

Pitcairn Island

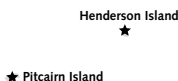
What's rarely mentioned about Pitcairn Island, between the infamous *Bounty* story and the 2004 sex trials gossip, is that it's a place of incredible natural beauty. The island's 4.5 sq km surface is almost entirely sloped and has a varied landscape – from desolate rock cliffs that look over an infinite expanse of sea to lush hillsides bursting in tropical plenty. As one of the most remote destinations on the planet, as well as the smallest territory in the world, the island feels both claustrophobic and wildly exhilarating. After a few days of hiking, exploring and meeting the local characters, it's not hard to understand why the islanders love it here and have been through so many hardships (from extreme isolation to scalding worldwide press) to stay here.

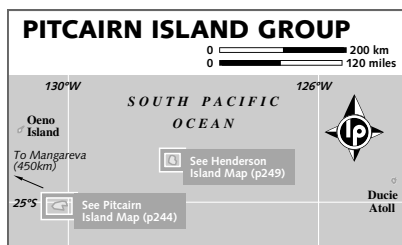
The nearest inhabited island to Pitcairn Island is Mangareva in French Polynesia which is 480km, about a 36-hour boat ride, away. Besides a few hundred cruise ship passengers per year (who often only spend an hour or two on Pitcairn when the ship passes), the only visitors are a few yachts, occasional groups of boat-chartering birders and a handful of ham radio enthusiasts.

The archipelago consists of two low-lying atolls, Oeno and Ducie, World Heritage-listed Henderson Island – a *makatea* (raised coral island) with a virtually untouched environment and endemic birdlife – and Pitcairn itself, which is the only inhabited island.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Taking a cool dip in the electric blue, glass-clear waters of **St Paul's Pool** (p245)
- Climbing up the precipice to **Christian's Cave** (p245) and imagining what must have gone through the mutineer's head as he sat there hundreds of years ago
- Mingling with the locals on Friday nights at **Christian's Café** (p246)
- Watching a flightless Henderson rail trundle by as you relax on the mosquito-free shores of **Henderson Island** (p248)
- Descending the cliff at Down Rope to fish off Pitcairn's only beach and inspect the **petroglyphs** (p245), reminders of Pitcairn's pre-European history





CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Pitcairn's climate is mild and equable, with mean monthly temperatures varying from 19°C in August to 24°C in February. The lowest temperature ever recorded was 10°C; the highest, 34°C. Annual rainfall (around 2000mm) is spread unevenly, but July and August are usually the driest months and November the wettest.

HISTORY

The islands of the Pitcairn group have always had a close connection with Mangareva in the Gambier Archipelago (p472), and at one time a Polynesian trading triangle operated between Mangareva, Pitcairn and Henderson. Pitcairn had the only quarry in this part of Polynesia where flakes could be chipped off the sharp-edged stones to make adzes and other tools. Inhospitable Henderson Island's small population supplied red tropicbird feathers, green turtles and other 'luxury' goods.

Overpopulation devastated Mangareva, and deforestation removed the trees used for making the great seagoing canoes. In a classic example of the flow-on effect of ecological disasters, the downfall of Mangareva led to the abandonment of both Henderson and Pitcairn.

When the explorer Pedro Fernández de Quirós chanced upon Henderson Island in 1606 it was uninhabited, which was presumably the case for Pitcairn Island also.

The four Pitcairn islands would probably have been annexed by the French, along with the Tuamotu and Gambier islands, were it not for the British settlement founded by the *Bounty* mutineers. For more on Pitcairn Island's history, see p243; for Henderson Island's history, see p248.

The Pitcairn Island group is Britain's last overseas territory in the Pacific. The governor, who is also the British high commissioner to New Zealand (NZ), lives in Wellington.

PITCAIRN ISLAND FACTS

Capital city (and island) Adamstown (Pitcairn)
Population 50
Land area 4.5 sq km
Number of islands four
International telephone code ☎ 64
Currency NZ dollar (NZ\$; official); US dollar (US\$; for tourist goods and services)
Languages English and Pitkern
Greeting Wat a way
Website www.government.pn & visitpitcairn.gov.pn

Prior to the sex trial (see p242), the island was governed at arm's length. The governor now has a representative in residence. At a local level, the Island Council consists of a mayor plus appointed and elected members, and tends to local matters including island maintenance, shipping arrivals, communications and medical services.

THE CULTURE

Pitcairn's families are descendants of the original *Bounty* mutineers and their Tahitian companions, plus other arrivals over the years. The island's extraordinarily remote nature means Pitcairners have forged a distinct language and culture. The isolated community is extremely close-knit and its gossipy and clan-like nature has been called 'claustrophobically intimate' by Kathy Marks in her 2008 book *Pitcairn: A Paradise Lost*, and was even more criticised by Dea Burkett in her 1997 travel memoir *Serpent in Paradise*. After all the bad press, the islanders have become very protective of their unusual way of life and generally do not welcome journalists. With a population that hovers around 50 – about half the number considered necessary to remain viable – it's been questioned by outsiders if the culture will survive.

Self-reliance is a way of life on Pitcairn, so when the longboats (see p247) crash through the waves from Bounty Bay to rendezvous with visiting ships, everyone's at quayside to help unload. It's not somewhere you can go it alone – community spirit is all-important. It's only by sticking together that Pitcairners have survived on this isolated outpost for so long.

Farming, fishing and shooting breadfruit from trees are everyday activities for much of the community, as are fixing machinery