

Aitutaki

Aitutaki is most famous for its magnificent coral lagoon, a highlight of any visit to the Cook Islands, and undoubtedly one of the most memorable sights in the South Pacific. Flying over the island from Rarotonga is an unforgettable experience; the vast lagoon spreads out below in a shining disc of jade-greens, turquoises and indigo blues, studded with 15 tiny islets and bright banks of orange coral just beneath the ocean's surface. It's easy to see why Aitutaki is the second-most visited island in the Cooks, and unsurprisingly for most people the lagoon is the major draw. Snorkelling trips and boat cruises to the deserted *motu* (islet) are both popular activities, and there are plenty of soft, sandy beaches to seek out – but the island's rural back-roads are also well worth exploring, with many intriguing *marae* (sacred meeting ground) and some beautiful coral-walled churches to discover.

AITUTAKI

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HIGHLIGHTS

- **Cruising the lagoon** (p100) before stopping off at famous One Foot Island for a barbecue lunch
- Hiring a kayak to explore some of the 15 deserted **motu** (p100)
- Exploring some of the island's beautiful **snorkelling spots** (p102)
- Hiking up to the top of **Maungapu** (p104) for panoramic views of the whole island
- Getting down with the locals at a local bar or an **island night** (p109)
- Discovering the island's quiet **back-roads** by pushbike or scooter
- Taking a guided tour of Aitutaki's ancient **marae** (p103) and other historical spots
- Experiencing the spine-tingling singing at a Sunday **church service** (p99)

■ POPULATION: 1800

■ AREA: 18.3 SQ KM



HISTORY

Various legends tell of early Polynesian settlers arriving on Aitutaki by canoe. The first settler was Ru, who according to various traditions came from either 'Avaiki (now called Ra'iatea) or from Tubuai (both in French Polynesia). Wherever Ru's homeland was, it had become overcrowded, so Ru, his four wives, four brothers and their wives, and a crew of 20 royal maidens sailed off in search of new land, finally reaching Aitutaki.

Ru went to the highest point, the top of Maungapu, and surveyed the island. He divided the land into 20 sections, one for each of the 20 royal maidens, and completely forgot about his brothers! They left the island in anger – they had come all that way to settle new land, and yet Ru gave them nothing. They continued over the ocean and eventually wound up in Aotearoa (New Zealand).

The original name of the island was Ararau 'Enua O Ru Ki Te Moana, meaning 'Ru in Search of Land over the Sea'. Later the name was changed to Aitutaki – *a'i tutaki* means 'to keep the fire going' – but the old name is still used in legends and chants.

Other canoes followed Ru's party, coming from Tonga, Samoa and various islands in French Polynesia, landing at different places on Aitutaki. Each new group of people had to be accepted by one of the 20 maidens or their descendants in order to have a space on the island to settle.

The island's European discoverer was Captain William Bligh, on board the *Bounty*, on 11 April 1789. The famous mutiny took place just 17 days later as the ship was en route to Tonga. In 1821, the missionary John Williams came and left behind Papeiha and Vahapata, two newly converted missionaries from Tahiti, to begin the work of bringing Christianity to the Cooks. Williams returned two years later to find that Papeiha had made remarkable progress. As a result, he was inspired to greater challenges on Rarotonga.

Later European visitors included Charles Darwin on the famous 1835 *Beagle* voyage. The first European missionary took up residence in 1839, and the 1850s saw Aitutaki become a favourite port of call for whalers scouring the Pacific. During WWII Aitutaki went through great upheaval when the Americans moved in to build the island's two long runways, which until 1974 were larger than Rarotonga's airport runway.

ORIENTATION

You can make a tour of Aitutaki in just a few hours. The island is shaped like a curved fishhook: at the point you'll find O'otu Beach and the private Aitutaki Lagoon Resort, and slightly north is the airstrip and international airport. Along the main shank of the hook, on the island's west side, you'll find most of the hotels and accommodation, and the main town of Arutanga about halfway down the coast. On the east coast are other villages, much smaller and quieter – Tautu, Vaipae and Vaipeka. The numerous *motu* around the edge of Aitutaki's lagoon are uninhabited.

Maps

The free fold-out map of Rarotonga published by Jason's has a simple map of Aitutaki on the reverse, with all the main hotels and points of interest marked. There's also another Jason's map that just includes Aitutaki, 'Atiu and Mangaia. The free *Cook Islands Sun* newspaper also has a small guide to Aitutaki. All these publications are available at the tourist offices on Rarotonga and Aitutaki.

INFORMATION

There are ATMs at both banks on Aitutaki. If you need to change foreign currency, the banks and some resorts offer exchange services as well as cash advances on credit cards, though you'll have to pay a fee. You might well find it easier (and cheaper) to bring a supply of cash with you from Rarotonga.

The tap water on Aitutaki is sourced underground; you should boil the water before drinking it. Many places get their drinking water from separate rainwater tanks.

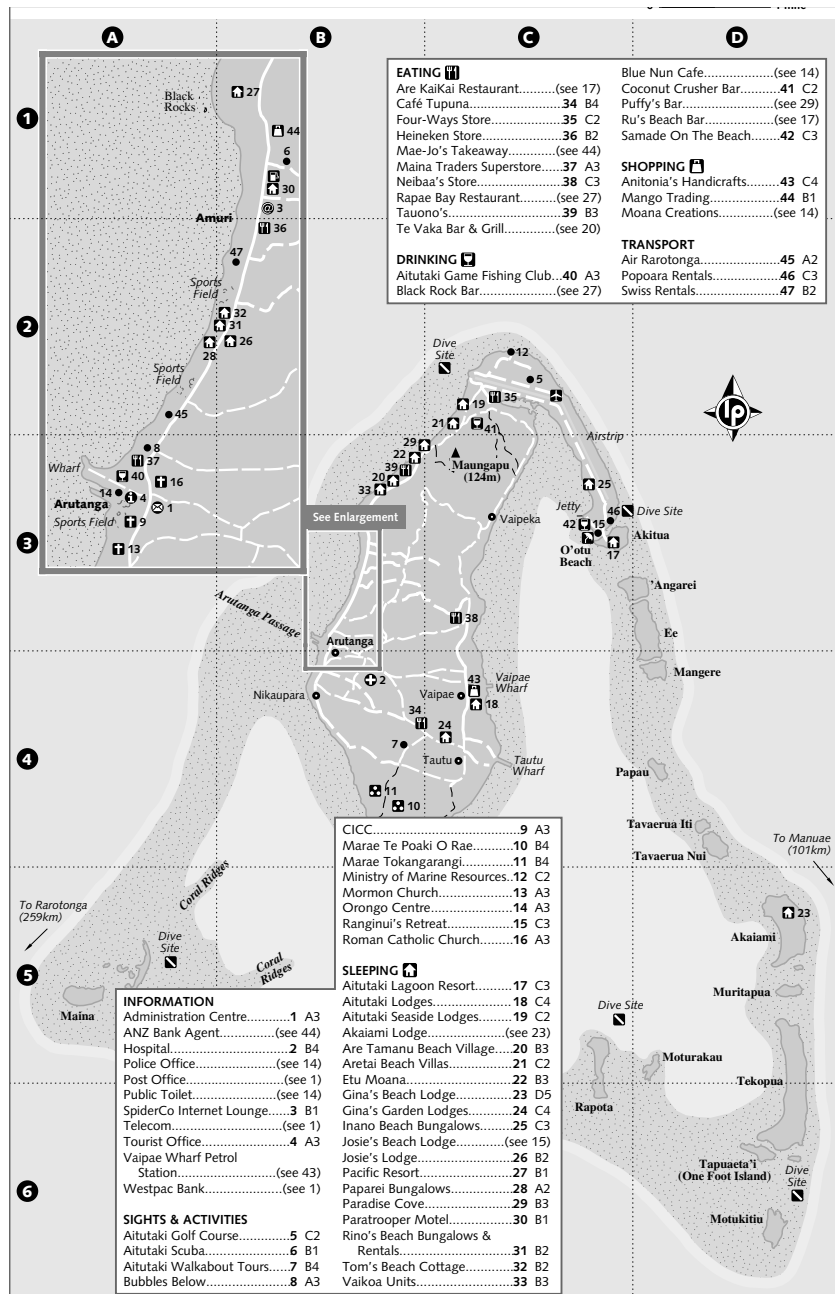
The main police office is behind the Orongo Centre near the wharf (though you'll often find no-one's at home).

