

The Magic Allure of the Polynesian Islands

French Polynesia - Tahiti, Bora Bora and Moorea

When the Moon, the stars, the Sun and the ocean decided to get together, they met in French Polynesia. It's the wonderment of watching the Moon slowly appear from behind the cloud encrusted peaks of Bora Bora, to cast its beam into the shallow waters of the lagoon below. The white sugary sand bottom reflects the Moonlight back and makes the lagoon glow an iridescent blue green which is just amazing to see. It only happens during a full Moon, so if you plan a visit to the islands, try to consult the astronomic charts.

The best way to see the islands is by cruise ship, and this will be my second year on the Radisson Seven Seas, m/s Paul Gauguin. The ship was empty at only 138 passengers. The crew alone is about 180, so we were well under capacity. This is summer, and the slow season in French Polynesia. It's also the rainy season, but the short periodic showers take the edge off the heat and strong Sun, so it's very welcome.

The Paul Gauguin visits a variety of islands, departing from Papeete, Tahiti to Raiatea, Taha'a and Motu Mahana, Bora Bora, and Moorea. The seven day cruise highlights the best of the Society Islands and each has its own unique character.

My favorite two islands are Bora Bora and Moorea. They are both distinctly different in both land mass and character. I chose a pre-cruise stay at the Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort which is on a Motu under the shadow of the peaks of Bora Bora. The purpose of my three day stay was to acclimate to the climate, four hour time zone difference, and just relax before starting the cruise. Last year I flew in and boarded the ship right away and felt rushed. It takes 3-5 days to really begin to relax here, since the pace is so much slower than the rest of civilization. I had a premium over-the-water hut at Pearl Beach, and it was the most incredible accommodations I ever had. The thatched hut was in traditional modern Tahitian style and had a huge sliding glass door which opened to an amazing view of the lagoon and then the peaks of Bora Bora. A few steps down from the porch I had my own dock with freshwater shower, and a ladder which led to the 2-3 foot deep sand bottomed lagoon for swimming. Inside, there was air conditioning, a ceiling fan, TV, entertainment center (CD, cassette, radio) and the highlight of the hut, the glass coffee table, which had a sliding glass top so that you could feed the fish at night.

The bathroom was equally incredible. It had a separate bathtub, shower, and water closet. The sink and bathtub were surrounded by 8" horizontal glass which allowed you to see the lagoon below, and allowed the green-blue light to flood the room with reflected sunlight.

The resort really doesn't have any nightlife, other than the bar which stays open until just before midnight usually. But the real show-stopper is feeding the fish at night. You can spend hours just gazing below into the lagoon while attracting stingrays, sharks, and a bounty of colorful tropical fish with bread or small pieces of potato chips. A floodlight below the hut illuminates the shallow water below, and a small coral encrusted block provides refuge for the smaller tropical fish. It's fun to watch the food chain in real life. Smaller fish eat the food scraps, then the larger fish and rays move in to see what all the action is about. With all the lights off in the hut, the reflected light off the lagoon below the coffee table provides a beautiful moving greenish shadow on the thatched hut ceiling, which will mesmerize you to sleep.

The resort has a beautiful infinity pool, sea kayaks, dugout canoes, and wind surfers for fun during the day. The mood there is very relaxed, and mostly catering to honeymooners and couples. I was the only single person there.

There is a pool side restaurant bar which serves up a wonderful coconut drink (in a real coconut). There is a second story restaurant with a reflecting pool for a buffet breakfast and buffet or a-la-carte dinner. Two nights a week they offer a Polynesian dance show.

I highly recommend a pre-cruise stay more so than a post-cruise stay since it gets you in that relaxed mood, and because it's hard to match the service on the ship after your cruise. I also recommend booking a normal pool side hut or other bungalow, then upgrading to an over-the-water hut when you arrive. Sometimes if Radisson is booking your pre-cruise, they're only allotted a certain number of bungalows at the resort, even though more premium units may be available.

The island hopping flight to Bora Bora is only about 45 minutes, and is a refreshing look back into what air travel was once all about (no security, no assigned seating, and even dogs as carry-ons).

Boarding the Paul Gauguin in the bustling port of Papeete was well organized, and smooth. Within 10 minutes I had my digital photo taken for ID purposes, set up a credit account, and was issued my room card/onboard credit and then escorted to my room by my butler.

I was in Suite number 814 which is on the top passenger deck, with a balcony and sitting room. The suite is compact but very well appointed with a mini-bar and queen bed. It's nice having a balcony so that you can appreciate the tropical nights and watch the stars and fish below while at anchor.

The ship itself is rather plain, but very functional. On deck 8 there is a small pool, pool bar, and restaurant (Pacific Grill). There is no putting green, no golf driving section, or basketball court which gives the ship a very classy feel to it. Those novelties barely work on larger ships, and are just a waste of space as far as I'm concerned. Towards the stern on deck 8 is La Palette, which is a beautiful piano bar and observation area. This is where people go at night for sunset cocktails or to listen to Hal Fraser play tunes on the piano.

The ship recently changed ownership and is now flagged a Bahamian ship. There were not many changes as a result, however there is a great new boutique on board, with upscale items and a fantastic array of pearls and Swiss watches.

