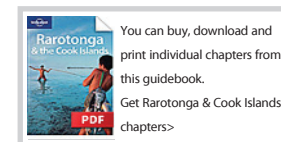


Getting Started



The Cook Islands can be visited as a destination on its own, as a stopover when crossing the Pacific, or as part of a Circle Pacific or round-the-world trip. The vast majority of people visit the Cook Islands as a short stopover on flights across the Pacific, usually staying only a few days on the main island of Rarotonga. But if you can, it's worth allowing at least a couple of weeks to visit some of the outer islands of the Southern Group, where you'll be able to get right off the tourist trail and experience a much more traditional side of the Cook Islands. Many travellers manage to make it over to Aitutaki and its wonderful lagoon, but the other islands are all well worth exploring: 'Atiu with its unique ecology and bird life, Ma'uake with its *makatea* (coral reef) caves and deserted beaches, Mitiaro with its lakes and underground pools, and Mangaia with its towering coral cliffs and inland plantations. And if you're really in search of that desert island atmosphere, you could also consider visiting the far-flung islands of the Northern Group, which most tourists (and, in fact, most Cook Islanders) never see.

WHEN TO GO

The Cook Islands is a great destination all year round; seasonal variations are slight, with temperatures ranging between 18°C and 28°C in the winter months (May to October) and 21°C and 29°C during the summer (November to April). The Cook Islands has a pleasantly even climate year round, with no excesses of temperature or humidity, although it can rain quite often.

Thanks to its high inland mountains, Rarotonga is often quite wet, and although you'd have to be unlucky to suffer one of the rare week-long rainy spells, bring wet-weather gear with you at any time of the year just in case.

The best times of year to visit are around the months of September and October, when there's a nice trade-off between warm temperatures and reduced humidity; March and April are also good months to come, as the cyclone season has passed and the skies are likely to be clear and sunny.

See Climate Chart (p165) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Swimming gear and a beach towel
- Mosquito repellent (50% DEET) and sun cream (at least 20+)
- A torch (flashlight), especially if you're visiting the outer islands
- Rain gear – tropical downpours in the Cook Islands are usually short but heavy
- A pair of old shoes or sneakers for walking in Rarotonga and on the *makatea* (coral reefs) of the Southern Group islands
- Your own snorkelling equipment, if you have it (don't worry if not – you can easily hire gear on Rarotonga)
- A few good, fat books to keep you entertained on those long afternoons and quiet nights
- Spare camera film
- Plenty of patience and a laid-back attitude (to cope with Cook Islands Time)

The wet season is from December through to March, when around 25cm of rain can fall each month; this period is also the most likely time for cyclones, which are becoming more frequent due to warming seas across the South Pacific. On average, a mild cyclone will pass by two or three times a decade, while severe cyclones generally only hit the islands once every 20 years or so – but in 2005, an unprecedented five cyclones tore through the islands in five weeks, suggesting that cyclones may be much more difficult to predict in the future as climate change hits home.

The wet season is also the hottest and most humid time of the year – it can get quite sticky and uncomfortable, so bring along some cool, light clothes. The winter nights can sometimes be quite cool, even chilly, so if you're visiting at this time of year, a warm sweater or jacket will probably come in handy.

The only really tricky time to visit is around the Christmas and New Year period, when many Cook Islanders return home from overseas to celebrate the holiday season with their families. The flights (especially the ones from Australia and New Zealand) can get really packed around this time, and accommodation will be much harder to come by as well. The small planes to the outer islands are also generally booked up months in advance and you'll have a tough time getting a seat at this time of year.