ANZ Bank agent (☎ 31418; Arutanga; 🕒 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) Located inside Mango Trading next to Mae-Jo's Takeaway.

Hospital (☎ 31002; Arutanga; 🕒 24hr) Located on the hill behind Arutanga.

Post/Telecom office (☎ 31470; Arutanga; 🕒 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) In the same office at the Administration Centre. Aitutaki issues its own special postage stamps that aren't available on Rarotonga; you can also buy Kia Orana cards and send and receive faxes.

Public phone (☎ 31684; Arutanga) Outside the Telecom office.



AITUTAKI IN...

Two Days

Once you've landed on Aitutaki and had your first whistle-stop tour of the island on the way to your hotel, it's time to get out and explore. Head down into **Arutanga** (below) and get yourself some wheels; either a motor-scooter or for an even more relaxed pace, a bicycle. While you're in town, take the time to browse around the shops on **Arutanga Wharf** (p110); then it's off around the island to explore. Top spots to check out include the practically deserted east coast, the excellent snorkelling at **O'otu** (p104) and the beautiful **beaches** (p102) along the northwest side of the island. Head over to **Tauono's** (p108) for afternoon cake, and in the evening seek out an **island night** (p109) at one of the resorts, the **Coconut Crusher Bar** (p109) or the **Blue Nun Café** (p109).

Day Two is all about the glorious **Aitutaki Lagoon** (p100). Hop on a **cruise boat** (p101) for some fantastic snorkelling and a visit to some of the unpopulated *motu* around the lagoon; bring your passport so you can get it stamped at the 'post office' on **One Foot Island** (p103). Round off your stay with some island cuisine at **Café Tupuna** (p108) or the **Rapae Bay Restaurant** (p108).

Four Days

With a couple more days you'll have time to explore some of the other *motu* at your own pace. Hire a **kayak** (p103) at Samade or Ranginui's or catch a **lagoon taxi** (p103) and head out onto the lagoon to play Robinson Crusoe for an afternoon. It's back to **Tauono's** (p108) again after dark, this time for some proper home cooking. On your last day you've got a choice – either take a **guided tour** (p105) of some of the island's historical sites, or just do as the Cook Islanders do – sit back, slap on the sun cream and enjoy the view.

SpiderCo Internet Lounge (☎ 31780; lounge@aitutaki.net.ck; Arutanga; per min NZ\$0.50) The only Internet lounge on Aitutaki (which explains the elevated price tag).

Tourist office (☎ 31767; retire-tourism@aitutaki.net.ck; Arutanga; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri) In a purpose-built cabin next to the Orongo Centre.

Westpac (☎ 31714; Arutanga; ☎ 9.30am-3pm Mon-Thu) In the Administration Centre.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES
Arutanga

Aitutaki's only town huddles along the main road behind the wharf. The road that leads southwest from the airport passes a few tin-roofed houses and ramshackle shops on its way into the town centre (such as it is). If you thought Avarua sleepy, prepare yourself: Arutanga is positively comatose by comparison. There's little here apart from a couple of trade stores and the wind-beaten old **Cook Islands Christian Church (CICC)**, picturesquely situated by the playing fields at the harbour.

Built in 1828, the church is the oldest in the Cooks (Aitutaki was the first of the Cook Islands to be converted to Christianity), and though it looks a little run-down from the outside, the interior is quite beautiful. Sunlight filters in through the old stained-glass

windows, carved wood painted in bold colours decorates the ceiling, and a colourful mural over the altar shows angels announcing 'Tapu, Tapu, Tapu' (Holy, Holy, Holy). Look out for the anchor on the ceiling with the inscription 'Ebera 6:19' (Hebrews 6:19).

It's the quintessential picture of a South Seas church, and is rumoured to have some of the best acoustics in the Cooks, so it's an excellent place to come on Sunday morning to appreciate the island's spirited hymn singing. In the church yard there's a double-sided monument to the London Missionary Society's pioneering Reverend John Williams and to Papeiha, the Polynesian preacher who Williams left here in 1821.

The harbour itself is usually quiet, though on the days when the cargo ships arrive from Rarotonga, the whole place bustles into activity. Since the lagoon is so shallow, the ships have to moor up outside the lagoon, and the cargo has to be unloaded by small barges; fine if you're just waiting for a shipment of fresh vegetables, but a nerve-racking experience if your cargo happens to be something relatively valuable (such as a small car!) When the harbour's quiet, you can get an excellent view of the island's western coastline from the end of the jetty.

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The **Orongo Centre** was built as a banana-packing plant to handle the island's major export crop. It's now home to Blue Nun Café and some small crafts and clothing shops. The building is on the site of the Orongo Marae, one of the island's most important *marae*; the large stones on the southern side of the building are part of this *marae*.

Aitutaki Lagoon

Twelve kilometres along its base and 15km from top to bottom, Aitutaki's lagoon is a vast natural aquarium, filled with all manner of tropical marine life, from giant clams and schools of parrot-fish to sea turtles and banks of flame-coloured coral. It's a wonderful playground for snorkellers, skin-divers and water-sports enthusiasts, but if you don't fancy getting wet there are lots of sedate lagoon cruises instead. Many of the surrounding *motu* have their own legends and stories; traditionally they were used by islanders for short breaks or weekend getaways, and today they're all completely unpopulated.

MAINA

Maina (Little Girl) has some of the best snorkelling spots in the lagoon especially around the coral formations near its shore and the large powder-white sandbars to the north and east. On the reef just to the north is the wreck of the *Alexander*, a cargo freighter which was wrecked in the 1930s along with its cargo of Model-T Fords. It's a popular snorkelling spot, but you'll need to visit with a tour operator who's familiar with the area.

Maina is also the nesting place of the red-tailed tropicbird, which led Cook Islanders from as far away as 'Atiu to come seeking its red tail feathers to use in ceremonial head-dresses. If you're here at the right time of year you may get to see them nesting on the island; their nesting season ends around December when they fly off to other lands.

Tour guides refer to the nearby sandbar as 'Honeymoon Island', after a Canadian couple who tied the knot here became the first people to marry on any of the *motu*.

AKAIAMI

This *motu* is where the old flying boats used to land to refuel; you can still see the wharf on the lagoon side of Akaiami. It was often used for short camping trips by its traditional owners, and a couple of the old island

lodges have now been turned into super-exclusive places to stay (see p106) – if you're after some solitude, this is the place.

EASTERN MOTU

From Akaiami southwards, the eastern *motu* are worth exploring, but the snorkelling is not great because there's little coral. It's an easy trip by kayak from O'tu Beach to any of these *motu*, and you'll probably have them to yourself. Good snorkelling spots include the lagoon around **Ee, Papau and Muritapua**, while the wooded islet of **Tekopua** (one of Aitutaki's largest *motu*) is a great spot to play castaway for a day. If you visit during the wet season, bring mosquito repellent.

