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### **In your dreams**

### **Sleek schooner Wind Song a silky-smooth way to cruise**

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TRAVEL

Great mountains of clouds rose from the horizon -- shades of lavender, pewter, strawberry ice cream. A rainbow sliced the froth. And in the distance, heat lightning crackled like a Fourth of July sparkler.

From somewhere, a choir interrupted the quiet aboard our four-masted sailing ship. It was Vangelis' homage to Christopher Columbus -- muscular music that's meant to be fused with the creak of rigging and the distant rumble of thunder. Music that danced with the unfurling South Pacific as it embraced the sleek white bow of the Wind Song.

A steward placed a flute of champagne in my right hand; my husband laced his fingers through the left. We leaned into the wind -- and each other -- savoring the moment.

We were bound for the lush, mountainous island of Huahine, the first leg of a seven-night **cruise** of the Society Islands. From there, our journey would take us to the islands of Raiatea, **Bora Bora**, Moorea and then back to Tahiti, where we'd started out. We'd be at sea only 45 hours during the week, cruising 343 miles.

Windstar **Cruises'** Wind Song is singing its swan song in French Polynesia this November. Windstar couldn't reach agreement with the French government to continue operations in Polynesia; money was the core of the problem. So the ship will move to Costa Rica -- after 10 years of mostly sold-out sailings here.

Other ships will **cruise** these islands. (See below.) But it won't be the same. When the Wind Song silences its engines and 22,000 square feet of computer-driven sail drop from its four masts, this sleek modern schooner transports passengers into the legendary South Pacific of Capt. James Cook, Paul Gauguin, Herman Melville, Robert Lewis Stevenson and James Michener.

And it transports with such grace, style and comfort. Such dignity.

"When I think of Windstar, I think of silk," said Laura Bly, travel writer at USA Today and a frequent cruiser. "The whole ship runs as smooth as silk. It's effortless."

Not for everyone

But the Wind Song isn't for everyone.

"If you're into the high life, the blowout parties, constant entertainment, Las Vegas-style floor shows, dressing up -- then this **cruise** is not for you," said Bruce Tarzy, former mayor of Poway. He and his wife, Beth, and 19-year-old son, Ryan, were among about 75 Southern Californians I joined last fall on a Wind Song **cruise** of the Society Islands.

People who **cruise** aboard Wind Song wear neckties to work -- not on vacation. This is a **cruise** for travelers who prefer intimate inns over high-rise hotels. It's for people who want adventure -- the soft, sane, somewhat pampered variety. (Feeding breakfast to sharks is fine fun, but not before enjoying your own breakfast in bed.)

The Wind Song is for couples who spend more time stocking their libraries than their bars. It's for travelers who've outgrown tour buses, midnight buffets and assigned seating. It's a **cruise** for romantics -- couples who'd rather slow dance than line dance.

It's also a **cruise** for travelers who want a luxurious -- but affordable -- way to sample the islands of French Polynesia.

"If you calculate the cost of staying ashore vs. on ship, where all your meals are included, you're far better off on ship," said Tarzy. "If you have to ask ashore what the cost of a meal is, you can't afford it."

It was the Tarzy family's third trip to the islands. And so they knew first hand about shoreside sticker shock: Even a camping space runs about \$50 a night here; over-water bungalows at the top hotels exceed \$800 a night -- without meals.

"And the food is better on ship than you'll ever get ashore," Tarzy added.

Scaled to perfection

Part of why the Wind Song works so well is its size. The 440-foot-long schooner accommodates 148 passengers in 74 outside cabins. There's one 222-square-foot owner's suite; all other cabins measure 185 square feet and are furnished with queen-size beds that convert to twins. Eleven cabins offer a third berth, and a few side-by-side cabins have adjoining doors.

There are 88 mostly Indonesian crew members to pamper guests.

Cabins have oversized portholes and enough storage space to accommodate serious over packing -- plus snorkel gear, which is handed out on the first afternoon of the **cruise**. Bathrooms are efficient, with large, circular showers and full-size sinks. Hair dryers and plush, terry robes are provided.

Decor is nautical, with lots of rich, hand-crafted wood and brass. The setting is more "private yacht" than "**cruise** ship."

But like most **cruise** ships, this one has the essential beauty salon, fitness center and casino. Only everything is small scale: The casino offers only two blackjack tables and a few slot machines. The tiny fitness center is equipped with two stationary bikes, two treadmills (one was out of order when I cruised) and some weights.

In the ship's library, cruisers borrowed books by Michener and Melville; they chose videos and selections from a 500-title library of CDs to play on their in-room VCR/CD players. The glass cabinets of the library were never locked. (During a three-day Caribbean **cruise** aboard Carnival's Ecstasy earlier this month, I noticed that library cabinets were locked. Carnival owns Windstar **Cruises**, so I asked a company spokesman about the locks. He explained that Windstar passengers don't steal.)

The Wind Song dining room accommodates all passengers at once -- and there's no assigned seating. "We sat with a different, interesting couple each night," said Judi Dash, a veteran cruiser and former editor of Relaxx, a travel magazine for physicians.

