

Passage to the South Pacific

Meera Dattani sails beyond the swish resorts of Tahiti to the remote Marquesas Islands, verdant and dramatic



LEFT Flamingos at Salar de Tara
lobster boxes; drumming lessons

“THE MISSIONARIES, THEY BANNED EVERYTHING. MUSIC, DANCING, TATTOOING, THE MARQUESAN WAY OF LIFE.”

These are words of our guide, Steven, but a sentiment often heard on these islands. Theirs is a culture that was almost obliterated, but drumming, haka dances and tattoo masters are back, with verve rather than vengeance.

800 miles northeast of Papeete, the Tahitian capital and home to the only international airport in this French overseas territory, the Marquesas are the world's most remote archipelago. Flights serve four of the six inhabited islands but prices, routes and lack of inter-island boats make exploring tricky. But the Aranui freighter, serving the Marquesans since 1959 and carrying passengers since 1984, offers a taste of the isles which attracted artist Paul Gauguin and inspired Robert Louis Stevenson's book, *In The South Seas*, after his 1888 visit.

Nature has produced a work of art in the Marquesas with soaring volcanic peaks, crashing waterfalls and tiny bays below wave-battered cliffs. This isn't brochure Polynesia of blue lagoons and over-water bungalows, but one of unspoilt wilderness, hiking trails and archaeological treats.

The archipelago is home to around 10,000 people. “In the late 1700s, it's estimated there were around 100,000 inhabitants,” said Didier Benatar, guide and resident, “But disease, such as TB, syphilis and especially smallpox, brought by early

navigators, killed many.”

By the 1850s, 20,000 islanders remained, dropping to 2,000 by 1920, taking traditions with them. The 19th century also witnessed the most extreme prohibitions of local customs by missionaries and officials who found society liberal and primitive. “These were, and are, skilled people,” said Didier. “Masters of fishing, talented tattoo artists, canoe builders, woodcarvers and warriors.”

As Marquesan culture regrouped, nuclear testing between 1966 and 1996 was another hitch, resulting in significant compensation from the French. More optimistically, the 1940s to 1970s witnessed a baby boom. “My father is one of 24, my mother one of 16,” cruise director Mila told us. 1987 saw the first Marquesas Arts Festival, a four-yearly event. Islanders may have Facebook, but they're getting tattooed and playing ukulele, too.

DUSTY DRAMA

Our first taste of Marquesan life was Taiohae on Nuku Hiva, archipelago headquarters. We watched crew shift crates of limes and bananas, and sacks of copra, dried coconut while locals queued outside a container-turned-post-office for smaller orders and the crane lifted a boat onto the deck.

As Aranui passengers, visiting time is dictated by cargo needs. 4WDs drove us to the Kamuihei, Tahakia and Teiipoka sites, excavated by Pierre Ottino in 1998 where a 600-year-old banyan tree, whose





roots fall like tentacles to the ground, towers over paepae house platforms, tohua meeting areas, sacred me'ae spots and ua ma, breadfruit fermentation pits. Higher up, two rocks feature petroglyphs, ancient rock carvings, of fish and turtles. Nearby Hikokua is another excellent site, uncovered by archaeologist Robert Suggs in the 1950s while the Taipivai valley, setting for Moby Dick author Herman Melville's novel Typee after his 1842 stint as a captive, is full of stone tiki, petroglyphs and paepae.

Our first traditional meal waited for us in Hatiheu village at Chez Yvonne, run by the village's ex-mayor. Staff peeled back layers of coconut fronds on the ground to reveal a smoking earth oven and three suckling pigs slow-cooking alongside root vegetable taro. Other dishes included poisson cru, raw fish marinated in lime and coconut milk, goatmeat and baked breadfruit. For dessert, mashed red bananas in coconut milk divided passengers in a way only Marmite can.

DUSTY DRAMA

At Hakahau village in Ua Pou, a smorgasbord of traditions lay ahead. We tucked fresh tiare flowers behind one ear - even the burliest Aranui cargo-checker wore one - and bought garland crowns and umu hei, aphrodisiac flower bouquets. "You'll find your man," Hina, my flower-maker said. Perhaps mine was faulty. Aromatic flowers filled the air, a bright red flame tree captured many an eye and locals performed the haka warrior and graceful bird dances at Hakahau's Te Ava Tuu paepae platform. Boarding the Aranui, clouds shifted to reveal Ua Pou's 12 spiky peaks in full glory.

