

PAUL GAUGUIN

Luxurious little liner is extending beyond her South Seas roots

By Peter Knego




Should Bali Hai beckon you to venture “where the sky meets the sea,” there is no better mode than Paul Gauguin Cruises’ *Paul Gauguin*, a gem of a vessel specifically designed to ply the very same *South Pacific* waters romanticized in Oscar Hammerstein’s yearning lyrics. Commissioned in late 1997 for Grand Circle Travel and longterm chartered to luxury operator Radisson (now Regent) Seven Seas Cruises, the *Paul Gauguin* was built in France at the famed Chantiers de l’Atlantique (now part of STX Europe). Aside from her maiden positioning voyage via the United States to Tahiti, she has never strayed from her South Seas base.

Grand Circle sold the ship in 2010 to Paul Gauguin Cruises, a newly formed division of Beachcomber Resorts, which operates five deluxe properties in French Polynesia. In turn, Paul Gauguin Cruises’ new

parent company has recently invested \$7-million in a two-part upgrade that has given the *Paul Gauguin* more suites, additional balconies, and renewed, sophisticated soft fittings in all public spaces and accommodations.

With a double-occupancy capacity for only 332 guests and a gross tonnage of just 19,200, the *Paul Gauguin* enjoys a passenger-space ratio of 57.8, one of the highest in the industry. She boasts seven passenger decks that are traversed by wide passageways and connected by two stairtowers and four lifts. At 513 feet long, the ship has a relatively broad beam of 71 feet to help compensate for a shallow draft of 16.9 feet that allows her to anchor in remote inlets inaccessible to larger ships.

Conditions permitting, the *Paul Gauguin* unfolds her Marina platform from the stern, offering a variety



The pretty *Paul Gauguin* is right at home,
anchored in beautiful Bora Bora.
(Spread Photo By Peter Knego)

of aquatic distractions, from kayaking and hosted Zodiac rides to windsurfing and paddle-boarding. A nice plus is that all guests are provided with snorkels, masks, and fins to use gratis throughout the cruise. For an extra charge, the *Paul Gauguin* also provides PADI-certified scuba lessons and gear for devout underwater enthusiasts as well as a number of excursions to some of the world's most spectacular dive spots.

Ranging from 202 to 588 square feet, the ship's six categories of staterooms and suites may not be the largest in the luxury cruise sector, but they are havens of serenity with copious amounts of storage space, intuitively placed controls, and some of the most comfortable bedding on the seven seas. The latest refit has rendered the cabins in rich tones of gold, ochre, jade, and royal blue that handsomely off-

set their cherry-toned paneling. With the exception of the five Category C cabins overlooking the stern (which have shower stalls only) and the one handicap stateroom bathroom (which is equipped with a roll-in shower), all are furnished with bathtubs, marble-top counters, and cabinets with plenty of nooks to stow toiletries.

There are no new-fangled waterparks or giant LED screens cluttering the ship's top decks. Instead, she has a plentitude of open space in which to unwind and relax; well laid out, beautifully appointed, and comfortable lounges for enjoying a quiet conversation and/or a good book; plus a host of culturally infused events to attend, whether it be a local troupe of Polynesian dancers or enrichment lectures by renowned naturalists and archaeologists.

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Category C, balcony stateroom.



Category E, window stateroom.



Category B, veranda stateroom.

MS PAUL GAUGUIN FACTS & FIGURES

Company: Paul Gauguin Cruises.

Built: 1997, Chantiers de l'Atlantique, St. Nazaire, France.

Country Of Registry: Bahamas.

Gross Tonnage: 19,200.

Length: 513 feet. **Width:** 71 ft.

Draft: 16.9 ft. **Speed:** 18 knots.

Propulsion: Diesel-electric; four MAN diesel engines drive twin screws.

Passenger Capacity: 332.

Passenger Space Ratio: 57.8.

Normal Crew Size: 217.

Nationality Of Crew: International.

