

THE COOK ISLANDS

Join Monica Frim in the heart of the South Pacific, as she snorkels in never ending lagoons and circumnavigates the islands of Aitutaki and Rarotonga. Here time is merely a mindset—unless you have to get back to a cruise ship.

THE COOK ISLANDS

A PACIFIC PARADISE OF IMMENSE LAGOONS AND TINY ISLANDS

BY MONICA FRIM

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN FRIM AND MONICA FRIM

There we were, halfway between Hawaii and New Zealand wading gingerly through knee-deep water, sidestepping fat, grey sea cucumbers on the lagoon's sandy floor. We were eight temporary castaways from a South Pacific cruise inching towards a smudge of white sand topped with a ruffle of green palm fronds that shimmered in the Pacific sun and teased our imagination with archetypal promises of an isolated island paradise. Moments earlier we had been snorkeling among candy-colored fish, hovering over blue-lipped clams big as bathtubs, and floating like driftwood among tawny coral formations only slightly less imposing than mountains. Now Honeymoon Island beckoned—an emblematic coral-and-seashell-topped sandbar at the southwestern edge of Aitutaki Lagoon in the archipelago known as the Cook Islands.





A red-billed tropicbird, known for its long red streaming tail, nests in the sand on Honeymoon Island.



Ootu Beach

UIG/Cathy Images

The Cook Islands are some of the most far-flung islands on the planet, 2,000 miles from the nearest continent and scattered over 850,000 square miles of South Pacific Ocean. Fifteen palm-fringed islands make up the group, each surrounded by its own reef and lagoon. Dozens of sandbars and uninhabited islets called motus sprinkle the lagoons like petals on a pond.

Settled in the 800s AD by Polynesians from the Society Islands, the Cook Islands remained fairly sheltered from European expansionism for many centuries. A few Spanish ships sailed by in the 1600s, but it was the British navigator, Captain James Cook who first mapped a sampling of outlying islands in the late 1700s. Somehow he missed the largest, Rarotonga, as well as Aitutaki, the latter discovered by Captain William Bligh in 1789 only 17 days before the mutiny against him. Incredibly, Rarotonga was not officially sighted by Europeans until the 19th century when Captain John Dibbs happened by as he was transporting the Reverend John Williams of the London Missionary Society among the islands. John Williams had established his first missionary post on the island of Raiatea in today's French Polynesia in 1817, and then used his Tahitian converts to help him bring Christianity to the Cook Islands. His first successful target was the island of Aitutaki in 1821. Rarotonga was a bonus.

In 1888 the Cook Islands became a British protectorate, then transferred to New Zealand in 1901. Since 1965 they have been a self-governing territory with their own prime minister but in free association with New Zealand, meaning that New Zealand still overseas defense and most foreign relations, but the islands' high chiefs, known as *ariki*, command a modicum of control over internal concerns. Cook Islanders have New Zealand passports, two official languages—Maori and English-- and use two currencies. The Cook Islands dollar is pegged to the New Zealand dollar at par, but includes unique denominations such as three dollar notes, two dollar triangular coins, and dodecagonal (twelve-sided) five dollar coins. Each coin depicts fauna, flora or cultural items that are unique to the Cook Islands, which makes them great souvenirs for visitors.

Tourism nips tamely on these blissfully isolated islands. There's none of the Coppertoned hordes that jostle for towel space on overcrowded beaches such as those of the boiler-plate resorts in more fashionable locations. Even Rarotonga and Aitutaki, the Cook Islands' most visited destinations, fall woefully short of tropical resort clichés. There are no high-rise hotels, no traffic lights, and on Aitutaki, no dogs—they are forbidden by decree. (Don't ask. I heard at least four different reasons for this unusual law, none proven de facto.)

