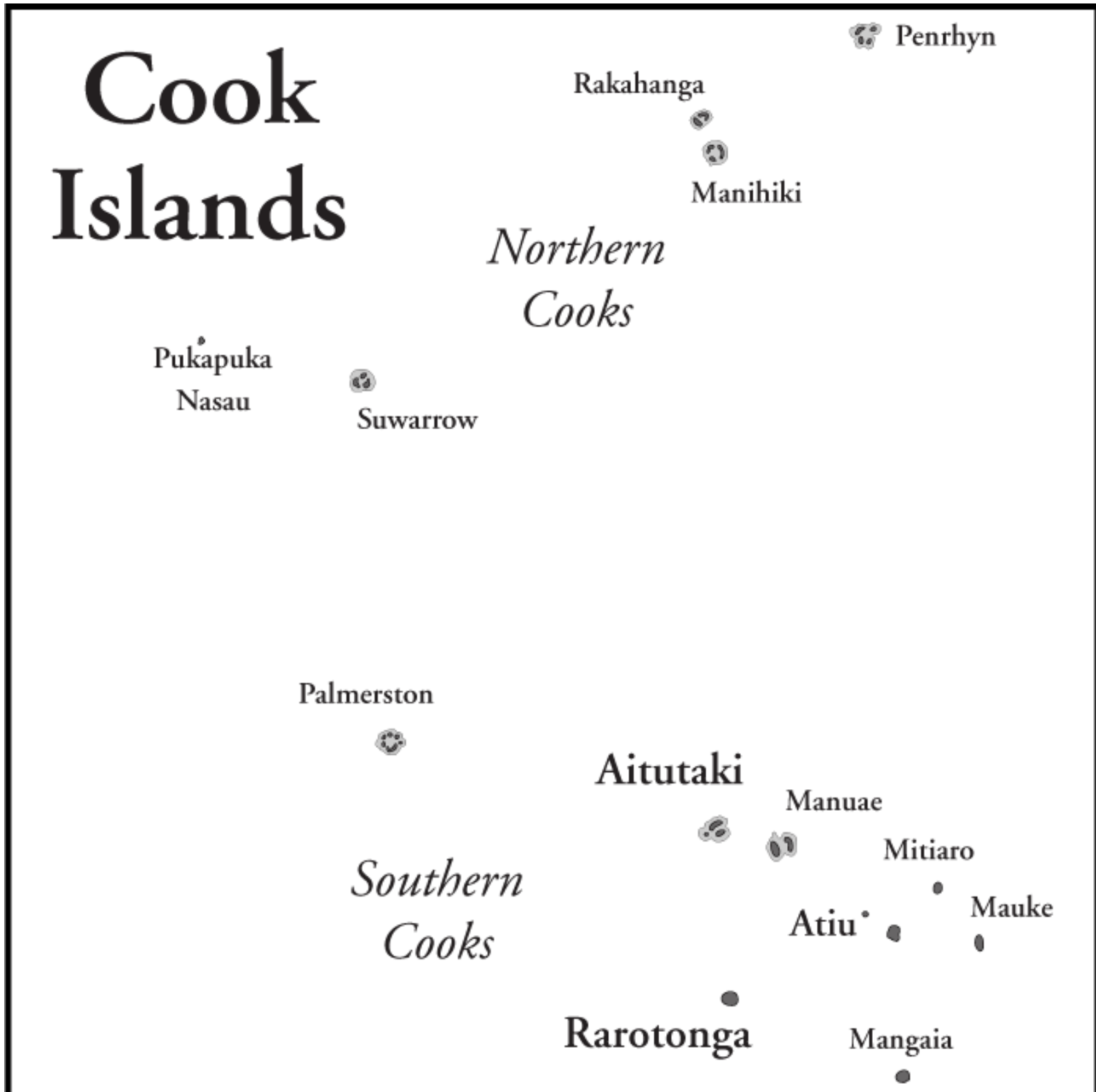


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Cook Islands Travel Guide



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Cook Islands Travel Guide

Rarotonga Island - the main island

Rarotonga travel is a unique experience - the island is extremely beautiful and small enough to explore with lush tropical mountains, pretty coastal scenes, sandy beaches and a very slow pace of life. The island takes under an hour to drive around so all sites are accessible wherever you choose to stay.

