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Back to the future on the Cook Islands



Calm and as clear as glass, Aitutaki Lagoon is the stuff of dreams.

By Anne Z Cooke

It was a quiet afternoon on Rarotonga, in the Cook Islands, when Lydia Nga got the news. Overnight her homeland, 15 Polynesian islands west of Tahiti, a paradise smaller than Detroit, had grown exponentially, reborn as a 690,000 square-mile nation.

But it wasn't the islands that grew. In 1982, the Third United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea ruled that coastal nations had jurisdiction over an "exclusive economic zone," defined as a 200-mile stretch of ocean measured from the shoreline. Most countries welcomed the idea. But for a tiny

nation like the Cooks, population 15,000, it was a Cinderella promise.

Fast forward 35 years to last August and our first visit to Rarotonga, the main island, lured by the thought of shimmering blue lagoons, gentle breezes, hometown smiles and fewer tourist visits per year than Florida's Disneyworld gets in two days.

"And how about that economic zone, the one the guidebook described?" asked my husband. Had success spoiled Rarotonga's Polynesian charms?

Not really, according to my friend Kathy, who stays up on these things. "The last time we looked, the Cooks were like Hawaii in the 1960s, 50 years behind everybody else," she said. (I knew what she was

thinking: If it doesn't have a spa, it isn't luxury.) "Ask around, see what people say and let me know," she added.

As our overnight flight from Los Angeles descended over a clutch of green volcanic peaks, my first view of the lagoon, its sandy shoreline, scattered roofs and rows of palms was reassuring. I figured we'd greet the dawn with a stroll along the beach, cool off in the lagoon, maybe even snorkel near the outer reef, where the coral clumps into mounds.

But Nga, my e-mail contact in the tourist office, now known affectionately as Auntie Lydia, had a request. So before bolting for the lagoon, we paid a visit to Ocean Specialist Kevin Iro to hear about the Marae Moana Marine Park

conservation project, and to learn why an in-depth survey of every fold and ripple within the Cook's 690,000 square miles is long overdue.

"Marae Moana means ocean domaine," said Iro, an athletic figure in shorts, ushering us and a half-dozen high schoolkids into a cramped lecture room with rows of desks, its only decor a large TV screen for presentations and a half-dozen back-lit photos of tropical fish and coral.

"The ocean domaine is a mindset, an idea," he said, putting a chart up on the screen. "It's a shift in the way we see ourselves." Not as separate islands, he explained, but as a single marine nation. And as the owner of vast, still untapped resources, the government needed

to appoint a task force to head the project.

It was also time for a just-caught, grilled fish sandwich at one of Rarotonga's many ocean-side cafes, where picnic-table seating guarantees conversation. And so began our education.

If our table mates happened to be islanders on a lunch break, they described the Cooks' historic connection with New Zealand, where almost everyone has relatives and yearly visits are the norm. When it's time for college, ambitious students generally go to New Zealand or Australia.

At the Moorings Cafe we learned that New Zealand's Maoris originally came from Rarotonga. Facing a fight with a rival clan, they loaded up their ocean-going canoes



Blue lipped clams, members of the Giant Clam family, thrive in Aitutaki Lagoon; Aitutaki Island, Cook Islands.



Brunch, lunch or a swim, life is easy at Aitutaki Lagoon Resort.



Tropical showers wind up an exhilarating half-day ride with Storytellers Eco Cycle Tours; Rarotonga, Cook Islands.



Auntie Lydia, with the Tourism Office, wears the traditional flower "lei," first cousin to a Hawaiian lei.

– vakas – and pushed off for parts unknown. And raw sea slugs? They are a favourite snack.

At Charlie's Cafe, I was thrilled to be sitting with people speaking Cook Island Maori, one of the few Polynesian languages still in common use. A required subject in school, it lives on despite colonial rule, a minor role in World War II, tourism and even cellphones.

Curious about the rest of Rarotonga, we decided to rent mountain bikes to explore the 20-mile-long circle-island road, "a good way to get your bearings," according to my guidebook. We could have raced but it was much more fun to poke along, stop at vista points, look for craft shops and wave at friendly motorcycle riders.