What Aitutaki does have is an exceptionally large triangular lagoon with more shades of blue than there are



James Cook, famous British navigator, explorer and cartographer during a journey in the Pacific, Engraving.

jewels: aquamarine, turquoise, lapis lazuli, sapphire, tourmaline, azurite... the list is as endless as the praises of the travel writers who trumpet the island's calm and quiet charms. Tony Wheeler, founder of the *Lonely Planet* travel guide nominated Aitutaki "the world's most beautiful island" in 2010. One Foot Island, one of many uninhabited *motus* in Aitutaki's lagoon received World Travel Awards for the best beach in Australia and the Pacific region, and Maina/Honeymoon Island offers unsurpassed kitesurfing for beginners on one side and advanced riders on the other.

Honeymoon Island was named after a Canadian couple that married there and is only accessible by boat and a heedful walk to shore. Like its neighboring sand cay, Maina, it is uninhabited save for hermit crabs and some unusual ground-nesting tropicbirds—a white tern-like seabird that sports a single skinny red tail feather that echoes the elongated tail of a stingray. It was worth our walk through sea cucumbers just to see the colonies of nesting birds, tame as trained dogs and undaunted by strangers—we could walk right up to them in their nests.

We also learned something of sea cucumbers. These leathery denizens of the reef may look loathsome (by North American standards) but serve a useful function in cleansing the lagoons by breaking down detritus. Moreover, many Cook Islanders consider them a culinary delicacy. They call them *rori* or by the more sophisticated name of

bêches de mer—maybe because they sound more palatable in French. Restaurants serve them fried in butter with herbs or marinated in coconut milk. Somewhat less refined is the practice of simply scooping one of these fat grey blobs from the ocean floor, squeezing it like a balloon until it explodes its spaghetti-like innards... directly into your mouth. The empty skin is then tossed back into the sea, where it will soon grow back its missing guts only to have the process repeated. I’m told the “spaghetti” is tasteless and bland.