An exuberant Sunday mass - the missionaries did find success in the



Marquesas - was the highlight of Hane village on Ua Huka, a beautiful island of three villages, 700 inhabitants and more goats than people. In Vaipae village, an excellent museum curated by Ua Huka's most talented woodcarver, Josef Vaatete showcases Marquesan traditions. "It's been my passion to create this museum," he told us, having relentlessly sourced old photographs and carved skilful reproductions of tikis, swords and outrigger canoes. Ua Huka handicrafts are particularly reasonable - wood-carved tikis, tapa cloth prints made from pounded strips of tree bark, monoi, tiare flower and coconut oil, and beaded and bone jewellery. No pressure, no haggling. At the botanical gardens, locals, and passengers, can pick juicy mangos, lychee-like quennettes and chillies for free.

Docking in Hiva Oa, the largest of the southern islands, it's easy to see what drew artist Paul Gauguin in 1901 and Belgian singer Jacques Brel in the 1970s. Both rest in Atuona's cemetery and two cultural centres celebrate their work. Jungles, villages and bays hold great appeal but so does Ipona, home to the Marquesas' most important tikis, second only to those of Easter Island. Restored in 1991, the tallest of these five stone ancestor god representations is 2.67-metre-high Taka'i'i, name of a warlord renowned for his strength. From Hiva Oa, the Aranui docks twice at tiny Tahuata, where Europeans first met locals when Spanish navigator Mendana landed in 1595, visiting Vaitahu village and, with many bays only accessible by sea, enjoying a private beach at Kok'uu.

For many, Fatu Hiva's mythological appearance casts the greatest spell. The most remote isle, with more hues of green than an artist's palette, it once had 10,000 inhabitants. Now 600 reside in two villages, ►



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Omoa and Hanavave, linked by a 10-mile trail through an unspoilt interior. “There’s no airport, no doctor and it’s four hours by sea to Hiva Oa,” said Didier. At sunset, Hanavave’s Bay of Virgins lights up, its rocky peak sparkling against a backdrop of soft, velvety greens.

DUSTY DRAMA

Sipping cold Hinano beers with fellow passengers was no chore. Mainly French, German and American, and a smattering of Canadians and other Europeans, from couples to aunts-and-nieces, solo travellers to small groups, a sense of adventure and curiosity was our biggest bond. After his Q&A, head of cargo Tino confessed, “I didn’t know people found freight so interesting.” A similar crowd attended ship engineer Gheorghe Nemesu’s talk about the Aranui 3’s construction and preview of the Aranui 5, sailing in late 2015 with more luxury cabins, extra dormitories and a spa.

Meals were delicious, three-course yet informal and the crew friendly without fawning. Polynesian-style entertainment, led by the ever-energetic Manaari, included transforming a pareo/sarong into various outfits, and, for brave menfolk, loincloths, plus traditional dance, singing and ukelele lessons, performed with enthusiasm and varying degrees of skill during the cruise’s only themed evening, Polynesian Night, and the final dinner.

Sometimes, the Aranui Band performed, perhaps with chief engineer Jean-Maurice drumming, Steven on bucket bass or cruise director Mila playing ukelele, while crew members whirled us around. Exploring the

ship proved fun, and on a quieter day at sea, Tino, an Aranui faithful for 30 years, let me onto the freight deck where the smell of copra, colossal containers and front-of-ship views remain a memorable image. En route, stops in Takapoto and Rangiroa in the Tuamotu archipelago and Bora Bora were an opportunity to experience the turquoise lagoons of these low-lying atolls.

This voyage is often called iconic, even unique. And it is. After 13 nights, it’s hard not to feel attached to the ship and companions. With some, you hope it’s au revoir, not goodbye. Back in rainy Papeete, after dinner at the roulotte food trucks, it emerged my taxi driver Justin hailed from Ua Pou. “If you weren’t leaving, I’d invite you home for a Marquesan family feast,” he said, beaming. I’m not one for fate, but it felt serendipitous to end the trip with another proud Marquesan.

WAY TO GO

 Meera travelled with **Discover the World** (01737 214 291; discover-the-world.co.uk). A 13-night Marquesas Islands cruise costs from £4,655 per person (based on two sharing a standard double cabin) and includes 13 nights’ on the Aranui III (full board), excursions and economy return flights (including taxes) from London to Papeete via Paris with Air Tahiti Nui. From November 2015, Aranui III will be replaced with a brand new vessel, Aranui 5 (aranui.com).



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