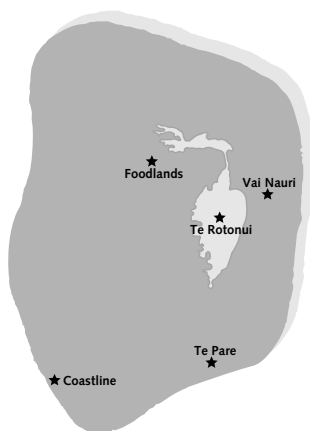


# Mitiaro

The minuscule island of Mitiaro is one of the least visited of the Southern Group, and while it might not have the glorious beaches or dramatic scenery of Aitutaki and Rarotonga, it's still a rewarding island to visit. Home to just a couple of hundred people, and barely 6km across at its widest point, Mitiaro is a great place to get to grips with traditional culture. The islanders still live in much the same way as their ancient ancestors, farming, fishing and trading with nearby islands (although these days they're helped by a few modern conveniences such as electricity and motor scooters). Like the other *makatea* (raised coral reef) islands, Mitiaro is riddled with deep caves, including the stunning underground pool of Vai Nauri, but it also has plenty of history to explore – the remains of the only known fort in the Cook Islands is hidden away in the *makatea* along the island's southern coast.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Taking a dip in Mitiaro's natural swimming pool, **Vai Nauri** (p133)
- Visiting the ruins of the coral fort at **Te Pare** (p133)
- Having a picnic at the island's largest lake, **Te Rotonui** (p134)
- Cruising around Mitiaro's deserted **coastline** (p133), either on foot or by scooter
- Exploring the lush plantations, known as the **foodlands** (p134), at the centre of the island



■ POPULATION: 236

■ AREA: 22.3 SQ KM

## HISTORY

The history of Mitiaro (traditionally known as Nukuroa) is bound up with nearby 'Atiu and its warlike ways. Like Ma'uke, the island was repeatedly raided by 'Atiuan warriors, but there are two particular battles which are important in this island's history. The first involves the arrival of an 'Atiuan war party led by the legendary warrior Maui. In order to avoid bloodshed, the Mitiaroans threw a great feast to which the 'Atiuan warriors were invited, but the Mitiaroans betrayed their guests and killed them while they were grating coconuts for the feast. The only survivor of the massacre was Maui, who escaped the island and fled back to 'Atiu.

Fearing bloody retribution, the Mitiaroan warrior Maaro constructed a stronghold deep in the razor-sharp *makatea* – the fort of Te Pare. Before long a huge war party from 'Atiu arrived, led by the great *ariki* (chief) Rongomatane, and though the fort initially proved a challenging obstacle for the 'Atiuans, Mitiaro's warriors were eventually overcome. The small and declining population on Mitiaro today is thought to be almost entirely descended from raiding 'Atiuan warriors.

The Reverend John Williams arrived on Mitiaro on 29 July 1823 accompanied by Rongomatane and the island was soon converted to Christianity, and 'Atiu officially remained in control of Mitiaro until 1902, when New Zealand established the Cook Islands as an overseas protectorate.

Before Christianity arrived in Mitiaro, the people lived in inland villages – Taurangi, Atai, Auta, Mangarei and Takaue. As occurred on Rarotonga, when the missionaries came they moved the people out to the coast, where they built a village around the church. The old village sites are now the plantation areas where the food is grown.

## THE CULTURE

Even within the Cooks, Mitiaro is a tiny island. Practically all the islanders are related to one another, and everyone seems to have family here, there and everywhere, as well as on Ma'uke, 'Atiu, Rarotonga and further afield. Unsurprisingly, this can make finding a spouse rather difficult – the lack of decent marital material is one of the main reasons for the population drain to

Rarotonga and New Zealand, along with the limited economic prospects for the island's younger generation. As on many of the outer islands, most of the population is either under 18 or over 50, with almost no-one in between.

