

IA ORANA

Experience Tahiti & the Society Islands

BY ETHAN CHUNG



PHOTO COURTESY PAUL GAUGUIN CRUISES



FOR JUST A MOMENT

upon first sight of the blue waters and green backdrops of French Polynesia, but then again and again throughout a recent trip to the island nation via the cruise ship MS Paul Gauguin, I found myself asking the question “Is this real?” I thought colors so vibrant could only be seen in paintings or Photoshop-doctored images. Did the ocean appear azure blue? Cerulean? Seafoam green? All of the above, actually. It’s no wonder Paul Gauguin, the Post-Impressionist French artist, well-known for his experimentation with color, escaped modern life to live out his days in French Polynesia. The incredible land and seascapes have been attracting visitors to French Polynesia for years, and there might not be a better way to explore all the islands have to offer than via a cruise ship named after the colorful artist. And guess what? Paul Gauguin Cruises is headquartered in Bellevue. Ia Orana! (The Tahitian equivalent to Aloha.)

THE SHIP

Paul Gauguin Cruises runs several trips throughout the year in locations such as Southeast Asia, the Caribbean and Europe, but perhaps most popular is its run through French Polynesia. Cruises on the luxury ship in the area are between seven and 14 nights, depending on the package.

Travelers on the MS Paul Gauguin generally fly out of Los Angeles International Airport via Air Tahiti Nui and land in Papeete, Tahiti. You can choose a cruise package that includes your airfare on Air Tahiti Nui, or not, but most experts say that this is a much easier way of keeping track of documents and itinerary. The flight is about eight hours long, but many of Paul Gauguin’s packages include use of a day room at one of Papeete’s gorgeous hotels.

During my trip, I had the pleasure of staying at Le Meridien Tahiti for the day until I had catch my shuttle to be onboard the ship at 5pm. The resort boasts gorgeous grounds, a pool, beach access with incredible snorkeling, friendly service and excellent food. I highly recommend including the day stay with your cruise package. After an eight-hour flight, navigating the “island time” service at the airport (friendly, but definitely pack your patience and don’t forget the common language here is

French) and a three-hour time difference, a hot shower, comfy bed for a nap and an early afternoon poolside with an adult beverage will do nicely.

The MS Paul Gauguin is a small luxury ship that carries 332 guests. Captained by Ante-Toni Mirkovic, the ship is specifically designed to navigate through shallower waters found in French Polynesia and Southeast Asia, allowing for stops at smaller ports. Guests are greeted with song and dance by Les Gauguines, the ship’s entertainment troupe made up of Tahitian performers. Throughout the cruise, the troupe performs nightly entertainment and offers cultural activities to guests. Along with cruise director Michael Shapiro, Les Gauguines (and Les Gauguins, their male counterparts) were my hosts and served as “the faces” of the cruise. “We have expertise here that no one else has. We have a true understanding of French Polynesia. Our job is to get you to remove your American or European glasses, and experience the tour through a local’s eyes. We want you to have a remarkable experience, and have you leaving us saying ‘That was the best vacation of my life,’” Shapiro said.

Aside from outstanding service and fun entertainment, and of course, all that the islands have to offer, the cruise itself is chock full of amenities. Paul Gauguin Cruises are all-inclusive, and yes that means meals and alcohol. The ship has three different restaurants — L’Etoile, Le Grill and La Veranda. La Veranda is

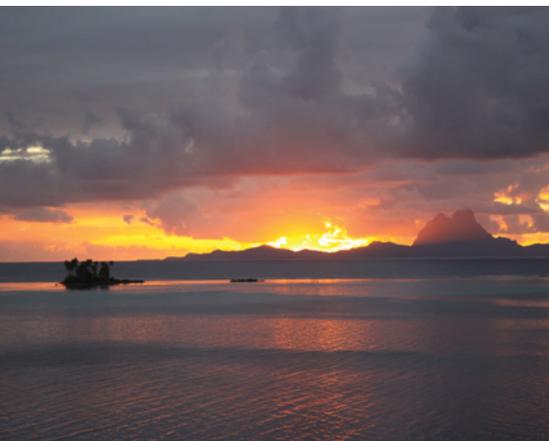


TOP The infinity pool at the Intercontinental Bora Bora Resort and Thalasso Spa. **ABOVE** Les Gauguines, local entertainers and hostesses on the Paul Gauguin

CLOCKWISE OPPOSITE PAGE The view of Motu Mahana; local fish at a market in Papeete; keshi pearls, which are non-nucleated pearls that aren’t fully formed and often sell for costume jewelry; a view of Moua Roa on Moorea

an elegant dining experience, serving modern French cuisine for dinner by reservation only, but also serves breakfast and lunch. Le Grill serves an Asian- and Polynesian-inspired menu, and, as with La Veranda, dinner reservations are required here, but not for breakfast or lunch. Both these restaurants serve the same set menu throughout the duration of the cruise so everyone has an opportunity to try the menus. L’Etoile is only open for dinner, but no reservations are needed, and the menu changes nightly. I grew up in Hawaii and I know my way around fish, but all compliments go to Executive Chef Paul Ellis, who served >>