It was so energising, in fact, that we joined a second guided ride with Dave and Tami Furnell, owners of Storytellers Eco Cycle Tours, a local outfitter. With rain threatening and 11 of us geared up and ready, we headed for the inland road, the historic, 1,000-year-old "ara metua," a grassy, gravelly track built at the base of the volcanoes.

Following Tami among the farm

fields, we discovered why restaurant food was so fresh. Away from the coast it was all produce: taro (the edible leaf variety), salad greens and tomatoes, pumpkins and red peppers, onions and bananas, and orchards growing limes, oranges, papaya, star fruit and noni.

Stopping beside the nonis, prized as a health tonic and mosquito repellent, Tami pulled off a couple of soft smelly fruits, broke them into pieces and to a chorus of "yuck, icky, sticky" and gales of laughter, dared us to rub them over our necks, arms and legs.

Since no visit would be complete without a couple days on neighbouring Aitutaki (eye-too-TOCK-kee), world-famous for its lagoon, we flew over, checked into an over-water cabin at the Aitutaki Lagoon Resort and booked a lagoon cruise with Tere (pronounced "Terry"), owner of Te King Lagoon Cruises.

Piling into Tere's 12-passenger boat we sped south across the lagoon, rounding the motus (islets), searching for coral gardens and stopping to snorkel. And after you've spent a morning in the heart of

one of these shimmering turquoise aquariums – lakes within a coral reef – you can't help but marvel.

Protected from wind and waves but continuously refreshed by the ocean spill-over, a lagoon's unique ecosystem nurtures birds, fish, crabs, clams, mollusks, coral and every other marine organism including people.

And while we gazed around us, literally in awe, Tere peppered us with Maori legends, celebrity anecdotes and marine biology. After a stop at One Foot Island – where "been there, loved it" passport stamps are issued – and a grilled chicken picnic, we headed back.

On our last evening, we squeezed in one of the twice-a-month dinners served at the Plantation House, the colonial home of former restaurant owner Louis Enoke. Dinner here, prepared by Chef Minar Henderson for 20 to 26 guests and served twice a month only, offers not just a blend of island-grown ingredients but an evening with islanders for whom cultural traditions and 21st-century science go hand-in-hand.

Finding an empty chair, I was boggle-eyed to find I was sitting next

to the prime minister, Henry Puna, who studied law in New Zealand and Australia before turning to politics. With dishes guaranteed to encourage conversation – everything from prawns with lemongrass to coconut-flavoured rice and couscous with lime – we managed to cover pearl farming on Manihiki, the search for rare-earth minerals and the importance of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (which President Donald Trump has abandoned).

He reminisced about the evening he hosted former secretary of state Hillary Clinton, whom he found to be delightful, intelligent and informed. But it was the pan-seared mahi mahi with ginger and garlic that added a sombre note.

"Your president doesn't believe in clean energy," he said. But, we agreed, global warming is creating rising seas, threatening atolls like Aitutaki. "Yes, we're worried," said Puna, "but we're doing our part. Right now 50% of the islands' electric power comes from solar installations. By 2020 the Cook Islands will be 100% solar."

If only the rest of us could say that. – TNS

The nitty gritty

WEATHER: The best time to visit is during summer, June through September, when it's warm and dry. December through March, the rainy season, is hotter and more humid. Shoulder months – April, May, October and November – are variable. **GETTING AROUND:** You may not need to rent a car. Most activities, cafes and beaches are close enough to go by bicycle. For longer explorations, check out outfitters like Tik e-tours (www.tik-etours.com) and Storytellers Eco Cycle Tours www.storytellers.co.ck

LODGING: Small hotels and family-run inns offering comfortable, affordable lodging are posted online or listed on Cook Islands tourism sites. Rustic, thatched cottages at the two four-star Pacific Resorts, one on Rarotonga and one on Aitutaki, offer full amenities, luxuriant landscaping, a restaurant, and swimming pool. Some units have a kitchenette. Rates vary according to date, size, and ocean or garden views. Book early; Pacific Resorts are a favourite with frequent travellers.