



March 17, 2012: Aranui, the Cruise Begins

We awakened before our wakeup call and scrambled to get all the last minute packing and primping done before departure to the Aranui III. Our ride with the Marmar Tour van, which we had been told might be a little late, was in fact early. I hustled to complete my final email, mildly lamenting that I had not been able to complete the last email to Dr Poole with a copy of my journal notes from his cruise. Our cheerful driver loaded the suitcases, then drove us, along with Frank, another tourist from Minnesota, to the dock. Along the way she asked if we needed further services, and Royal and Wanda finalized their pickup from the boat in two weeks.

The Aranui III lay alongside dock with a decided list to starboard while two cranes lifted cargo and then turned to deposit it on deck while hands below steadied the final descent. Crew loaded our baggage while our driver directed us to the gangplank. After Frank helped us take some of the obligatory tourist-posed photos, we ambled up the aluminum steps of the gangplank while the dock side of the steps scraped slightly back and forth with a light squeal.

Onboard, crew greeted us, then directed us to the check-in desk where our passes and passports were checked. Then we were led by a host to the elevators where we saw our bags disappear behind closing doors. Rather than wait, we told the host we would be happy to climb the stair. Somewhat relieved, he kindly directed us to the stairs, then moved on to more of his multiple chores.



Steep stairs with tall steps led up three flights to our deck. The assistant had joked that we would be next to God when he found our room number. Frank in return had stated dryly that he would be descending to hell with his berth on the lower deck, which had us all laughing. At the top of the stairs and around the corner we found our bags waiting at the door to our cabin.



Though small by landlubber standards, the cabin had ample room for comfortable living with double bed, wardrobe, desk and cabinet. A small table with double bench seat on one side and single chair on the other, both upholstered in blue, ribbed fabric, lay in front of the two forward-facing windows. Outside, in full view, the crew bustled, loading goods for transport.

A tall yellow crane rested on a stout base, lifting boats, barges and cargo, while a heavily tattooed Marquesian named Mahalo skillfully operated the controls. He caught our attention immediately with dark ink tracing Polynesian themes over fully half of his face and top of head and arms. It seemed a foreshadowing of places and people yet to be seen.

As the unloading continued, we settled into our cabin which would be our home for the next two weeks, relieved to no longer be consumed by the hideous ritual of weighing and redistributing items between bags. As we settled in, the list to starboard slowly leveled, and occasional gentle motions of the boat reminded us that we were now in Neptune's domain.



By 9:30 AM we gathered at bar for complimentary drinks and then scattered with the crowd to the deck overlooking the pool. Marquesans performed on native drums with singers and dancers entertaining the guests. The men looked fierce and awesome with grass leggings, and head dresses decorated with animal bones and skulls as their muscular bodies rocked in unison to the throbbing rhythm. They appeared to be the veritable visions of experiences that Melville had put on paper so long ago, and for a moment I felt touched, not only by the writings, but by the people who were portrayed and now seen in the flesh.

As the drums and chants faded, we were drawn back to the real maritime world with orientation to emergency lifeboat procedures. The “anglais,” or English speaking passengers were sent to the video room in the bowels of the boat. Several stood or sat on the floor since seats were scarce and we listened to a German expatriate explain in English the procedures aboard this French and Tahitian boat. Then we returned to our rooms to await the seven short bells and one long bell signaling the lifeboat drill.

We obediently gathered our lifejackets and proceeded to our mustering station on the swim deck where Tahitian ladies called out our name. Something must have been wrong, since all of the passengers on the list were accounted for and none of those present belonged elsewhere. Who ever heard of that happening? Next they led us like cattle to the slaughter to the deck where boarding of the lifeboats would (hopefully not) take place. About all of the talk there that I could understand amounted to: if the lifeboat fails to deploy, do not jump from the deck down to the water; ladders will be lowered part way and then jump from the end of the ladder.

Right, I thought, had they seen some of the bellies on this boat? Some could barely make it down the stairs, let alone a ladder. I had visions of some barely making it over the rail to the ladder, failing to find the rungs, falling, and my head somewhere below being the last thing to slow their plunge towards the water. I was more than ready to depart when the lifeboat drill was over.

Immediately following the drama, dinner was served in the restaurant. We sat at a long table where two French couples were also dining. A bottle of wine cheered our spirits as we awaited the tuna, followed by a plate of fried turkey breast with pureed sweet potatoes and a reddish fruit-based side that blended marvelously with the turkey. Normally I enjoy sweet potatoes as much as a child likes cauliflower, but the sweet potatoes, like everything else were delicious. Dessert consisted of a delicately delightful cream puff with strawberry, and we left the table not just filled, but fully satisfied.

I headed back up to the room to continue writing, while Fairy, Wanda, and Royal headed to B-deck, or hell, as Frank, a fellow passenger had referred to it. While water splashing against the portholes revealed that it was not truly hell, it seemed nearly as hot. They struggled in the steaming sauna-like room to figure out how the machines worked. One unfortunate couple, Paul and Mari had used too much soap and had trouble rinsing it all out. Fairy and Wanda had trouble setting the controls, but the engineer-minded Royal helped sort it all out. Even so, in one of the washing machines, though set on cool, the clothes came out piping hot. Another couple, Kathy and Tom from Reno, Nevada, commiserated with them as all as they sweltered and sweat through the ordeal.

After the cleaning conniption was well behind, we all headed to the lounge for the 6:00 PM briefing for the “Anglais.” The French had just finished their briefing, but loitered in the lounge with no particular hurry to make room for the attendees of the following meeting. Still a bit hot under the collar from the laundry room, we quietly fumed as we picked some poor seats as one group French people circled their chairs into a group occupying fully a third of the room. I fully expected a chorus of “Kum ba yah” to break out before the lecture asked them to leave so the “Anglais” could have their lecture. They did so without complaint or apology, leaving their chairs circled for the late comers to straighten out.

Our German expat then led us through important items that we needed to know aboard the boat and various things to make life aboard the boat much easier. He also described the following day at Fakarava and times to depart, return and what activities to consider in between. Other than a couple hours on the huge coral atoll, there would be little other activity through the day other than dining and a Polynesian dance lesson.

Immediately after the lecture we returned to the dining room for the final meal of the day, joined by Frank from Minnesota, currently living on B-deck, or “next to hell” as he had put it earlier. Only five people sat at our table that had room for six as we dined on minestrone soup, mahi-mahi, and a dessert of custard, delicious as usual. Since no one else showed at the table, Wanda shared “her” bottle of wine with the other four of us as we exchanged stories with Frank.

He and his wife had planned this trip, but she died of cancer about a year earlier, so he came on his own. At 84 years of age he still had an adventuresome visit, which we admired. He had been a marketing agent for General Mills and had an interest in photography and astronomy, so we hit it off well during the dinner and visited leisurely until time to return to the room and to bed.

Waves rocked the boat rhythmically as we settled to slumber the first night aboard our freighter birth. Dreams of days to come and thoughts of those who had plied these waters before us filled our minds as we hovered between awake and sleep, then faded away as we rocked like babies in a cradle.

Whaleboat loading onto the Aranui



Aranui Bar



Aranui Pool



Papeete Airport Aircraft Departure



As seen from the Aranui



Departure from Papeete



Hotel Tahiti Nui from the Deck



Papeete Harbor



Papeete Harbor



Headed to Sea