COSTS & MONEY

The Cook Islands is a midway point on the South Pacific price ladder; it's more expensive than Fiji, but prices are nowhere near the horrendous levels of Tahiti and French Polynesia. Rarotonga is steadily repackaging itself to cater for slightly fewer travellers with slightly deeper pockets. The price of accommodation will be your major outlay – generally prices for a private bungalow on Rarotonga start at around NZ\$120 upwards, although there are plenty of budget rooms available in hostels and guesthouses for between NZ\$20 and NZ\$80. Solo travellers will find accommodation particularly expensive in the Cook Islands – prices tend to be given for the room or villa, rather than per person.

Budget travellers should be able to get away with spending between NZ\$40 and NZ\$75 a day if you're happy to stay in a hostel, cook your own food, and you're not planning on doing too many organised activities; NZ\$100 will allow you to explore a few of the island's restaurants and bars as well. Midrange travellers staying in a nice private villa should plan on about NZ\$250 to NZ\$350 a day per couple, which will include a few meals out, tours and activities, though you could bring costs down by self-catering, renting a house (p84) and looking after your own entertainment. Top-end travellers could easily find themselves forking out in excess of NZ\$700 a day, staying in luxury villas or resorts, eating at the best restaurants and doing all the organised activities on offer.

The Cook Islands is heavily dependent on imports (primarily from New Zealand) and there's a healthy slug on top of New Zealand prices to cover the shipping costs (shipping is a major element in the high prices of most Pacific islands). This is especially noticeable in the food prices, which are quite steep in comparison to the US, New Zealand and Australia.

Many visitors to the Cooks come on all-inclusive package holidays. Check out the packages available from travel agents; sometimes you can

get accommodation-and-air-fare packages for about the same price as air fare only, or even less! Don't feel bound by the package terms: there's usually nothing stopping you from taking five days in relatively luxurious accommodation as part of your package and then moving into a hostel for another couple of weeks.

A 12.5% value-added tax (VAT) is figured into the quoted price of just about everything. If a price is quoted to you 'plus tax' or 'plus VAT', you must add 12.5% to see what you'll actually pay. If you're staying at a resort that includes VAT in its restaurant prices and you're charging meals to your room, make sure you don't get VAT added again when you pay the bill.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

The South Pacific has long been a favourite escape for writers and artists, and the Cook Islands is no exception. There has been a surprising number of books written about the Cooks, including some real classics, but sadly many are out of print and you will have to search libraries or second-hand bookshops if you want to find them. Most of the following titles can be found in the bookshops around Avarua (p51), or you can borrow them from the Cook Islands Library & Museum Society (p51) or the National Library (p55) by signing up for a temporary borrower's card.

An Island to Oneself by Tom Neale (see the boxed text, p159) is the quintessential Cook Islands read. It was written by a New Zealander who voluntarily stranded himself on the remote island of Suvarrow over several extended periods in the 1950s and 1960s and is an evocative, well-written book that gets to the heart of our enduring fascination with desert islands.

Robert Dean Frisbie is another famous Cook Islands character, an American who gave up the luxuries of Western life to run a tiny shop on the island of Pukapuka during the 1920s. His classic accounts of his life in the Cook Islands include titles such as *The Book of Pukapuka* and *Island of Desire*. The latter contains his first-hand account of the savage cyclone that swept through the island of Suvarrow in 1942 – an incident he only managed to survive by tying himself and his children to coconut trees.

Frisbie's daughter Florence 'Johnny' Frisbie is also a talented writer – her book *The Frisbies of the South Seas* is well worth seeking out (in fact, you can probably get your copy signed – Johnny Frisbie still works in the Cook Islands Library in Avarua).

The Miss Tutti-Frutti Contest by the award-winning travel writer Graham Lay includes three chapters on the Cook Islands, as well as several other tales from his travels in the rest of the South Pacific.

From *Kauri Trees to Sunlit Seas: Shoestring Shipping in the South Pacific* is an entertaining yarn about the glory days of inter-island shipping in the South Seas, written by Don Silk, an ex-skipper and notorious local character in the Cooks. Expect plenty of tall tales and shaggy (sea)dog stories, as well an interesting chapter about the author's meeting with Tom Neale.

