

The passage to Paradise

Roberto Serrini goes in search of an authentically exotic paradise aboard the Aranui 5.

Photography by **Roberto Serrini**



Traditional Polynesian dance is very much alive as locals keep this vibrant tradition present in current culture.

As a kid, one of my favourite stories was about how my grandfather came to New York City. Travelling from Panama at the age of 12, he was stowed away on a cargo ship, tucked among ropes and crates as a hidden human package. Each time he told me the tale, I hung on every word with the same wide-eyed grip as the first time I heard it.

It's this story that peaked my interest in *Aranui 5* – a cruise with a beautiful identity crisis; half cargo ship and half luxury cruise liner. The difference to my grandfather's story, however, is I'm trading the Manhattan metropolis for the tropical Marquesas Islands, a handful of extremely remote, pristine islands within Polynesia. And I certainly don't have to hide behind any crates.

If the concept of *Aranui 5* sounds a little unorthodox, it's because it is. Sure, it's a cargo ship that transports much needed supplies to these remote outposts of Polynesia, but it doubles as a luxury cruise ship where I'd be sleeping within the comforts of a delightfully appointed room, and spending my days sipping a cold Hinano beer next to the pool.

When I first spot the ship, my jaw drops. It's as if some mad scientist has Frankensteined commerce and tourism into some half-baked, late-night metal explosion. From the front, *Aranui 5* doesn't resemble the grandeur I'd expect. The bow masks its deep belly, which stores everything from cars to livestock, while two spindly cranes breach its sharp hull like a floating praying mantis. When I look to the stern, however, the scenery changes to a manicured amphitheatre of suites surrounding a beautiful open-air deck and pool, and balconies are decorated with colourful chairs inviting us into happy hour.

It's this brackish melee of sophistication and rustic culture that captures the intrepid spirit for any traveler willing to make the journey.

Once onboard, all sense of the ship's identity crisis dissipates and I'm surrounded by welcoming hospitality and luscious comfort. The rooms are large, each with its own bathroom. Some suites even have a living room and balcony. There's cable TV, Internet, a gym, pool, and a lively bar to keep even the most restless cruiser occupied.



While the island of Fakarava is known for its beautiful pearls, the Tetamanu church is a jewel in its own right with colorful interiors and shell-laden chandeliers.

Dining on the *Aranui 5* is an experience in itself. Breakfast is a lavish buffet of fresh eggs, breads, fruits and cereals, but by the time dinner rolls around, I'm well and truly impressed. As the grand hall fills with travellers, each anticipating the unfolding beauty ahead of us, new friends meet for the first time and discussions about the future possibilities unfold. A three course meal paired with a selection of French wines follows, carefully crafted by the onboard chef who mixes local island flavours with a global flare.

What strikes me as interesting is that almost everyone here has either been on the cruise before, or has discovered it through a personal recommendation. It's a testament to the quality of this unique experience and ensures plenty of diversity in the chatter about expectations as the ships horn sounds and it starts gliding through the salty blue mass towards paradise.

Nothing can prepare us for the remarkability of our destination and despite the *Aranui 5*'s obvious attraction as a cargo ship, it's the remote Marquesas that really steals the spotlight. That's why we're here after all; the *Aranui 5* is merely our vessel to get to the otherwise difficult to reach and wholly untapped islands.

You will not find the usual gift shops or tacky t-shirts to welcome travellers, and there are certainly no Starbucks or McDonalds, let alone cellular service. The archipelago is wild and sparsely inhabited, but fiercely traditional. Here life is simple, and far less diluted by the common global consciousness of the Internet age. The people are friendly, curious and authentic, and the islands are pure and rugged, with dramatic coastlines and devastatingly lush interiors.

Over the next two weeks we visit more than half a dozen islands, each equally as beautiful as the last, but with its own hint of individuality. Wood carved cathedrals dot the sandy beaches of Nuku Hiva, while Fatu Hiva's rugged lush landscape is decorated with waterfalls that cascade

between emerald covered peaks. Some islands are known for amazing woodwork, and others have spent years mastering bone carving.

As I watch a young craftsman on Nuku Hiva practice the skills that have been passed down from father to son for millennia, I marvel at the kindness and warmth of the local people, willing to show their talents with those visiting the island.

