

Saturday, December 10

Take the cargo ship to paradise

[What's this](#)



Calm waters lap on to the shore at Nuku Hiva Tim Laman/Getty Images

Stanley Johnson

December 10 2011 12:01AM

Travelling on a working vessel through Polynesia is the best way to see the beautiful Marquesas

Every month a cargo ship called *Aranui 3* sails 800 miles from Tahiti to a remote archipelago called the Marquesas. On board are vital supplies, such as food and medicines. The *Aranui* is a lifeline to the 8,000 people who live on these islands. No wonder the locals give it such a warm welcome when it docks.

That's one of the reasons this cruise is so out of the ordinary. While the accommodation, food and service is excellent, this is a working ship, the main role of which is to deliver supplies. That means that at every moment of our journey we were in regular contact with the Marquesans.

Because the ship's monthly visit is the high point of their calendar, the locals usually came down en masse to greet us at the dock as we moved from island to island. The islanders set up stalls by the water's edge, selling sarongs or pareos, tapa (bark cloth) and wood and stone carvings. The money they earn from the passengers is hugely important to them. If France ever reduces the subsidies that it pays to its overseas territories, these commercial transactions will become even more significant. The Marquesans are overwhelmingly friendly. Did any grudge, I wondered, the hours they must have put in making the shell necklaces or garlands of flowers that they hung about our necks? They didn't seem to.

On the last Sunday of the voyage, we put in at Tahuata, the Marquesan island "discovered" by the Spaniards in 1595. This was also the site of the first French settlement in 1842. Catholic missionaries followed a few years later. Along with several other passengers, I attended mass that morning in the tiny village of Vaitahu. The church was built a few years ago with funds provided by the Vatican. Brilliantly designed, it is a light, airy structure. If your attention wanders, you can lift your eyes to the surrounding tree-covered hills. High above the altar there is a stained-glass window of surpassing beauty, depicting a Polynesian Madonna and Child. There was a wonderful cheerfulness about the service. Several of the Marquesans had brought drums and ukuleles, and the congregation broke into song, or so it seemed, on every possible occasion.

In spite of a population collapse (from 100,000 in 1774 to 1,500 in 1921) caused by the arrival of the Europeans and their diseases, the Marquesans have retained — or at least reinvented — a strong cultural presence. On the fifth day of the voyage the *Aranui* put in at Taiohae, a spectacular bay on Nuku Hiva, the largest and most populated of the islands. While cargo was loaded and unloaded, we rode in Jeeps up winding mountain roads to the Taipivai valley. With the possible exception of Easter Island, this must be one of the finest examples of Polynesian culture in the South Pacific. Though only a fraction of the site has been cleared, you are able to gain a clear impression of what must have been an immense archaeological complex.

For me, the high point came when a group of Marquesans stood on a vast *paepae* (stone platform) in front of the biggest banyan tree I have ever seen to perform a ceremony known as the Pig Dance. How much of that dance was genuinely traditional and how much newly invented wasn't quite clear. And I never found out precisely what the dance symbolised. But there was no doubting the enthusiasm with which it was performed. On these islands the past merges with the present. In a dry spell recently one of the giant banyan trees caught fire, revealing the skulls and skeletons of Marquesans whose bodies, according to tradition, had been concealed among its roots.

When you are moving, as we did, from island to island almost every day, you tend to ask yourself, as Paul Gauguin did in one of his most famous paintings: "Where did we come from? What are we? Where are we going?" Well, on Hiva Oa, you can visit Gauguin's grave. Though his most productive period in the South Pacific was probably spent on Tahiti, he came back from Europe at the beginning of the 20th century and settled in the Marquesas. Talking to the Marquesans, you get the feeling that Gauguin was a rather suspect character. He seduced the local girls, argued with the church and didn't pay his bills.

Jacques Brel, the Belgian singer, also died and is buried on Hiva Oa. He is much more popular than Gauguin, at least among the Marquesans. He brought a plane with him when he came to live on the islands, a Beechcraft that has been restored and is on display in a specially constructed hangar in Atuona village.

Visiting the Marquesas provides the ideal excuse for a stopover in Tahiti, Moorea or Bora Bora on the way out or on the journey home. We spent three nights on Moorea. For me the high point was the morning spent on a small catamaran watching the humpback whales. Our guide warned us not to expect too much. Most of the humpbacks, he said, had already started on their long journey back to Antarctic waters.

We were lucky that day. In four hours we must have seen half a dozen humpbacks at close quarters. There was one unforgettable moment when my wife and I quickly put on our flippers and facemasks and slipped from the boat into the water to swim alongside a mother and her calf.

Steppes Travel /www.steppestravel.co.uk / 01285 880980 offer this 14 day voyage around the islands of Polynesia & the South Pacific from £4,995 pp. Including international economy flights with Virgin Atlantic and Air Tahiti, two nights accommodation with InterContinental, full-board cabin accommodation and guided excursions.

More information: Tahiti Tourisme (020-73670946, Tahiti-tourisme.co.uk)