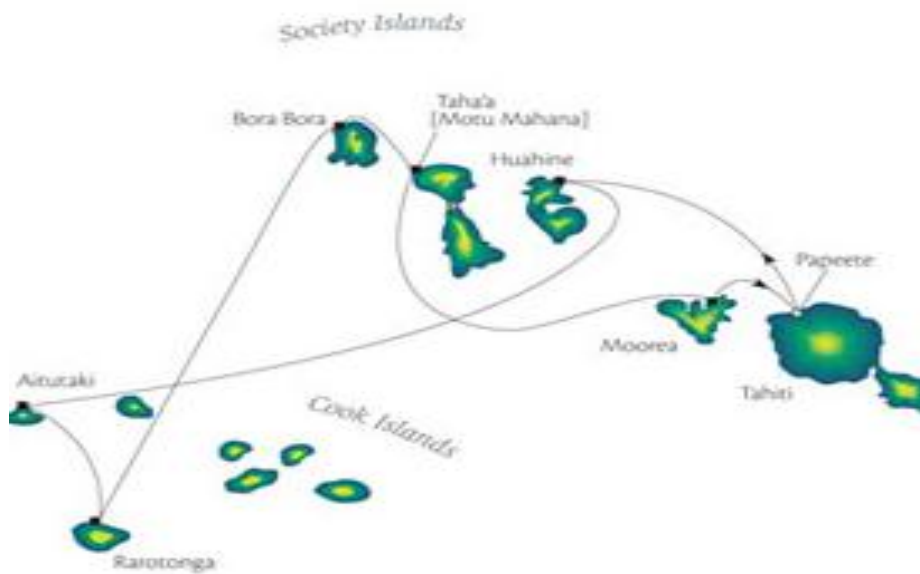
At 3:00 PM Marcia and I catch a ride on the large tender for a short ride to town where we spend half an hour walking through the small shops. Marcia buys a Pareo (a colorful Polynesian wrap). I spend the rest of the afternoon relaxing by the ship’s small saltwater pool, then clean up and attend a 6 PM lecture by Dr. Mark Edeewos, the ship’s onboard anthropologist about

“Tahiti at the time of Captain Cook”. At 6:30 PM I sneak out of the lecture and join the others in the lounge for refreshments and enjoy listening to an acoustic set by the excellent band Siglo. Then another great dinner and we retire. Marie and Kal stay up for the Polynesian Show in the theater.

Below is a picture of the stern of the Paul Gauguin. Our cabin is the center cabin – just above the flag. So we have a wonderful view of ports as we depart and much of the time we are anchored.



South Pacific Vacation – Day 6 – Tuesday March 6th – Bora Bora Day



Today is our second day anchored in the Bay of Faanui inside the reef at Bora Bora.

After breakfast Peggy and Dick go on a shore excursion “Bora Bora Island Tour by Le Truck”. Le Truck is an open air vehicle resembling a windowless bus. They are widely used for public transportation in French Polynesia. On their tour they circumnavigate the entire island, a distance of 19 miles, and see many interesting sites and have great views.



Marie and Kal also go on a morning shore excursion “Bora Bora Off Road Adventure”. They ride on bench seats along the back sides of a Land Rover Defender 4 wheel drive vehicle, six people in each vehicle. They travel up incredibly rutted dirt roads to the lookout on Pahonu Hill and then ascend to another high lookout where cannons, installed by the US Army during WWII still stand. 5000 US troops were stationed on Bora Bora during WWII to secure it as a transfer station for supplies going to the Solomon Islands. They make several more stops and have beautiful views.

This morning I take the first tender to the *Paul Gauguin* private beach and do some snorkeling, returning an hour later for lunch with Marcia. This afternoon Marcia and I go on a shore excursion “Land and Sea Safari with Snorkeling”. The first part of this tour does much of what Marie and Kal did this morning, in fact we have the same excellent driver/guide that they had, Sy. We and the other four passengers in our Land Rover vote to have him remove the canvas roof and he folds it up and stores it under his lowered windshield. Great fun bouncing along on the dirt roads hanging onto the roll bars. We stop and view the WWII cannons and note that they were made in 1907 by Bethlehem Steel. As we get ready to leave the cannons, it starts to pour rain. Up goes the canvas roof and we bounce back down the mountain with rivers of water following us in the ruts. The rain stops after ten minutes and off comes the canvas roof. After some more sightseeing we are taken to a beach where we board a catamaran motor boat. We travel for 15 minutes to a snorkeling site called the Coral Canyon. The water is crystal clear and we enjoy great snorkeling. The boat then takes us back to the main dock where the *Paul Gauguin* tender waits for us.



We all meet for refreshments before dinner. We remark that we’ve never seen such a uniformly pleasant group as the crew of the *Paul Gauguin*. Everyone always has a smile on their face and a warm greeting. Most of the crew is from the Philippines. The Captain and top sailing officers are from Croatia. Other top officers and department heads are from France, England, New Zealand, Australia, Polynesia and the USA. Our cabin attendant is Jenifer and she does an excellent job keeping of cabin in shape and keeping our in room refrigerator stocked with the (free) beverages of our choice.



