

BEAUTY MARQ

Sail the South Pacific by passenger-cargo ship



Lionel Gouverneur

By CLINT BROWNFIELD

THE Marquesas make up the South Pacific island group that's farthest from any landmass on Earth. An ambitious crew would have to fly 3,000 miles from one of its 15 islands to reach the west coast of Mexico. So if you really want to get away from it all — this is it.

For centuries, this French Polynesian paradise has attracted those seeking adventure, exoticism and inspiration. Many, naturally, were writers. Herman Melville jumped ship off the biggest island, Nuku Hiva, in 1842 and wrote his first book, "Typee," about his

adventures living among cannibals. In 1888, Robert Louis Stevenson leased the Casco and voyaged to the Marquesas — spending six months there and later writing "In the South Seas." Sailing aboard the Snark in the early 1900s, Jack London made his way to the islands and was inspired to write the adventure book "South Sea Tales."

Short of sailing on your own, the Aranui 3 is the most thorough way to experience this unparalleled slice of utopia. Built to serve as both a cargo and cruise ship, the Aranui 3 sails from Papeete, Tahiti, up through the Tuamotu atolls and

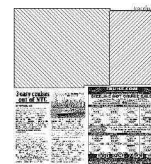
around the six principle Marquesas Islands every three weeks, year-round. Virtually every item that reaches the Marquesas — farm equipment, groceries, tools, condoms — arrives to the remote archipelago via this ship.

Nine decks in the back of the 200-passenger vessel comprise the passenger portion, with four types of accommodations: dormitory style, standard cabins with twin beds, deluxe cabins and suites (priced from \$2,624 to \$6,519 per person). A large lounge and library, dining room, pool, bar and wraparound decks

form the ship's social hubs. This is not a bare-bones boat — but it's also not a 4,000-passenger luxury liner with blinking casinos and rock-climbing walls.

Experts on board explain what will be experienced along the way, with separate sessions in English, French and German. We were shown a National Geographic film that makes a very convincing case that early Marquesans were talented navigators and reached Hawaii, New Zealand and Easter Island. Ashore the next day, on one of several excur-

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sions led by the all-Tahitian and Marquesan crew, we saw smaller statues, “tikis,” that are believed to be the predecessors of the colossal ones on Easter Island.

Although Internet access can be spotty, I managed to send a couple of emails to a friend to crow over the sheer beauty of my surroundings — incredible volcanic cliffs with 1,000-foot waterfalls, secluded beaches and jungles that contain myriad secrets, ancient original sculptures, petroglyphs and sites where human sacrifices took place.

Meals onboard are multi-course, sit-down affairs with a major French twist (the Marquesas are an overseas collectivity of France). But visits to local restaurants and picnics and cookouts on spectacular beaches offer an opportunity to enjoy local foods and beverages. Try the Tahitian beer Hinano — refreshing and cheaper than the mixed drinks onboard.



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TAT'S LIFE: Marquesans love their ink.

Excitement ensues when the ship pulls into the ports. Goods are unloaded and deals are struck. One day a horse was loaded on to be taken to the next island. We didn't know exactly what the horse thought, but it

seemed to be content with a diet of water and extra banana leaves.

Perhaps our most famous island excursion was to Hiva Oa, where Paul Gauguin lived, painted masterpieces and also allegedly dated a lot of the local girls. We visited his grave in the cemetery at Atuona on Hiva Oa, where noted Belgian singer/songwriter Jacques Brel, who adopted Gauguin as a role model, is also buried.

A sail on the Aranui 3 could be bucket-list trip or you could join the 9,000 happy Marquesans and stay for the rest of your life, ending your years like Paul Gauguin — with a satisfied smile on your face.

INFO: aranui.com