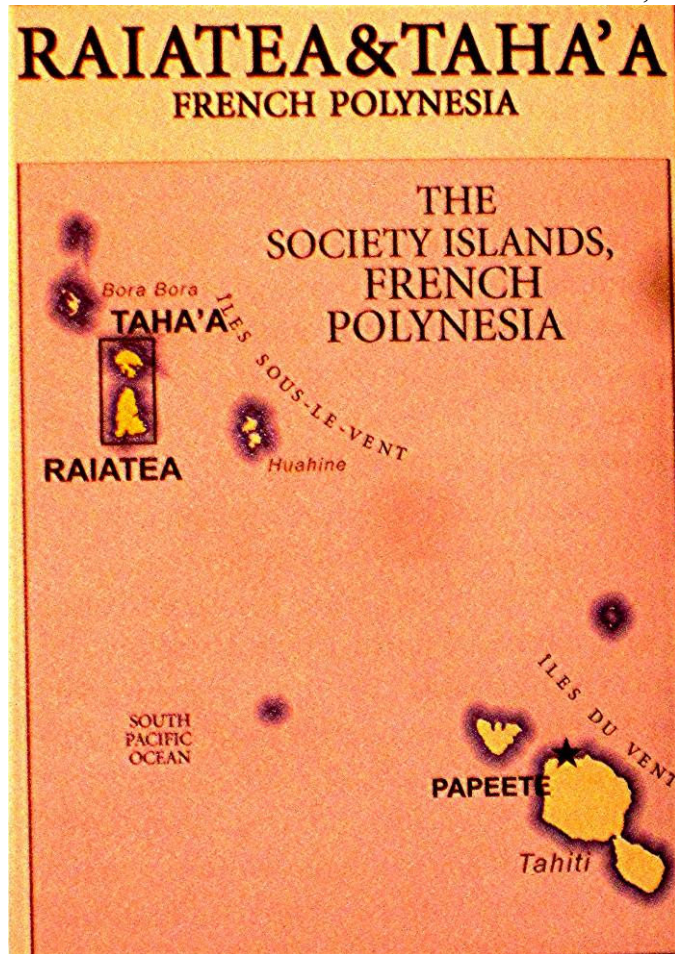


Day 18 – Raiatea, Society Islands – Mata’s Tour - 13 Oct 09: The day started with a cloudy sky, low 80s temperature and a bit of humidity. We had spent the entire night slowly traveling the 25 distance between Bora Bora and the island of Raiatea. Raiatea, like Bora Bora, is one of the Society Islands in the archipelago of French Polynesia. The location of Raiatea in French Polynesia is shown in the map on the right. The smaller island of TaHa’A is less than 3 miles north of Raiatea across the ocean channel between the two islands.



As we approached Raiatea in the early morning the entire island could be included in a single picture, as shown below.



The Amsterdam took on a harbor pilot and we threaded our way between two islands in the outer reef and made our way to the town of Uturoa. Thankfully we were docked so that going and coming from the ship was not complicated by having to deal with the tender boat schedule. The pictures below were taken as we approached Uturoa through the reef.



Raiatea is on the left and the island of TaHa'A is on the right. The island of Bora Bora can barely be discerned in the far distance between the images of Raiatea and TaHa'A.



This is the scene as the Amsterdam approached the harbor of Uturoa.

The ship was docked and we were cleared to proceed ashore by 8am. However, we didn't have any specific touring plans so we took our time and didn't venture off the ship until about 9am. Near the gangway of the Amsterdam were these classic South Sea Island huts that had been set up for handing our literature and travel guides to visitors. We noted that a generous quantity of pandanus tree leaves had been used to make the



attractive roofs. The black and white pavement stones also drew our attention. They had been arranged in a most artistic way as shown on the left. In this scene the passengers leaving the Amsterdam are being greeted by people offering local tours and other tourist related activities.

The presence of the lady in the motorized wheelchair deserves some comment. We have been

favorable impressed with the concern and effort expended by the Amsterdam staff in caring for people who have handicaps that impair their mobility. Sometimes it requires a little patience on the part of us more mobile types. This morning Orlin needed to return to our stateroom a few minutes after leaving the ship and he found that both the exit and the entrance gangways were blocked. The exit gangway was blocked by a couple stewards helping an elderly gentleman walk down to where he could get into his wheelchair. The entrance gangway was shutdown temporarily while a mechanical elevator device was employed to lift a rather large electric wheelchair, with passenger, onto the gangway so the person could enter the Amsterdam.