How to Get Lost & Found in the Cook Islands by John and Bobbye McDermott is another in the Air New Zealand-funded series by a Hawaiian ex-adman, with entertaining stories from most of the Cook Islands. The quirky writing style won't be to everyone's taste, and the hard facts are a little outdated these days, but it's still a very decent beach read.

HOW MUCH?

Bus ticket NZ\$3

Internet access per hour
NZ\$9

Island night & buffet
NZ\$50

Guided tour NZ\$50

Midrange private villa on
Rarotonga with sundeck
NZ\$250

See also Lonely Planet
Index, inside front cover.

'There has been a surprising number of books written about the Cooks'

TOP FIVES & TENS**Five Favourite Festivals**

For more on these and other festivals, see p77 and p167.

- Dancer of the Year (April)
- Gospel Day Celebrations (25 July on Rarotonga, 26 October on other islands)
- Constitution Celebrations (late July/August)
- Tiare Flower Festival (November)
- Vaka Eiva Canoe Race (November)

Top 10 Scenic Sights

Here's a quick rundown of the top natural wonders in the Cook Islands.

- The view from Te Rua Manga (p64; otherwise known as the Needle) on Rarotonga
- The Takitumu Conservation Area (p67) on Rarotonga, home to the endangered *kakerori*
- Aitutaki's fabulous glittering-blue lagoon (p100)
- Anatakitaki (the Cave of the Kopeka; p115) on 'Atiu
- Motuanga (the Cave of 100 Rooms; p125) on Ma'uuke
- Mitiaro's 'natural swimming pool', Vai Nauri (p133)
- The *makatea* cliffs of Mangaia (p136)
- The scattered islands of Manihiki (p150) and its pristine lagoon
- The unspoiled marine reserve of Takutea (p122)
- Suwarrow, the most remote island in the Cooks, and the country's only national park (p158)

Top 10 Island Activities

By the time you step onto the plane to leave the Cook Islands, make sure you've done the following:

- Danced at an island night (see the boxed text, p87)
- Visited a *marae*, such as Arai-Te-Tonga Marae (p63)
- Snorkelled with tropical fish (p68)
- Swum in the Aitutaki Lagoon (p100)
- Picnicked on a *motu* (p100)
- Hiked across Rarotonga (p64)
- Tried the food at an *umukai* (see the boxed text, p43)
- Taken a scenic flight (p71)
- Bought some handicrafts (p170)
- Visited an underground cave (p162)

INTERNET RESOURCES

As always, the Internet is an absolutely invaluable resource for planning your trip. You can book hotels and cheap flights, buy books, check weather patterns, get advice from fellow travellers and find plenty of background info on the Cooks before you even leave home – in fact most of the hard research and planning work will probably be done by the time you arrive, leaving plenty of time to get out and explore the islands themselves.

The main Lonely Planet website (www.lonelyplanet.com) is one of the best all-round travel sites on the net, with loads of destination info, an online shop, and the invaluable Thorn Tree forum, where you can post questions and queries to fellow travellers before you go.

Most businesses and hotels on Rarotonga and Aitutaki have websites or email addresses, so you can easily contact them in advance if you've got questions or you want to enquire about availability. If you can't find the one you're looking for, try searching at the online Yellow Pages (www.yellowpages.co.ck). The main Internet suffix in the Cooks is .co.ck – perhaps not the wisest choice in retrospect.

Air New Zealand (www.airnewzealand.com) Check out flight schedules and prices at the site of the main airline flying to the Cooks.

Air Rarotonga (www.airraro.com) Find out about inter-island flights and book tickets at the website of the Cook Islands' only domestic airline.

Atiu Tourism Society (www.atiutourism.com) Great site if you're planning on visiting 'Atiu; also check out www.atiu.info.

Cook Islands (www.ck) Useful site for all-round Cook Islands information, including pages on most of the individual islands, as well as some useful stuff on history, culture, geography, accommodation and general activities.

