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Cruising

Seduced by islands of love

By Roderick Eime
 March 12, 2006

THE men, oiled, lean and exuberant, gather ominously around us on the beach. All the while, a hypnotic drum beat urges them on, each licentious beat met with an overt, unambiguous thrust of the hips. This elaborate welcome could be mistaken for many things.

We're ashore on Kiriwina, the main island of the Trobriands, a tiny group east of the tip of Papua New Guinea and fabled as "the islands of love".

Our ship, the 76-passenger, 2000-tonne *Oceanic Princess*, is on her maiden international voyage – and what a premiere.

I turn to Naomi, a sprightly, well-travelled, 70-something lady with whom I've just shared a very civil lunch of lobster, prawns and asparagus.

She's stunned, watching with mouth agape and eyes like saucers.

The drums – and the dancers – reach a fever pitch, then stop as if a mighty handbrake has just been applied.

To the sound of a chap in a comical shirt-and-tie combo bellowing pidgin English into a bullhorn, the men momentarily lose their determined demeanour and step back to reveal a dozen or so exquisitely adorned young women, each of whom bears a beautiful, hand-crafted laurel of frangipani – and not a great deal else.

Amid a palpable, expectant silence, they approach in unison and delicately place the fragrant laurels around each of our necks.

"The Trobrianders have made seduction an art form," Nancy, our resident anthropologist, reminds us. "It's all a part of the matrilineal (female-based) society of this region."

Dr Nancy Sullivan is also our interpreter. Without her, we'd be more than floundering in this complex, multi-layered "kula" culture that trades in chattels, food and favours.

Kula is a benign, yet



Greeting ... the exciting dancers of Kiriwina, in the Trobriands. Picture: Roderick Eime / AAP

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highly involved, game of strategy and influence that has been the basis for inter-island relations in the Milne Bay region over many centuries.

"This gorgeous shell jewellery," Nancy announces as she picks out a girl who is probably the equivalent of a princess, "is a very clear sign of her status in the community."

Nancy delicately cradles and admires the weighty assembly of mother-of-pearl, spondylus and crocus shell strung together to form a magnificent, and very valuable, ceremonial piece.

I'm entranced by the intricate decorations. Her flawless skin is dusted with iridescent golden pollen from yellow flowers, while around her neck are garlands of tiny, painstakingly woven flowers.

Dark armbands with shell adornments match the cluster of hand-fashioned red shells cascading from her ear lobes. A similar strand encircles her subtly painted forehead, which in turn is topped with a tiara of bird feathers.

Each girl is similarly bedecked, but infinitesimal differences declare her family's ultimate status in the community.

The dainty troupe turns to escort us up the short hill for the elaborate spectacle of the Yam Harvest Dance, which quenches any argument about how these serene and beautiful people earned their reputation.

Students of anthropology will no doubt recall the huge works of Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead, both of whom immersed themselves in these complex societies.

Victorian-era Malinowski saw only the male's perspective, and berated himself severely for his lascivious thoughts.

The more liberal Mead unveiled the intricate women's culture and apparently embraced the local customs wholeheartedly.

In response to the locals' obvious focus on "simple pleasures", much confusion was sown by waves of Christian missionaries who sought to conceal these erotic spectacles with dowdy, shapeless garb and searing Sunday sermons.

Our entire 10-day itinerary aboard *Oceanic Princess* was an intoxicating exploration of these unheard-of islands rimming the steamy Solomon Sea.

The Marshall Bennet Group, the enticingly named D'Entrecasteaux Group, Green Island, Dobu Island, Nissan Island and New Ireland all yield tropical wonders never seen on any mundane travel brochure. Each landing is a discovery – for our hosts and ourselves.

Many of these small, impossibly isolated communities rarely see "dim-dim" (white) folks, and judging by the looks on some of the youngsters' faces, we're their first.

Oceanic Princess – the product of decades of knowledge gained by Tony and Vicki Briggs and their long-serving skippers – is ideally suited to this task of exploration and discovery.

Despite her 63m length, she is highly manoeuvrable. On one occasion, Captain John Lynch (ex-Royal Australian Navy) deftly brought her within 20m of a sandy beach.

Later, he guided her up a beautiful channel that was just 12m deep.



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Yes, you can still get a cocktail and pull up a deckchair, but prepare yourself for inspirational experiences that transcend the term "holiday".

FACT FILE

- **Getting there:** Cairns-based Coral Princess Cruises operate the new 76-passenger expedition yacht *Oceanic Princess* on arange of 10- to 13-day itineraries that take in theislands of Papua New Guinea, Melanesia and New Zealand. All meals and excursions are included.
- **Prices:** From \$6950 per person twin-share.
- **Details:** **Coral Princess Cruises**, 1800 079 545 or **Adventure Associates**, 1800 222 141

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