



Return to Raro

By Matt Taylor

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Nestled in the heart of the South Pacific lies Rarotonga, the largest of the Cook Islands. With its idyllic beaches, lush tropical forests and welcoming locals, Rarotonga is the perfect destination for those seeking a peaceful escape from the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

As you fly into Rarotonga, there's always a sense of excitement when you see its towering peaks rise from the sea. It's like an exclamation mark that you've left the cooler climes of New Zealand and are about to swap them for blissful tropical warmth.

We've visited Rarotonga numerous times before. And each time we do, there's a sense that you're returning to a place that feels like home. Maybe it's the language, Cook Island Maori culture, the New Zealand dollar currency and being able to buy the same products that you get back home. In reality, it's all of the above. And this familiarity is one of the Cook Island's drawcards.

On this particular Rarotongian adventure, we based ourselves at Muri Lagoon – home to the island's best-known stretch of sand. Our HQ was Muri Beachcomber, a top spot that's located right in the heart of Muri Village (next to food stalls at Muri Night Markets).

Muri Beachcomber's two-bedroom garden villa provided the ideal set-up for myself and the kids. There was plenty of space and a wide, sun-soaked deck right opposite the pool. The fully self-contained kitchen came in super-handly too. It was re-stocked with essentials like bread, milk, butter, breakfast cereals and spreads, which meant quick kid's snacks could be made on the spot!

The resort's one-bedroom villas were located right on the beach, with a lovely wide lawn leading to a beach top sundeck and stairs down to the sand. Guests could help themselves to kayaks, paddleboards and snorkelling gear, but it's just as pleasant quietly bathing in the crystal-clear waters.

Making the most of Muri

There's plenty to see and do around the Muri area.

Of course, the beach is a highlight. And even though the island's accommodation was close to full, the beach was never packed with people. Which is a big plus for those seeking peace and quiet.

Muri Village has plenty of dining options too.

One of our favourite spots was The Moorings (directly across the road from Muri Beachcomber). Jill Stanton, the Kiwi-born owner has been serving her legendary fresh fish sandwiches for over 20 years and they never disappoint. Each Sunday, The Moorings bring in a live ukulele band and allow visitors to BYO drinks – a fun way to spend an afternoon.

La Casita is another top spot to grab a bite. As the name suggests it has a Mexican theme, but they also serve some yummy pizzas. It's hard to pick out a single dish – order the fish tacos, chicken quesadilla or pizza and you are guaranteed to go home happy. (Add in a cold beer too – sorry forgot to mention).

It should also be noted that the prices are reasonable too. Very similar to what you'd expect at home if not cheaper, a little cheaper in some places.

The Muri Night Markets are a must-visit too. Every Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday night, dozens of vendors gather to sell an array of mouth-watering food, handmade crafts, and souvenirs. From fresh seafood to local delicacies like Ika Mata and Poke, there's something to satisfy every taste bud.

It's a fun atmosphere, with live music and traditional dance. It's a great place to experience the warmth and hospitality of the island's community and rub shoulders with the locals who love the food too!

Other places to put on your list?

LBV Bakery and Café is home to superb coffee and a fine selection of delicious handmade pastries. (A yummy way to start your day).

The Rarotongan Sailing Club offers grandstand views over Muri Lagoon – it's a top spot for a beverage or bite to eat and people-watch while you're at it.

If you hanker for some Asian flavours, try the Vietnamese delights at The Rickshaw.

If you're after supplies, there's a fully stocked mini-supermarket right next to the Night Markets. It has everything you need, including wine and beer. They also have an ATM if you require cash.

Muri Lagoon adventures with Captain Tama's Lagoon Cruises

One of the most popular ways to explore Muri Lagoon is on a lagoon cruise with Captain Tama's. The action begins before you even set foot on the glass-bottom boat – with singing, drumming and ukulele giving guests a clue about the fun coming their way. The Captain and crew are natural entertainers who keep the humour flowing.

Cruises include a stop at a tiny motu, or atoll island in the lagoon – this is where a delicious barbecue lunch is set up on the beach. There's a whole bunch of fun activities too. Ever wanted to climb a coconut tree? You're about to find out! Want to learn how to husk a coconut or learn all the ways you can tie a sarong? It's all part of the fun. And of course, there is plenty of time to snorkel in the lagoon waters, getting up close and personal with schools of tropical fish and the colourful reef systems. Captain Tama's Lagoon Cruise is suitable for people of all ages and will make for a most memorable experience!