After another great dinner we go up to the top deck, deck 9, for some stargazing lead by the ship’s Naturalist, Meagan, and a ship officer who has set up a telescope. Meagan has a nifty laser with which she points out the different stars. We see Mars and now know how to find the Southern Cross. The nightly show tonight features a magician. Peggy said he was great and she was up on stage as one of the participants.





At 7 AM after a short overnight sail of 52 nautical miles from Bora Bora we approach the islands of Taha'a and Raiatea in French Polynesia. There is only one channel through the reef (you can see the channel in the 3 o'clock position in the above photo) and the *Paul Gauguin* successfully enters through the reef, cruises around Taha'a and sets anchor (at about the 9 o'clock position in the photo). The six of us meet for breakfast at the ship's open air restaurant, Le Grill. They always have an extensive buffet of hot and cold foods and they will cook omelets made to order.



Now, we expect today to be one of the highlights of our vacation. *Paul Gauguin* maintains a small island on the reef at Taha'a (it's one of the very small islands in the 9 o'clock position on the photo) called Motu Mahana. On each of their cruises they host an all day picnic there. At 10 o'clock the six of us make sure to catch the first tender to the island and secure our chaise lounges in a shady area under palm trees. I quickly circumnavigate the island; it's only about half a square mile in size. The PG beach consists of permanent open air buildings containing a bar and a kitchen, nice rest rooms and shaded tables and chairs for dining.



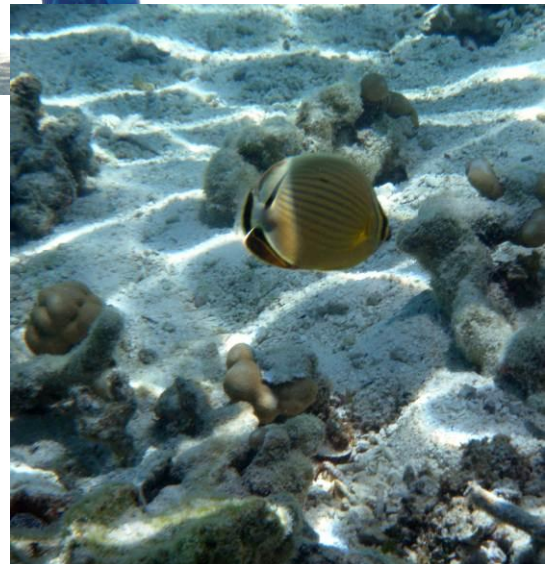
There is very good snorkeling right off the beach (just watch out for the sea urchins). They have brought over several sea kayaks from the ship and Marie and Kal enjoy a paddle out to the reef. The crew has been busy hollowing out hundreds of coconuts and the bar serves us the drinks of our choice poured into the coconuts. Several of The Gauguins, the ship's young female Polynesian hostesses, stroll among the guests playing guitars and ukuleles and singing Polynesian songs. From noon until 2 PM they serve us a delicious lunch buffet of hot dogs, hamburgers, fish kabobs, steak, all kinds of salads and fruits, and deserts. A most relaxing day in a perfect tropical setting. At about 3:30 PM we tender back to the *Paul Gauguin*. Today's weather has been hot and sunny, with one brief passing shower.



At 5 PM our ship raises anchor and sets course for the Cook Islands, 540 nautical miles away. Tomorrow will be a full day at sea.



We have an enjoyable dinner tonight at the ship's French restaurant, La Veranda.



South Pacific Vacation – Day 8 – Thursday March 8th – At Sea in route to Aitutaki in the Cook Islands



Last night at 5 PM we left Taha'a in French Polynesia for a 540 nautical mile cruise to Aituaki Atoll in the Cook Islands. We will not anchor in the lagoon at Aituaki until 8 AM tomorrow morning. We will be at sea all of today.

When we awake we find that the ship is rolling a little bit. This seems to affect Marie, Kal and myself while Marcia, Peggy and Dick feel fine. The three of us take the motion sickness pills supplied by the *Paul Gauguin* and they seem to help fairly quickly. At noon the Captain addresses us over the PA system. He says we are just about half way to Aituaki and have been averaging 14.5 knots. He is going to now slow down to 12 knots so as to not arrive too early (I am not sure whether this is to avoid an extra day of the large anchoring fees each island charges...I think it's just to make sure we are awake and viewing what will be a beautiful entrance into the lagoon tomorrow morning). He says we are traveling through 10 foot high swells, although they don't look that large from our views on the upper decks. The ocean is 14,500 feet deep and the temperature is 77 degrees. He says the water will be 82 degrees at Aituaki with some swells that could cause some issues with the tendering to the dock.

We spend most of the day reading, relaxing and lounging around the pool. The salt water pool is a refreshing place to cool off. We continue to be amazed at how "uncrowded" the ship feels. This cruise is sold out with 330 passengers but never a problem finding a seat in a restaurant or a lounge by the pool, even on a sea day like today when all are on board. The majority of the passengers are from the USA, but we've met French, Canadians, Aussies and Brits. All are friendly.



