

PARADISE, TWICE OVER



The border is open, the skies are blue and they've got your room ready: in the first of our new travel stories, **Kirsty Cameron** made a visit to the Cook Islands.

THE ITINERARY

Five days of luxurious adult-time in the Cook Islands: two on Aitutaki, three in Rarotonga.

THE HIGHLIGHTS

Snorkelling with a turtle, coral gardens, Ali the vaka captain, the dinners, the vaka lunch, Punanga Nui Markets, Aitutaki.

WHY GO

The sun is shining, the water is warm, and there's no quarantine or RATting required. Tourism is 80 per cent of the Cook Islands economy and after two long years, everyone in a tourism-adjacent enterprise is just happy to see you. The flight is around three hours and 45 minutes from Auckland, the currency is the New Zealand dollar (ATMs readily available), and there is no need for power adaptors either. It's unplug and play: relaxation, rest, recuperation and often a digital detox too. There's no Spark roaming plan (you can buy Vodafone credit or a SIM with a WiFi plan), and the WiFi is dial-up slow, which could be challenging if you were planning to work from your sunlounger. But go analogue and embrace holidays as they used to be.

WHERE TO SLEEP

On Aitutaki, the five-star Pacific Resort is a secluded getaway set in lush tropical gardens — who remembers how good they smell? All of its 29 bungalows face to the world-famous Aitutaki lagoon: coral-ringed turquoise waters



dotted with tiny atolls and islands. An adults-only haven, the only noise is the *whoosh-whoosh* of the lagoon waters onto the fine sand outside your bungalow.

There's an infinity pool, snorkelling kits and reef shoes to borrow and a nothing-is-too-much-trouble-can-I-arrange-that-for-you attitude from the resort staff.

Extra stars for: the authentic bonhomie of guest-relations manager James Lockery, and for Sri, the resort's spa manager. Sri's blend of Balinese and local massage techniques using the Cooks' Te Tika oil will have you as chilled as the local cats.

Pacifcresort.com/aitutaki



On Rarotonga, the boutique resort of Motu (full name, Motu Beachfront Art Villas) offers 10 self-contained, luxuriously set-up bungalows on Titikaveka lagoon, on the southern side of the island. It's owned by Auckland surgeon John Dunn and wife Rose. Of Cook Islands descent, John has been a visiting general and laparoscopic surgeon to Rarotonga for 20-plus years. In 2019 the Dunns bought the property, extensively renovated it and relaunched it as Motu, with profits to be shared with Pacific arts, community and healthcare projects.



Motu welcomes guests aged 18-plus. Every room features local artwork, as the name suggests. The Dunns have made a commitment to make Motu's carbon print as light as possible: the resort van is electric, the coffee pods are compostable, there are e-bikes for guest use.

Extra stars for: The info-rich in-room compendium, which includes news about Kiki the resort cat (despite what her behaviour implies, she does get fed). Also for John Dunn's opinion-page contributions to the *Cook Islands News*, salty takes on what could be done to improve the tourist experience, written, you presume, from the gut as much as the heart.

(Amongst Mr D's wishes: fewer wandering dogs and Indian mynahs, more native birds, better WiFi).

Motuvillas.com

TO DO



Lie on your sunlounger with a copy of Kate de Goldie's *Eddy, Eddy* or catch up on island and world affairs with the *Cook Islands News*. For activities that will get you off the lounge, highly recommended are:



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The Vaka Cruise. This is a magical day of snorkelling, song, stories and island-style food on the 21-metre *Titi ai Tonga* (“wind from the

south”) modern waka. The boat cruises the turquoise lagoon, with stops on several tiny atolls for sandy steps into myths, legends and modern history — Aitutaki was the refuelling stop for the TEAL flying boats on the Pacific-hopping “Coral route”. And it’s worth mentioning the lunch. Put aside any of your (or my) unpalatable memories of buffets on tourist boats. The vaka’s barbecued tuna, local-style salads and vegetable dishes were outstanding. Captained by the charismatic Ali Maa — more than once he’s been asked by a Disney-imprinted little if he’s Maui — it’s available as a day trip from Rarotonga, with return flights included in the ticket. Transfers from either the airport or local accommodation is also included.
thevakacruise.com