Exploring Muri Lagoon with Captain Tama's



Muri Beach © Pacific Resort Rarotonga



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Turtle time with Charlotte Piho

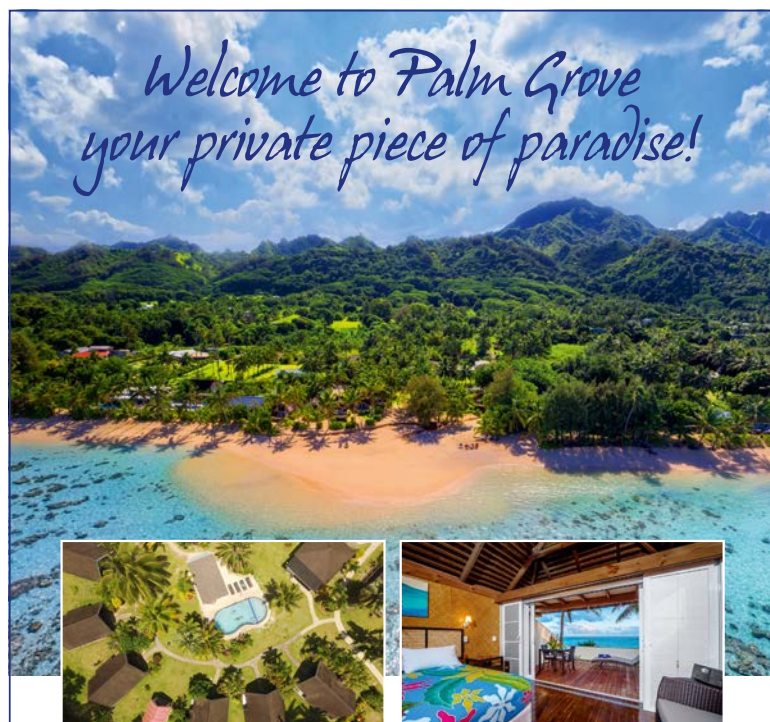
One of the highlights of our trip was the turtle snorkel with Charlotte Piho Tours. A Cook Island local, Charlotte is a world-class underwater photographer with a passion for marine conservation. Her turtle tour was the perfect way to bring those two together.

The turtle tour is based at Avaavaroa Passage on Rarotonga's south coast. This gap in the reef provided early Polynesian navigators with a safe entry point to land. The tidal currents that flow through the channel also bring a steady supply of marine nutrients to resident turtles, fish and eagle rays.

Charlotte's Tour is a chance for visitors to experience Cook Island's natural wonders and see turtles in their natural environment. Each turtle has a name and a unique personality – some are lazy only moving a couple of times a day, while some are more active swimming all day in the gentle currents.

Charlotte ensures safety is a top priority. Tours are split into small groups. Each group is given their own guide who swims alongside them. The guides also carry flotation devices in case someone needs a rest. On-water lifeguards on paddleboards are also on-hand as an extra precaution.

In the water, the turtles glide straight past you. On the bottom, about 10-15m below the surface, you'll also spot Eagle Rays gracefully circling. As you'd expect the final photos are quite exceptional and provide memories that will last forever.



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Getting about

The coastal road that circles the island is only 32k around, so you can get the whole way round in less than an hour. Of course, a trip that quick is unlikely - there are far too many fun things to see and do.

In terms of transport, scooters can be hired. But I'd opt for a rental car which gives you room to throw in towels, shopping and anything else you come across.

There are numerous rental car companies on the island. Otherwise, you can travel 'local' by jumping on the public buses that circle the island.

Either way, you'll have the freedom to explore. If you're doing the circuit, you'll find a variety of locally run cafes, restaurants and bars. The standard of fare is excellent - as you'd expect 'caught-that-day seafood' is a speciality, but there are plenty of other ways to fill hungry tummies too.

Charlie's Café (located at Titikaveka Beach on the south coast) is a popular spot for a drink and bite to eat. Just remember, it does fill up quickly, so best to get there early if you want a seat.

On the Beach (OTB) restaurant and bar at Manuia Beach Resort is another great place to call into. With its prime location on the beachfront, visitors can enjoy their meals while admiring the turquoise waters and breathtaking scenery. You might even spot a whale passing by.

The restaurant prides itself on its sumptuous cuisine that blends local and international flavours, with an emphasis on fresh, seasonal ingredients. Whether you're in the mood for a hearty breakfast, a light lunch, or a romantic dinner, the OTB Restaurant and Bar has you covered. The restaurant's bar also offers

an extensive selection of cocktails and beverages, including tropical drinks that perfectly complement the island vibe.

Our recommendation – OTB's own Ika Mata made with lime, sea salt, marinated tuna, fresh chilli, coriander and fried taro! Delish.

Hitting the town

Seeing the sights of Avarua (Rarotonga's main town) is also fun.

One of the top attractions in Avarua is the Punanga Nui Market. This bustling marketplace is the perfect place to experience the local culture and purchase handmade souvenirs. The market is open every Saturday and offers a wide variety of goods, including fresh produce, clothing, jewellery, and handicrafts.

