

Off the Grid

Park your laptop, leave your cell phone,
and spend a weekend on One Foot Island in Aitutaki's famed lagoon.



There's no surer cure for civilization than three days on a tiny motu, totally off the grid. I had just arrived in Rarotonga for two weeks of business and cleared customs, so when Benson greeted me with hugs and leis and an invitation up to One Foot Island, I didn't hesitate – despite Raro's sunny, perfect weather, despite other plans, despite my deep fatigue. He brushed off my reluctance, “you can sleep when you're dead.” Benson's motto over the years seemed more appropriate now than ever as we headed off grid: “It's the lifestyle, stupid,” he joked.

“Besides, Daniel's coming, and you're his Auntie. He'll need someone to play cards with and to clean his fish. Please,” he implored. Benson, Cook Island affiliate to the investment company I directed, had rented the island for the weekend – this weekend, and the flight for Aitutaki left in two hours. So I signed on through my jet lag, and began to wrap my head around a camping trip, but not without noticing the sensuous curve of turquoise lagoon as we circled onto the main road. It always took my breath away.

“Go pick up supplies,” I barked, handing crisp currency to Benson while he put the last suitcase on the verandah. When on Raro, my home is Aloha Mana in Titikaveka, a beautifully-renovated historic holiday house, circa 1880, straddled up to the most exquisite section of white sand beach on Raro's lagoon, with a backdrop of a mountain that looks like a Tahitian goddess. Benson drove off to Wigmore's leaving me to haul my luggage in. Why, oh why, did I say ‘yes’, I wondered. I could have had a quiet weekend, getting a little pampering at the Rarotongan Spa, playing a bit of tennis, visiting friends at the sailing club, decompressing from four weeks of business travel from Auckland to Papeete. I sat on the verandah a few long minutes, enjoying the stunning lagoon view, breathing in the sweetly scented air. ‘Frangipani and tiare,’ I thought. Oh, how I love this place! Eventually I jumped up, rummaged through my suitcases and pulled out a small backpack, filling it with bikinis, pareus, t shirts and shorts. I grabbed snorkel, mask and fins from the hall closet, brushes for teeth and hair. The horn honked as I found two beach towels then grabbed a couple paperbacks from bookshelves that buckled from the weight of its library.

“We just have time for mai tais,” Benson grinned, loading my things into his Honda. “The school bus will drop Daniel at the airport.” Spending twenty minutes catching up with business and island snippets, we finished our drinks and parked in the sandy airport lot, walking over to the tarmac.

“What did you bring me, Auntie?” Daniel asked, hugging, obviously happy to see me. Daniel was motherless, having been raised by his dad for nine years. I pulled out a new game for the Gameboy I had given him at Christmas, and watched him light up. I tousled his hair, and he feigned hating it.

“Ok then, let’s rock,” I said. “and you sit with me, D. I have more treats.” I was fortified, and Benson was right. I could sleep later. I had been to Aitutaki before on a day trip, but as the Air Raro jet took off down the Avarua runway, an excited anticipation began to take hold. One Foot Island on Aitutaki’s famed lagoon was ours for the weekend.

Landing gently, just past midday, we stopped briefly in Arutanga town for remedial supplies...like bread. Benson had given me a run-down of the groceries he’d purchased, and it was seriously lacking in a critical things like matches or a lighter, water, wine. On the way we picked up Melynnda, gathering new rates and brochures at the Aitutaki Lagoon Resort. A travel agent and friend, she had arranged everything for the island and was joining us. We three adults were wearing stress lines from workaholism and were seriously in need of some down time.

It took half an hour in town to purchase additional supplies and plenty of ice for the chilly bin, then while Benson and Daniel loaded everything in a friend’s small yacht, loaned to us for three days, Melynnda and I downed a couple of local beers at the Yacht Club, there on the pier. Soon the boys arrived with two more boxes of groceries and grog, which we stored in the hull. Peter and Daniel rigged the boat, checked everything twice, then gently backed it away from the pier and cleared the channel to open waters as we sailed off towards the southeast end of the lagoon.



