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WELL TRAVELLED

COOK ISLANDS

Heed the calling of the isles of love

WORDS: MELISSA RIMAC



THE SUN, THE SEA... AND OTHER BUSS AT RAROTONGAN BEACH RESORT & SPA

Wanting turquoise lagoons, remote islands, glistening white beaches; an idyllic tropical haven far from the grind of 'progress'? It's a tall order, but the Cook Islands serve it up in spades.

There's something inimitably intoxicating and dreamy about being in the middle of nowhere. And the Cook Islands – a splash of 15 gorgeous tropical islands sprinkled thousands of kilometres from the nearest continent – are about as far as you can get from anywhere. A more appropriate place to cleanse yourself of worldly woes and deepen your connection with yourself and your loved one is hard to imagine.

Perhaps it's the fact that getting to 'the Cooks' involves hours of gazing out at the blue, blue vastness of the South Pacific, then crossing the International Date Line. Or the fact that unlike so many tropical idylls, the same mass tourism hasn't been allowed to supplant the Cook Islands' innate beauty and warm, friendly culture. One thing is certain though, when the dramatic remnants of Rarotonga's volcano reared up out of the sea and I looked down upon individual clumps of coral – I knew I headed for something very special.

LEAVING IT ALL BEHIND

Almost immediately, I felt as if I'd stepped off the edge of the planet – the detritus of crowds, noise, regulations and hassles that now characterise urban life felt much further away than they are in reality.

But, much as the far-flung location is a joy in itself, the Cook Islands, in essence, an attitude; a mindset that lures you to lose the chatter in your head and let the mesmerising emerald greens and sparkling blues still your mind and simply let things be.

Island time is how the locals put it, and it speaks loudly about a place which has a lot to teach us about abandoning our slavish devotion to our watches and giving ourselves permission to linger and savour the moment. Suddenly, it didn't matter that my toast took a little longer than I'd expected or that I couldn't get hold of my favourite newspaper.

My pulse slowed and I too was breathing deeper and feeling like I'd had a long head massage. Pausing to smell the frangipanis became my priority.



A FIRE DANCE WARRIOR AT THE RAROTONGAN BEACH RESORT & SPA



A WARM WELCOME AWAITS AT THE AITUTAKI LAGOON RESORT & SPA



THE RAROTONGAN BEACH RESORT & SPA

A few days on low-slung, very laid-back Rarotonga is an ideal way to slip into the serenity which envelops the islands. By government decree, no building can be higher than a coconut palm, and – in scenes set to shake staid suburban sensibilities – roosters, chooks, pigs and goats roam freely while spontaneous conversations become a delightful inevitability. Here, people don't look straight past each other, rather, smiles and chat-stops rule the rhythm of the day.

"Raro" is a small, very striking island, dominated by a mountainous heart and encircled by a sparkling lagoon. Hungry to have the wind rustle through our hair, my partner and I hired bikes and rode around the island, a jaunt that should take only a few hours, but given the number of superlative spots for a dip and a contemplative gaze out to sea, as is apt in "the Cooks", the hours soon slipped...

There's excellent snorkelling at Black Rock and Muri, and several Motu – empty islands – are just a short kayak away. Waterside cafés and eateries, charming historic churches and galleries (where you can see shell and black pearl jewellery being made) dot the coast road, whilst local colour – and clamour – awaits at Punanga Nui market, near Avatu (the islands CBD) harbour.

The palm-fringed beaches and bathwater-warm water are so captivating that it's all too tempting to keep your feet planted firmly near the sand, but the back roads – some of which were originally built of coral blocks – proffer treats of a different kind; like plantations with rambling homesteads and traditional gardens. A series of walking tracks, some offering spectacular views, criss-cross Rarotonga.

They say the tropics can do strange things to people, and it certainly brought out some surprising turns in me. Where I usually relished Sunday sleep-ins and look askew at things religious, in the Cook Islands, I'd spring out of bed, slip on my most respectable outfit and head to the nearest church! Here, voices that could only be described as heavenly sent quivers of delight down my spine and the sense of occasion stirred my heart: locals strolling along palm-lined paths in their Sunday Best, men strumming guitars, women laughing and humming a tune as their shock-bright dresses billowed in the breeze. It's impossible not to get swept up in the power and the passion, and, after the service, you'll most likely be invited to a social gathering.

