

Hakahau Bay with *Aranui 5*  
docked at the quayside  
unloading cargo for the  
residents of Ua Pou

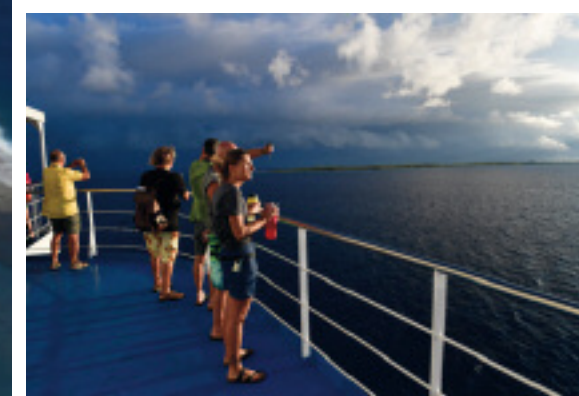
# Polynesian *paradise*

Set in a vast area of the South Pacific, the Marquesas Islands make a magical impression on **Clive Nicholls** during the trip of a lifetime

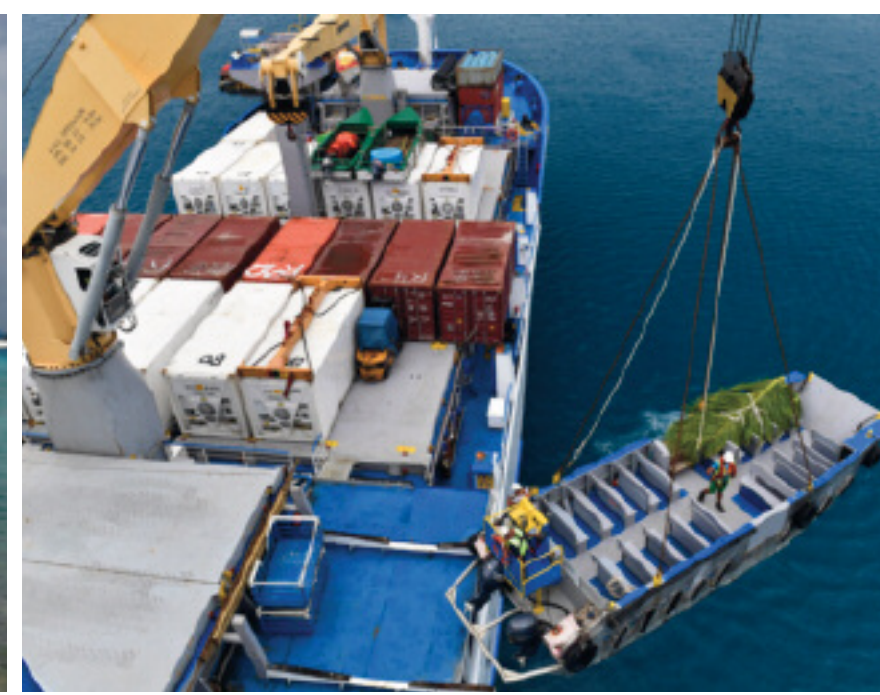
PICTURES: CLIVE NICHOLLS



Clockwise: The white cross on Ua Pou; Rangiroa, a stunning atoll in the Tuamoto Islands; Life on board *Aranui 5*; stunning sunrises; welcoming smiles; traditional dancers and the barges going from ship to shore



“The view across Hakahau Bay is simply stunning. Blue sky, fluffy clouds, turquoise sea, yachts bobbing on the gentle breeze...”



