

The Cook Islands – 20 reasons to visit !!!

It's a favourite getaway for New Zealand travellers seeking warmer climes. So if you haven't already discovered it for yourself, here are 20 great reasons to visit the Cook Islands.

① SMALL ISLAND, BIG SMILES

It may be the main island in the nation and its commercial hub, but Rarotonga is a compact 32 kilometres in circumference and feels like one big, friendly resort. Hop aboard the round-Rarotonga bus service to get acquainted with the beaches, lagoons, shops and churches on the island; the bus runs regularly on two routes - clockwise and anti-clockwise (ck/bus.htm). If you prefer your own wheels to get around, rent a scooter or car and set off to discover secluded waterfalls and swimming spots.

② GREAT VALUE

The currency of the Cook Islands is the New Zealand dollar, making a Cook Island holiday as easy as one at home - just warmer. The best value can be found on locally sourced foods and products made in the Cook Islands, as import duties can be high.

③ MARKET APPEAL

Don't miss the Punanga Nui Cultural Market in the heart of Rarotonga. It's open every day except Sunday, with the most action on Saturday mornings when farmers and fishermen from the outer islands come to sell their fresh produce. As well as a rainbow of tropical fruit, you'll find stalls selling delicious meals, snacks and juices. Live music performances and a carnival atmosphere might put you in the mood to snap up sarongs, shell and pearl jewellery, wood carvings and woven baskets. punanganuiculturalmarket.co.ck.

④ THE LIFE AQUATIC

Beach lovers rejoice! The islands of Rarotonga and Aitutaki have some of the most picture-perfect white-sand beaches and tranquil swimming lagoons in the South Pacific, a region that knows a thing or two about iconic beaches. Scuba-dive or snorkel in the clear lagoons and come face-to-face with enormous turtles, colourful fish and unforgettable coral formations. The chest-high water is so clear you can see if your toenails need clipping. Captain Tama's Lagoon Cruise departs daily from Rarotonga and includes a delicious barbecue lunch of just-caught fish and tropical fruit. captaintamas.com.

5 POLYNESIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

A seafaring people, Cook Islanders consider themselves descendants of Polynesians from nearby Tahiti, who first settled the area about 1400 years ago. Captain James Cook discovered the 15-island chain spread across a vast waterscape of the South Pacific in 1773; it took another 115 years for the Cooks to become a British protectorate. In the years since there has been missionary zeal, rule by New Zealand, followed by independence today. To learn more about the culture and history, visit the Cook Islands Library and Museum or the National Museum. enjoycookislands.com.

6 FRIENDLY FACES

The warm face of modern Cook Island Maori culture is on full display in the Cook Islands. Don't be surprised to find yourself invited home for dinner with a local family or hearing local folklore from a grandmother selling pawpaw by the side of the road. For a more informal glimpse of the local traditions, have a beer with the locals on Friday and Saturday nights. Popular Avarua bars on Rarotonga include Whatever (whatever.co.ck) and Rehab. Cooks Lager is the local brew.

7 THE FOOD

It's a small nation with big taste buds. Cook Islanders love to eat, and to gather to share food and laughs. Eat your way around the markets and roadside stalls for a fix of home cooking and fresh fruit on the cheap, then scale it up with a memorable waterfront dinner at Tamarind House (tamarind.co.ck). On the Progressive Dinner and Wine Tour, visitors dine at three island abodes, enjoying home-cooked fare and a relaxed chat with locals. Book through cookislandsholidays.com

8 STRAIGHT TO PARADISE

At least daily Auckland-Rarotonga flights are available year-round on Air New Zealand, which also operates flights to Aitutaki via Rarotonga. See airnewzealand.co.nz for flight schedules, prices and booking information.

9 SUNDAY SPIRIT

British missionaries introduced Christianity to the Cook Islanders in 1821 and today more than 50 per cent of locals regularly attend services at the 24 congregations of the Cook Islands Christian Church. Go along to the Avarua, Rarotonga, main service at 10am on Sundays and you'll see islanders of all ages dressed up in their finest clothes and ready to raise the roof with a joyful noise. On the first Sunday of the month, all attendees are asked to wear white.

10 FISHING FRENZY

Don't worry about the one that got away: In the Cook Islands there are plenty of fish in the sea. Deep-sea fishing charters will have you reeling in the catch of the day just five minutes beyond the reefs. Trophy fishing is almost a spectator sport in these parts; in the lagoons surrounding Aitutaki, the extra-large bonefish and trevally are in such plentiful supply they make legends of amateur anglers. seafari.co.ck.

11 STEP BACK IN TIME

With a population of just 180 and fewer than 10 cars on the island, life on Mitiaro is slow-paced and gentle. Little has changed here since the first subsistence islanders fished the waters. Stay a while and be welcomed into a local family's home - and into the community - with Mitiaro Homestay. Three thatch-roofed homestay villas are available on this charming remote island (cookislands.travel/MitiaroHomestay). Don't expect fancy dinners and five-star amenities because this is grassroots tourism, with hospitality offered from the heart.

