

March 29, 2012 Reluctant Return from Rangiroa



Fairy awoke in the middle of the night and gasped at the brightness of the Milky Way. The curtains had been left wide open and we were drawn to the glorious glow. To one side, the familiar Southern Cross gleamed proudly above the pointer stars of Alpha and Beta Centauri. We gazed for a short time then went back to bed. Hours later I rolled over with open eyes and noted the cross in a different part of the sky, on its side, nearing the horizon. Fairy awoke to marvel at it too, our last view of our beloved gem during this trip. When I awoke again, twilight had erased the stars from the sky.

Breakfast was punctuated with goodbye's as we lingered until nearly time to go ashore. A short time later, the low islands of Rangiroa appeared, and the Aranui 3 slipped



through the pass, around the shoals to fair anchorage within the lagoon. Fairy and I had returned to the room and stuffed the final last minute items into the bags. She was about to go the reception desk to check with Steve about our departure, when he knocked on our door and asked for our bags. Always one step ahead of us, he had the bags at the desk before we arrived. The



barge took us to a cement ramp that ended abruptly at the water's edge, and the barge lowered the front ramp onto the cement for easy debarkation. Little swell was present in the calm lagoon, and the easy exit seemed almost a letdown after our boarding adventures of previous days.

We lingered along shore with eyes desperately searching the scenes while our hearts and minds clung to

the final visions of our island visit. Too soon it seemed, Steven appeared with his cousin's vehicle and loaded our bags aboard for the final journey. We expected a quick trip to the airport, but when he learned that we had more than an hour before we needed to check in, he stated:

First we take tour. He drove us by the airport, past the University of Rangiroa, where he had been schooled, and past various sights on both sides of the road. Finally he came to a stop by a diner and asked if we would like something to drink. We settled on diet coke, and then he announced that we should all have paninis to eat. The lady at the restaurant seemed to know Steven and made quick work of three very large panini sandwiches.

We chatted for a while, then returned to the airport to await the propeller driven craft that was to carry us to Papeete. I took pictures out of the window as it climbed skyward and turned over the lagoon. For a moment, the glorious island between deep blue ocean and azure lagoon stood proudly, but as they faded into distance, the island, the airport and the Aranui 3 seemed jilted and forsaken. Or was it us?



The flight to Papeete continued smoothly except for me clumsily dropping my polarizing filter down the side of the seat. It landed behind the foot of the passenger sleeping in the seat behind. With the help of the stewardess, it was retrieved no worse for the wear, so I returned my gaze to blue sky, clouds, and rippled blue water out my window.



Finally, an atoll appeared on the right side of the plane framed in clouds, but revealing a complete ring and lagoon. Before long the engines throttled back and we began our descent into Papeete, straight in without any turns in the pattern. We saw familiar tanks and bay where we had boarded the Aranui 3, then skimmed low over the water on the final part of the approach. Land appeared, then the runway, seconds before our gentle

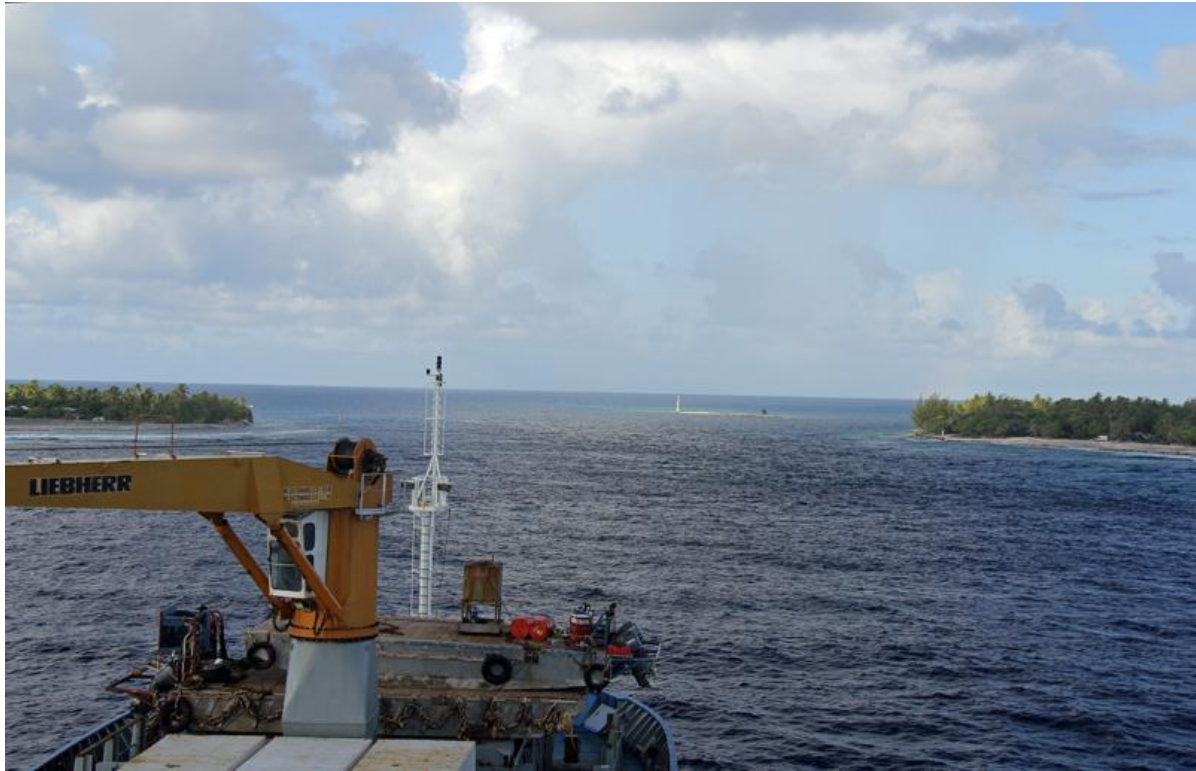
touchdown. We were back in Papeete, and it seemed our adventure was nearly over.