Avarua Town on the north coast, minutes from the international airport, is the administration centre of the Cook Islands. It's a good place to stay if you want to make a base for exploring the island and as it does not have a swimming beach, properties in and around town are much cheaper than elsewhere. Muri Beach on the east coast is the busiest stretch for tourism on the island and has lots of beach activities, restaurants, beach bars and crowds on Sundays when the locals get together. The south coast is very quiet with only a scattering of small beach bungalows and vacation homes. The beaches here are very picturesque and snorkelling is generally excellent - this is a great choice for those looking for a quiet holiday away from the large resorts. The west coast of Rarotonga is dominated by Arorangi Village which offers several family owned accommodations. North of the village is the second highest concentration of accommodation from small boutique resorts, one large hotel and lots of self catering bungalows. The beach here is sandy and extends unbroken right along the west coast, with swimming at high tide and reef walking at low tide. This is the leeward side of the island with more sunshine and sunsets.

Several tours explore inland Rarotonga, including Pa's cross island trek and the takitumu Nature Reserve with its unique species of birds and tropical flowers. There are lots of other tours around the island from historical circle island tours to aerial sightseeing.

Getting around Rarotonga is easy - it takes just 45 minutes to go around the island by bus and is possible to cycle in a day. The most popular way to travel is by moped and for just NZ\$55 for four day moped hire, most tourists give it a go. The following guide follows an anti-clockwise circuit around the island, starting from the International Airport.

West Rarotonga

The West coast of Rarotonga is one long stretch of sandy beach backed mostly by ironwood trees and plenty of accommodation. This stretch of coastline stops at Black Rock in the north, opposite the 9-hole public Rarotongan Golf Course. Black Rock is an excellent swimming and snorkelling spot, and is believed to be the point where the ancient Maoris spirits departed for the afterlife. The coast north of Black Rock is a marine protected area and is a good place to spot humpback whales when they visit the island between June and October.

South of Black Rock marks the beginning of a continuous stretch of sandy beach that extends south for four miles. There are a few mid-range motels to choose from including [Sunset Resort](#) as well as the large [Edgewater Resort](#), the largest hotel in the Cook Islands with just over 200 rooms, and the smaller boutique hotels of [Manuia Beach](#) and [Crown Beach Resort](#).

One of the attractions of this stretch of coast is the six good independent restaurants which are all within walking distance of each other. Being leeward side of the island, it is also protected from the prevailing winds. Tropical sunsets are a definite plus.

In the heart of the west coast is the large village of Arorangi. The village extends for over a mile, lined by colourful houses with pretty gardens. The Tinomana Palace and Zion church next door are both attractive buildings. In the heart of the village is [Castaway Villas](#) which has a nice swimming pool and beach front. The beach at Arorangi is nice and in the evenings and weekends kids from the village use it as their playground. Unfortunately the lagoon drains at low tide exposing the dead coral making it only suitable for reef-walking.

The south-west coast of Rarotonga has some excellent swimming beaches and all day sun. About a kilometre south of the village, on a nice secluded palm fringed beach, is [Aroa Inn](#). The swimming and snorkelling here is

good and the units, through rather unappealing in architectural style, offer clean and spacious living. [Backpackers International](#) offers the cheapest dormitory rooms in Rarotonga and is located about a minute walk inland from the beach which stretches for miles to both ends. On the south-west corner is Aroa Beach, location of the lively [Rarotongan Beach Resort](#) on what is claimed by the resort to be one of the best beaches in the South Pacific. It certainly isn't the best on Rarotonga, let alone the Cook Islands, so you can safely assume the resort is one to oversell itself. The lagoon at Aroa Beach is quite deep which makes it an ideal spot for swimming and the protected marine reserve ensures good snorkelling. The south coast of Rarotonga is quiet with lovely secluded beaches and lush mountain views.