The other sudden turnaround was in my relationship with my partner. Happily, there's something magically transforming in simply stopping and

focusing on having fun. The previous stress of a seemingly endless renovation, the looming cloud of an ever-expanding mortgage, the way that it's so easy to offload anger and frustration on those closest to you... these things slip away like a distant memory, almost like another world.

It certainly doesn't hurt that the Cook Islands are dripping in sensual references. The Cooks' signature style of hula is said to be the sauciest in the Pacific, with one 19th century missionary famously declaring the gyrations "positively obscene". For an entertaining insight into why he was so miffed, and to soak up more soulful music, be sure to catch Island Night, held regularly at Rarotonga's resorts.



THE AITUTAKI LAGOON RESORT & SPA

SPA LIFE 73

WELL TRAVELLED

WHERE TO STAY & SPA

THE EDGEWATER RESORT & SPA

When you want to relax with your loved one, watching the sun sink into the ocean, cocktail in hand, as you listen to palm trees sway then The Edgewater Resort & Spa is for you. Nestled among six acres of frangipanis and hibiscus, bordered by a white sandy beach, overlooking a beautiful blue lagoon the Edgewater Resort & Spa is certainly a relaxed tropical paradise. Avarua, the capital of Rarotonga, is located a short drive away so you have the luxury of convenience and paradise. The Edgewater Resort & Spa is Rarotonga's largest resort offering 250 air-conditioned guest rooms including self-contained, full serviced apartments; spacious Garden Rooms; Beachfront rooms with exceptional views of the lagoon; and deluxe Beachfront Suites with luxury hot tubs and private patios overlooking the beach.

The Resort also features the lovely Edgewater Spa & Salon where you can indulge in tropical Spa treats as well as traditional beauty therapies. After you have indulged and relaxed in the Spa what better way to add the final touch by having your hair cut and coloured, having a nourishing hair treatments or simply styled for a romantic dinner out that evening.

www.edgewater.co.uk



THE EDGEWATER RESORT & SPA

4-star resorts, SpaPolynesia features such delicious tropical delights as the 'Nita' Pawpaw Body Wrap, 'Tama' Coconut Scrub, and the 'Moana' AquaMarine Sea Salt Rub.

SpaPolynesia is especially sought out by wedding couples wanting to look and feel their best for their big day, and by newlyweds making the most of their dream South Seas honeymoon. The Spa also features the specialist German skincare range Biodroga, which delivers some amazing results. Biodroga is a highly concentrated product with many active ingredients in its formulations and the big plus for the big day is that it often solves several skin problems at once.

Best time to go? Anytime is perfect. If you travel during June to September you get to escape a miserable winter at home – plus if you're lucky you might even see amazing humpback whales breaching off the shore as they journey past the Cook Islands. If you go during December to April, you get to enjoy longer days, plus the frangipani, flame trees, mangoes, pineapples and other quintessentially tropical things are all in season then, so it's especially wonderful! Check out www.therarotongan.com or email info@rarotongan.co.uk for fabulous upgrade deals available right now for two-resort stays.



THE RAROTONGAN BEACH RESORT & SPA

SPAPOLYNESIA

SpaPolynesia is a South Pacific-style Spa and beauty therapy centre located at sister resorts The Rarotongan Beach Resort & Spa and The Aitutaki Lagoon Resort & Spa.

The Aitutaki Lagoon Resort & Spa is an all-bungalow resort located on its own private island, which sits on the breathtaking Aitutaki Lagoon. The Rarotongan Beach Resort & Spa is the signature resort of the Cook Islands, located on the beach on the main island of Rarotonga.

At the Resort Spa centre, SpaPolynesia, therapists are inspired by an ancient Polynesian legend called "How the Moon Regains Her Brightness" as they work with your own inner wellspring to revive and refresh.