Cabins: 166 in eight categories, all outside, comprising two Category OS owner's suites (one measuring 588 square feet including a 57-sq.-ft. veranda; the other 534 sq. ft. including a 77-sq.-ft. veranda), two Category GS grand suites (529 sq. ft. including a 197-sq.-ft. veranda), five Category A veranda suites (349 to 358 sq. ft. including a 53- to 58-sq.-ft. veranda), 17 Category B veranda staterooms (303 to 305 sq. ft. including a 47- to 56-sq.-ft. veranda), 63 Category C and 26 Category D balcony staterooms (239 sq. ft. including a 37-sq.-ft. balcony; the five Category C cabins overlooking the stern on Deck Seven measure 261 to 303 sq. ft. including a 70- to 75-sq.-ft. balcony); 37 Category E window staterooms (202 sq. ft. with picture-window), and 14 Category F window staterooms (202 sq. ft. with two portholes). All suites and veranda category cabins include butler service, in-room bar setup, iPod music system. One Category E stateroom is slightly larger (225 sq. ft.) and wheelchair accessible. Nearly every cabin features a queen-size bed and full-size bathtub. Love-seat/convertible-beds offer triple occupancy in all suite and veranda category staterooms, as well as in 12 Category C, five Category D, and 11 Category E cabins. Every stateroom has a separate sitting area with sofa, stool, and coffee table; desk/vanity area with stool, hairdryer, 110-/220-volt electric

outlets; well-appointed bathrooms with luxury amenities; refrigerator stocked daily with soft drinks, beer, and bottled water; fresh fruits replenished daily; fresh flower arrangement upon embarkation; European bed linens; cotton robes; closet; safe; umbrella; TV (including complimentary in-room movie channels) with CD/DVD player (DVD library onboard); direct-dial satellite telephone; individually controlled thermostat.

Public Rooms: Bar De Soleil (outdoor bar on topmost sun deck that accommodates up to 200); Captain's Reception Lounge (accommodates 24 for cocktails and can be used as a meeting room); Pool Bar (accommodates 25); Le Grill (restaurant seats 100 for buffets at lunch and breakfast and seats 60 for reservations-only dinner); La Palette (lounge atop the stern, seats 40 inside and 44 on outdoor terrace, offering continental breakfast, afternoon tea, juice bar, craft classes, karaoke, live music, and live disc jockey); Fare Tahiti (gallery on Deck Six with reference library and Polynesian art); La Veranda (restaurant seats 134 inside and 40 outside for breakfast and lunch, also serves reservations-only dinner for 75 guests); Le Grand Salon (showroom and bar seats 314, offering movies, enrichment lectures, cultural shows, guest performers); Le Casino (blackjack, roulette, 13 slot machines); Piano Bar (casino-adjacent room seats 43); L'Etoile (open-seating dinner restaurant accommodates 204 guests).

Facilities/Features: Fully air-conditioned; stabilized; seven passenger decks; four passenger elevators; two stairtowers; Marina (retractable platform aft on Deck Three offering Zodiac rides, windsurfing, kayaking, snorkeling, scuba [extra charges apply]; note that there is no swimming or snorkeling from directly off the platform); outdoor pool; PADI-certified scuba classes; La Boutique (gifts, sundries, souvenirs); Internet Cafe (eight stations); Wi-Fi in public areas and

all staterooms (extra charges apply); Photo Shop (shipboard photos, cameras, supplies); Reception (24 hours); Travel Concierge Desk (shore excursions, scuba classes); Fitness Center (weight machines, two ellipticals, three treadmills, one stairclimber, one recumbent bike, one upright bike, free weights); Deep Nature Spa (one hairdresser, two manicurists, three therapists, two aestheticians, five treatment rooms, sauna, steam room); walking track; shuffleboard; table tennis; laundry/dry-cleaning services; hospital; pharmacy.

