

Cook Islands Feedback re GF Experience: Sanctuary Rarotonga April 2017

(written to the Reservations Manager)

I would like to make comment regarding the gluten free catering issue I encountered at your resort, as it is something that did cause emotional upset for me on several occasions, and in the end I was very glad to be leaving. My comments are intended to give some general perspective from a coeliac experience, and to clarify that for coeliacs eating gluten free is not a dietary choice (we are not trying to be difficult), we simply get very sick if we eat it and ultimately become malnourished with various subsequent health issues. Some actually need to be hospitalised. I appreciate that GF is probably not huge in the Cook Islands so the need to cater well for it has therefore not been high, but as a coeliac a huge component of my enjoyment of a travel experience is linked to how well it can be catered for. Let me explain why.

Travelling as a coeliac is fraught with difficulty as sourcing GF is only the first issue, ensuring cross contamination does not occur is just as important. It often means we do not get to enjoy local culturally specific food in areas we travel to, or even nice food as unprepared chefs cater for GF by simply removing elements from existing dishes. This usually results in all flavour and textures being removed as well. Yet we are surrounded by other diners that are enjoying wonderfully tasty and creatively prepared food. And we have to pay the same amount even though our dish is missing key elements or just simply no longer enjoyable. This is why I go to the trouble of sourcing and pre warning accommodation and restaurants who will genuinely cater for gluten free by creating interesting and tasty alternative dishes, listed on the menu with the expectation that non GF diners will enjoy them as well.

My time eating at the Sanctuary/ Rarotonga restaurants was spent establishing what I can't eat. The wait staff were not informed so lengthy delays occurred each meal as they went back and forth to the kitchen, often coming back to tell me that a dish they originally said was GF actually wasn't and I had to choose again. It usually took about 45 minutes each time to find something I could eat. And the result was a plain meal with nearly all flavour (sauces, salad dressings) removed to be replaced by plain olive oil for salad dressings/sauces & bread the texture of chalk with no butter...dishes that no chef would ever design to send out to the public but as a coeliac I am meant to be happy that at least I got something to eat. Hooray! And in the end you end up feeling like a winger and your dining experience has become exhausting.

The exception was the breakfasts on the first two mornings as the GF bread (4 slices each time) was very nice (which I had to initially ask for...there was none ready for me). The breakfast staff for those 2 mornings were great, seeking to look after me and bringing the toast and eggs out quickly. The third morning as you know was terrible. After a 15 min wait with still no food, I politely asked the waitress (new lady to previous two days) if it was coming. I was simply told 'yes it is coming'. She did not go into the kitchen to check. She apparently rang through...But it was another 10 minutes before the eggs came, and then a further 10 minutes before 2 pieces of small undercooked (not browned in any capacity) came out. I asked for an extra 2 pieces and could they please be toasted so they have some colour on them. Another 10 min I got 4 pieces. The extra 2 pieces were obviously a different loaf and were inedible (texture of chalk...they could simply be snapped in two, and barely warm). My husband had completely finished his breakfast 20 min earlier, which included lovely pastries, all versions of toast, cereal and flapjacks. As had all the diners that had started when we did or arrived 20 minutes after we had sat down.

So the message I got as a coeliac was that it does not matter to us if you enjoy your meal. Just be happy you received anything at all as it is a real pain to cater for you.

So a couple of things I would like to clarify:

Communication issues at Reservations led to the resort not being prepared ahead of time to cater GF for me. As a resort your approach to what it means to cater for GF obviously needs revising (eg. create tasty appetising alternatives don't just remove stuff), as does your understanding as to exactly what GF is (your Food and Beverage Manager seemed confused...GF does not mean also dairy free or egg free). Communication issues within the restaurants also needs to improve so that all staff are informed correctly of gluten free options and individual guest needs.

As a point of contrast, my experience eating GF at our Aitutaki resort (Pacific Resort) involved the Head Chef chatting with us at our first meal in depth to anticipate how best to fine tune the options to best suit my needs, enjoying GF versions of every option on the breakfast menu, eating nearly every option from the Islander Buffet Night as it was almost ALL prepared gluten free, for everyone, enjoying a seafood platter with my husband where EVERY yummy option was GF, and enjoying a dessert platter where again EVERY yummy creative option was GF. I was not once made to feel like I was missing out, or that I was a winger/difficult /a princess...

This was our 5 star experience. Sanctuary was meant to be 4 star. But it felt more like 2-3 star in this respect.

I hope my feedback can be useful. Thank you again Jason for handling our stay respectfully and professionally.