There's a nice restaurant on the beach at Vaima a few miles on from Aroa beach and a more affordable cafe bar serving excellent fish. Just beyond the derelict Sheraton hotel which was never completed over 10 years ago is a turn off for Papua (Wigmores) Waterfall. About a mile up a dirt track in lush rainforest is this attractive waterfall and natural swimming pool (the waterfall can dry out from July to October if little rain). The track continues right across the island past the Te Rua Manga needle to Avarua Town and is an excellent and relatively easy half day hike. The summit offers spectacular views around the island and overlooking the sparkling coral reefs although the trail is impassable after heavy rains. If you don't want to go it alone, join an organized tour with "Pa" to learn about the surrounding environment. Be prepared - mosquitoes thrive in the rainforest and the heat is very dehydrating.

South Rarotonga

About a mile further on, almost in the middle of the south coast is the very affordable [Palm Grove](#) (some beach side, some mountain side). Here the beach is wide and long with good swimming. Organised walks through the conservation area offer a good insight into the rainforest and its secrets. It's managed by a non-profit organisation dedicated to the protection and continued survival of the endangered kakerori flycatcher (native bird). Quiet white sandy beaches continue along this stretch of coast and here is Rarotonga's newest upmarket property, [Sea Change](#) which offers six self contained bungalows each with a private swimming pool.

Beyond the attractive village of Titikaveka, with its prominent white church, the mountain views are impressive and there's a lovely Maire Nui botanical gardens and cafe. The beach along Titikaveka is excellent and stretches for almost 2 miles. There are several lovely small collections of beach bungalows here including [Little Polynesian](#). Just past Takitumu and turning towards the south-east coast, the beach continues for several more miles. This point has the best snorkelling lagoon in the Cook Islands. It's a five minute walk from here to the elegant three upmarket villas of [Reflections Rarotonga](#) which sits on a lovely sandy beach on the south-east corner of the island. From here its a fifteen minute stroll along the beach to Muri.

Muri Beach, East Rarotonga

Muri Beach sits on a picturesque location on the east coast of Rarotonga. Muri's attraction is the tranquil sandy bottom lagoon which is excellent for swimming, its lovely sweeping beach and four uninhabited islets within the lagoon. This is the place to go for water activities (sailing, kayaking, wind-surfing and even kite-surfing) and there's a beach bar and restaurant at the Sailing Club to sip beers and watch people. The only drawback (apart from lack of seclusion) is the wind tends to pick up in the afternoon and, being on the east side of the island, the sun disappears late afternoon.

It's easy to wade (or kayak) across to the uninhabited islets at both low and high tide and spend a day relaxing on the quiet beach and looking back towards the mountains of Rarotonga. Snorkelling in the lagoon is good only for marine life - there's no coral here and the lagoon is only waist deep in most places which makes it easy for beginners. Muri Beach has the highest concentration of accommodation on Rarotonga from a small 65-room resort ([Pacific Resort](#)) and self-catering bungalows ([Muri Beachcomber](#), [Muri Hideaway](#), [Manea Beach](#) and [Kura's Kabanans](#)) and the popular budget accommodation at [Vara's](#). There's several independent restaurants and take-aways in the Muri Area including Ambala Gardens, Flame Tree Restaurant and the Sails Club. Climb the hill opposite Pacific Resort for excellent views of the lagoon and islets.

On the north end of Muri opposite Motutapu islet the lagoon comes right up to the shoreline (no beach). You can stay here at the inexpensive [Aroko Bungalows](#) which looks faces the lagoon. This is where the Cook Island Maoris departed in double hull catamarans to colonize New Zealand. Avana faces a small islet in the lagoon. The passage here is a the best and most reliable surfing spot in the Cook Islands and allows entry for protected anchorage for yachts and motor boats. Inland from Avana is the extremely the attractive and peaceful Turangi Valley. A dirt track leads almost 3 miles inland into the heart of Rarotonga and makes for excellent walking past small plantations and lush tropical forest.