However, since practically everyone on Mitiaro is a relative, there's a strong community spirit and a high degree of cooperation. There's not much money around, but agriculture and fishing produce abundant yields; there's a lot of sharing and everyone gets what they need. Most people on Mitiaro now live in Western-style houses, but usually have a few traditionally thatched outbuildings used as cookhouses or fishing shacks. A few people even live in these traditional huts – look out for the occasional electricity meter hooked up onto the side of a pandanus-roofed hut!

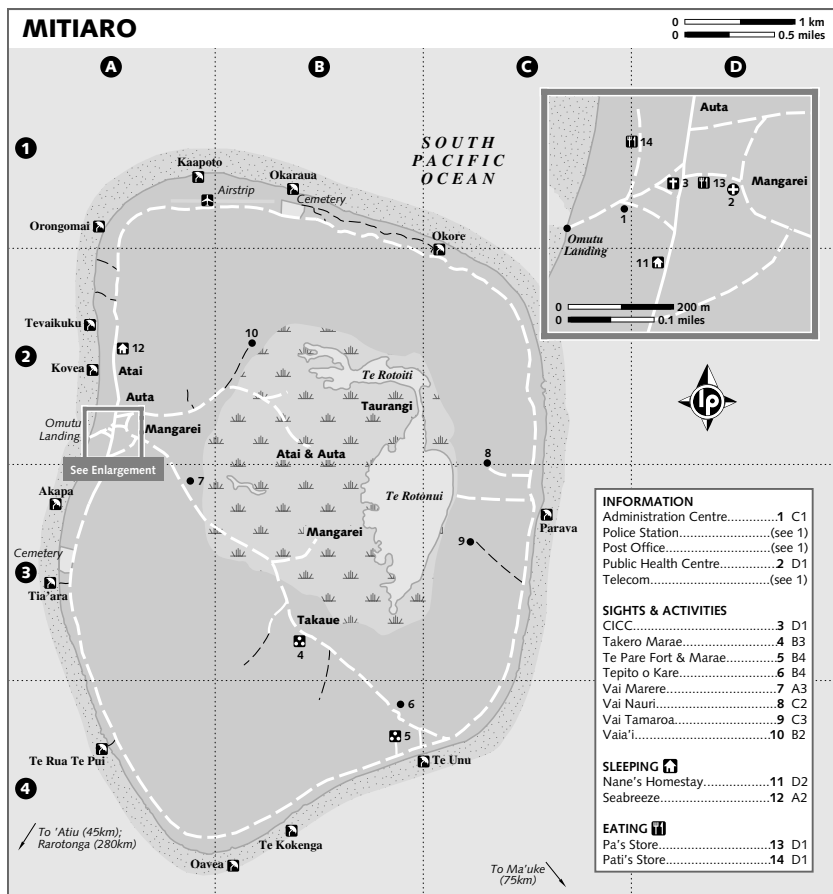
Mitiaro has three *ariki* titles – To'u, Tetava and Te Ma'eu. Mitiaro, with Pukapuka and Mangaia, differs from other Cook Islands in that there is no central land court; land is distributed by family agreement and when disputes arise, they're settled by the three *ariki*.

## ENVIRONMENT

Mitiaro is tiny (just 6km across and 16km in circumference) and astonishingly flat. Like its sister islands nearby, Mitiaro is ringed by a raised-coral, limestone outer plain, the *makatea*, which rises to a maximum of 9m above sea level. The interior plantations on the island's central plateau are barely 3m higher than the *makatea* at their highest point; much of the interior of Mitiaro is swampland, barely a metre above the ocean's surface. Two parts of this swamp are deep enough to be considered lakes: the prosaically named Te Rotonui (Big Lake) and Te Rotoiti (Small Lake). Unlike Ma'uke and 'Atiu, Mitiaro has little coastal forest; much of the exterior *makatea* is surprisingly barren, home to only the hardest plants.

