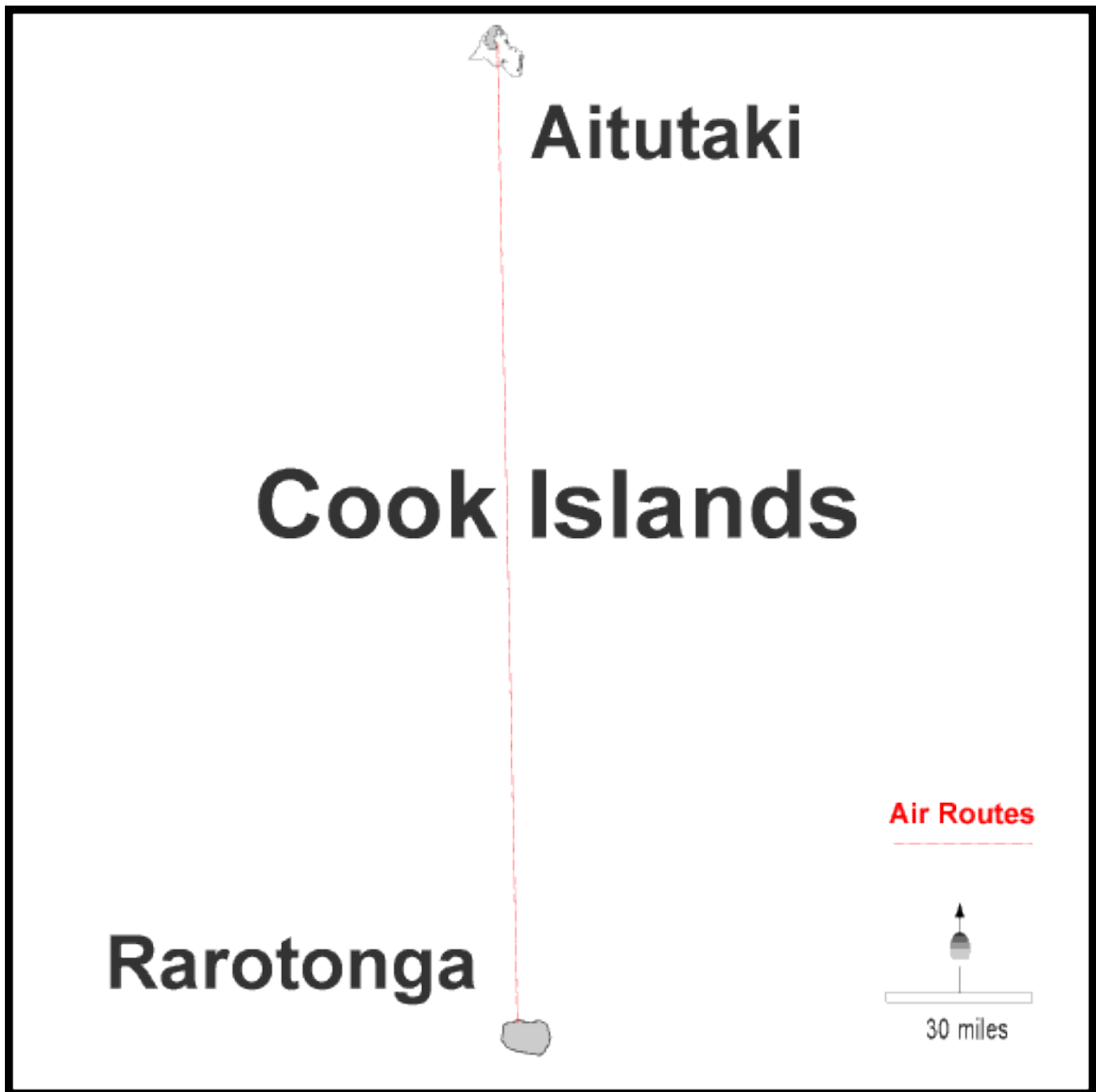


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Cook Islands Travel Guide



The Cook Islands is a collection of 15 islands in the heart of the South Pacific. As a holiday destination, only two of these have a developed tourist infrastructure with beach resorts, restaurants and day tours, and it is on these two islands that cater to more than 95% of all tourists. The remaining islands are a happy mix with traditional fishing villages, with some great eco touring opportunities on Atiu Island and half a dozen extremely remote atoll islands in the north where black pearls are farmed in the lagoons.

