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DESTINATION "I DO"

TV host Catriona Rowntree and new husband James Pettit chose a jewel of the South Pacific – the stunning Aitutaki, in the Cook Islands – for their fabulous honeymoon, writes Larry Writer.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROSS COFFEY



Newlyweds Catriona and James take a stroll in the crystal clear water at The Aitutaki Lagoon Resort & Spa. Opposite: Relaxed and happy Catriona poses for a picture in a shady palm grove.

WW | romance



FROM THE MOMENT she wiggled her toes in the bright white sand of Aitutaki, Catriona Rowntree was on island time. "After the chaos and crazy fun of our wedding [Catriona married her long-time sweetheart, graziat James Pettit, 36, on April 5], it was wonderful to relax in the sun by the most beautiful lagoon on earth," says Catriona, also 36, sitting in the shade of a coconut palm as a ukulele plinks somewhere in the distance. "James and I knew right away we'd come to the right place for our honeymoon."

As a reporter for the Nine Network's *Getaway*, Catriona had sampled all the best destinations and could have chosen anywhere to celebrate the start of her married life with James. Yet she opted for the 20-square-kilometre Aitutaki, one of the 15 Cook Islands, just west of Tahiti. "Because we're both frantic at work, we

could only take a shortish break," says Catriona. "We didn't want jet lag when we returned to Australia. We did want duty-free, a cultural experience and a stunning island where James could fish and I could flake."

And where they could both revel in their new marriage. "I never understood it when friends told us we'd feel different after we were married," says Catriona, sighing. "But we do. It's a lovely secure feeling. And since we've been on Aitutaki, James has been much more *musky* than before! It's as if there's a secret potion here that makes you happy, healthy, sleepy and romantic."

The newlyweds' holiday HQ is The Aitutaki Lagoon Resort & Spa, where they are ensconced in an overwater bungalow on the lagoon. You can hear the water lapping below your bedroom and the swish and >>>



Above: The couple take some exercise on bikes around the palm-fringed lagoon. After the "chaos and crazy fun of our wedding", James and Catriona wanted a relaxed honeymoon. "It was wonderful to relax in the sun by the most beautiful lagoon on earth."

thump of fish night-feeding by the pylons. There can be no better place to view the riotous orange, pink, yellow and red South Pacific sunsets, or from which to dive for a moonlight swim. Today, Catriona has just finished reading her first novel and plans to make headway on her second before her scheduled 3pm massage.

James – "my hunter and gatherer", quips Catriona – has just returned from a 6am spearfishing expedition outside the reef, with a 1kg parrot fish. Tonight, the chef at the resort's Flying Boat Beach Bar & Grill (named after the Tasman Empire Airways Limited flying boats that landed in the lagoon in the 1950s) will grill the fish and serve it to the honeymooners with a pupu-pawa salsa salad.

When planning their honeymoon, Catriona was unsure whether workaholic James, who toils on his family's property 14 hours a day, seven days a week, would take to an island holiday. "Will he be bored? Will he want to fly home early to return to work?"

Yet when their Saab 340 turbo-prop plane descended after its 45-minute flight from Rarotonga, all but skimming the tops of the Aitutaki palms as it came in to land, and James saw the vast turquoise lagoon encased by a triangular reef, "he caught

his breath and I knew it would be okay". More than okay. While Catriona recharges her batteries – running low after "six months of interrupted sleep, worrying about the wedding" – lazing and dreaming, James is embracing island life. As well as fishing beyond the reef and swimming in the lagoon, he has paddled an outrigger canoe, been taught to hank coconuts by Cecil, whose hands can crush the toughest shell and whose eyes are the colour of the lagoon, and learned to play the eight-stringed ukulele.

So accomplished was James on the ukule that he was invited onstage during the island night feast and cultural show to sit in with the band on a reggae rendition of the 1992 hit, *Adely Breaks Heart*. Later, he joined the hip-swaying, fire-twirling dancers and drummers. Catriona, impressed by her husband's hitherto concealed talents, beamed from their table.

"James convinced me to go night-snorkelling in the lagoon, which is a marine reserve," says Catriona. They dove down with torches and ogled the tropical fish, including the vividly hued yellow and black striped butterfly fish, and, she says, "When we surfaced, we looked up into the heavens and our guide, Rangī, told us tales about the stars."

It was during this activity that Catriona proved that her reputation for being able to talk underwater was justified. "With Catriona, everything was, 'Wow! Look at this!'", says James. "It didn't matter that it was dark down there and she was wearing a snorkel. I always knew where Catriona was because I could hear her!"