## INFORMATION

Electricity is available daily from 5am to midnight, and 24 hours on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Make sure to bring plenty of cash with you, since it can be difficult to change money on Mitiaro and you'll find that many places don't accept credit



cards. There's no 24-hour public phone but when Telecom is open you can make toll calls or Kia Orana card calls. Fresh water on Mitiaro often gets mixed up with saltwater, so you should avoid drinking water from the tap.

As on Ma'u'ke, there are a few essential items to bring to Mitiaro: good walking shoes, a torch (flashlight), industrial-strength mosquito repellent and some emergency food supplies. The food shops have a very limited selection of goods.

The **island secretary** (☎ 36108; fax 36157) and the mayor have offices in the Administration Centre. **Julian Aupuni** (☎ 36180) is Mitiaro's tourism officer – ask for him at the Administration Centre.

**Administration Centre** (near wharf)

**Police station** (☎ 36150, 36122) In the Administration Centre.

**Post office** (☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) In the Administration Centre.

**Public health centre** (☎ 36120; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) This small centre is east of the CICC, beside the community hall; emergency cases are sent by plane to Rarotonga.

**Telecom** (☎ 36680; ☎ 8-10am & 1-3pm) In the Administration Centre.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Be prepared to ward off mosquitoes when you come to Mitiaro; much of the island is covered by either lake or soggy swampland, providing an ideal breeding ground.

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES Beaches, Caves & Pools

Mitiaro has some fine little beaches and at low tide the reef is excellent for walking on all the way around the island. Most of the beaches are small and few are signposted, so you'll have to keep your eyes peeled while you're driving around the main coast track – the nicest is probably **Tia'ara Beach** on the island's western side. The reef is also generally very shallow, so don't plan on too much swimming or snorkelling.

Having said that, Mitiaro is a fantastic place for a dip – but the best swimming spots aren't in the encircling lagoon, but deep inland, hidden away in the rocky *makatea*. Mitiaro has some of the most beautiful **underground pools** of any of the Southern Group islands. The water in the pools, as well as in the lakes and the swamp, rises and falls with the tide, riding on top of the saltwater lens beneath the island.

Best of all is **Vai Nauri**, Mitiaro's huge 'natural swimming pool' on the eastern side of the island near the lakes. The deep, brilliant-blue pool is found at the base of a large limestone cavern, decorated with stalactites and tall pillars of brown rock. You can reach the water either by climbing down some rickety steps on one side and wading in, or by going around to the other side and leaping off the 3m cliff, as the locals kids do (screaming as you leap is apparently compulsory). It's a fabulous, otherworldly spot; floating in the silent cavern, listening to drops of water fall from the roof like rain, is a truly memorable experience. Then again, when the local kids descend on the cave after school and at weekends, you can throw any thoughts of peace and tranquility out the window, so you might as well join in the fun. There's a dirt road right up to Vai Nauri.

A 10-minute walk from the village on the Takaue road, near Pape Neke's house, **Vai Marere** is the only sulphur pool in the Cook Islands. It's only just visible from the main road, but as you duck into the cave it broadens out into a gloomy cavern covered with stalactites. The water is darker than in other pools, possibly due to the sulphur content, but it's refreshingly cool and the minerals make your skin and hair feel silky soft after a dip. Locals swear that the water

has healing properties, especially for skin complaints such as eczema and psoriasis.

**Vai Tamaroa's** open-air pool is reached by a tricky 15-minute walk across sharp *makatea* from the coast road; the start of the track is marked by a fallen sign commemorating a 1980s Boys Brigade project. The rough, uneven track is only rarely used, so it's quite faint in places, but you can get there without a guide if you take care to watch the path. The pool is at the bottom of a deep circular hole with walls a good 10m high – apparently it's a popular swimming spot with the locals, but how they manage to climb out is anyone's guess. Mitiaro's women hold their *terevai* gatherings (see the boxed text, p134) at both Vai Tamaroa and Vai Nauri.

Much of the *makatea* on Mitiaro is covered by thick bush and sandalwood trees – you might come across a few locals taking sandalwood cuttings on your way to the caves. **Vaia'i**, or Sandalwood Cave, in Mitiaro's north has a good freshwater swimming hole, but people rarely go there nowadays because the track is difficult to find.