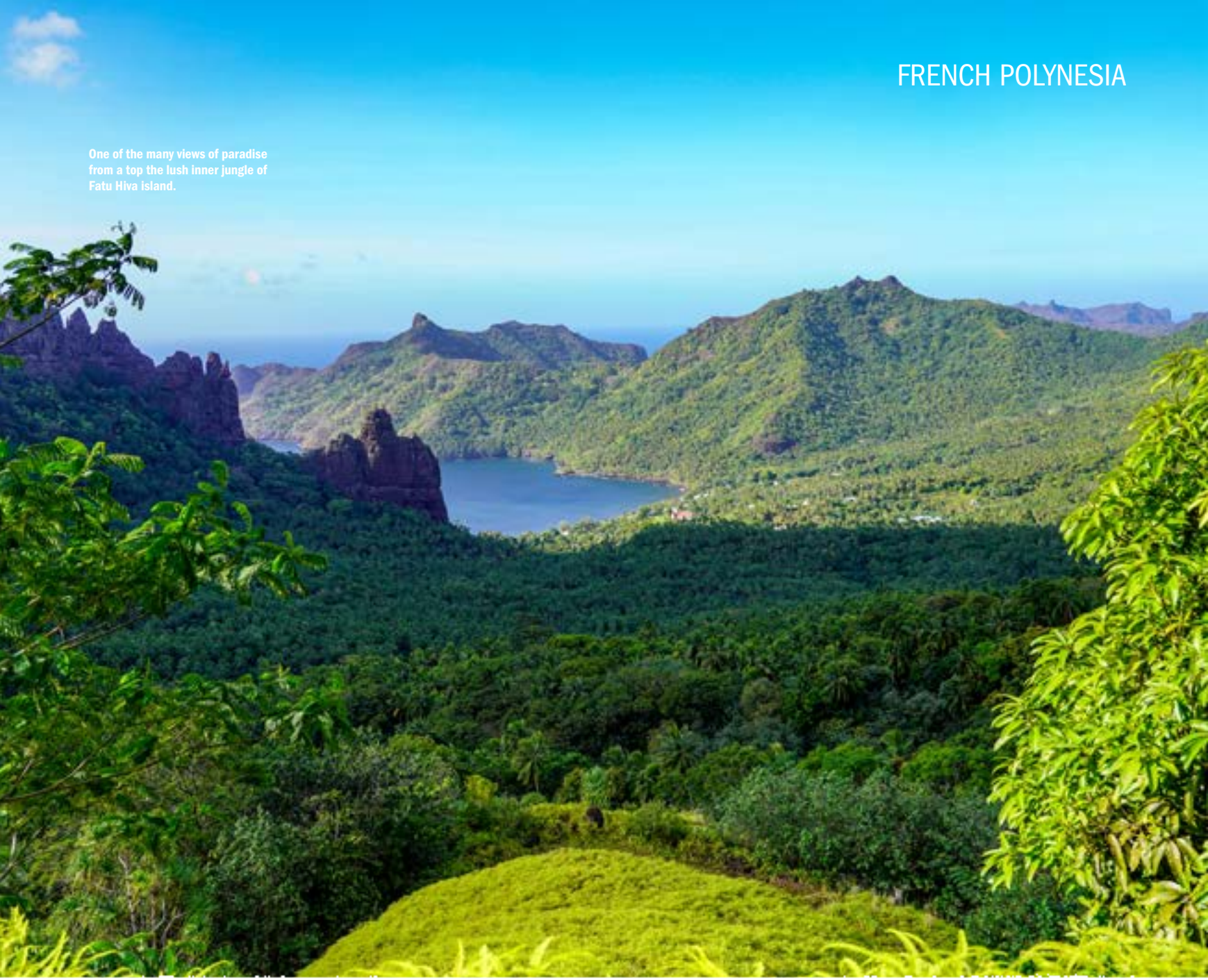
There is no established tourism here, but that's exactly what makes these islands so special, and the experience even richer. Predominantly locals, the staff onboard bring the adventure to life, sharing their knowledge, experience and culture. We may be guests, but we are welcomed to the islands as if we are family.