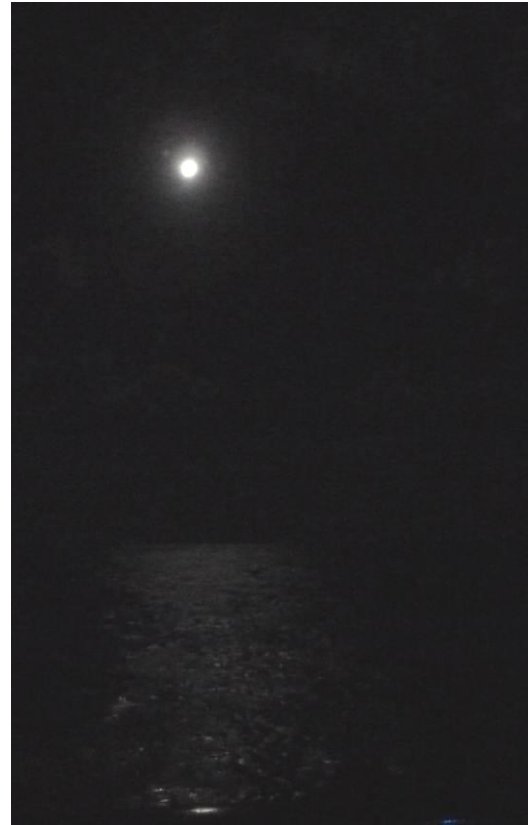
We have learned that the first inhabitants of the Cook Islands were most probably Polynesians moving down from Tahiti around 900 AD. Spanish ships first visited the islands in the 16th century. Captain James Cook of England discovered one of the southern Cook Islands on his last voyage in 1790 and the island chain was named after him. Lt. William Bligh of the HMS *Bounty* was the first European to visit Aitutaki in 1790, just before the famous mutiny. Missionaries from England arrived in 1820 and within ten years had converted almost all of the islanders to Protestantism.

The Cook Islands became a British protectorate in 1888 largely out of fears that the French would occupy it like they had Tahiti. The New Zealand government annexed the country in 1901 and it remained a New Zealand protectorate until 1965 when the Cook Islands were given self-governing status. Today the Cook Islands are essentially "self governing in a free association with New Zealand". They have a democratic government.

The land area of the 15 islands comprising the Cook Islands totals 91 square miles but the sea area covers 690,000 square miles. Population is about 18,000, 13,100 of whom live on the main island of Rarotonga which we will visit the day after tomorrow. 88% are pure Polynesian (Maori). There is a much larger population of Cook Islanders in New Zealand where 58,000 live. Tourism is the main industry with 100,000 visitors a year.



Prior to dinner we meet for refreshments at 6 PM and enjoy the music of the house band Siglo and magic tricks from the magician whose show Peggy and Dick saw the other night. We have another great five course meal in the main dining room. We are enjoying a full moon.



South Pacific Vacation – Day 9 – Friday March 9th – Aitutaki



After a 540 mile nautical cruise from Taha'a in French Polynesia we approach Aitutaki in the Cook Islands just as the sun is rising. We have learned that Aitutaki consists of a small central island 8 square miles in size surrounded by a triangular barrier reef dotted with small islands. The lagoon area is said to be one of the prettiest in the world. Fewer than 2000 people live on Aitutaki. We watch from the bow as the *Paul Gauguin* approaches the one channel through the reef into the lagoon.

We can't believe it's wide enough for our ship to pass through and sure enough, we anchor outside of the reef (in a position at 12 o'clock in the above photo). We will be taking tenders through the channel to the docks in the town of Arutanga. They announce that the number of folks allowed onto the tenders will be reduced from 120 to 60 due to the swells where we are anchored outside of the reef. The *Paul Gauguin* only comes to the Cook Islands a few times a year. We are happy to be here and able to land. We were scheduled to be here several days ago but the Captain rearranged the schedule due to the inclement weather and sea conditions in the Cook Islands. Today's weather is forecast to be fine; highs in the mid-80s and sunny.



Dick and Peggy go to shore and rent a motor scooter and have a good time cruising around the main island. They make sure to stay on the left hand side of the road...they drive British style here.



Marie and Kal have signed up for a shore excursion, "Snorkeling Tour". They board a small motor boat that holds 8 guests and travel out into the lagoon to Motu Main, a nesting area for local birds and to Honeymoon Island, a beautiful set of low sandy islands that you can walk between. They also had three snorkeling tops and saw many fish. The area they were in is in the upper left hand portion of the above photograph.

Marcia and I have signed up for the 5 hour "Lagoon Cruise and Beach Break". We meet in the ship's ballroom at 9:15 AM and are surprised to learn that 60 people have signed up for this shore excursion. They call out cabin numbers to board the tender and we are among the last to be called and must sit in

the very front of the tender. Thus, we are the last to exit the tender and at the end of the long line to board the large boat that is to be our excursion vessel. You know what they say; "the last shall be the first"? Well, there wasn't room on the big boat for us, so they brought around a small boat and eight of us got on. It is a nice boat powered by a 100 horse power outboard.

