

Tiara & Ball Frock ... not required

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Living the Dream

Life as it should be ...

As a seasoned traveller to Tahiti I wasn't sure if I would find too many surprises when I decided to treat my significant other to a trip on Windstar's 'Wind Spirit'.

Not being too much of a "flop-&-dropper" I confess I did wonder if perhaps I would get restless on a 7 night voyage. So off to the library before we departed NZ, five books later I felt I'd have enough to keep me entertained.

As it turned out, I read just one.

Every day a new port, a new experience.

We did as little, or as much as we wanted. Me, I was up before 5.30am each day, sitting on the upper deck with coffee and a flaky croissant.

Watching the ship glide into a new bay, the sunrise always spectacular. Off to the gym straight afterwards (work off that croissant). Then to breakfast. The food ... fantastic.

And so each day would begin, and never a moment of boredom.

Defining moments : top of the list, when the ship first glides out of Papeete harbour on sunset. Sails unfurling to Vangelis 1492 'Conquest of Paradise', and on that first night; Rocking-Rod's "We are sailing".

The ship takes only 148 passengers, one of the reasons we chose it ... we don't like to run with the masses of the larger cruise ships.

Like-minded people on board, a mixture of ages and nationalities, also preferring a more intimate experience.

Other Kiwis on board; honeymoon-ers from Masterton, a farming couple from Darfield celebrating a 50th birthday. Some more mature American couples, some Europeans; a real mixture.

(incidentally, there's no elevators on Wind Spirit, so the people you find on board are fairly active and able-bodied).

One elderly gentleman we watched each day as he did stand-up paddle board, snorkelling, hiking (almost overtaking me when we hiked up a very steep hill in Raiatea to gain the most amazing view).

It's the people you meet along the way that makes life so interesting.

The retired meteorologist from Nebraska who worked for the Pentagon (developing heat sensors in guns). The Chinese lady whose family fled China from Mao. The couple from Seattle who were in their 4th Windstar cruise, and already booked for their 5th (many more like that on the ship; "Wind-Starring" is a addiction) ...

Those who had been on other cruises said the Tahiti Voyage was the best.

The ship itself was built in 1988 and very well maintained. Crew are there every morning before sunrise scrubbing decks and taking care of maintenance before the guests wake.

Don't expect a big swimming pool. In fact, it is tiny. But let's face it, when you're surrounded by startling clear lagoons it feels wrong somehow, to be in a pool. A swim in the lagoon is very easy from the Marine centre at the back, the platform comes down and there's easy step ladder to the water.

Helpful hint: Only non alcoholic drinks are included onboard.

You can take wine and champagne on board but only to consume in the cabin. Or BYO to the restaurant and common areas ... Corkage applies.

We bought wine at the dining table, and if you don't drink the full bottle you can take it back to your cabin. We were pleasantly surprised at the cost of alcohol ... (much the same as an average Auckland bar).

Before we joined the ship in Papeete, we found a Wineshop (5 minutes walk from the ship on the main boulevard). XPF4,800 for four bottles of gorgeous French wine (that's \$65 Kiwi). We took this onboard to have pre-dinner drinks in our cabin.

Shore excursions are expensive to buy on board. I pre organised a ray feeding excursion on Bora Bora (not to be missed), before we left NZ.

A 2 hour buggy ride round the island of Bora Bora, we just booked on the spur of the moment when we were in the town (Vaitape). Fabulous.

Water skiing is free. As are kayaks, paddle boards. Loved the floating rubber pads in the water, (secured to the boat and stable enough to laze on). Big enough to fit several people, we spent hours just gazing at the view & socialising with other guests.

Best tip ... Ladies, don't pack too much, (like I did) Dress code is unpretentious - doesn't matter if you wear the same outfit twice. Leave the high heels at home.

Men are ok with smart casual for dinner.

The voyage: I'd heard about the sails being raised accompanied by the music so I wasn't expecting the thrill ... and it creates an instant bond between passengers. Yes the engines do all the work, but the sails do help

The islands

Weather had patches of rain. However, we had more than a few fine days, almost a relief not to get burnt. The best thing about the rain is the spectacular cloud hanging around the mountain peaks, a wonderful moodiness.

How the ship handles : Given the distance covered on the 7 x night voyage, I had expected sometimes it would be rough. And yes, it was from time to time. But the ship is very stable, and the crew handle it beautifully.

The highs :

Crew who become your friends and can't do enough for you, and they remember your name.

The best highlight: People we met.

The rocking of the ship at night sailing to the next destination.

Sunrise, fresh pastries, and tea. Spectacular vista.

Realising what we were experiencing was even better than the pictures on the brochure.

The lows : rainy weather on the last day, which meant some guests didn't venture off the ship, and didn't appreciate the stunning beauty of Huahine (The Garden Isle). Not at all perturbed, we donned our plastic ponchos, hopped on a bus around the island with a few of our (new-found) friends, and went to the town of Fare.

A chat to the locals, and a walk down some hidden paths we found beaches, which even in the rain looked sublime.

Found a a pearl shop tucked away down a driveway, (and yes, I did take away a lovely black souvenir fresh from the farm).

Last words; if Tahiti and her islands is a place you've always wanted to see, then this is the way to see the best of the best.

Can't wait to do it again!