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Ariki Adventures Sea Scooter Safari. On Rarotonga, Ariki Adventures host a 90-minute snorkelling tour of coral gardens and the wreck of the RMS *Maitai*, which foundered in Avarua Harbour on Christmas Day, 1916 and is now part of the reef. It’s a small group activity, with guides swimming front and back and squad support with a dinghy and paddleboard. You are propelled by a sea scooter: a hand-held James Bondian device (it looks a bit like an overgrown Dustbuster) that zips you through the water while you’re enjoying the view below through your mask. The coral is stunning and the guides explain what you’re seeing. An extra thrill was stopping, scooters stilled, to watch a turtle perform its graceful aquatic ballet. Swim skills





and a reasonable level of fitness is recommended: the scooters pull you along but you need to kick. This tour is accessible to those with some disabilities — the Ariki team creates all sorts of workarounds. arikiadventures.rezdy.com

Arts and Culture. Several of the bigger hotels have show-style cultural evenings: see cookislands.travel for information, or pick up brochures at the tourism office in Avarua. The historic churches on both islands are magnificent and, on Sundays, the singing is reportedly transcendent.

On Rarotonga, there are galleries and local art outlets: the Beachcomber's Bergman Gallery

in Taputapuatea has changing exhibitions. There are also locally printed pareu — sarongs — and crafts for sale at Saturday's Punanga Nui market.



TO EAT

Aitutaki's hotels offer dining with views, and its cafes are a casual option: both the Boat Shed and Koru Cafe are popular. The Pacific Resort's Rapae Bay restaurant is outstanding on any score: food, service and for putting two olives in a perfectly chilled martini. The welcome was just as warm and the food delicious at Tamanu Beach Resort's waterside restaurant.

Rarotonga offers many more options, from casual to swish, island style: the long, floaty dresses worn by women at Nautilus restaurant at Muri Beach looked like a flight



of tropical butterflies. For more of a burger-and-beer sort of evening, the waterside Rarotonga Sailing Club bar and brasserie is a good call. It's a little tricky to find in the dark but worth the stop. The Muri night markets are fun as a dinner option: food trucks and stalls offer a wide selection of meals to be enjoyed in the open air. It's on several nights a week, take cash.

Rarotonga is also serviced by a couple of small supermarkets: Wigmores on the south side of the island is particularly good for supplies. Meat, mostly imported from New Zealand, is expensive but then, it's imported. I was warned before I left that "food is



so expensive” and to take wine and snacks with me. This might have been true once, but maybe our prices have caught up with Rarotonga’s, because it wasn’t what I found. A quick sticker check of crackers, chips, peanut butter, ice cream, soap: all Kiwi brands and similar prices to what I’d expect to pay in Auckland. Wine seemed to be about \$5 a bottle more than prices in New Zealand. For the bountiful local fruit and salad vegetables, Saturday’s Punanga Nui Markets are the place to stock up. Just-harvested quality, it’s well patronised by locals and visitors alike.

GET AROUND

Hire a car (New Zealand licence required) or motor scooter (you can apply for a local scooter licence) on both islands. On Rarotonga there are no traffic lights, two roundabouts and one main road that loops around the island: it’s about 50 minutes to complete a full circuit. Alternatively, Rarotonga has

buses: the clockwise one and the anticlockwise one. Both pushbikes and e-bikes can also be hired, but the road is one narrow lane in each direction. There are no footpaths outside of the Avarua area, and with dim street lighting in some places and the ambling dogs, walking and driving after sunset demands careful attention. Walking is more pleasant on Aitutaki — locals in cars and on scooters give pedestrians a cautiously wide berth and most often, a cheerful wave too.



THINGS TO KNOW

Covid is circulating in the Cooks. If you were to come down with the virus on your trip, the local health authority, Te Marae Ora requires you to isolate in your accommodation for seven days. If that’s not possible, Te Marae Ora will direct you to specific accommodation. It is at your cost, travel insurance in case of an extended stay is recommended: check your preferred provider to see what they cover.

Visitors to the islands need to get an international vaccine record: go to health.govt.nz. And there’s a Cooks’ government pre-arrival declaration to complete: see cookislands.travel for links to the form. Before departure, you’ll need complete a similar digital form for New Zealand. This returns a QR code which you can show as the email or a saved image on your phone at check in.

If your first destination is Aitutaki, make sure you have everything you need for that first night in case you can’t get a local store. My hotel didn’t sell toothpaste, for example. I’d also forgotten to take a rash vest for snorkelling (preferable to a layer of sunblock, certain types of which contain chemicals that destroy the coral reefs) but couldn’t find anywhere selling them.

Hotels and restaurants accept credit cards but smaller stores and dairies often don’t. If you forget cash, ATMs are dotted around. ■

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Kirsty Cameron travelled as a guest of Cook Islands Tourism.

For more information visit:
cookislands.travel