

## South Sea Islands

Nine days after leaving Ecuador we finally sight the most isolated group of islands in the world; The Marquesas. These islands, part of French Polynesia, are 500 miles from their nearest neighbours and 3,700 miles from the nearest continent.

Our first impressions are of sheer black volcanic cliffs rising out of the haze of a tropical afternoon. The island of Hiva Oa resembles the lower jaw of a gigantic crocodile with pure white surf pounding the jagged rocks and black sand beach. The Captain will not allow us to go ashore by tender boat because of the dangerous swell, so Hiva Oa, for us, will always be a wildly beautiful but inaccessible land.



Hiva Oa from the ship



Snorkelling in Tahiti

We sail on for two more days until we reach The Society Islands of Tahiti and Bora Bora. We arrive in Papeete, the main town of Tahiti, at noon. The temperature is over 30 degrees Celsius, and climbs steadily throughout the Siesta time of the afternoon. Some of the tourist shops and jewellery shops stay open all day; it seems that everyone wants to buy black pearls from Tahiti - the only area of the world in which they grow naturally.

The town is large by Polynesian standards; it is colourful and multicultural, and has shaded gardens and squares in which to relax. The quiet afternoon gradually becomes alive towards evening time, and we take the opportunity to dine in the town instead of on the ship, after all, this is one of the few ports of call where the ship is berthed overnight.

We walk along the sea front on this Saturday evening and find every imaginable mobile catering van setting up tables for their customers.

There are Chinese, Indian, fried chicken and burger vans, and even a pig roasting on a spit!

Walking a little off the main street, we hear music coming from a local bar and make our way towards it. We find a group of Tahitian singers/musicians already playing traditional songs using acoustic guitars, a banjo and a strange skiffle-like instrument. As the night wears on more local people arrive, some with their own instruments, and those who do not have an instrument are given spoons and plastic bottles filled with rice to use as Maracas! Apart from a few small breaks to change a guitar string, or to take a few sips of drink, they carry on playing until after midnight when we return to the ship. It is a memory we will treasure for a long time.



M.V. Van Gogh berthed in Tahiti



Bora Bora

The island of Bora Bora is called "The Pearl of the Pacific", and is often used in advertisements and brochures to depict a typical South Sea Island. Its area is only 15 square miles and it has a central volcano surrounded by white sand beaches. It is protected almost entirely by a circular barrier reef with only a small opening for ships to sail through into the warm waters of the turquoise lagoon. Disembarkation is by tender boat and the quayside has many stalls selling hand-dyed Pareos, hand-carved Tikis, and pearl and shell jewellery. When we arrived this morning at 8.30 the temperature was already 36 degrees Celsius.

We leave Bora Bora on the evening of February 5<sup>th</sup> and immediately hit a patch of rough seas. The ship bucks and rolls and corkscrews and judders for three days. The waves in the swimming pool, caused by the ship's motion, escape onto the decks and every afternoon dark storm clouds signal the start of the monsoon rain.

We cross the International Date Line and "lose" one whole day. We go to bed on February 7<sup>th</sup> and get up on the 9<sup>th</sup>, when a certificate to mark our crossing is pushed through the door of our cabin.

The next day we arrive in The Friendly Islands of Tonga - an archipelago of around 170 islands and still a member of the British Commonwealth. The town of Nuku'alofa where we dock is a sleepy ramshackle place with mostly small single storey shacks in various states of disrepair. Some of these are made of wood and sit on top of concrete pillars; some are made of corrugated sheeting and others of breezeblocks. Not all of them have windows, just grilles over the openings, although further out of town, in the suburbs, there are some very nice houses, schools and offices.

Many of the property boundaries are hung with purple garlands, which signify the 12 month mourning period for the last King, who died in September. The Tongan people are gentle giants and many would make good rugby players (women included!) They are happy, moral, deeply religious people, who really love their King and country.



Downtown Tonga



Palace of the King of Tonga

Our next port of call on this fantastic voyage should have been the islands of Fiji Unfortunately the Foreign Office has advised against travelling here due to the unrest in these islands, so the ship's itinerary has been amended to include an additional port of call - Auckland. Watch this space!