

March 16, 2012 Around the Island of Tahiti



As usual there was little time to sleep in that morning since we wanted to obtain more of the local currency and go shopping at the famous downtown market. The clerk directed us to one bank, but it did not accept Master Card, so we went to another and this time tried the machine and withdrew 10,000 xPF, about \$110 US dollars. At first I thought I had gotten the equivalent 1100 US dollars, and was confused by the unfamiliarity of it all.

A few blocks away, surrounded by brilliantly-colored buildings, the market bustled with activity between four busy streets lined with cars, scooters, bicycles, and pedestrians. It was crowded and a bit chaotic, but unlike the din of urban areas we were so used to in the homeland. After stopping at a marine store to buy a new snorkel for Wanda, we made our way into the market that covered a whole block and had two stories of open air shopping beneath one large roof.





Flowers food, and crafts covered the lower level, and busy merchants marketed their wares to passersby of all nationalities. We made our way up the stairs to the Café Marche and had omelets and bread for breakfast. It was not until I paid the tab that I realized that the ten bills I had were for 1000 francs (11 US), not 10,000 francs (\$110 US). For a brief moment I was terrorized by the

thought that I might have paid over \$300 US for breakfast for 4, but then realized it was only a little over \$30 US dollars equivalent. Not bad for four people eating a restaurant meal in Tahiti.

Money problems cropped up again now and then as we tried to overpay or underpay at times by mistake. The merchants kept close track, and showed no ilk nor inclination to take advantage of their bumbling buyer's mistakes. We visited store after store, and after quickly depleting our local currency, I hustled back to the ATM and this time took out 30,000 xPF, plenty to cover all our shopping needs.

The ladies bought four pareos for friends at home, some for Wanda, and a black and white honu pareo for me, but they forgot to purchase one for Fairy. The kindly clerk showed us how to tie the pareos, and then threw in one extra as a free gift.

On the upper floor we gazed at amazing wood carvings, many from the Marquesas. In one corner store long hollow wooden sticks resembled didgeridoos, and I asked a shy clerk what they were. She got one down and blew into it with a resonating deep sound. With her permission, I played it as well, and was able to perform like a didgeridoo, but with the trumpet tone instead of the lower drone of a didgeridoo. Still, it played quite well, and she was beaming with laughter as I finished.

From the upper levels we gazed at the various vendors and wares, from fish to flowers, to carvings of wood and shell, to fragrant soaps. Fairy stopped to load up on the latter, and it brought back fond memories of our last trip here over eight years earlier. Finally we retired back to the hotel with goods in hand to prepare for our island tour at 1:15 PM.

Breakfast had filled us up late that morning and we felt no need for a noon meal, so we headed to the lobby to await the Marama Tours bus. Another group of five people waited as well and we discovered that they were Canadians. When the bus arrived, Jean Batiste, the driver, wore a puzzled frown as he counted the passengers. It seemed that someone had told him that our party consisted of three, not four, and they were one seat short. After some thought and discussion, we

went to the back of the bus that normally seated three, and with marginal effort, we all four wriggled into position. Royal had some succinct comments about the situation, but we were stuck with little alternative, save one of us remain behind.

Again our tour guide was bright, knowledgeable and interacted well with his guests. He had been doing it for over five years, knew the area well, and was able to anticipate many of our interests and concerns. Much was said about the benefits versus the problems of being a French protectorate, as we cruised past the scenery, and he gave an enlightening view of situations that we had never considered before. Various buildings of importance were discussed along the way, along with changes that accompany the ongoing evolution of the society.

The road rounded many beaches where surfers and paddle-boarders plied the waves with varying degrees of skill. When one took a spectacular splash atop a wave, we could not help noting how easily any one of us could have done that. Others, however, held our admiration as they rode large waves far in towards shore.

Towards Mahina, buildings with symbols of Venus and the sun began to appear as we approached the turn off to Point Venus. In the 1769 Captain Cook and crew had set up an observatory there to view and carefully time the transit of Venus across the face of the sun. Many other expeditions had traveled to various parts of the world to attempt the same observations as Cook. They had hoped to obtain precisely timed observations of the transit that would make it possible to accurately determine the distance of the sun from Earth, known as the astronomical unit. If successful, the distances of all the planets in the solar system could then be calculated using Kepler's laws of planetary motion. Unfortunately, diffraction properties of light created an "ink drop" phenomenon that obscured the margins of Venus and limited the accuracy of the timings. Though ultimately a failure, it was a notable effort and has become known as the "Apollo Program" of the 18th century.