MOTURAKAU & RAPOTA

Moturakau ('Tree Island') and Rapota are the only two of the 15 main *motu* that have volcanic rocks; the islands also support several species of tree and some native plants that only grow here and on the main island of Aitutaki, but not the other *motu*.

Moturakau played host to the first series of the British reality-TV show *Shipwrecked*, and at the time of writing, TV crews had returned with another band of hapless contestants to film a subsequent series here and on nearby Rapota. Both islands can be reached in about 20 minutes from the Aitutaki mainland – so despite the claims of programme makers, they're not exactly desert islands – but it's interesting to try and figure out how the camera operators manage to keep the legion of lagoon boats out of shot to support that 'miles from civilisation' feeling. Rapota was also the site of a leper colony in the 19th century (when Aitutaki's dog population was chosen as the unfortunate scapegoat for the disease). An unlucky pair of islands indeed – Rapota with its lepers, and Moturakau with reality TV.

MOTUKITIU

This tiny island is one of the main roosting sites for native birds, and the surrounding area has been designated as an official marine sanctuary. It's also one of the last refuges for the endangered coconut crab.

TAPUAETA'I

Aitutaki's most famous *motu*, and certainly the one most visited by tourists, is Tapuaeta'i, or One Foot Island. Most of the

lagoon cruises end up at One Foot Island at the end of the tour for a barbecue lunch and to swim in the channel between One Foot Island and its neighbour, Tekopua. There's no coral in this section of the lagoon, so the snorkelling isn't that impressive, but the water is beautifully clear and the island itself has some fine beaches of brilliant white sand. The Tapuaeta'i 'post office' will stamp your passport if you remember to bring it with you. Tour guides call the sandbank nearby 'Nude Island' because nothing grows there.

Lagoon Cruises

Taking a cruise across Aitutaki's fabulous lagoon will be one of the main highlights of your visit to the Cook Islands and it's well worth the expense. There are several operators who provide trips on the lagoon and its surrounding *motu* – some also provide a lagoon taxi service, where you can be dropped off at one of the *motu* in the morning and picked up in late afternoon (remember to take lunch and drinks).

Ask what's included in a cruise, and which islands the operators visit. Some only go to two or three; others visit four or sometimes more, and may offer more snorkelling time. Cruises generally leave from the jetty near O'tu Beach at around 10am and are back by 3.30pm or 4pm, and operate from Mon-

day to Saturday. Prices are about NZ\$60 to NZ\$65, including lunch. All offer snorkelling at one or more spots around the lagoon, and provide a barbecued fish lunch on the *motu*. Bring your own snorkelling gear if you can – the boats sometimes don't have quite enough to go around.

It's also worth checking whether the boats have roofs – you'll be spending all day under the sun, and ending up the colour of a freshly cooked lobster could seriously spoil your suntan.

Aitutaki Adventures (☎ 31171) Lagoon cruises run from Sunday to Friday and include snorkelling, fish-feeding and a barbecue lunch on Tapuaeta'i.

Aitutaki Glass Bottom Boat (☎ 31790; story@aitutaki.net.ck) Aitutaki's only glass-bottomed boat chugs around the lagoon and the outside reef – you're bound to see turtles, clams, coral and tropical fish, and might even glimpse humpback whales in season.

Bishop's Lagoon Cruises (☎ 31009; bishopcruz@aitutaki.net.ck) Bishop's is one of the oldest and most experienced tour operators, with two small covered motor-boats and a larger cruiser. Tours visit Maina, Moturakau and Tapuaeta'i (NZ\$35), as well as sunset and honeymoon cruises and drop-offs at Tapuaeta'i only.

Kia-Orana Cruises (☎ 31442; kruise@aitutaki.net.ck) Smaller tour operator, with one main tour to Maiana, Moturakau, Honeymoon Island and Tapuaeta'i (NZ\$65), and private charters available. Tours run Sunday to Friday.

THE CORAL ROUTE

Aitutaki had a pioneering role in Pacific aviation as a stopping point in Tasman Empire Air Line's (TEAL) 'Coral Route'. Back in the 1950s TEAL, the predecessor to Air New Zealand, flew across the Pacific on an Auckland-Suva (Fiji)-Apia (Samoa)-Aitutaki-Pape'ete (Tahiti) route. Most of the journey was in four-engined Solent flying boats.

The stop at Aitutaki was purely to refuel, carried out on the uninhabited *motu* of Akaiami. It took over two hours, so passengers had a chance to take a swim in the lagoon. The old Solents carried their 60-odd passengers in some degree of luxury. Food was cooked on the aircraft and was served with napkins and proper cutlery; passengers were even allowed to smoke ciggies on board (but not pipes or cigars). At that time, the fortnightly flight into Pape'ete was the only direct air link between Tahiti and the rest of the world, and the aircraft's arrival there was a major event – especially if the plane was carrying a famous passenger or two (John Wayne and Cary Grant are just two of the well-known names who flew the Coral Route).

Usually the trips were uneventful, but on one occasion a malfunction at Aitutaki required off-loading the passengers while the aircraft limped on to Tahiti on three engines. It was a week before it arrived back to collect the passengers – who by that time had begun to really enjoy their enforced stay on hotel-less Aitutaki.

On another occasion, the aircraft was forced to return to Aitutaki when the Tahiti lagoon turned out to be full of logs. The trip to Tahiti was attempted twice more before the lagoon was clear enough for a landing. One of the TEAL flying boats is now on display at the Museum of Transport & Technology (MOTAT) in Auckland, New Zealand.

Paradise Islands Lagoon Tours (☎ 31248; titiaitonga@aitutaki.net.ck; Aitutaki Lagoon Resort, Akitua; cruises NZ\$65) Cruises are on a 34ft Polynesian-style catamaran, the *Titi Ai Tonga* (Wind from the South), which has a roof and onboard bar. If you're after a stately cruise with great food and plenty of room, this is the one for you.

Teking (☎ 31582; teking@aitutaki.net.ck) Billed as the specialist snorkelling operator, with a main 'Four Island' cruise to Akaiami, Tapuaeta'i, Honeymoon Island and Maiana, including the wreck site of the *Alexander* (NZ\$65). Private charters also available.

Beaches & Snorkelling

The best swimming and snorkelling, and the loveliest beaches, are found out on the deserted *motu* around the lagoon, but the main island also has some good places to explore. The beaches along the island's west side are sandy and secluded, but not that great for swimming thanks to the shallow water. You can walk all the way to the outer reef on a natural coral causeway that starts 50m from the shore (opposite Mae-Jo's Takeaway), which, at low tide, is knee-deep all the way.

A little to the north of where this causeway meets the outer reef is the Tonga Ruta passage. The branches of the passage are very narrow – some are only 30cm wide – but they are over 15m deep and full of fish, and it's a good spot for some sea angling. This is one of the main passages through which the lagoon drains, so the outgoing current is very strong as the tide ebbs – be careful.

If you continue around the corner beyond the black rocks on the beach, to the

north of the Pacific Resort, there's a slightly better beach, with water about 1.5m deep and some interesting snorkelling. The snorkelling is pretty good along the west coast all the way up to the airport, even though the water is not deep. The reef here is close in to the shore, and the coral formations support plenty of marine life.

Most of the coastline along the island's eastern (lagoon) edge is muddy rather than sandy – one of the main reasons you won't find any buildings on this side of the island. The best snorkelling on this side is off O'otu Beach (p104), and in the channel separating Akitua *motu* from the main island. The water's normally packed with kids on weekends – the shady area beyond Samade is a popular picnic spot for local families, and it's usually a great place to make friends.

Anywhere there's a jetty – in Arutanga, or around the eastern side of the island at Vaipae – you'll find local kids charging around, bombing into the water or performing perfect swan dives. Chances are you'll find yourself joining in.