Cook Islands Herald (www.ciherald.co.ck) The website of this weekly newspaper offers online access to all the recent news features and regular opinion columns, including the ever-controversial Island Comment.

Cook Islands News (www.cinews.co.ck) The online edition of this daily newspaper is great for finding out about current events in the Cook Islands.

Cook Islands Tourist Authority (www.cook-islands.com) The main website for the Cook Islands tourist information office, with comprehensive info on accommodation, activities and practical travel details.

Kia Orana (www.kiaorana.com) Myths, legends and images of each of the Cook Islands.

Ministry of Cultural Development (www.culture.gov.ck) Contains useful background on culture and history and a calendar of upcoming events.

Telecom Cook Islands (www.oyster.net.ck) Searchable telephone directories: white pages and yellow pages (with company websites), plus an email directory.

The two main travel agents on Rarotonga, **Jetsave** (www.jetsave.co.ck) and **Island Hopper** (www.islandhoppervacations.com), have websites that carry a range of general information about travelling around the Cook Islands.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

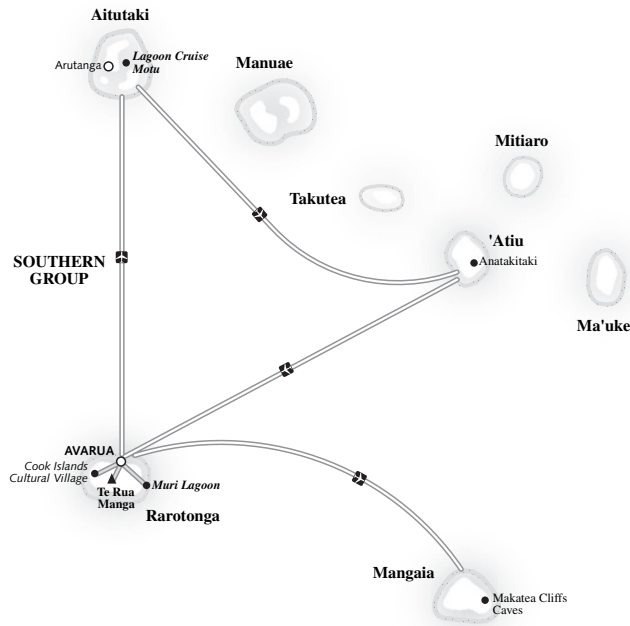
SOUTHERN SIGHTS

Two Weeks

The Southern Group islands are easily accessible from Rarotonga. If you haven't got enough time, consider just visiting the first three islands; but if you can manage to do the whole route, you won't regret it.

Start your trip with four days on Rarotonga, which should give you time to cover the major sights: a stroll around the island's capital, **Avarua** (p56); a hike up the Cross-Island Track to **Te Rua Manga** (p64); a day's snorkelling in **Muri Lagoon** (p63); and a visit to the **Cook Islands Cultural Village** (p62). Don't forget to check out an **island night** (p87) while you're here. Then hop on a plane for the 50-minute flight to **Aitutaki** (p96), hire a scooter and explore the island. A **lagoon cruise** (p101) is essential, but you could also consider hiring a kayak to explore some of the deserted **motu** (islets; p103) around the lagoon's edge. Stop by the CICC Church in **Arutanga** (p99) if you can for some of the Cook Island's trademark choral singing. Then it's another short hop to 'Atiu, where you can visit **Anatakitaki** (p115), the cave of the *kopeka* ('Atiuan swiftlet); sample the island's home-grown **coffee** (p116); and take a memorable **eco-tour** (p119). Back to Rarotonga and onto another quick flight to **Mangaia** (p136) and its extraordinary **caves** (p139) and vast **makatea cliffs** (p139), perhaps the most dramatic sight anywhere in the Cooks.