THE TALL white cross stands proud on the hilltop above the village of Hakahau. The walking trail up to the cross is steep but manageable and, taking it steady, I'm there in 20 minutes. It's not the cross I've come to see, however. It's the view across Hakahau Bay – and it's simply stunning. Blue sky, fluffy clouds, turquoise sea, yachts bobbing on the gentle breeze and the star of the

show, the cruise liner-cum-supply ship, *Aranui 5*, alongside the pier. I take the pictures but then take time to enjoy the view. It's too easy to see all the best bits of your holiday through a camera viewfinder – I'm the world's worst – but it's sometimes better to store memories in your mind as well as your camera's memory card. So where is Hakahau? It's on the island of Ua Pou in the Marquesas Islands in

French Polynesia, in the South Pacific, more than 3000 miles from the nearest continental land mass. They are some of the remotest and most beautiful islands on the planet. Let me take you back to the start of my South Seas adventure. I flew into Tahiti – that sounds amazing in itself, but it gets better. We've all seen the shots in the films of welcoming smiles and garlands of flowers, but this actually happens. It's a

long flight through Los Angeles but by the time you've watched a couple of films, eaten dinner and had a nap, it soon passes. I bought some noise-cancelling headphones; they're a bit bulky but they make a huge difference to in-flight films. The welcome in Tahiti is exciting and I can't wait for the next stage of my journey in this Polynesian paradise – boarding the *Aranui 5*, the cruise liner that doubles up as a supply vessel for these remote islands.

As I board the ship, once again the welcome is floral, warm and very real – the smiles are infectious. Compared with conventional cruise liners, the *Aranui 5* is small; on my trip there are fewer than 200 passengers and just over 100 crew. What makes it interesting is that the front half of the ship is for cargo that is a lifeline to the islands we'll be visiting. We are carrying everything: food, construction materials, white goods and I can see that

someone has ordered a new 4x4 pick-up truck. Not only that, we're carrying everything needed to unload the cargo: barges (we can't always dock alongside a pier); forklift trucks big enough to pick up a full container; and we've even got a high-end fishing boat if you fancy a spot of sea fishing. Just before we sail from Papeete in Tahiti, traditional dancers give an amazing show on the pool deck. The men, all





Clockwise: The tug turns back as we leave Tahiti; Supplies ferried ashore; Aranui's bridge; local dancers; cookery classes and someone has just got a new fridge/freezer. Clouds hug the mountain tops in Nuku Hiva; mooring ropes make a good playground and the beach at Hakahau



super-fit, seem to be aggressive (they're not, I spoke to them afterwards and they are lovely); the women's dance is more willowy and they are simply beautiful. As we leave the harbour, I'm standing on the wings of the bridge where I've got the same view as the captain. It's amazing; the ship is very relaxed and apart from when they're involved with tricky manoeuvres, if you want to visit the bridge, it's no problem – I'm loving it already.

As we leave the Society Islands (Tahiti and its neighbours) we head towards Fakarava, an atoll in the Tuamotu Islands. We'll be there in the morning; it brings home to me the scale of these islands. They may be small with very few people living there, but they are set in a million square miles of the South Pacific. We approach the atoll at sunrise (the sunrises are amazing and I make a mental note not to miss one) and anchor offshore.

