

Travel



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South Pacific: islands of enchantment

Cruise ship takes travelers to fabled world

By William Schemmel
special writer

WHEN I WAS a schoolboy, bounding with buccaners o'er the storybook seas of Robert Louis Stevenson, I of course, had no foreknowledge that some years later — on one of those turning-point birthdays — I would be huffing up a steaming jungle trail in Western Samoa to the mountaintop where the immortal storyteller lays at rest.

His moving "Requiem," carved on a simple tomb, reads:
*Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will*

*This is the verse you grave for me;
Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill."*

At the base of Mount Vaea spreads Vaillima, the spacious bungalow where Stevenson spent his final five years. "Absolute bliss for the weary," he proclaimed the lush volcanic Samoan islands.

With Treasure Island, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and other classics behind him, he wrote finish to his career with such works as *The Beach of Falesa*, *A Footnote to History* and *The Ebb Tide*. When he died at Vaillima in 1894, of a brain hemorrhage while blending mayonnaise in his kitchen, grief-stricken Samoans carried his beloved *Fa'afuata* (Teller of Tales) in solemn procession up the Road of Loving Hearts to the gravesite.

From this peaceful acre spreads not only a wide and starry sky, but a vast and scenic Pacific. At rest now, the Royal Viking Star, the vessel which brought us to this far-off corner, shimmers in the blinding early morning sun of Polynesia.

BEHIND US lay fabled lands: Tahiti, Moorea, Bora Bora, Pago Pago. Still ahead on this two-week voyage are Fiji, New Caledonia, New Hebrides and, finally, Australia.

Between ports o' call, the Star is welcome retreat, a cushy place to unwind, be shamelessly indulged and amply ponder unfortunate friends laboring in stuffy offices thousands of miles away.

Treasure to its reputation as one of the world's premier cruise lines, Royal Viking's food, service, accommodations and entertainment is first-class in all respects.

For many a passenger, days at sea begin with a jog or a brisk walk around the docks just after dawn, followed by coffee, fresh fruit and Danabars. Next comes full breakfast in the dining room, then mid-morning bouillon, a splash in the salt water pool, early-bird cocktails, hamburgers and a mind-boggling à la carte buffet.

The heavy afternoon schedule calls for bridge, bingo, deck tennis, more time in the pool, and a deck chair excursion to store up energy for the evening's activities.

An elaborate American/continental dinner, with wines and champagnes, leads to floor shows, dancing, roulette and one-armed bandits in the casino, movies in the theater, or closed circuit in the privacy of one's own stateroom.

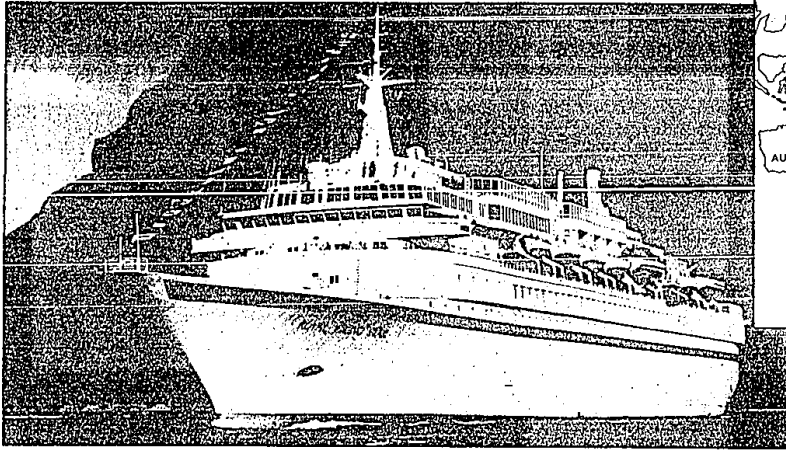
At midnight, a tempting buffet appears, and the evening winds down with late-night drinks and a stroll around the open decks under the twinkling lights of the Southern Cross.

WHILE A two-week cruise is usually ample for most of us, a "surprising" number of passengers aboard the Royal Viking Star a virtual home away from home. At the end of this South Pacific cruise, for example, many stay aboard and sail on to Singapore, Bali, Japan, Hong Kong, China and back to Hawaii and Australia.

For those accustomed to cruising the well-traveled waters of the Caribbean, the South Pacific is a refreshing new adventure. Because cruise ship calls are infrequent in these far-flung islands, Polynesians and Melanesians have not turned cynical and hostile as the Bahamas and Virgin Islands. Visitors are treated with warmth and hospitality, and tipping violates local traditions.

Physically, the islands are among the loveliest places anywhere on earth. Volcanic mountains fit carved green and turquoise like the best of tropical islands.

Polynesians, Samoans and other tropical peoples are friendly and warm. Their homes are the huts of bamboo and thatched palm, and their villages run



The jagged mountains of Bora Bora, French Polynesia provide the backdrop for its 25,000-in. Royal Viking Star. The writer traveled aboard the Star throughout the South Pacific and to Australia. Among the ports of call: Bora Bora and nearby Tahiti, which are east of the Fiji Islands.

wild across the landscape.

When the cruise is over and done, small vignettes sing in our minds like Polynesian drumbeats. On the Western Samoa, a dog barks and a splendid old lady dances. Aggie Grey is the South Pacific's living legend. The fates brought her to the islands in 1919, where she opened a small bar in Apia Harbor.

The bar eventually evolved into Aggie Grey's Hotel, a beacon for World War II sailors, writers, adventurers, the weary and homesick. Legend has it she was the inspiration for the sally *Bloody Mary* in James Michener's "Tales of the South Pacific."