Our Captain/Tour Guide is "Black Jack" assisted by his son. They both speak excellent English, the common language of the Cook Islands. Black Jack lets us know right away that we will see more and do more than those on the big boat due to his boat's small size, fast speed, and his expertise! We are quickly off to the Honeymoon Island area where we stop for some excellent snorkeling and later a walk on the island. We run into Marie and Kal whose small boat is also beached there! Then we travel east for more excellent lagoon snorkeling. At each snorkeling stop Black Jack gets in the water with us and leads us to his favorite snorkeling attractions



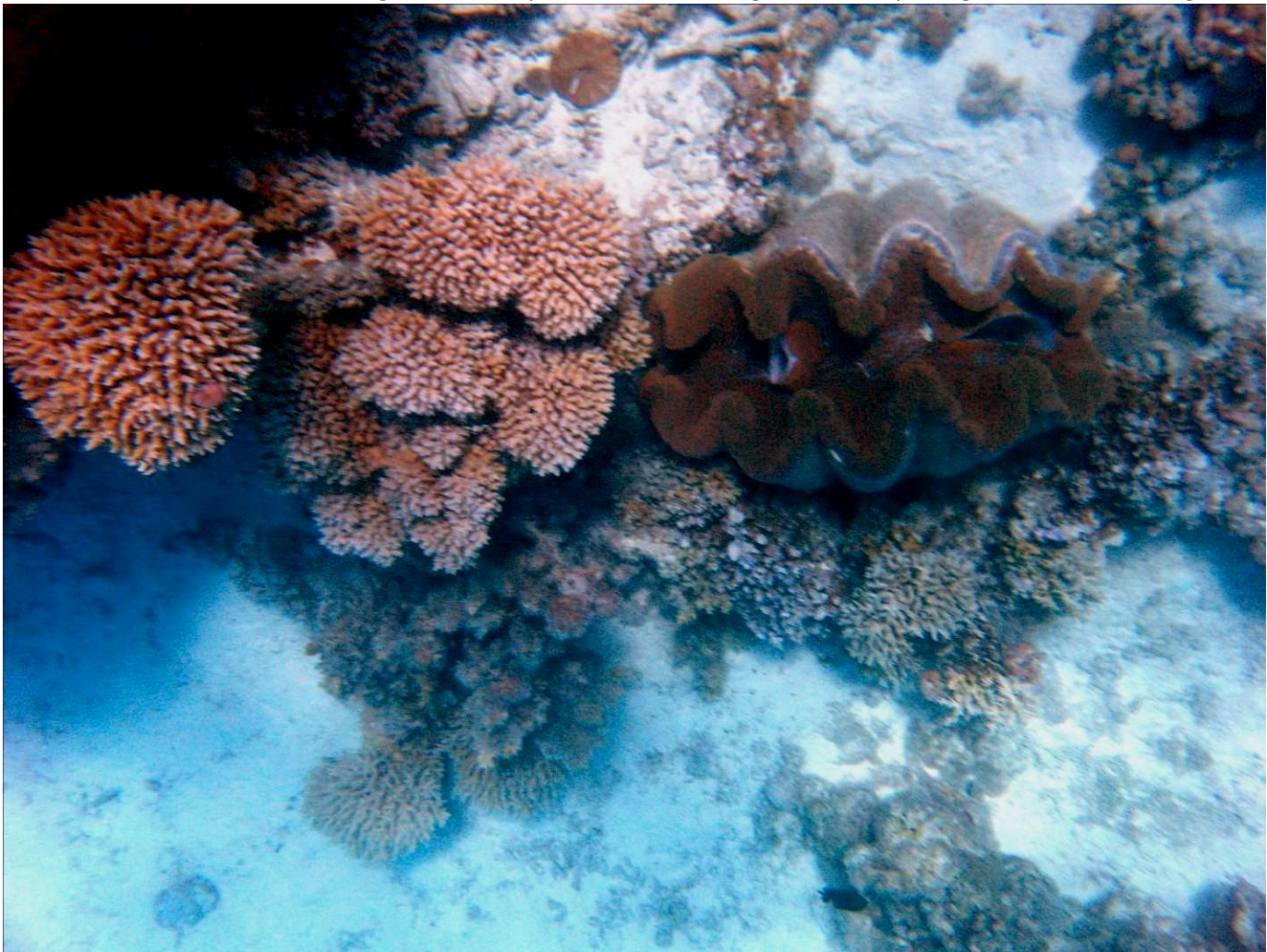


Then we cruise to One Foot Island (in the 6 o'clock position on the Aitutaki aerial photo). Here we spend 1-1/2 hours having a nice lunch, walking the circumference of the island and swimming in amazingly turquoise blue water. After lunch we head up the chain of small islands for more snorkeling before heading for an area north of Honeymoon Island. There we snorkel and feed the fish with bread Black Jack had secured at lunch.





We literally have hundreds of colorful fish “eating out of our hands” ...amazing. We stop at the site of a ship wreck from 1959 and Black Jack snorkels us to view the debris. We cruise back to the dock and are tendered to our ship, arriving back 7 hours after we started. We got our money’s worth and had a great time exploring a most beautiful lagoon.



We

have an enjoyable dinner tonight at La Grill, the outdoor sea food restaurant on deck 8.

South Pacific Vacation – Day 10 – Saturday March 10th – Rarotonga



At 7 AM we approach Rarotonga after an overnight cruise of 143 nautical miles. We anchor off the north shore (about 2 o'clock in the above aerial photo) near the town of Avarua, the capital of the Cook Islands. Rarotonga is the only high, mountainous island of the 15 in the chain. With a population of 10,000 Rarotonga has more than half the population of the Cook Islands.