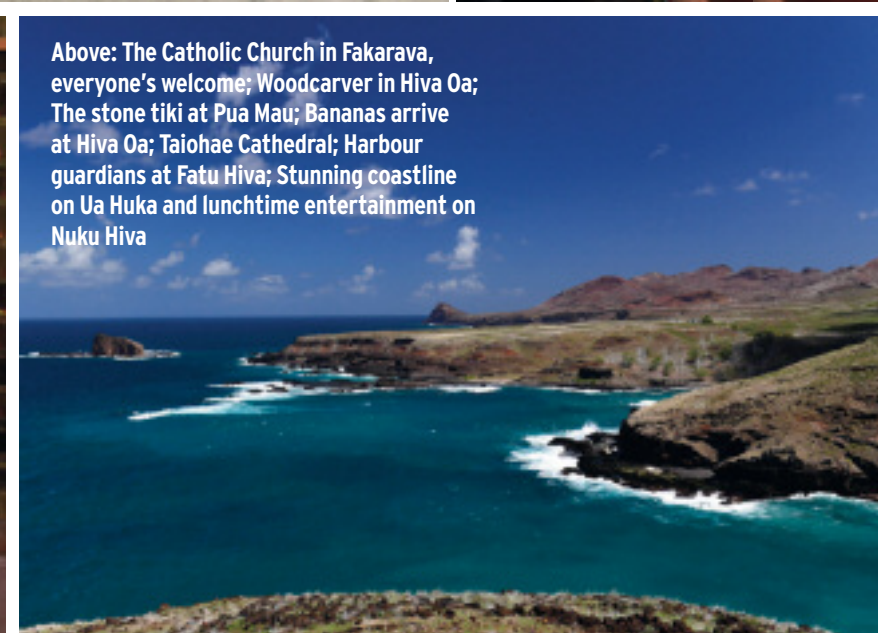
The seamen crane off the barges and pick us up from deck 3. Their skill is amazing; they are never going to let anyone fall in as we transfer from ship to barge. There was a blind woman in my group; she was wonderful and everyone loved her, and there was no problem for the seamen – with a secure grip, she stepped on board with a smile on her face. As we reach the shore it's warm, just under 30°C, but the sky has clouded over

and there's a bit of rain in the air. I stroll down the main street of Rotoava, drawn by the sound of singing from the Catholic Church. The doors are open and everyone is welcome. You can stay for a few minutes or take in the whole service, it's that sort of atmosphere. Just over 800 residents live on Fakarava; it's a tropical paradise but they are dependent on the supplies that the Aranui brings ashore. I see one of the barges

heading back to the ship with a load of palm leaves. Checking the itinerary I realise they are for the palm-weaving course and for decorating the pool deck for tomorrow's 'Planca Night' – dining under the stars. Back on board, we've got a long run (550 nautical miles) to our next stop, Ua Pou, the first of the Marquesas Islands and that fabulous view from the white cross. We'll call in at Nuku Hiva at

5.30am (the day after tomorrow) to pick up passengers but for now we settle in and enjoy a day at sea. It's still dark when they launch the barge to pick up from Nuku Hiva but I can't resist being on deck – I really don't want to miss a minute. With the transfer complete, we're on our way to Ua Pau and we dock at the end of the pier. My first priority is the walk to the white cross but coming back down





Above: The Catholic Church in Fakarava, everyone's welcome; Woodcarver in Hiva Oa; The stone tiki at Pua Mau; Bananas arrive at Hiva Oa; Taiohae Cathedral; Harbour guardians at Fatu Hiva; Stunning coastline on Ua Huka and lunchtime entertainment on Nuku Hiva

from the hilltop, Hakahau has come alive. It's a public holiday and locals are taking to the beach.

The ship is busy unloading and a queue of 4x4s are lined up on the quayside to pick up their orders. I see a Land Rover heading off with a boxed fridge freezer in the back – I bet that's been a long wait, considering the temperatures here. The other benefit for the local kids is that the mooring ropes for the *Aranui* stretch out over the harbour. The more skilled use them as a tightrope, some shuffle along

the ropes, some go 'monkey-style'. The result is always the same; they end up in the water screaming with laughter. Some bypass the ropes and just hurl themselves off the quayside. At home, health and safety would have been an issue, but they could all swim like fish and were having great fun.

I really like Ua Pau and as luck would have it, we'll call back here later on in the cruise with more supplies, but for now it's back on board for the scheduled stop at Nuku Hiva.

### Five million years young...

*Aranui 5* is only a couple of years old, built exactly for this purpose, and is based on refining earlier *Aranuis*, so island-hopping is both comfortable and luxurious and it's only a short run to Nuku Hiva.

So, we're almost 1000 miles north-east of Tahiti approaching the largest of the Marquesas Islands. They are all volcanic and less than five million years old. The youngest, Fatu Hiva, which I'll visit later – a new-born at just 1.3 million years (still sounds pretty old to me – still bears the

same trademarks: pointy, sticky-up hills and mountains, and despite the wonderful weather, they all seem to attract a blanket of cloud across the very tops of the mountains. At Nuku Hiva the barges are busy; here it looks like food, building materials and that shiny 4x4 are the main things going ashore.