This four-island voyage takes you on a whistlestop tour of the main sights of the Southern Group, from the main islands of Rarotonga and Aitutaki over to eco-friendly 'Atiu and mysterious Mangaia.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

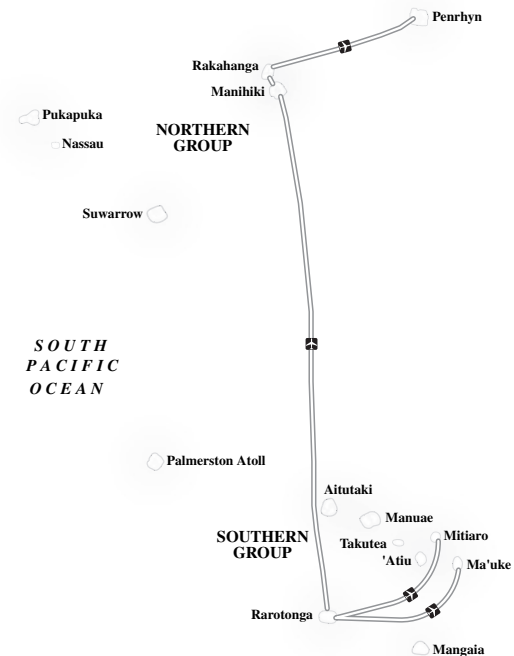
Four to Six Weeks

For those hardy travellers who are really keen to get off the beaten track, how about visiting the distant islands of the Northern Group? They're a long, long way from the busy main island of Rarotonga, and that makes them a fantastic place to experience and appreciate traditional Cook Islands culture.

You could start your voyage of discovery with the classic trip around the Southern Group islands, and then possibly tack on the other two islands – tiny **Mitiaro** (p130) with its lovely underground pools and **Ma'u'ke** (p123), the garden island, with its deserted beaches and historic caves.

Then it's back to Rarotonga as a springboard to the real adventure. You could catch a plane all the way to the Northern Group islands, but the most adventurous way to get to the northern islands is via inter-island freighter all the way to **Manihiki** (p150), the black-pearl capital of the Cook Islands, with its tiny coral atolls and massive natural lagoon.

With a bit of luck your boat will then move on to isolated **Rakahanga** (p152), or if it's not stopping there, straight on to **Penrhyn** (p154), where life is still lived very much along traditional lines. You'll have plenty of time to get to know the islanders and practise your fishing skills – but don't plan on going home too soon, as the next boat might not be around for a while...



A once-in-a-lifetime trip to all the major Cook Islands, from the Southern Group islands right up to the coral atolls and black-pearl farms of Penrhyn and Manihiki.

TAILORED TRIPS

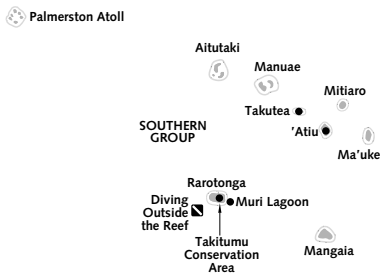
WILD WALKS

Start on Rarotonga at the **Takitumu Conservation Area** (p67), where you should catch sight of the endangered *kakerori* (Rarotongan flycatcher), before heading inland to check out the island's wild mountain tracks and inland valleys.

Then jump into the water for a fascinating snorkelling tour around **Muri Lagoon** (p63) or a **diving trip** (p69) in the deep ocean outside the reef. Here, you'll be amazed by walls of coral, tropical fish, eagle rays, sharks, and even the odd humpback whale in season.

On Aitutaki, you can explore the **lagoon** (p100) for views of giant clams and sea turtles, while on 'Atiu you'll be able to visit **Anatakitaki** (p115), home of the *kopekaka*. Look out too for fruit doves, coconut crabs and kingfishers.

