



# in good company

PHOTOGRAPH BY TESSA CHRISP WORDS BY JANE BINSLEY

Don't know anyone in the Cook Islands? Never mind. Just book into the apartments Kiwi couple Melinda Morris-Punga and Andrew Punga have built onto their Rarotonga home and you'll never feel like a stranger in a strange land. They'll pick you up from the airport, fill you in on the local goings and share their favourite haunts. By the time you leave, you will have friends in the coconuts – and you'll be planning your next trip to visit them.

It was our first time in the Cook Islands, but Andrew greeted us as long-time locals when he welcomed us off the plane, draping fragrant frangipani in the Rarotongan version of the lei around our necks as he led us through the steamy tropical air.

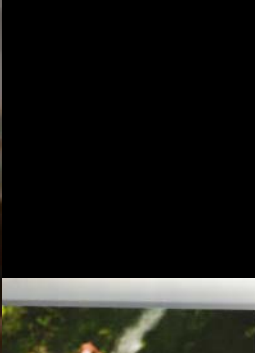
Initially, I was disappointed that our four-hour Pacific Blue flight from Auckland arrived in the middle of the night. We didn't get

Feeling less like a tourist and more like a visitor when you're overseas is easy, with a little help from your friends

to see from the air the 15 islands of the Cook Islands group, which have a total land area of only 240 square kilometres, spread over more than two million square kilometres of ocean. But it turned out to be a magical way to discover a new land.

The 20-minute night drive from the airport gave few visual clues to the reef-vested, mountain-studded island of Rarotonga, by far the biggest and most populated island in the Cooks, so when I woke to see the roaring waves from one window and the brooding mountains framed in another, I felt as though I had been teleported from a mediocre Auckland evening to a morning in a tropical paradise.

Six years after moving to Rarotonga, Melinda and Andrew still feel that excitement when they wake up each morning – so much so that they designed a horizontal window in the seaward wall of their bedroom, so they can lie in bed and watch the waves. It's typical of

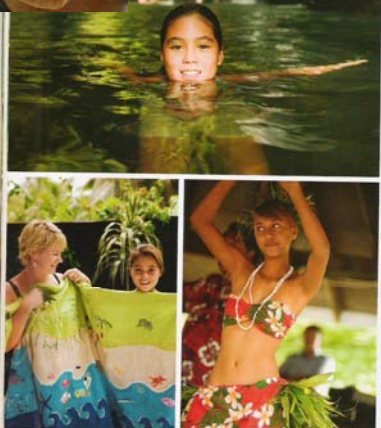


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130 NEXT

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actress Greer Robson  
on leaving the past behind  
THE CHANGING FACE OF MOTHERHOOD



**Take five in roro**  
Take a day trip to Muti Lagoon with Captain Tama's Lagoon Cruise. A glass-bottomed boat will transport you to snorkel among tropical fish before adorning to a private island for a barbecue lunch, followed by coconut husking and canoe-flying demonstrations. Great wedding/bachelorette, click or phone (862) 27350.

**Take to the hills. You can**  
Take to the swimming hole at Wagona's Waterfall, but to see further inland you'll need a guide like the Pū Teuana. This island character and herbal healer will captivate you with his ancestral knowledge and astonishing the experiences as he leads you on a four-hour hike across the terrain of the island. Email [planetourism@netcom.co.nz](mailto:planetourism@netcom.co.nz) or phone (862) 27179.

**Take in a 18th-century feast**  
Island Night at Stratos Restaurant, where you'll receive a set meal of local delicacies, including *karu* (raw fish) and *haka* (cooked taro leaves), followed by a performance of traditional Cook Islands drum dancing. Phone (862) 21254. See [www.cookislands.com](http://www.cookislands.com).

**Offer a range of in-room pampering services** including beautiful hair treatments, facials, manicures, pedicures and private yoga lessons, or she'll arrange for a massage to come to your room, set up a hot tub and give you a sub-zero.

