



# INTO THE BLUE

An archipelago of gem-like atolls in the South Pacific, the Cook Islands radiate beauty, from its breathtakingly blue lagoons to its unwaveringly friendly residents, writes Cathy Wagstaff.

Before I visited the Cook Islands, I'd been told – on numerous occasions – that the archipelago was home to lagoons of peerless beauty. Superlatives were thrown around: dreamy, pristine, stunning, dazzling. Turns out that none quite do justice when it comes to describing this pocket of the South Pacific.

Fifteen droplets of land cast across two million square kilometres of opal-like ocean – an area larger than Queensland – the Cook Islands are simultaneously remote and accessible, modern and traditional. The jewel in this string of pearls is the tiny island of

Aitutaki, and that's where I am headed first. As the plane banks for a landing on Aitutaki's renovated World War II airstrip, the whole atoll comes into view – lush tropical vegetation and bone-white sandy beaches ringed by a sparkling azure lagoon. Its colours are blinding from the air, and even more vivid up close on a private charter with Platinum Cruising. We pause to snorkel in gin-clear water, accompanied by giant trevally that glide over enormous purple-lipped clams that quiver as we drift by. A barbecue lunch of freshly caught fish and locally grown salad awaits on the powdery shore of

Tapuaetai, aka One Foot Island, one of 15 motu (islets) comprising Aitutaki's atoll – if I was to glimpse Tapuaetai from above, it would indeed resemble a foot. At ground level, it's a postcard-worthy swathe of palm trees that lilt toward the turquoise lagoon and sandbanks. It's easy to while away the day here, but as the sun begins to sink and light up the sky with candy pinks my accommodation at Aitutaki's adults-only Pacific Resort awaits.

## Pacific style

The bungalows and villas of this thatched-roof retreat are decorated in





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*“We pause to snorkel in gin-clear water, accompanied by giant trevally that glide over enormous purple-lipped clams...”*

01 - 02 The stunning scenery and vibrant colours of the Cook Islands © Cook Islands Tourism 03 Pacific Resort Aitutaki 04 You could while away your day strolling the pristine beaches here 05 Snorkel gin-clear waters © Cook Islands Tourism



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understated colonial-Pacific style, all with absolute beachfront and a glorious coral reef on the doorstep. The laid-back service is best enjoyed at Rapae Bay restaurant, where every table has a sunset view across the lagoon to waves breaking on the outer reef. The menu offers a taste of Cooks cuisine through dishes like *ika mata* (fresh fish marinated in lime and coconut cream) and grilled mahi mahi with cassava chips.

The next night I stroll along the sand to Tamanu Beach resort, where I meet general manager Nick Henry and soon find myself invited to dinner with his extended family. There’s laughter, music, gossip and way too much food. At the end of the night, everyone piles into the back of Nick’s pick-up truck and I’m given a lift back to my bungalow at the Pacific. My entourage wave furiously as I retreat to bed. Perhaps the only accommodation closer to the water than mine is Aitutaki Lagoon Private Island Resort, where bungalows come stilted over the sea – where a makeover is currently underway.

### Island hopping

It’s a short flight from Aitutaki to Rarotonga. My adventure here also starts in the water when I join Ariki Adventures to explore the Avaavaroa Passage marine reserve. Currents are strong here, so it’s a good thing I have a James Bond-style

underwater scooter to pull me along with ease. I aim mine down into the depths and moments later find myself cruising alongside a lazy green sea turtle that seems unfazed by the intrusion. It’s one of many that surround me on my hour snorkel adventure.

Lunch is at the Punanga Nui market, held every Saturday morning. It’s a dizzying union of sights and sounds, and stalls are piled high with colourful sarongs, tropical flowers, ukuleles, beauty products scented with frangipani and coconut oil, and every Cook Island’s snack imaginable. I graze my way around the spectacle, feasting on freshly baked coconut buns, island-roasted coffee, and creamy fruit smoothies crammed with mango and papaya. Rarotonga’s other market is held at night in Muri, whose nearby lagoon is the colour of an ice mint. It’s tempting to join the queues to grab a bowl of curry from The Seafood Man here, but I have one final dinner date at Antipodes.

This clifftop restaurant easily has the most spectacular sunset views on the island, its villa enveloped by rainforest and with an unbroken outlook over the reef. Dining here is alfresco, while the menu is modern Mediterranean – think platters piled high with scallops, prawns and mahi mahi; grilled meats; seafood ceviche; and decadent antipasto plates. It’s a breezy journey back to Nautilus Resort, a barefoot-luxe retreat where the main infinity pool seems to unite with the lagoon, just beyond.

My villa is like the Pacific in a snapshot, all polished wood and thatched roofs, and with a four-poster bed swathed in flowy netting.

It seems fitting to end my stay with a cocktail, and the signature here is a muddle of gin, Midori, peach liqueur, pineapple juice, sour mix and passionfruit syrup. Its name? Island Love Potion – a tagline that neatly sums up my week in this beguiling part of the world. ♦

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