

# **Radisson Seven Seas**

**m/s Paul Gauguin**

by Greg "Pepe" Giese

COPYRIGHT 2003  
All Photos Courtesy of Pepe

## **A Cruise to Paradise**

**Tahiti, Raiatea, Bora Bora and Moorea**

### **Radisson m/s Paul Gauguin**

**If you were to close your eyes, and dream of a tropical paradise, you'd wake up in French Polynesia. From the azure seas, to the cloud encrusted volcanic mountains, the Society Islands make the path for the Radisson Seven Seas cruise ship, the Paul Gauguin. For seven days, you are a part of a dream which compels you to stand back, and just admire what the best that nature has to offer.**

**If one were to imagine a more idyllic magical place, Moorea would come into mind. This is my favorite of the islands on the itinerary of the ship: Raiatea, Motu Tahaa, Bora Bora and Moorea. Every morning you wake up to your dream, just by looking outside your balcony. Cruising for me is the best way to take a vacation, since you are part of the environment you are moving through, you naturally see and do more than you would on any land-based vacation. Every morning and every evening is different, for the sea rarely treats you to the same mood twice but always surprises you at the end of the day with an incredible sunset.**

**The Paul Gauguin was built specifically with this voyage in mind, and does so to an almost full ship each week of the year. Winter is typically hot (very hot) and with short periods of rain, while the summer brings some needed relief in the form of cooler temperatures (and no rain).**

**The rain never lasted more than a few minutes (except on the island of Tahiti) and helped to help cool things off and while umbrellas are provided, I found them not necessary in most cases because of the short duration.**

**The people of French Polynesia are very warm, kind and gentle. While they say that it is not Polynesian culture to tip, I think it will become more of the norm as tourists keep innocuously shedding a bit of culture as they travel amongst the Society Islands. For now though, it's refreshing not to have to tip, and believe that somebody is serving you because they truly want to.**

**Travel arrangements made through Radisson/Carlson Travel will assure you quality flights and all the necessary transfers and hotel stays, and for this trip all ran smoothly. Friday night before the cruise I flew into LA, and stayed at the Airport Hilton. While it wasn't the most modern of hotels, it had it's purpose and was fine for one night.**

# A Cruise to Paradise

page 2

Friday night I went out to Manhattan Beach and with my friend Marni ate at a very good restaurant called, "Beaches" (117 Manhattan Beach Blvd) and had an incredible dinner, along with a few martini's. Marni had the Chipolte Salmon (which was slightly hot and a fusion of wonderful flavors) while I opted for the Surf (filet mignon) and Turf (grilled shrimp with a salsa seasoning). Both of the meals were outstanding. The evening was capped off with "Mud Pie" which was a scintillating chocolate lovers dream. Overlooking the Pacific, it was a nice prelude to a cruise which would begin the next day.

The next morning I ate the complimentary buffet breakfast at the Hilton, then proceeded to the the airport via the hotel shuttle.

The Air Tahiti Nui flight from LAX to Papeete, Tahiti lasted a very long eight and a half hours. I got to the airport early, and requested a business-class upgrade for \$600 one-way, and was glad I did. For the hours before the flight, I was treated to the Quantas VIP Lounge where you were treated to a variety of light snack foods, and an open bar of a fine selection of wines and various liquors.

The Airbus was fully loaded, and those in the back were quite cramped. On the way back, I wasn't as lucky to get the upgrade and sat in back, but was pleasantly surprised since we were on a new Airbus (only had flown that route three times prior) and had more comfortable seats. On the first jet, they only offered Business Class (three rows of two seats across). The newer Airbus offered a First Class (three seats), then Business Class, then Economy, which was 2-4-2 seats across. Service in the Business Class was excellent, and we were all given more than enough to drink and offered about a 10 course meal over the period of eight hours. At the beginning of the flight, you're given a Pua (small flower), which is predominant in the Tahitian archipelago. It's a classy touch.

Arriving at Papeete around 8:30pm, I cleared customs, was on the bus, and on the ship within about a half hour. The embarkation process is smooth and efficient. After a digital photo is taken for security purposes, the staff collects your passport and then you are whisked away to your cabin (while being offered a "welcome aboard" glass of champagne). I barely made the 9:30pm closing of the main restaurant in L'Etoile and imagine that some of the late embarking passengers probably had to order room service. The first night I was lucky to pick La Palette lounge as my destination, and ended up having a night cap with my new British friends (living in Houston), Sean and Rose.

