

F SETTING FOOT ON ALL OF THE MAJOR ISLANDS OF ALOHA WEREN'T ALREADY ENOUGH OF AN ADVENTURE FOR ONE CRUISE, a select number of NCL America's Hawaii cruises offer the unexpected — a detour to a truly South Pacific experience.

NCL America's 11-day sailings break away from Hawaii for a rousing blue water jaunt nearly 1,000 miles south to Fanning Island in the Republic of Kiribati. This isolated, undeveloped speck in the Line Island chain is equidistant from North America and Australia — 3,300 miles from each. Talk about the middle of nowhere.

Though not really a "South Pacific Island," Fanning is a mere 228 miles, just 3 degrees, north of the Equator. It's also a world away from Hawaii in one distinctly southern Hemisphere way. Fanning, called Tabuaeran in Kiribati, is an atoll, one of those idyllic, circular, reef-ringed islands so associated with the South Pacific. Indeed, Kiribati is part of the larger Gilbert Islands that stretch away south toward Australia and include such legendary locations as Tarawa and Christmas Island, the world's largest coral atoll.

On Fanning Island, there are no Hawaii-like, vegetation-covered lava headlands. Nor is there anything else that says "standard" about this port of call. By the time you heave-to for tendering to an intensely scenic circle of palm shaded sand, you sense that this is special. For physical beauty, the atoll is a sight to behold, shimmering under a sun noticeably more intense than Hawaii's.

And no air-conditioned shopping arcades greet you. This is a Third World island, where the locals have no electricity or running water. It's island life at the very edge of the modern world. The NCL shore experience features everything you need for a great lunch and a pristine beach and water sports activities. But NCL's approach to "development" is as low impact as the island scene is low key.

"Immigration" is a card table set up under a palm with two uniformed Kiribati constables stamping passports for those who want. Nearby, long shaded tables are a flea market of hand-crafted Kiribati souvenirs. Among the more interesting are fans, hats, and baskets made from coconut and pandanus leaves, colorful woven fabrics, and sharktooth-lined, triangular-bladed knives.

After "shopping," there's a satisfying lunch and a rousing traditional dance demonstration. Robert Louis Stevenson said the dancing he saw on Kiribati was "the best" in the Pacific. "Gilbertese dance appeals to the soul," he went on, and has the "essence of great art." Then it's a short tender trip across the atoll's opening and an easy 10-minute stroll to the Na Pali beach water sports area. On the way around the closest curve of the atoll you pass scenic old

thatched huts not unlike the very rustic structures that still shelter most Fanning Islanders.

For the travel wise, this'll be more than a "flop in the sun" kind of spot. Walk the shore away from your fellow cruisers and it won't be long before you're alone in a place very different and far removed from the 50th state where you've spent most of your time recently. Grab a kayak and venture out into the powder blue/green pastel of the lagoon — what island aficionado hasn't fantasized about doing that? The milky water entices the eye to the other side of the island and makes you wonder about the people who live there, miles away, down the sandy road from NCL's landing site.

One visitor in 2005 couldn't contain her curiosity. When Arla Johnson went ashore in September, she skipped the lunch and island dance program to walk with the ship's photographer a mile beyond Na Pali beach to huts occupied by a local family and a nearby primary school (sponsored by Norwegian Cruise Line). Johnson was shocked at the primitive conditions. "I've heard of Third World, but is there such a thing as Fourth World," she asks? Nevertheless, she couldn't get over the dazzling smile of one little girl. Ironically, she also learned that infection from tooth decay was a perennial, potentially fatal problem on the island.

Johnson went home to the frozen north and by the August — as close as Minnesota gets to Fanning's equatorial temps — she'd decided to tap friends, family, local schools, and church community for the dental supplies needed to keep her young friend's smile, and those of her neighbors, as bright as possible.

She accepted donations and by late fall had 50 pounds of tooth-brushes and tooth paste ready to ship to a Norwegian Cruise Line employee on the island. Johnson paid the \$220 UPS bill and NCL agreed to deliver the package free of charge. In late February 2007, she received her first photos of the Kiribati kids experimenting with First World dental hygiene practices.

By then she had a full-fledged movement on her hands. United Airlines Captain Denny Flannagan wrestled the red tape needed to clear Johnson's subsequent shipments for free flights on United



Airlines, the carrier with the most flights to Hawaii. "I owe him a lot," Johnson says. "I couldn't have afforded to send the next three shipments without his help." To date she's shipped 247 pounds of supplies to the island.

## destination profile

"Most people go on cruises to relax and escape from reality," says Heidi Fehring, a reporter for the Quad Community Press in the Minneapolis suburb where Johnson makes her decidedly untropical home. Fehring, who



frequently covered Johnson's efforts in the local newspaper, says, "Instead, Arla spent the rest of her cruise thinking about how to help the people she met on Fanning Island. It's always a reporter's hope that stories like Arla's will inspire others in the community to reach out."

"I've been on cruises," says

Johnson, "but nothing ever struck me like this before. The response to my effort grew much faster than expected."

There's a lot more than the expected about NCL's Fanning Island itinerary. It's perfect for the cruiser who may want some therapeutic time "at sea." There's something about savoring a globe-girdling expanse of ocean that perfectly complements the otherwise island-hopping Hawaii experience. Factor in a bike ride around a sandy side of an atoll in the middle of nowhere and this is a cruise that even the experienced sailor won't soon forget.

