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## ONCE UPON THIS TIME

*Story by Anne Z. Cooke, Photography by Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld*

It was a quiet afternoon in 1982 in Avarua, Rarotonga, when Lydia Nga got the news.

With the stroke of a pen, her homeland, the Cook Islands, 15 scattered islets and atolls west of Tahiti, grew exponentially, remade as a 690,000 square-mile nation.

But it wasn't the islands that grew. Instead, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea ruled that countries with coastlines had rights to 200 miles of adjacent ocean, defined as "an exclusive economic zone." For an archipelago country like the Cooks, the new land-plus-water footprint was a Cinderella promise.

Fast forward thirty-five years to 2016 and our first visit to Rarotonga, the main island, lured by the thought of blue lagoons, warm breezes and fewer annual tourists 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 hasty view -- the lagoon, its sandy shoreline, scattered roofs and rows of palms -- was reassuring. I figured we'd start the day with a stroll on the beach, a swim in the lagoon and maybe even a snorkel trip into deeper water, where the coral clumps into mounds.

But Nga, my email contact in the tourist office, now senior enough to be known as Auntie Lydia, had a request.

"Please stop in at the Marae Moana office to meet Ocean Specialist Kevin Iro," she'd said. "He's the one who can explain what our Marine Park conservation project is all about."



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



"Marae Moana means ocean domaine," said Iro, a trim figure in sport shorts, ushering us and a half-dozen high school kids into a cramped room outfitted with rows of desks, a large TV screen for presentations and a half-dozen glowing photos of tropical fish and coral.

"It's a mind-set, an idea, a shift in the way we see ourselves," he said, clicking through a series of charts on the screen. "We aren't just people from different islands," but citizens of a single marine nation, he said. As conservators of vast, still untapped resources, it was time for a government-appointed task force to conduct a detailed survey of every fold and ripple under those 690,000 undersea miles.

It was also time for lunch, so we headed to one of Rarotonga's many ocean-side cafés, for a fresh-grilled fish sandwich served picnic-table style. And so began our education.

When our table mates were locals grabbing lunch, we learned about the Cooks' historic connection with New Zealand, where almost everyone has relatives and yearly visits are the norm. College-bound students head to New Zealand or Australia.

At the Moorings Café we learned that New Zealand's Maoris originally came from Rarotonga. Facing a dispute with a rival clan, they loaded up their ocean-going canoes – vakas – and pushed off for a new island – New Zealand. And sea slugs? Local folks eat them raw, a kind of quick snack.

At Charlie's Café, I was thrilled to be sitting with people speaking Cook Island Maori, one of a 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 cell phones.

Curious about the rest of Rarotonga, we rented bikes for a 20-mile jaunt on the "outer" circle-island road, "a good way to get your bearings," according to my guidebook. We could have rushed – the road is paved -- but it was more fun to stop at vista points, look for craft shops and wave at passing motorcyclists: everybody from teens to moms with kids and men with fishing rods.

It was so interesting that we signed up for a guided mountain bike ride on the 1000-year-old inland road, the "ara metua," with Dave and Tami Furnell, owners of Storytellers Eco Cycle Tours. A sometimes-paved, mostly grassy, gravelly track, the road circles the island at the base of the volcanoes.

Winding between forests and farm fields, it became obvious why restaurant food is so fresh: it's grown locally. Patches of taro (the edible leaf variety) were interspersed with salad greens and tomatoes, pumpkins and red peppers, onions and bananas, pineapple and orchards, and orchards with limes, oranges, papaya, mangoes, star fruit, passion fruit and noni.

Stopping beside the nonis, mostly grown for export as a health tonic, Tami pulled off a couple of mushy, smelly fruits and explained that they were a perfect mosquito repellent. Breaking them into pieces – and to a chorus of laughs and "yuck, icky, sticky" – she dared us to rub them over our necks, arms and legs.

Since no Cook Island is complete without a couple days on neighboring Aitutaki (eye-too-TOCK-kee), world-famous for its lagoon, we hopped 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.

With 12 of us from three countries packed into Tere's outboard motor boat, he sped south across the lagoon, rounded a couple of motus (islets), edged past coral gardens and stopped here and there to snorkel. After a morning in the heart of one of these natural aquariums -- vast, shimmering, blindingly turquoise lakes held together by an encircling coral reef – I couldn't help but marvel.

