



# Fantasy island

If you've ever fantasised about escaping to a tropical island retreat of storybook charm and natural beauty, Rarotonga – the untouched and unforgettable gateway to the Cook Islands – should be top of your family holiday bucket list, writes [ALENEY DE WINTER](#).

Imaginations hit overdrive as our plane descends into Rarotonga. "Treasure!" shouts my eldest kid as he spies the jewels strewn below us: jagged mountains carpeted with emerald green jungle and swathes of pearl-white sand, all prettily packaged in a Tiffany-blue lagoon.

A few hours later, our body clocks already reset to island time, we're surrounded by kids, dogs and chickens as we peruse treasure of a different kind at Rarotonga's weekly Punanga Nui Markets, stalls laden with brightly coloured *pareo* (sarongs), black pearls and flowers. Necks decorated with flower garlands and chins sticky from devouring tropical fruit, my daughter slurps on the contents of a coconut while my son noisily test drives a ukulele that has been cunningly fashioned out of the husk of another.

Dominated by a once almighty volcanic pyramid, worn down by time to sawtooth peaks, the island of Rarotonga is the largest of the Cook Islands, though at just 32 kilometres in circumference, it takes just 45 minutes to drive around the whole drop of land. At least it would if – between taking in some of its

most sacred sites, limestone churches, inland villages and plantations – our kids weren't intent on stopping every five minutes to shimmy along a palm tree, explore another impossibly blue lagoon and collect fragrant fallen frangipani. By the time we stop to watch the sunset turn the sky pastel pink over Black Rock Beach, our hire car is heaving with so many blooms it looks more like a garden.

### Marine moments

Time, like most things in the Cook Islands, has a mind of its own and our days roll by with the island tides. To a fairly consistent soundtrack of twanging ukulele we eat, cycle, kayak and lazily immerse ourselves into waters too blue to be true.

We submerge our little family under the sea in the **Raro Reef Sub**, a semi-submersible boat tour over shipwrecks – including the RMS *Maitai*, which sank in 1916 – along Rarotonga's northern coast. The kids are thrilled with the underwater mission, spying turtles, spotted eagle rays and a school of giant pouty fish, which look for all the world like they've been overdoing the collagen injections.

Keen for more underwater adventures, we take to the retina-searingly cerulean waters of Muri Lagoon with **Koka Lagoon Cruises**. We revel in the tropical waters, snorkelling through coral gardens past giant clams and schools of colourful fish and snapping selfies on the camera which, along with a card full of memories, is relegated to the lagoon in a moment of clumsiness. But the lack of a camera proves freeing and instead of snapping memories, I make them, playing with the kids in the water, kicking back to watch the kite surfers who float high on the steady winds that blow across the lagoon, and drinking the rewards of some warp-speed coconut tree climbing by the too-cool crew.

But it's in the crystal-clear azure waters of Aroa Lagoon Marine Sanctuary, just metres from the door of our beachfront villa at the **Rarotongan Beach Resort & Lagoonarium**, where we spend most of our holiday, submerged in a fantastical marine microcosm that's perfectly protected from the open ocean by an encircling coral reef. When we can drag our own little fish from under the water, the four-star resort's activities desk keeps us busy with ukulele lessons and kayaking. We even

manage to squeeze in a deliciously relaxing aromatherapy massage while the kids are kept entertained at the resort's Moko's Kids Club.

### Song and dance

Tradition and heritage are trademarks of the island and in an effort to immerse ourselves into Rarotonga's local culture, Sunday morning sees us bathing in the glow of stained-glass in a pretty whitewashed church. It's already a full house when we arrive but we manage to slip in between two lovely local ladies dressed in their prettiest *muumuus* and woven *rito* hats on the coral-hued pews. The sermon is uplifting but it is the cascading multipart harmonies and guttural grunts of the *imene tuki* (hymn of grunts) that sets our souls soaring.

Music is an integral part of Cook Islands' Maori culture and later that evening at the **Te Vara Nui Village**, inspired by the passionate locals sharing their history and traditions through music and dance, the kids join in. My eldest whacks out a cacophony of noise on the *pate* (log drum) while my youngest performs an impromptu hula. Their performances, while entertaining, are quickly overshadowed as Rarotonga's best musicians and rubber-hipped dancers take to the stage. We're entranced as the women swing their hips seductively to the rhythmic drumbeat, but as the men start breathing fire in a display that would make even the fiercest dragon proud, I'm relieved that the kids elected to step down and leave the show to the experts. ■



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01 Aerial view of Muri Lagoon © Darren Tierney/Shutterstock 02 Island performer 03 Snorkelling in Rarotonga 04 Culture show at Punanga Nui Market 05 Lagoon cruise. Images 02 & 05 © Aleney de Winter. Images 03 & 04 © ChameleonsEye/Shutterstock