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## Survivor Rarotonga: Hacks on racks

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For a group of people whose careers supposedly revolve around observation, not noticing the massive coconut tree we were building our sleeping quarters under was a bit of a blow to the confidence.



A sunset view from uninhabited Honeymoon Island, off the coast of Aitutaki in the Cook Islands. Photo / Supplied

When we discovered the wasp nest next to the hut, our professional self-esteem was pretty much destroyed. Deserted islands do strange things to people.

Thinking we'd watched enough to understand how uninhabited islands worked (minus the imaginary polar bears and the other weird phenomena), our group of Kiwi journos spent three hours clambering up palm trees for leaves – at the risk of pulling a Keith Richards – weaving them together and constructing a modest, yet snug, bivouac without doing what is apparently second nature to local Cook Islanders: looking up.

"I always look up," explained one of our guides, Ngaakitai Pureariki, or Ngaa.

"Even when I go to the city, I look up at signs and things like that; you never know what could come down."

In his laidback island way, Ngaa pointed out that if one of the rock-hard fruits were to come loose and fall 100m from its perch during the night, we may not be delivered back to our five-star resort intact, or we'd be a little bit cuckoo-nuts at the very least.

Thankfully we didn't have to restart construction, because it emerged there were no fully grown fruit on the tree.

It's a wonder we didn't have coconuts on the brain, having gathered dozens on a two-hour trek through bush on neighbouring Aitutaki before coming here.

Our guides, Ngaa and fellow local Andrew Katu, had shown us potential food sources and given us survival tips before handing out a map, machete and flint and telling us to grab what we needed because there wasn't much where we were going.

Ngaa, who runs a 4WD safari tour on Aitutaki, is the talker of the two. While managing to remain chilled out

in true Cook Island fashion, he excites easily and insists on giving members of the group nicknames. He grew up in Melbourne but returned to the Cooks six years ago.

Andrew, who operates a lagoon cruise business, stands in the background every now and then offering words of advice in his soft voice. But both men are full of knowledge about their native islands, which helps calm the nerves a little.

Who knew that a hibiscus had so many uses? Toilet paper, rope, food ... And coconut palms were vital in making the roof for our hut and our bedding base.

After the gathering mission on Aitutaki, a quick boat trip – spent weaving palm-leaf plates to use for dinner and picking giant snails off the reef for fishing bait – sees us arrive at our home for the next 24 hours, Honeymoon Island. No bigger than a few kilometres across each way, the island consists of sand and a few coconut trees.

It was a bit of a contrast to the previous two nights in over-water bungalows at the five-star Aitutaki Lagoon Resort and Spa – probably not the best preparation for a night roughing it. We weren't allowed to take much with us, either. Just a towel, a small bottle of water and a jumper. No toilet paper, no alcohol, no cameras and definitely no phones.

Once on the island, we got stuck into setting up for the night. While several of us worked on the hut, two of the boys were tasked with catching enough fish to feed our tribe of eight.

We'd only eaten fruit from the bush that day and were starving from all the walking, so pressure was mounting.

But the gatherers exceeded expectations, catching about 10 brown spotted rock cod, using a skinny branch as a rod and fishing in waist-deep water about 500m from the island. Bait was hermit crabs they'd ripped apart and mashed up amid a few sharp nips and some squeals.

Aitutaki was the location for series 13 of the popular reality TV programme Survivor, but Ngaa, who worked as an adviser on the show, tells us it wasn't a survivor experience at all and contestants were given canned food off-camera.

So it was a good feeling when all our work was done and we were standing in the water as the sun was going down, eating our fish, pawpaw and coconut – all delicacies we'd retrieved ourselves – off plates we'd woven.

After a few good old hermit crab races and a chats around a fire we'd started using flint, we were knackered – it was time to head for our homely shelter.

I can honestly say I don't think I've had a worse sleep in my life. We all dreamed about the comfy bungalow waiting for us back in Aitutaki and prayed for dawn.

The sun came up after what seemed like an eternity of tossing and turning and we groggily arose to face the new day.

A game of touch rugby got our spirits up and afterwards we gathered for a de-briefing.

Ngaa, did most of the talking, telling one scribe with more than 15 years in the trade that he was the weakest link. This was because of a comment he'd made earlier about being terrified of sharks. But, he concluded, the reporter had conquered his fear and come up trumps.

He then told a female journo, who he'd nicknamed "Eagle-Eye" because of her fantastic orienteering skills in the Aitutaki bush, that she had come out the leader of the pack.

After the motivational speeches, Andrew said a prayer and we were set free.

We all agreed the trip would be a great team-bonding experience for corporate or sports groups. We weren't totally out of our comfort zones, but add a couple more nights to the trip and we'd really be survivors.

## CHECKLIST

**Real survivors:** An overnight stay on a deserted island – Honeymoon Island, one of the 20 uninhabited islands in the west tip of Aitutaki – with groups having to catch their own fish for dinner, make a fire for cooking and build a hut for sleeping in. There is a minimum of two persons in order for the tour to operate. For two, the cost is \$500 a person; for three or more, \$400 a person.

**Getting there:** [Pacific Blue](#) flies direct to Rarotonga from Auckland three times a week, with connecting fares from Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin.

A domestic flight must then be taken to Aitutaki on [Air Rarotonga](#), which makes the 45-minute flight several times daily.

**Further information:** To book Real Survivors or find out more, see [islandhoppervacations.com](http://islandhoppervacations.com)

*Alanah May Eriksen survived Aitutaki as a guest of Real Survivor, Pacific Blue, Rarotongan Beach Resort and Spa and the Aitutaki Lagoon Resort and Spa.*