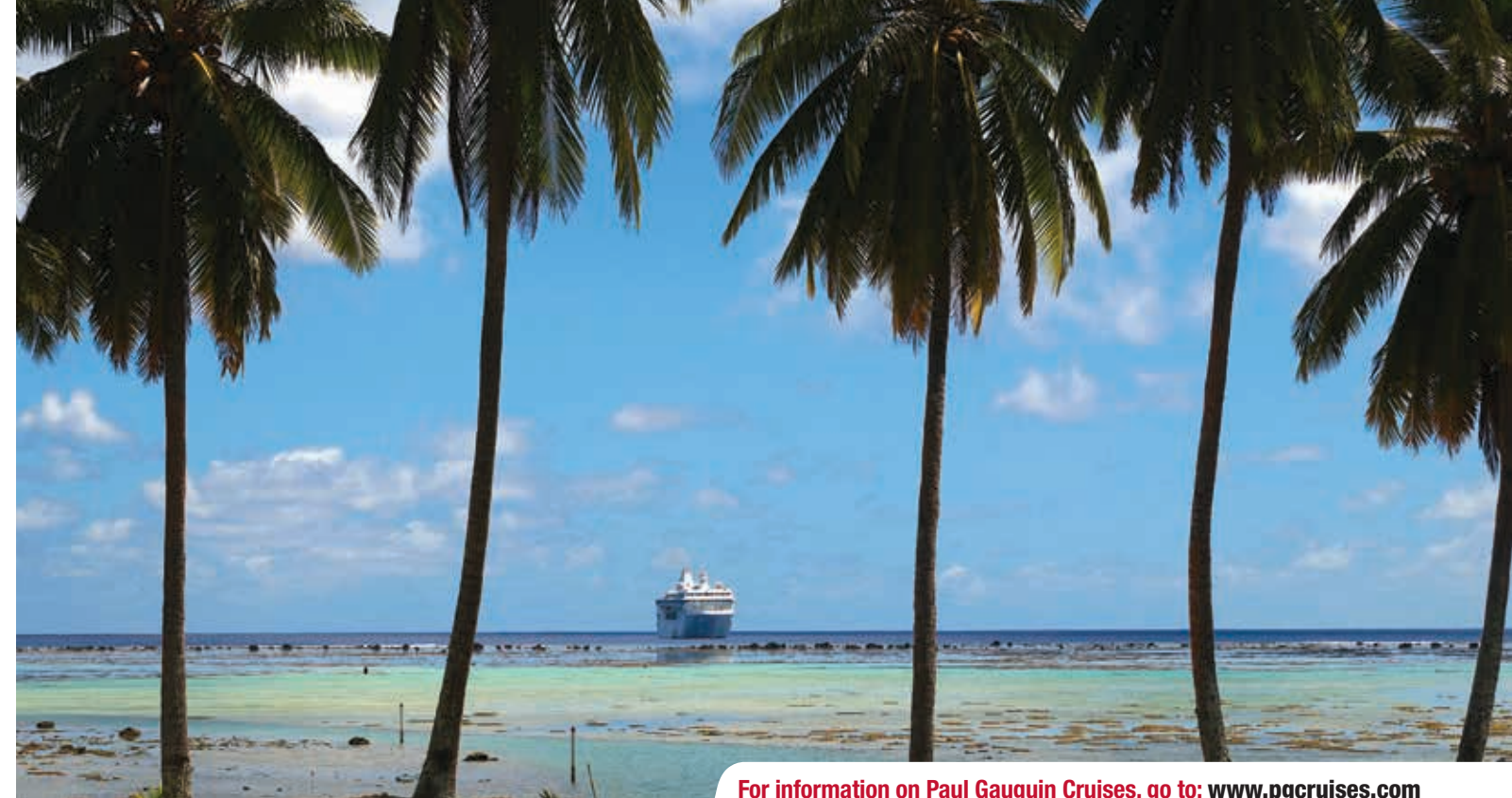
While Aitutaki’s marine charms are its prime drawing card, the interior offers blissful walks among coconut palms, flamboyant hibiscus that change the colors of their flowers from yellow to red with the seasons, and fruit trees that are so plentiful that the locals toss their surplus to the pigs. It’s a small island—a teardrop of only seven square miles that can be traversed on foot in less than half an hour (or several hours, north to south). Its loftiest summit is an eroded volcanic hill called Maunga Pu (at 407 feet it falls considerably short of mountain status) that offers 360-degree views over jungle-covered slopes and plots of cassava and yams to the surrounding lagoon and coral motus. Numerous beachfront bungalows and lodges line Aitutaki’s west coast and offer beach privileges to anyone, even those not staying on the properties. But for the very whitest, sandiest beach, Ootu at the island’s north east hook wins hands down. Here the views of the aquamarine

lagoon with its necklace of snow-white motus outshine everything else on the island.

There is no public transportation, in fact not much vehicular traffic at all, on Aitutaki. Unmetered taxis are available but don’t roam the streets—you have to call them. Most people tour the island by scooter or bicycle, called *push bikes* in island parlance, or avail themselves of shore excursions offered by cruise ships. You’ll need a license to rent a car or anything motorized in the Cook Islands, but if you can drive your vehicle to the police station in Arutanga, the sleepy port village that serves as Aitutaki’s main municipality, you’ll get one on the spot. Most resorts and guesthouses carry bikes of various vintages and conditions, so what you get can be a crapshoot. No worries. In the event of a breakdown, you can simply leave your scooter or push bike on the roadside—someone will pick it up and return it.

South of Aitutaki, the island of Rarotonga is better suited to vehicular traffic. It’s the largest of the Cook Islands and the only one with public buses. Two buses travel in either a clockwise or “anti-clockwise” direction around the entire island, which has a circumference of only 32 kilometers (20 miles). Signposts along the road indicate distances from the capital, Avarua, so it’s important to know the kilometer marking that corresponds to the attraction you are seeking. If you’re navigating your own way around the

The CICC (Cook Islands Christian Church) in Avarua was built of coral limestone in 1853. It replaced an earlier church that had been destroyed by a tropical cyclone.



For information on Paul Gauguin Cruises, go to: www.pgcruiises.com

Due to Aitutaki’s shallow lagoon, even small cruise ships like the *m/s Paul Gauguin* must anchor in deep water outside of the reef.

island it’s also better to bring a driver’s license from Aitutaki. Rarotonga charges about 10 times more and requires you to do a short driving test. Remember, the Cook Islands are a New Zealand realm: driving is on the left and the steering wheel is on the right.