EXPLORING TAHITI AND THE SOCIETY ISLANDS

My recent trip on the MS Paul Gauguin took me to Tahiti and The Society Islands for seven nights. Stops included the islands of Tahiti, Taha'a, Raiatea, Bora Bora and Moorea. Your shore excursions are really the only extra expenses that you'll be paying for on your cruise, aside from souvenirs, dining off the ship or spa treatments. Paul Gauguin Cruises recommends you book your excursions in advance because they tend to fill up quickly. You can always make additions to your excursion itinerary while onboard the ship. Most excursions average about \$90. Note, all currency on board is in the American dollar. Anything off-board, for small souvenirs or snacks, will be paid for with Polynesian francs. However, aside from the occasional mom-and-pop traditional craft stand, most places accept credit cards.

Each island has different sights to see. Taha'a is well-known for its vanilla; Raiatea for its black pearl farms. Bora Bora has some incredible beaches and resort attractions. Moorea is famous for its mountain landscape, specifically Moua Roa (or, Bali Hai in the musical "South Pacific"). And Tahiti is where Papeete, the capital of French Polynesia, is located. It's a bustling city compared to the sedate life on the outer islands, and I was pleasantly surprised by the farmers market I discovered on Saturday upon disembarkation.

One special stop you will not want to miss is the day you have access to Motu Mahana, the MS Paul Gauguin's private island. A little tender boat takes large groups from the cruise to and from the island, which is probably the size of three or four football fields. Guests are treated to a barbecue lunch with all the fixings, beach access, excellent snorkeling and cultural activities such as coconut peeling and basket weaving. There's even a floating bar. Be sure to check the ship schedule before you book your excursions and make sure you block out some time to experience Motu Mahana.

One of my most memorable excursions was to the Anapa Pearl Farm on Raiatea. A representative from the pearl farm takes you on a small boat out a few hundred yards off shore to a little hut in the middle of the ocean. The hut is situated on a coral bed, and the view

from three sides of the hut are of water shallow enough to see tropical fish swimming around. The fourth side of the hut looks out into cold, deep-blue ocean and buoys bobbing just under the surface, each one holding onto strings of oysters.

Summer Rotu, a San Diego native who manages Anapa Pearl Farm, talks with guests about the black pearl grafting process while a pearl grafter demonstrates his delicate work. The growing process is slow and arduous, and the extraction requires knowledge and precision, and so it's no wonder the product fetches high prices. If you're hunting for the perfect souvenir, do chat with an expert either at a pearl farm or at the boutique on board the ship. You can buy black pearls from small stands at many different spots throughout your trip, but buyer beware — black pearls come in many different shapes and grades. If the price seems too good to be true, you might be buying a low-quality pearl. Do your research and find out what it is you're looking for before you purchase.

Another highlight was a "day at the beach" excursion to the Intercontinental Bora Bora Resort and Thalasso Spa. Seems like a strange choice, since I was already staying on a floating hotel. This excursion did not disappoint. The impeccable property offers world-class bungalows, all with 180-degree ocean views and ridiculous amenities like glass-topped coffee tables that slide open so you can feed the fish. The spa is a one-of-a-kind experience, using deep ocean water in many of its therapies. The resort also offers access to beach toys like stand-up paddle boards, canoes and kayaks, cultural activities and a fun and safe "feed the stingrays" session. Also, it sounds silly given your proximity to warm tropical water, but the infinity pool is not to be missed.

While at port on Bora Bora, consider an evening trip to a Bloody Mary's, a local fish house restaurant. The food is excellent on board, but many guests who have made the trip rave about this restaurant. It's sort of kitschy, bordering on gaudy (sand-covered floors, coconut stumps for chairs), but has plenty of celebrity appeal (a whole wall is dedicated to the celebrities who have visited). You have to make a reservation with the travel concierge onboard, and they will set up a taxi to take you to the >>

some of the freshest and best-tasting fish I've ever had the pleasure of enjoying in L'Etoile. Tip to the hungry — don't be shy. This is an all-inclusive cruise. You've paid a pretty penny to get there, so it's OK to try one of everything on the menu. I did, and while my waistline may have regretted it, my taste buds did not.

Other amenities on board include 24-hour room service (remember, all-inclusive), a casino featuring slot machines, blackjack and roulette with the occasional evening tournament, a pool and deck, fitness center, boutique and multiple bars and lounges and a world-class salon and spa. The MS Paul Gauguin also offers diving services and excursions for novice and experienced divers. Guests also are provided their own snorkeling equipment for the duration of the cruise.