As with most things, getting there is half the fun, and this was no exception. What was exceptional was the sheer brilliance of clipping along at about 30 knots over an expanse of eye-searing aqua, sun sparkling, wind drowning out conversations. We passed a couple alone on Ma’ina’s honeymoon beach, then sailed into open space, watching as white kotuku circled above and Aitutaki retreated nearly from view, but not before sighting Maunga Pu and hearing the legend of Maru, the stolen mountain. Daniel handed around cold Steinlagers, grabbing an orange Fanta for himself, and we all settled in for the crossing.



By about four we spied our destination and pulled in for an easy landing in a shallow channel between two small islands. We anchored the boat then disembarked, splashing into the lagoon, handing down supplies and hauling them towards the small structure that would be our home for the duration. It was pretty rustic and basic, but it had a covered area which housed a couple of picnic tables, a ‘kitchen’ with gas burner, sink and water that came from a small holding tank on the roof. Upstairs were piles of mattresses and futons. We hauled a few down where we would sleep on the tables or the beach. Daniel and I began putting things away and Mel and Benson disappeared. “Off for the hunt,” he said.

“First things first,” I told Daniel. “Bring the fishing gear,” I called back, loping into the lagoon. The water was crystalline and the perfect temperature. I swam from one end of the channel to the other, observing underwater through my mask. At the end closest to the reef the fish became more plentiful and colorful, larger. I spotted some triggers, parrot fish, wrasse, a few lobsters. Swimming back towards the hut, I felt a rush of relief, instantly cured of jetlag. I felt human again. Daniel and I spent the next hour together, collecting shells and catching two lobsters and several fish for dinner. We explored our tiny island, made spears and wove baskets, searching for eggs hidden by a small band of chickens.

When we finally hooked up with the other two, they presented us with a bucket of coconut crabs from the island across the channel. We enjoyed a simple dinner of ika mata (raw fish in fresh coconut cream), a mixed green salad and fresh seafood pasta, all against a blazing sunset that seared across the lagoon. Mel made rum and cokes, and we played cards and told ghost stories until candles flickered and heads nodded. Benson and Mel slept up in the hut, fighting off bats and other crawly creatures, while Daniel and I choose the beach, under a blanket of stars, Venus, Orion, and the Southern Cross, hanging predictably overhead as night covered us.



Friday morning came with a blast of color along the channel and out to the lagoon. I lay there on the beach, where just a few hours before I had been cradled in stars, and smiled as a classic island dawn nudged me into the day. I put together pancakes, sausages and a fairly drinkable coffee while the boys slept in and Melynnda sat at the table, putting on her make-up, because even though we were off the grid, she insisted on being ready for anything. “Besides, it has SPF 30 in it.”

So we sunned and decided to head towards the east, “for the most killer snorkeling.” Soon we were swimming with coral trout, bone and glassfish. Moving away from the others I crossed shelf coral at about twelve to eighteen feet and saw more: flame angels, red hawkfish, ventralis, lemonpeel angelfish and the Hawaii state fish, more abundant here than in Hawaiian waters – the trigger fish, humuhumunukunukuapua'a. Amazing varieties flashed by my mask with a manta ray, glassfish, neon darters and spectacular butterfly fish enveloping me in color.

Suddenly I was surrounded in darkness as the shelf dropped away and I felt sucked under. I stared into a dark and bottomless pit. Chicken skin crawled over my body, and my breath quickened. I backed up, looked around for the others. There seemed something sinister down there...just out of sight. Drawn further into the emptiness, I swam slowly ahead, diving down ten to fifteen feet. Finally acknowledging my pounding heart and growing fear, I retreated back to the shelf. Surfacing to look for the others, no one was around. I had just a moment of panic before Benson swam alongside.

“Did you see that?” I asked, gesticulating wildly. He motioned for me to swim with him, and we headed back towards Tapuaetai. Once landed, I shared my excitement at seeing the abyss. No one else had seen it, which made me wonder what exactly I had seen. And felt.

By the time we got back it was the heat of the day, and we were all pretty pooped out. I grabbed sunscreen and a tattered paperback, *Losing My Virginity* ~ a great read by Richard Branson and wandered over to a shady palm, settling into its shade on a tattered beach chair.