Sadly, you'll probably see a lot of dead white coral around the lagoon, caused by a general rise in temperature in the Pacific Ocean, and aggravated by the severity of recent hurricanes. As global warming worsens, the rising temperatures and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns pose a serious threat to the long-term future of coral ecosystems in the Cook Islands. Projects to turn parts of Aitutaki's lagoon into protected marine reserves will certainly save them from further human exploitation, but no one yet knows if anything can be done to save the lagoon from the dangers of global warming.

Diving

Scuba diving outside the reef is an obvious attraction, perhaps even more so than Rarotonga. Visibility is great, and features include drop-offs, multi-levels, wall dives and cave systems; the wreck of the *Alexander* is also a popular diving spot. The drop-off at the edge of the reef is as much as 200m in places, and divers have even seen whale sharks, humpback whales and an operating submarine!

There are two professional diving operators on the island. Both usually run morning and afternoon dives depending on weather; single-dive trips cost NZ\$90 to NZ\$100 including gear. As always, discounts are avail-

TAPUAETA'I (ONE FOOT ISLAND)

The name Tapuaeta'i doesn't mean 'One Foot', but 'One Footprint'. There are several versions of how this *motu* got its name – you'll probably hear at least one if you take a cruise onto Aitutaki's lagoon. One legend tells of how a father and son, fleeing warriors from the main island, sought refuge on Tapuaeta'i. Upon reaching the *motu's* shore, the father picked up his son, ran across the beach and hid the child in a tree. When the warriors arrived they killed the father, but, having seen only one set of footprints leading away from his canoe, did not realise the man's son was there. The son returned to Aitutaki and told the story of how the single set of footprints had saved his life.

In another legend a seafarer from Tonga was crossing the seas with his sister. She died, but he wanted to bury her on land, not throw her to the sharks, so he kept her body in the canoe until he sighted land. He entered Aitutaki's lagoon and landed on Tapuaeta'i, hoping to bury his sister on the *motu*. As he disembarked from the canoe, however, some fierce Aitutakians emerged from the bush and he jumped back into the canoe and sailed away, still bearing his sister's body and leaving only a single footprint in the sand.

able for multiple dives, and snorkellers are usually welcome to tag along.

Aitutaki Scuba (☎ 31103; scuba@aitutaki.net.ck; Amuri), run by Neil Mitchell, is the longest-running outfit and is affiliated with PADI and NAUI.

Bubbles Below (☎ 31537; www.diveaitutaki.com; Arutanga) is a newer operator that has a great reputation with visiting divers, mainly thanks to the entertaining manager, Onu Hewett (out of interest, his name translates as 'turtle' – surely no coincidence).

Other Water Sports

If you fancy tootling around the lagoon yourself, there are a handful of places where you can rent boats or kayaks – an ideal way to escape the crowds and guided tours and explore the lagoon *motu* at your own speed.

Samade on the Beach (☎ 31526; O'otu Beach) rents kayaks (one hour/half-day/full day NZ\$10/15/20).

Ranginui's Retreat (☎ 31657; www.ranginui.com; O'otu Beach) rents kayaks for NZ\$15/25 for a single/double-seater. Ranginui's also runs Wet & Wild Adventure Tours, which offers spear-fishing, wake-boarding and tube-riding on the lagoon, as well as lagoon taxi services and charter cruises.

Fishing

As in the rest of the Cook Islands, fishing has been a way of life in Aitutaki for centuries, and it's still a popular pastime. There are several boats on the island that can take you out big-game fishing for marlin, tuna, wahoo and *mahi mahi* outside the reef, or for smaller reef fish inside the lagoon.

The best place to head is the **Aitutaki Game Fishing Club** (☎ 31379; Arutanga) down by the wharf in Arutanga. There are usually some salty old seadogs on hand to answer your queries; alternatively look around for pamphlets in the main tourist office. Prices for fishing trips range from around NZ\$80 to NZ\$150 depending on where you want to go and what you want to catch – if you're heading beyond the reef, make sure your boat has lifejackets and a first-aid kit.

The following operators are some of the better-known ones on the island. Most operate daily except Sunday.

Aitutaki Sea Charter (☎ 31281) Big-game fishing trips (four to five hours) outside the reef cost NZ\$110 per person.

Baxter's Fishing Charters (☎ 31025; baxter@aitutaki.net.ck)

Vaikore Bone Fishing Charters (☎ 31292)

If you're looking for something a little more traditional, **Tauno's** (☎ /fax 31562) sometimes operates reef-fishing trips in a traditional outrigger canoe. Phone to see if the tours are currently running.

Exploring

If you've got wheels, or even if you're on foot, an exploration of Aitutaki's backroads can be enormously rewarding. Roads on the island are quite well signposted, and it's a pretty small island so you'd have to work hard to get lost for long. The palm-shaded **eastern side** of the island is generally even quieter than the west side; usually you won't pass a soul, and your only company will probably be the odd mud crab

COCONUT CRABS

Unfortunately for the large, blue-grey *unga* (coconut crab), its flesh is delicious. The crab has been eaten to near extinction on many Pacific islands, but is still common on some of the Cook Islands. Coconut crabs are slow growers: they can take 20 years to reach their mature weight of 2kg or more, and they live to a ripe old age. They live close to the water and come out at night to feed on the flesh of coconuts. How they crack open the coconuts is something of a mystery. Some people believe that they simply use their enormous claws to crack them open, but others claim they scale the palm trees and snip off a few coconuts, which split open when they hit the ground.

skittering across the main road. There are great views and nice swimming spots at **Vaipae** and **Tautu** wharfs.

Aitutaki has a number of *marae*, in various states of overgrowth. If you're a *marae* aficionado, you'll notice the ones here are notable for the large size of the stones.

The main road along the east coast goes right through a big *marae* at the turn-off to the Aitutaki Lodges; the stones are along both sides of the road. The huge *ava* (banyan) tree arching over the road here is a memorable sight.

The other *marae* on the island are pretty difficult to find. You'll almost certainly need a guide to find them and to properly appreciate their historical significance. **Aitutaki Walkabout Tours** (opposite) is your best bet – and be prepared to contend with some seriously ravenous *namu* (mosquitoes).

On the inland road between Nikaupara and Tautu, you'll find some of the most historic *marae* on the island. The large *marae* of **Te Poaki O Rae** (The Stone of Rae), covers about 1.6 hectares. It has several groupings of stones; the tallest one, at 2.8m, is attributed to Rae, who brought it from an ancient *marae* elsewhere on the island. The line of stones on your right as you enter the *marae* area was where watchmen used to stand to guard the *marae*. **Tokangarangi**, hidden by bush, just off the inland road to your right, is a *marae* built by Temuna Korero, who came from 'Avaiki on the canoe Ua-Tuau-Au.

Golf

It's not quite Gleneagles, but Aitutaki does have a golf course of sorts. To arrange club hire (NZ\$10) and play a round (green fees NZ\$20) on the Aitutaki Golf Course, phone **Ned Neale** (☎ 31188) or **Putangi Mose** (☎ 31508).

Maungapu

Maungapu, at just 124m, is the highest point on the island. It's an easy 30-minute hike to the top, from where there's a superb view of the island and the entire lagoon. The route to the top starts opposite Paradise Cove and is marked by a sign on the road. It starts off gently and gets steeper as you near the top.

O'otu Beach

O'otu Beach is one of the best swimming spots on the mainland, and boasts a fabulous view of the lagoon and great snorkelling.

Guests at the nearby Aitutaki Lagoon Resort pay heavily for the location, but thankfully you can enjoy it without having to shell out NZ\$1300 a night for the privilege. **Samade on the Beach** (☎ 31526) is the centre of attention here – a great open-air bar with kayak hire, food and, of course, beer (even on Sunday!). Nearby is **Rangini's Retreat** (☎ 31657), which also has kayaks for hire. The launch point for most of the lagoon cruise boats is just around the coast from Samade.