There's a lovely CICC church at Matavera, a mile or so north of Muri, which is built from limestone blocks in 1853 and which makes a good choice for a Sunday Church service and meeting local Rarotongans. South of Matavera

the beach is mostly sandy and extends unbroken all the way to Ngatangia. Unfortunately the sea here is too shallow for swimming but this is an excellent place for beachcombing and is usually deserted apart from a few locals fishing in the lagoon. Midway along the beach is [Tropical Sands](#), a collection of five very reasonably priced self contained bungalows, ideal for those who like privacy, and a little further south is [Sunrise Beach Bungalows](#), offering motel-style rooms and bungalows set on a rocky coastline.

Avarua & North Rarotonga

The mountain scenery all around Rarotonga is truly beautiful, but along the north-east coast it is at its most dramatic. The beaches along this stretch are wild and in places covered with pebbles and dead coral. Swimming here is not safe but the coast is good for beachcombing, fishing and watching the waves crash over the reef.

On the eastern coast of Avarua Town, the rugged mountains are stunning viewed from the main road and you'll find some ancient stone foundations (marae) on the inland road, as well as several dirt tracks leading into valleys. The coastline here is rugged, with mostly pebble beaches, and like Avarua, there is no place to swim. The budget style resort, [Club Raro Resort](#) is a good base for those who like the resort atmosphere and service but at very reasonable prices.

Avarua is the main town on Rarotonga and extends east from the airport. The town is quite small with a few supermarkets, two banks both with ATM machines (ANZ and Westpac), several restaurants / cafes, internet booths and lots of small boutiques specialising in the sale of black pearls and fine handicrafts. Avarua is well worth a visit, especially on Saturday morning when the open air market takes place. You'll find everything from brightly coloured sarongs (wrap around dresses), to flower garlands, fresh fish and tropical fruits. To sample the very best of Rarotonga nightclubs, be sure to visit Avarua on a Friday or Saturday evening - the locals really make a night of it with seductive dancing and endless drinking. Unlike its South Pacific neighbours, Cook Islanders rarely get aggressive when drunk and fighting is uncommon.

The coast along Avarua Town is rocky but a passage through the reef makes it ideal as a harbour for fishing boats and yachts (yachting season May-Sep). There are a few part-sandy beaches to the east of Avarua Town but swimming is restrictive. Accommodation in and around Avarua is mostly budget inns and hostels, and includes [Paradise Inn](#) which sits alongside a small part-rocky beach and [Tiare Village](#), a popular spot for budget travellers set in the foothills of the mountains behind town.

Aitutaki Island

Aitutaki lies a 45-minute flight to the north of Rarotonga, the main island of the Cook Islands in the heart of the South Pacific. There are no direct international flights to Aitutaki but the island is connected by five daily flights from Rarotonga (flight time approx. 40mins ; no flights on Sunday) and by a monthly ferry service which takes 18 hours. The population of Aitutaki is just over 2,000, spread out along coastal and inland villages.

Aitutaki Cook Islands is a large and spectacular sunken lagoon almost the size of Rarotonga with one main island (Aitutaki) and about 20 small uninhabited islands (locally referred to as motu) along the edge of the fringing reef. Aitutaki is ideal for those who want to experience the slow and easy Polynesian lifestyle away from the more commercial tourist centre of Rarotonga, and to enjoy some of the finest palm fringed beaches in the Cook Islands.

The main island of Aitutaki Lagoon is much flatter than Rarotonga and much smaller being only about four miles long and just one mile across. Aitutaki has a true south seas atmosphere. The villages are small and sleepy and not a great deal happens here. There's not even a lot of attractions to see. It's simply a place to hire a bike and absorb the tranquillity of the South Seas lifestyle. Stay here for more than a few days and you'll learn how to truly kick back.

Aitutaki Cook Islands is one of the most exquisite lagoons in the world. The lagoon itself is large - the largest island in the Cook Islands, Rarotonga, can fit inside it. The lagoon is 12 km across its base and 15km from top to bottom. The main island is called Aitutaki - it is a flat island on the north section of the lagoon. There are another 20 small Uninhabited Islands (motu) along the edge of the lagoon, most on the east fringe.