Paying a visit to the Cook Islands National Museum is worth the effort. This museum showcases the history and culture of the Cook Islands, including artefacts and exhibits that highlight the island's rich heritage.

No visit to Avarua is complete without a cold beer and bite to eat at the iconic Trader Jacks Bar and Grill on the waterfront. This establishment always has a lively atmosphere and fresh seafood is delish. You can dine indoors or outdoors while enjoying the stunning views of the Avarua Harbour. The bar offers a variety of tropical drinks, including the famous "Trader Jack's Mai Tai."

After a long absence, it was nice to be back in Rarotonga. Like always, the island provided an immersive holiday experience – where we could get out and about and soak up local attractions at our own pace. It's different from your regular 'stay in the resort' style of holiday and sometimes that's just what you want.





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RESORT SPOTLIGHT

RADISSON BLU RESORT FIJI, DENARAU

Smiles and sunshine.

Radisson Blu Resort Fiji, Denarau Island has mastered the art of keeping everyone happy.

by Fran McDermott

Radisson Blu Resort Fiji has always been an Islandtime family favourite. It's the kind of resort that caters to adults and kids alike. The staff are professional and welcoming in that fun Fijian way. The dining options never fail to disappoint. And the room options provide complete flexibility, regardless of whether travelling as a couple or with kids in tow.

The fun never stops

Radisson Blu Resort Fiji really is a place where the fun never ends. The entertainment is led by the famous 'Banana Boys' activities crew who are experts at keeping hordes of Kiwi and Aussie kids smiling!

Treasure hunts, touch footy and pool volleyball are just a few of the activities on offer and the 'Bananas' love it just as much as the kids. Radisson Blu is also a resort where staff tend to stay on year-after-year, so every return visit becomes like a big reunion and the fun starts where it left off last time.

The lively atmosphere means it's easy for kids to make new 'best' friends too. In next to no time they'll be running around with kids they've only just met – having a bundle of fun and keeping themselves happily entertained - without a screen in sight!

Dining delights

One of the standout features of Radisson Blu Resort Fiji is the variety of dining options.

Chantara Thai Restaurant is a must-visit for lovers of Thai cuisine, serving up delicious and authentic dishes in a tranquil setting overlooking the resort's iconic waterfall. The extensive menu is packed with yummy treats – like classic noodle and rice dishes, aromatic curries, fresh salads, soups, and wok options, as well as a family-style set menu and live Thai BBQ! The restaurant is perfect for casual dining and a great place to take the kids.

For those who prefer Mediterranean cuisine, the resort's Byblos Restaurant is a marvellous Lebanese-inspired eatery - think delicious and nutritious options with fresh cold and hot plates in the middle eastern custom of Mezze (which involves sharing generous portions of appetisers among family and friends).



Tastes like Lebanese Tabbouleh, hummus, fresh saj bread, Mashawi (charcoal grill) and the famous baklava and many other sweet delights will have you coming back for more. Plus it's a healthy option too. To top it off, Byblos boasts one of Denarau's most picturesque waterfront locations.

Italian fans will love the resort's family-style restaurant, Basilico which features a traditional Italian menu. The restaurant is a recent addition to the resort's dining line up and dishes like prawn linguine, beef carpaccio and Sicilian baked fish will be sure to have you coming back for more.

Perfect pampering

When it's time to relax and unwind, the resort's Harmony Retreat Spa is the perfect place to escape.

Featuring a range of luxurious treatments and therapies, including massages, facials, and body scrubs, the spa is an oasis of calm and relaxation. They also use the Pure Fiji range of luscious products.

It's tough to know where to start, but you could try the spa's signature 'sugar glow' treatment - a unique exfoliating and hydrating treatment using coconut and natural cane sugar. Or maybe pamper your skin with a 'firming ritual', using a delicious blend of Fijian honey and fresh coconut. (As you can imagine, you won't want to leave the place.)

Hit the water

For those looking for a little more adventure, the resort's extensive range of water sports is sure to please. From kayaking and stand-up paddleboarding to jet ski hire and banana boats, there's something for everyone to enjoy. The main pool is always a popular spot and the little ones will love frolicking in the shallower pools that flow off it. There's also an adults-only pool which provides more peace and privacy – grab a book, and a cocktail and settle on in!

Room to move

We've always liked the spacious apartment-style room design at the Radisson Blu Resort Fiji. Rooms come in Standard, Superior and Deluxe categories, and one and two-bedroom suites. All Suites feature a separate bedroom, full kitchen and separate lounge, which is much appreciated by families and groups. Room outlooks include Garden View, Lagoon View and Courtyard Rooms that are located on the ground floor.

Pure magic

The Radisson Blu Resort Fiji is an excellent choice for anyone looking for a relaxed tropical holiday. With exceptional dining options, a tranquil spa, and an extensive range of water sports and activities, there's something for everyone to experience the magic of Fiji. 