My cabin (707 on Deck 7) was a well appointed, compact, but very comfortable stateroom. The balcony was great, and provided a nice vantage point for some relaxing moments while the islands passed slowly by. The mini-fridge is fully stocked, and you get your choice of one premium or two stock bottles of liquor or wine. I also had a bottle of champagne chilling for me upon my arrival. Bottled water and soft drinks were replenished daily, but I never even touched the bottles of liquor since there was complementary wine at dinner, not to mention the fantastic drinks at the shipboard lounges.

The strategic use of mirrors and beautifully crafted wood veneer walls and cabinetry makes the cabin seem huge, when in reality it's very compact. I never felt crowded, and the lighting was perfect. The bathroom was also compact, but had a lavish white marble floor, sink and countertop, again, with plenty of mirrors. I always had hot water, and fresh towels always seemed to appear from nowhere. I used room service three times, and it was prompt, courteous and efficient. Even at 1:30am, I had food in my cabin within 20 minutes.

This will be the first cruise in which I brought several digital cameras and my iBook (notebook computer). There are both 115V and 220 V outlets for all your digital gear (recharging). The in-suite TV even had an external video feed so that you could watch the results of your digital or video camera.

Over the course of the coming week, our daily routine would be to cruise a short distance to a new island (usually from sunrise to midmorning) and then after dropping anchor in some beautiful bay, the tenders would be lowered for shore access. Also during this time, the rear marina platform would be lowered to provide passengers with sea kayaking, water skiing, or even windsurfing. I did try the sea kayaking in Bora Bora, and then windsurfing in Cooks Bay, Moorea. When evening came, the tenders would be hoisted onto the ship, and guests would choose between the many pre-dinner venues and then select from any of the three main dining areas for a scrumptious meal.

Since I was spoiled last year aboard the Radisson Diamond (we only had 140 passengers on a ship which typically had about 320), I wasn't sure what to expect on this cruise. My favorites on this cruise were the reception staff, who knew me by name.

Of the regular ships staff, Michael Shapiro (Cruise Director), Lorene and Claudia (Social Hosts), and Giovanni (Head Bartender) all greeted me the entire week by name, and really made the effort to make sure all was well. While it may seem a bit trivial, the hallmark of an outstanding staff is their ability to call you by name. It's not easy to do with an ever changing passenger roster, but it makes an unmistakable impression on a person (as was the case here and on my Diamond cruise.)

The cabin stewardess and steward did a fine job, as did the restaurant staff. I was impressed after I requested an off-the-menu item (sushi/sashimi) that they knew exactly who I was every night. But I wasn't impressed when I had to give them a 24-hour notice when I wanted it. I mean really, how do I know what I'll want 24-hours in advance? My solution-- just make it every night! It worked. I had wonderful sushi or sashimi every night. On the Radisson Diamond, the restaurant staff knew me by name, and would always have a chilled coke at my table even before I knew I wanted it. I realize it's difficult to achieve the outstanding level of service, but that is what I'm expecting from Radisson. It's a class act, and I'll hold them to it.

As far as the food goes, the specialty of the ship was undoubtedly French. In La Verandah (reservations required), they would regularly offer a multi-course French dinner. Since I'm not a fan of truly French food, I'll reserve comment. Others I spoke with were quite satisfied, comparing the quality to land-based restaurants. At any of the restaurants, complimentary wine (red and white) was served, of a very good quality.

As for me, I ate mostly in the main dining room L'Etoile, which offered a more continental cuisine, usually opting for the filet mignon or fish entree's. There was another (more casual) open-air dining up at Le Grill on the top deck. But I never ate there because it was always still too hot outside (even in the evening just after sunset) to dine.

For breakfast and lunch, you may eat in one of the inside dining rooms, or opt to eat outside on deck at Le Grill. Aboard the Radisson Diamond, for lunch every day they'd set up a charcoal grill and prepare a-la minute your favorite hamburger, steak or fish. On the Paul Gauguin, the cooking at Le Grill was done inside, and most likely with gas or electric. While the food was good, nothing compares to the taste of freshly charcoal grilled burgers or fish. Again, it's setting that standard of excellence that I'm looking for. However trivial a charcoal grill may be, it sets the tone of outstanding quality. Personally, I'd like to see wood fired ovens or grills aboard every ship. You can't surpass the amazing taste of wood or charcoal grilled food.