We start off with an island tour. The cathedral at Taiohae tells the story of the island. A local woodcarver was commissioned to carve a series of wall plaques that tie in Christianity with the

local cultures. I visit archaeological sites – there's still plenty more to uncover – and see the Banyan trees that inspired the director of the film *Avatar*.

I think in the next few years more will be discovered about the past but, with so little written history, I can only imagine the sights that these lands have witnessed. It's a magical island and, once again, the local dancers more than get into the spirit of things. I check my internet in the village, buy a few souvenirs and leave Nuku Hiva with fond memories of this

faraway land. The lectures on board are brilliant. I really like lecturer Victoria Andrews. She knows everything I want to know, and more.

The daily talks, washed down with an *Aranui* cocktail of course, make the islands come to life and, not only that, she also feeds me with cold remedies when I pick up a bug. Thank you, Victoria: you made the Marquesas special – and my cold is better now.

Next stop, south-west to Hiva Oa, an island of just 130 square miles and fewer





Clockwise: Arriving at Ua Pou; Jacque Brel's grave at Atoona; breakfast and shopping on board; home life at Hanavave; beach at Atuona



◀ than 2000 residents, and Tahuata, the smallest of the Marquesas.

The carved stoned Tiki at the sacred site near the village of Puamau on Hiva Oa are really impressive – the biggest around 8ft tall. Still shrouded in mystery, the human-like statues are generally carved out of a reddish volcanic rock and have given rise to a cottage industry carving wooden copies (obviously smaller) to sell to tourists at the craft markets.

Prices vary across the islands, but I find

Hanavave on Fatu Hiva a good place to buy. These are the most iconic souvenirs of the Marquesas and come in sizes from a few inches to a couple of feet tall. If you go for the bigger sizes, just remember your luggage allowance.

We move by ship to the other side of the island and dock alongside the pier at Atuona.

The cemetery here has two famous residents: Jacques Brel, the Belgian singer and songwriter, and the troubled and

argumentative artistic genius Paul Gauguin. Brel was suffering from lung cancer and wanted to drop out of the limelight. He sailed his yacht across the Pacific to Atuona bay and set up home in the town in 1975. He bought a plane to island-hop and helped the locals get supplies.

In the summer of 1978 and in poor health, he was flown back to France for hospital treatment where he died in October aged 49. His body was returned to

Hiva Oa for burial in Calvary Cemetery. Gauguin, after living in Tahiti, moved to Hiva Oa in 1901, and died there two years later. The two celebrity graves are just a few plots apart in Atuona.

Just a short hop by sea (2.5 half miles), pretty little Tahuata and the town of Vaitahu are on our itinerary. The 600 residents depend on the Aranui for supplies and, as the barge delivers and picks up, I visit the Catholic Church that dominates the only street in Vaitahu.

It was opened in 1988, and the church carvings are from local woods and inside, given the limited resources, it's really rather beautiful.

All the islands have their own character and Ua Huka is no exception. Captain Faraire Faaora takes the *Aranui* into a narrow gorge and turns her with just feet to spare at the bow and stern.

The sailors leap ashore with mooring ropes and the whole manoeuvre is very skilful, very impressive and great

entertainment. On shore there's a botanical garden where I'm encouraged to eat the fruit – I never could resist ripe mangoes – a brand new museum and some of the most spectacular scenery you could ever wish for.

On board it's the Polynesian evening on the pool deck, with fabulous dancing, great music, fine food and wine. It's a balmy evening under the stars and one of those nights you just don't want to end.

My trip will soon be over, as we head ▶



back south-west I'll be leaving at Rangiroa and will miss Bora Bora and the return to Papeete by sea – I'll be flying in.

