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## ***President's Cruise: Tahiti, French Polynesia. Dreams of Tahiti***

**By Melody Wren, Travel Writer**



We cruised the Islands on the recently renovated Star Breeze, a jewel in Windstar's crown of ships. To say the renovation was extensive is an understatement—it included adding 20m to the length of the vessel. No wonder that Windstar President Chris Prelog wanted to share the transformation of Star Breeze during the special 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary cruise in French Polynesia.

Joining him was the President of French Polynesia, Eduardo Fritch, to help celebrate the spectacular ship transformation and anniversary.

We started the special itinerary in Papeete, the capital of Tahiti where the arrival of each passenger was heralded with Polynesian dancers. The seven-day cruise was to take us exploring, snorkeling, partying and eating our way through the Society Islands starting with Bora Bora. Celebratory events and cultural tours run by local experts were offered daily, culminating in a party at President Fritch's Palace back on Tahiti.

**The beauty of small ship** cruising is that once you unpack into your comfortable suite, you are all set for the duration of the cruise. You breakfast at any restaurant you choose and gear up for your excursion where you have an incredible outdoor experience with other like-minded passengers.



You exchange stories over meals in a variety of onboard restaurants or over a drink in the bar. With onboard laundry and spa treatments there is plenty to keep you entertained. If its lounging with a good book that takes your fancy for a few hours, loungers are set up throughout the deck of the ship and you can be as sociable as you want.

After familiarizing ourselves with the ship, we dined on fresh local seafood, had a good night's sleep while underway, then readied ourselves for our first morning excursion. Good morning, Bora Bora or in Tahitian, la Orana (Yo rah nah).

Our ship approached another Windstar ship, Star Spirit for a sail past, both ships sounding their horns in the first celebratory moments of the trip.

**Heading out on a snorkeling** excursion to the waters surrounding Bora Bora, we were transferred by a small local boat to a shallow coral reef. I slipped into the legendary clear turquoise water filled with a mixture of fear and excitement knowing stingrays and black tipped sharks were waiting. Sun sparkled on the water and the crew of our small boat sang and one very talented woman played the ukulele.

It felt surreal and magical all at once. I floated on the water, flanked by up to three sharks at a time with enormous stingrays so close I could have touched them but chose not to. We walked in three feet of water spotting bright yellow fish shooting in between the many sharks, then moved to a deeper spot to snorkel through coral gardens with powerful currents. The crew continued to sing Polynesian songs while returning us to shore setting a magical backdrop to the scene.

Later that day we took a bus tour around Bora Bora to see how the locals live, to see the overwater tourist bungalows for which the island is famous and to learn some of the history of the tiny island. Bora Bora is the oldest of the Society Islands with a small population of around 10,000 people, mostly Polynesian with some Chinese and French. Many movie stars have visited the island including Marlon Brando, Elizabeth Taylor and Sharon Stone.

**Two mountains can be seen** from different angles of the island, Mt. Olpea and Mt. Otemanu. They are smothered colorfully with bougainvillea and with hibiscus, which blooms yellow in the morning, orange in the afternoon and red to match the sunset. The entire island is circled by a protective barrier reef. In 1943, Americans



**Excursions from the ship** aren't mandatory but they are a wonderful way to immerse yourself in local culture as well as having opportunities to snorkel, kayak and hike. A swimming platform off the back of the ship encourages passengers to kayak, paddle board, snorkel, swim or sun on gigantic floating mats.

On one of the most memorable excursions, we glided gently along the Faaroa River in a covered outrigger canoe. Tihoti, a local Polynesian elder from Taha'a, shared traditions history about the area in vivid storytelling fashion. Tattoos covered him from head to toe in traditional Polynesian style, each symbol representing different aspects of his life and history.

**The Faaroa River** is the only river in French Polynesia that is navigable for boats of any type. We stopped at a riverside hut to taste coconut water and star apples, sweet and fleshy like plums, growing on adjacent trees.

The motor was turned off and Tihoti asked all of us to be silent. He chanted in Tahitian and played a nose flute and the birds started to respond. We motored to a private island to swim and snorkel in the crystal clear water.

Local tradition says that Raiatea and Taha'a used to be one island until a young girl was swallowed by a large eel. The angry eel taken over by her spirit severed the surface of the earth which made the sea flow. The



built a little-used wartime airport which later helped build tourism on the island.

One of the stops we made was to visit an islander who makes pareos, flowing wraps that can be worn as a dress or skirt cover for men or women. The artist demonstrated dying cotton with botanical dyes adding handmade stencil designs of flowers, turtles or fish which then baked in the sun to make the stencil.

