

# Beautiful Pacific

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## 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 Rarotongan 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.