**Tepito o Kare** is a freshwater cave that was often used as a drinking hole by fishermen returning from Te Unu Beach in days gone by.

## Marae & Fort

You'll need a guide to find Mitiaro's *marae* (ancient open-air meeting grounds) and historical sites, as most are on private land.

**Takero Marae** is one of the few easily accessible *marae* on the island, on the inland road south of 'town' beneath an ancient chestnut tree. This area is where the old Takaue village used to stand. Casting around among the undergrowth you might find the huge stone seat of the *ariki*, and there are several old graves nearby.

Mitiaro's main historical site is the ruined **Te Pare Fort**, in the southwest of the island, constructed as an impregnable defence against 'Atiuan raids by the famous Mitiaroan warrior Maaro. Hidden and protected by the surrounding *makatea*, the fort is built on top of an underground cavern where people congregated in times of danger, while above was a lookout tower from which approaching canoes could be seen. It's thought that the coral walls of the fort once stood at least 6m high, though

now only a few broken rocks and stones remain.

Footsteps could be easily heard on the fort's stone pathway, and Te Pare's small *marae* ensured there was spiritual as well as physical protection. Nevertheless, a war party led by the 'Atiuan chief Rongomatane found the fort by standing on tall Te Pooki Ikei rock nearby. They attacked, standing on their war clubs to protect their feet from the sharp *makatea*, and overpowered the defenders. The current three *ariki* of Mitiaro are descended from the foremost Mitiaro warriors, appointed by the 'Atiuan conquerors to represent the three *ariki* of 'Atiu.

The only guide to Te Pare fort is Mitiaro's tourism officer, Julian Aupuni (opposite).

## Plantations

Mitiaro's most fertile soil is found inland in the peaty plantation areas near the island's centre, known locally as **foodlands**. Back in the old days, people set up their villages near to where they grew their food, but when houses were moved to the coast by missionaries in the 1800s, families continued to use their old central plantation areas. Nowadays there are roads across the *makatea* to the plantations. The peaceful back roads and lush plantations are well worth a look; you can easily drive there, although many people still make the long trip on foot.

## CICC

The white-painted CICC (Cook Islands Christian Church) – the third church the London Missionary Society (LMS) built in the Cooks – with its blue trim, stained-glass windows and parquet ceiling decorated with black and white stars is a fine sight, and the singing on Sunday is, as usual, superb. Mitiaro also has a small Catholic church and an Assembly of God church.

## Lakes

Mitiaro is also unique for its two lakes, **Te Rotonui** (Big Lake) and **Te Rotoiti** (Small Lake), home to the island's famous *itiki* (eels). The eels – a local delicacy – are caught at night by blinding them with a light and then whacking them with a bush knife. They can also be caught by baited hooks, or by hooking them around the body and hoisting them out of the water. Rather confusingly, the larger eels are known as

## TEREVAI

The women of Mitiaro have a grand old custom known as *terevai*. On special occasions, such as when family visits over Christmas, a group of women get together and go to one of the island's pools (Vai Nauri and Vai Tamaroa are the two favourites). On the way they sing the old bawdy songs of their ancestors – many of them action songs – with graphic movements accompanying the lyrics. The mood gets exuberantly racy and by the time the women have trekked out to the pool, everyone is in high spirits. Once at the pool, order reasserts itself, but only for a short while: a prayer, a hymn and a chant precede a wild, synchronised leap into the water. (At Vai Tamaroa, only the nimble make the leap, because it's a long, difficult climb back out.)

*tuna* – local fishermen say some can reach the thickness of a man's thigh. Milkfish, another renowned delicacy, are also plentiful in the lakes, due to a Japanese project stocking the lakes with fish brought from Aitutaki, Penrhyn and Hawaii.

