

> REAL ESCAPE

As far away as far can be . . . in French Polynesia

Want to get off the beaten track? Try sailing the Pacific Ocean on a cargo-passenger ship

KRISTIN KENT
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

THE MARQUESAS, FRENCH POLYNESIA—Sometimes you just need the rug pulled out from underneath you. And that's what happened the day I met Tino Young.

When he grabbed my hand and said, "Viens avec moi," we were in the middle of the Pacific Ocean sailing towards the Marquesas on a cargo-passenger ship. It was close to midnight. I could see a few stars flicker above me, but not many. Clouds, I thought. Too bad.

As we slithered up the cordoned-off stairwell labelled "restricted," a few passengers stared with suspicious eyes. I trusted Young had done this before. After all, he has worked on the Aranui 3 for 30 years.

The wind pummeled us as we climbed to the top deck. It was pitch black.

Or at least I thought it was.

Then, I looked up.

Oh my, there's the Scorpion and the big dipper constellations! Does the Milky Way really span the entire sky? Oh, wait, now, can that be Venus? Being a gal from Toronto, I was left breathless. We were utterly domed by the stars.

It was in that moment, I grasped where I was. And where I was going.

The Pacific Ocean is enormous; it has the power to make you feel infinitely small. With a surface of 165,200,000 square kilometres, it makes up nearly half of the Earth's water area. It is so big that it can fit all of the world's continents within its borders, with enough room to spare for another Asia.

Amazing spectacles happen here. Dolphins and flying fish frolic beside the ship as we sail. A giant humpback whale graces us with its presence, surging out of water

and flapping its tail against the sea in what seemed like good fun.

On land, there are odd creatures such as tree crabs, which are huge prehistoric-looking beasts capable of opening a coconut with their own claws. (Because of their steady sweet diet, I also hear they're delicious.)

Erupting underwater volcanoes continue to give life to new islands. More than 25,000 of them criss-cross this ocean, most found south of the equator, including Tuamotu Archipelago and the Marquesas Islands, the two regions I'll be exploring this trip.

If you close your eyes and picture paradise, a clichéd portrait of a palm-tree-lined island may come to mind. Takapoto, my first glimpse of land in the area, is just that, but the atoll also comes with a piercing turquoise lagoon.

These lagoons are common in the archipelago. They make for scuba diving meccas with impressive underwater ecosystems.

In Rangiroa, for instance, I swam with diverse schools of fish, some tiny, flat and blue, while others were plump and fiery red or bright yellow. In places, the coral was a soft shade of purple.

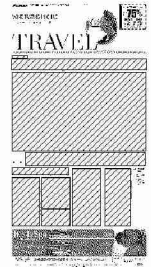
My heart did stop for a moment when two black point sharks circled above me. I later learn these dreaded beings are, most of the time, harmless to humans.

About 1,095 kilometres away — yes, you read that right — from that atoll are the Marquesas Islands. Here, you'll find a different kind of paradise.

TAHITI continued on T9

TAHITI from T1

Towering mountains jet out of the sea so high they create their own



weather systems. It may be sunny at sea level, but once you reach a mountain's peak, you may need to reach for a warm parka.

To call the Marquesas remote is an understatement. It is rugged terrain, unspoiled by western development. There are no resorts, no box stores and very few accommodations. For someone who likes to get off the beaten track, as I do, this is heaven on Earth.

The islands are most accessible by boat, as most of islands don't have surfaces flat enough to accommodate an airstrip. The **Aranui 3**, the ship I am on, is one of the only ways to visit each inhabited island.

This is no luxury cruise, but it is an adventure of the best kind. The Aranui 3 is a working cargo ship first. It sails on a three-week rotation from Tahiti to the Tuamotus to the Marquesas and back. It is the economic lifeline in the region, as it is the vehicle that allows local residents to deliver and sell their goods.

Massive cranes transport jam-packed containers onto shore. At port, locals huddle around to sell stacks of bananas or dried coconut meat (called copra), for instance. The ship also acts as a delivery service, transporting everything from automobiles to livestock.

Aboard the ship, crew members mingle with guests. Do yourself a favour and chat them up, if you go. You'll learn more about life and culture from them than you will in any guidebook.

This is how I met Tino Young.

We exchanged stories for hours that first night, and again nearly every night after that. He spoke with such passion, such grace. "C'est la magie!" Young would say when describing his homeland, the Marquesas.

He told me about his ancestors, how they navigated by starlight on these very seas 700 years ago. He directed me to visit sacred lands on shore, now archeological sites, where he said I'd feel "la force de la nature."

And, man, was he right.

Kristin Kent's visit was subsidized by Tahiti Tourisme. Follow Kent on Instagram @kent_kristin.

> JUST THE FACTS

Hurry, the Aranui 3 will be sailing throughout 2015's winter and spring months. But she is being replaced after that. The larger the Aranui 5 will change the designation from cargo-passenger to passenger-cargo, which means more people and potentially less intimacy among crew and passengers. There were 152 passengers and 65 crew members on my voyage. The updated ship promises to near double that.

Next year promises to be an excellent sailing year, too, as the idyllic island of Bora Bora been added to the itinerary.

You can splurge on a double bed or you can shack up in dormitory-style accommodations. Prices start at \$2,624 per person. For more information visit aranui.com



KRISTIN KENT PHOTOS FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Mountains in the Marquesas Islands rise out of the sea so steeply and to such a height they create their own weather systems.



Ship manager Tino Young has worked aboard the Aranui 3 for 30 years.

adventure

1. **TURTLE**
 A large sea turtle is seen swimming in the water. It has a dark, patterned shell and a long, pointed snout.

2. **CRAB**
 A vibrant purple crab is shown on a rock. It has a bright blue and white pattern on its legs.

3. **MAP**
 A map of the Marquesas Islands is shown, highlighting the islands of Nukunono, Hakaheke, and Hakaheke.

4. **HIKER**
 A hiker is seen on a steep, rocky trail. The hiker is wearing a blue jacket and a white hat.

5. **WOMAN**
 A woman is seen holding a large fish. She is smiling and looking at the camera.

6. **SCENIC VIEW**
 A scenic view of a mountain range in the Marquesas Islands. The mountains are steep and covered in lush green vegetation.

7. **WOMAN**
 A woman is seen on a boat deck. She is wearing a patterned shirt and is looking towards the camera.

8. **WOMAN**
 A woman is seen holding a large fish. She is smiling and looking at the camera.

9. **WOMAN**
 A woman is seen on a boat deck. She is wearing a patterned shirt and is looking towards the camera.

10. **WOMAN**
 A woman is seen holding a large fish. She is smiling and looking at the camera.



KRISTIN KENT FOR THE TORONTO STAR

From the infinity pool at the InterContinental Tahiti Spa and Resort, you can look out at the Pacific Ocean. The ocean is so big that it makes up nearly half of the Earth's water area.