Ministry of Marine Resources

Near the airport, the **Ministry of Marine Resources** (☎ 31406; admission NZ\$2) is worth at least a quick visit. Several species of giant clams – the huge ones with wavy lips – are being raised in tanks here and in a farm in the lagoon for introduction into the lagoon. Baby sea turtles are also raised here.

QUIRKY AITUTAKI

As anyone who's spent a bit of time on Rarotonga will tell you, stray dogs are a real problem – but it's not something they have to worry about on Aitutaki, since there are no dogs on the island whatsoever. Exactly what happened to them is something of a mystery, however, although there a number of shaggy dog stories that claim to explain their strange disappearance. The most interesting legend is that during a 19th-century leprosy outbreak, dogs somehow copped the blame for carrying the disease, and were all hunted down. Another story is that a dog mauled the child of an *ariki* (high chief) who then promptly banned all dogs from the island.

There are, however, plenty of pigs – that most popular of Pacific domestic animals. South Sea pigs have made coconuts a major part of their diet, and well-kept pigs also have papaya and *taro* mash (hardly surprising that they're much fatter than normal porkers). There are even some pigs, kept on one of the *motu* (lagoon islets), that have learnt to dig up and break open *pa'ua* (clam) shells, which are an Aitutakian delicacy.

Roosters are also one of Aitutaki's most ubiquitous residents. Unfortunately, their sense of time is absolutely hopeless – they seem to crow at practically every time of day (and night) except dawn. Spend a few days on the island and you'll be glad you remembered to bring those earplugs...

TOURS

Air Rarotonga (☎ 31888 in Arutanga, ☎ 22888 on Rarotonga) Day trips from Rarotonga to Aitutaki, departing from Rarotonga international airport. Trips (adult/child NZ\$399/202) include an island tour, lagoon cruise (on Paradise Islands' Titi-Ai-Tonga) with snorkelling gear provided, lunch on the lagoon, and plenty of time for swimming, snorkelling and soaking up the sun. Children under two are free. Bookings can be made directly with Air Rarotonga or through travel agents on Rarotonga. Flights depart at 8am and return at 5.30pm, Monday to Saturday. **Aitutaki Walkabout Tours** (☎ 31757; www.aitutaki-walkabout.com) The island's main tour company. It's run by local guide Ngaakitaiti, who offers three separate expeditions exploring the island's history, culture and natural environment. The Aitutaki Walkabout Tour (adult/child NZ\$40/10) is on foot and concentrates mainly on native flora and fauna, while the Aitutaki Discovery Safari (adult/child NZ\$55/10) explores many of the island's *marae* and historical sites in a sturdy jeep. Both tours run Sunday to Friday twice daily, and include light refreshments. During crab season, you can even go on a night-time crab hunt (adult/child NZ\$45/10).

Chloe & Nane's Tropicool Tour (☎ 31248) Offers village and *marae* tours in a small minibus, as well as a popular sunset tour where you should be able to catch sight of Aitutaki's rare blue lorikeet. They also offer transfers to restaurants and nightspots and a bus service to church on Sunday. Circle-island tours cost NZ\$30 and take place from Monday to Saturday.

SLEEPING Budget

Decent budget accommodation is becoming increasingly hard to find on Aitutaki as the island becomes steadily more upmarket, but there are still a few options. Some of the

lower-end places have rather erratic hot-water supplies, especially during prolonged cloudy periods.

Paradise Cove (☎ 31218; www.paradisecove.co.nz; Arutanga; house s/d NZ\$35/45, beach hut s/d NZ\$45/60, bungalows NZ\$160) Standing on a glorious stretch of white beach, and shaded by tall palm trees, the quaint thatched huts and pole houses of the Paradise Cove make ideal brochure material, but they don't quite live up to the picture-perfect image. Most of the budget rooms are actually inside the main one-storey house, where you'll also find the lounge, kitchen and shared showers; outside there are several *very* basic beach huts (complete with bed, mosquito net, bar fridge and not much else). The thatched pole houses you'll see on the brochures are much more expensive, and basically consist of a small bedroom and minuscule kitchen leading onto a small beachfront veranda. Still, you probably won't be inside much anyway – the beach here is fabulous and great for swimming and snorkelling.

Vaikoa Units (☎ /fax 31145; Arutanga; s/d/tr NZ\$55/75/85, beachfront bungalows NZ\$110-130) This venerable motel has been a time-honoured option for budget travellers on Aitutaki for years, and some of the self-contained units are showing their age. The older, tin-roofed motel units are a little murky, with the main bedroom area separated from the kitchen and bathroom by a couple of curtains; but they're quite cheap and fairly clean. The newly finished beachfront bungalows are much lighter and roomier, and probably worth the money if you can afford it.

AITUTAKI GETS A MOUNTAIN

According to legend, Aitutaki was once just a low atoll. The inhabitants decided that they needed a mountain for their island, so they went off across the sea in search of one. Coming to Rarotonga, they spotted Raemaru, the mountain behind the village of 'Arorangi, and thought that it would be perfect. However, it was rather large for Aitutaki, so they decided they'd take just the top off and bring that home.

Late at night, they sneaked up the sides of Raemaru and encircled it, thrust their spears in until they had severed the top from the bottom, and took off with it. They held it aloft with their spears as they set off for Aitutaki in their canoes, spread out in the sea all around the mountain top.

When morning came, the 'Arorangi villagers looked up and noticed something was wrong. They set off in hot pursuit of the Aitutakians to reclaim their mountain. But the fierce Aitutakian warriors beat the Rarotongans back, using only their single free hands while still holding the mountain aloft between them with their spears in their other hands. After bringing the mountain top to Aitutaki, they placed it on the northern part of the island.

Back on Rarotonga, Raemaru today has a distinctly cut-off, flat-topped appearance.

ISLAND ESCAPES

If you're really looking to get away from it all, how about staying on your very own desert island? The uninhabited *motu* of **Akaiami** was often used for getaways by local families in days gone by (as well as being the stop for the TEAL flying boats) – but these days it's possible to stay in a lodge on the island courtesy of **Gina's Beach Lodge** (☎ 31058; www.ginasaitutaki.com; s/d NZ\$180/300), a spacious one-storey bungalow complete with colonial veranda, or the super-luxurious **Akaiami Lodge** (www.coralroute.com; NZ\$600), a beautiful villa rebuilt on the site of the old TEAL terminal, just a stone's throw from your very own private beach. Once the last lagoon boats have left for the day, you'll have the island entirely to yourself.

Tom's Beach Cottage (☎ 31051; papatoms@aitutaki.net.nz; Arutanga; s/d/tr NZ\$32/48/60, bungalow s/d/tr NZ\$84/98/110) Let's be clear about this from the outset – Tom's Beach Cottage is Budget with a capital B, so if you're planning on staying here, be prepared. All rooms are inside the old family house, and as long as you don't mind the ancient beds and odd spot of peeling paintwork, then they're about the cheapest option on the island. There's also a separate bungalow behind the house.

Josie's Lodge (☎ 31111; fax 31518; Arutanga; s/d/tr NZ\$20/36/50) If you're keen on getting to know some of the locals, friendly, family-run Josie's is an OK option. It offers small rooms inside the main house with canopy mosquito nets over the beds and plenty of frilly curtains for added appeal. Josie runs a tight ship, so wild parties and late-night drinking are definitely off the menu. She also runs **Josie's Beach Lodge** (☎ 31659; s/d/tw NZ\$20/38/50; O'otu Beach), another large family house opposite the beach.