These islands are raw and functional, with a rustic charm that only a real adventurer and authenticity seeker will enjoy. It's unrefined, and at times, unorganised, but in a world of pre-packaged, Instagram-saturated travel, this unconventional experience is a welcome breath of fresh air.

From treks into the island's inner caverns, joining a traditional feast of wild pig and breadfruit, or exploring ancient sites that are yet to be documented by archeologists, I uncover the Marquesas biggest allure.

As we wander the pristine shores of Nuku Hiva, we discover a bay near Taipivai village, where azure blue waters crash against pristine white sands. We're told Herman Melville wrote his first book here, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*. It's a small reminder of the remote destination's rich, connected history.

We find it again a couple of days later on Hiva Oa, which enticed French painter Paul Gauguin, who made the dangerous journey to the island in 1890, a voyage which consequently resulted in his European rise to fame through his artistic interpretation of this unseen world. The artist is buried on the island and a colourful cannon of his work is on display in the Paul Gauguin Cultural Centre.



One of the many views of paradise from a top the lush inner jungle of Fatu Hiva island.



Locals free diving to feed moray eels in a cloud of tropical fish.



The *Aranui 5* knows how to throw a party, both beautiful and fun, and definitely delicious.

FRENCH POLYNESIA

What do they say about the end of a rainbow? A shuttle prepares to take passengers to ashore.

In the neighbouring Tuamotus, we visit Rangiroa, where a cycling tour down the sandy coast uncovers a pearl farm. A long pier leads into the sparkling sea where black stingrays dart around below the surface. A local diver disappears into the crystal depths and returns with a fresh oyster plucked from the ocean floor. Shucking it open, the grey shell reveals the oyster’s fleshy interior, garnished with a black pearl. The diver hands it to me, and I’m wonderstruck by this gift of nature.

Even when we trade the sand between our toes for the sea breeze through our hair back onboard the *Aranui 5*, the excitement continues.

From craft and cooking classes, to dance lessons and parties, there’s always something to do. When I discover I can get a tattoo by one of the locals, this was obviously a must – I collect ink like passport stamps, and Polynesia, known for its rich history with tattoo culture, was something I had to add to the story on my skin. I met with one of the local staff members who offered to do the work for me below deck in the spa. We talk about my impression of the islands,

my background, what ideals I hold dear and what I think is important for a good life. Then, with a modern tattoo gun and all the modern convenience of latex gloves and alcohol wipes, he proceeds to engrain his impression onto my arm. Just under an hour later, I have a beautiful new piece of work done in classic Marquesas style and it immediately becomes my favorite.

As I turn into my freshly made bed, we voyage away from the Marquesas, and paradise becomes nothing but a memory. We wake up to the manicured Society Islands, where the *Aranui 5* staff ease us back into reality with a farewell party atop a private atoll in Bora Bora.

Along the streak of white sandy beach, everyone trades stories and perspectives, processing the unique culture we’ve learnt so much about over the last 13 days. There, walking along the beach, I looked back across the blue expanse and a smile creeps across my sun-kissed face knowing that the spirit of discovering untapped culture is still possible, and that sometimes, much like New York City was to my Grandfather, the fairytale of a new paradise still exists.


GET PLANNING



GET THERE

Air Tahiti Nui flies from Melbourne, Brisbane, Gold Coast and Sydney to Fa’a’ā Airport in Pape’ete via New Zealand from AU\$1107.

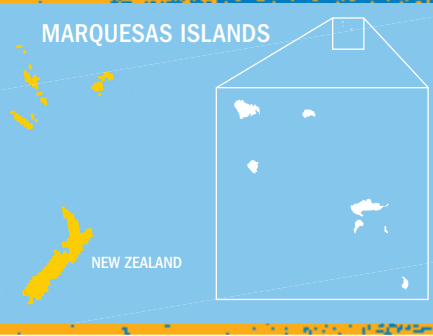
airtahitinui.com



TOUR THERE

Aranui is a passenger and freighter vessel that travels from Pape’ete to the Marquesas Islands via Tahiti and Bora Bora. There are eight cabin types available from dormitory style to the presidential suite, and the ship also offers a boutique store, spa, laundry services, and a range of activities. It departs from Papeete, Tahiti three times a week, all year. Priced from AU\$2920.

aranui.com



AD SPACE