We had planned to just wander around town and perhaps take a private tour if we found one that was attractive. We soon met Cruise Critic friends, Neville and Bonnie, at the Visitor's Center and found that they did not have specific arrangements for the day's activities. However, they were actively looking for a tour so we decided to join them if the right tour came along. Nearby in the Visitor's Center was a booth set up by Mata's Tours. Mata was there selling seats on his tour which he described with enthusiasm. The

itinerary consisted of 4 to 5 hours of snorkeling with sting rays and sharks, lunch on his private island, vanilla plantation tour, and pearl farm visit. While we were there several people who had taken his tour in Bora Bora yesterday came by and signed up because they were so pleased with that prior tour. Encouraged by this information we decided, along with Neville and Bonnie to join in. The cost of Mata's tour was \$60 USD per person which was about half the cost of shorter, less extensive Holland America Tours in Raiatea.

After a short wait while Mata sold all the seats in his boat (16) he gathered us up at about 9:30 and we proceeded to his boat. Here is our gang, primarily from the Amsterdam, heading for Mata's boat. We passed by the big one on the right and boarded the small blue and white one in the water on the left.



Mata turned out to be a great tour host with a real dedication to showing his customers a good time while in his care. The ladies got a nice thrill when he shed his conventional clothes for a colorful loincloth to begin the boat ride, as shown on the left.

He then grabbed a large conch shell and sounded the traditional Polynesian signal for the start of a sea voyage.



After these introductory ceremonies, Mata gunned the motor and maneuvered our boat quickly out of the harbor.



By this time we were pretty sure that we were on the right tour.

We traveled at high speed through the open ocean between the islands of Raiatea and TaHa'A for about 45 minutes to a shallow spot in the reef off the north shore of TaHa'A Island. The route of our complete tour is shown on the map below.



Mata anchored the boat over a flat sandy area with crystal clear water. He jumped in and with some small bait fish in his hands he soon attracted a school of sting rays. He said that these were his trained fish and this was his aquarium. In order to calm any fears we tourists might have he played with the rays to show that they were harmless (That island in the background is Bora Bora).

Soon many of the passengers jumped in to join the fun.



Orlin dived in while Barbara did the photography from the boat. Here Mata tries to get someone to test the water.



There were plenty of rays around. We were given bait fish to attract the rays. Here, Orlin and Neville cozy up to one of these fish.



In this photo Orlin is getting instructions on just how to feed the rays without getting his fingers pinched by the mouth. It turns out the best way for the untrained tourist is to put the bait fish in the nostril, just behind the eyes and the ray sort-of sucks it in.



In this picture on the right, Mata is demonstrating that the tail of a ray could be handled carefully with some advanced handling techniques.



Because of unique spot patterns on the rays he could distinguish between them. Mata said this ray was his favorite.



After a half hour or so of frolicking with the rays we all got back in the boat and moved about a mile to another spot in the coral reef where Mata knew there were sharks. On the way we got this picture of us, on the right. The lady on our left, was taking a picture of a passing coral islet and not Barbara's ear.



We also got this photo, on the left, of Neville and Bonnie.

Mata carefully maneuvered the boat through a channel in the coral reef to a small island with a tumbled down shack on it. He anchored next to

the island in a shallow place with a lot of coral and not much sand.



Mata jumped into the water with some bait fish and soon attracted some sharks.



People with aqua shoes and snorkel gear followed Mata into the water. We opted to just observe and photograph the activities. Here are a couple photos of the shark show.



There was a dangerous looking kind of sea urchin nestled in the crevices of the coral. Mata gingerly lifted a couple of these from the water to show us what they looked like.

These critters should be avoided by bare footed coral walkers at all costs.



After about 30 minutes of this activity we pulled up anchor and headed to Mata's private island for lunch. On the way Orlin got some sun out on the bow of the boat.



We pulled in to the dock at an idyllic spot with tall palm trees swaying in the breeze. Mata tied the boat up and we explored the small island while he fixed lunch. He said the island originally belonged to his grandfather and then his father. He now owns the island and uses it as the base for his tour business. Here, on the right, is a picture of our tour boat at the pier.



The island was electrified by the latest in solar panels and there was a satellite dish for TV as

shown on the left.

Mata brought in a cooler full of drinks and fresh fruit. There were also some coconuts on the island that he broke open to obtain the white meat inside. We all enjoyed this refreshing lunch in the shade of the palm trees and no one complained about the fact that he prepared the meal without putting on a fresh loin cloth.





After lunch we all piled back into the boat and we headed for the island of TaHa'A and the vanilla plantation. On the way out from Mata's island we passed an exclusive resort on an adjacent island. It was on the exotic side with individual rooms built on pilings over the water of the lagoon. We were told that the going rate for an overnight stay was \$1400 USD.