At church, they were thrilled by the rhapsodic close harmonies of the choir and they attended an *umuka'i* feast, where pork, lamb and chicken are wrapped in banana leaves, roasted for four hours in an underground oven, then devoured. Another highlight was cycling 8km into the village of Arutanga to cheer on the Aitutaki rugby league team against their Rarotonga rivals. At the palm-fringed field next the Cook Islands' oldest church (circa 1828), the honeymooners sat on the grass chatting with the locals as the 120kg combatants collided. Kids around them, they learned, play footy with coconuts.

Aitutaki's soundtrack is the roar of waves breaking on the reef, the crowing of roosters and the rustling of palm fronds in the gentle tropical breeze. Its scents are those of frangipanis and gardenias, pupu-pawas and fish being barbecued. "It's the ideal remedy for me," says Catriona, "because I had the post-wedding day >>>



Above: Catriona takes a shower in the garden of their Honeymoon Villa, surrounded by a screen of lush tropical plants. Below: Catriona and James only had to roll out of their king-size bed into the pool for a refreshing wake-up swim.



Above: James would start the day with a 6am fishing trip to the outer reef and bring back the morning's catch for dinner – "my hunter and gatherer", says Catriona – which the honeymooners would eat on a table set up in the lapping waters of the lagoon.

blues... I was sad when our wedding was over, when parents and friends left, and the flowers started to turn... The day was so long in the planning and over so soon. "Being here is a chance to decompress, to reflect on all the wedding day delights we may have forgotten if we'd gone straight back to work," Catriona turns to James and laughs as she says. "Like when Karen fell over on the floor when she tried to catch the bouquet and your dad got up to sing with Leo Sayer."

Island life, too, has soothed James' soul after a near catastrophe when they spent the night at Rarotonga on the way to Aitutaki. "I took off my wedding ring and left it on the bedside table because my fingers had swelled in the heat," he explains. "When we dashed off to the airport next morning, I'd left it there." An urgent phone call to the hotel saw the ring rescued and on the next flight to Aitutaki, where James, much relieved, slipped it back on.

"We arrived frazzled and exhausted. Catriona was packing right up to the moment we left!" says James. "But now our bodies and spirits are refreshed."

Many on Aitutaki are also honeymooning, including thousands of birds: the island's snowy white "love" terns find a mate early and stay together forever. Catriona first visited Aitutaki 12 years ago. "It was the most enchanting island I'd ever been to. Many South Pacific and

Caribbean islands are overrun by tourists, there's crime and litter. They've lost their original charm because they've sold out to tourism and neither visitors nor locals treat them with the respect they deserve. "In Aitutaki, the locals are proud of their natural surroundings, their culture and their faith, and are friendly and dignified. Visitors follow their lead."

With no glitzy high-rise hotels (no building is taller than a coconut palm) or shopping malls, life on Aitutaki, with a population of around 2000, is lived languorously and its pleasures are simple and authentic. It offers the idyllic South Pacific of Jack London and James A. Michener. "I like slick in a city," says Catriona, "not in paradise."

Surely, Captain William Blyth was similarly impressed when he dropped anchor at Aitutaki on April 11, 1789. Yet his memories would always be tainted because here, during a wild storm, he first fell out with Fletcher Christian, who, 17 days later, led the mutiny on the *Bounty*.

History records that the island was first settled in 800AD by seafarers from Tupua in what is now French Polynesia. The first missionaries arrived in 1821 and the island remains devoutly Christian. When their honeymoon ends, Catriona and James will have mixed feelings. Both are champing to resume their careers. The producers of the Nine Network's

Getaway and *The Chopping Block* are anxious to have their star back in front of the camera and Catriona can't wait to be there. And for James, its time to sow crops, "one of the busiest times of the year," he says. Yet it'll be hard to leave paradise. Not that they won't be back to this beautiful island, probably again and again in years to come.

And next time, they may need a bigger hunk of glow. "Can you think," asks Catriona, "of a nicer place to bring children?"

For our special feature on other romantic island getaways – including resorts on the Maldives, Fiji, the Solomons and Australia's Hayman Island – visit [The Weekly's website at www.ww.com.au/travel](http://www.ww.com.au/travel)

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS
Fly: Air New Zealand (tel: 13 24 76; www.airnewzealand.com.au) has daily flights to Rarotonga via Auckland.
When: All year, temperatures range from 18°C-29°C. Best times: November-April (Frangipani Season).
WIN A ROMANTIC COOK ISLANDS HOLIDAY
For your chance to win a superb seven-night Frangipani Fantasy holiday, including stays at The Rarotongan Beach Resort & Spa and Aitutaki Lagoon Resort & Spa, turn overleaf for details.