Getting to Aitutaki is easy - [Air Rarotonga](#) have four daily flights (no flights on Sunday) costing about NZ\$450 round-trip.

The main island of Aitutaki has a population of about 2000. The island has a pretty coastal road and several cross island roads making exploring easy. There are also lots of bush tracks meandering through inland plantations. There is no regular bus service so the best way to get around is by moped or bicycle which can be hired from most hotels. You could even walk to most places on the island given a good sun hat and plenty of drinking water.

Arutanga Village on the west coast is the main settlement with a lovely white church, wharf, post office, bank, supermarket, restaurant and petrol station. There is no beach at Arutanga, which has a deep water harbour, but the beach begins less than a mile to the north at the village of Ureia with its colourful houses along the main road and large playing field. Outrigger canoes can usually be seen fishing in the lagoon and swimming is OK here although snorkelling not so good. There are a few budget accommodations here including the cheapest, Toms Beach Cottage, a rather run-down collection of rooms, and the slightly more presentable [Rinos Beach Bungalows](#).

North of Ureia Village is another attractive village. Amuri boasts a few small boutique shops and restaurants and the new luxury [Pacific Resort Aitutaki](#) which offers 30 bungalows and villas on an attractive sandy swimming beach with another 40 planned for construction. The white sandy beach with palm groves extends from Pacific Resort right up the north west coast. [Aitutaki Villa](#), a private holiday home sits right on the swimming beach and a little further north are the adjacent properties [Are Tamanu Hotel](#), offering 12 luxury bungalows and the budget [Matriki Beach Huts](#) which offers sailing and private lagoon trips. A trail leads north of here to Mt. Maungapu, the highest point at 124 metres. The track to the summit is quite easy and offers spectacular panoramic views of the island and lagoon.

The southern tip of the finger known as Ootu Point has a gorgeous swimming beach and great views of the island - it is also the departure point for most of the island day cruises. There are half a dozen small properties here, the pick of the bunch being [Samade Beach Bungalows](#) which offers A-Frame wooden huts with hot water ensuite bathrooms and a lovely sand floor restaurant. The budget [Ranginui's Retreat](#) has six basic self contained bungalows on the beach whilst [Popoara Ocean Breeze Villas](#) offers 4 self catering units in amongst tropical pandanus trees. Around the point on the lagoon is the new [Inano Beach Bungalows](#) which has five self catering bungalows. A land bridge connects the main island to the small island of Akitua which boasts the Aitutaki Beach Resort.

The east coast is popular with local fishermen and you will see them most days fishing in their outrigger canoes from the jetty at Vaipae, the islands second largest village. There is no beach on the east coast, instead rocky outcrops and tidal mud, not practical for swimming. There are two accommodations here, [Gina's Garden Lodges](#) which is set in tropical gardens inland from the coast at Vaipae Village. Also in Vaipae is Aitutaki Lodge, a collection of six self catering units which are quite expensive considering there is no beach here.

It's possible to ride a bike along the south coast either on the beach (at low tide) or on a rather bumpy bush track. Although the beach along the entire south coast is tidal and not particularly attractive, it's a great place to explore. The southern tip of the island has no villages and is mostly low lying bush with a few family plantations. If you follow the signs and look hard enough, you'll find some of the best ancient marae on the island in a small clearing in the bush. Along the south east coast is Maina Sunset Motel, located on a marshy coastline about 15 minutes ride south of Arutanga Village. Although it offers clean units and a swimming pool, the location is not ideal.

The large lagoon and uninhabited motus encircling the reef are Aitutaki's greatest attraction. There are several day cruises which explore the lagoon and motu and visit some fine palm-fringed sandy beaches, notably One Foot Island. All cruises depart early morning (connections with Air Rarotonga day excursions from Rarotonga) and offer snorkelling, barbecue lunch and then a few hours relaxing on the beach. It takes about an hour to cruise from Aitutaki to One Foot Island in the far south of the lagoon and it's possible to hire a boat and driver for the day to explore other islands.

