

CRUISING THE Cannibal Isles

BY CHRISTOPHER P. BAKER

From Tahiti to the Marquesas Islands on a copra freighter fit for voluptuaries

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he Marquesas Islands have long been a haven for world-weary souls, perhaps because they're the most remote island group on the face of the earth: the furthest from any continent. Isolation makes tourism rare. There are no high-rise hotels here; no contrived performances of musicians and dancers. The dancing, as with life

on these French Polynesian islands, is real.

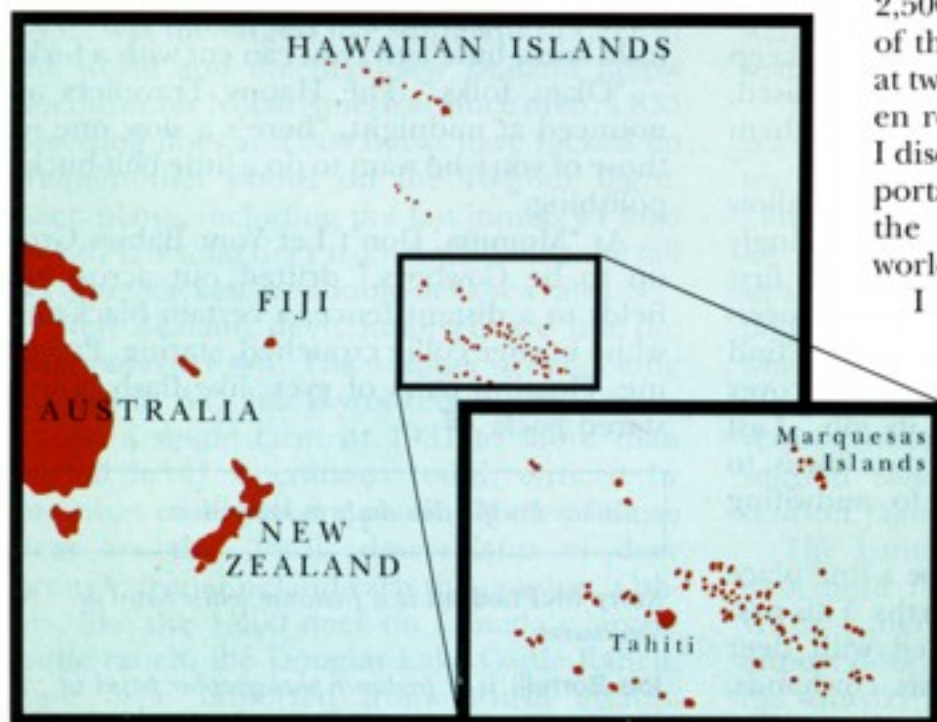
Air service to the Marquesas, which lie 1,200 kilometres northeast of Tahiti, is sporadic and expensive. Find these islands by sea, the way novelists Robert Louis Stevenson, Herman Melville and Jack London did.

To reach the Marquesas means three days and nights from Tahiti, steaming aboard the German-built cargo vessel *Aranui*, an offbeat copra freighter that also comfortably accommodates up to 60 paying passengers in four classes of cabins (many local islanders travel deck class, camped out on mattresses at the stern). Every three weeks the freighter

leaves Papeete in Tahiti on a 16-day, 2,500-kilometre, round-trip circuit of the Marquesas Islands, with stops at two Tuamotu atolls and Bora Bora en route. The 105-metre *Aranui* is, I discovered, much more than transportation to these isles. She's also the islanders' link to the outside world.

I sailed from Papeete beneath a shiny moon. We headed northeast through the Tuamotu Archipelago, a congregation of countless coral atolls barely higher than the surface of the ocean. Early sailors called them the Dangerous Isles. When dawn broke, I could

Once inhabited by head-hunters, the Marquesas today have more than a few idyllic hideaways for suntan hunters.





make out the tousled coconut palms of Takapoto. Soon, Aranui was sitting in deep waters offshore. I could hear the drowsy monotone of surf rolling ashore onto a beach enclosing a lagoon of startling blue.

"*Ce bon plonger!*" said our captain, Jean Voirin, a huge, dark-skinned

sailor. The breathtaking landscape, the heavenly scents and the statuesque beauty of the islanders have enticed sailors, artists and writers for centuries.

Robert Louis Stevenson, in his travel book, *In The South Seas*, wrote that "few men who come to the islands leave them; they grow where they alighted: the palm shades and the trade-wind fans them till they die . . ."

In an overgrown cemetery near Atuona on Hiva Oa — "the loveliest, and by far the most ominous spot on earth," said Stevenson — are the gravestones of two who stayed: French postimpressionist Paul Gauguin spent his last two years painting on Hiva Oa, and Belgian singer-composer Jacques Brel a few feet away, was buried on the island he called "my paradise."

In 1842, at Taiohae Bay on nearby Nuku Hiva, Herman Melville had seen the six-ship fleet of the French Admiral Du Petit Thomas in the process of forcing the Marquesan islanders into the service of France. Any reflections on the iniquities of colonial conquest, no doubt, were soon dispelled by the laughing swarm of Marquesan girls who swam out to the whaler *Acushnet* and, clambering aboard, stood "dripping with brine, their jet-black tresses streaming over their shoulders, and half enveloping their otherwise naked forms."

Alas, no such welcome for us. The milling throng on the quayside seemed interested only in the ship's cargo. I stepped onto the jetty without so



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Above: The Bay of Virgins, despite the name, is open to all. Right: A young passenger from the cruise ship *Aranui* sheds modesty for a bath.