Today is Dick's 70th birthday (although he and Peggy look and act at least ten years younger). When Peggy mentions the birthday to the steward that brings them this morning's coffee, he quickly returns with a cupcake with a candle in it and sings "Happy Birthday".

Peggy, Dick, Marie and Kal take a tender to shore and explore the town of Avarua. It's Saturday morning and many of the residents of Rarotonga have come to Avarua for the Saturday morning market.



Marcia and Jim have signed up for a shore excursion "Raro Safari by 4x4". We tender to shore through rough swells and board Land Rovers with seating for eight. We spend the next three hours circumnavigating the island, occasionally taking dirt roads up into the mountains for high views. Our driver/guide is Mr. Hopeless who does a good job of describing the vegetation and the Polynesian ways. At one stop he shows us how to split and open a coconut which he accomplishes in about a minute. We enjoy tasting the coconut milk and coconut meat.

At one point we pass an unfinished 210 room hotel. It was to be the islands first 5 Star hotel, a Hilton, with five pools and an eighteen hole golf course. Construction started in 1988 and stopped four year later when it was 80% complete. It now stands empty, its exterior walls covered in graffiti.



We tender back to our ship through heavy swells. The crew does an expert job of getting everyone safely back aboard the *Paul Gauguin*.

The six of us meet at 12:30 PM for a nice lunch on the outside veranda of the La Veranda restaurant. At 4 PM the *Paul Gauguin* raises anchor and departs for a 550 nautical mile voyage to Moorea in French Polynesia. The Gauguins, the young, Polynesian hostesses and entertainers gather on deck and sing Polynesian songs as they leave Rarotonga. Today's weather has been warm with some clouds. We enjoyed our time in the Cook Islands, especially yesterday at Aitutaki Atoll. I forgot to mention, yesterday, the reality TV show "Cook Island Survivor" was filmed at Aitutaki in 2006 and that we saw most of the sites where the filming was done.

Ten of us gather for dinner at 7:15 PM. Besides the six of us we are joined by Judy and Bill and Don and his wife, friends of Peggy and Richard from a previous cruise. The occasion, of course, is Dick's 70th birthday and we have an enjoyable dinner.



After dinner I join Peggy and Dick in the Grand Salon for an excellent show by the guest magicians. Then I go up to the lounge where the ship's band will play an hour rock set. Earlier, they told me that they had learned the song I requested of them our first night on the ship, and would play it tonight if I showed up. This is a talented group of three young Pilipinos. They play an acoustic set each night before dinner and then a rock set many nights at 10:30. They have a lead guitar, bass guitar and the lead singer plays the drums for the rock set. They seem to be able to play any song and the lead singer can cover just about any vocalist's sound. They open tonight's set with the Beatles "Get Back", and then play my request, BTO's "Taking Care of Business". Then they play extended versions of two R&R classic, Lynard Skynard's "Freebird" and Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven". They close with Lynard Skynard's "Sweet Home Alabama". After the set they come over and chat with me for half an hour.

South Pacific Vacation – Day 11 – Sunday March 11th – At Sea in Route to Moorea



Today will be a full day at sea. We are cruising from Rarotonga in the Cook Islands to Moorea in the Society Islands of French Polynesia a total of 620 nautical miles.

Even though we are in a remote part of the world communications and news are readily available. In addition to pretty good internet connections always available for our netbook computer, the ship has an internet café with several computers where you can easily connect. The TV in our cabins in addition to having the ship channel and numerous channels running recent movies has all of the news channels; Fox, CNN, MSNBC, CNBC, BBC and Sky News. Mini newspapers in several languages are available each day at reception. Each room has a DVD player and the *Pail Gauguin* has an extensive (free) library of DVDs as well as books.

Dick and I sit in on the “Chat with the Captain” event this morning, hosted by Verity the Cruise Director. The Captain, Toni Mirkovic, tells us that he was born in Split and raised in Drobevenek

Croatia. I find this of some interest as Marie, Kal, Marcia and myself have picked the Dalmatian Coast of Croatia for part of our next vacation this coming September. Most of the questions from the passengers were rather technical; example: How often do you take on fuel? *“The Paul Gauguin hold 450 tons of diesel fuel. Our 11 cruise will consume 300 tons as we travel 1504 miles. We will refuel before the next voyage at the docks in Tahiti”*. Finally Dick asks the best question of the day: What was the dumbest question you’ve ever been asked at one of these? The tactful Captain thinks and then responds: *“The most annoying question I get asked, at least 40 times a cruise, is when someone spots me away from the bridge and asks who is running the ship”*. *“Now the dumbest; one time a lady asked has this ship has ever sunk? I responded: no, have you ever died? Also, I frequently am asked if the crew spends the night on the ship”*. Then Verity chimes in with her favorites *“One time a lady asked me if it was fresh water or salt water in our small pool on the ship. I responded its salt water and she said she thought so as she saw waves on it. Also, I am frequently asked if the ship generates its own electricity. Depending on my mood I sometimes reply no, we are trailing a long cable from Tahiti”*.

In the afternoon we are all mostly reading. I am by the pool working on my sunburn. Every once and a while I enter the pool to cool off. It’s fun as the pool generates a big wave when we are cruising and go over a swell. Peggy, Marie and Kal attend a cooking demonstration by our onboard celebrity chef, Art Smith (used to be the personal chef for Opera Winfried). Later, Marie, Kal and I attend



an excellent lecture on the formation of the volcanic islands, motus and coral atolls given by our on board naturalist, Meagan.