Rarotonga is the main island in the Cook Islands and where almost 90% of tourists spend their entire holiday. Rarotonga has lush tropical mountains, pretty coastal scenes, lots of picturesque sandy beaches and a very slow pace of life. Whilst the Polynesian inhabitants have lost much of their traditional culture and heritage, the islanders retain a very laid back lifestyle mixed with an inherited business sense from its protectorate, New Zealand, and hence there are lots of small local enterprises, locally owned tourist accommodations and a healthy social infrastructure. English is widely spoken and the weather is absolutely bliss - not too hot, never cold. The Cook Islanders are also famed for their impressive hip swirling and leg wobbling dance performances. All in all, this is one of the safest and most relaxing tourist destinations in the world.

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 and has most of the tourist accommodation with pleasant beaches. There are another 20 small uninhabited islands (motu) along the edge of the lagoon, most on the east fringe, and these are the destination of day cruises for its glorious picture postcard beaches and fine snorkelling in the lagoon.

Rarotonga Island

Rarotonga is the main island in the Cook Islands and where almost 90% of tourists spend their entire holiday. Rarotonga has lush tropical mountains, pretty coastal scenes, sandy beaches and a very slow pace of life. The island takes just 45 minutes to go around by bus. However, the most popular way to travel is by moped and for just NZ\$55 for four day moped hire, most tourists give it a go. The following guide follows an anti-clockwise circuit around the island, starting from the International Airport.

Muri Beach is Rarotonga's most picturesque and popular tourist area and sits on the east coast. Muri's main attraction is the tranquil sandy bottom lagoon which is excellent for swimming, its lovely sweeping beach and four uninhabited islets within the lagoon. This is the place to go for water activities (sailing, kayaking, wind-surfing and even kite-surfing) and there's a beach bar and restaurant at the Sailing Club to sip beers and watch people. The only drawback (apart from lack of seclusion) is the wind tends to pick up in the afternoon and, being on the east side of the island, the sun disappears late afternoon.

It's easy to wade (or kayak) across to the uninhabited islets at both low and high tide and spend a day relaxing on the quiet beach and looking back towards the mountains of Rarotonga. Snorkelling in the lagoon is good only for marine life - there's no coral here and the lagoon is only waist deep in most places which makes it easy for beginners. Muri Beach has the highest concentration of accommodation on Rarotonga from a small 65-room resort to lots of self-catering bungalows. There's several independent restaurants and take-aways in the Muri Area. Climb the hill opposite Pacific Resort for excellent views of the lagoon and islets.

On the north end of Muri opposite Motutapu islet is Avana Passage where the Cook Island Maoris departed in double hull catamarans to colonize New Zealand. The passage here is the best and most reliable surfing spot in the Cook Islands and allows entry for protected anchorage for yachts and motor boats. Inland from Avana is the extremely attractive and peaceful Turangi Valley. A dirt track leads almost 3 miles inland into the heart of Rarotonga and makes for excellent walking past small plantations and lush tropical forest. There's a lovely church a mile or so north of Muri which is built from limestone blocks and makes a good choice for a Sunday Church service.

The south coast is the quietest stretch on Rarotonga and has lovely beaches and stunning mountain views. There are several tracks inland including the walk to Popoara Waterfall which continues through the rainforest past The Needle and crossing Rarotonga to Avarua Town. The village of Titikaveka has a prominent white church and there's a lovely botanical garden and cafe. The beach along Titikaveka is excellent and stretches for almost 2 miles. There are several lovely small collections of beach bungalows here. Just past Takitumu is the best snorkelling lagoon in the Cook Islands.

The West coast of Rarotonga is one long stretch of sandy beach backed mostly by ironwood trees and plenty of small resorts and self catering bungalows. This stretch of coastline stops at Black Rock in the north, opposite the 9-hole public Rarotongian Golf Course. Black Rock is an excellent swimming and snorkelling spot and is a good place to spot humpback whales when they visit the island between June and October. There are six good independent restaurants which all within walking distance of each other. Being leeward side of the island, it is also protected from the prevailing winds. Tropical sunsets are a definite plus.

Avarua Town on the north coast, minutes from the international airport, is the administration centre of the Cook Islands. It's a good place to stay if you are on a budget and want to make a base for exploring the island. The town is small with only a few supermarkets, two banks both with ATM machines, several restaurants / cafes, internet booths and lots of small boutiques specialising in the sale of black pearls and fine handicrafts. Avarua is well worth a visit, especially on Saturday morning when the open air market takes place. You'll find everything from brightly coloured sarongs (wrap around dresses), to flower garlands, fresh fish and tropical fruits.

The coast along Avarua Town is rocky but a passage through the reef makes it ideal as a harbour for fishing boats and yachts (yachting season May-Sep). There are a few part-sandy beaches to the east of Avarua Town but swimming is restrictive. The mountains are stunning viewed from the main road and you'll find some ancient stone foundations (marae) on the inland road, as well as several dirt tracks leading into valleys. The coastline here is rugged, with mostly pebble beaches, and like Avarua, there is no place to swim. There are a few budget resorts here.

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.

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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.