

# A freighter to paradise

Traveling the  
Marquesas  
Islands in the  
style of  
Gauguin

Story and photos by  
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Special Contributor

Traveling to them on a modern cruise ship, which holds more people than some of these sparsely populated islands put together, seemed inappropriate. So I was thrilled to learn that you can still visit the Marquesas by freighter, in a fashion akin to the steamship that carried Gauguin there in 1901.

The Aranui III is a mixed cargo and passenger ship that cruises the same two-week circuit throughout the year, departing from Papeete, Tahiti, and stopping at each of the six populated Marquesan islands to deliver supplies.

The front half of the ship is devoted to freight. The back half has a dining room, lounge, swimming pool and cabins for up to 200 passengers. For those looking for a bit more luxury, a couple dozen staterooms and suites are available. There's also a dorm for budget-minded travelers.

At mealtime, you'll forget you're

**P**ristine beaches, lush green valleys, soaring mountain peaks: The guidebook images that depict the Marquesas Islands as a tropical paradise are still accurate today, more than a century after French painter Paul Gauguin brought the remote islands in French Polynesia to the world's attention.

on a freighter. Food is varied and delicious, with three-course lunches and dinners. For breakfast, the ship's pastry chef makes the best *pain au chocolat* this side of France.

Early on our third morning, I hurry to the top deck to get my first glimpse of the Marquesas. Nuku Hiva's dramatic cliffs, eroded by centuries of waves and wind, loom large and green.

No towns, no roads, no sign of life. Had I not just finished reading *Typee* — Herman Melville's gripping account of his captivity here in 1842 — I might have thought we were the first to discover it.

As we round a headland, the small village of Taiohae comes into view at the end of a deep bay. Going ashore, we learn the Marquesas have, in fact, a long human history, beginning with the arrival of Polynesians from other South Pacific islands as early as 500 B.C.

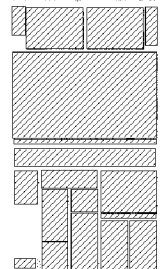
We jump in Jeeps to cross the island on narrow, winding roads with spectacular ocean views and luxuriant foliage all around. In the dense jungle, archaeologists have excavated numerous *tohuas*, where people once gathered for feasts and ceremonies, including human sacrifices.

After the Marquesas were discovered by Westerners in 1595, things changed rapidly. Whaling ships, traders and missionaries brought the familiar trio of diseases, alcohol and religion. The population plummeted.

I wonder: Is this why the women in Paul Gauguin's paintings at the Gauguin Cultural Centre on the island of Hiva Oa look so sad? When he lived here, Marquesans were emerging from a century of social and cultural upheaval.

"No dancing, no singing, no tattoos," our guide Steeven Tehiva tells us when we visit the Notre Dame Cathedral in Taiohae. "They lost their culture for 120 years."

"Everything now is a reconstruction," confirms Jean-Michel Chazine,





**The grave of French painter Paul Gauguin** is a popular site for visitors of Hiva Oa, where Gauguin spent the last two years of his life.

archaeologist and guest lecturer on the Aranui. "There was a gap."

Today, Marquesans are experiencing something of a cultural renaissance. Tattooing is popular, and many islanders are skilled carvers of wood, stone and bone.

On Fatu Hiva, an older woman shows us how to make traditional cloth from the inner bark of plants, and hair ornaments from herbs and flowers.

But we're not just here to look and learn. We're here to have fun, and the crew of the Aranui ensures we do. One day they announce we're going to a beach on the island of Tahuata for a barbecue. "It's absolutely wild," says Jorg Nitzsche, another of our guides. "There's nothing there."

Nothing, that is, but soft white sand, a few coconut palms for shade, and water that changes from turquoise to aquamarine. We just might

have found paradise.

Other days we hike up mountainsides, ride half-wild horses or wander around villages, observing life in the slow lane. We eat at local restaurants, sampling Marquesan specialties such as banana in coconut milk, and pork roasted in a traditional earth-oven called an *umu* until it's falling-apart tender.

We watch islanders giddily carry away Nescafé coffee, canned soup and bags of sugar from the Aranui in trucks and wheelbarrows.

We stop and inhale the intoxicating fragrance of gardenia, frangipani and jasmine.

And, like three couples on board for their second time in five years, we make plans to come back.

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## When you go

Rates for the Aranui III's 14-day trip range from \$2,234 to \$5,594 per person.  
1-800-972-7268. aranui.com

**On Fatu Hiva,  
a narrow road  
climbs**

through verdant forest to a plateau overlooking the ocean. The 10-mile hike is popular with visitors to the island.



**Steeple-shape peaks** pierce the clouds above the island of Ua Pou. These are the highest mountains in the Marquesas, with one peak reaching more than 4,000 feet. The island itself is only about 10 miles long and 7 miles wide.





**Local kids play on the ropes** that tie the *Aranui III*, a combined freighter-passenger ship, to the dock at Hakahau on the island of Ua Pou. The arrival of the ship every two weeks is a big event for islanders, as it brings supplies, including large items such as cars.