After pre-dinner refreshments listening to the acoustic music of Siglo, we all enjoy a great dinner in the main restaurant.

At 9 AM I leave dinner and go to the main ballroom as Siglo will be playing dance music for half an hour. The doors are



closed but I walk right in. Only the band is there. The lead guitar player shouts.....Jim.....we were just getting ready to practice your song....we screwed it up last night. They then launched into a great version of Bachman Turner Overdrive's "Taking Care of Business" as the doors open and other passengers take their seats. Marcia joins me and we watch the first hour of a not so great show.

Tomorrow we dock in beautiful Moorea for two days.

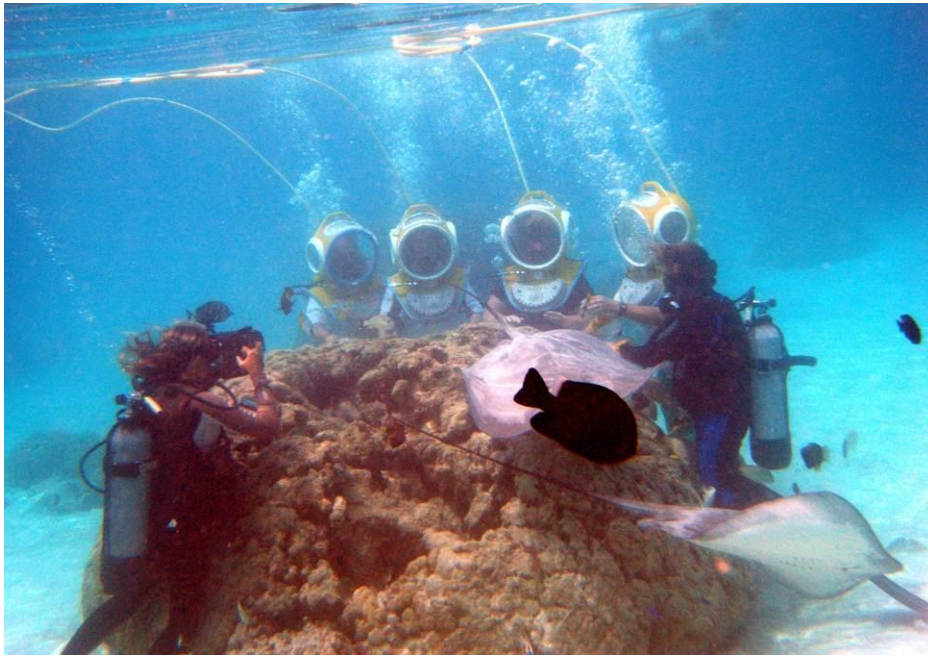
South Pacific Vacation – Day 12 – Monday March 12th – Moorea



We are all up at 7 AM after a good night's sleep. We cruised through a calm ocean last night. We approach the beautiful volcanic formed island of Moorea, ringed by a wide reef. The *Paul Gauguin* enters the narrow Opunohu Bay. High, green mountains surround us on all sides. It reminds us of Milford Sound in New Zealand or a fiord in Norway. Above us towers Mt. Mouaroa, better known to many as Mitchener's "Bali Hai". We will be here for the next two days.

Peggy and Dick take an early tender to shore. They and another couple that they met when they rented jet skis earlier on this trip are planning to rent a car and drive around the island. Al and his

wife already have the car set to go when Peggy and Dick arrive on shore...a small blue Peugeot. For the next two hours they drive around most of the 37 mile circumference of Moorea and up to the famous Belvedere lookout for a great view of the *Paul Gauguin* anchored in Opunohu Bay and also Cook's Bay. Then they decide to take a dirt road. Oh Oh....they strike a rock and the transmission will not work. They wait for a passing vehicle; the driver does not speak English but has a cell phone so they call the rental car company. They send out a repairman. He determines that the car cannot be fixed in the field. They call for a larger car to take them back to the rental center. Al had taken out the additional insurance from the rental car company but is informed he will owe the \$880 deductible as he drove on a dirt road. They produce a document he signed saying he would not leave paved roads. He declares it a forgery. Peggy and Dick make it back to the ship by 1:30 PM and Al, a retired lawyer, is looking forward to fighting this case!



Marcia and I take the 9:30 AM tender to shore for the “Aquablue Underwater Walk” excursion. There are only eight of us on this excursion. We take a short van ride to a luxury ocean side hotel and go to the dive center. There we enter a nice boat with three crewmen and motor for ten minutes to an area of the lagoon that is a “sanctuary”; i.e., no fishing allowed. The all French staff gives us a good briefing on what to expect and the hand signals that will be used when we are underwater. Then the four Aussies in our group enter the water one at a time. They each have 180 pound “diving bells” (large helmets with air pumped into them) lowered onto their heads as they enter the water. The air captured inside the diving bell balances out the weight so there is no extra weight to carry while underwater! They stay under water for about forty minutes while I snorkel in another area of the lagoon. Then it’s time for another couple, Dick and Carol, from Denver (Marcia has discovered that he was born in the same hospital in San Antonio, Texas as she and Marie) and Marcia and I to enter the water. What an experience! We walk underwater; we are in depths of ten to twenty feet. The helmets we are wearing have glass on three sides and at the top so visibility is great, especially for me as I can wear my glasses inside of the helmet, something that I can’t do when snorkeling. One of the crew stays on the boat to monitor our air lines and supply. The other two are in the water with us in SCUBA gear. One is taking pictures and videos while the other is making sure we are all OK and leading us to different areas and activities. He first has us feed the many fish that gather. Then he attracts the five sting rays in the area and has us “pet” them as they swim all around us.

