

COVER STORY

Return to Eden

With direct flights resuming between Australia and the Cook Islands, it's time to start planning your escape to paradise, writes *Sarah Maguire*.



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They say we have every shade of blue in the Cook Islands.

UNEXPECTEDLY, my first swim in a Cook Islands lagoon is to the strains of a little choir of school-girls and their teacher, singing in Maori as they stand waist-deep in the water. We haven't wasted any time splashing our way past them. My partner and I arrived in our room at Rarotonga's Muri Beach Club Hotel approximately five minutes ago. It is absolute waterfront. The Muri Lagoon is a few strides away across white sand, and its turquoise fabulousness lures like a siren.

Later at the hotel bar, we'll have pina colodas at outdoor tables set up on the beach, shaded by striped blue umbrellas and looking across the lagoon towards the fringing reef where crashing waves are a constant soundtrack. The sand is between our toes, rustling palm trees are all around and bowls of sliver-thin kumara chips are delivered with our drinks. On our first night, we'll head into the hills for dinner at Antipodes restaurant, feasting on oysters, prawns and barbecued tuna as we watch the sun set over the South Pacific.

What tropical island holiday dream come true is this? For a start, we're in Polynesia, that vast triangular swathe of Pacific islands

stretching from Hawaii in the north to New Zealand in the south with places like Tahiti, Tonga and Samoa in between. With none of the internationally branded mega-resorts you'll find in the likes of Fiji, the travel experience on the Cook Islands is intimate; the local culture is waiting just beyond the driveway of your boutique resort, which is most likely owned and operated by locals. In the case of the 30-room, adults-only Muri Beach Club Hotel, that local is Liana Scott, a former Miss South Pacific, who grew up in the immediate area and whose father dad, John, built the resort in the 2000s.

The Cook Islands is one of the tiniest nations in the world. I think I've misheard when I hear the population is just over 17,000. Surely that's 70,000? Nope. More than 10,000 of them live on the biggest of the 15 islands, the elliptical Rarotonga, with its main road a traffic-light-free 32-kilometre ring around its perimeter serviced by two buses - one goes clockwise, the other anticlockwise.

In our hire car, we ultimately travel the entire loop as we drive to restaurants and meeting points and just to take in the sights: beautiful white-washed churches famously attended each Sunday by women in "rito"

hats woven from the young leaves of coconut palms; poignant grave sites everywhere due to the custom of burying loved ones not in cemeteries, but on family land; colourful roadside bursts of hibiscus and frangipani; and, forever in the background, the island's spine of jagged volcanic mountains that shoot up to heights of more than 600 metres.

INTO THE INTERIOR

We get off the main drag on a morning bicycle tour led by Storytellers Eco Cycle and Walking Tours' Dr Corrina Tucker, an environmental sociologist from New Zealand who came here in 2018 to do research in tourism and environment practices, and liked it so much, she came back to live. "It's a sense of wellbeing; I love the climate, the ocean, the bush, the relaxed atmosphere," she says. "On that trip, I was like, 'Why am I going to wait until I retire?'"

A tour group of four, picked up at our resorts in a pick-up truck, we cycle behind Corrina into the lush west coast interior, along roads and tracks that pass by modest homes, crops of cassava and taro, mango and banana trees, goats and cows and huge pigs lolling about in the shade of the tropical trees. Chick-

ens lead the free-range life on these islands. Like coconuts, they are everywhere; you'll even find them on top of the mountains, Corrina says. We pull up at a grassy clearing for a coconut husking session, involving a sharp stick and a small machete; it's not our first coconut tute, nor our last, during our five nights in the Cooks.

When we stop for a coffee break at Castaway resort, looking out over the lagoon where a couple of locals in the distance are catching octopus and collecting shellfish, Corrina peels open a large green pod so we can eat koko, or ice-cream bean, chewing away white flesh to reveal the glossy black seed. As we're wheeling our bikes back out to the road, she plucks Surinam berries from a tree in the driveway for us to eat; they look like tiny oxheart tomatoes and the locals call them "vene vene", meaning very sweet, although there is a kick of bitterness and pepper, too.

Corrina also tells us stories of the history and culture of the Cooks; how Rarotonga is the traditional home of three main tribes, and the local chief, or Pa Ariki, lives to this day in the Tinomana Palace, built to last from coral and lime in 1849. We admire the pitched-roof building from across the road, outside a community centre that doubles as a cyclone shelter.

