



36 hours in rarotonga

Katie Newton takes paradise lying down during a heavenly few days in the Cook Islands

Sunday 1pm It's been four days since we arrived in Rarotonga and I've spent most of that time horizontal. Sleeping, sunbathing and floating in the ocean have all been blissful pastimes, but none has been as good as my massage from local masseuse Inano McMurchy. The owners of Apartments Kakera have arranged for her to do a house call, and once she's kneaded me into drooling submission, even climbing the floating staircase to our mezzanine bedroom seems like hard work. Instead, I flop into a sun lounger and contemplate how much fatter the bunch of bananas will have to get before they prove too heavy for their branch and plop into the plunge pool.

4pm The stretch of coastline out the front of our apartments is as deserted and idiosyncratic as nearby Muri lagoon is popular and predictably perfect. The reef is close and the huge waves are setting up well for the local lads who have turned up on motorbikes with surfboards tucked under their arms. At the shoreline, shallow pebbly pools provide an ideal cool spot for surfer surveying, but we've retired

to sip sauvignon blanc and eat homemade sushi with our hosts on beanbags under an umbrella. Melinda Morris-Ponga tells us how she and her husband Andrew left Auckland's Mt Albert to build their version of paradise on this family land six years ago. We're staying in Apartment Pepe, one of two breezily contemporary luxury apartments they have built alongside their family house. Melinda was a beauty therapist and hairdresser in New Zealand and has a business offering pampering packages, including hair and makeup for weddings. It's a much more private and relaxed alternative to the big resorts on the island and the Pongas are incredibly thoughtful hosts. Looking at the three beautiful nut-brown kids careening carelessly around in the shallows, it's not hard to see why they love it here.

7pm Friends of the Pongas, Tooks and Meegan, own a restaurant down the road called the Paw Paw Patch. Sunday is barbecue night and for \$30 a head you get a feast including a stupendously good banana trifle and the best ika mata (raw fish marinated

in coconut milk and lime) that I've had on the island – and I've been eating it for practically every meal! **Monday 11am** As is often the case during the rainy season, a quick but heavy morning rain shower provide a welcome respite from the heat. We're tucking into smoked marlin hash cakes and iced coffees on the verandah of our favourite breakfast spot, Café Salsa, with a couple of roaming bantams who are also taking shelter. Like most visitors to the island we've hired a scooter to get around because, even though it's only 32km in circumference, restaurants, supermarkets and good swimming spots are all quite spread out. It's worth paying the \$15 fee and sitting the test (a five-minute turn around the block with the cops following behind) to get your Cook Island motorbike driver's licence.

2pm It's turned into a perfect, blazing hot day and a cooler bag stacked with food and drinks has materialised on our doorstep while we've been out. Tucked into the pocket is a map with a picnic spot marked in pen. Grabbing towels, snorkels and two fat novels we jump back on the scooter and peel off down the road. The pristine white sand beach we arrive at is empty save for a few kids having a swimming lesson in the distance. It seems like a good idea to park up in the shade of a coconut palm grove until "thwack!" – a hairy bowling ball crashes to the ground less than a metre away. We pick a spot on the beach to set up instead. Later, as I snorkel along the coral reef, I'm glad the fat sea cucumbers, with their squidgy sausage bodies, stay on the lagoon floor. They're harmless, but I certainly won't be sucking down their spaghetti-like innards as I've seen others do. After an hour, we retreat to our shady spot and watch two older American couples who have arrived to snorkel in the waist-deep water.

getaways

Hilariously, they're wearing lifejackets. **7pm** We're really getting into the Island Night at the Pacific Resort on Muri Beach. Cook Islands' drummers have always been a favourite of mine, but this time I can't take my eyes off the young female dancers, their confident swishing hips clashing gorgeously with their shy smiles. The drinks at the touristy bars and restaurants can be pricey, but not at the local Fishing Club. My night-ending \$3 tequila, lime and dry is basically tequila, with a dash of lime and an even smaller dash of dry. The barman grins as I reel from my first sip, and leaves the two-litre bottle of ginger ale for me to top up my glass at will. Now that's my kind of service.



NEED TO KNOW

Apartments Kakera, Ngatangia

Apartment Pepe is one bedroom, Apartment Ra has a master bedroom and a second bedroom that sleeps two singles. Both have their own kitchen, living area, bathroom and plunge pool. From \$360 per night. See www.apartmentskakera.com

Paw Paw Patch The Sunday barbecue is \$30 per head, which includes two courses and a performance by local musicians. Visit www.pawpawpatchrestaurant.com

Maoro Massage Inano McMurchy is as accomplished a masseuse as you will find anywhere in the world. inanom@gmail.com