

South Pacific

Where no building is taller than a palm tree

Sitting in the middle of the South Pacific, the Cook Islands are a hotel-chain-free desert island fantasy wrapped in a glorious adventure – and there's never been a better time to discover them, says Anna Selby

There are no fast-food outlets, no international hotel chains, and above all, no skyscrapers. Welcome to the Cooks, one island paradise that is going to stay that way because, after gaining self-governance in the 1960s, the government created a mandate of quite staggering foresight: no building could be taller than the tallest palm tree. Avarua, capital of the main island Rarotonga, is no Honolulu.

Sitting in the middle of the South Pacific, the Cook Islands are a collection of 15 volcanic islands and coral atolls with pristine lagoons teeming with technicolour fish. I first fell in love with them 25 years ago when I lived there for a while – so I really am biased – but on my most recent visit, I found them as enchanting as ever and essentially unchanged.

Yes, there are a few more hotels (though these mostly consist of handfuls of traditional thatched villas) and a few more cars – but you will never find a traffic jam and the car horn is only ever used as a way of saying hello. The Cook Islands does have a roundabout now (though still no traffic lights), and it was front-page news when the first escalator arrived recently in the newly built courthouse.

I don't imagine the court house gets much business, as this is a place with



▲ Glass-bottomed boat: Capt Tama's Lagoon Cruises
▶ Seafront song: an Orama dance crew perform

hardly any crime and where everyone seems to know each other. The population is just 13,000. Rarotonga itself is small and almost circular; the entire island is circumnavigated by two buses (the clockwise bus and the anti-clockwise bus) in less than an hour, stopping wherever you flag them down.

'Life is taken at a slow, island-time pace and entertainment is essentially homemade'

So, you get the picture: the Cooks are as laid back as it's possible to get. The only hazard is the possibility of a falling coconut if you sit under a tree for too long. I defy anyone to feel stressed here – an immediate cure is to watch the endless crashing of ocean on coral reef, its constant rumble the soundtrack of the

islands. Life is taken at a slow, island-time pace and entertainment is essentially homemade.

One such is Captain Tama's glass-bottomed boat. The first time I was here it was still the original Captain Tama who, to the amazement of my four-year-old, jumped off the boat into the lagoon and surfaced wrestling with an octopus (dinner, he explained). The enterprise has grown to three boats: you can still watch the gaping giant clams, giant trevally, multi-coloured clownfish and bright blue starfish through the glass. Or you can jump in and snorkel alongside them. Afterwards, you have a barbecue on a motu (a tiny island in the lagoon) and learn how to husk a coconut, make coconut cream, tie a pareu (Cook Island sarong) and dance like a Polynesian warrior.

Dancing is a major form of entertainment in the Cooks and it's taken very seriously – boys and girls learn this at school from age four. There are Island Nights at Te Vara Nui where professional dancers and musicians perform on floating stages by torchlight. And this is the one time Cook Islanders are not so laid-back – expect tremendous drumming, the cries of challenging warriors and the fastest hips on the planet.

It's always worth seeing what's on locally. One highlight of my first stay was the National Coconut Tree Climbing Competition. This time I was lucky enough to be in Rarotonga on the final night of the Cook Island Dancer of the Year competition. The serious stuff had already taken place in the National Auditorium and so this was a night for retired dancers and the papa'a (white) community prepared to play it for laughs. Rehab nightclub was completely full and the audience was appropriately dressed with crowns of flowers, happy to compare the finer points of technique and share their food with complete strangers.

Sharing is the norm here. You can even go on a "progressive dining tour" to the houses of locals who will share their food, talk about their cooking, sing, play the ukulele (the instrument of the islands) and, of course, pray at the start and end of each course. This is a



Long-haul precautions

One downside is the long flight (20 hours plus) and the associated risk of DVT (deep vein thrombosis), something Professor Mark Whiteley of the Whiteley Clinic (thewhiteleyclinic.co.uk) knows about. The surgeon and phlebologist explains that the link is due to the reduced oxygen in the air of a pressurised aircraft cabin and the effect this has on the blood vessel walls, which can lead to blood clots. If worried, get your veins checked out at a clinic before you fly. It's like a pregnancy ultrasound, except for your legs; you'll be told instantly whether there's any sign of a clot. Risk factors include varicose veins, smoking, hormones (like the Pill) and a sedentary lifestyle. When on board, Prof Whiteley recommends:

- ▶ Flight socks
- ▶ Exercising (walk around, wriggle your toes)
- ▶ Plenty of water
- ▶ No more than one cup of coffee

▶ Island paradise: Rarotonga can be circumnavigated by bus in just an hour



Essentials

Anna Selby was a guest of the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (cookislands.travel) and flew with Air Tahiti Nui (flights from Paris to Tahiti via Los Angeles) and Air Rarotonga. Access to the Cook Islands from the UK has recently become easier with increased flight capacity to the country's main island of Rarotonga, plus new weekly flights between Honolulu and Rarotonga with Hawaiian Airlines and three flights a week from Sydney to Rarotonga, starting with Jetstar, and three weekly flights between Tahiti and Rarotonga with Air Rarotonga and Air Tahiti. These are in addition to daily direct flights from Auckland with Air New Zealand and Jetstar. Aitutaki's lovely Tamanu Beach Resort (00 682 31 810; tamanubeach.com) has rooms from £288.

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