We stopped to admire the tall, white, multi-tiered lighthouse at Point Venus, near where Cook's observations were made. Behind the lighthouse, a white memorial with symbolic Venus hovering over a blazing white star commemorated the transit that had tempted the explorers over two centuries prior. Other memorials commemorated Captain Bly and the men of the Bounty as well as the missionaries, or "micnoaries" as Melville described the locals term for them, that had

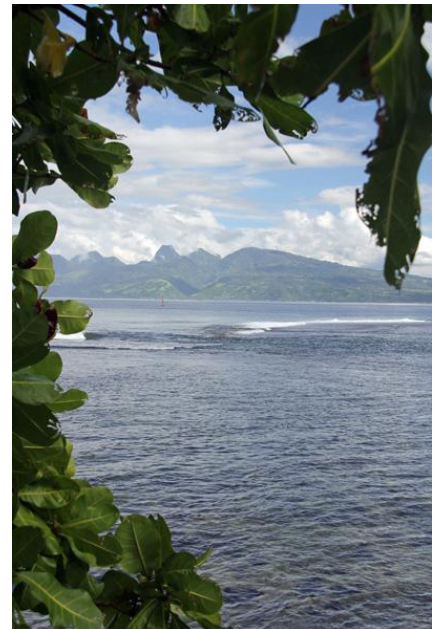
brought Christianity to the islands, with attending benefit and peril to their cultural heritage. Jean Batiste spoke explicitly of both the rewards and the problems resulting from the European influence, and left us with much to ponder as we pressed onward around the Island.



Off the main road, a paved drive led to the parking area of the Three Cascades of Fa'arumai Valley. A rocky path traced over an arching footbridge, through dark, flowered woods to the base of the Vaimahuta waterfall. Perhaps a hundred feet up the escarpment, two streams of water plummeted from the foliage above to a ledge with a depression where the waters mixed into a single stream before cascading to the pool below. The water then regrouped and bubbled over rocks and boulders downward aside the path that had led us here. We stopped to take photos and a kind young Oriental lady from Houston volunteered to take our photo with our camera. Fairy and she chatted merrily as we retraced our steps towards the bus. We had not even noticed that she had been on the small tour bus since she was seated in the front by the driver. Her family was with her on vacation, but had declined the adventure of the tour, so, with a sparkling spirit of independence, she went on her own.

Other falls could be heard splashing in the distance, but we only had time to visit the one. The bus continued on while Jean Batiste described the landing of Wallis and his senseless slaughter of a quarter of that region's population. Courage and war clubs were no match for cannons and steel as cultural ideals clashed in a deadly, one-sided catastrophe.

We continued on past the roads to Tahiti Iti where most of the Tahitian agriculture occurs. Very few people live there since, other than agriculture, there is little work, and it could take up to two hours during rush traffic to travel to work on Tahiti Nui (the bigger island). We passed by Harrison Smith Botanical Gardens, then stopped for a short time at the Paul Gauguin museum. While some went inside, Fairy and I had Jean Batiste drive us to the local grocery for some soft drinks and to get change so we could pay our fare. Back at the museum Fairy and I watched some beautiful red crimson-backed tanagers flitting about the nearby trees. Like Gauguin, the tanagers were imports from distant lands.



After leaving the museum, we turned again towards Papeete, and while rain prevented our visit to large caves along the way, we did manage a glimpse of them as we passed by. Also, time did not permit a stop at Arahurahu Marae, a beautifully restored marae (stone temple). Many of the other marae had been destroyed at the behest of the missionaries in their fight against the local ancient religions, or their stones simply used in other, newer structures.

The tour guide dropped off the friendly young lady that had taken our photo by the falls, then returned us to our hotel to freshen up and then go out for dinner. We had heard of the good food and reasonable prices available from the food trucks at To'ata Place by the harbor, just down the avenue from our hotel.



We ambled down the dark street filled with traffic and people celebrating the first evening of the weekend. By the water we easily found the trucks and park where locals gathered for fun and food. Kids played around the park to the right, while the trucks were set up with various cuisines, with Chinese being the local favorite. After making rounds of the various vendors, we settled in at the

first one we had visited and had a delightful meal of Chinese food while taking in the sights and sounds of the area.