Land ownership is complex and disputatious. The place marked on the map as "Sheraton Hotel (derelict)" is a case in point:





the sprawling ruin was meant to be the Cooks' first five-star resort. At its sod-turning ceremony in 1990, a long-running dispute over the land saw a local in the traditional dress of a high priest turn up and curse it. Three years later and close to completion, construction was abandoned amid allegations of Italian Mafia involvement. It's a saga worthy of

a movie, and these parts are no stranger to international film crews, nor movie stars, as we are to soon discover.

ONWARDS TO AITUTAKI

A 50-minute flight on a twin-engine turboprop from Rarotonga Airport, where a chook has strutted around our feet in the open-air domestic departure lounge, gets us to Aitutaki, the Cooks' second most visited island behind Rarotonga. With a welcome lei of fragrant gardenia around my neck, we scout the hire cars to find the one that has our name on the dashboard. The keys are waiting in the ignition. On a tiny island less than 19 square kilometres in area, which takes 45 minutes to drive around and is home to about 1700 people who probably all know each other, a car thief wouldn't get very far, we figure.

We check in to our thatched-roof bungalow at Tamanu Beach resort, owned by the Henry

family whose forebear in 1965 became the first premier of the Cook Islands. Some of the family's illustrious history is told on the walls of the reception lounge, where guests gather for happy hours and cocktail specials like Purple Rain, a concoction involving blue curacao, pineapple juice and vodka.

Paradise is a word routinely flung around for tropical islands, but Aitutaki in particular is used to accolades that affirm its beyond-stunning, otherworldly status. In September, for instance, it knocked French Polynesia's Bora Bora out of first place to win the World Travel Awards' Leading Island Destination in Oceania.

We head out to explore some of the 15 motus, or islets, in Aitutaki's spectacular lagoon on a private charter with Quinton Schofield, owner of Wet and Wild tours.

"They say we have every shade of blue in the Cook Islands," says the charismatic Quinton, who with wife Melo is bringing up five kids on Aitutaki.

After thumping across the lagoon on Quinton's speedboat, barefoot and surrounded by the blueness, our first stop is Akaiami Island. We're following in the footsteps of celebrities like John Wayne and Marlon Brando here; once upon a time, they travelled the island-hopping "Coral Route" on a flying boat service operated in the 1940s and '50s by Air New Zealand's precursor Tasman Empire Airways Limited (TEAL). Akaiami was among its refuelling stops, and the wealthy passengers would disembark and have a swim. The ruins of the landing pier are still evident in the water.

We walk along the white sand, past the bucolic Akaiami Paradise lodge built on the site of the TEAL terminal and with room for six guests (rates for two people start at NZ\$500 a night; not bad for a private island experience). For a short while, before a tour boat that has pulled up expels its load, it feels like we are

the only two people on the motu. This is about as remote as it can get on planet Earth.

Another short boat ride and Quinton lets us off to walk across the volcanic islet of Moturakau or, as Quinton tells us, "Island of the trees" - specifically the native Tamanu, or mahogany, trees. It's also a nesting ground for little white terns, the most delicate of seabirds. Five seasons of UK reality show *Shipwrecked* were filmed here; so was the 2006 US season of *Survivor*. We emerge on Moturakau's other side to a landscape marked by pitch-black rocks spewed out of now-extinct volcanoes and sitting dramatically on the beach.

Back out on the lagoon, we pull on flippers and jump in, snorkelling around coral reefs teeming with a colour explosion of fish species ... red squirrelfish, unicorn fish, butterfly fish, triggerfish, yellow boxfish, at least three types of wrasse ... how to keep up! The snorkelling is almost as good just out front of Tamanu Beach resort, and we float around out there for as long and as often as we can during our short stay. We don't do so well with our stint in one of the resort's kayaks, capsizing about three minutes in.

Five nights isn't enough to see and do everything we'd like to on Rarotonga and Aitutaki, let alone take a day or two out to simply kick back on a beach lounge with a good book and a cocktail, and have a massage or two (both resorts we stay at have onsite spas).

And beyond Rarotonga and Aitutaki, other, even more remote Cook islands await. There's Atui, population 400, known for limestone caves, tropical jungle, coffee and fruit beer; or the most southerly island Mangaia, where you can swim in rock pools, eat giant donuts, visit a shipwreck and go exploring on a hired scooter. All these things will have to wait for next time. And maybe the time after that.

Sarah Maguire travelled courtesy of Cook Islands Tourism.