"Never in my life have I been on a ship where I met so many interesting people. Every person was fascinating. They were people like us -- informal, relaxed, well-traveled."

After-dinner entertainment aboard the Wind Song usually meant an informative lecture on the next day's port of call. Then maybe dancing under the stars on deck.

But our **cruise** also included a couple of floor shows: We sat on the floor of the main lounge as Polynesian children from local islands came on board to perform traditional dances and songs.

Robert Lewis Stevenson, who cruised here from 1888 to 1890, called Polynesians "God's sweetest work." Nothing has changed in the past century.

Reflections of one day

Ask Wind Song passengers to describe a typical day aboard ship and the answers are as varied and multicolored as the myriad fish one encounters on an early-morning snorkeling adventure off **Bora Bora**.

"Every day is a fascinating new experience -- an experience wrapped up in the enchantment of Tahiti, its warm breezes and this great ship," said Dennis D'Alessio, one of a contingent of 60 cruisers from the California Yacht Club of Marina del Rey.

This is what I remember about the day we spent anchored in Cook's Bay at Moorea. I was up at dawn that morning, joining a few other passengers on the bridge to witness our arrival into the bay.

"I can see why Gauguin came back and why Fletcher Christian mutinied," whispered Mary Jane McClintock from Marina del Rey.

Most of us said nothing. We allowed all of our senses to absorb the beauty: the lush, green, volcanic peaks, the distant crow of a rooster, the warmth of the rising sun. We inhaled the salty scent of sea merging with whiffs of freshly mown hay, wild vanilla, red torch ginger and freshly brewed coffee rising from the glass-enclosed Veranda restaurant, just below the bridge.

We gathered with new friends for breakfast under umbrellas on the deck outside the Veranda, indulging in fresh papaya, perfectly ripened mangoes and the sweetest pineapple I've ever tasted. We polished off poached eggs heaped with crab and drizzled with hollandaise.

Nobody worried about calories; we'd work off breakfast soon enough. In another hour, we'd be in wet suits, strapping heavy tanks to our backs to explore underwater. We'd learned from diving instructor Cynthia Gneiser that visiting the underwater world is as important to experiencing French Polynesia as the time spent ashore. That morning our dive expedition came nose-to-nose with black-tip sharks, danced with a gaggle of extroverted stingrays and encountered so many gorgeous humuhumunukunukuapuaa (Hawaii's state fish) that we took them for granted.

About the time we arrived back at the Wind Song, others were taking off on shore excursions. Most of the 15 of us on the early dive decided to take the rest of the morning off. We staked out private spots on the pool deck and stretched out on turquoise and white-striped, cushioned lounges.

A bell in a church steeple beckoned us to a service somewhere on the island. Then the sound of a choir drifted over. One high, sweet voice stood out from the others. Nobody on deck whispered a word. We were in nature's church; the setting commanded reverence.

"The ship was anchored at only one end," my husband recalls. So as

we drifted in the current, our view continuously changed and eventually spanned 180 degrees. "We didn't even have to move our heads."

This is a man who prides himself on reading a dozen or more novels when he's on vacation. I remember watching him that morning, peeking out at the majesty of Moorea from under the brim of a baseball cap. His first book lay open on his belly, face down. It was day six of our **cruise**.

The rigging clanged, a bartender stood idle, the flag of French Polynesia dawdled at the stern.

"How quickly I relaxed really surprised me," said Kirsten Shaw from San Francisco. "I was down notches the first day. I'll remember that for a long, long time."

"This is the most relaxing vacation we've been on, and we travel all over the world," said Christian Lewis from Basking Ridge, N.J. "Everything's done for you in the most unobtrusive way -- so gently. There's no herding."

And there's nothing to mar the mood of relaxation: "I love that there's no ship photographer," said Anne Devulder of Orange. "Nobody's taking pictures of you every minute. That's so nice."

After a lunch of fresh seafood ceviche, tortilla soup and papaya stuffed with shrimp, cruisers went their own way: some to shore to explore on their own, others to a wide range of excursions offered by the ship -- everything from parasailing to glass-bottom-boat tours. Others chose to relax aboard ship.

"French Polynesia is not a stopping-off point," said Martin Scott, captain of the Wind Song. "Everybody who comes here, comes deliberately. But what one chooses to do here is as different as each individual."

That night, passengers convened back aboard ship for dinner and to share stories of their adventures.

"When no more bikes were available for rent, we hitchhiked around the island," said Anne Kunkle of Palm Desert. "It felt great doing something you wouldn't do in ordinary life. And you know you're perfectly safe here."

Others lamented that the **cruise** would be ending soon and talked about images that would linger longest:

"Dessert at lunch," said Christy Bucci of Houston. "I think that's

going to be the single hardest thing to give up when I go home."

"The rum-raisin bread pudding," said Peter Hammett of Baltimore. "It's reason enough to take this **cruise**. My only disappointment is that they didn't serve it at every meal."