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## Details

- Starting in September 2007, Pride of Aloha will make one stop in Fanning Island every month.
- Make donations to Arla Johnson's Fanning Island dental hygiene program by e-mailing ArlaMJ@msn.com for instructions on how to contribute.
- A not so flattering but hilarious look at Kiribati is the recent book Sex Lives of The Cannibals: Adrift in the Equatorial Pacific by J. Maarten Troost (Broadway Books, 2004). Publishers Weekly said of it, "Troost's chronicle of his sojourn in a forgotten world is a comic masterwork of travel writing and a revealing look at a culture clash." His newest book is Getting Stoned with Savages: A Trip Through the Islands of Fiji and Vanuatu (Broadway, 2006).



## Finding Fanning

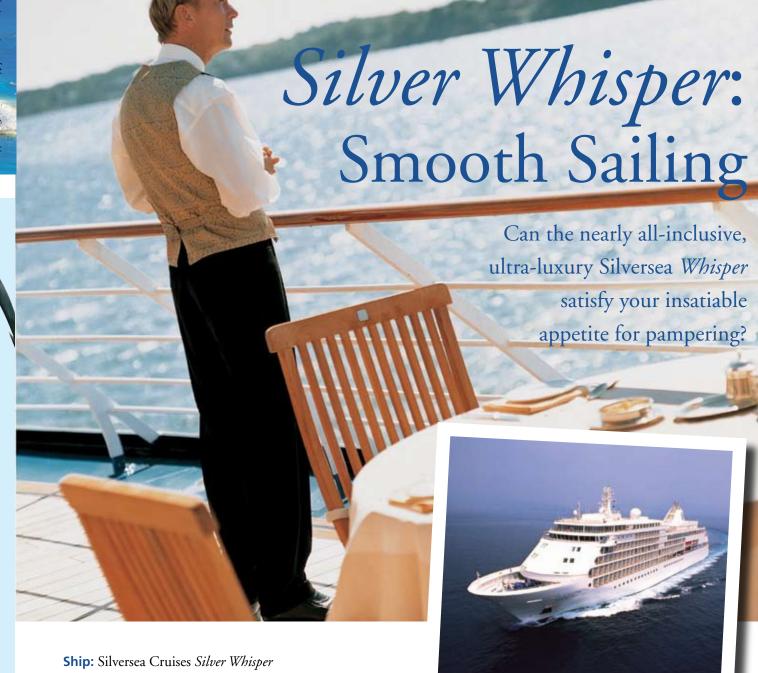
Several years ago, Captain Gunstein Langset and a tiny crew set out from Christmas Island on a fishing boat. As Norwegian Cruise Line's senior port captain, Langset's mission was to visit Fanning Island to determine whether it might make a good port call for NCL's planned Hawaiibased ship, then the Norwegian Leo. Langset was trying to find a way to comply with a century-old U.S. law that prohibits foreign-flagged vessels from picking up and dropping off passengers at U.S. ports, without first having cruised to a "distant foreign port."

Christmas Island was to have been that distant foreign port, but it was too distant. Plus, the harbor was not deep enough for the ship's tenders. Captain Langset knew Fanning Island had sufficient deep water and was closer to Hawaii than was Christmas Island. So he chartered a fishing boat and set out with crew.

The trip to Fanning Island was uneventful, but on the return the boat's engine failed, leaving Langset and crew adrift in the South Pacific. Fortunately, Langset was able to radio a nearby navy boat for help. His good fortune on the high seas marked an auspicious beginning for what would become one of Norwegian Cruise Line's most successful moves — to base a ship year-round in Hawaii, made possible only by using Fanning Island as a distant foreign port for its then foreign-flagged vessel

## **Did You Know?**

The U.S. maritime provision that left Langset and crew adrift is known as the Passenger Vessel Services Act. The provision was designed to protect the U.S. shipbuilding industry by allowing only U.S.-flagged vessels to embark and disembark passengers in U.S. ports, thus giving American-built ships a perceived advantage over foreign-flagged competitors (in practice, however, U.S. minimum-wage laws, which internationally flagged vessels need not comply to, eradicate some of the competitive advantages for U.S.-flagged ships.) — Ralph Grizzle



**Entered Service: 2001** 

**Date Reviewed:** February 2007

**Overview:** This spring, the six-year-old *Silver Whisper* went to drydock for shipwide improvements. Among the key upgrades: The fitness facility doubled in size, and new equipment was installed; stateroom televisions were replaced with flat-panel displays, Wi-Fi was extended to all staterooms, new audio systems were added, and mattresses were upgraded. Additionally, a new "Viking Cooking School at Sea" was installed for cooking classes.

Like its sister Silver Shadow, Silver Whisper boasts an ultra-luxury, "near all-inclusive" experience. You won't

need to dole out extra cash for gratuities, alcohol, soft drinks, juices, speciality coffees or shuttle service between the ship and city centers. But your cruise fare won't quite cover everything, either. There are charges for shore excursions, internet usage, spa services, cigars from The Humidor, and premium wines and liquors. Laundry service, but not dry cleaning or pressing, is included in many stateroom categories, and use launderettes is free of charge for all stateroom categories.

Of Silver Whisper's five dining options — The Restau-

Avid Cruiser

Can the nearly all-inclusive,

satisfy your insatiable

appetite for pampering?