

Somewhere In Between

A couple finds a balance between recreation and relaxation on a cruise in French Polynesia. | BY IVY GRACIE

My husband, Mark, and I are somewhat bipolar in our vacationing styles. On one hand, we crave tropical vacations where we can flop onto pool- or seaside chaises, nap in the shade, linger over dishy beach reads and take cocktails at 4 p.m. On the other hand, we'll go all out exploring a new land- or seascape, embracing the culture, hanging with locals and taking cocktails at 4 p.m. For us, traveling has always meant going to one extreme or the other; there's never been an in-between. That is, until we boarded the m/s Paul Gauguin for a seven-night cruise through French Polynesia.

After a 15-hour travel day expanded to 20, we were late getting to Papeete, the capital of Tahiti and the Gauguin's port of embarkation. So instead of departing at 5 p.m., we boarded the ship under the cloak of late evening's darkness.

Mark and I stepped out onto our private balcony to watch Papeete disappear; soon we were surrounded by blackness above and below. With nothing to see, there was no reason not to give in to the travel weariness that pushed down on our shoulders and eyelids. We nestled into our cushy size (queen-size) bed and sunk into silent slumber. Throughout the night, the ship's barely perceptible undulations lulled us deeper into our dreams while it traveled the 112-mile course toward our destination, the Society Islands.

Volcanic in origin, the islands are rugged but lush, and the waters surrounding them are as turquoise and cobalt as their Photoshopped

likenesses splashed across glossy pages of travel books and magazines. Explored by Captains Cook and Bligh, and immortalized by author James Michener and post-Impressionist painter (and our passage's namesake) Paul Gauguin, the Society Islands are divided into two groups: the Windward and Leeward islands. We would be visiting four on the latter: Huahine, Bora Bora, Taha'a and Moorea.

The next morning, propelled by a combination of heightened anticipation and maladjusted circadians, Mark and I beat the sun to its own ascent. In the predawn shadows we sprang out of bed and padded to the balcony, where the scenery hadn't changed since the night before. Eventually the sun peeked over the South Pacific's horizon and slowly spread a coat of coral and peach glaze across an endless sky. We were so enchanted by the vibrant display we hardly noticed that the ship was gliding stealthily toward Huahine.

When we saw the approaching island thrusting up from the ocean, its surface covered in lush, green foliage and its perimeter surrounded by calm, cerulean water, our travel-related bipolar disorder flared, firing off salvos of anxiety and excitement: Tour each island! Lounge poolside! Explore the ship! Snorkel in the lagoons! Walk the beaches! Take naps! Four islands, seven nights! And, damnit, one night is already gone! Do we want recreation? Or relaxation? How do we fit it all in? How do we do this?

Almost organically, our surroundings provided the answers. Because French Polynesia's temperatures climb to the upper 90s in mid-afternoon, it made sense to be active in the morning or early afternoon and rest after



that. Once we figured that out, the rest was easy: On board, we'd split our time between the public spaces and our well-appointed stateroom; off the ship, we'd divide our time between land and water.

The Paul Gauguin's excursion menu is deep, varied and accommodating to a wide scope of tastes and abilities. We chose an assortment of land and sea activities, all of which offered some form of exercise, education and entertainment: snorkeling trips on Huahine, Bora Bora and Moorea; a tour of a vanilla plantation on Taha'a; and a half-day land tour of ancient temples and a pineapple plantation on Moorea. That left us a day to ourselves on Bora Bora and enough time to attend a lavish, daylong barbecue on the Gauguin's very own private motu (small islet), where we could busy ourselves with snorkeling, lolling under palm trees, drinking sweet nectars laced with rum out of hollowed coconut shells, and learning to tie-dye and tie sarongs.

Every day our activities finished in time for us to return to the boat and observe the afternoon ritual we'd initiated the first day: a short stint poolside followed by a catnap in cool, crisp linens, then an hour on the balcony watching the ever-changing views and enjoying a visit from Abner, our butler, who arrived every day at 4 p.m. bearing amuse bouche and aperitifs. After that, we'd shower, dress and stroll to one of the ship's three restaurants for a lingering dinner.

Within the first few days, Mark and I struck a balance between doing and being — something we'd never been able to do before. There were no extremes; we'd found our in-between. It was no coincidence that we discovered it here; after all, the Paul Gauguin itself is a study in "in-between." Built specifically to hug the shallow coastlines of French Polynesia, Fiji and Australia, it's somewhere in-between big boat and small ship.

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private paradise The m/s Paul Gauguin pampers passengers with mahogany-lined staterooms with butler service, a casino, full-service spa, retractable watersports marina, and three gourmet restaurants. Each cruising itinerary with the m/s Paul Gauguin features a stop at the ship's private motu (small islet), where passengers enjoy a lavish barbecue with entertainment, activities, and quiet shaded spots for afternoon napping.

With accommodations for just 332 passengers, it's somewhere in-between intimate and exclusive. And with a staff of 217 and a crew-to-guest ratio of 1:1.5, it's somewhere in-between posh and pampering.

It didn't take long to appreciate the Paul Gauguin for what it really is: a floating five-star resort. With three fine-dining restaurants, a smattering of cocktail lounges, a show lounge and a small casino, it offers an array of adult entertainment. A full-service spa, state-of-the-art fitness center, outdoor pool and retractable watersports marina cater to more physical pursuits. And the spacious staterooms, 70 percent of which feature private balconies, are well-appointed with mahogany-stained woodwork, ample closets, sitting areas, entertainment centers and well-stocked beverage refrigerators. No wonder the Paul Gauguin has consistently been named one of the top-ranked luxury cruise ships in the world since 1998, or that in 2011 alone it was named one of *Condé Nast Traveler's* "Top Five Small Luxury Ships" and one of the "World's Most Scenic Cruises" by *CNN.com* and *Travel + Leisure* magazine.

Any misgivings Mark and I might have had about choosing this cruise over a stationary over-the-water hut in Bora Bora or Moorea were assuaged once we realized that there's not much to do on any one island. For us, spending more than a day or two on land would result in utter ennui. We preferred moving from one island paradise to the next on a paradise of our own. Each morning we awoke anticipating the day's adventures, and at the end of each excursion we couldn't wait to return to our luxurious home on the water.

The Paul Gauguin transports passengers from destination to destination, but the truth is it's a destination in itself. And it's one I hope Mark and I will visit again. Because there we learned that we don't need to go to extremes. There we learned that finding balance is easier than it seems. And there, in the middle of the Society Islands, aboard the m/s Paul Gauguin, we found our "somewhere in-between." **AL**