

MAIN STORIES

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Pages 5, 14 *Theresa  
May*



HEALTH & SCIENCE

# The secret to standing on one leg

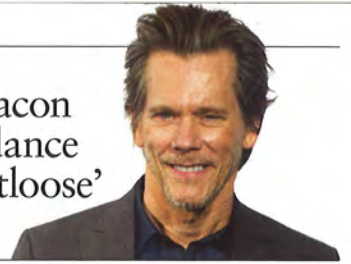
p.20



PEOPLE

# Why Bacon won't dance to 'Footloose'

p.10



# THE WEEK

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# Standing alone

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global leadership role?

Pages 4, 6

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## This week's dream: The Cook Islands, Polynesia's pristine jewel

The Cook Islands are a Polynesian paradise unspoiled by the modern world, said Anne Cooke in *Tribune News Service*. Last August, my husband and I headed to this South Pacific nation—a cluster of 15 tiny islands west of Tahiti—“lured by the thought of shimmering blue lagoons, gentle breezes, hometown smiles, and fewer tourist visits per year than Florida’s Disney World gets in two days.” A friend had cautioned us that the Cooks were 50 years behind the rest of the world. But we weren’t looking for spotless luxury. And as our flight from Los Angeles descended over the green volcanic peaks that rise from the main island of Rarotonga, “my first view of the lagoon, its sandy shoreline, scattered roofs, and rows of palms was reassuring.”

I figured we’d start our first day cooling off in the lagoon, and maybe “snorkel near the outer reef, where the coral clumps into mounds.” But my contact in the tourist office had a request. So before hitting the water, we visited marine environmentalist



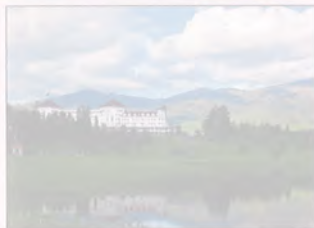
Rarotonga's peaceful lagoon

Kevin Iro to hear about conservation efforts in the Cooks’ 770,000-square-mile ocean domain. Our education continued over lunch at one of Rarotonga’s many seaside cafés. As I savored a grilled fish sandwich, our tablemates— Islanders on a lunch break—described the Cooks’ historic ties with New Zealand, where almost all the locals have relatives. At another café, “I was thrilled to sit with people speaking Cook

Island Maori, one of the few Polynesian languages still in common use.”

Eager to see the rest of Rarotonga, we rented mountain bikes and cycled the island’s 20-mile perimeter road, stopping at vista points, looking for craft shops, and waving at friendly passersby. “No visit would be complete without a couple of days on neighboring Aitutaki,” so we flew over and booked a cruise around its world-famous lagoon. As we sailed across the fish-filled turquoise waters, our guide peppered us with Maori legends and celebrity anecdotes. On our last evening, we dined at Rarotonga’s Plantation House, where chef Minar Henderson serves a feast for 25 guests twice a month. Already swooning over the prawns with lemongrass and the pan-seared mahi-mahi with ginger and garlic, “I was boggle-eyed to find I was sitting next to the prime minister, Henry Puna.” At the *Aitutaki Lagoon Resort* ([aitutakilagoonresort.com](http://aitutakilagoonresort.com)), three-person bungalows start at \$430 a night.

### Hotel of the week



A majestic mountain setting

#### Omni Mount Washington Bretton Woods, N.H.

The first time I approached this grand property, “I was awestruck,” said Jaci Conry in *The Boston Globe*. Built in 1902 as a summer retreat for wealthy vacationers, the 200-room Omni Mount Washington Resort is “a place entirely of another era.” Set on a 10,000-acre property, it boasts sparkling Tiffany windows and a cavernous lobby with 23-foot-high ceilings. But its “crowning element” is the 900-foot-long wraparound veranda, where guests can sip midafternoon cocktails and enjoy sweeping views of the mountains, as their children roll and laugh around the sloping lawn. [omnihotels.com](http://omnihotels.com); doubles from \$199

### Getting the flavor of...

#### America's finest beach

On a barrier island off the coast of Sarasota, Fla., there’s a beach where the sparkling white sand “is as fine as powdered sugar and soft as kitten’s fur,” said Tamara Lush in the *Associated Press*. Recently rated the U.S.’s best beach by Stephen Leatherman, a coastal expert at Florida International University, this stretch of sand is exceptionally silky because it’s composed of 99 percent pure crushed quartz. Leatherman, who’s made a career of studying and ranking beaches around the country, uses some 50 criteria to assess seashores. Siesta Beach earned his top mark this year thanks to its cleanliness, convenient facilities, natural dunes, and placid, shallow turquoise waters. It’s often busy—even on weekdays—but since the beach is 200 to 300 feet wide in places, you can stretch out and not feel crowded. “Added bonuses include lots of parking, a trolley service to and from the island’s adorable downtown area, and plenty of lifeguards.”

#### Chicago's high-tech writers museum

Think of Chicago’s new shrine to our nation’s great writers as a “populist literary arcade,” said Deanna Isaacs in the *Chicago Reader*. The American Writers Museum, which opened last month in an office building near Millennium Park, is stuffed with high-tech toys: Push a button, spin a wheel, or tap an icon and a screen or speaker will spit out a quote or a chunk of trivia. The museum has one significant, but loaned, artifact: the long roll of tissue-thin paper, brown with age, on which Jack Kerouac typed *On the Road* in 1957. Some visitors might enjoy the Nation of Writers hall, with its informative time line charting the big names of American letters, from Mark Twain to David Foster Wallace and beyond, or the Mind of a Writer gallery, where you find out “which author fired up with a brownie or with alcohol.” But if you’re looking for real paper books by those authors, well, they’re mostly used for decoration and out of visitors’ reach.

### Last-minute travel deals

#### Antarctica in focus

Save \$1,000 on a 13-day Antarctic expedition led by wildlife photographer Andy Rouse. The cruise departs Nov. 17 and starts at \$7,060 per person, based on double occupancy, when you book by June 30. Use the code “Antarctica1000.” [naturalworldsafaris.com](http://naturalworldsafaris.com)

#### Twofer airfare to Asia

Explore Asia with select air-inclusive packages from Wendy Wu Tours and your travel partner will fly free when you book by June 30. The 13-day Discover Japan tour, for example, starts at \$12,630 for two travelers, a savings of \$1,350. [wendywutours.com](http://wendywutours.com)

#### Taos in summertime

New Mexico’s Taos Ski Valley is taking up to 30 percent off its Summer Liftoff package, which includes a one-night stay in a double room, a scenic chairlift ride, and breakfast. The package starts at \$165; book by June 20 for stays through September. [skitaos.com](http://skitaos.com)