As we enter the lagoon to Rangiroa, the water changes from blue to turquoise – this is the largest atoll in the Tuamotu Islands and it's simply stunning. As other passengers take a tour of the oyster farm, I spend my time in the shade of a palm tree watching the crystal-clear waters lap up the coral beach. Life doesn't get much better than this.

As the barges return to the *Aranui 5*, I watch as she weighs anchor and sets course for Bora Bora, reflecting on my magical cruise on this wonderful ship. So many highlights – truly a trip of a lifetime.

I head towards the small airport. It's shut but a kindly woman with a bunch of keys and a fabulous Polynesian smile opens it up for me. I wait for my plane to fly in and, as the incoming passengers disembark, they are met with flower garlands and warm smiles. Sadly, I'm leaving... but the show goes on.



**Banyan tree on Nuku Hiva and palm leaf weaving lessons on board – I was rubbish!**

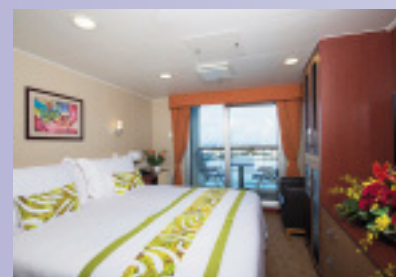
**“Capt Faora takes the *Aranui* into a narrow gorge and turns her with just feet to spare at the bow and stern. The sailors leap ashore with mooring ropes and the whole manoeuvre is very skilful and great entertainment”**

## Passport to French Polynesia

Aranui specialises in passenger/freighter cruises to the Marquesas Islands in French Polynesia offering a unique adventure and cultural experience. The *Aranui 5* is a part passenger/part freighter ship that delivers essential items such as cars, fuel and food to the islanders enabling passengers to integrate with the local people.

The Marquesas are some of the most remote islands in the world, located nearly 1000 miles north-east of Tahiti. The 13 day cruise allows passengers to discover what Tahiti looked like 50 years ago, visiting all six of the inhabited islands in the Marquesas, as well as Fakarava and Rangiroa in the Tuamotus and Bora Bora in the Society Islands.

Over the past 30 years, Aranui has helped revitalise the long forgotten Marquesan culture and contributed to the local economy by



**The plush cabins on *Aranui 5* provide comfortable accommodation**



introducing these islands to nearly 45,000 international passengers.

To experience the richness of the Marquesas, from its people to its history and culture to its breath-taking scenery, contact Trailfinders on 020 7084 6502. Prices start from £3400 per person for the 13-day cruise, including full board, taxes and activities in a standard cabin. For more information on Aranui go to ([www.aranui.com](http://www.aranui.com)).

Air Tahiti Nui is the national carrier to French Polynesia with departures from Paris, Los Angeles, Tokyo and Auckland to Tahiti (PPT) with connecting flights available from London. The four stations are serviced to/from Papeete with a number of flights depending on the season:

Los Angeles, 11 to 14 weekly flights; Paris, four to seven weekly flights; Tokyo, two weekly flights (Saturday and Monday out of Narita, Friday and Sunday out of Papeete); Auckland, three weekly flights (Monday/Wednesday/Saturday).

Flights are operated by a fleet of Airbus 340-300 offering 32 seats in business and 264 in economy class, retro-fitted for greater passenger comfort with plans to replace the aircrafts in the last quarter of 2018 with the new Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner, which will include an additional premium economy class.

Priority Pass/Lounge Pass/Celebratory 'Delices & Champagne' are available on board and can be pre ordered.

**Fares:** London to Papeete via Los Angeles from £1885 - all taxes included in Economy Class.

**For reservations and information, tel: 0844 482 1675 e-mail: ([resa@airtahitinui.co.uk](mailto:resa@airtahitinui.co.uk)). Website: ([www.airtahitinui.com/uk-en](http://www.airtahitinui.com/uk-en))**

**For more information on Aranui go to ([www.aranui.com](http://www.aranui.com)).**