Money Matters: The *Paul Gauguin* is a "cashless society" where all onboard purchases are made with the guest's ID card, which is registered to a credit card (Visa, Master Card, American Express) or settled with cash (U.S. dollars, euros, and Pacific francs) and/or traveler's checks (in U.S. dollars or euros). All-inclusive fares include select wines and spirits, soft drinks, bottled water, and hot beverages, as well as gratuities for room stewards and dining staff.

Itineraries/Fares: Throughout 2013 and into 2014, the *Paul Gauguin* sails on the following itineraries: 12- and 13-night Fiji, Tonga, Cook & Society Islands; seven-night Tahiti & The Society Islands; 10-night Society Islands & Tuamotus; 11-night Cook Islands & Society Islands; and 14-night Marquesas, Tuamotus, & Society Islands. In 2014, the ship will offer new itineraries that include an 11-night Fiji to Australia voyage, a 12-night Australia to Fiji voyage, and two 14-night voyages between Australia and Southeast Asia. Brochure rates, per person/double-occupancy, for seven-night Tahiti & The Society Islands sailings range from \$3,995 to \$11,995.

For More Information: Contact your travel agent or Paul Gauguin Cruises (Cruise Travel Magazine), 11100 Main Street, Suite 300, Bellevue, WA 98004; call 800-848-6172; or log on to www.pgcruiises.com.

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By day, onboard activities include movies, craft classes, table games, and enrichment lectures. At night, the main shows on my sailing featured Les Gauguins, the ship's ensemble of Polynesian dancers and musicians, a piano recital, and a cabaret show headlined by cruise director Steve Wood. Additionally, the once-per-cruise Polynesian night gives guests a chance to actually don the colorful

clothing, beads, and other baubles purchased during the week.

While the ship is deluxe, her dress code is very relaxed, eschewing tuxedos and formal gowns for a more practical and comfortable "country-club casual" attire. This made visiting the outer decks in the evening and dining at al fresco venues far more enjoyable in the tropical climes of Polynesia.

Named for the famous French artist who made Polynesia his home during his later years, the *Paul Gauguin* is chiefly deco-

rated with warm wood tones and soft fittings that combine sophisticated autumn hues with vibrant Polynesian and nautically themed motifs. There are several extremely attractive rooms, starting topside with La Palette, an indoor/outdoor lounge on Deck Eight aft with a large glass screen that opens on to a teak-lined patio overlooking the stern. It was a natural stop for continental breakfast and fresh-pressed juices in the morning, a great place to chill for afternoon tea, and the ultimate venue for live music, karaoke, and a DJ at night.

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Tim McKenna/Paul Gauguin Cruises

The multi-purpose indoor/outdoor La Palette lounge bustles from morning till night.

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On Deck Six, the aft portion of the starboard promenade—which features banks of seating and a reference Library—is called Fare Tahiti. This unique, Polynesian-themed art gallery even boasts a genuine Gauguin—a menu cover the struggling, not-yet-world-renowned artist sketched in exchange for food at a Tahitian cafe.

Public spaces on Deck Five boast a few additional feet of ceiling height, beginning forward with Le Grand Salon, a comfortable showroom with excellent sightlines that can seat all guests. Two finite exterior teak-lined promenades follow, with a shuffleboard court on the starboard side. A wide interior starboard passage connects Le Grand Salon with the relatively petite Le Casino and the Piano Bar, which has been beautifully redone in burgundy and ochre tiki patterns. The Piano Bar opens nightly at 6:30 p.m. and is a favorite pre- and post-dinner haunt, since the main restaurant, L'Etoile, is just a few short steps aft.