For the "piece d' resistance", I'd like to see the following items; carved ice sculptures as a dining room feature at dinner, carved melons at least once during the week, and a shaved ice machine for afternoon delights, and some fun after-dinner drinks (such as shaved ice martini's.) While I may have missed the ice sculpture and melons... it was one feature on the Radisson Diamond that made an unmistakable impression on me. It's classy and fun.

My favorite time of the day aboard a cruise ship is magic hour. It's at the end of the day, when the sun slowly melts into the distant horizon, and paints a beautiful sky, marking the end of another wonderful day cruising. For me, this means finding a perch at the highest point of the ship, while sipping on a cool martini and waiting for just that right moment to take a digital photo to capture it all, for you to see.

On the Paul Gauguin, the bar, La Paletta is located on the the highest deck eight, and is probably my most favorite place to hangout on the ship. This multifaceted room is at once a martini bar, Canapes pre-dinner bar, a piano bar, a disco and even has room for a small band. Its indoor-outdoor pavilion can keep you cool from the heat, while allowing you to enjoy the tropical Moon outside just a few steps away.

Not only was La Paletta my favorite sunset and before dinner haunt, but it turned out to be the best after dinner (after show) bar as well.

# A Cruise to Paradise

page 5

I wasn't expecting much for entertainment aboard the ship, but was pleasantly surprised by several visits by local (traditional) Polynesian dancers, a magic act, and even a brilliant one-man Broadway Review from our own talented Cruise Director, Michael Shapiro. In La Paletta, it was the piano bar featuring the sharp whited Hal Fraser who sang excellent renditions of all your favorite songs. In both the stage area (Le Grand Salon) and at times near the pool or La Paletta, the small band, El Siglo entertained passengers with singing and playing both retro and contemporary songs.

My favorite talent of the cruise was Michael Shapiro-- not only was he an outstanding Cruise Director, but he has enough talent singing and composing that it won't be long before a producer-type will snatch him away from Radisson. Michael is a great people person, and not that over-smiley type Cruise Director you can get on most cruises. His down-to-earth humor and sincerity make him a great asset to Radisson. His effort shows daily, and he was able to call most of the passengers on a first-name basis by the end of the week.

The other equally favorite talent on the ship was Hal Fraser, who played nightly requests at the piano bar in La Paletta. Hal had a steady following every night of the week at La Paletta, and it just shows how Radisson really seeks out the best of creative talent. It's not easy playing to a small crowd with such varied musical tastes.

As far as evening wear goes, there was a great variety aboard the ship. While the standard is "resort casual" which I would term contemporary tropical casual, sported Hawaiian print shirts seeming to be the norm with slacks for the gents, and a variety of tropical dresses or pants suits for the ladies.

I actually prefer to dress up when I go to dinner on ships, and would regularly wear a basic suit coat, shirt and tie. Most men wore a short sleeved shirt and slacks. This is one cruise where you could actually get by with one carry-on piece of luggage for the entire week. On other cruises, there is a formal night, which requires a bit more upscale clothes such as a tuxedo or suit, (or formal gown for women) none of which are needed during this week afloat.

The staff and passengers aboard the cruise were outstanding. The reception desk crew were always cheerful, and always willing to answer any question. They were addressing me by name every day. The passengers on this cruise were also a diverse and fun mix of people. Don't wait until the last night to say hello to fellow passengers. Making friends is always one of the best parts of cruising. Some of them will undoubtedly become friends for a lifetime.

Our cruise had 260 passengers, so we were well under the capacity of 320. There were never lines and the only small wait you had was between the 30 minute tender schedule from ship to shore. The ship always anchored out, except at the port in Papeete, Tahiti. If you wanted to water-ski, you needed to visit the reservations desk to schedule a time. And while they always seemed full, I never heard of anyone not getting a time slot, albeit they might have to be a bit more flexible in time selections.

As for the itinerary, I think the draw for most people to the South Pacific will be the tropical islands of Bora Bora and Moorea. The Paul Gauguin has an excellent choice of islands for this cruise which included the favorites.

Of the entire voyage, a few land based restaurants are worth seeking out.