Within minutes the beautiful colors blended and the stenciled pattern was clear. He then demonstrated many different ways to wear the pareo which are an ideal inexpensive souvenir to buy for yourself or to take home for gifts.

Later the same day, Windstar hosted a party on a private island or motu. Catamarans delivered us along with passengers from Star Spirit, anchored nearby. Greeted by crew members draping leis on each passenger, we were led to a majestic feast.

**Local musicians and fire dancers** added to the magical evening with a backdrop of a purple-pink sunset. As fire dancers continued dancing, we cruised back into the night towards our waiting ship lit up beautifully in the Polynesian dark sky.

The next day we docked at the local pier in Raiatea and were greeted by musicians wearing floral crowns while a local woman and her tiny daughter handed out miniature flowers to adorn our own hair. Walking into the small village of Raiatea, there were shops selling handmade crafts, dresses and pareos as well as a local French grocery store and cafes.



pressure of the water divided the island in two and Raiatea and Taha'a were created.

**Taha'a is often referred** to as the vanilla island.

Cooking with Tahitian vanilla enriches any dish so taking a tour of a local family owned vanilla plantation was interesting as Tahitian vanilla is among the best in the world; the large pods leaving a beautiful vanilla scent trailing wherever we walked.

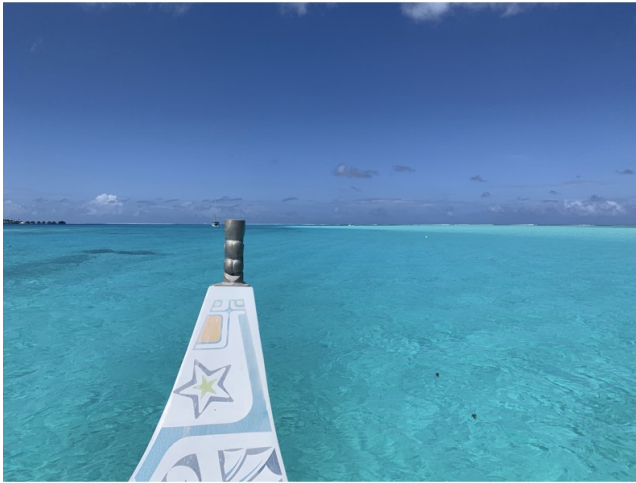
If you buy vanilla pods for baking desserts, making custards and ice cream, you can scrape out a bean from inside, bake it into the dessert and remove it from the dessert afterwards to re-use. Best stored in a jar filled with alcohol at the bottom.

The owner mentioned that there has been a surge in the use of vanilla beans in the last two to three years and added that "crème brûlée without vanilla simply isn't crème brûlée." Vanilla pods grow on vines which grow for 50 years and they produce for 10-15 years. The small shop sold vanilla paste, liquid pure vanilla and vanilla pods.

**Moorea is one of the most** incredibly scenic islands in the world surrounded by clear sapphire blue seas which are enhanced by its history. The island itself is about two million years old and people have inhabited the island for almost 2,000 years. Two major research stations on the island make its biology and geology among the most studied islands in the world.

Cook's Bay is the place to watch for dolphins or whales. Humpback whales migrate to warmer breeding waters of the South Pacific. One excursion joined Dr. Michael Poole who studies the mammals for scientific purpose studying their behaviour, weather and sea conditions. We were allowed to swim with the whales but strictly told to stay at least 98 feet away from them.

**Traveling through the Society Islands** showed the beauty and richness of the natural surroundings that need to be protected by locals and tourists. Our final celebration took place at the Presidential Palace in Moorea. In the words of President Eduardo Fritch, "We are convinced that our ancestors have left behind a legacy to enjoy and grow but not destroy. We are aware of the richness and value of that heritage."



### ***Know before you go***

Locals speak French. Currency is Tahitian Francs. Use only biodegradable sunscreen to protect the delicate coral reefs and ecosystems souvenirs: if you like to pick up souvenirs only available in Tahiti, black pearls are available only in Tahiti. Take time to learn about the grading system before you buy. There are many different types ranging from inexpensive simple bracelets available at the market to high end in hotel gift shops and jewellery stores. Compare prices and ask questions.

Vanilla is an ideal souvenir. To avoid carrying liquids, vanilla pods or paste are a good choice.

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**For more adventures by Melody, visit her website: [www.melodywren.com](http://www.melodywren.com) or follow her on on Instagram [@melodywrentravels](#)**



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