Paratrooper Motel (☎ 31563; Amuri; r NZ\$15) The cheapest option on the island offers several prefabricated, bargain-basement motel units and is run by an Aitutakian couple. The décor's seen much better days, but it's clean enough and very, very cheap.

Midrange

For once the old adage is true: the higher you move up the price scale on Aitutaki, the more you'll get for your money. If you're

willing to push the boat out, there are some lovely places to stay on the island. Remember to ask about weekly specials, where if you stay six nights you get the seventh free.

Gina's Garden Lodges (☎ 31058; www.ginasaitutaki.com; Tautu; s/d/tr NZ\$75/120/150; 📍) If you're not desperate to stay in earshot of the sea, then these four lodges, set around a secluded garden with fruit trees and flower blossom, represent perhaps the best value anywhere on Aitutaki. Run by one of Aitutaki's three *ariki*, Manarangi Tutai Ariki (also known as 'Queenie' or just Tutai), the four lodges are all self-contained, with spacious, high-ceilinged bedrooms and large private verandas overlooking the gardens and swimming pool; there's also a small loft sleeping area that's perfect for kids. The old-fashioned décor could do with a little freshening up, perhaps, but let's be honest – how often do you get the chance to stay with a queen?

Aretai Beach Villas (☎ 31645; www.aretaibeachvillas.com; Arutanga; bungalows NZ\$250) Perfectly positioned halfway between town and the airport, these beautiful sea-view bungalows are a real home away from home, with light, lovingly finished interiors, wooden floors and tastefully chosen furniture. There are a couple of large bedrooms in every bungalow – great for families – and the kitchens are probably better-equipped than the one you've got back home.

Paparei Bungalows (☎ 31837; www.papareibungalows.com; Arutanga; d NZ\$200) These two swish new bungalows on the island's west side are just a short walk from town. Tastefully decorated in light tones, with exposed beams, potted plants and bright bedspreads thrown in for good measure, these bungalows represent a nicely judged balance between modern convenience and tropical atmosphere. The covered sundecks are top-notch too.

Inano Beach Bungalows (☎ 31758; www.inano.beach.com; O'otu Beach; lagoon view/beachfront bungalows NZ\$130/160) On the other side of the island, out towards the airport, these secluded new lodges have been constructed using local materials wherever possible. The iron-wood balconies, mahogany tabletops and fibre-plait walls give them a hand-finished, authentic feel, though they might be a little too rustic for some. Most have a great view over the lagoon's northern side, but the beach here is no good for swimming. You'll definitely need wheels.

Aitutaki Seaside Lodges (☎ 31056; www.seaside-aitutaki.com; bungalows NZ\$250) Slightly closer to town, hidden away in a deliciously private setting on the west side of the island, these free-standing wood-panelled bungalows are a top choice if you're looking for peace and quiet – as long as you don't mind the odd bit of plane noise from the airstrip nearby. Kayaks, reef shoes, snorkelling gear and hammocks are all available onsite, and a Sunday barbecue is usually thrown in as well.

Rino's Beach Bungalows & Rentals (☎ 31197; rinos@aitutaki.net.nz; Arutanga; d NZ\$120, beachfront bungalows NZ\$185-285) The only out-and-out motel accommodation on Aitutaki, with a selection of modern apartments near the beach and several slightly older rooms in the twin-storey buildings nearer the road. There's not too much island character to shout about (wood-panels and pastel-shaded paint is about as good as it gets), but the units are decent value and most have a balcony with some kind of sea view. Best of all is the new deluxe honeymoon bungalow right on the beach – ask sweetly and you might just be able to get a deal.

Samade on the Beach (☎ 31526; www.samade.beach.com; O'otu Beach; bungalows NZ\$285) This popular bar on Aitutaki's northern side has recently built a number of timber-walled

bungalows, arranged around a sandy garden just inland from the shore. The rectangular rooms are a bit like the Aitutaki equivalent of a log-cabin – there's a main bedroom with a small kitchen and bathroom at the back and a small veranda at the front. Great for the beach and the bar, but you can do much better for the money.

Aitutaki Lodges (☎ 31334; aitlodge@aitutaki.net.nz; Vaipae; 1-2-/3-person chalets NZ\$238/248/321) The lagoon view from the six simply furnished A-frame chalets here is one of the very best on the island, but there are a few drawbacks; you're a long way from town, and the beach here (as along all the island's eastern edge) is muddy and no good for swimming. The lodges themselves are lovely, though, dotted around a verdant garden populated by shrubs and fruit trees, with large studio-style bedrooms, brightly coloured quilts and the essential sea-view sundeck. There's also an onsite bar and circular dining area, sheltered under a thatched roof.

Top End

Both of Aitutaki's main resorts have sister places on Rarotonga, and there are usually twin-island packages on offer. If you choose to stay at one of the resorts, it's worth considering how much of your money is likely to go back into the island rather than to overseas developers; in order for Aitutaki to remain an unspoiled paradise, it's important that local communities receive the benefits of tourist cash as well as the big resorts.

Aitutaki Lagoon Resort (☎ 31201; www.aitutakilagoonresort.com; Akitua; garden/beachfront/overwater bungalows NZ\$495/650/1325, beachfront ste NZ\$890; 📍 📍) If you're really looking to do Aitutaki in style, then this glorious resort is hard to top. Perched on its own private island and joined to the mainland by a regular ferryboat, the resort offers a range of delightful bungalows, from thatched garden villas right through to lavish suites that sit on wooden poles right above the lagoon. Unsurprisingly, the standard of accommodation (and the price tag) is astonishingly high – tailor-made for members of the international jet-set or honeymooners on a once-in-a-lifetime trip.

Pacific Resort (☎ 31720; www.pacificresort.com; Amuri; beachfront bungalows/ste/villas NZ\$760/1020/1330; 📍 📍) Another splendid resort with suitably sky-high rates, this award-winning

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Etu Moana (☎ 31458; www.etumoana.com; Arutanga; villas NZ\$395; 📍) These lavish boutique beach villas are rapidly gaining a reputation as one of the best places to stay in the Cook Islands, and rightly so. Opened in 2003 and run by a friendly Canadian couple, the eight thatch-roofed villas have been finished to the very highest standards, from the gleaming Tasmanian oak floors, lofty roofs, and vast beds to the ultraromantic private outdoor showers and teak-wood sundecks. It's the kind of place where you just know everything's been painstakingly thought out – hand-carved ornaments and decorative details have been custom-made by local artists for each villa, and there's a beautiful tear-drop pool complete with rock garden, sun-shaded tables and a generously equipped 'honesty bar'. Etu Moana means 'blue starfish' in Maori, and this place certainly has a touch of star quality.

hotel pulls out all the luxury stops to cater for its exacting clientele. The minute you walk through the sumptuous foyer, complete with an oriental lily pond and a reception desk the size of several family cars, you know you're in for something special. Utterly private sundecks, cavernous bedrooms and magnificent ocean-view sitting rooms are really just the start – if your pockets are deep enough, then you'll live in truly royal style for the duration of your stay.

Are Tamanu Beach Village (☎ 31810; www.aretamanu.com; Arutanga; d NZ\$365-410; 🍷 🍷) Are Tamanu and Manea Beach have now joined forces to become one of the largest properties on the island, offering a choice of self-contained *are*-style bungalows or a selection of suites over at Manea Beach. The suites are larger and more contemporary in style but come without a kitchen – guess that means you'll be eating at the inhouse Te Vaka Bar & Grill (right), then. Needless to say, the beach is only steps away, and everything you could possibly need is within easy reach.

EATING

You can pick up light meals and snacks at most of the island's bars, including Puffy's, the Coconut Crusher Bar (opposite) and the Blue Nun Café (opposite). If you're after more sophisticated fare, Aitutaki has a couple of excellent local restaurants, or you could try one of the large resorts.

