

# TRAVEL



**Strolling on Muri Beach** on Rarotonga, Cook Islands, with the islet Taakoka on the horizon. The Cooks get fewer tourist visits per year than Florida's Disney World gets in two days.

**Lydia Nga** (known as "Auntie Lydia") of the Cook Islands Tourism Corp. wears the islands' traditional flower "ei," a first cousin to a Hawaiian lei.  
STEVE HAGGERTY / ColorWorld

## In the Cook Islands, it's time and tide

The tiny Pacific nation, population 15,000, has embraced the future while preserving the past. For visitors, there are blue lagoons, great seafood, fresh produce, eco-tours, and bicycling up a volcano.



By Anne Z. Cooke  
TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

**A**VARUA, Rarotonga, Cook Islands — 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 geographically smaller than the city of Philadelphia — 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 shimmer-  
See **COOK ISLANDS** on N5



**Brunch at the Aitutaki Lagoon Resort** on Aitutaki, Cook Islands. The resort offers over-water cabins, cruises of the famed lagoon, and snorkeling among its coral reef.

STEVE HAGGERTY / ColorWorld

# A Pacific idyll on the Cook Islands

**COOK ISLANDS** from N1  
ing blue lagoons, gentle  
breezes, hometown  
smiles, and fewer tourist  
visits per year than Flori-  
da's Disney World gets in  
two days.

"And how about that eco-  
nomic zone, the one the  
guidebook described?" my  
husband asked. Had suc-  
cess 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 Ha-  
waii 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 peo-  
ple say, and let me know,"  
she added.

As our overnight flight  
from Los Angeles descend-  
ed over a clutch of green  
volcanic peaks, my first  
view of the lagoon, sandy  
shoreline, scattered roofs,  
and rows of palmed was re-  
assuring. I figured we'd  
greet the dawn with a  
stroll along the beach, cool  
off in the lagoon — maybe  
even snorkel near the out-  
er reef, where the coral  
clumps into mounds.

But Nga, my email con-  
tact in the tourist office,  
now known affectionately  
as Auntie Lydia, had a re-  
quest. 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 domain," said Iro,  
an athletic figure in a  
shorts, ushering us and a  
half-dozen high school  
kids into a cramped lec-  
ture room with rows of  
desks, its only decor a  
large TV screen for presen-  
tations and a half-dozen  
back-lit photos of tropical  
fish and coral.

"The ocean domain is a  
mind-set, 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 said, but as a single ma-  
rine nation. And as the  
owner of vast, still-un-  
tapped resources, the gov-  
ernment needed to ap-  
point a task force to head  
the project.

It was also time for a  
just-caught, grilled fish  
sandwich at one of Raro-  
tonga's many oceanside ca-  
fes, where picnic-table  
seating guarantees conver-  
sation. And so began our  
education.

If the tablemates hap-  
pened to be islanders on a



**With Storytellers Eco Cycle Tours on Rarotonga**, finishing up a half-day ride on the inland road, the historic, 1,000-year-old track built at the base of volcanoes. STEVE HAGGERTY / ColorWorld

lunch break, they de-  
scribed the Cooks' historic  
connection with New  
Zealand, where almost ev-  
eryone has relatives and  
yearly visits are the norm.  
When it's time for college,  
ambitious students gener-  
ally go to New Zealand or  
Australia.

At the Moorings Cafe,  
we learned that New  
Zealand's Maoris original-  
ly came from Rarotonga.  
Facing a fight with a rival  
clan, they loaded up their  
oceangoing canoes — *va-  
kas* — and pushed off for  
parts unknown. And raw  
sea slugs? They are a fa-  
vorite snack.

At Charlie's Cafe, I was  
thrilled to be sitting with  
people speaking Cook Is-  
land Maori, one of the few  
Polynesian languages still  
in common use. A re-  
quired 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 is-  
land-circling road, "a good  
way to get your bearings,"  
according to my guide-  
book. We could have raced  
but it was much more fun  
to poke along, stop at vista  
points, look for craft  
shops, and wave at friend-  
ly motorcycle riders.

It was so energizing, in  
fact, that we joined a sec-  
ond 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 vol-  
canoes.

Following Tami among  
the farm fields, we discov-  
ered why restaurant food  
was so fresh. Away from  
the coast, it was all pro-  
duce: taro (the edible leaf  
variety), salad greens and  
tomatoes, pumpkins and  
peppers, onions and  
bananas, and orchards  
growing limes, oranges,  
papaya, star fruit, and  
noni.

Stopping beside the noni,  
prized as a health tonic  
and mosquito repellent,

Tami pulled off some of  
the soft, smelly fruit, and  
broke it into pieces, and to  
a chorus of "yuck, icky,  
sticky" and gales of laugh-  
ter, dared us to rub it over  
our necks, arms, and legs.

Because no visit would  
be complete without a cou-  
ple of days on neighboring  
Aitutaki, world famous for  
its lagoon, we flew over,  
checked into an over-wa-  
ter cabin at the Aitutaki La-  
agoon Resort, and booked a  
lagoon cruise with Tere,  
owner of Te King Lagoon  
Cruises.

Piling into Tere's 12-pas-  
senger boat, we sped  
south across the lagoon,  
circling the islets, search-

ing for coral gardens and  
stopping to snorkel. And  
after you've spent a morn-  
ing in the lagoon, we flew  
over, checked into an over-  
water cabin at the Aitutaki La-  
agoon Resort, and booked a  
lagoon cruise with Tere,  
owner of Te King Lagoon  
Cruises.

Protected from wind  
and waves but continuous-  
ly refreshed by the ocean  
spillover, lagoons' unique  
ecosystems nurture birds,  
fish, crabs, clams, mol-  
lusks, coral, and even peo-  
ple.

And while we gazed  
around us, literally in awe,  
Tere peppered us with  
Maori legends, celebrity  
anecdotes, and marine bi-  
ology. After a stop at One

Foot Island — where  
"been there, loved it" pas-  
port stamps are issued —  
and a grilled chicken pic-  
nic, 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 own-  
er Louis Enoka. Dinner  
there, prepared by chef Mi-  
nar Henderson for 20 to  
26 guests and served  
twice a month only, offers  
not just a bounty 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 — every-  
thing from prawns with  
lemongrass to coconut-  
flavored rice and cous-  
cous with kaffir lime —  
we managed to cover

pearl farming on Manihi-  
ki, the search for rare-  
earth minerals, the  
evening he hosted then-  
Secretary of State Hillary  
Clinton on her visit to the  
Cooks, and the Trans-Pa-  
cific Partnership trade  
agreement (which the  
United States has since  
pulled out of at the direc-  
tion of President Trump).

But it was the pan-  
seared mahi mahi with gin-  
ger and garlic that added  
a somber note.

Global warming is creat-  
ing rising seas, threaten-  
ing atolls like Aitutaki, we  
agreed. "Yes, we're wor-  
ried," Puna said, "but  
we're doing our part."  
Right now, 50 percent of  
the islands' electric power  
comes from solar installa-  
tions. By 2020, the Cook  
Islands will be 100 percent  
solar.

If only the rest of us  
could say that.



**Blue-lipped clams**, members of the giant clam family, thrive in Aitutaki Lagoon in the Cook Islands.

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