12 LAND OF THE BIRDS

Nature lovers, bushwalkers and birdwatchers have spoken and the verdict is in: Atiu Island is well worth a visit. Also known as Enuamanu (land of the birds), the island is home to fewer than 600 people and several species of indigenous birds. Tours of the underground caves where birds nest are popular, as are nature walks through the lush tropical jungle. Walk with confidence and don't fear being eaten alive. Although Atiu's history is studded with tales of cannibalism, those days are long gone. atiu.info.

13 AITUTAKI

Known unofficially as Honeymoon Island, Aitutaki is less than an hour's flight from Rarotonga. Romance is everywhere on this mesmerisingly beautiful island, from the ukulele serenade at the airport to the petal-strewn Polynesian bungalows at Pacific Resort Aitutaki (pacificresort.com). Wedding ceremonies, renewal of vows, honeymoons, babymoons and romantic getaways are celebrated here in fairytale fashion under the swaying palm trees. Memories of world-class snorkelling in water so blue it looks as if it has been photoshopped will last you a lifetime.

14 ISLAND NIGHTS

Hawaii has luaus, in the Cook Islands it's island nights. For many visitors, this memorable celebration of local culture, dance, song, costumes and cuisine is the highlight of their trip. Shows are on every night of the week, with the larger hotels laying it all on a few times a week. Stand-alone venue Te Vara Nui Village offers a top-notch night, with its traditional cultural village tour, a spectacular flame-throwing, hip-swivelling dance performance and a buffet spread heaving under the weight of local delicacies. tevaranui.co.ck.

15 FESTIVAL FEVER

In the laid-back ease of the Cook Islands, work-life balance is clearly weighted in favour of enjoyment of life. Locals love to celebrate, family time is paramount, and festivals of all kinds are anticipated with great excitement. Count yourself lucky if your stay coincides with the finals of Dancer of the Year (May), Rarotonga Gospel Day (July) or the Te Mire Tama flower festival (October). The most important event on the calendar is the annual celebration of self-rule. Te Maeva Nui is an extravaganza of song, dance and national costume, held at the end of July. cookislands.travel/nz

16 BEAUTIFUL BLOOMS

Surely the Garden of Eden took more than a little inspiration from the natural beauty of the Cook Islands. At the Maire Nui Botanical Gardens, lush greenery is a foil for an abundant wonderland of bright tropical flowers. Yellow and red hibiscus, pandanus and flowering ginger look and smell wonderful in this non-profit garden. A cafe on the grounds serves organic tea and coffee. You can take home the scent of the islands with the frangipani, tiare and coconut soaps and oils available from Perfumes of Rarotonga. perfumes.co.ck.

17 ACTION STATIONS

While the fly-and-flop crowd soak up the rays, the adventure buffs have plenty of options for thrill-seeking in the Cook Islands. Explore the undeveloped interior of Rarotonga in a four-wheel-drive safari tour, ride a pony along secluded beaches or burn off last night's taro chips on a mountain trek. Mountainbiking is gaining popularity, as is the novelty of paintball, caving and quad tours. Wildlife and bird tours suit all fitness levels. cookislands.travel/nz

18 ART APPEAL

The vivid colours and forms of the tropical flowers, lagoons and eternal sky in the Cook Islands have inspired many artists to pick up a paintbrush. The art of tivaevae, or traditional quilting, is also alive and well. You can see watercolours, sculptures, weavings and more by local artists at galleries and art dealerships around town. Loretta Reynolds' style has a tiki tribal-art influence (pacificart.info), and Ian and Kay George (theartstudiocookislands.com) work the islands' colours into prints, textiles and paintings.

19 LUXE DIGS

It may be a tropical island getaway, but don't expect row upon row of high-rise beachfront hotels and apartments. You won't find chain resorts in the Cook Islands, where no building is higher than a coconut tree. The four private villas in the Crystal Blue Lagoon Luxury Villas complex on Muri Beach, Rarotonga, offer unpretentious luxury and elegance; they get an A for awesome unrestricted views of the dazzling lagoon and ocean beyond the reef. The infinity pool just seals the deal. <http://www.crystalbluelagoonvillas.com/>

20 PEARLS

Beautiful black pearls are farmed in one of the remotest parts of the Cook Islands and are then exported to the world. On the atolls of Manihiki, Rakahanga and Tongareva (also called Penrhyn), about 1365 kilometres north of Rarotonga, pearl diving has been a way of life for centuries. Although they were named for the colour of the shell they are found in, the pearls come in hues of blue, silver and deep green. You can pick up a quality souvenir or two from the pearl retailers in Avarua. Gorgeous rings, pendants and bracelets are among the items available, at competitive prices.