Tauono's (☎ 31562; cakes \$3-6, dinner NZ\$25-40; ☺ afternoon tea 3-5pm Mon, Wed & Fri; fruit & veg shop 10am-5pm Mon-Fri; dinner by reservation) Hidden away in a shady glade just off the main road, Tauono's is one of Aitutaki's best-kept secrets. Run by husband-and-wife team Sonja (Austrian, horticulturalist, head chef) and Tauono (Aitutakian, craftsman, head waiter), this tiny restaurant uses only the freshest organic produce from its lovingly tended vegetable garden. This is 'slow food' at its best; afternoon tea and home-cooked meals are served outside at rustic covered wooden tables. Sonja usually breezes out to say hello and ask how you'd like your food cooked at the start of the meal, while Tauono wanders around cracking jokes and entertaining guests. Top tips – try the homemade smoothies, Sonja's trademark coconut cake and the 'Aitutaki kisses'.

Samade on the Beach (☎ 31526; O'otu Beach; lunch NZ\$7-10, dinner NZ\$13-20; ☺ lunch & dinner) Sheltered

under a thatched canopy right on the beach, this open-walled restaurant is a fine spot for lunch or dinner. Local-style fish, salads and stir-fries all feature on the varied menu, but the busiest day is Sunday, when Samade throws a great afternoon barbecue that's as popular with locals as with tourists.

Rapae Bay Restaurant (☎ 31720; lunch NZ\$10, dinner mains NZ\$25-45; ☺ lunch & dinner) As you'd expect of one of the island's poshest resorts, the outdoor restaurant at the Pacific Resort has spared no expense in creating a beautiful setting and a tropical ambience. Guests dine at candlelit tables arranged around the patio, with views of spot-lit palms and the nearby lagoon. Fresh seafood, racked spring lamb and organic pork are all served with a Pacific Rim twist, complemented by delicious desserts and homemade breads. But Aitutaki is best-known for its crayfish, and this is probably the best spot on the island to find out if it lives up to its reputation (it does).

Te Vaka Bar & Grill (☎ 31870; dinner NZ\$22-27; ☺ lunch & dinner) The inhouse restaurant at Are Tamanu has a pleasant island ambience, with open walls and understated décor, and it's a good place to try local specials such as seafood chowder and *ika mata* (marinated raw

fish); there's usually a selection of chicken, fish and meat dishes on the main menu, with a specials board and a weekly barbecue too.

Are KaiKai Restaurant (☎ 31201; breakfast NZ\$10, lunch NZ\$15-20 plus extras NZ\$7, dinner mains NZ\$25-35; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A la carte dining in the elegant surrounds of the Aitutaki Lagoon Resort (think starched white tablecloths, gleaming cutlery and wicker furniture), with a formal menu and nightly theme nights, including a fisherman's catch night and an *umukai* (a traditional feast cooked in an underground oven). Not a place to turn up in your swimsuit. There's also the tricky issue of how to get here; fine if you're staying on-site, not so great if you have to hang around for the next ferry back to the main island.

Mae-Jo's Takeaway (☎ 31820; mains NZ\$12-32; ☺ dinner Mon-Sat) About the only option for cheap takeaway on the island, this Chinese restaurant offers the usual range of fried rice, stir-fries, curries and chow mein dishes, with a few tables outside if you fancy eating in.

Self-Catering

Most people will be self-catering and the supermarkets are well stocked. There are lots of tinned and packaged goods, and the prices are mostly comparable to those on Rarotonga, though luxury items like biscuits, crisps and cakes are often sold at a premium. People might recommend that you bring supplies with you, but it's not really necessary.

Maina Traders Superstore (☎ 31055; Arutanga) The biggest shop on the island, with several well-stocked aisles, some big deepfreezers and a good range of fruit and vegetables at the rear of the shop (usually best at the start of the week). You can pick up bread and fresh cakes too. There are also sections for groceries, household goods and souvenir items.

Heineken Store (Maki Trading; ☎ 31003; Arutanga) On the main road into Arutanga, this small store is a good option for quick supplies. You can also pick up beer and bottled booze.

There are several small local shops around the island, but their range of goods is very limited. If you're desperate for supplies, then they're worth a look – only the **Four-Ways Store** (☎ 31492), near the airstrip, and **Neibaa's Store** (☎ 31655) in Vaipae are open on Sunday.

Tauono's (opposite) sells the freshest produce on the island, all organically grown in the owner's own orchard and vegetable garden, or at their plantation inland.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

As on Rarotonga, the main after-dark entertainment on Aitutaki is an island night. There's often a slightly different repertoire of songs and dances here, so it's worth going again even if you've already been on Rarotonga. There are twice-weekly shows at the Pacific Resort, the Aitutaki Lagoon Resort, the Coconut Crusher Bar and the Blue Nun, as well as one weekly night at Samade.

None of these places have a cover charge and usually if you don't want the buffet meal you can watch the show for free (as long as you buy some drinks). Island nights including buffet will normally set you back around NZ\$30 to NZ\$35. Most places will come and pick you up from your accommodation if you ring and arrange it beforehand.

Coconut Crusher Bar (☎ 31283; ☺ Mon-Sat) This rough-and-ready, open-walled bar looks like it's been thrown together from spare parts – an odd tin sheet here, a handy piece of plywood there (one of the walls is made entirely from stacked-up bottles). Despite the rickety construction, it's a great place to down an evening drink or catch the excellent island night. There's also a weekly backpackers' night and a DJ at weekends.

Samade on the Beach (☎ 31526; O'otu Beach) Another popular spot for drinking, dinner and island nights, with a great view of the lagoon thrown in for free. The only drawback is the out-of-the-way location; luckily transfers can be arranged. It's particularly popular on Sundays as it's about the only place you can buy booze on the island.

Blue Nun Cafe (☎ 31604; Orongo Centre; ☺ dinner & drinks Tue-Sun) One of the main nightspots on the island, this open-air bar-restaurant is at the end of the Orongo Centre, with views over the lagoon and nearby wharf. There's a tropical-themed dining area, decorated with flowery tablecloths and palm fronds, next to the bar, but it's on the huge concrete dance floor where the action really kicks off after dark – there's usually a live band on Friday night, as well as a couple of top-notch island nights every week.

Puffy's Bar (☎ 31317; ☺ dinner & drinks Mon-Sat) A tiny little bar with a covered veranda, popular with locals and backpackers from nearby Paradise Cove. Cheap booze is mostly served in cans and plastic cups, and basic meals (fish and chips, burgers etcetera) are also available; there's also a weekly island night.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Café Tupuna (☎ 31678; Tautu; mains NZ\$26-29; ☺ dinner) If you're after somewhere to eat out in Aitutaki, then Café Tupuna should be your first choice. Situated away from the coast in the middle of the island, not far from Gina's Garden Lodges, this locally run gourmet restaurant has one of the best reputations on the island, and once you've tasted the food it's easy to see why. Local ingredients and freshly caught seafood, all tinted with an imaginative island flavour, are the staples of the simple menu, supplemented by specials from the chalkboard. The tropical garden setting and colourful furnishings are elegant and unstuffy, and the front wall of the restaurant is left open to the breeze (very welcome on a hot night). It's the kind of place where you can sit back and really feel like you're on holiday rather than having to worry about being on your best behaviour – and if you feel like indulging in a celebratory tippie, the staff can arrange transfers too. Highly recommended.

Black Rock Bar (☎ 31720) The lovely pool-side bar at the Pacific Resort is a great place for an island cocktail or two, but bring your emergency cash – the prices are steep. The management can be a little snooty about nonguests, though if you've booked for dinner or the twice-weekly island night, you should find the welcome a little warmer.