The legend tells that somewhere in a serene corner of Polynesia lie Te-Vai-ora-a-Tane, the Living Waters of Tane. This is the sacred spring of one of the chief gods of ancient Polynesia, Tane, the god of light and of fertility. In these divine waters the weary find renewed strength, the sick are healed. Even Marama herself, the Moon, when washed in waning, bathed and gained new brightness, entering the Living Waters as Ina-urii (dark Moon) yet emerging as Ina-ka (Moon Glow). As an integral part of these secluded

For more information on the Cook Islands go to www.cook-islands.com



When it's time to really, truly, deeply unwind, slip into luminous Aitutaki Lagoon and let nature's thalassotherapy renew your soul. The Aitutaki Lagoon Resort & Spa is a tranquil romantic retreat where you can feel free to laze in a beach hammock, ease into a soothing massage at SpaPolynesia or kick back with a sunset cocktail at the Flying Boat Beach Bar & Grill and gaze out together as moon and stars come out to play.

Featured on the cover of Conde Nast Traveler, The Aitutaki Lagoon Resort & Spa is the only resort directly on Aitutaki Lagoon, considered the world's most beautiful lagoon in '100 Places to See Before You Die'. The resort is also the only Cook Islands' private island resort, and the only one to offer exclusive Overwater Bungalows. Alluring Aitutaki awaits you.

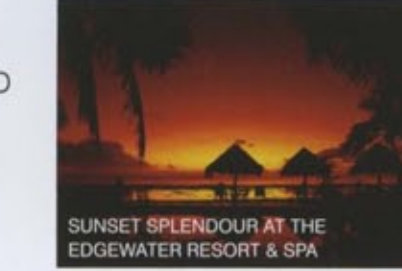
Aitutaki Island, Aitutaki, Cook Islands
Phone: (+682) 31 203 Fax: 31 202
info@aitutakilagoonresort.co.uk
www.aitutakilagoonresort.com



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WELL TRAVELLED



SUNSET SPLENDOR AT THE EDGEWATER RESORT & SPA

How could you not feel sexy when you're sated with sunshine, surrounded by gin clear, bathwater-warm water and caressed by salty breezes that gently rustle the palm-fronds? Unashamedly, flamboyantly tropical. I'm now convinced a Cook Islands sojourn should be included as part of the best relationship counselling sessions!

FAR-FLUNG AND FANCIFUL

To really ratchet up the romance and utterly unwind, head to Aitutaki, the stunning beautiful, hook-shaped island. As the small propeller plane tilted, swooped and almost kissed the satiny Pacific, I couldn't help but swoon. Aitutaki lagoon, with water so intensely turquoise that it startsles, and studded with tiny, uninhabited islets that catch the light and twinkle like diamonds, is the stuff of legend – for good reason.

A dreamy, decadent rhythm characterised our Aitutaki days: the luxury of a languid breakfast, snorkelling amidst a seascape brimming with technicolour fish and coral, or, if seclusion seduced us, getting dropped off for the day on an alluring motu. Reef and beach combing and cycling around the island, past giant fruit trees, pretty thatched villages with coral-walled churches and the ever-present temptation of an almost impossibly beautiful swimming spot, kept us endlessly entertained.

What's really striking about the Cooks, is that apart from a few concessions to modern commerce, life here is lived much as it has been for centuries. Rather than frantically chasing the next dollar, people are happy to share the island produce and to just be. This becomes more apparent on the less-visited outer islands. On the ecologically rich and diverse island of Atiu, locals defer to their Polynesian Heritage; and a bike ride around the island reveals Marae (open-air meeting grounds), ancient coral roads and burial caves, and the chance to take part in traditional ceremonies. Secluded beaches, lush forests and spectacular caves also await the adventurous.

Manihiki, like many of the outer islands, doesn't make it onto most itineraries, which is a major part of its attraction. This stunning cluster of 40



LOVER'S DELIGHT AT THE EDGEWATER RESORT & SPA

islets scattered through what has to be one of the most glorious lagoons in the South Pacific, is the black pearl capital of the Cook Islands. Visit the islands between September and December and you'll be able to see pearl being harvested. Lagoon cruises make visits to pearl farms and also take you to otherworldly snorkelling spots that would otherwise remain unexpected and motu's cloaked in thick coconut groves.

"Kia Orana", meaning 'may you live long', is a greeting often heard in the Cook Islands. And, whilst the length of my life remains uncertain, what I'm absolutely sure of is that the Cook Islands taught me how to live better and happier.

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