

Cook Islands: 'Like Hawaii in 1960s'

On this archipelago near New Zealand, Polynesian charms — and language — resist change.

By ANNE Z. COOKE
Tribune News Service

It was a quiet afternoon on Rarotonga, in the Cook Islands, when Lydia Nga got the news all those years ago.

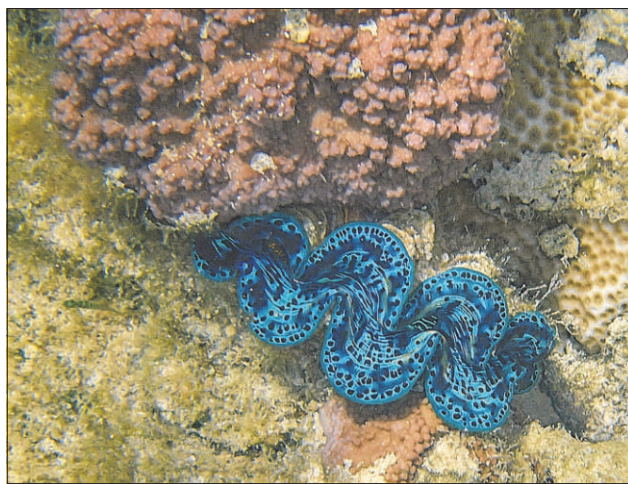
Overnight, her homeland, 15 Polynesian islands west of Tahiti with a population of 15,000, a paradise smaller than Detroit, had grown exponentially, reborn as a 690,000-square-mile nation. It was 1982, and the Third United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea ruled that coastal nations had jurisdiction over an “exclusive economic zone,” defined as a 200-mile stretch of ocean measured from the shoreline.

Fast forward 35 years to last August and our first visit to Rarotonga, the main island. We were lured by the thought of shimmering blue lagoons, gentle breezes, hometown smiles and fewer tourist visits per year than Florida's Disneyworld gets in two days.

“And how about that economic zone, the one the guidebook described?” asked my husband. Had success spoiled Rarotonga's Polynesian charms?

Not really, according to my friend Kathy, who stays up on these things. “The last time we looked, the Cooks were like Hawaii in the 1960s, 50 years behind everybody else,” she said.

As our overnight flight from Los Angeles descended over a clutch of green volcanic peaks, my first view of the lagoon, with its sandy shoreline, scattered roofs and rows of palms, was reassuring. I figured we'd greet the dawn



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From top: Calm and clear as glass, world-famous Aitutaki Lagoon is the stuff of dreams. Blue-lipped clams, members of the giant clam family, thrive in the lagoon. An exhilarating half-day ride with Storytellers Eco Cycle Tours.

with a stroll along the beach, cool off in the lagoon, maybe even snorkel near the outer

reef, where the coral clumps into mounds. Before bolting for the

lagoon, we decided to learn about conservation efforts, at the suggestion of Nga, my contact at the visitors center, now known affectionately as Auntie Lydia. So we paid a visit to ocean specialist Kevin Iro to hear about the Marae Moana Marine Park conservation project.

“Marae Moana means ocean domain,” said Iro, an athletic figure in shorts, ushering us and a half-dozen high school kids into a cramped lecture room with rows of desks, its only decor a large TV screen for presentations and a half-dozen backlit photos of tropical fish and coral.

“The ocean domain is a mind-set, an idea,” he said, putting a chart up on the screen. “It's a shift in the way we see ourselves.” Not as separate islands, he explained, but as a single marine nation.

Exploring the inland

It was also time for a just-caught, grilled fish sandwich at one of Rarotonga's ocean-side cafes, where picnic-table seating guarantees conversation. And so continued our education.

If our table mates happened to be islanders on a lunch break, they described the Cooks' historic connection with New Zealand, where almost everyone has relatives and yearly visits are the norm. When it's time for college, ambitious students generally go to New Zealand or Australia.

At the Moorings Cafe, we learned that New Zealand's Maoris originally came from Rarotonga. Facing a fight with a rival clan, they loaded up their oceangoing canoes — vakas — and pushed off for parts unknown. And raw sea slugs? They are a favorite snack. At Charlie's Cafe, I was thrilled to be sitting with people speaking Cook Island Maori, one of the few Polynesian languages still in common use. A required subject in school, it lives on despite colonial rule and tourism.

Curious about the rest of Rarotonga, we decided to rent mountain bikes to explore the 20-mile-long circle-island road, “a good way to get your bearings,” according to my guidebook. We could have raced, but it was much more fun to poke along, stop at vista points, look for craft shops and wave at friendly

motorcycle riders.

