

# Holidays

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## Technicolour dreams



The Cook Islands offers a panorama of spellbinding sights, both above and below the water, as Cathy Finch and her daughters discover...

cook islands

Have you ever looked into the eyes of an octopus while he's hanging out in the crevices of a coral bommie? Have you stroked his velvet skin or seen him transform from purple to cream, to chocolate brown? Do you know what it's like to hear the suck of his tentacles as you lift his long slender tendrils from your skin? No? It's like lifting a plastic suction bathmat from your shower floor. It's like seeing a metamorphosis of colours you have never seen before. It's like looking into the eyes of a rare beauty.

Here in the Cook Islands, beauty is all around us. My two young daughters miss a week of school to plunge headfirst into an intimate adventure with sand and sea but I am free from any sort of guilt. After all, some things you can't learn in a classroom.

We are on the mountainous main island of Rarotonga and jump onboard Captain Tama's glass bottom boat to take a cruise over the clear waters of Muri Lagoon and snorkel among giant clams, coral bommies and technicoloured fish.

Heaven on earth  
Made up of 15 islands and sprinkled over 2.25 million square kilometres, the Cook Islands are said to have the world's most visually stunning lagoons. Add to this majestic peaks where wispy clouds linger, untouched coral atolls, great food, dancing and the Polynesian

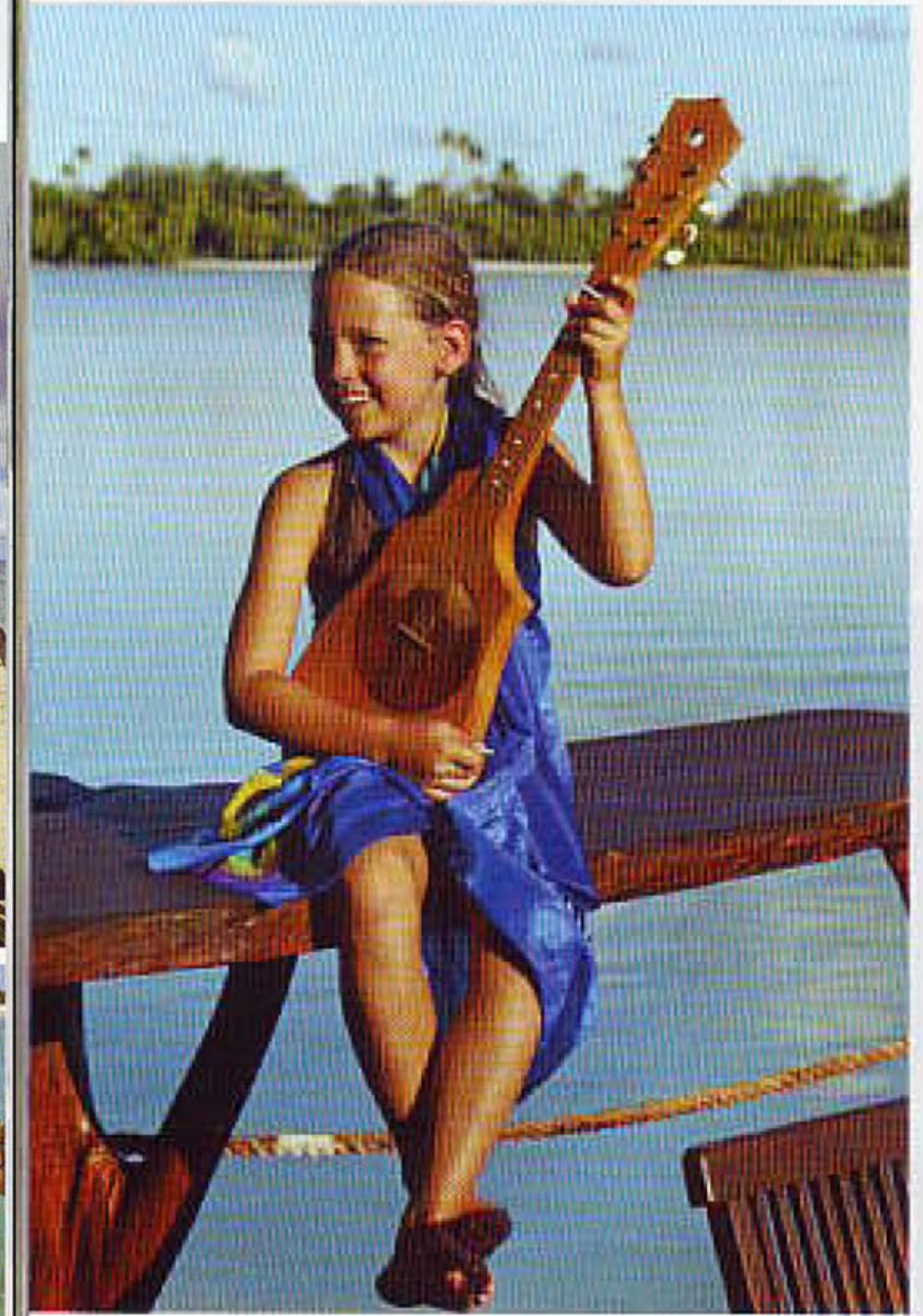


Above: Hayley playing with coconuts shells at Aitutaki Lagoon. Top right: The beautiful beach at Rarotonga. Right: Enjoying the crystal clear waters of Aitutaki Lagoon.



