



LUSH OASIS:
Koka Lagoon Cruises' glass-bottom boat at Koromiri Isle where the guests are fed seafood and witness an absorbing show from Bob Hunter and his team.
Pictures by Jo Ferris

RAROTONGA REVERIE

As the days darken with winter here, Jo Ferris drifts back to the joy of snorkelling Rarotonga's balmy waters . . .

Snorkeling is on the “must-do” list — alongside basking on white sands, browsing Te Punanga Nui's weekly craft and food market and testing motor scooter nerves while navigating Rarotonga's two-odd kilometre circumference (crash helmets not compulsory).

The highlight however, is the outing with Koka Lagoon Cruises. Now into its third year, this family affair has notched up rave reviews and currently headlines TripAdvisor's top six attractions in Muri Lagoon — the widest stretch of water within the turquoise ribbon embracing Rarotonga. It's also arguably the most scenic, given the offshore isles, motu, fringing the reef.

Among them is Koromiri, a lush oasis where Bob Hunter and his team feed customers seafood and stage an absorbing show following their snorkelling encounter.

The feather in the cap of this happy band is Papa Jack, alias Captain Awesome.

With Adonis looks and body to match, it's easy to see why ladies blush and fair-skinned blokes begrudgingly admire his physique as he shimmies up a coconut tree. In eight seconds flat to be precise — making him a multiple South Pacific champ.

Yes, it is a serious competition — scaling trees monkey-style, husking coconuts and mastering several tasks in the process.

Owner and founder of Koka Lagoon Cruises, Bob Hunter, along with brother Conrad, were born on the island — with mum a Rarotongan and dad an Irish engineer who arrived to work on the airport and never left. It's easy to see why. Non-islanders can't buy land in the Cook Islands, so you might as well marry into it.

Bob grew up on Muri Lagoon's beachfront — the family home is now part of the office for a family-run backpacker and resort operation — named after Bob's mother, Vara.



Bob Hunter, founder and co-owner of Koka Lagoon Cruises

Muri sits within Takitimu — an area comprising three villages of Tikikavaka, Ngatinga and Matavia — Maori connections not unnoticed.

It's thanks to village elders' foresight, that a marine reserve was established some time ago. They learned the hard way that coral is a living thing — discovering only when it was dying that drastic action was needed to preserve the marine life so vital to every islander's existence.

International marine biologists taught villagers to clean the coral — literally hand scrubbing it to rid threatening algae and remove pest fish breeding and killing the coral. More than a decade on, the reserve is a protected breeding ground for the exquisite marine life that is the Pacific's trademark.

Bob's vision focused on snorkelling in the reserve, while working on its ongoing restoration.

Giant clams — some up to 35 years old — were imported from nearby Aitutaki Island and placed in cages for their own protection and to spawn. It's here, tourists are introduced to the Koka experience.

With a background in engineering, Bob and Conrad built the glass-bottom boat that can hold 50 patrons plus crew.

The familiar sound of the conch each morning announces its arrival to the beachfront in front of Vara's. Puttering across the lagoon from Koromiri after early preparations for the daily feast — patrons welcome the greeting. What follows is a three-hour experience, or thereabouts, depending on Bob's “island clock”.

The marine reserve is around a half-hour away — a scenic trip that showcases Rarotonga's stark beauty, while hearing some history and being entertained along the way.

Snorkelling isn't mandatory, but you're a fool not to try it. Life jackets are optional and you don't have to swim to the three designated sites. But, if you want to eyeball Roger the Moray eel, you might as well test your fitness. It's just as satisfying floating around by the boat, however.

Tropical fish come in freely — well used to being hand-fed.

It's a surreal experience in the warm waters of this tropical paradise.

As the boat putters towards Koromiri guests relax, swaying to jaunty ukulele tunes, before Captain Awesome winds into full stride with lessons on the sarong. Marvel at the variety of ways to wear one — be you boy or girl. As it happens, there is also timeframe styling — daytime garb, evening flair and the glamour that supports the “hip-swaying-come-hither” allure Rarotongan women master so exquisitely. All of it in the wrap of a single piece of cloth. Amazing!

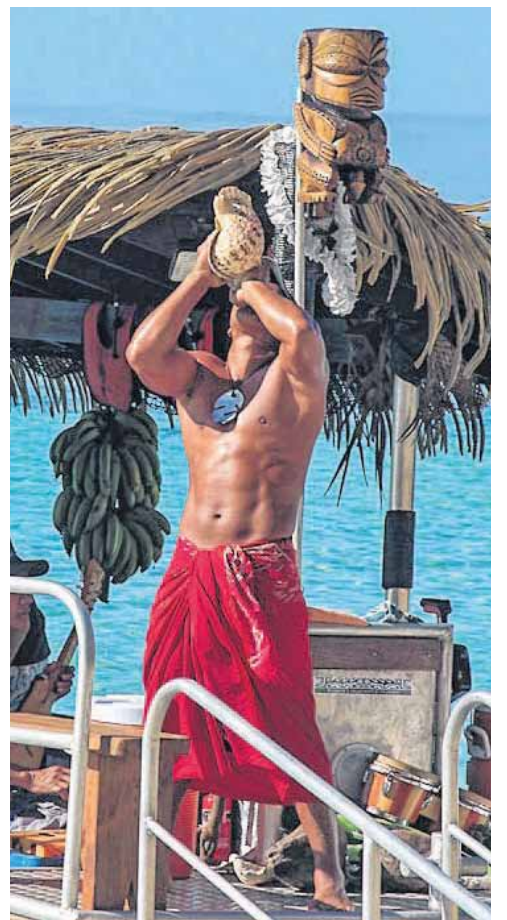
Timing is everything in show biz — and once on Koromiri, several women have already experimented with sarongs they bought at the market.

With the island family-owned, the Koka team built their own shelter and cooking facilities on this engaging spot. There's even a flushing toilet!

At low tide guests of the various resorts along Muri Beach wade to the isle and bask in all-day sun — such is the welcome of Muri Lagoon.

Koka's dining experience is tantalising — fresh fish, salads and humble sausages. The snarlers, rather obviously, come from the supermarket. Fish however, are caught off the reef every night.

These boys are busy and multi-talented. Captain Awesome is the undisputed star — a born entertainer and natural athlete. He involves



WELCOME: The conch announces the arrival of the boat in front of Vara's and greets the guests at the start of their outing with Koka Lagoon Cruises.

everyone in his tutorial about the coconut by finding targets in each audience and easily persuading greenhorns to weave leaves, husk coconuts and shred them and even attempt tree climbing.

Then there's the crab race!

Yes, there are crabs on Rarotonga — quite big ones. Climbers in fact: which learned over the eons to scale a tree, drop a coconut and rip them open with their giant claws.

It's not worth thinking where they sleep at night!

The journey to Koka Lagoon Cruise's birth in 2010 fulfilled a long-held dream for Bob driven by his passion to nurture the reserve. Part of every trip's proceeds are donated to marine conservation as a result.

Plans include another boat perhaps. It would mean another crew and entertainment troupe. Known for big families in Rarotonga, that shouldn't present a problem. Captain Awesome apparently has a twin brother. How convenient?



BEACHFRONT:
Life's a ukulele and a beach on Rarotonga.