After a 15 minute ride we arrived at Chez Louise Restaurant which also doubled as a vanilla plantation.

We all hopped off the boat and Mata led us in to a fenced off garden area filled with vanilla bean vines.

The garden consisted of rows of

small trees about 8 feet tall with the vanilla vines growing on the trees. Here, on the right, is a picture of some vanilla beans on the vine.

Going a bit further, there were some vanilla bean blossoms to be seen, as shown below.



Mata demonstrated how the blossom was pollinated by hand. Apparently the hand pollination is necessary in order to assure that a good crop of beans bearing vanilla oil will be produced.

Barbara couldn't pass up an opportunity to get a picture of this sign for Chez Louise Restaurant since that was her mother's name and Barbara's middle name.



On our way back to the boat we took some pictures of the beautiful flowers that grew in the garden.



This Wandering Jew plant below was the largest one we have ever seen. We used to keep a small potted version of this plant in our kitchen.



After the tour of the vanilla plantation it was back on the boat for a ride to the pearl farm. It was about 2:30pm and some of the people on the boat were getting worried about making back to the ship in time for the 4:30pm sailing. Mata assured us that there was no problem so we made the 20 minute ride to the pearl farm. The farm was on the south coast of TaHa'A island and in the direction of the Amsterdam so that helped allay some of the worry about getting back to the ship on time.

On the way to the pearl farm we passed a pretty little church on the coast of TaHa'A Island, as shown below.



We arrived at the pearl farm and tied up to the wharf that was built out onto the reef.

A very pleasant lady came out to a demonstration set-up on the pier and showed us how pearl oysters are grown. First a small piece of “mother of pearl” with the desired color (black, green, rose and white) from a sacrificed oyster is placed inside near the center of the oyster and allowed to “graft” on to the oyster’s natural mother of pearl lining over a period



of several months. Then the oyster is taken out of the water again and a small spherical piece of clam shell is placed on the grafted mother of pearl to form the nucleus of a pearl. The oyster then, over a period of years, covers the small piece of clam shell nucleus with mother of pearl having the color of the “graft” placed there at the beginning of the process. She said the Japanese perfected this process of controlling the color of the pearls



that are grown. They hire a Japanese specialist to perform the operations on their oysters. Here, on the left, is what her display setup looked like.

After explaining how pearls are grown she took us in to the house where the pearls are graded and stored. She explained about the grading process and different colors of pearls. She had a large pearl, about ¼ inch diameter, that had been cut in half to show the nucleus and the layer of black mother of pearl that was deposited on the nucleus. A picture of the pearl showing the cut cross section is shown on the right.



We were all amazed when she brought out boxes filled with black pearls that must have been worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.



The name of the pearl farm is “Monique & Bernard Champon” at www.tahitipearlonline.com with email Champonb@mail.pf. From the off-the-cuff price quotes she was giving for ear rings and other jewelry their prices seemed to be less than we had seen in Bora Bora. Fortunately there was not enough time to pursue any purchase because of our need to get back to the Amsterdam.

The boat ride back to the harbor at Uturoa in Raiatea was only 30 minutes and we were back in plenty of time for the 4:30pm sail away of the Amsterdam. We said our goodbyes to Mata and promised to see him again if we ever returned to French Polynesia. These were genuine sentiments based on his obvious dedication to giving good value for the tourist dollar. During the lunchtime people had asked questions about his career and he showed pride in what he was doing. He dug out a letter he had received inviting him to a convention of Tour Operators that will be held in Geneva, Switzerland next January. He proudly showed where the notice indicated he would receive a “Gold Medal” for excellence in the tour industry. We kidded him about the fact that he would have to wear more than a loin cloth because it would be cold in Geneva next winter.

We didn't go directly back to the ship because we still hadn't found an appropriate place for the required photo of Barbara's library card in Uturoa. We wandered around and found the photo opportunity shown on the right.



Barbara's library card visits the market in Uturoa, on Raiatea Island

We still hadn't finished the shopping "experience" as we prowled through the market place. We found an artistically carved shell from the nut of the Hue PaPa'A tree. We couldn't leave the poor thing here in Uturoa so we snapped it up. Here is Barbara, on the right, holding her new treasure after we returned to the ship.

We also found some economically priced flower arrangements in the market place and bought one for our stateroom, as shown below.



These kinds of flowers last a long time and should provide beautiful decoration for a week or so.

The ship got underway about 5pm. We are headed for the island of Rarotonga which is part of the Cook Islands Group in the South Pacific. We'll have a day at sea tomorrow to rest up from the events of today.