Learning about the Cook Islands culture and music.

cook islands



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hospitality and warmth, and you have the ultimate holiday escape.

We stay at the Rarotongan Beach Resort & Spa situated directly off Aroa Lagoon Marine Reserve. The Resort boasts the best snorkelling in Rarotonga, seconds from your door.

But be sure to plan your day. You may have to choose between playing with the rainbow-coloured fish or learning to paddle a vaka (outrigger canoe), husking a coconut, dancing the ura (hula), playing the pate (log drums) and ukuleles or making your own ei (fresh flower garland). And that's just you. The kids have their own adventure list offered free at Moko's Kids' Club.

Around the corner along Rarotonga's south-eastern shores, the Pacific Resort rests on the palm-fringed Muri Lagoon and offers beachside resort accommodation and family activities. Set in six acres of tropical gardens, we enjoy stunning sunrises and a safe sandy lagoon where the children revel

in the fact they can always stand up for a breather, any time of the tide.

**Getting around**  
Rarotonga's main township of Avarua is approximately 20 minutes away, and although local buses operate around the main road that encircles the island, we hire a car for approximately \$50 per day. Scooter hire is also hugely popular for around \$20 per day.

To gain a deeper understanding of the landscape and history we join Johnny on a Raro Mountain Safari Tour to explore ancient roads, the islands, interior and panoramic views. Johnny makes an entertaining guide and encourages us to be inquisitive. "Don't be afraid to ask questions," he says. "We stopped eating people in the 1800s."

There is a lot to learn about the cultural practise of cannibalism, ancient ceremonies, legends and sacred history and the Cook Islands Cultural Centre

does an informative Highland Paradise tour Monday to Saturday that enthralls even my small children.

**Awesome Aitutaki**  
Top of our list however, is the neighbouring island of Aitutaki (a 40-minute flight from Rarotonga). Rimmed by astonishing shades of blue, it's fair to say that no sand and sea holiday comes close to our time spent on Aitutaki's stunning lagoon. For me, the world stops here. In fact, my writing stops here. Aitutaki's beauty is indescribable.

At the Aitutaki Lagoon Resort & Spa my children form friendships with staff who take them fishing, kayaking and serenading.

Together we play chess under the palm trees, swim after dark and gently rock in hammocks by the sea. Suspended over the lustrous lagoon, we sip cocktails at sunset and watch hermit crabs at work. Not far away at the Pacific Resort

Aitutaki, rooms are moulded naturally into their volcanic scenic lookout with direct access to the beach. Stunning interiors, large balconies and outdoor garden showers are some of the highlights. White terns soar above us through the bottle-blue sky and I am made to feel like the last surviving fish on the reef.

Fire torches, horizon pools, traditional umu (underground oven food) and feverish island dancing are just some of the survival foods. Children are welcome but there are no set activities in this lap of luxury.

If it all sounds too magnificent - it is. Unfortunately, everyone needs to be released. I feel like an octopus's tentacle. I grip, suck and hold onto every tiny detail. The conch shell is blown and rings through my ears for the very last time. I go through a metamorphosis of feelings.

I have looked into the eyes of a rare beauty. Where can I possibly holiday after this? ■

### footnotes

Cook Island Tourism Corporation  
Phone: 02 9955 0440  
Website: www.cook-islands.com  
Getting there:  
Pacific Blue  
Phone: 136789  
Website: www.flypacificblue.com  
Air Rarotonga  
Phone: +682 22 888  
Website: www.airraro.com  
Accommodation Rarotonga: The Rarotongan Beach Resort & Spa offers the only kids' club in the Cook Islands. www.therarotongan.com  
Pacific Resort Rarotonga offers a kids' daily activities board. www.pacificresort.com  
Accommodation Aitutaki: Pacific Resort Aitutaki is boutique at its best. www.pacificresort.com  
The Aitutaki Lagoon Resort & Spa offers front row accommodation on Aitutaki Lagoon. www.aitutakilagoonresort.com  
Edgewater Resort: www.edgewater.co.uk

## Make New Memories



Just west of Tahiti at the Cook Islands' signature resort, The Rarotongan Beach Resort & Spa, you can snorkel any time of year straight off the island's best beach in the renowned Aro'a Lagoon Marine Sanctuary (like snorkeling in a tropical aquarium), or feed the friendly fish from the restaurant deck! Experience warm island hospitality, fine Pacific cuisine, superb FREE Kids Club and loads of complimentary activities. Paradise, from the heart. **KIDS EAT FREE with SECOND ROOM!!** www.TheRarotongan.com

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