

Beautiful Pacific

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Aitutaki Lagoon

Aitutaki lies a 45-minute flight to the north of Rarotonga, the main island of the Cook Islands. There are no direct international flights to Aitutaki but the island is connected by five daily flights from Rarotonga (flight time approx. 40mins ; no flights on Sunday) and by a monthly ferry service which takes 18 hours. The population of Aitutaki is just over 2,000, spread out along coastal and inland villages. Aitutaki is a large and spectacular sunken lagoon almost the size of Rarotonga with one main island (Aitutaki) and about 20 small uninhabited islands (locally referred to as motu) along the edge of the fringing reef with a turquoise lagoon in the centre.

The main island of Aitutaki is much flatter than Rarotonga and much smaller being only about four miles long and just one mile across. Aitutaki has a true south seas atmosphere. The villages are small and sleepy and not a great deal happens here. There's not even a lot of attractions to see. It's simply a place to hire a bike and absorb the tranquillity of the South Seas lifestyle. Stay here for more than a few days and you'll learn how to truly kick back. Aitutaki is ideal for those who want to experience the slow and easy Polynesian lifestyle away from the more commercial tourist centre of Rarotonga, and to enjoy some of the finest palm fringed beaches in the Cook Islands.

Aitutaki Cook Islands is one of the most exquisite lagoons in the world. The lagoon itself is large - the largest island in the Cook Islands, Rarotonga, can fit inside it. The lagoon is 12 km across its base and 15km from top to bottom. The main island is called Aitutaki - it is a flat island on the north section of the lagoon. There are another 20 small Uninhabited Islands (motu) along the edge of the lagoon, most on the east fringe

Arutanga Village on the west coast is the main settlement with a lovely white church, wharf, post office, bank, supermarket, restaurant and petrol station. There is no beach at Arutanga, which has a deep water harbour, but the beach begins less than a mile to the north at the village of Ureia with its colourful houses along the main road and large playing field. Outrigger canoes can usually be seen fishing in the lagoon and swimming is OK here although snorkelling not so good.

The north west coast of Aitutaki boasts a few small boutique shops and restaurants, several budget accommodations and two luxury hotels both on an attractive sandy swimming beach. The white sandy beach with palm groves extends right up the north west coast. A walking trail leads to Mt. Maungapu, the highest point at 124 metres. The track to the summit is quite easy and offers spectacular panoramic views of the island and lagoon. The southern tip of the finger known as Ootu Point has a gorgeous swimming beach and great views of the island - it is also the departure point for most of the island day cruises.

The east coast is popular with local fishermen and you will see them most days fishing in their outrigger canoes from the jetty at Vaipae, the islands second largest village. There is no beach on the east coast, instead rocky outcrops and tidal mud, not practical for swimming. It's possible to ride a bike along the south coast on a rather bumpy bush track. Although the beach along the entire south coast is tidal and not particularly attractive, it's a great place to explore. The southern tip of the island has no villages and is mostly low lying bush. If you follow the signs and look hard enough, you'll find some of the best ancient marae on the island in a small clearing in the bush.

The highlight of Aitutaki is undoubtedly exploring the uninhabited motu fringing the lagoon. There are about 20 islands in all, and until recently no one lived there and there was no accommodation. These were true paradise islands. However, Akaiami Island now an upmarket lodge. Day cruises to the motu depart every morning except Sunday, which is a strict day of rest when everything closes down.

Most tourists visit the exquisite One Foot Island in the south where it's possible to walk out into the lagoon and along sand banks. One Foot has gorgeous beaches and great views of the other islands, but, with lots of day-trippers all trying to see and do as much as they can in a few hours, the place is rather busy. Snorkelling throughout the lagoon is excellent with loads of friendly fish and giant clams and there is good scuba diving to view the drop-offs outside the main reef. Maina or Honeymoon Island in the west tip is another popular spot and has lots of nesting sea birds and great snorkelling.