Kitty Kingma of La Jolla and Pat Welch of Portland, Ore., said they'd remember the color of the South Pacific seas. "You can't capture it on film," said Kingma. Added Welch: "It's the color they paint the bottom of swimming pools."

John and Patty Thompson from Simsbury, Conn., celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary, talked about the romance that the **cruise** inspired. They explained how they met as students at Cleveland State. He worked at a dairy; she worked at a grocery. He'd send her love poems wrapped around milk bottles. Her favorite remembrance of the **cruise** is the love poem she found with her milk one evening; it was written on an old dairy order form.

"I used to live in Tahiti," said Serge Falesitch, a former chef at Delicias in Rancho Santa Fe who now has his own restaurant, Eclipse, in West Hollywood. Falesitch and his bride, Charane Allen, were among eight honeymooners aboard. "I know this is the most romantic place on Earth," he said. "That's why I wanted to take her here."

The newlyweds wandered off to the deck where a band played under the stars. Tiny lights twinkled in the rigging. A tropical breeze rustled her hair as they held each other close. They swayed to the gentle rhythm of the tides and their private wind song.

"There may be some place in the world that's more beautiful than this is," Tarzy said. "But if there is, I don't know it."

If you go: Cruising the Society Islands

The best times to **cruise** the Society Islands are May, June, September and October, when the weather is balmy and tropical. July and August are very hot, and at other times there's more rain -- but even downpours here clear up fast.

THE WIND SONG: Cabins are still available for weeklong Wind Song **crui**ses in French Polynesia. The ship's final sailing is set to begin Nov. 15. **Crui**ses depart Saturdays from Pepeeete on Tahiti and include stops in Huahine, Raiatea, **Bora Bora** and Moorea. Dress is informal -- though shorts and tank tops are not allowed at dinner.

Rates for standard cabins range from \$2,648 to \$2,716 per person, based on double occupancy. Round-trip airfare from San Diego adds \$960 per person. Port charges run \$140 per person. Ask your travel agent about package deals.

Shore excursion prices aboard the Wind Song range from \$20 for a 3 1/2 -hour bus tour of Moorea to \$155 for 20-minute helicopter tours of the island. Snorkel equipment is provided free, but there's a \$39 fee for most snorkeling expeditions. The ship provides scuba-diving lessons for \$55; dive expeditions cost \$55 each.

On Nov. 22, the Wind Song departs Tahiti for Costa Rica, where weeklong **cruises** will begin Dec. 13. Wind Song's South Pacific fans, like jilted lovers, are predicting the ship's eventual return. But at least for now, Windstar **Cruises** is making no promises. Spokesman Erik Elvejord said the ship will remain in Costa Rica at least through 1999.

Fares for Costa Rica sailings begin at \$2,716 per person, not including airfare. From San Diego, the add-on for round-trip airfare is \$1,010 per person. Add \$160 for port charges.

For more information, ask your travel agent or phone Windstar **Cruises** at (800) 258-7245.

**OTHER SHIPS IN FRENCH POLYNESIA:** The 386-passenger Club Med 2 is offering three, four and seven-night **cruises** of French Polynesia through 1997. Three- and four-night cruisers depart or return from Pepeeete and **Bora Bora**. Seven-night **cruises** begin and end in Pepeeete and include stops in Moorea, Raiatea, **Bora Bora** and Rangiroa.

Fares start at \$990 for three-night **cruises**, \$1,320 for four-night **cruises** and \$2,310 for seven-night **cruises** without airfare. With round-trip airfare from Oakland, seven-night **cruises** start at \$2,980. Prices are per person, based on double occupancy and do not include port charges of \$140 for seven-night **cruises** (\$60 and \$80 for three- and four-night **cruises**). Cruisers who are not members of Club Med must pay a \$30 initiation fee (per family) plus \$50 dues per person.

Ask your travel agent about special deals. For example, Club Med currently is offering married couples up to 30 percent of the price off their **cruises** (but not airfare). Discounts are based on the number of years married. For more information, ask your travel agent or phone Club Med at (800) 4 LE SHIP.

[] Radisson **Cruises** will introduce the 320-passenger Paul Gauguin to French Polynesia for seven-night **cruises** beginning Jan. 31, 1998. The ship, currently under construction, will sail year-round from Tahiti and include stops in Rangiroa, Raiatea, **Bora Bora** and Moorea. Inaugural-season fares start at \$2,795 per person, with add-on airfares starting at \$195 from San Diego. Port charges will run \$189 per person.

The new ship will offer deluxe cruising in the style of Wind Song. The smallest cabins will offer 200 square feet of living space. The two

dining rooms will feature single open seatings. There will be no formal nights. For more information, ask your travel agent or phone Radisson Seven Seas **Cruises** at (800) 333-3333.

ETCETERA: If you book airfare with your **cruise**, be sure to check whether the airline you choose will award frequent-flier mileage. I flew Air France, planning to earn mileage on its partner, United Airlines. I learned later that United doesn't give credit for Air France miles on the Los Angeles/Tahiti route.

INFORMATION: For more details on Tahiti and the Society Islands, phone (800) 365-4949.

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