This Sting Ray Loved Marcia



Then he takes us to where the moray eel lives and we stand at a distance as he feeds this dangerous beast. We dance for the cameras. After 40 minutes we re-board our boat. This was a most memorable experience. Back to the docks and we have to wait for the 1:40PM tender back to the ship. This gives Marcia time for a little shopping from the craft booths set up by locals. At each tendering stop, the *Paul Gauguin* sets up a refreshment table manned by the excursion staff with chairs and shade to comfortably wait for the tender.



Moray Eel –(photo taken from a safe distance)

Marie and Kal attended the morning talk by Meagan the Naturalist and then take the 1:30 PM tender to shore and go on the “Aito Off-Road Safari” excursion. They have a great time. Marcia and I will be going on the same excursion tomorrow morning, so details and pictures of this excursion will be in tomorrow’s report. Today’s weather has been mostly clear and hot although Marie and Kal experience some clouds and even rain on the more mountainous parts of their tour.

At 4 PM I go on a tour of the ship’s galley, led by the head chef and learn about how the restaurants and food service is run for the ship’s three restaurants and the crew’s kitchen; very interesting. Marcia attends the 5 PM lecture by the onboard Marine Biologist on dolphins and whales.

At 5:30 PM I enjoy listening to my favorite band Siglo’s acoustic set by the pool then we all meet in the lounge to listen to a local band from Moorea play Polynesian music before dinner. We have an excellent dinner; Polynesian theme tonight. The lobster was great and we enjoyed talking with our favorite waiter, Rey, and learning more about his life growing up on Cebu in the Philippines.

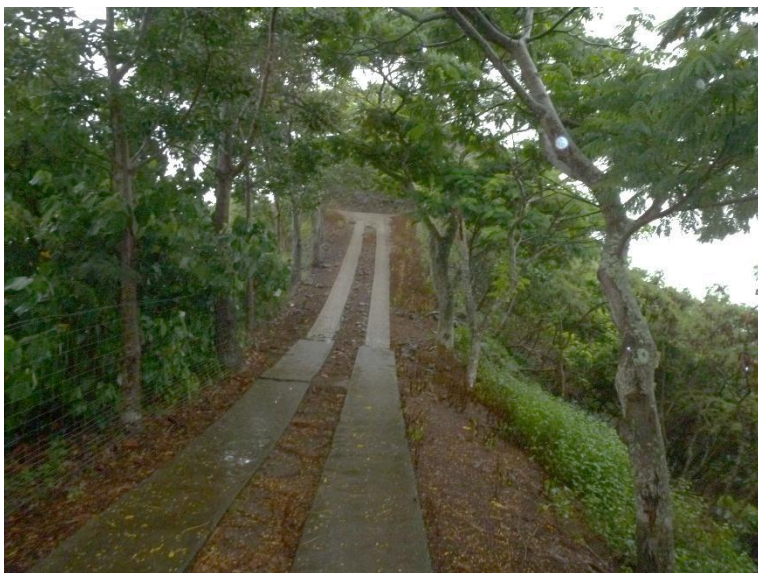
The after dinner show is the Polynesian Spectacular.

South Pacific Vacation – Day 13 – Tuesday March 13th – Day Two in Moorea



Marcia and I are up early this morning as we have booked a Shore Excursion that starts rather early. We have ordered a room service breakfast this morning. Although free room service has been available 24 hours a day, this is the first time we have used it. It arrives right on time at 7 AM and our omelets are delicious.

It is raining fairly hard and apparently it has been raining all night. Other than a few quickly passing rain showers, this is the first real rain we've experienced on this vacation. Our morning excursion is the "Aito Off-Road Safari" which will be another island exploration in an open Land Rover Defender.



We learn that many of today's excursions have been canceled but not ours, so we don some waterproof gear and catch the 8:30 AM tender to shore. We meet our driver Bubba. There is only one other participant on our excursion (apparently some cancelled), Penny who is originally from England and now lives in Ontario Canada. We have plenty of room in the back of the Land Rover. We have a canvas roof but keep the side curtains up for visibility, so we expect to get a little wet.

Our vehicle first takes us on a narrow, extremely steep and windy private road to near the 1000 foot high summit of Magic Mountain where we have an easy hike to the top and get great views of Opunohu Bay. It is still raining but the clouds are high so we can see quite well. We go back down and drive through the sprawling grounds of the Agricultural School, making frequent stops to learn about local plants and crops like pineapples.





Staying off-road we found two creeks and stop at an old Tahitian “temple” site where we take a short stroll to view the ruins. We enjoy the different kinds of trees and find the rain and the mist to give us some interesting views. After a stop for refreshments we drive to the 1000+ foot high Belvedere Overlook where we get great views of both Opunohu Bay and Cook’s Bay. We return to the coast, stopping at a juice factory, at the shore of Cook’s Bay and at the spot on Opunohu Bay where Captain Cook first landed. Bubba has us back in time to just catch the 12:10 PM tender to the ship. We enjoyed this excursion and the good natured commentary of our driver/guide.