What you notice most about a Radisson ship is the outstanding service and food. This ship is a flagship in regards to service. You feel pampered from the very first moment you board. Everyone greets you with a smile, and it is evident that the staff on the ship really enjoys working on the Gauguin and serving passengers. There are three restaurants onboard, and my favorite was the reservation based Pacific Grill on deck 8. They will grill fresh seafood and beef for a unforgettable meal. What I like best is the more local style of both food presentation and cooking. This is a French ship, and it's reflected in it's reservation restaurant, and the main restaurant, La Etoile. I'm not a big fan of French food, but I can say that my meals in the Pacific Grill were amongst the best I've had during my 13 cruises. The other Radisson ships have similar (more casual) restaurants on the top deck as well, and have been consistently outstanding.

Room service is available at any time, and provides a nice range of options no matter what time of day. What I like best about Radisson is that they'll try their best to accommodate any of your requests.

One night a group of us arranged a seafood bouquet dinner in La Etoile, which meant alot of extra effort from Gary, the Maitre-d, Chef Daniel, and the kitchen staff. We started off with a two level platter of muscles, clams, crab legs, and shrimp. That was followed by lobster tails, and some incredible prime rib, and the finally some soufflé for dessert. The evening was quite memorable. We presented the chef with a bottle of scotch and then got a small collection together for those who made this most memorable evening of the week possible. It's that extra effort that really defines a crew. You know the staff is special when within a few days they're all calling you by your first name.

During the week, there are plenty of tours available at each stop. Of course you can elect to stay on the ship, or go to a local Motu to relax on a beach if you prefer. I try to do several tours to sample the local fare, and recommend more interesting tours. In Bora Bora, I started off with a helicopter tour which is just amazing. You get to see the full beauty of the island and the surrounding waters which is best seen from the air. A group on the ship chartered the helicopter direct and saw the surrounding islands for a different perspective than is offered on the 20 minute tourist flight. The helicopter holds four passengers, and can be chartered for private flights for a group rate of about \$2,000 for just over an hour of airtime. It's a once-in-a-life experience and should not be missed. The ship helicopter tour includes the entire island in 20 minutes and is \$140 for Bora Bora, and about \$170 for Moorea, which is slightly longer. The best photography vantage point is the left-back seat.

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On Bora Bora I also rented a bike for a few hours, which was only about \$10.00 (\$1,500 French Pacific Francs). Since I brought my GPS with me I could easily calculate mileage and other fun things. I biked 3 miles to Bloody Mary's, which is a world famous thatched-hut restaurant on the shores of Bora Bora, and in the shadow of her volcanic peaks. The crew has community bikes on board, however the passengers must rent from local vendors. Might be a good idea for Radisson to have some courtesy (or even rental bikes) for passengers. It's hot when you're biking, so bring plenty of water.

On both Bora Bora and Moorea, I also booked the WaveRunner tour of the islands which was fantastic. While it's a bit fast paced, you got to enjoy a vantage point of the islands which most do not get to see when on a land-based tours. You also get some fantastic photo opportunities. On the Bora Bora tour, we stopped by a local Motu and had some fresh coconut and bananas, while our guide climbed a coconut tree and taught us how to open coconuts with a Oak stick (he also used his teeth which is one of those do-not-try-this-at-home demonstrations). On the Moorea tour, we stopped at a small Motu and were greeted by a herd of beautiful stingrays that were looking for some handouts.

This ship anchors out every night on this voyage, however the water is completely calm inside the reef. In Bora Bora, the ship anchors in 100 feet of the prettiest blue water you have ever seen. This is the original volcanic crater of the island of Bora Bora. Just outside your balcony are the peaks which tower above and almost seem to capture clouds as they move by. It gives Bora Bora that mystique which is only enhanced by a full Moon. All around the ship, you can hear fish feeding, so you know it's a very healthy and vibrant ecosystem. The only other ship we saw all week was a Windstar Cruise Ship.

In Moorea, the ship is anchored in Cook's Bay, which is surrounded by the tropical green escarpment covered peaks. Moorea has a number of very pristine anchorage's, that are dead calm even though the seas may be rough outside of the outer reef.

You'll be lucky if you see a few complete sunsets all week, since there are always some building cumulus clouds on the distant horizon. In Cook's Bay, you're surrounded by very tall peaks, so you'll never see a sunset there. At night, take some time to stargaze, since at night the sky usually clears, and you can see the Milky Way Galaxy in all it's brilliance.

The ship heads back and docks at Papeete on Friday evening, so guests can depart either Friday night or on Saturday morning. For those with late evening flights on Air Tahiti Nui on Saturday night, Radisson will arrange a day room at a local resort. I stayed in Le Meridien last year and stayed at the Beachcomber on this cruise. I highly recommend flying or upgrading to Business Class on Air Tahiti Nui, since it's a 8-8.5 hour flight back to LAX. Last minute upgrades are on a space available basis, and usually about \$600 each way. While it's not as important for the comfort factor on the way home, I definitely recommend upgrading for the trip to Tahiti, since it starts off your vacation in a relaxed mood.

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My overall impressions of the m/s Paul Gauguin French Polynesian cruise were outstanding. The staff and service aboard the ship are second to none. The islands hold their own beauty and mystique, which everyone should experience at least once in their lifetime. As for myself, I am making this a regular yearly visit. The sheer beauty of the region has you in awe for the entire journey.

To see the complete travel journey, please visit:

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