Tahitian with a Cheshire cat grin and white hair as curly as sheep's wool. His giant-sized hand gripped me powerfully as he helped me into the wooden whaleboat for a run through swells that surged through a break in the atoll. This was a swimming and snorkelling stop for passengers' pleasure. The *Aranui* is that kind of ship.

Two days later the Marquesas hove into view. As the *Aranui* entered the bay at Hakahau, I leaned against the rail, with the wind whipping my hair, and took in the island of Ua Pu: the precipices covered in cloud, the rugged pinnacles clawing the sky like fairy-tale castles.

Geography here is savage. No coral reefs protect these Polynesian islands from the full force of the Pacific. Copper-coloured cliffs loom massively out of the sea and pile up to cloud-hung, volcanic heights. Between the serried mountains run deep valleys filled with a silence that seems to ignore the crushing inten-



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Left: The beauty of Nuku Hiva — and its people — enchanted Herman Melville, among others. Below: There are many reasons to smile on Nuku Hiva, the largest of the Marquesas Islands.

much as a handshake.

"What strange visions of outlandish things does the very name (the Marquesas) spirit up!" wrote Herman Melville in *Typee*. "Naked houris — cannibal banquets — groves of coconuts — coral reefs — tattooed chiefs — and bamboo temples; sunny valleys planted with breadfruit trees — carved canoes; dancing on the flashing blue waters — savage woodlands guarded by horrible idols."

When Melville, as a common sailor in 1840, deserted his ship in Taiohae Bay 150 years ago, he found a vigorous culture not much different than that seen by Captain Cook in 1768. Only 46 years later, however, Robert Louis Stevenson arrived in his yacht *Casco* to find the Marquesan islanders on the point of extinction.

Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendana's "discovery" of the islands in 1595 meant the beginning of the end for the 2,000-year-old Marquesan culture. Mendana christened the islands Las Islas Marquesas de Don Garcia Hurtado de Mendoza de Canete, after the viceroy of Peru. The islands received their name in a baptism of fire: Mendana set the example for later explorers and whalers by foreshortening his cultural lessons with the musket ball.

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Fortunately, two centuries went by before a European sailing ship — Cook's *Endeavour* — again appeared on the horizon. The contempt of the Spanish for the lowly "savages" could hardly have been more misplaced. Engravings in Cook's journals show artistically tattooed warriors with long-plumed headdresses drifting on a calm bay in long, spritsailed canoes. The canoes, with their intricately carved, upturned bows and maze-like designs marked Marquesans as master woodcarvers.

Cook's observations, and those of later visitors, depict a complex, carefree society free of griefs and vexations, with "no foreclosures or mortgages . . . no destitute widows with their starving children existing on the cold charity of the world."

Life in the Marquesas before the advent of the European was, however, no idyll. In droughts, the breadfruit crop — the staff of life — often failed, resulting in mass starvation. The tribes, too, were almost always at war, valley against valley.

In the wake of Cook's voyage came ships on colonial conquest — first Americans, then British and finally the French — and whaling ships, which called here as often as not



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Above: Passengers from the *Aranui* travel up a mountain river.

Right: Marquesans aren't shy about their tattoos. Or much else, either.

merely to slake the sailors' sexual thirst. Venereal diseases, smallpox and tuberculosis became almost endemic. The magnificent, happy-go-lucky Marquesans, described by Captain Cook as "by far the most splendid islanders in the South Seas," coughed and shivered their way to near oblivion: from some 100,000 islanders in 1768 to a mere 5,000 by the turn of the 20th century. Approximately 7,000 people inhabit the Marquesas today.

On Nuku Hiva, I puffed up a narrow trail that winds a mile or so through the clammy jungle to the largest of the ancient ceremonial sites in Taipivai valley. It was here, on the island's southeast coast, that Herman Melville was held captive among those "inveterate gourmandisers of human flesh," the Typee. Everywhere grew mangoes, bananas, papayas, breadfruit, orchids, bougainvillea, and flame-coloured hibiscus — the "flower of friendship." At the foot of a large knoll, half screened by masses of overhanging foliage, we came upon two great stone terraces known as *marae* — "idolatrous altars of the savages" — and sculptured stone figures called *tikis*: large, squatting statues, solemn, big-eyed, with large, scowling mouths. They were weatherworn and smothered with blue-green

algae. On Hiva Oa, we explored more substantial stone complexes beneath the dark shadows of tall banyan trees. Here, victims were once hung in the branches to consecrate the holy site.

Today, life seems once more idyllic for the ever-smiling Marquesans, who take the French subsidized copra, the family allotment, the free medicine as part of their due. I saw at least two dozen stereos and as many VCRs invade the Marquesas, along with jeeps, scooters, refrigerators, stoves, cement, timber, crates of beer and other staples of island life. Heavy subsidies from the French government mean that even the most remote cottages boast sliding glass doors, tin roofs and television antennae.

At Taiohae on Nuku Hiva and Hakahau on Ua Pu, we tied up to newly built jetties; elsewhere, we anchored offshore in remote coves and made shore landings in whaleboats through the surf. When needed, two or three sailors would leap into the surf, then whisk passengers frail of heart or limb from the boat and carry them to terra firma. Safely ashore, we set off to explore each island in the care of a guide, while the Polynesian crew — tall, bronzed and as muscular as sculptors' models — loaded and unloaded our cargo.

In the Marquesas, the coconut palm is the tree of life and coconut