Have dinner at Bloody Mary's on Bora Bora. This is one of the most charming and exotic restaurants in the world. Skip lunch, and just go there for dinner. You select from a buffet of fresh fish, shellfish and meats for your dinner, then they will cook them over a grill to perfection. You may also have a portion of each if you want to try more than one entree. The quality of the food was outstanding, of course you have to love anything that's cooked on a grill, to order. The sand floors, thatched roof, with the towering peaks of Bora Bora silhouetting the waterfront pier make for the most magical of dining experiences. The night I was there with a family and another couple, we were graced by some short periods of rain, followed by a beautiful Moon which peeked out amongst the clouds and volcanic peaks.

The other place I loved was lunch at Bali-Hi Hotel at Cooks Bay in Moorea. The waterfront restaurant has some of the prettiest views in the world. You can look to your right and see the Paul Gauguin at anchor, and just to the left you can see the tropical green covered peaks which surround the bay. Occasionally, you'll see a local with an outrigger canoe slowly paddling by. The food is cooked outside, and you have a small selection of fish or meat, which is prepared in Polynesian style, with local herbs and fruit. Combined with the local brew, you are assured a lunch to remember. Moorea is where some segments of "An Affair to Remember" was filmed, and you can see why they picked this French Polynesian backdrop for the on-location portion of paradise.

When roaming around the islands, it is wise to carry some of the local currency. In French Polynesia it is the CFP (Cour de Franc Pacifique) or French Pacific Franc. In January 2003 the exchange rate was about 116 CFP to one U.S. Dollar. Onboard ship, expect about a 100 CFP for each dollar. At first I wasn't going to get any, but decided to get around \$100 USD worth for lunch, taxis, and the Internet cafe. I always pay with my American Express when possible, so I don't have to carry around cash.

French Polynesia is on the cellular GSM network, so unless you have a European compatible cell, don't expect service here. You can buy phone cards on any of the islands. Expect to pay \$15 a minute for the ship phone which utilizes a satellite connection. If you need to check or send an email, the ship does offer a service, but I'd recommend a less expensive and more timely access by using one of the Internet cafe's on Bora Bora (near the docks), Moorea, or Papeete. Expect to pay 40 Francs per minute for island Internet access. The ship email service charges on a per kilobyte basis, and emails are sent out in batch format at the end of the day.

While I did not buy any black pearls, the pearl farmers are everywhere and shops that sell them are easy to find. I heard that Moorea is the best place to buy them, with many people buying just the pearls, and having them mounted back home through their local jeweler.

Radisson has teamed up with some of the local tour outfits to provide a wide variety of island tours, ranging from diving, fishing, to sightseeing.

On Raiatea I took the Faaroa River Tour which provided an excellent introduction to the island and the Polynesian way of life. Half of the tour was on a motorized outrigger canoe, followed by a drive up into the foothills in a off-road vehicle. Along the way we stopped to admire the amazing variety of tropical foliage, and to see the many waterfalls which shed the showers of rain that fall on the green covered escarpment.

On Bora Bora, I elected to take the Off Road Adventure where we got to drive up some pretty rough roads to some of the many gun emplacements from World War II. The views from these heights are incredible. The tour eventually will take you around the entire island, with a stop at Bloody Mary's for a cool drink. Along the way the drivers would stop and serve up some fresh island fruit, such as pineapple, coconut, grapefruit, cantaloupe and others. I have to say that the fresh pineapple was some of the best I have ever tasted.

On Moorea, I took the 25 minute Helicopter Tour of the island which provided spectacular views of both the ocean, reefs and mountains.

There were a lot of other tours offered, all of which got high marks from passengers, but probably the most talked about were the WaveRunner Tours, offered in Bora Bora and some of the other islands. In this tour, you get to actually circumnavigate the entire island.

American Express offered some complimentary tours and socials if you purchased your cruise with the AMEX card. While the first tour on Bora Bora was full, the next one at Moorea only had a few people.

To get the most out of this cruise, I recommend the following--

- try not to do too much. Too many tours do not allow you time to relax. While you may want to see all there is to see, take time to step back and become part of the environment.

- take time to adventure on your own. Some of the best adventures are ones you create. While French is the main language, almost everyone understands English so getting around is not a problem. The unique friendly nature of Polynesians will have you greeting constantly with smiles and a "may I help you" attitude.

- wear plenty of sunscreen and a hat. The tropical near-Equator Sun is strong. Don't kid yourself, a bad sunburn can really ruin your vacation.

Almost everything aboard this ship was done right, or at least the result of many years of an evolutionary process of trying to get it perfect. Radisson excels in this area. The only competition for Radisson is Silverseas and Seabourn, with most passengers I spoke with, more were leaning towards Radisson or Silverseas since there are a few more people on the ships.

