

Rarotonga & the Cook Islands

📍 682 / POP 19,500

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Best Places to Eat

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Why Go?

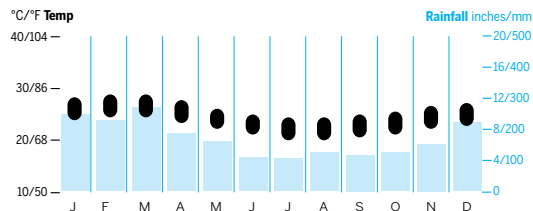
Fifteen droplets of land cast across 2 million sq km of wild Pacific blue, the Cook Islands are simultaneously remote and accessible, modern and traditional.

With a strong cafe culture, a burgeoning organic and artisan food scene, and a handful of bar and clubs, Rarotonga lives confidently in the 21st century. But beyond the island's tourist buzz and contemporary appearance is a robust culture, firmly anchored by traditional Polynesian values and steeped in oral history.

North of 'Raro', the lagoon of Aitutaki is ringed with deserted islands and is one of the Pacific's most scenic jewels. Venture further and Polynesian traditions emerge nearer the surface. Drink home brew at a traditional 'Atiuan *tumunu* (bush-beer drinking club), explore the *makatea* (raised coral cliffs) and taro fields of Mangaia, or swim in the underground cave pools of Mitiaro and Ma'uke. The remote Northern Group is a South Seas idyll experienced by a lucky few.

When to Go

Avarua



Mar–Apr The end of cyclone season usually brings clear, sunny days.

Aug Celebrate the nation's 1965 declaration of independence at the annual Te Maire Nui Festival.

Sep–Oct Look forward to warmer temperatures and reduced humidity.

RAROTONGA

POP 10,572 / AREA 67.2 SQ KM

The most populous of the Cook Islands is stunning in its natural beauty and physical drama. A halo of flame-orange coral reef encircles the island, and Rarotonga's sapphire-blue lagoon is trimmed by sparkling white beaches. Beyond the reef, breakers foam and crash like distant thunder.

Rarotonga's settlements are nestled on the coastal flatlands, with the island rising spectacularly through lush fields and rural farmland to the mountainous and thickly forested interior. These silent, brooding peaks dominate the landscape from every angle.

Rarotonga has plenty of history, too, with ancient *marae* (traditional meeting places) and monuments to explore, and some of the best-preserved coral churches in the South Pacific.

History

Legend tells that Rarotonga was discovered by Io Tangaroa, who arrived about 1400 years ago from Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas (French Polynesia). In the early 13th century two great warrior chiefs, Tangi'ia from Tahiti and Karika from Samoa, arrived in *vaka* (ocean-going canoes) to conquer the island and rule Rarotonga as joint kings. The land was divided among six tribes, each headed by an *ariki*. The first recorded European visitor was Philip Goodenough, captain of the *Cumberland*, who came in 1814 and spent three months looking for sandalwood. In 1823 missionaries John Williams and Papeiha set out to convert the Rarotongans, and in little more than a year Christianity had taken a firm hold.

Getting There & Away

Air New Zealand links Rarotonga to Auckland, Sydney and Los Angeles, and Virgin Australia has flights between Auckland and Rarotonga. Air Rarotonga and Air Tahiti operate code-share flights linking Rarotonga with Tahiti.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Most hotels and hostels provide transfers from Rarotonga Airport. Raro Tours operates an airport-shuttle service (NZ\$20 per person one way to anywhere on the island).

BUS

Circle-island buses run around the coast road in both directions, departing from the Circle Island Bus Stop at Cook's Corner in Avarua. Buses running clockwise depart hourly from 7am to 11pm Monday to Saturday, and from 8am to noon and 2pm to 4pm Sunday.

Buses running anticlockwise depart at 30 minutes past the hour, from 8.30am to 4.30pm Monday to Friday, and from 8.30am to 12.30pm on Saturday. There are no anti-clockwise buses on Sundays.

A night bus service runs clockwise on Friday at midnight and at 2am on Saturday. Note there is no 11pm bus on Friday.

Adult/child fares are NZ\$4/3 for one ride, NZ\$8/5 for a return trip (two rides) or NZ\$30/19 for a 10-ride ticket. A family pass, valid for two adults and two children, costs NZ\$26. There's also a day pass (NZ\$16). The bus can be flagged down anywhere along its route. Tickets can be purchased on board.

Pick up bus timetables from the tourist office or the bus driver, or see the website for **Cook's Passenger Transport** (☎ 55215, 25512; www.busabout raro.com). Several free publications, including the *Cook Islands Sun Rarotonga Map*, also contain timetables, and they are often posted in restaurants and shops.

CAR, MOTORCYCLE & BICYCLE

The speed limit is 50km/h outside town and 30km/h around Avarua. It's illegal for motorcyclists to ride two abreast (though many do), and if you exceed 40km/h on a motorcycle without a helmet you'll be fined. Driving is on the left-hand side of the road.

To rent a car, your drivers licence from your home country is valid, but if you're planning on zipping around the island on a scooter, you'll need to get a Cook Islands drivers licence (NZ\$20). If you're not licensed to drive a motorcycle at home, you'll also have to take a short practical test (NZ\$5) including negotiating a simple slalom course of road cones. You can get your licence any day from 8am to 3pm, but turn up early as the police station issues many motorcycle licences daily and queues can be long.

The quintessential mode of transport in the Cook Islands is the scooter. Good rates for rental bikes are around NZ\$50 for three days or NZ\$100 per week. Cars and jeeps are available for around NZ\$50 to NZ\$70 per day. Mountain bikes are around NZ\$7 per day or NZ\$50 per week.

Avis Cook Islands Airport (☎ 21039; www.avis.co.ck); **Avarua** (Map p204; ☎ 22833; CITC Shopping Centre) Also has a branch at the Pacific Resort at Muri Beach (p218).