

Back to the future on the Cook Islands

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A VARUA, Rarotonga, Cook Islands It was a quiet afternoon on Rarotonga, in the Cook Islands, when Lydia Nga got the news.

Overnight her homeland, 15 Polynesian islands west of Tahiti, a paradise smaller than Detroit, had grown exponentially, reborn as a 690,000 square-mile nation.

But it wasn't the islands that grew. In 1982, 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. Most countries welcomed the idea. But for a tiny nation like the Cooks, population 15,000, it was a Cinderella promise.

Fast forward 35 years to last August and our first visit to Rarotonga, the main island, lured by the thought of shimmering blue lagoons, gentle breezes, home-town smiles and fewer tourist visits 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. (I knew what she was thinking: If it doesn't have a spa, it isn't luxury.) "Ask around, see what people say and let me know," she added.

As our overnight flight from Los Angeles descended over a clutch of green volcanic peaks, my first view of the lagoon, its sandy shoreline, scattered roofs and rows of palms was reassuring. I figured we'd greet the dawn with a stroll along the beach, cool off in the lagoon, maybe even snorkel near the outer reef, where the coral clumps into mounds.

But Nga, my email contact in the tourist office, now known affectionately as Auntie Lydia, had a request. So before bolting for the lagoon, we paid a visit to Ocean Specialist Kevin Iro to hear about the Marae Moana Marine Park conservation project, and to learn why an in-depth survey of every fold and ripple within the Cook's 690,000 square miles is long overdue.

"Marae Moana means ocean domaine," 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 back-lit photos of tropical fish and coral.

"The ocean domaine 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. And as the owner of vast, still untapped resources, the government needed to appoint a task force to head the project.

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

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, a minor role in World War II, tourism and even cellphones.

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, 1000-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.

Since no visit would be complete without a couple days on neighboring Aitutaki (eye-too-TOCK-kee), world-famous for its lagoon, we flew over, checked into an over-water 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 spill-over, 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. After a stop at One Foot Island where "been there, loved it" passport stamps are issued and a grilled chicken picnic, we headed back.

On our last evening, we squeezed in one of the twice-a-month dinners served at the Plantation House, the colonial home of former restaurant owner Louis Enoka. 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 everything from prawns with lemongrass to coconut-flavored rice and couscous with kaffir lime we managed to cover pearl farming on Manihiki, the search for rare-earth minerals and the importance of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (which President Donald Trump has abandoned).

He reminisced about the evening he hosted Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, whom he found to be delightful, intelligent and informed. But it was the pan-seared mahi mahi with ginger and garlic that added a somber note.

"Your president doesn't believe in clean energy," he said. But, we agreed, global warming is creating rising seas, threatening atolls like 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."

If only the rest of us could say that.

THE NITTY GRITTY:

WEATHER: The best time to visit is during summer in the United States, 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 like Tik e-tours (www.tik-etours.com) and Storytellers Eco Cycle Tours www.storytellers.co.ck.

FLIGHTS: Air New Zealand offers the only non-stop flight from the U.S. to Rarotonga, a nine-hour flight on a new Boeing 777, with seats in economy, business and premium business (including spiffy flat-bed seats). Rates vary by season and availability but run from \$854 (a recent special promotion) to \$2354.

COOK ISLANDS TOURISM: At www.cookislands.travel. For dinner reservations at the Plantation House, email iliving@oyster.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, luxuriant landscaping, a restaurant, bar and swimming pool. Some units have a kitchenette. Rates vary according to date, size, and ocean or garden views. Book early; Pacific Resorts are a favorite with frequent travelers. The Aitutaki property has additional hotel rooms in the adjacent building. At www.pacificresort.com.

Lodging at the Aitutaki Lagoon Resort, the only resort on a small motu, ranges from modest self-catering cabins to spacious and attractively furnished cottages. Ten over-water 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.

Rarotonga now has several five-star properties, some with spas. Look for Rumours Luxury Villas & Spa, Te Manava Luxury Villas & Spa and Nautilus Resort, all on Muri Beach, on Rarotonga's southeast coast.

(Follow veteran traveler Anne Z. Cooke on Facebook at "Anne Z. Cooke" and on Twitter at @anneontheroad.)

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Chicago Tribune staff pick 101 of the best foods in Chicago, from fried chicken nachos with the Honey Butter touch to a spicy, coconuty and cheekily named tequila cocktail to silky thin crepes with goat cheese, honey and black figs, a treasure you'll find at Chicago's first Kurdish restaurant.

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