When selecting a cruise, I'm looking for at least one of the following criteria which will really make the cruise a special event; the ship, itinerary and people aboard. On this cruise, the itinerary and people were fantastic. While the ship layout was efficient and easy to get around, I thought it just had a lack of character.

The Paul Gauguin has an austere ship interior design was purposely not meant to detract from the beautiful islands and sights outside. However, most people take cruises to be on a ship, so the ship for me is always part of the destination.

While the ship itself has stabilizers, the shallow draft contributes to its roll at sea. While I find this rhythm very relaxing, a few others were well on their way to getting slightly seasick on the first night. Luckily, after the first nights passage, the ship rarely moves. The waters within the reefs near the islands are almost perfectly flat. You'll barely feel the ship move while at anchor. Since reefs protect all of these islands, you are assured a quiet anchor.

Quiet that is, except for the numerous fish jumping at night. It seems as though there is a nightly show that nature puts on, right outside your balcony. The lights of the ship attract some insects on the water, which in turn, attract smaller fish, and finally, bigger fish. Late at night, the fish are jumping all over the place. It's great entertainment to watch, and some big Barracuda can be seen darting around the waters below. It's just one more part of the magic show which slowly unveils itself throughout the voyage. I hope that on the next ship Radisson builds for this area, that they have some underwater lights that they put on a few hours each night, to enhance the viewing of the fish feeding.

The only comments which were made known to me by the passengers were, "I wish there were more shade." The top deck (during the winter months) gets so hot that you have to be careful not to burn your feet, and the staff regularly will give the hot deck a dousing of water to cool it off. Nature helps during the rainy season by providing some short, but relieving showers during the early afternoon. It never rained more than a few minutes during the cruise, but Tahiti (Papeete) seemed to get more than the rest of the islands. In Australia, they use a huge triangular fabric shade in the outback, and something like that would work well on this ship.

Another passenger observed that the bed mattresses were uncomfortable at times, and I would agree. Although it may seem minor, it won't take much to make the Paul Gauguin an outstanding ship in every conceivable manner.

As far as ships go, my general rule of thumb for a heavily used ship is to have it replaced every five years. While the upkeep on this ship is excellent, the age of the ship is starting to show, and I'd like to see either a large catamaran or proa (outrigger ship) replace it. The new ship would have a number of solar electric, hot water, and desalination panels on it, along with some solar ovens and a hydroponic greenhouse which would lend more harmony to the local environment for which it is a part of.

On every ship I've been on, there always seems to be a "dead zone" on top of the ship which is never used. On the Paul Gauguin, there is a small bar area on the Sun deck (which is on deck 9) which was never used. Even with a full ship, most people prefer to relax near the pool, or under some shade near the grill, or at the back of the ship a level down.

For these areas of the ship that are never used, why not utilize the space for a small greenhouse, to grow fresh hydroponic herbs, vegetables and flowers? There are a number a tropical varieties of plants which would be perfect for shipboard life, and give the ship a wonderful "living" ambiance which would more readily incorporate the ship into its environs.

While it is a small detail, I'm surprised why the photography concession on the ship has yet to go digital. A good portion of the photographs are thrown away, not to mention the harsh chemicals which are required to develop the film and prints. In such an environmentally fragile environment, I would take more interest in trying to find ways to get the same product, but without endangering the very waters that generate the revenue for the ship. Digital cameras are to such a level of sophistication now, that you can barely tell the difference between them and the legacy film cameras. In addition, an entire trips worth of photos could be transferred to a CD or DVD for the passenger to take home with them. They could then email, or post their photos on a website for all their friends to view.

Overall, Radisson has successfully integrated a voyage of adventure through the islands in French Polynesia. From the lush tropical mountains to the myriad of colors which surround the atolls, this is a cruising itinerary which takes you to the best the Society Islands has to offer. The service, staff, and passengers of the ship will grant you a most wonderful vacation experience.

This is a cruise of a lifetime, and for those who partake, the magic of the French Polynesian island will bring back memories of the beautiful people and sights which will last forever.

Good travels, may the wind always be at your back, and Godspeed.

---

Note: Greg "Pepe" Giese is a freelance travel writer who publishes ship reviews for the Cruising Review website. There is an extensive photo journal of this cruise which can be found at: [www.cruisingreview.com](http://www.cruisingreview.com)