It was so energizing, in fact, that we joined a second guided ride with Dave and Tami Furnell, owners of Storytellers Eco Cycle Tours, a local outfitter. With rain threatening and 11 of us geared up and ready, we headed for the inland road, the historic, 1,000-year-old Ara Metua, a grassy, gravelly track built at the base of the volcanoes.

Following Tami among the farm fields, we discovered why restaurant food was so fresh. Away from the coast, it was all produce: taro (the edible leaf variety), salad greens and tomatoes, pumpkins and red peppers, onions and bananas, and orchards growing limes, oranges, papaya, star fruit and noni.

Stopping beside the nonis, prized as a health tonic and mosquito repellent, Tami pulled off a couple of soft, smelly fruits, broke them into pieces and to a chorus of “yuck, icky, sticky” and gales of laughter, dared us to rub them over our necks, arms and legs.

Snorkeling in lagoons

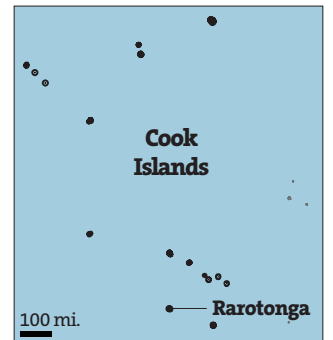
Since no visit would be complete without a couple of days on neighboring Aitutaki (eye-too-TOCK-ee), world-famous for its lagoon, we flew over, checked into an overwater cabin at the Aitutaki Lagoon Resort and booked a lagoon cruise with Tere (pronounced “Terry”), owner of Te King Lagoon Cruises.

Piling into Tere's 12-passenger boat, we sped south across the lagoon, rounding the motus (islets), searching for coral gardens and stopping to snorkel. And after you've spent a morning in the heart of one of these shimmering turquoise aquariums — lakes within a coral reef — you can't help but marvel.

Protected from wind and waves but continuously refreshed by the ocean spillover, a lagoon's unique ecosystem nurtures birds, fish, crabs, clams, mollusks, coral and every other marine organism, including people.

And while we gazed around us, literally in awe, Tere peppered us with Maori legends, celebrity anecdotes and marine biology.

On our last evening, we squeezed in one of the infrequent dinners served at the



Source: Tribune Media Services

IF YOU GO: COOK ISLANDS

Weather: The best time to visit is June through September, when it's warm and dry. December through March, the rainy season, is hotter and more humid. Shoulder months — April, May, October and November — are variable.

Getting around: You may not need to rent a car. Most activities, cafes and beaches are close enough to go by bicycle. For longer explorations, check out outfitters such as Tik e-tours (tik-etours.com) and Storytellers Eco Cycle Tours (storytellers.co.ck).

Flights: Air New Zealand offers the only nonstop flight from the U.S. to Rarotonga; from Los Angeles, it's a nine-hour flight on a new Boeing 777.

Cook Islands Tourism: Find more information at cookislands.travel. For dinner reservations at the Plantation House, e-mail ilivingoyster.net.ck.

Lodging: Small hotels and family-run inns offering comfortable, affordable lodging are posted online or listed on Cook Islands tourism sites.

Rustic, thatched cottages at the two four-star Pacific Resorts, one on Rarotonga and one on Aitutaki, offer full amenities, including a bar and swimming pool. Some units have kitchenettes. Rates vary according to date, size and ocean or garden views (pacificresort.com).

Lodging at the Aitutaki Lagoon Resort ranges from modest self-catering cabins to spacious and attractively furnished cottages. Ten overwater bungalows have lagoon-access outside decks, lagoon-access steps, outdoor showers, large bathrooms with double sinks and a kitchenette corner. The main lodge has a restaurant and adjacent pool; seclusion and lagoon access are its outstanding features (aitutakilagoonresort.com).

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Plantation House, the colonial home of former restaurant owner Louis Enoke. Dinner here, prepared by chef Minar Henderson for 20 to 26 guests and served twice a month only, offers not just a blend of island-grown ingredients but an evening with islanders for whom cultural traditions and 21st-century science go hand-in-hand.

Finding an empty chair, I was boggle-eyed to find I was sitting next to the prime minister, Henry Puna, who studied law in New Zealand and Australia before turning to politics. With dishes guaranteed to encourage conversation — from prawns with lemongrass to coconut-flavored rice and couscous with Kaffir lime — we covered pearl farming on Manihiki, the search for rare-earth minerals and global warming.

Rising seas threaten atolls such as Aitutaki. “Yes, we're worried,” said Puna, “but we're doing our part. Right now, 50 percent of the islands' electric power comes from solar installations. By 2020, the Cook Islands will be 100 percent solar.”