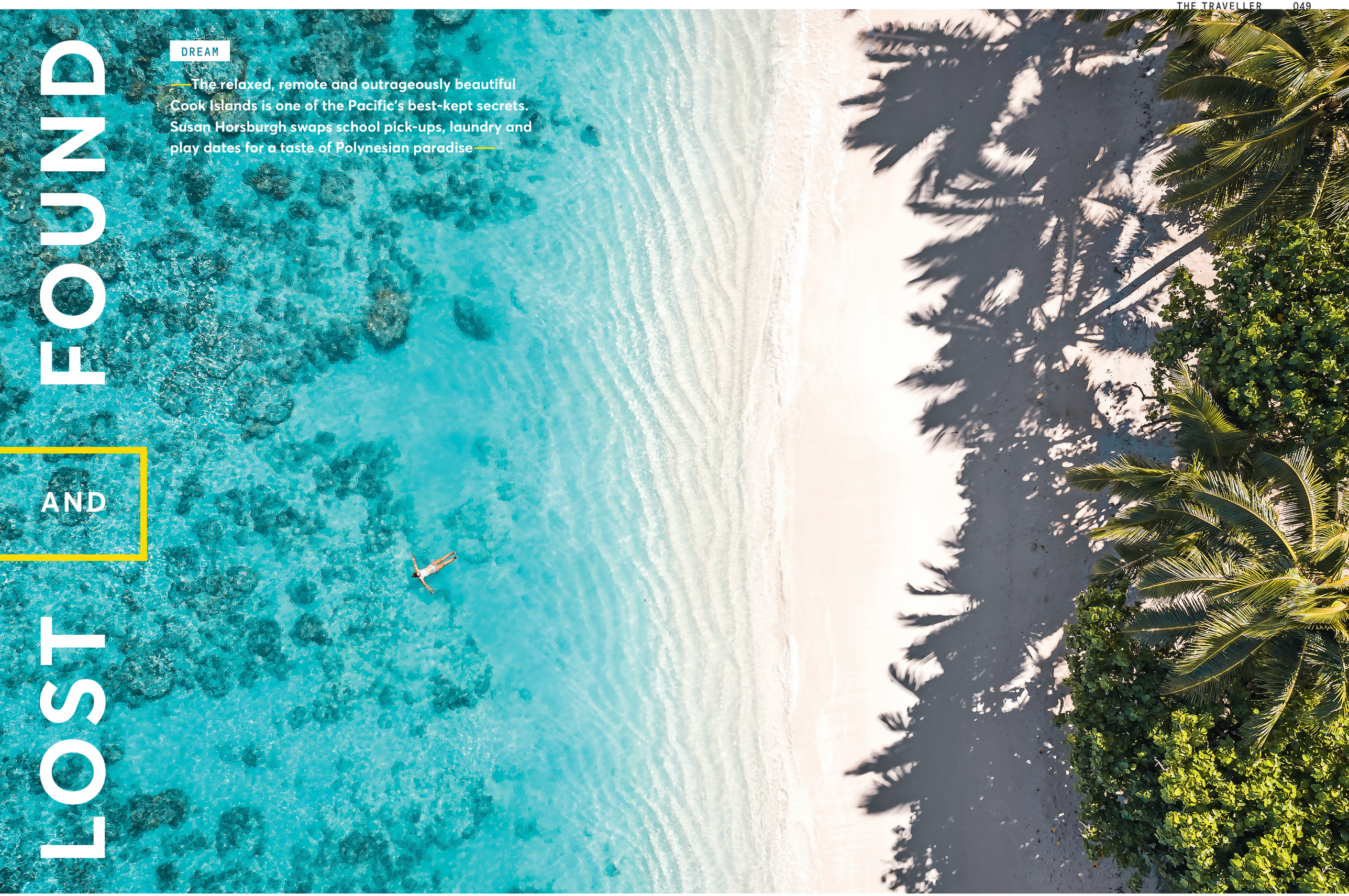
FOUND AND LOST

DREAM

—The relaxed, remote and outrageously beautiful Cook Islands is one of the Pacific's best-kept secrets. Susan Horsburgh swaps school pick-ups, laundry and play dates for a taste of Polynesian paradise—





A SUP YOGA SESSION

When the holiday planner asks what kind of activities might interest me, I give it to her straight: "Nothing that raises my heart rate." So when the itinerary for my four-day trip to the Cook Islands arrives, I'm puzzled by a scheduled session of something called "SUP yoga". I google it and up comes an alarming picture of a perky twentysomething in a string bikini doing a downward dog in the middle of the ocean – on a stand-up paddleboard.

I have all the flexibility of an iron bar – I can't do yoga on a solid surface – so doing the aquatic version a week later, on Rarotonga's Muri Lagoon, is predictably challenging. Deep breathing on our backs while bobbing in a protected cove is blissful but then we're on our knees and it's all "cat-cow" and "threading the needle" and "reverse tabletop". Long-neglected muscles shudder in protest as they're called into service.