**Take your cues.**  
Apartment Katers are popular with honeymooners and small weddings have been held on the beach or in the courtyard. Melinda has the skills to work pampering brides on their big day. Visit [www.pacificblue.com](http://www.pacificblue.com).

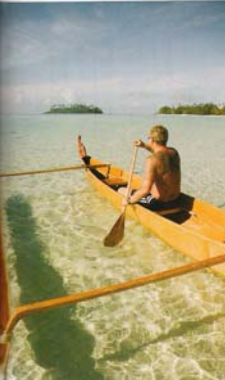
rested passive venting and natural insulation to cool the interiors and they electric, and chose recycled products for the cladding and roofing. Melinda has nurtured her sublime organic garden without exclusively from outside, and they recycle all their waste. Their next project is to harness the sea breeze to provide their own power source.

Although trained as a hairdresser and makeup artist, Melinda has a keen interest in interior design and architecture, so she worked with a local

132 NEXT



Clockwise from top: Paula, Tegeema, Andrew, Dennis and Melinda



the attention to detail that they put into planning their spacious, eco-friendly family home and the two adjoining guest apartments.

It is the realisation of a dream for the New Zealand-born couple, who left Auckland in search of adventure and a more natural environment in which to bring up their three children, Daniel, now 13, Paulina, 10, and Reewena, 7. They'd just completed a 10-year renovation of their 1980s bungalow, and were looking for a change.

"Why don't we go and live in Rarotonga?" Melinda said to Andrew, who had family there, and what started as a throwaway line soon grew to become a life-changing reality.

Six months later they had packed up their belongings, and their cat, and moved to paradise. In the Cook Islands way, Andrew applied to his family for a plot of land and was granted a near-waterfront section, plus a horticultural allotment in

the foothills further inland. And so began the project of designing and building the home and apartments – surely one of the largest and most sophisticated residential buildings on an island populated by modest single-storey houses painted in cheerful candy colours.

Crumbing around the ring road that circles the island (it takes about three-quarters of an hour to circumnavigate at the unofficial speed limit of 40km/h), the local love of the land becomes clear. The island is like one huge tropical garden, its fertile volcanic soil abundant with frangipani and magnolia, banana and coconut palms, papaw trees ripe with fruit and fields of vibrant taro.

Believing they are only guardians of their land for future generations, Melinda and Andrew, who is a builder, were keen to meld eco principles with a luxurious aesthetic in their home and apartments. So they

## 66 I felt as though I had been teleported from mediocre Auckland to paradise 59

**melinda and andrew's favourite nosh spots**  
tamarind house, hupapa  
One of the island's original colonial homesteads has been transformed into a gracious seaside restaurant, serving up *Le Cordon* and *Le Jardin* style tropical cuisine. Visit [www.tamarind.co.nz](http://www.tamarind.co.nz)

**kikau hut, anarangi**  
A charming island-style restaurant run by ex-restaurantier and chef John Kiffin. Or and her husband Michael, who cooks a mean steak. Email [michael@kikau.net.nz](mailto:michael@kikau.net.nz) or phone (862) 26900.

**swill, muti lagoon**  
Trendy food served in the clubhouse of the Rarotonga Sailing Club. Built above the sands of lovely Muti Lagoon, the veranda is a sublime spot for lunch in the sun

or evening cocktails. Visit [www.sailrestaurant.co.nz](http://www.sailrestaurant.co.nz)

**the game fishing club, hupapa**  
Non-members are welcome at this bar, where you can drink at a table by the beach and order fish and chips from the excellent Flying Fleet takeaway bar, housed in an old boat.

**india, paitera**  
A Rarotongan branch of the Auckland chain of Indian restaurants. Great courses to eat in or take away.