Protected from wind and waves but continuously refreshed by ocean spill-over, the lagoon's unique ecosystem nurtures not just birds, fish, crabs, clams, mollusks, coral and every other marine organism, but the seafaring people who washed up on their shores.

While we took it in, 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 to all comers – and a grilled chicken picnic -- we headed back.

On our last evening, we ate out at the famous Plantation House, the colonial home of former restaurant owner and botanical gardener Louis Enoke. Dinner here, prepared by Chef Minar Henderson for 20 to 26 guests, is served twice a month only, at a single long table. Offering a cornucopia of island-grown ingredients, it guarantees an evening with forward-looking islanders for whom ancient culture and 21st century science go hand-in-hand.

Finding an empty chair I was amazed to find I was sitting next to the Prime Minister, Henry Puna, who studied law in New Zealand and Australia before turning to politics. Delving into dishes guaranteed to encourage conversation – everything from prawns with lemongrass to coconut-flavored rice and couscous with kaffir lime – we talked about pearl farming on Manihiki, the search for rare-earth minerals and the importance of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (which Trump has abandoned).

He reminisced about hosting Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, whom he described as delightful, intelligent and informed. But it was the pan-seared mahi mahi with ginger and garlic that turned the conversation to global warming and warmer ocean water.

"Your president doesn't believe in clean energy," he said, noting that melting ice means rising sea levels, threatening Aitutaki and other atolls. "Yes, we're worried," said Puna, "but we're doing our part. Right now 50 percent of the islands' electric power comes from solar installations. By 2020 the



*Brunch, lunch or a swim, life is easy at Aitutaki Lagoon Resort; Aitutaki Island, Cook Islands.*



*A moment in time - repeated daily - awaits visitors to Aitutaki Lagoon Resort; Aitutaki Island, Cook Islands.*



*Taking a break on board as Te King Lagoon Cruises owner Tere steers for Honeymoon Island; Cruising Aitutaki Lagoon, Cook Islands.*

Cook Islands will be 100 percent solar.”

If only the rest of us could say that.

## THE NITTY GRITTY

**WEATHER:** June through September, when it's warm and dry., are the best months on the Cook Islands. December through March is the rainy season, when the weather 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](http://www.tik-etours.com) (<http://www.tik-etours.com>)) and Storytellers Eco Cycle Tours [www.storytellers.co.ck](http://www.storytellers.co.ck).

**FLIGHTS:** Limited flights are the biggest obstacle to traveling to the South Pacific. Air New Zealand operates the only non-stop flight from the U.S. to Rarotonga, a nine-to-ten-hour flight on new Boeing 777s, with economy, business and premium business seats (including spiffy flat-bed seats). Roundtrip rates vary by season and availability but run from promotional rates starting at \$854 to \$1654.

**COOK ISLANDS TOURISM:** At [www.cookislands.travel](http://www.cookislands.travel) (<http://www.cookislands.travel>). In include a dinner reservation at the Plantation House go to [iliving@oyster.net.ck](mailto:iliving@oyster.net.ck) .

**LODGING:** Dozens of small hotels and family-run inns offer friendly, affordable lodging posted online and listed on Cook Islands tourism sites. Hotels include two four-star Pacific Resorts properties, with rustic, thatched cottages and tropical landscaping on Rarotonga and on Aitutaki; amenities include beach, restaurant, bar and swimming pool. Some units have a kitchenette. Book early; Pacific Resorts are a favorite with return travelers. The Aitutaki property has additional rooms in a multi-story hotel building. At [www.pacificresort.com](http://www.pacificresort.com).

Lodging at the Aitutaki Lagoon Resort, the only resort on a private motu, ranges from modest self-catering cabins to spacious and attractively furnished cottages. Ten semi-over-water bungalows have outside decks, steps into the lagoon, outdoor showers, large bathrooms with double sinks and a kitchenette counter. The main lodge has a restaurant and adjacent pool; seclusion and lagoon access are its outstanding features. Very popular for family vacations.

Rarotonga's five-star properties offer seclusion, beachfront access, pools and spas. Look for Rumours Luxury Villas & Spa; Te Manava Luxury Villas & Spa; and Nautilus Resort, all on Muri Beach, on Rarotonga's southeast coast.

Follow veteran traveler Anne Z. Cooke on Facebook at “Anne Z. Cooke” and on Twitter at [@anneontheroad](https://twitter.com/anneontheroad).

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*A quiet moment at Charlie's Café, with grilled fish sandwich on order; Rarotonga, Cook Islands.*