Next thing, we're on our feet, hands in the prayer position, and I'm tumbling off the board – just from closing my eyes. I topple into the water twice more, much to the delight of a bendy 10-year-old classmate. The instructor (kitesup.co) tells us to "find our core" but I suspect mine went AWOL some time between my second and third babies.

I may have lost my sense of adventure around the same time. Blame a rinse-and-repeat routine of school pick-ups, swimming lessons and sausage sizzles but the breeding program over the past decade hasn't allowed for much international jetsetting. In fact, my first thought when I clap eyes on Rarotonga from the air – with its lush mountainous interior and wreath of sapphire, reef-fringed waters – is Moana, the Disney movie.

My last real island holiday – the kind that involves sleep-ins and swim-up bars – was my 2005 honeymoon in Phuket. A dozen years passed before we went back to recapture the magic but by then, we had three kids in tow. This time, I'm living every mother's holiday dream – in splendid isolation. My only household admin involves calculating the ideal balance between lounging and experiencing the delights of this extraordinary place.

Plonked in the centre of the Pacific, halfway between New Zealand and Hawaii, the Cooks are a chain of 15 islands, all with idyllic sandy beaches and clear tropical waters, yet the country seems almost a secret destination:

Franz Russ, David Kirkland

DID YOU KNOW?

It is illegal for buildings in the Cook Islands to be taller than a coconut tree.

it attracts around 26,000 Australian visitors a year, compared with Fiji's 300,000-plus.

Home to more than 10,000 of the country's 17,000-strong population, Rarotonga is the main island – a sleepy place of banana and taro plantations, low-slung homes made of concrete blocks and louvre windows and white family gravestones in the front yards. Dogs and goats roam freely and the sultry, gardenia-scented air carries the sound of crowing roosters.

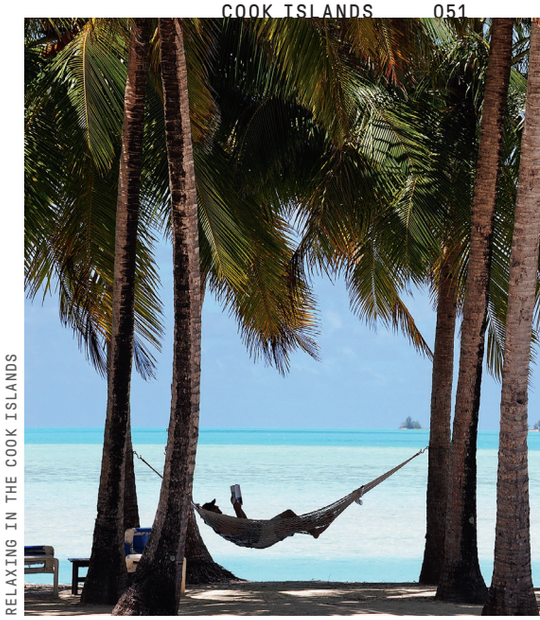
"Kia orana!" says my Cook Islands Tourism host, Tina Kae, offering the ubiquitous local greeting as we set off on a drive past the island's countless churches and postcard-perfect beaches. With one 32-kilometre road around the circumference and not a single traffic light, you can rent a car or scooter and take a spin around "Raro" in 45 minutes flat but it's more fun to explore along the way.



A DISH OF IKA MATA



A LOCAL STRING BAND PROVIDES DINERS WITH ENTERTAINMENT



RELAXING IN THE COOK ISLANDS

A definite must-visit is the Mooring Fish Café (themooringfishcaferaro.com), not far from the tourist hub of Muri Beach on the island's east side, where you can treat yourself to a sensational crumbed mahi and lime mayo FOB (fresh off the boat) sandwich. Right on Avana Harbour, next to local fishermen bringing in their catches and kids playing in the shallows, the café is a blue-and-green converted shipping container with a photo wall of famous past patrons, most of them rugby heroes that Tina is appalled I can't identify.

The sixth of nine children, Tina is the only one of her siblings who has not moved to Australia or New Zealand but she reckons her island home has no competition. "We're living a lifestyle others pay millions for," she says.

In the Cook Islands, where Christianity has flourished since the first missionaries arrived in 1821, the culture is all about faith and family: there is no need for nursing homes, meals start with a prayer and messages like "May God bless you" are emblazoned across roadside stores. There are atheists here, insists Tina, but she doesn't know any.

If family and faith define Cook Islands culture, then food and music must not be too far behind. Twangy island tunes seem to accompany every event in the Cooks, from the moment you touch down at Rarotonga's tiny airport. There, an elderly man in an orange hibiscus-print shirt serenades new arrivals with an electric ukulele, perched above the baggage carousel. On a progressive dinner tour (cookislandstours.co.ck) the following night, 32 of us eat at three local homes in one evening,



entertained by family musicians aged four to 84. "Make yourself at home – for 40 minutes," quips our second host, retired teacher Kafo Tuteru, before we tuck into a spread of pan-fried tuna, rukau (cooked taro leaves) and banana poke on her hillside verandah.