An old-fashioned telephone on a tree adds a humorous touch to a scenic lookout. In the background Te Rua Manga, aka The Needle, rises above the jungle

We took a passive stance and opted for a guided tour in a 4WD open-top Land Rover Defender. It proved to be an adventuresome option that had us bouncing like the toy figures in a Lil’Movers™ school bus along rutted mountain paths with potholes big enough to swim in. When someone shouted “Hey where are the seat belts?” our guide, Big Mac, yelled back, “Here we just hang on to each other.”

Rarotonga happens to be the Cook Islands’ most rugged—a 26- square-mile mass of jagged mountains and lush green valleys surrounded by a flat coastal plain that eases into silky white beaches lapped by a crystalline lagoon. The island’s jungle-wrapped center makes for some of the best hiking trails in the archipelago, sometimes with gimmicky props like the disconnected telephone that’s mounted on a tree at the lookout to Te Rua Manga—a skybound monolith also known as “The Needle”. Guides, whether leading intrepid hikers on treks across the island or herding cruise passengers in and out of safari vehicles, make a point of stopping here. The views are stupendous.

As we follow the bumpy trail back to where it connects with the main road, Big Mac points out various tropical fruit trees—guava, papaya, mango—and entertains us with bits of island wisdom. “We burn coconut as a mosquito repellent,” he says. It seems a non sequitur until we see puffs of white smoke rising like sea spray out of





Papua (Wigmore's) Waterfall



Performers from the Aikirata Dance Troupe of Rarotonga perform aboard the *m/s Paul Gauguin*.

The lagoon between Muri Beach and a nearby motu is a safe, watery playground for children.

the hillside. Its sweet scent lingers like memories of a fine wine before it's lost among mainstream appurtenances like airport, college, hospital and the county's only jail. Big Mac says the jail houses 20 or 30 prisoners—the total for an entire country!—most serving time for petty theft. As part of their rehabilitation they make beautiful ukuleles and sell them to the public.

I meet my first mosquito at Papua (Wigmore's) Waterfall and, lacking burnt coconut fiber or any other form of repellent, give it a pat on the back. Within seconds I'm attacked by a squadron of minikin dive-bombers. The bushy setting, about a mile off the main road, seems to be as attractive to bitsy biters as the island's southern beaches are to sun-starved foreigners. Fortunately the mosquitos don't cross territories. Big Mac lets us flounder briefly under the onslaught before he once again rounds up the troops with a weighty "Let's go. Into the truck! Ladies first." Respect is important in Cook Island society says Big Mac. "Women are always first on the truck, first to receive fruit, and first to push the truck if we get stuck!"

Our next stop at Muri Beach leaves us gazing in awe at a magical scene reminiscent of Aitutaki's Ootu Beach. Muri Beach is arguably Rarotonga's best with smooth, clear shallows and four sandy motus that float like meringues atop a giant blue cocktail.

The two islands have many similarities. Both are laid-back and unhurried, although the people of Aitutaki think of Rarotonga with its pair of buses and smattering of cars somewhat akin to a Kansas farmer contemplating New York during rush hour. Imagine then, the mindsets of the unworldly inhabitants on the remoter islands. Some of those islands received telephones only a few years ago.

It's a funny thing about the Cook Islands. The very ocean that unites them also keeps them apart. Like gemstones in separate drawers of a jewelry box, the islands lie in two groups, northern and southern. Each has its own customs and some (like Pukapuka) even a different language. Then there's Palmerston Island where English, not Maori, is the native language since all but three of the islanders are descended from a single English carpenter who claimed it his own.

I had crammed as much as I could into my short stop on Aitutaki and Rarotonga and caught but a glimpse of the serenity and quiet contentment for which the Cook Islands are known. My only regret is that I didn't go to jail. It would have been nice to buy a ukulele... but my cruise ship beckoned.

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