

Tahitian Treat

The Society Islands' highlights start — but certainly don't end — with unforgettable diving

BY GINA TARNACKI

I haven't been on the bottom long when I get the cue to grab onto a small rock and stay still. *Already?* I think excitedly as I peer eagerly into the deep blue distance of the calm lagoon surrounding Bora Bora.

I see nothing. Or do I? Slowly, hypnotically, two soft shadows appear against the blue. As the seconds roll by, the gentle movements of the shadows become more lucid until the diamond-shaped bodies of two eagle rays become clear. Their flying mesmerizes me as they glide by, just a few feet away.

The eagle rays' smooth, easy motions epitomize my dive experience aboard M/S *Paul Gauguin*: effortless and relaxing. Add the luxury of upscale staterooms, gourmet cuisine, private beaches, other aquatic activities and stunning island views, and it's an incredible ocean experience.

Paul Gauguin Cruises is not a cruise operator catering exclusively to divers. There are plenty of options aboard *Gauguin* — from fine dining to nightly shows to paddleboarding. I was excited to experience all that and more, but the aspect that thrilled me the most as I embarked on a seven-night Tahiti and Society Islands cruise was the diving I knew would be part of the equation. As anticipated, the dive staff on board made the experience easy and unforgettable.

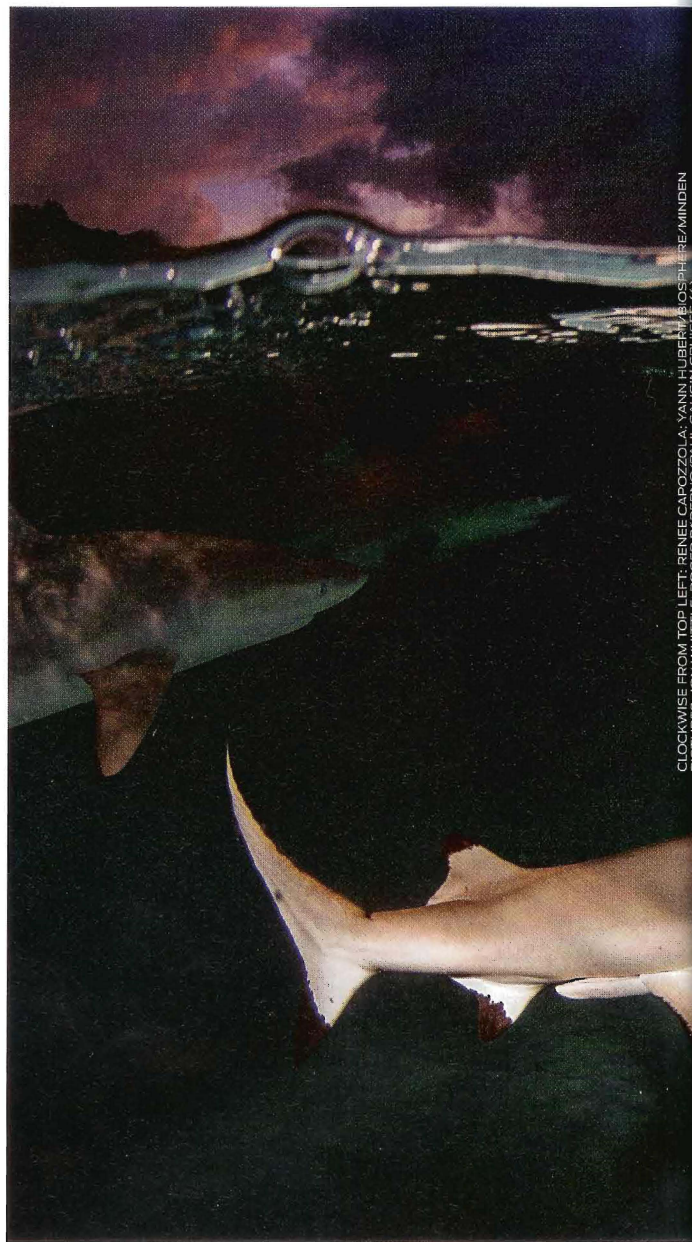
The stern of *Gauguin* is home to a watersports marina, which is where the dive excursions begin, and the atmosphere is jovial and familiar when I show up for my second dive in Moorea. After a quick briefing, we head to the site via Zodiac and descend in small groups of two to three with each dive guide.

