



Built specifically for the islands of French Polynesia, the Gauguin is small and able to manoeuvre from open ocean to shallow lagoon as nimbly as a yacht. — PHOTOS: TIM MCKENNA.

An artful voyage

Paul Gauguin Cruises delivers an intimate portrait of the islands of French Polynesia

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SPECIAL TO THE SUNDAY PROVINCE

Painter Paul Gauguin had a deep love affair with Tahiti.

To see the kind of rapture Gauguin felt for French Polynesia can be achieved in various ways. Visitors to Tahiti can island hop and stay in hotels or overwater bungalows. Or, they can cruise the shallow shores along the Society Islands and see a different kind of Tahiti. It's from the water that the majestic, craggy emerald hills, multi-hued channels and basaltic mountains leave their own indelible paintings in the mind.

Paul Gauguin Cruises offers just such an experience. Unlike today's monster ships, the Gauguin is an all-inclusive, small luxury vessel. It's an intimate guest experience with room for just over 300 passengers, built specifically for shallow waters so guests can get up close and personal with the sights.

Not to say the Gauguin is shy on

amenities and comfort. All suites and staterooms are spacious with ocean views — 70 per cent with private balconies. Butler service is available and 24-hour service is complimentary. The typical cruise offerings are there — restaurants, casino, gym, and the Deep Nature Spa by Algoterm — but with the focus on the destination, the Gauguin stands out with a retractable marina, where guests can enjoy water activities right off the ship, an on-board dive program, interactive chef presentations, Tahitian language classes, pearls seminars and a lecture series drawing writers, anthropologists and cultural experts.

A seven-night cruise of Tahiti and the Society Islands departs from Tahiti's capital, Papeete, and first sets sail to the quiet garden island of Huahine, where choices of excursions range from lagoon snorkelling to a tour of sacred sites and ceremonial temples, to a visit to Faie to see Tahitian eels.



All suites and staterooms on the Gauguin feature ocean views.

Taha'a is the second stop, known as Vanilla Island for its "black gold" plantations. But it may be more tempting to take a jaunt to Motu Mahana, a private islet where guests can bask in the sun, paddle board and snorkel while chefs prepare a

Tahitian barbecue.

Passengers then wake up to the epic vista of Mount Otemanu on the legendary island of Bora Bora. Cruisers can take advantage of yet another private glistening white sand island of which the Gauguin has exclusive

access; or, choose from helicopter flightseeing, stingray and shark encounters, an off-road adventure, a glass-bottom boat tour, and even the unique aqua underwater safari, where helmets attached to dive tanks allow any novice to walk the ocean floor.

Two nights later, the Gauguin anchors at Moorea, the inspiration for Bali Hai in the musical, South Pacific. Moorea is a utopia ripe for exploration — the cliffs of Belvedere Point boast views of Oponohu and Cook's Bay, all via a hike or a scenic drive by jeep or ATV. You can amble along a coffee or pineapple plantation or sample the tiare-laced jams and fresh fruit juices. Enjoy sunset sails, wild dolphin watching, sea fishing and snorkelling.

By cruise's end, guests arrive back on Tahiti having indulged in five unique French Polynesian settings worthy of an artist's canvas. Gauguin would have approved.

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