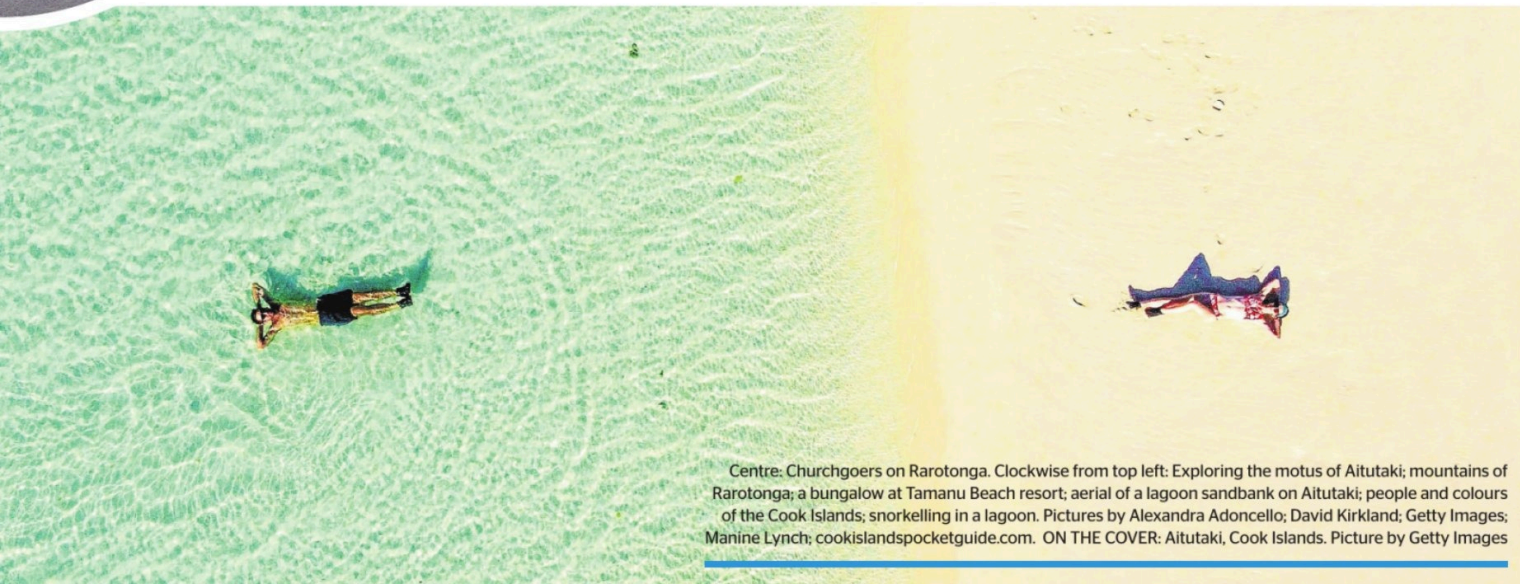
TRIP NOTES

Getting there: Jetstar begins thrice-weekly return flights between Sydney and Rarotonga on June 29, with one-way fares starting at \$369. Air Rarotonga operates flights between Rarotonga and Aitutaki; expect to pay in the vicinity of \$400 return.

Staying there: Muri Beach Club Hotel (muribeachclubhotel.com/) on Rarotonga has garden rooms from \$NZ495 (\$453) a night for two, and beachfront rooms from \$NZ638. On Aitutaki, one-bedroom bungalows at Tamanu Beach resort start at \$NZ795 a night; bungalows in the adults-only wing of the resort start at \$NZ250 a night.

Touring there: A four-hour bicycle tour with Storytellers Eco Cycle and Walking Tours (storytellers.co.ck) is \$NZ95 (\$87) an adult, including lunch. A three-hour Wet and Wild (wetnwild-aitutaki.com) private boat charter is \$NZ450 for 2 people, \$NZ250 for each extra person. To explore Muri Lagoon on Rarotonga, a Captain Tama's Lagoon Cruise is highly recommended (captaintamas.com). It includes snorkelling, a fresh fish barbecue lunch, and high-energy entertainment including coconut husking and sarong-tying demonstrations. From \$NZ289 a person.

Explore more: cookislands.travel



Centre: Churchgoers on Rarotonga. Clockwise from top left: Exploring the motus of Aitutaki; mountains of Rarotonga; a bungalow at Tamanu Beach resort; aerial of a lagoon sandbank on Aitutaki; people and colours of the Cook Islands; snorkelling in a lagoon. Pictures by Alexandra Adoncello; David Kirkland; Getty Images; Manine Lynch; cookislandspocketguide.com. ON THE COVER: Aitutaki, Cook Islands. Picture by Getty Images