Today, at 86, she's as zesty and full of devilment as her fictional alter-ego. "I'm still looking," she winks mischievously at a handsome young man who could be her grandson. "I hope you are."

On this day, while the Star's passengers demolish an alfresco Polynesian feast, she puts on a bravura performance. Moving among the nimble young Samoan dancers, she sways languidly to the drumbeats, undulates her hips, her feet, her hands with a girl's fluid grace.

Her eyes sparkle with a wicked charm, remembering other days, other dances. The crowd goes crazy, and her small brown dog yips and prances beneath her feet.

PAGO PAGO (pronounced "Pango Pango") belongs with Timbuktú, Kathmandu, Samarkand and Casablanca, a place whose very name rings the adventure bell in us all. Early in the century, Somerset Maugham took a ship from Honolulu for this exotic backwater of what's now American Samoa. Also aboard was one Miss Sadie Thompson, whose yeasty reputation had led to forcible expulsion from Hawaii. At Pago Pago, Maugham spun a tale called "Rain" around Miss Sadie, and she thus joined the immortals of her profession.

If you'd like to see the boardinghouse where this took place, look among the mangoes and colorful fabrics at what's now Max Haleck Store No. 3 on the main road. The Rainmaker Hotel honors this renowned lady with its Sadie Thompson Room.

Fiji takes the prize as the friendliest and most colorful of the South Pacific Islands. The handsome, easy-going native Fijians — "the gentle giants of the Pacific" — share their island with Europeans, Chinese, and East Indians initially brought here by the British as indentured servants.

"Bulu" is the village, and on the crowded streets of Suva, the largest city and port of call, the ancient Fijian holds rings out time, and again, always accompanied by a winning smile. Away from major towns, Fijians live much as their ancestors did, in a thatched-roofed "bure," where the chief's word is law and death.

As the Star prepares to sail from Suva, the Royal Fiji Police Band assembles at the harbor. In their long, ear-lobed white skirts and crisp blue jackets, they parade along the pier, playing a series of brass instruments with an Elvis Presley melody. Broadway showbands and

ship bands follow, but the star of the show is the band of the Fijian Song of Aloha.

The most beautiful South Pacific island Paradise travelers take this part of

the world rate it a tossup between Moorea and Bora Bora, sisters with Tahiti in the French Society family. Choosing between them is like selecting among fine clammings. It's purely a matter of taste.

ACROSS THE harbor from Tahiti's busy capital city of Papeete, Moorea beckons, the South Seas of your daydreams, her sheer green mountains framed between a perfect sky and a perfect sea. Take a seven minute flight over, or savor it slowly, on a scenic ferry ride.

Spend a couple of unbelievable days biking from lagoon to lagoon. Skin dive among the coral reefs, in waters of turquoise, violet and lapis lazuli. Climb up the mountains, visit the villages, watch the sunset turn the sea to flame, and rest assured that paradise does not exist solely in picture books.

No less an authority than James Michener himself has pronounced Bora Bora the world's champion island. All arguments vaporize as this mass of green and gray volcanic bumps, ringed by lagoons and motus (tiny lalela) looms into the dawning light.

Adorned by its pearly necklace of pristine beaches, sparkling with waterfalls and coral reefs, the island, about

17 miles around, seems to whisper seductively in your ear: "Stay awhile with me, stay awhile and enjoy my pleasures."

If you're tempted to jump ship and obey that very command, several cozy hotels and some very gracious people are awaiting to attend you.

And in case you think it's impossible to leave the "real" world behind and find a new life on a South Seas island, talk with the Vietnam vet who operates the souvenir shop on the Bora Bora dock. He's been here 10 years, has a lovely Polynesian wife, and couldn't be paid enough to return stateside.

Noumea, on New Caledonia, is hands-down the most cosmopolitan stop on this 14-day odyssey from Tahiti to Australia. Proudly wearing its label, "The Paris of the Pacific," the affluent port city of 50,000 weaves a Gallic joie de vivre into a laid-back Melanesian manana.

European women in the latest Paris styles, ample native women in colorful Mother Hubbards, move along avenues named for heroes of the Republic, darning in and out of patisseries, boulangeries, French cafes and boutiques, and open-air markets. On the beaches, sleek Parisiennes in topless bikinis

pose on the sands and play on their yachts.

Ah, but there's a storm brewing in this Franco-Pacific playground. Taking a cue from their brothers and sisters on the nearby New Hebrides, who recently went independent as Vanuatu, indigenous New Caledonians are agitating for their own seat at the U.N.

BUT THE FRENCH, jealously guarding a lucrative nickel-mining industry and a cushy lifestyle, are thus far holding firm, partly through a sneaky tactic of inducing more Frenchmen to immigrate to the islands and thus dilute the burgeoning independence fervor.

Early on a Monday morning it all comes to a bitter-sweet finale. Out of the ebony pre-dawn gleam a million

pinpoints of light. The soaring skylit Harbour Bridge and clam shell fountains of the Opera House proclaim the Royal Viking Star's entry to Sydney and Australia and the end of the voyage.

For those disembarking, however, this is the beginning of a truly new adventure. We'll linger awhile, at taste the sophisticated pleasures Sydney lodge ourselves in the splendid new Regent Hotel, enjoy a night at the Opera, languid days on the beach, then head for the fabled Outback, to "Towns Like Alice," Ayers Rock, dingy wallabies, roos, the aboriginals, and a that lot. But that, as they say, is another story.

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