We settled into the airport, sweltered through the afternoon while awaiting our flight home. Shortly after sunset we walked across the parking lot and up the hill behind to the edge of the highway to look at the sights. I stopped and took more photos of the “upside-down” moon, then we returned to the seeming sauna of the airport waiting area. Check-in and security screening went smoothly and we anticipated cooler conditions at the terminal gate. It was actually cooler, but only slightly; the sweat no longer dripped from our skin, but instead slowly crystallized to salt.

Even the airplane suffered, it seemed, in the heat. It used up most of the runway before gently rotating for lift off at a speed of 185 miles per hour. Instead of rocketing upward as most commercial flights seem to do, it munched its way along; nose up, struggling under a heavy load in the warm muggy air for every foot of elevation gained. Finally, the flaps were raised, airspeed and altitude eased upward, and like two soggy rats, we were on our way home; ingloriously perhaps, but returning from a most excellent adventure.



Final Memories



Tiputa Pass Rangiroa



Rangiroa



Rangiroa airport



Rangiroa lagoon



Coming ashore in Rangiroa



Barge landing ramp



Lowering the gate



Terra firma



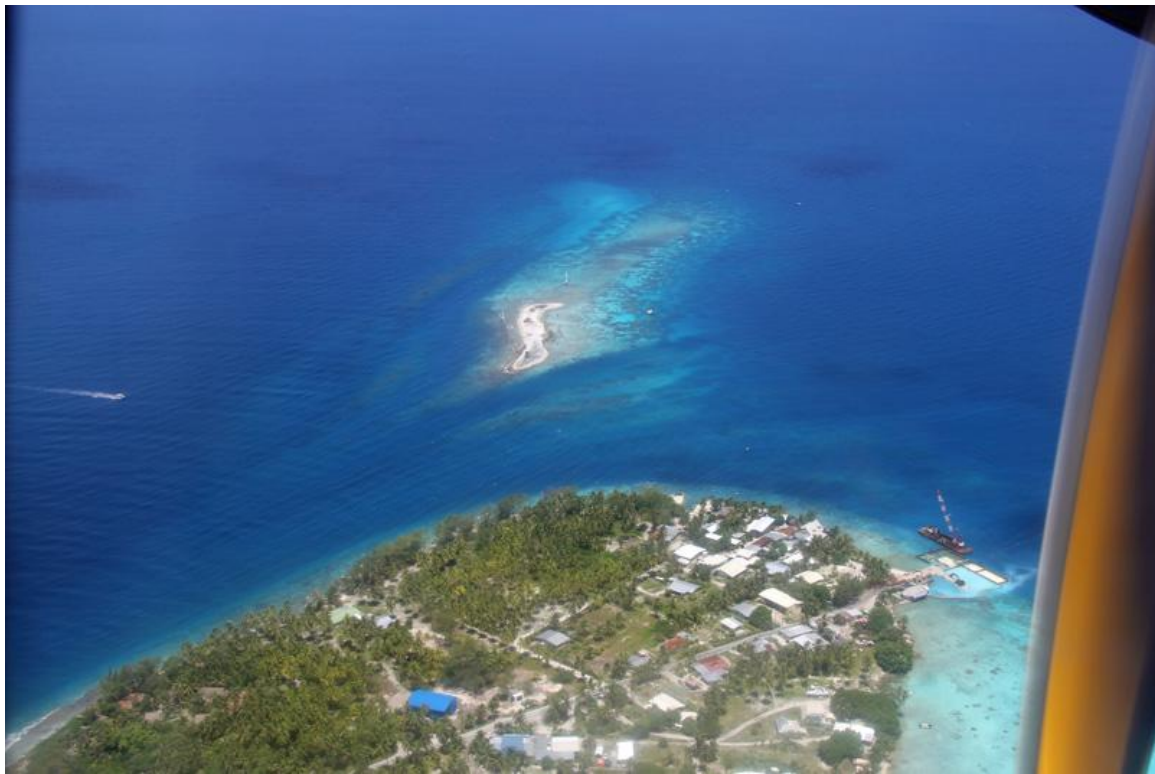
Tranquil lagoon



Rangiroa airport



Departure



Over Rangiroa



Aranui remembered