As I learned from the quick sighting of the eagle rays, the dive staff knows the waters of the Society Islands exceptionally well, and their expertly trained eyes again come in handy for this dive with the spotting of an often-disguised scorpionfish. Easy to spot, however, are the 8-foot lemon shark and inquisitive sea turtle I encounter, and they become two of the highlights of a blissful experience sailing aboard *Gauguin*.

DIVE IN

Expert Insight

For a diver's touch, head out on *Paul Gauguin* with guest host **Jean-Michel Cousteau**. The son of the legendary Jacques-Yves Cousteau will join the crew next on Nov. 19 to offer special lectures and lead dives on a 14-night cruise off the Marquesas, Tuamotus and the Society Islands. Musical artists, winemakers and a variety of others attend as guest hosts throughout the year.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: RENEE CAROZZO/LA; YANNI HUBERT/ALBLOSPHERE/MINDEN

TRIP TIPS



Trails of the Ancients Trék Experience Moorea's lush forest with a hike away from the lagoon to ancient ruins hidden in the trees with an entertaining, knowledgeable guide.



Nightly Shows Stay up after dinner to see the shows on board, especially the ones featuring local dance groups that come to entertain when *Gauguin* is in port overnight.

TRIP HIGHLIGHTS

Day 1

Savor breakfast — and the water view — on the balcony before heading to the marina to get snorkel equipment, which can be used at Paul Gauguin Cruises' beautiful private beach on a reef islet near Bora Bora.

Day 2

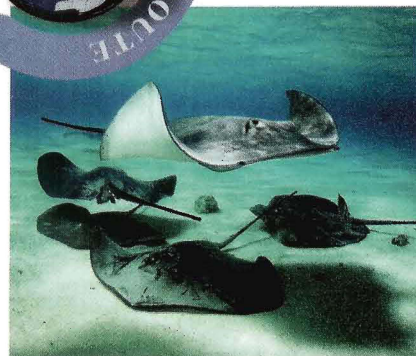
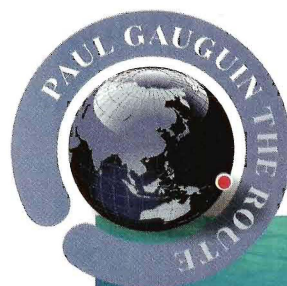
Start the morning at Toopua dive site with eagle rays and iridescent clams, spend the afternoon biking along the Bora Bora coastline, and end the day with a gourmet five-course meal featuring fresh fish.

Day 3

Enjoy snorkeling, kayaking and trying local delicacies before you unwind at a floating bar in the aqua lagoon at tropical Motu Mahana, Paul Gauguin Cruises' exclusive private island off the coast of Taha'a.

Day 4

Explore the reef wall at the Ledges dive spot in Moorea and observe a variety of sea animals and coral. Later, dress up for Polynesian Night featuring traditional Polynesian cuisine and dance performances.



Clockwise from left: Groups of blacktip reef sharks and pink whiprays patrol the waters off Moorea; diving is just one of the watersports available from *Gauguin's* specially designed onboard marina platform.

THE BOAT

M/S Paul Gauguin
Total passengers: 332
Cabins: 166 suites/staterooms
Total crew: 217
Length: 504 feet
Beam: 72 feet
Number of decks: 9



Watersports Galore Go paddleboarding, windsurfing and kayaking from *Gauguin's* watersports marina platform to easily explore the turquoise lagoons of the Society Islands.



Fine Dining Make a reservation right when you get on board so you don't miss out on La Veranda and experiencing the gourmet cuisine from its menu created by award-winning chef Jean-Pierre Vigato.