Then for the crowning glory it's a boat trip aboard the research vessel *Bounty Bay* to visit the natural wonderland of **Takutea** (p122), rumoured to have some of the best diving in the entire South Pacific.



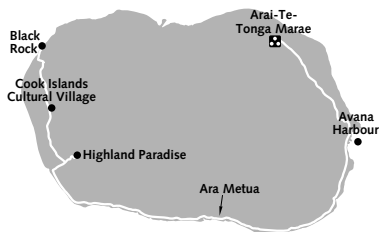
HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS

It might not be the thing that initially attracts visitors to the Cooks, but most people soon find themselves getting caught up with the rich culture and history of the islands. This tour takes in all the major spots.

Start at **Arai-Te-Tonga Marae** (p63) near Avarua, once one of the most important *marae* on Rarotonga, then head over to **Highland Paradise** (p62), located high on the west side of the island on the site of an ancient vil-

lage. Take some time to explore the **Ara Metua** (p51), the ancient coral road built by one of Rarotonga's first chiefs, and book yourself a visit at the **Cook Islands Cultural Village** (p62) for an introduction to traditional skills and an atmospheric cultural show. Don't forget to visit **Avana Harbour** (see the boxed text, p67), from where the great *vaka* (canoes) left Rarotonga for New Zealand, and **Black Rock** (p61), on the northwest side of the island, which is traditionally believed to be where the spirits leave for the afterlife.

If you've got extra time, there are more *marae*, historical buildings and ancient sites to discover on 'Atiu (p112) and **Mangaia** (p136).



Snapshot

It's a time of change in the Cook Islands. New buildings are springing up everywhere you look. There's a new prime minister in charge, Jim Marurai (the first Mangaian to hold the post). And the streets into Avarua, Rarotonga's main town, are just starting to get to grips with that most modern of inconveniences – the rush-hour traffic jam.

There's no doubt that the islands have undergone considerable change in recent years. In a relatively short space of time, the main island of Rarotonga has been transformed from a sleepy South Pacific hideaway into a cosmopolitan, paid-up member of the modern world. These days you're more likely to see a Cook Islander sipping a cappuccino than drinking from a freshly picked coconut, and the price of a New Zealand air ticket is probably of greater importance to most people than the investiture of a new *mataiapo* (chief). For a country that's renowned for its laid-back attitude towards time, the pace of change is unnerving, and as the tempo gets ever faster, many local people are starting to question the long-term direction in which the islands are moving.

The main engine driving the Cook Islands forward is undoubtedly tourism, an industry which continues to grow at a phenomenal rate. In 2005 the islands said *kia orana* (hello) to over 80,000 tourists, and it's now by far the country's biggest employer – over a third of the country's workforce are employed in jobs that are in some way related to the tourist industry. While tourist money provides a much-needed source of revenue for the islands, in a country of just over 14,000 people, that's a lot of visitors to handle – and the signs are that the upward trend looks set to continue.

Depopulation, especially from the outer islands, is another major headache for the powers-that-be. Well over 75,000 Cook Islanders now live overseas, mostly in New Zealand and Australia, and many of the islands are struggling to persuade their young people to forego the big bucks and bright lights of Auckland and Sydney in favour of a more traditional lifestyle back home.

Land, church, inheritance and family are all omnipresent issues in most people's lives, but perhaps the most pressing problem for the Cook Islands is one that lies almost entirely beyond its own control. Global warming hit home in a big way in 2005, when five devastating cyclones ripped through the islands in the space of five weeks – traditionally the Cooks could expect one such cyclone every 20 years. It's a clear sign that something's changing in the climate of the South Pacific.

But thankfully it's not all doom and gloom. Politics – practically a national sport in the Cook Islands – is as lively, colourful and controversial as ever, and the heated argument over the new Unit Titles Act (p26) has really got the fur flying. Many traditional arts, including the ancient sport of *vaka* (canoe) racing, are currently enjoying something of a renaissance, and the islands are becoming much more aware of the value of preserving their indigenous history and heritage. But as always, it's the all-consuming passion for dance and music that gets most Cook Islanders really fired up. The first *Raro Idol* competition was recently held on Rarotonga and the six finalists found themselves splashed all across the local newspapers and national TV, becoming minor celebrities in the process.