On return, we found the hotel alive with weekend revelers, eating at the restaurant or imbibing at the bar. Fairy, Wanda, and Royal settled in for the night while I worked on the journal. Finally around 11:30 I made one more trip to the lobby to check on details for the journal. I was joined on the elevator with two very tall ladies, or were they men in drag? One greeted me playfully with a word I did not recognize, so I replied, “Bon jour,” and the conversation ended.

In the lobby the pace had quickened even from what it had been when we returned from dining by the bay. I was quite happy to complete my work and return to the room to escape the din in the lobby and call the night to an end. It was time for a more relaxing venue.

Photo Gallery:



View Papeete and distant Moorea from Hotel Tahiti Nui



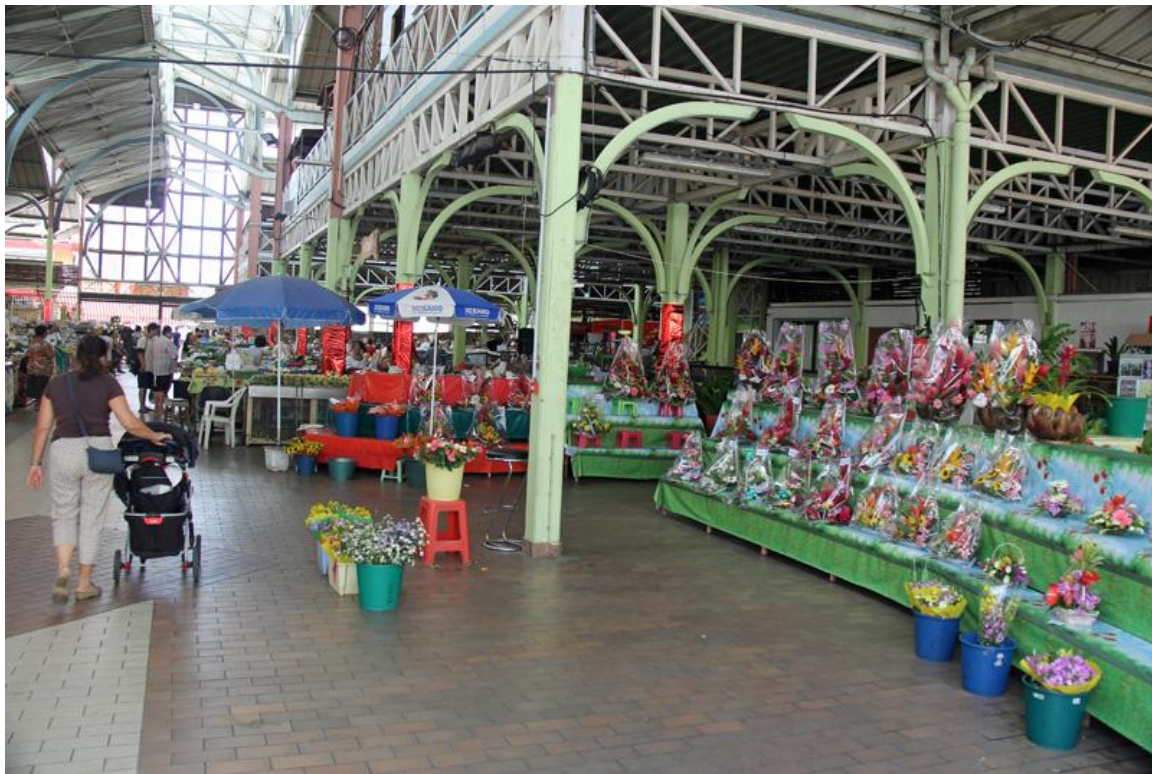
Downtown Papeete



Outside the market at Papeete



Market Entrance



Inside market at Papeete



Market from above



Point Venus Lighthouse, top to bottom.



Monument to the Cook expedition and Venus Transit



Path at the Three Cascades of Fa'arumai Valley



Brooks along the way



Ginger beside the path



Path to Vaimahuta waterfall



Vaimahuta waterfall



Tahiti Iti across the bay



Crimson-backed tanager outside Paul Gauguin Museum



Food trucks and grounds at To'ata Place