Three dining venues provide a wealth of culinary experiences on the *Paul Gauguin*. L'Etoile, which seats 204, is the most opulent with its soaring Art Deco chandelier and matching sconces in addition to a panorama of floor-to-ceiling windows. Its plush wood-

en arm chairs feature chrysanthemum-patterned upholstery that is mimicked by custom Schonwald chargers in an elegant touch of detailing. L'Etoile serves a leisurely open-seating dinner between 7 and 9:30 p.m. and has a healthy proportion of two-tops as well as larger tables. The menu changes daily and features up to eight entree selections (preceded by a homemade sorbet "intermezzo") in addition to two or three soups, salads, appetizers, and pasta dishes. There are "light and healthy," no salt, and vegetarian selections as well as local specialties. And if the desserts aren't decadent enough, hold out for the inevitable tray of homemade petits-fours. Abundant wines, beers, and cocktails are complimentary, but there is also a wine list for those seeking to purchase special vintages.

Reservations are required for dinner in La Veranda, but there is no charge to dine in the venue, aft on Deck Six, that offers a French-inspired menu. The highlight is a fixed selection of specialties approved by two-star Michelin Chef Jean Pierre Vigato of the Paris-based L'Apicus Restaurant, including three appetizers (foie gras, escargot, terrine of leeks and shrimp) a choice of entrees (mahi mahi or lamb fillet), and

dessert (fresh fruit with white chocolate cream and vanilla lime ice cream). To maintain its exacting standards, La Veranda is restricted to 75 dinner guests between 7 and 9:30 p.m. in scheduled increments.

However, for breakfast (7:30 to 9:30 a.m.) and lunch (noon to 2 p.m.), La Veranda can accommodate up to 134 inside and 40 more on the adjoining outdoor terrace. Its airy setting features floral-patterned soft fittings in turquoise and seafoam green that are offset with light wood accents. During breakfast there is an egg station and cold cuts, bacon, fresh fruit, lovely baked goods (croissants, pain au chocolate, breads), jams, yogurts, and cereals. For lunch, La Veranda has a salad bar with a wide choice of dressings and even a nice selection of gourmet oils and vinegars. There is also a pasta bar, warm and cold appetizers and entrees, and delicious desserts in addition to a daily menu for full-service, a la carte courses.

Le Grill, a reservations-required/no-extra-charge dinner venue, has a fixed menu featuring local and Pacific Rim-inspired cuisine. Located just aft of the pool up on Deck Eight, the alfresco space is sheltered by an awning and wind screens forward and on either side. Le Grill seats 60 dinner guests between 6:30 and 8:30 p.m. during scheduled increments. It offers buffets for breakfast (7 to 9:30 a.m.) and lunch (noon to 2 p.m.) and serves afternoon tea at 3 p.m. with live music by the pool



Paul Gauguin Cruises

Kayaks are among the Marina's aquatic diversions.



Peter Krieger

The elegant L'Etoile restaurant accommodates 204 guests at open seatings.

and a wonderful selection of baked treats and small sandwiches. Nearby, a juice bar in La Palette provides specials like fresh-pressed carrot/beet juice, while the Pool Bar frothed up the ship's most genuine and potent espresso drinks.

One of the most sublime extra-tariff dining experiences available on any cruise may well be the recently implemented Marina Dinner, available for two (\$250 per-table) or four (\$400 per-table) guests in Bora Bora and Moorea, weather permitting. It's hard to think of anything more romantic than this private event under the stars with the gently lapping Polynesian waters only steps away. Items from La Veranda's l'Apicus menu are served, and there is a personal waiter in attendance as well as a special serenade from Les Gauguins.

I utilized the punctual 24-hour complimentary room service on an almost daily basis as my morning alarm clock, waking to a friendly tap on the door followed by a selection of muesli, smoked salmon, fresh orange juice, and a cappuccino to savor on my balcony.

Our voyage kicked off with a late-night sail-away party ondeck as the ship departed Papeete, Tahiti, arriving the following morning at Uturoa on Raiatea. In ancient Polynesian lore, the island of Raiatea, which means "bright sky," was considered the birthplace of the world and was originally



La Veranda offers casual breakfasts and lunches but serves a French-inspired gourmet dinner.