The highlight of Aitutaki is undoubtedly exploring the uninhabited motu fringing the lagoon. There are about 20 islands in all, and until recently no one lived there and there was no accommodation. These were true paradise islands. However, Akaiami Island now has two small lodges and there is a small lodge on One Foot Island.

The private [Akaiami Lodge](#) on gorgeous Akaiami Island is the only up-market place to stay. It is a carefully reconstructed lodge made from local materials where once stood the air terminal for the Teal flying sea-planes which flew the Coral Air Route between North America and New Zealand in the 1950's. Akaiami was one of the refuelling stops en-route and the original jetty still exists. The beaches on Akaiami are fantastic with excellent swimming and it is possible to wade across to neighbouring islands at low tide.

Day cruises to the motu depart every morning except Sunday, which is a strict day of rest when everything closes down. Most visit the exquisite One Foot Island in the south where it's possible to walk out into the lagoon and along sand banks. One Foot has gorgeous beaches and great views of the other islands, but, with lots of day-trippers all trying to see and do as much as they can in a few hours, the place is rather busy. Snorkelling throughout the lagoon is excellent with loads of friendly fish and giant clams and there is good scuba diving to view the drop-offs outside the main reef.

Moturakau is another popular setting down spot and is one of two islands in the centre of the lagoon, both of volcanic origin and therefore are higher. It was here that the original British television docu-soap series

Shipwrecked was located.

Maina or Honeymoon Island in the west tip is another popular spot and has lots of nesting sea birds.

Whilst the larger day cruises offer a quick glimpse at the islands and congregate on mass at One Foot Island at about the same time (midday) to really appreciate the beauty of the islands it is best to take a private boat cruise to visit other islands or to visit One Foot in the early morning or late afternoon.

Eastern Islands

Atiu Island

Atiu is the most developed of the outer Southern Islands, but tourism is still quite limited with just six places to stay. The island is mostly flat and the coast wild and rugged with beautiful cove beaches that are rarely visited.

The island, an eroded volcanic island, is slowly rising again due to tectonic plate movements and over the past 100,000 has risen 70 feet. This has created the wild rugged rocks and cliffs on its coast (which at one time was the reef). This dead reef encircles the island up to a mile inland where it has created a second set of cliffs, some as high as 100 feet. The cliffs are known as makatae. Another result of this uplift was the creation of limestone caves. Anatakitaki cave, the most famous of the caves, is home to a unique species of black swiftlet called the kopeka and can be visited on a guided tour. Other caves scattered around the island were used as burial caves in times of old.

All villages on Atiu are located in the central plateau inland from the coast. There are lots of good bush trails for exploring and over twenty beautiful deserted sandy cove beaches around the coast - most are unsuitable for swimming but you will find large pools you can dip in. Although all beaches are pretty secluded, they are easy to find on your own - most have small trails leading down to them from the coastal road - and you will be guaranteed the place to yourself.

Atiu is renowned for its bush beer, a tradition from the days of old when the drinking of Kava was banned by the missionaries. Tumunu are traditional gatherings when the men of the village get together in a small hut and spend the evening drinking the sweet alcohol brewed from oranges, telling stories and singing songs. Tourists are welcome at these gatherings and is a must do.

Atiu has several excellent day tours. [Atiu Tours](#) offer an Atiu Day Tour and the Anatakitaki Cave Tour with the Humphries family. [Birdman George](#) offers excellent Eco Tours of the island as well as specialist bird watching tours to spot the rare kakeori bird and others. Whales can be spotted off the reef (which in places is less than 20 metres from the coast) during the months of July to October.

Takutea

The tiny uninhabited island of Takutea lies just 9 miles off the coast of Atiu and is a sanctuary for nesting tropic birds and boobies. Atiuans visit the island every so often for copra cutting and egg collecting and it is possible to join them if you're there at the right time.

Mauke & Mitiaro

Mauke lies 30 miles to the south and east of Mitiaro, the furthest of the Eastern Islands from Rarotonga. It is very similar to Atiu but smaller. Motuanga Cave has a lovely natural swimming pool. Accommodation is provided by Tiare Holiday Village on the south side of Mauke.

