

GAUGUIN'S PACIFIC CANVAS

MAGGY OEHLBECK CRUISES THE SOCIETY ISLANDS
DISCOVERING THE SIGHTS, COLOURS AND PEOPLE
THAT SO ENCHANTED TAHITI'S MOST FAMOUS ARTIST.

Some years back, en route to the United States, our liner made a scheduled stop in Tahiti. I awoke to the spectacular profile of Moorea and the legendary peak that is said to have been the inspiration for the mythical 'Bali Hai' in James A Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific* – the book that spawned the musical *South Pacific*. The image of Moorea remains embedded in my memory. So this is how Paul Gauguin felt? Spellbound by the islands of French Polynesia and their people, the painter never returned to France.

It was time to reprise. We were clustered on the deck of small luxury cruise ship *Paul Gauguin* transfixed by the billowing cloud formations and searing sunset colours that intensified then diminished in the ever-changing kaleidoscopic hues of indigo, crimson and chrome yellow favoured by the artist.

But dinner beckoned, and for our first night on board we chose the main dining room, L'Etoile, where we were ushered to a carefully selected table by Chilean maitre d' extraordinaire Luis Alvarez, who, like other crew members on this charming ship, works magic to please guests.



Nor did we want to miss the welcome-aboard show in Le Grand Salon. On stage, the ship's versatile Polynesian hosts, Les Gauguines and Les Gauguins, were choreographed in a tableau instantly familiar as a Gauguin painting depicting his beloved subjects – a group of beautiful Tahitian men and women in their island paradise. The dancers' poses dissolved seamlessly into a series of compositions perfectly capturing the sensuality of the artist's canvases. Our reverie was soon exploded by the frenzied drumming and hip shaking that defines the traditional Tamure dance.

With senses reeling, we returned to our stateroom, walking back along the upper deck. The sea was calm as glass and the storm clouds had dispersed. The next day was full of promise.

We were on a seven-day cruise of French Polynesia's Society Islands, sailing from Papeete with port calls in Huahine, Taha'a, Bora Bora and Moorea. Cloaked in opulent foliage, fragrant with tiare and ginger flowers and surrounded by aquamarine lagoons, these volcanic atolls exude a hypnotic power. Cast across the South Pacific like the lustrous pearls Tahiti is famous for, the optimum way of experiencing them is by a cruise ship capable of navigating the shallow waters that larger deep-draft vessels cannot.

We need never have strayed from the lavish comforts of our

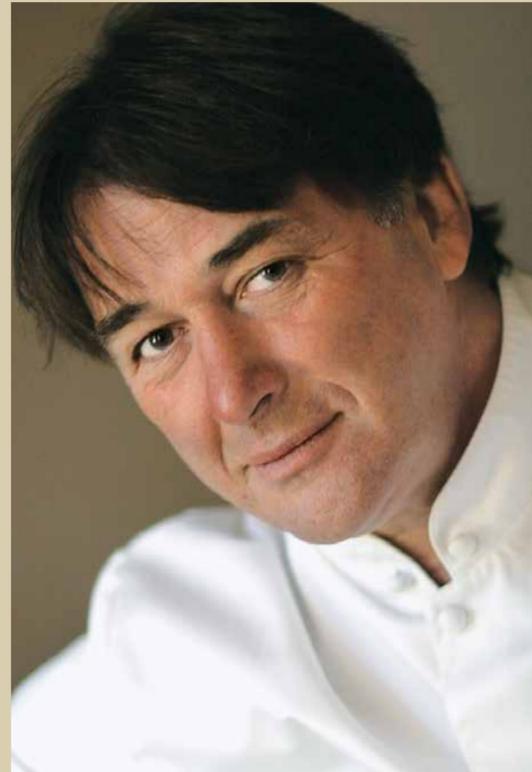
stateroom with its balcony views. But we enjoyed the conviviality of newfound friends and found breakfast at the Grill just right – luscious tropical fruits and anything else you fancied, including good espresso, a rarity on many ships. Lantern-lit by night, the Grill is also popular for intimate dinners.

Guests were already busying themselves with snorkel and scuba gear, heading off to the marina platform aft to join dive excursions, go swimming with sharks and stingrays, take a WaveRunner island tour, kayak or a host of other choices. Somewhat sheepishly I sneaked off to a talk about Tahiti's highly prized black pearls – which aren't just black but come in myriad subtle colours. There are shore excursions to black pearl farms and the ship's boutique has a collection of pearl jewellery featuring the exquisite designs of Hinerava.

Our first port, Huahine – the 'Garden Island' – hides shyly under a verdant mantle. Everything grows in abundance, including vanilla vines. It is also the cradle of Polynesian culture and has the greatest concentration of ancient marae in French Polynesia, dating back to 700AD.

On our mini-tour, we were charmed by the island's gentle villagers, proud custodians of their archaeological heritage. We were intrigued by the ancient stone fish traps, and the sacred eels with steely blue eyes.





Michelin-starred chef Jean-Pierre Vigato.



A cold beer at Huahine's local yacht club proved a sensible idea before catching the tender back to the ship in time for lunch at the Veranda Restaurant. For dinner service, the Veranda becomes a reservation-only restaurant but doesn't attract a premium. The French menus are designed by celebrity Michelin-starred chef Jean-Pierre Vigato (of Apicius fame in Paris) and the brasserie-style menus are equal to the best in France.

Decisions: will it be lounging around the pool, a luxurious monoi (coconut oil and gardenia) massage at the spa, a workout at the fitness centre, an enrichment lecture on marine science from one of the Wildlife Conservation Society experts or a dangerously delicious afternoon tea? All of them actually, but over a period of days.

Next stop: Tahā'a and a beach barbecue at the cruise company's own private island – Motu Mahana. Many guests rated this their favourite day. The clear, turquoise water made my newly minted spa pedicure look positively neon. Guests languished under beach umbrellas or in the shade of coconut palms that had been stripped of fruit to avert accidents, but also to provide whimsical half-nut cocktail containers. Or you could create your own cocktail at the floating bar bobbing about within wading distance of the shore.

Bora Bora is dominated by the presence of a massive basalt mountain encircled by a cerulean lagoon – which is actually the rim of the volcanic caldera. We chose an island tour on 'Le Truck'. Though canopied, it was open on all sides, with wooden benches and cushions provided. We loved taking in the sights of village life up close and personal.

And so to Moorea, our last port, where I'd first fallen under the spell of Tahiti and the islands of French Polynesia. Now I was content to lounge on deck gazing up at 'Bali Hai'. **W**

THE SHIP

Paul Gauguin carries 332 guests, with a crew-to-guest ratio of 1.5. All accommodation has ocean views and 70 per cent of suites have private balconies. All-in fares include selected wines and spirits, onboard gratuities, kayaking, paddleboarding and windsurfing in select ports and use of the ship's own islet, Motu Mahana. Shore excursions attract a fee.

Maggy Oehlbeck was a guest of Paul Gauguin Cruises.
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