Ru's Beach Bar (☎ 31201; Akitua) This fine bar has a great wooden deck jutting out onto the lagoon, and a cheap cocktail happy hour every night. It's not a particularly convenient option for casual drinks (since you have to catch a ferry here and back), but the island night makes the trip worthwhile.

Aitutaki Game Fishing Club (☎ 31379; Arutanga; ☎ Wed-Sat) Basically just a shack with picnic tables next to the wharf in Arutanga, but a good place for cheap beer and a fishy tale, as well as a beautiful view of the sunset.

SHOPPING

Aitutakian crafts include pandanus purses, bags, mats and hats, white *rito* (bleached pandanus leaf) church hats, shell-and-*rito* fans, shell jewellery, wooden drums, ukeleles, *kikau* (palm leaf) brooms, and colourful *pareu* (sarongs) and T-shirts.

Island crafts and souvenirs are available at a handful of shops in the Orongo Centre, including **Moana Creations** (☎ 31718; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Mon-Sat). Also try some of the small shops around the island, which mostly operate from people's houses; **Anitonia's Handicrafts** (☎ 31207; Vaipae) is worth a look, but the opening hours are somewhat erratic.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Aitutaki's airstrip was built by US forces in WWII. It's the only airport in the Cooks with a two-way runway and, relative to the size of the planes that land here, it's enormous – big enough for Boeing 737s. There are rumours that the airstrip might be developed to cater for larger planes; the tumble-down terminal has recently been rebuilt and is now rather grandly referred to as 'Aitutaki International Airport'. Watch this space.

There are several daily flights from Rarotonga to Aitutaki from Monday to Saturday, as well as one flight on Sunday. Regular fares are NZ\$168 each way; cheaper fares are available if you book early and are happy to lock yourself into a particular flight.

Aitutaki Day Tours run by Air Rarotonga operate from Monday to Saturday, leaving Rarotonga at 8am and returning at 5.30pm. The cost is NZ\$400 per person including flights and tours.

Air Rarotonga also offers an Island Hopper Pass (NZ\$400). The pass includes a round-trip of flights from Rarotonga–Aitutaki–'Atiu–Rarotonga; you're free to select any flights from Rarotonga to Aitutaki and from 'Atiu back to Rarotonga, but there is only one weekly flight from Aitutaki to 'Atiu, which runs on Tuesdays.

The **Air Rarotonga office** (☎ 31888; www.airraro.com; Arutanga) is in a small hut on the main road in Arutanga. There's also an **information desk** (☎ 31347) at the airport.

All the Rarotongan travel agents offer packages for flights, transfers and accommodation on Aitutaki, which can work out cheaper than booking things yourself, though you'll probably have to stick to a pre-defined schedule. Book as early as you can: certain flights and hotels can sell out pretty quickly, and if you leave it too late, chances are your first choices won't be available.

See p179 for more information about Air Rarotonga's flights and multi-island deals.

Boat

See p180 for details on cargo ship services between Rarotonga and Aitutaki. Often a stop on Aitutaki is included in trips from Rarotonga to the Northern Group islands. The narrow reef passage is too hazardous for

large ships to enter, so they are loaded and unloaded outside the reef by barge. Aitutaki, a popular yachting destination, is an official port of entry for the Cook Islands.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Connecting with all arriving and departing flights is **Island Tours** (☎ 31379), a mini-bus transfer service; you'll probably get a whistle-stop tour of the island courtesy of larger-than-life driver Willy on the way to your hotel. The cost is NZ\$10 (each way) to and from the airport. The two resorts and some hotels provide airport transport for their guests.

Car, Motorcycle & Bicycle

Several places on the island rent scooters, cars and bicycles, as do some hotels. Most places will give discounts for weekly rentals.

Popoara Rentals (☎ 31739; www.popoara.com; O'otu Beach) Rents scooters (NZ\$25), cars (from NZ\$65) and small motorised buggies (NZ\$50).

Ranginui's Retreat (☎ 31657; O'otu Beach) Scooters cost NZ\$20 per day.

Rino's Beach Bungalows & Rentals (☎ 31197; Arutanga) The main rental spot on the island; bicycles are NZ\$5 per day, scooters are NZ\$25, and cars and jeeps are between NZ\$70 and NZ\$100.

Swiss Rentals (☎ 31600; Amuri) Bicycles cost NZ\$5 per day and motorbikes NZ\$25.

MANUAE

Collectively known as Manuae, the two tiny uninhabited islets of Manuae and Te Au O Tu (6.2 sq km in area), belong to the people of Aitutaki, 101km to the southeast. In past decades the island was regularly visited by Aitutakians, who came to harvest copra from the island's coconut forests; but Manuae is now officially protected as a marine reserve, and it's become an important breeding ground for marine turtles and many types of seabird.

A traditional 'Atiuan legend says that the first people to establish a settlement on Manuae were two 'Atiuan brothers and their Aitutakian wives. Naturally enough, this version of events is hotly disputed by Aitutakians, who maintain that the island was first discovered by the great Polynesian explorer Ruatapu, a contemporary of Tangi'ia (one of the two great chiefs who settled Rarotonga) and later one of the great chiefs of Aitutaki. Ruatapu is traditionally said to have given the island its name: Manu Enea (land of birds), which later became Manuae. His son Tupui is thought to have christened the other atoll Te-Au-O-Tupui (Kingdom of Tupui), giving rise to the islet's present-day name.

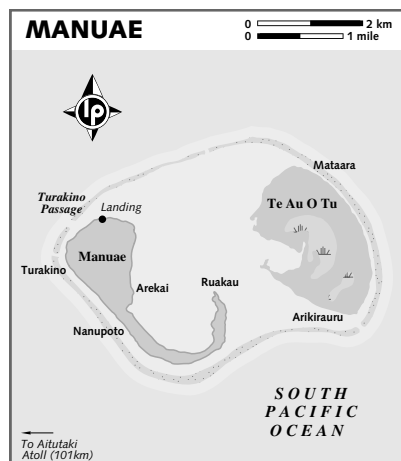
Manuae has the notable honour of being the first of the modern-day Cook Islands to be seen by James Cook. He sped past in 1773, naming it Hervey Island (the name he eventually applied to the entire group). In 1777, on his third and final voyage, Captain Cook stopped and spoke with the inhabitants via his trusty Tahitian interpreter, Omai. Whether it had been settled by 'Atiuans or Aitutakians originally, in 1777 Omai was told that Manuae was under the control of 'Atiu – its people, like those of Ma'u'ke and Mitiaro, subservient to an 'Atiuan *ariki* (chief).

In 1823 the missionary John Williams visited the island and found about 60 inhabitants. However, soon afterwards, a group of Aitutakians gathering coconuts on Manuae were killed by the locals, and the resulting punitive raid all but wiped out Manuae – there were only a dozen or so people left in the late 1820s, and European missionaries transplanted those to Aitutaki.

Later, a series of Europeans made temporary homes here. The best-known was the ubiquitous William Marsters, who in 1863 was moved to Palmerston Atoll with his three wives (see p146) in order to become the island's caretaker.

Manuae was occasionally used as a penal settlement between the 1890s and early 1900s, where prisoners were sent to cut copra before the construction of the Rarotonga jail. Since then it has been uninhabited except for occasional coconut-harvesting visitors from Aitutaki, and the odd (very lucky) fishermen. There's an airstrip on Manuae, visible as you fly over en route from Aitutaki to 'Atiu, but it hasn't been used for many years.

These days it's the birds and turtles that rule Manuae, and if you have an opportunity to visit, you'll be one of the fortunate few. The only vessel that's likely to go anywhere near the island is the *Bounty Bay* (p70), based on Rarotonga, which visits on occasions, although mainly for research purposes.



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