The only easy way to reach Mitiaro's lakes is via the road leading right up to the shore of Te Rotonui. There's a small clearing at the side of the lake shore that makes a nice spot for a picnic and has great views across the silvery water.

## QUIRKY MITIARO

Look out for the graves around Mitiaro – many are festooned with some rather unusual decorations. Mitiaro has a tradition that the possessions of the deceased are left at their headstone. Most of the graves are decorated with plates, bowls and cutlery so that the spirit of the deceased can eat their meals on their own dinnerware – sometimes you'll even see a full set of pots and pans. For a month or two after death, the family lays food out at the graveside until it's felt that the spirit has departed, but the plates and cutlery are left behind. Tin or enamel bowls and cups adorn older graves, while newer ones have more modern plates and cutlery – you'll also sometimes see graves covered with medicine bottles and, poignantly, the odd baby's bottle or tiny shoe.

The cemetery on the island's north side is the most interesting, with a few modern-style cement tombs and older graves simply marked by an upright slab of coral. Another cemetery, an easy walk south of town, also has supplies left for the departed. If you're on the island for Turama (All Soul's Day) on 1 November, you'll see many families making candlelit processions to lay flower garlands and fragrant 'ei on the graves.

## TOURS

**Julian Aupuni** (☎ 36180) Mitiaro's tourism officer is the only guide with permission to lead tours to Te Pare Fort. A short island tour is included in the NZ\$30 price tag. **Papa Neke** Leads tours around the island's main sights, and you'll also visit his beautiful inland retreat, with its orchard and vegetable garden. He can be contacted through Seabreeze (see below).

## SLEEPING & EATING

**Seabreeze** (☎ 36153; r per person NZ\$75 incl meals) The longest-running (and for many years the only) visitor accommodation on the island, run by a local family on the outskirts of town. There are a couple of rooms inside the main house and a spacious self-contained unit out the back; the facilities are pretty basic, but the welcome is very warm and there's a small store on site. Seabreeze rents out bicycles (NZ\$10 per day) and motorbikes (NZ\$25) and can organise local tours.

**Nane's Homestay** (☎ 36107; s/d NZ\$35/45) The only other place to stay on Mitiaro is with Nane Pokoati, a local *mataiapo* (head of a subtribe) and a bubbly, friendly host. There are no private rooms, just beds in a communal sleeping area in Nane's large modern house, but there's a large kitchen and all your meals will be cooked for you. Nane's is a great option if you're looking to experience village life on the island.

There are a couple of tiny stores on Mitiaro, but the supplies are very limited. Seabreeze's shop has most of the essentials (and sells beer and ice-cream). Alternatively you could try **Pati's Store** (☎ 36003) or **Pa's Store** (☎ 36155).

## ENTERTAINMENT

Let's be honest – you don't come to Mitiaro for the nightlife. There are occasional village events in the church hall in town, but otherwise, you'll be making your own entertainment. A pack of cards might come in handy.

## SHOPPING

Mitiaro women make a variety of woven pandanus products for everyday use, including floor mats, table mats, fans, handbags, baskets and the like. The artistic speciality of Mitiaro menfolk, on the other hand, is carved wooden bowls. Sadly, none of the islanders are particularly interested in selling their wares. It's worth asking around just in case, but you'll probably be out of luck.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

**Air Rarotonga** (in town ☎ 36888; www.airraro.com) flies to Mitiaro three times per week on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. It costs NZ\$290 return. There are also occasionally direct flights to Mitiaro from Ma'uke, but these only run when there's demand for them.

See p56 for details of travel agencies on Rarotonga that can organise flights and package deals to Mitiaro.

### Boat

See p180 for details on inter-island cargo ship services among the Cook Islands. Stops at Mitiaro are often made in conjunction with visits to 'Atiu and Ma'uke.

## GETTING AROUND

Transfers from the airport will be provided by the people you're staying with. Motorbikes and bicycles can be rented from Seabreeze, but you can walk around the whole of Mitiaro on foot in about two hours (as long as you don't stop too often to admire the views).

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