Les Gauguins provide authentic Polynesian entertainment.

named Havai'i. I joined the afternoon "Pearl Farm & Snorkeling" excursion on an out-rigger that crossed the lagoon shared with nearby Taha'a, a smaller island known for its ancient fire-walking ceremonies and now nicknamed "Vanilla Island." At the black-pearl farm, our guide demonstrated how oysters are selected, then grafted and seeded with a "starter" pearl to begin the gem-making process. Next came a scenic ride along Taha'a's lush coast to a spot where we enjoyed our first snorkeling experience.

Very early the next morning, the *Paul Gauguin* anchored off Taha'a at Motu Mahana, the ship's private *motu* (small island). This is one of the most popular highlights on the itinerary, where guests are tendered to a beach lapped by crystalline waters and serenaded by Les Gauguins. A full, included-in-the-fare bar and grand barbecue are set up, and local vendors sell wares that range from shells to hand-crafted textiles and pearls.

That evening, the *Paul Gauguin* sailed off to nearby Bora Bora, where she would spend the next two nights anchored in Vaitape harbor. We awoke the following morning to marvel at the jagged form of Mt. Otemanu, the lava "plug" of a long-since-eroded volcanic peak, lurking overhead. Bora Bora was first sighted by Captain James Cook in 1769, and the locals claim it is the inspiration for the mythical Bali Hai in *South Pacific*—even its popular watering hole Bloody Mary's is named for one of the songs in the musical.

After breakfast, we tendered ashore to spend the night at Le Moana, a four-star Beachcomber-owned resort set on Matira

Beach, considered one of the finest in the world. The overnights can be booked in advance, but only day visits to the resort (which includes access to the beach and pool area as well as lunch) are sold on the ship. Le Moana shares a tender service with the even more upscale five-star Intercontinental Resort & Spa, which is located on a *motu* that faces the other side of Mt. Otemanu.

We were back onboard the *Paul Gauguin* the following day in time for a leisurely lunch before tendering off to another *motu* to snorkel amid schools of exotic fish and utterly spectacular coral formations. That afternoon, I nibbled at a homemade tart and sipped a cup of tea in Le Grill, pining away as we slowly departed Bora Bora, the spires of Mt. Otemanu gradually disappearing in our wake.

The next morning, I sat transfixed on my balcony as we approached Moorea, its series of jagged volcanic peaks and lush greenery perhaps even "out-paradising" Bora Bora. Shortly after we anchored in Cook's Inlet, I was off to join the "Trails Of The Ancients" excursion, hosted by resident archaeologist Mark Eddowes. Early in the tour, he pointed out what Mooreans call "Mt. Bali Hai"—

the cathedral-like Moua Roa, a 2,880-foot-tall volcanic plug that was once a sacred burial ground. After visiting Cook's 1777 landing spot, we stopped at a local agricultural school to taste homemade jams, followed by a chance to take in a panoramic view of the island from the Belvedere Lookout. The tour concluded with a long hike (wear long sleeves and pants to avoid pervasive mosquitoes) into the rain forest to visit a recently restored *morai*, or burial mound, before emerging into a pineapple plantation.

Prior to the *Paul Gauguin* leaving Moorea the following afternoon, I enjoyed a Zodiac ride into a nearby lagoon to swim with gentle stingrays and ominous-looking but docile black-tipped sharks.

After a short crossing to Papeete, there was one last night to savor the *Paul Gauguin* before debarking for an afternoon at Beachcomber's Intercontinental Tahiti Resort, a beautiful property near the airport. Pre- and post-cruise packages are available there, as well as at the Beachcomber properties in Moorea and Bora Bora.

Even James Michener, the author of *Tales From The South Pacific*, created mystical Bali Hai with a good deal of artistic license, letting the natives of Moorea and Bora Bora both stake their claims to the name without challenge. But for me, that special place "where the sky meets the sea" could very well be the good ship *Paul Gauguin*. **CT**



Le Grand Salon can seat all passengers for nightly entertainment, enrichment programs, and more.