Later that afternoon we were skipping across the water, bound for yet another island, Benson at the helm, Mel mixing cocktails and Daniel amusing us with legends and stories about Suwarrow and Pukapuka. It was perfect sailing weather with just enough wind and a sparkling lagoon. We sailed north to Akiami, landing off its stunning stretch of powder beach. Diving in I swam the length of the island, enjoying stretching out, feeling the buzz of muscle and breath. Mel and Benson already had a small chilly bin onshore, and a cold brew eliminated the salt taste in my mouth. While Mel made herself comfortable with folding chair, red hat and plenty of sunscreen, Benson ventured across the middle of the island in search of firewood and crabs for dinner, and Daniel and I walked up around the east end. There, crossing through some underbrush, we were suddenly surprised by a wild pig. I don't know who moved faster, the humans or the pig, but we all jumped straight into the air, squealed and ran in opposite directions.

I was first to rise on Saturday morning, walking down to the water, gently lapping on shore. Wading in knee deep I watched the morning show of dawn on lagoon, breaking my morning habit of checking emails and news stories. Then looking left I saw the yacht, run aground across the channel.

“Benson...Benson, get up. Something's happened to the boat,” I woke our captain. Within minutes we were a flurry of activity, wading across the channel to see if there had been any damage.

Luckily everything looked ok, but we'd have to wait until the tide came up sufficiently to nudge the boat back towards the center of the channel to float again.

After breakfast, while Benson figured out how to right the boat and Mel sunned with full make-up, shirt, hat and plenty of sunscreen, Daniel and I took off for a walk about. Usually the crabs on the east side were more plentiful, so we headed over to gather food. Coming around the far side a branch cracked, and we jumped to attention.

"It's another pig," Daniel whispered, cocking his sling gun. We stopped in our tracks, hushed, waiting...as a band of tourists rounded the bushes...and nearly got shot.

"Day trippers. It must be Saturday," said Daniel, observing the tourist invasion and releasing his sling. Midday the day tour stops in at One Foot Island. Tourists climb off the glass bottom boat and circumnavigate the island, snapping pictures and stopping for a barbeque lunch at the far end.

"We gotta get out of here," he exclaimed.

Crossing back through the fern glen, we found the boat righted, floating and seaworthy once again. We made haste to pack a lunch then all jumped aboard and sailed away towards Rapota, a nearby motu. Another sweet stretch of beach welcomed our landing. The island had been the film set in prior years for a major British studio production. And what a set! It was pristine, with little cays, tiny beaches, an interior forest grove, stiring mango and ironwood trees. I was hiking around the island, clicking away on my Nikon, enjoying my new polarized filter, when suddenly wails came from around the bend ahead. Mel had stepped on a jellyfish, and the boys were busy peeing on her foot. "It remediates the poison," said Mel, face turned away and grimacing in pain. I went back to hunting the perfect shot, including a few of our motley crew. I'd be back on chef duty soon enough, and nurse wasn't on my job description.

By Sunday noon the ice chest was empty except for some peanut butter and a couple of warm beers, so we readied the launch and sailed reluctantly back across the expansive lagoon towards the small airport on Aitutaki. Benson started out – our confident skipper, but within minutes dark clouds came up from behind, the wind changed, and Daniel grabbed some lines. Soon we were all crewing, Benson shouting orders as the storm approached, then caught up with us. The boat listed and nearly toppled. An easy return turned into a two-hour crossing with choppy seas and blasts of wind and rain, which we fought gallantly. Still the last hour seem an eternity. Fortunately Benson and son were seasoned sailors (who isn't in this island paradise?) Former commodore of the Raro Sailing Club, Benson kept us on even keel, so although we worried, he did not, and despite a rocky landing, we all made it unscathed. Exhausted, but unscathed.

Once back on terra firma, hot burgers and cold beers at the Lagoon Resort proved just what the doctor ordered. Then we boarded a small twin engine for the flight home, tanned but tired. Heck, I could always sleep later.

Resources:

Virgin Blue www.virginblue.com.au

Rarotongan Beach Resort and Spa <http://www.rarotongan.co.ck/>

Air New Zealand: <http://www.airnewzealand.com/home>

Air Rarotonga: www.airraro.com

Bishop Cruises: www.cookpages.com/BishopsCruises/

Aitutaki Lagoon Resort and Spa <http://www.aitutakilagoonresort.com/>

Cook Islands Tourism: <http://www.cookislands.travel>

Rarotonga Sailing Club

http://www.sportingpulse.com.au/assoc_page.cgi?assoc=1124&name=%20Sailing%20Cook%20Islands&client

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