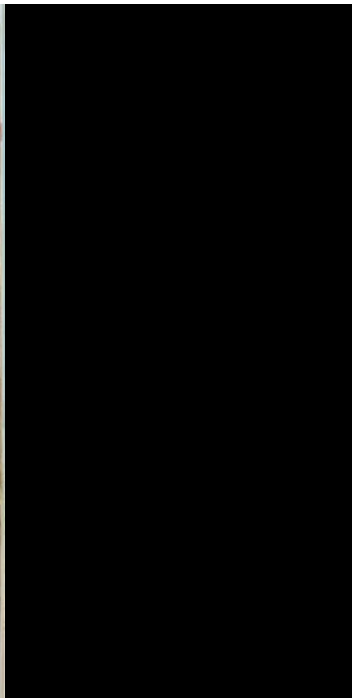
**mae-joe's cafe, cook's corner, anarangi**  
A family favourite for a casual Chinese meal with the kids. **the cafe, anarangi**  
Andrew recommends the coffee that's roasted on site at this open-air, daytime cafe.

TRAVEL

NEXT 131



**checklist**  
what to take  
• Sunblock and insect repellent  
• Reef shoes for the beach, walking shoes for the mountains  
• Cook, casual clothes and a light rain jacket  
• Your driver's licence. Getting a Cook Islands licence is a \$10 formally, but you'll need to show your NZ licence  
• A hat, bacon, meat and milk are expensive, so take your own if you're planning on self-catering. Have most necessities packed and ask your butcher for a certificate of origin for Cook Islands customers, what not to take  
• Alcohol. It's cheap to buy spirits in Rarotonga – Melinda recommends the July free store on your right as you queue to have your passport stamped upon arrival at their airport, what to buy  
• How. The Cook Islands consist of a nucleus – as costly as they are colourful  
• Clubs. The Saturday morning markets on Avana are the best place for cheap beer, hats, food, coverings and more  
• Local artwork. Check out the contemporary Pacific art at the Art Studio, Anarangi  
• Beach pearls.



## 65 It's been a labour of love, but the things we do together work out for the best 59

city has since she worked at in Auckland.

"One day, I asked what he was up to that weekend and he said, 'I've got my 21st', and I said, 'So have I?' Melinda.

It turned out the two shared exactly the same birthday, although Andrew was born in the morning and Melinda in the afternoon. "He's older, so I'm not a cradle-rocker," she laughs. A week later, they went out on their first date, and 10 months after that they bought their first house.

"We've saved hard and we've worked hard too," says Andrew. "I think my family are quite proud that we've come back to make a go of it here. I feel cherished when I see my old garden and they call me the 'Bans' boy'. Out of all the nations in the Pacific, I reckon we'd have to be the best."

It's hard to envisage. As a New Zealander, you wouldn't look for a more relaxing holiday. Everyone speaks English, and even the local language, Cook Islands Maori,

bears a striking similarity to our own – hardly surprising when you learn that only two million live up the beach from Apartments Katers in 1996. You can see New Zealand money in all the shops and drink the sweetest mango from the sap, the food is fantastic, and the people are genuinely friendly and welcoming.

I'm already planning my next trip, especially now that I have friends to visit. >

**needed to know**  
to Pacific Blue has lived between Auckland and Rarotonga on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Prices start from \$200 a night. Visit [www.pacificblue.com](http://www.pacificblue.com)

**still Apartments Katers, Katers**. They offer newly appointed modern apartments with full self-catering facilities, plunge pools, CD and DVD players and loads of lovely personal touches. Booked from \$200 a night (single or double) and yoga classes available. Visit [www.apartmentskaters.com](http://www.apartmentskaters.com)

**drive the island and meet the way to visit the island** to be a local. Call 0800 44 44 44 or 0800 44 44 44. A scooter for \$20 a day, from Island Car & Cycle Hire. Email [www.islandcarhire.co.nz](mailto:www.islandcarhire.co.nz) or visit [www.islandcarhire.co.nz](http://www.islandcarhire.co.nz)

134 NEXT