

Palmerston

The distant island of Palmerston is unique in the Cook Islands. All the island's 70-odd residents are descended from just one man – an English adventurer by the name of William Marsters, who arrived in 1863 and (with considerable help from his three Maori wives) set about the task of creating his very own island dynasty. The present inhabitants of Palmerston Atoll are all Marsters – in fact, you'll find Marsters all over the Cooks, and it's a common name on cemetery headstones.

Technically Palmerston is part of the Southern Group, though it's actually an atoll rather than a volcanic island, and it's geographically closer to the Northern Group. Palmerston's lagoon is 11km wide at its widest point, and 30-odd small islands dot the reef. Passages are shallow – at low tide the lagoon is completely closed off – and visiting ships have to anchor outside the reef.

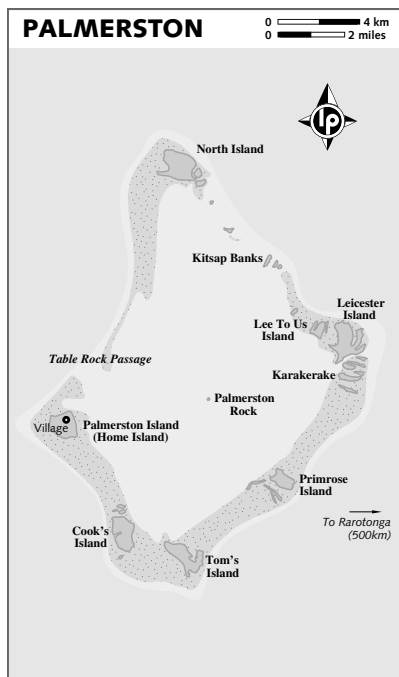
If you're a nature lover you'll enjoy the rich wildlife around this isolated lagoon, but Palmerston is perhaps even more fascinating as one of the few islands that still practises the traditional notion of Cook Islands hospitality.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Just making it to Palmerston is a highlight – few travellers ever make it to this far-flung island, and simply getting here is an adventure in itself
- Staying with a local family and experiencing the island's entirely unique lifestyle
- Earning your keep by spending a few days working on the island – either in the hospital, the island school or wherever else you might be needed

■ POPULATION: 70

■ AREA: 2 SQ KM



HISTORY

Palmerston Atoll was populated infrequently in the distant past; it was known as Avarau (Many Passages) on other islands. When James Cook sighted Palmerston Atoll in 1774, it was unpopulated; he named the atoll after the first lord of the admiralty (always a good career move).

Cook didn't stop on his first trip, but in 1777 when he passed by on his third voyage, he sent boats ashore to seek provisions. Palmerston has the singular honour in the Cook Islands of having had Captain Cook actually step ashore.

In 1850 the crew of the *Merchant of Tahiti* rescued four starving Europeans on the island. The castaways, having landed on an uninhabited, unclaimed island, had a legal right to claim it, but they traded that right to the *Merchant of Tahiti's* captain for their passage to Rarotonga. Palmerston's claim eventually made its way to a Scottish trader in Tahiti. He needed representatives on the island and found one in William Marsters, an Englishman living on Manuae Atoll, near Aitutaki. Marsters

moved to Palmerston in 1863, and the rest, as they say, is history.

At one time the population of the atoll was as high as 150, but the population has dropped steadily, as young people move away to Rarotonga and Auckland, to its present figure of about 70.

THE CULTURE

Palmerston's small population are all descendants of William Marsters. This is the only place in the Cook Islands where English is the native tongue. However, it's a unique version of English, with a distinct Gloucestershire burr (Marsters' home town) and many 'borrowed' Maori words introduced, it is thought, by Marsters' wives.

Marsters divided his family into three families, each descended from one of his wives – the three family names are Akaingaro, Matava and Te Pou. Careful rules were spelt out concerning the allocation of resources and land for each family, and the rules covering marriages between families are quite strict. Even with this set of carefully established rules, conflict between the three families is not uncommon, and there's always a bit of jostling for position going on. Palmerston's island council, unique in that its members are appointed and not elected, is chosen to represent the three families equally. William Marsters died on 22 May 1899 at the age of 78 and is buried near his original homestead.

As well as the handful of Marsters on Palmerston itself, more than 2000 live on Rarotonga and in New Zealand. All consider Palmerston 'home'.

INFORMATION

Tere Marsters (☎ 37684, 54660; fax 37683; palmertonisland@hotmail.com) is Palmerston's island secretary and though he usually lives on Palmerston with his family, he's quite often on Rarotonga on official business. He should be your first point of contact if you're planning to travel to Palmerston or you're just after further information.

You can contact people on Palmerston either by high-frequency radio (phone ☎ 020 to arrange this with Telecom) or by phoning the single **public telephone** (☎ 37684) on the island. There is electricity from 6am to midday and 6pm to midnight (it's spaced

out like that so that freezers, storing tuna for export, won't defrost).

QUIRKY PALMERSTON

Palmerston has the highest ratio of freezers to people in the world, and they're almost all crammed to the brim with freshly caught fish. The atoll's small population earns its living primarily through fishing; many of the delicious tuna you'll find on restaurant tables in Avarua were caught in the deep waters off Palmerston.

SLEEPING & EATING

Palmerston has no organised accommodation for visitors, but the atoll has long had a tradition that the first person to greet an arriving yacht will welcome you into his or her home. You'll be hosted by one family, who undertakes to provide food and accommodation and make sure you're acclimatised to the island.

According to the rules laid down by the original inhabitant William Marsters, visitors are never charged anything for staying on the island, whether they choose to stay as little as three days or as long as three

months. It's a tradition that's still alive and well to this day – but in return for your accommodation, it's expected that you'll offer your services to the island for a few days by way of thanks. Nurses, doctors, teachers and computer whizzes are always in particular demand!

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The only regular transport to Palmerston is via inter-island ferry (see p180). The ferries transport supplies to and from the island about once every two months, and space on one of the berths is usually available for about NZ\$300 return. The *Bounty Bay* (p70), based at Avatiu Harbour on Rarotonga, is occasionally chartered by the island for private voyages to Palmerston – you might just be lucky and blag yourself a berth, but it's likely to cost you between NZ\$700 and NZ\$900.

By far the greatest number of visitors to Palmerston arrive via private yacht – though even if you are in charge of your own luxury liner, you'll still need to contact Tere in advance to make sure there's room on the island.

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