

A lovely bunch of coconuts

TRACY MORRIS, the mother behind the Instagram account @theblondenomads, discovers the glistening shores of the Cook Islands, family in tow.

With the sun shining down on us and the sweet smell of frangipanis in the air, my family and I jump into our bright yellow hire car, excited to start a new adventure. Ziggy, my nine-month-old boy is on my lap reaching forward trying to push as many buttons on the dash as he can before I put the seatbelt over us both. As my husband Rob starts the engine, I peer over my shoulder into the back seat to find our three-year-old girl Marli sitting up, looking out of the open window like an excited puppy soaking in the sights and sounds of this new paradise.

Paradise found

Driving along the coast, the road hugs the shoreline, and as we look out of the windows at the picture-perfect scenery, a wave of relaxation washes over us. Steep mountain peaks, lush green jungle and coconut palms cascade into the vibrant turquoise water. With the same time zone and latitude as Hawaii, we can see why the islands are sometimes labelled as the “Hawaii down under” – just minus the hustle and bustle.

With a maximum speed limit of only 50 kilometres we have no choice but to embrace ‘island time’. There is one main road that circles



Kia orana: welcome to the Cook Islands

Rarotonga and it takes about an hour to drive the entire circumference. You can also catch the bus; there are only two – appropriately named “Clockwise” and “Anti-clockwise”!

Rarotonga roadtripping

We find ourselves exploring the island at our own pace, greeted by the friendly locals with a neighbourly wave. Passing through quaint countryside of banana crops, starfruit, guava, papaya and taro (the potato of the tropics) we watch the farmers at work – a wonderful experience for our little ones who are eager to learn how all the different fruits and vegetables are grown. The kids excitedly spot pigs, goats, cows and chickens as we cruise by.

It is not long until we find a road that winds up and into the steep hills. The extinct volcanoes are capped by their very own clouds and it feels as though we’ve entered into the Jurassic era – at any moment a Triceratops may just jump out at us from the jungle!

Luckily there are no dinosaur encounters, but we do stumble upon a 600-year-old **Highland Paradise**, once home to the Tinomana Tribe. Walking the 25 hectares of manicured gardens and fruit trees on a self-guided tour we find recreated huts, fire pits, tribal artefacts and canoes. We soon learn of the tribe’s meeting place and place of worship, called a *Marae*, and their practices of tribal justice which included human sacrifice and cannibalism. Intrigued, we carry the kids onwards and upwards into the hills in search of the Sacrifice Rock. We reach a clearing surrounded by moss-covered boulders and take a closer look at this dark part of the island’s history and all agree we are glad it is no longer practised today!

Soaking up the Vitamin Sea

Back on the coast we spend our days playing in the sand and enjoying our accommodation at **The Rarotongan Beach Resort & Spa**. As a natural breeding ground for several hundred species of reef fish we are greeted by large trevally, butterfly fish, clams and eels just to name a few. The kids adore finding hermit crabs and fossicking for beach treasures while Rob and I unwind and watch the sunset.

Saturdays are local market day and we decide to take a wander through the colourful stalls selling local produce, baked goods and handmade souvenirs. We love the atmosphere so much, we venture out multiple times during



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cross-island trek to quad biking, boat tours to night snorkelling, hat weaving to ukulele lessons, the choices are endless. The “Cook Islands” – as Marli calls them – have it all. ●



- Information**
www.cookislands.travel/au
- Getting there**
Air New Zealand flies from Sydney to Rarotonga International Airport multiple times per week, with one direct flight once a week.
www.airnewzealand.com.au
- Stay**
The Rarotongan Beach Resort & Spa
www.therarotongan.com
- Do**
www.highlandparadise.co.ck
www.cookislandswildlifecentre.com

DIRECT FLIGHT to Rarotonga from Sydney! **KIDS + TEENS STAY & PLAY FREE!** at the Cook Islands’ leading family friendly resort, **The Rarotongan Beach Resort & Spa**. Hand-feed the reef fish or enjoy all-tide, sheltered FREE snorkelling, stand-up paddleboarding or kayaking in the Aroa Lagoon Marine Reserve. Fun crab racing & karaoke! Kids Nature & Culture Discovery Programme @ FREE Moko’s Kids Club. NEW VIRTUAL TOURS online. Visit us at www.TheRarotongan.com for bonus deals.

Aroa Beach + Lagoon Marine Reserve
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