Read more at about Executive Chef Paul Ellis and what it takes to cook for 332 guests on a cruise ship at 425magazine.com



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A wall of oyster shells at Anapa Pearl Farm on Raiatea; the view of Moua Roa from the cruise ship; Tahiti Drink from Jus de Fruits de Moorea; Polynesian francs; a beach scene on Motu Mahana **OPPOSITE PAGE** Delectable fish from Paul Gauguin's executive chef Paul Ellis; a sunset view from the Paul Gauguin.



BOTTOM LEFT PHOTO COURTESY PAUL GAUGUIN CRUISES

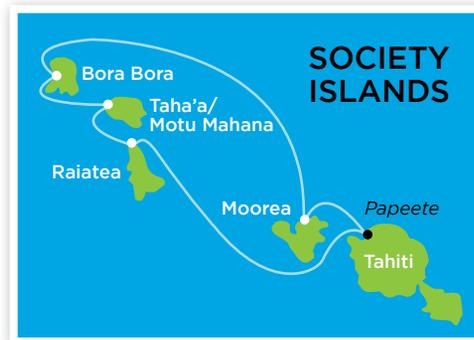


restaurant, which is about a 10-minute drive away. Once there, you check in and make your way to a counter where a manager explains the night's fresh-fish choices, plus other proteins such as beef, pork ribs and chicken. But I was there for fish. I ordered meka, a type of broad-billed swordfish only found in the South Pacific at extremely deep waters. The freshness was without compare and the meal was a highlight of my trip.

I had expected all my enjoyment from the Paul Gauguin cruise to come from water-based activities, but my final excursion on Moorea was the Aito

Off-Road Safari, a land-based adventure that takes you through the lush landscape of the island. The tour lasted about three hours, and included a stop at an agricultural school where you could purchase fresh juices and jams made by local students. We also got up-close looks at Moua Roa, the epic jagged mountain that looks like a shark's tooth, and even made a stop at a local distiller where we could purchase Tahitian rum and something called Tahiti Drink, a delicious concoction of rum and local juices packaged in a milk carton.

One element that stood out for me with the Paul Gauguin cruise was the variety of excursions. At the end of my trip, I had done and seen so much, but felt like I'd missed out on plenty. I don't doubt I could go back next year, book the same week-long cruise, but have a totally different experience. In fact, the staff told me that a couple had taken the cruise to celebrate their anniversary the week before I was there, but loved it so much, they booked another week and picked different excursions to fill the second leg of their cruise. That's a testament to the variety, service and overall feeling of luxury of Paul Gauguin, all reasons to experience the cruise line for the first time, or again. 🍹🍹



PRICING

Pricing varies by season, and Paul Gauguin Cruises does plenty of promotions. For a seven-night, all-inclusive cruise, including airfare from Los Angeles via Tahiti Nui Air, prices start at around \$4,000 per person. Visit pgcruises.com for more information.

425 MAGAZINE CRUISE

Visit 425magazinecruise.com to learn more about a special reader offer for a trip to French Polynesia via Paul Gauguin Cruises.

CRUISING TIPS — IT'S ALL IN THE PLANNING!

Amy Kilbreath, a local travel professional with Woodside Travel, is experienced at getting you to where you want to go, and has plenty of expertise with cruises, specifically Paul Gauguin Cruises. Here are her five tips to help you plan your cruise.

1 Be sure to use a travel advisor. There is a cruise line to fit every personality and travel preference, but avoid a vacation nightmare by making sure that you choose a cruise line that fits you best. A travel advisor is key to ensure a perfect cruise match, saving you time and ensuring a wise use of your vacation budget.

2 The biggest travel misconception I hear is someone assuming that "they're not a cruise person." While they may not find larger cruise ships appealing, I can almost guarantee that there is a river cruise or small ship that they would love. Some destinations are even best seen via cruising.

3 Get VIP treatment. Look for a Virtuoso-affiliated travel advisor. Virtuoso is a network of the world's best travel advisors who are not only extremely knowledgeable, but they can also provide access to exclusive travel offers and VIP treatment that you can't get on your own (i.e. upgrades, private excursions, access to best the cabins, etc.) due to their relationships with the cruise lines.

4 Compare apples to apples in evaluating price. Not every cruise fare is the same! It's important to know what is — and isn't — included in the cruise fare. Often, an all-inclusive cruise line will have a more expensive price initially, but will end up saving you money in the end by not having to pay for all of the extras — from soft drinks and alcohol, to tips and airfare.

5 And the most basic cruise rule to live by: Always fly in the day before your cruise leaves! This ensures you — and your bags — won't miss your cruise due to an airline delay. You will also start your cruise refreshed and relaxed!

For more information, contact Amy Kilbreath at travelbyamy.com