The national dish is ika mata, raw fish marinated in lemon juice and soaked in coconut cream, which turns up in every Cook Islands buffet, including the one the next night at the Te Vara Nui Over-Water Night Show (tevaranui.co.ck). Local cuisine is laid on before a super-slick cultural spectacular of traditional flame-throwing, drum-beating and grass-skirted dancing – a hip-flipping marvel that looks a bit like ancient twerking.

The next morning, I wake up in my own time to sweet, sweet silence. I am momentarily disoriented: why isn't a child screaming for her socks or assaulting a sibling? In my spacious one-bedroom villa, I have a private swimming pool out the front and a beach at the bottom of my back steps. A yellow kayak is glaring from under the house, trying to guilt me into action but I lounge on a day bed on the ocean-front deck instead. Gazing out on the islet just beyond Muri Beach, coconut trees framing the scene, I wonder if it gets any better than this.

"GAZING OUT ON THE ISLET BEYOND MURI BEACH, I WONDER IF IT GETS ANY BETTER THAN THIS."

I have my answer two days later when I take a daytrip (airraro.com) on a 34-seat propeller plane to heavenly Aitutaki, an island located just 40 minutes from Rarotonga. Lonely Planet co-founder Tony Wheeler calls Aitutaki's lagoon the most beautiful in the world and he won't get any argument from me. It's absurdly idyllic – an island paradise straight out of central casting – with otherworldly ombré waters that graduate from aqua to turquoise to royal blue. Four of the 15 islets in this dreamy lagoon played host to the 2006 season of reality television series Survivor and I now suspect the contestants didn't suffer that much at all.

On a 21-metre by six-metre catamaran, we go island hopping through the blue lagoon, which is so big it could fit Rarotonga inside it.

The local crew ham it up on the boat with a coconut-husking demonstration and later join us in the water, touching giant clams on the sea bottom as we snorkel among the coral reefs. Giant trevally a metre long swarm around the back of the boat, nibbling on our shiny jewellery and jumping for the raw tuna a crew member feeds them (between bites of it himself). Post-snorkelling, there's a buffet

DID YOU KNOW?

Actors John Wayne and Marlon Brando stopped at the dreamy Aitutaki islet of Akaiami on their way to Tahiti in the 1950s, when they flew the famed "Coral Route" in a flying boat.



TE VAKAROA VILLAS

lunch of salads and tuna fillets barbecued on the boat. "Everything runs on 'island time' here, except when it comes to food," jokes our generously proportioned guide, Andrew Rave. "Then we are very punctual people."

The last stop is a swim at the uninhabited One Foot Island and then it's a weary, late-afternoon cruise back to Aitutaki, the crew entertaining us with a drum-and-ukulele mash-up of everything from Bob Marley to Jessie J. It's my last full day in the Cook Islands and a spectacular finale.

Still, I wish I had a bit more time to sample some other local highlights: a cross-island hike in Rarotonga, perhaps (or at least a gentle hinterland stroll), a Sunday church visit to hear the harmonising congregation raise the roof, and definitely a lot more of nothing, sitting on a beach, soaking in the sunshine and staring into the middle distance.

The next day, after a farewell massage at the Islander Hotel (islanderhotel.co.ck) opposite the Rarotonga airport, I leave the self-indulgence behind and hop on a plane home. Within hours of touching down, I'm at my 12-year-old's early-morning soccer match. It's a bleak Melbourne day and yet the return to suburban reality doesn't seem so brutal. A few days in paradise have reminded me there's a whole wondrous world out there, beyond play dates and laundry piles. And maybe that sense of adventure hasn't gone AWOL after all.

DID YOU KNOW?

Tourists and Cook Islanders under the age of 25 have to wear helmets on scooters, motorbikes and bicycles but older locals are let off the hook – because it messes up their hairdos and church hats on Sundays.

STAY

> Rendezvous Villas

A 15-minute walk from tourist central, Muri Beach, these two adjoining one-bedroom villas are generously sized and right on the water – each with their own private swimming pools and barbecues. Wake up to a killer view and laze the day away on the ocean-front deck or make use of the villas' kayaks and snorkelling equipment to explore crystal-clear Muri Lagoon. About $490 per night for two people. No children under 12 allowed.
rendezvousvillas.com

> Te Vakaroa Villas

The ultimate in waterfront luxury, these six architect-designed villas are nestled among lush tropical gardens, with spacious living rooms and private patios overlooking the infinity pool and, beyond that, beautiful Muri Lagoon. Thanks to fully equipped kitchens, guests can choose to self-cater or order room service from Sails Restaurant next door. Situated in the heart of Muri Beach, these five-star villas are close to cafés and restaurants, as well as water activities such as kitesurfing and lagoon cruises. One-bedroom villas are about $780 per night for two people; two-bedroom villas are about $1050 for up to four people. No children under 12 allowed.
tevakaroavillas.com

JETSTAR HAS GREAT LOW FARES TO RAROTONGA. JETSTAR.COM