

RUMOURS OF PERFECTION

Once mainly a family package destination, the Cook Islands have raised the bar with luxury properties catering to the most discerning traveller. James Graham flew in.

Rumours of Romance offers enticing views over Muri Lagoon

In the competitive South Pacific holiday market, the under-hyped Cook Islands have always punched above their weight.

With a population barely the size of a small New Zealand town – at last count around 16,000 – their unspoiled, unhurried charm has warmed the hearts of generations of Kiwis.

Some visitors are lured by a barefoot beach wedding under swaying palms, or the Cooks' diversity of culture within its 15 islands spread over 5 million sq km between Tahiti and Tonga. Many more again are enticed by simply knowing you can leave the foreign-language dictionary on the shelf and forget about the jet-lag pills; this English-speaking Pacific paradise is just a four-hour flight from Auckland. And the money's the same.

Now, we're happy to report, you can add a luxury bed to that list of reasons to visit the Cooks, where they've developed their own distinctive five-star style reflecting their unique location and culture.

Nowhere is that style more on show than at the enticingly named Rumours of Romance, on the southern shores of the Cooks' main island, Rarotonga.

This contender for world's best small boutique hotel

has every high-end angle covered, from marble floors and private swimming pools to Rumours' signature backyard fountains.

Despite the rather showy name, the resort's showpiece, the Beachfront Ultimate Villa, is worth every penny of the NZ\$1,500 (rack rate) a night for single or double occupancy.

Each of the two bedrooms has a carved and canopied, four-poster super-king bed, luxurious ensuite marble bathrooms, sexy glass-walled and -roofed showers surrounded by greenery, and Italian ceramic twin basins, toilets and bidets.

If you tire of the uninterrupted views of Muri Lagoon's crystal-clear waters, perhaps you'd like to watch a movie – in your personal mini-cinema complete with a 2.5m screen, full theatre projector and audio/visual system.

For those who really can't let go of the office, there's also wireless internet throughout the villa, on the deck and even on your private beach.

Interestingly, there is no restaurant at Rumours, but there are plenty of meal options. You can whip up your own masterpiece on the barbecue or in the well-equipped kitchen, call on the 24-hour room service, or

take advantage of your on-call chef, who'll pop around to the villa and scare up a feast.

Before we get too comfortable with that thought, though, we tear ourselves away to visit Rumours' nearby sister property – another member of Small Elegant Hotels of the World – Reflections on Rarotonga.

Reflections' other endorsement is from the Australian Bridal Industry Academy and it's not hard to see why honeymooners are queuing up to fall into its charms.

The \$1,000-a-night two-bedroom beachfront villas are a water-lover's delight, with a stunning beach literally at your doorstep, and your own freshwater swimming pool for that romantic midnight swim.

Other features include a 46-inch LCD telly with full surround-sound stereo and complimentary DVDs and CDs, a fully-equipped designer kitchen, marble floors and a four-poster super-king bed waiting seductively beneath a gauzy mosquito net.

Although it doesn't have that private pool, Reflections' waterfall villa (\$500 a night for two) is apparently just as popular.

This self-catering one-bedroom villa is just 25 paces from the lagoon edge and provides a luxury alternative

for those after something a little more intimate but with most of the same trimmings.

Its private outdoor living area sits in a stunning tropical garden complete with stream and waterfall.

A short ride west on your automatic scooter – the most popular form of transport for tourists along the 32km coastal road – brings you to the waterfront oasis of the recently refurbished Little Polynesian.

The Little Poly, as locals affectionately call it – it's been a Raro icon for more than 30 years – is also helping to dispel the myth of the Cooks as a budget package playground.

Sisters Dorice Reid and Jeannine Peyroux bought the property at Titikaveka in 1985 and a couple of years ago extensively refurbished the Little Polynesian, making a bold bid for a slice of the high-end holiday, wedding and honeymoon market.

Now, a modern foyer neatly blending the best of Cook Islands' design with contemporary materials lures you towards a gorgeous infinity saltwater pool ringed by the best poolside furniture to be found on the island.

Dorice and Jeannine's crowning glories, however, are the 10 new over-the-beach villas.

Reflections on Rarotonga is a water-lover's delight



Both Rumours and reflections are members of the Small Elegant Hotels of the World

Bordering one of the best stretches of white, powdery sand anywhere along Rarotonga's coral-ringed coastline, the air-conditioned rooms are the epitome of minimalist tropical luxury.

Dorice's eye for the minutest detail even stretches to the thatches in the rooms' beams, the kind of traditional handiwork rarely seen today except in the Cooks' outermost islands.

Dine on your private deck or at the poolside restaurant and your taste buds are in for a treat, and without an assault on your ears. Children are not just frowned upon at the Little Poly, they're banned: this is, after all, a romantic retreat and the owners leave nothing to chance.

Try the NZ\$18.50 tropical nicoise lunch, a delicious mix of sesame-coated game fish, boiled eggs, lettuce, snow peas, beetroot, cucumber, pawpaw and banana, and you'll know why we're in love with the food.

Some of Cooks most mouth-watering jewels, though, can be found on a horseshoe-shaped semi-atoll called Aitutaki. So we parked our scooter for a couple of days and took the 45-minute flight north on Air Rarotonga's busy Saab 340 34-seater.

It's a lot quieter than Rarotonga, but Aitutaki more than makes up for the lack of gift shops, golf course and various activities in every other way.

Just arriving over the gorgeous azure lagoon is worth the trip, but check in at the Aitutaki Lagoon Resort and Spa – the only Cooks resort on its own private island – and you'll leave wishing you'd planned to stay longer.

The resort's recently renovated overwater bungalows – the only ones of their kind in the Cooks – offer some of the best accommodation in the South Pacific.

From your spacious private deck it's just a few lazy steps down to an outdoor shower (there's another in the garden out the back), all-tidal swimming, and unsurpassed views of one of the most spectacular lagoons in the world.

At night, enjoy fresh island fusion cuisine at the resort's world-class restaurant – they recently poached one of Fiji's best chef's from Turtle Island – or indulge in a candlelit dinner in your room or on the sand.

From where we sit, the Cooks have never looked better. 🌴

For more information, contact our travel partner Voyage Affaires Ph +64 9 302 0800