Mitiaro is located about 30 miles to the north and east of Atiu. The low lying island is surrounded by rugged limestone cliffs. There is just one main settlement on the west coast of the island. There are a few small inland caves around the makatea and a large area of swamp with two connecting lakes in the interior. The island is not as fertile as its neighbours and consequently, being poorer, there are more traditional thatch fales on the island. There are several interesting marae, ancient stone foundations marking religious meeting places and a limestone cave with a lovely natural swimming pool. The Sea Breeze Lodge provides clean and basic accommodation with shared facilities.

Mangaia

Mangaia, 110 miles to the south east of Rarotonga, is believed to be one of the oldest islands in the Pacific. It was formed in a similar way to Atiu, Mauke and Mitiaro but is far more dramatic. The makatae inland is in places over 200 feet high and the surrounding coast is extremely rugged. The village of Onerua on the west coast is split on two levels between the makatae, with a huge pass carved between two levels. Ara Moana Bungalows has six traditional thatch cabins on top of this makatea cliff. Modern and larger motel style units are available through Babe's Place. Mangaia is fiercely independent and looks very much after itself. Fishing is excellent right off the coast and if you're lucky, you may see humpback whales passing between July and October. There are several limestone caves around the island, including the impressive Te Rua Rere. Tuatini cave was used as a burial chamber and several intact skeletons and small wooden boxes can be seen on ledges carved into the cliffs. Both caves can be visited with guides.

Northern Atolls

Palmerston

Palmerston is a large atoll, 11km wide with over 30 tiny coral atolls surrounding the fringing reef. Palmerston is extremely remote, lying 370km to the north-west of Aitutaki and is theoretically part of the Southern Islands although it is closer to the Northern Group. Only 50 people live on the island, all descendents of the Englishman William Masters and his three Cook Island wives, three sisters from Penrhyn. Masters died in 1899 but his descendents live on, running the plantations. Olde English is still spoken on the island. There is no official accommodation but guests can arrange home stay through the local Church.

The remote Northern Group of islands comprise of six huge lagoons surrounded by tiny flat islands. There are only a couple of government initiated guesthouses to stay at in the entire Northern Group, although it is possible to arrange family stays on all islands through [Air Rarotonga](#) or Taoi Shipping when booking transfers. Air Rarotonga offer a twice monthly tours of Manahiki, Pukapuka and Penryn lasting one week and include accommodation.

Manihiki

Manihiki, 750 miles north of Rarotonga, supports the largest population in the Northern Group with around 1000 people. Manihiki is the centre for black pearl farming and you'll see quite a few fully serviced houses propped up on stilts in the centre of the lagoon. There are a few villages on the islets around the lagoon, several shops and a Post Office, radio station and hospital at Tahunu Village. Penryn, in the far north, is the largest atoll, being seven miles wide and fifteen long. It too has some amenities and an excellent harbour making it popular for passing yachts. Passing yachties should obtain clearance from the government station based at Omaka Village on Moananui.

Suvarrow

Suvarrow also has good anchorage and is the most remote island in the group. It was uninhabited until Tom Neale obtained permission from the government to live there in 1952. For 15 of the next 25 years of his life, Neale survived alone and his book *An Island to Oneself*, was published in 1966. Suvarrow today is managed by a caretaker and his family who live on Anchorage Island. Visiting yachties can obtain a three day pass to Suvarrow from the caretaker, although all journeys to the islets must be accompanied by the caretaker. These islets are important breeding grounds for millions of sea birds including sooty terns, tropic birds and boobies. If you start your journey in Rarotonga, a 31 day pass can be obtained.

Other Atolls

Pukapuka and Rakahanga are also lagoon islands with air strips and only Nassau is a small sand bank with a treacherous reef with no passage and no lagoon.

[Air Rarotonga](#) offer weekly flights to Manihiki, Penrhyn and Pukapuka which all take about 3hrs 30mins from Rarotonga costing about NZ\$600 one way. A cheaper but much slower option (up to five days) is cabin or deck passage on one of the cargo boats operated by Taoi Shipping.