Unlike many nations in an increasingly globalised and interdependent world, it's not who they are that Cook Islanders really need to worry about. The real issue is where they might be heading.

FAST FACTS

Population according to 2001 census: 14,990

Estimated number of pigs in the Cook Islands: 16,000

Land area: 238 sq km

Sea area: 1.8 million sq km

Average life expectancy: 69.8 years

Ratio of annual tourists to residents: 5:1

Value of exported goods: NZ\$11 million

Cost of imported goods: NZ\$112 million

Annual hours of sunshine: 2246

Drop in Southern Group population since last census: 26.2%

The Authors

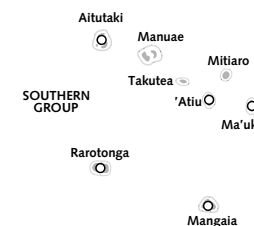


OLIVER BERRY

Oliver's first trip to the Cook Islands was as a short stopover on a long haul to New Zealand, a visit that was meant to last eight days and ended up lasting eight weeks. He's since travelled widely across the islands of the South Pacific and picked up a few useful skills along the way, including how to catch sand crabs with your bare hands, some top tips for beating a tribal chief at poker, and an excellent Samoan recipe for homemade mosquito repellent. He's been trying to find an excuse to return to the Cook Islands ever since that first unforgettable trip; writing a guidebook is the best one yet.

My Favourite Trip

Nothing can beat skimming across the Southern Group islands in a tiny 12-seater plane, watching the great blue Pacific roll out beneath you as another new tropical island looms on the distant horizon. I always begin a trip to the Cook Islands with a few days on the 'big island' of Rarotonga (p47) – mooching around the market, snacking on some freshly made *ika mata*, and buzzing round the coast on a motor-scooter. Then it's a short skip over to the enigmatic island of Mangaia (p136), where the *makatea* cliffs tower over the landscape, followed by a few days visiting old friends at an 'Atiuan *tumunu* (p120) and a quick visit to the underground caves and deserted beaches on Ma'uke (p123). Last stop? No question – it just has to be a sunset swim in the glittering lagoon of Aitutaki (p96). With the wind rustling through the palms and a white moon shining across the water, the real world will never seem so far away.



ERROL HUNT

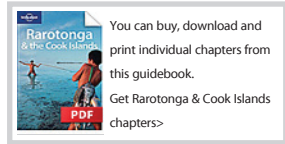
After growing up in Whakatane, New Zealand, Errol moved to a wee town called Hamilton where he bluffed his way through a physics degree. That led him across the Tasman, where he bluffed his way through five years working for a moderately nasty mining company before joining Lonely Planet. There he was coordinating author of the first edition of *South Pacific* and has written for various other Pacific/New Zealand titles. He spends most of his time, however, as commissioning editor for the Australia Pacific region. He is still bluffing.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are independent, dedicated travellers. They don't research using just the Internet or phone, and they don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage. They travel widely, to all the popular spots and off the beaten track. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, cafés, bars, galleries, palaces, museums and more – and they take pride in getting all the details right, and telling it how it is. For more, see the authors section on www.lonelyplanet.com.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHOR

Michael Sorokin Dr Sorokin has extensive experience as a physician and GP in South Africa, the UK, the Pacific islands and rural South Australia. He has special interests in rheumatology, infectious diseases and preventative medicine. He was recently awarded the Order of Fiji in recognition of his services to health care in Fiji. Dr Sorokin is partly responsible for the maintenance of the Travel Doctor TMVC Database and helps with reference material for the continuing education of Travel Doctor TMVC medical staff.



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