We join Peggy and Dick at 12:30 PM for lunch in La Veranda. Over lunch we discuss how we are going to rate this cruise, as they have given us questionnaires to fill out. We decide we will rate just about everything “excellent” or “exceeded expectations” and give special mention to our favorite waiters, room stewardesses and entertainers. It is hard for me to describe to you the exceptional level of service and friendliness from all of the staff of the *Paul Gauguin*.

Marie and Kal tender to shore at 9 AM and rent a car. They drive around the island and up to the best viewpoints. They return to the ship at 2PM and enjoy a late lunch. By mid-afternoon the rain has stopped.



At 5 PM the *Paul Gauguin* raises anchor and leaves Moorea for the 19 mile cruise to our final stop; the docks at Papeete Tahiti. Marcia and I go down to the main ballroom where the Captain is hosting a “Farewell Party”. The Captain makes some nice remarks: “We have traveled 1581 nautical miles on this cruise, consuming 300 tons or 400,000 gallons of diesel fuel. You have also consumed 1,800 bottles of the best French and Chilean wine”. Then the beautiful Gauguins sing while the whole ship’s crew, by department, comes up on stage.

We all give them a standing ovation. Our cabin stewardess, Jenifer, comes to us and gives us hugs.



Next Marcia and I go to the “secret” viewing balcony on deck 8 and watch in awe as the ship approaches Tahiti at nighttime and docks at Papeete a little before 7 PM. Dick has reserved a table for the six of us, outdoors on deck 8 at Le Grill for dinner at seven o’clock. It is a great experience...having a wonderful meal with friends while watching all of the activities going on in the busy harbor and on shore in the capital city of French Polynesia.

At 9:30 PM we all go to the Grand Salon for a performance of “O Tahiti E” performed by what is billed as Tahiti’s #1 folkloric dance troop. It was very Polynesian. At the end of the show I go to the La Palette lounge to watch the last rock set of my new

favorite band, Siglo. Then up to our cabin to finish packing as bags have to be outside our door at 11:30PM. Tomorrow we disembark from the *Paul Gauguin*.

South Pacific Vacation – Day 14 – Wednesday March 14th – Tahiti



Photograph by Paul Chesley

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It is raining quite hard when we wake up this morning. This will be our last day in French Polynesia. After breakfast we vacate our rooms at 9:30 AM so that housekeeping can get them ready for the next group of passengers who will start boarding the *Paul Gauguin* at 3 PM.

Marie, Kal, Marcia and I leave the ship and walk a few blocks from the docks to an indoor marketplace in Papeete. The first floor of the market contains mostly food vendors while the second floor has clothing and souvenirs for sale. Back on board we have an early lunch and prepare to disembark. Our flight to the USA does not depart until just before midnight so as part of our *Paul Gauguin* package we will be given a three hour coach tour of part of Tahiti and then will be transported to the Radisson resort where each couple will get a day room to use before we are taken to the airport.

We leave our ship for the last time shortly after noon. The rain has stopped. Peggy and Dick experienced the Tahiti tour when they cruised on the *Paul Gauguin* four years ago so they have elected to be transported directly to the Radisson. The other four of us board a comfortable motor coach and begin the tour. We first drive by the former France Nuclear

Weapons facility. From 1962 until 1996 France manufactured their nuclear weapons here and conducted above ground and below ground nuclear tests on a remote atoll in southeast French Polynesia. French Navy frogman destroyed the Green Peace ship in the Auckland NZ harbor (that had been known to anchor near the nuclear test site to delay tests) in the early 90s causing international outrage. When France shut the facility in 1996, under international pressure, 20,000 people either lost their jobs or moved back to France from Tahiti. The French Polynesian economy has never recovered.



Our first stop is the restored home (circa 1930) and the museum honoring James Normal Hall. He wrote or co-authored 33 books, the most famous being *Mutiny on the Bounty*. He was also a hero in WWI. Although an American, he enlisted in the British army just after the start of the war, moved to French Air Army as a member of the Lafayette Escadrille, and then the USA Army Air Corp when the US entered the war. He was Ernie Rickenbacker's wingman. Next we drive along the rocky east coast of Tahiti which reminded us of the California shore line. We stop to walk to a beautiful waterfall.



After a stop at Point Venus, where Captain Cook landed and conducted his astronomy experiments, we drive to the Radisson and check in a little after 3:00 PM. The rooms at the Radisson are great, except for the Tinka's which has a broken air conditioner.



At 8:45 PM we leave for the airport and work our way through rather slow moving check in and security processes. We board a full Air Tahiti Nui jumbo Air Bus A340-300 and take off on time at 11:55PM for an eight hour overnight flight to Los Angeles.

We land on time in LA at 11AM on Thursday March 15. We are all staying tonight at the BEST Western near LAX and will fly to our homes tomorrow. This concludes our vacation journal. We enjoyed this restful vacation which was quite different from our past trips.

Best, Jim

PS: Any questions, please e-mail me at: jelving1@nycap.rr.com

