



WORD TRAVELS FAST

LANGUAGE PLAYS: A multilingual guide comes to share idioms, proverbs and colloquialisms sure to spark the response, *Say What?* (Lonely Planet, \$5.99.)

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NATURE'S CANVAS



Beautiful, peaceful strokes paint the French Polynesian islands

BY JAE-HA KIM
Staff Reporter

PAPEETE, TAHITI — It is with trepidation I walk back to my room after dinner. I am used to strolling back to hotels in foreign countries, but I am not accustomed to looking overboard into a pitch black ocean while doing so.

But when you are on a cruise ship, that's what you do. You lay in the sun. You eat plenty of food. You relax. And if you're a land lover like me, you think about what it takes to keep a liner like the M/S Paul Gauguin afloat.

Granted, at 513 feet long and

with a capacity to hold 320 guests, it is a smaller ship than most. By comparison, the Royal Caribbean's Adventure of the Seas is 1,020 feet and holds 3,114 people while the Carnival Conquest is 952 feet long and houses 2,974 passengers.

But the M/S Paul Gauguin's

size, or relative lack of it, is also its strong point. It's one of the few cruise ships small enough to enter the narrow bays in French Polynesia. While the larger lines have to dock outside the *motus* — the ring of small sandy islands surrounding main islands such as Bora Bora — the M/S Paul Gauguin, which is part of the fleets operated by Radisson Seven Seas Cruises, is sleek enough to pass through right into the bay.

The 118 islands of French Polynesia span more than 2 million square miles of the South Pacific and are divided into five groups: the Society Islands (which include Tahiti, Moorea, Bora Bora and Raiatea), the Tuamotus, the Marquesas, the Aus-

trials and the Gambiers. An overseas territory of the Republic of France, French Polynesia's population of just under 250,000 people skews 5 percent Asian, 12 percent European and 83 percent Maohis (Polynesians).

Located south of the equator in the Pacific Ocean — about midway between Australia and California — French Polynesia shares the same time zone as Hawaii, but it's a world apart from the United States in culture, language and style. The islands dot the ocean, dwarfed to the west by Australia and to the east by South America.

The first thing you will say to

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Above: The magnificent, ancient volcanic peak of Bora Bora. —DENTON MORRIS PHOTOS/FOR THE SUN-TIMES



A turtle enjoys the warm waters around Bora Bora.

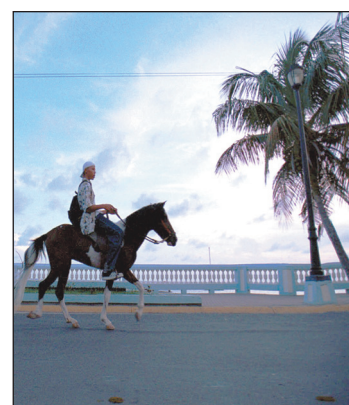


A local islander scrapes the meat out of a freshly acquired coconut.



A clown fish protects its home anemone on the reef around Moorea.

PUERTO RICO



Riding horses at full gallop on the promenade is common in the village of Esperanza on Vieques Island. —AP

Charming isle sheds military

With U.S. gone, Vieques seeks way

BY HOWARD WOLINSKY
Staff reporter

ESPERANZA, Vieques Island — This is the place where the chicken crossed the road.

The movement occurred mid-afternoon on the *malecon*, or promenade, in a tourist-friendly area with bars and guesthouses along Calle Flamboyant Avenue in the heart of this fishing town overlooking a gorgeous Caribbean harbor.

This island, just seven miles from the "mainland," better known to us North Americans as Puerto Rico, still shows its rustic roots.

It's a place with more than twice the land area of Manhattan but with only 9,000 residents, about the size of Flossmoor. Wild horses roam and locals ride domesticated horses at full gallop along the black-top late in the night.

Be prepared for a different type of experience on Vieques. There are no Mickey D's here. And a cell phone might not work.

You can stay in luxury here or in dirt-cheap accommodations.

The Spanish dismissed Vieques and its sister island Culebra as "useless" because no gold or silver were found here, though they built their last fort in the New World here.

Vieques was considered so desolate that the original, 1963 version of the movie "Lord of Flies" was filmed on a beach here. Another factoid: Vieques is the southern tip of the Bermuda Triangle.

Since the 1940s, the U.S. Navy controlled two-thirds of the 52-square-mile island, using it for target practice. But there was trouble in this paradise when a civilian guard was killed in a bombing exercise in 1999.

The people rose up angry — you can still see some protest signs — as Puerto Rican nationalists, politicians, religious leaders, peace activists, environmentalists and development interests combined forces in the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques. They had powerful and glitzy backup, too, as major figures weighed in on what became a cause celebre, including Jesse and Jacqueline Jackson, Hillary Clinton, the Dalai Lama and singer Ricky Martin.

The Navy surrendered last year. Now Vieques is trying to find its way in the civilian world. It's still a work in progress.

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cancun

MEXICAN CARIBBEAN

The Ultimate Beach Experience!

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