

History

POLYNESIAN SETTLEMENT

Cook Islanders are Polynesians: people of the *poly* (many) islands of the South Pacific. They are closely related to the Maoris of New Zealand and Tahiti (Cook Islanders can happily converse with their Maori cousins from overseas, despite differences in vocabulary and dialect). For more on Cook Islands culture, see p27.

The Cook Islands were first settled around 1500 years ago by travellers from the Society and Marquesas Islands (now known as French Polynesia). Polynesians had been trekking across much of the South Pacific in huge ocean-going canoes for a couple of millennia before they arrived in the Cooks. The first settlers arrived in Melanesia from Southeast Asia around 2500 BC, before heading on to Fiji, Samoa and Tonga; French Polynesia was then settled somewhere between 200 BC and AD 200. From there, canoes travelled thousands of kilometres in all directions, reaching Rapa Nui (Easter Island), Hawaii, South America, and finally Rarotonga and the Cook Islands in around AD 500.

EARLY COOK ISLANDS SOCIETY

Although written records only began with the arrival of the Europeans, oral history on Rarotonga traces its ancestry back about 1400 years. One of the oldest legends tells the tale of To'i, the great chief who built the Ara Metua (the ancient inland road) on Rarotonga somewhere around the 11th century, suggesting that there was already a sizable population living on the island (probably settlers from present-day French Polynesia). Traditional history, however, begins in the 13th century with the arrival of Tangi'ia and Karika, great chiefs from Tahiti and Samoa, who arrived aboard mighty ocean-going *vaka* (canoes), conquered the resident population, and founded Rarotonga's six main tribes.

Every island in the Cooks was ruled by several *ariki* (high chiefs). Beneath the *ariki* were *mataiapo* (chiefs) and *rangatira* (sub-chiefs). Land was divided into sections called *tapere*, each governed by one or more *mataiapo*, and home to a large extended family who used the land to build houses, farm crops and raise livestock. Each tribe had its own *marae* (sacred meeting places) and worshipped specific gods. The *koutu* was the most important meeting place of all – it was the official seat of a ruling *ariki*, and the place where the main sacrifices, offerings and annual feasts were made.

A chief's authority depended on his *mana* – a complex term signifying not just physical or hereditary power, but also confidence, victory, prestige, knowledge, spirituality and all-round star quality. *Mana ariki* was the hereditary power of a chief; *mana atua* was the divine authority of the priest; and *mana tutara* was the ruling power of a *mataiapo*. *Mana* could be gained as well as lost; great deeds in battle and cowardly acts could all affect a person's *mana*, and the way he was regarded by the tribe.

Ta'unga (literally 'experts') were also important figures. There were *ta'unga* in many fields, including woodcarving, agriculture, medicine,

canoe-making and navigation. The *tumu korero* (speaker) was responsible for memorising tribal history and genealogy, but the most powerful *ta'unga* was the high priest, who was seen as the main bridge between the people and the spirits of the gods and ancestors. The high priest could declare certain acts or places *tapu* (forbidden), either by order of the gods or the *ariki*; the chief would decide when *tapu* had been violated and what the punishment would be (generally it was likely to be fairly unpleasant).

Like their modern-day descendants, early Cook Islanders never passed up the opportunity for a party. There were elaborate ceremonies for all kinds of occasions – coming-of-age ceremonies, marriages, deaths, harvest festivals and victories in battle – so the islanders had plenty of opportunity to perfect their song and dance routines.

EUROPEAN EXPLORERS

The Cook Islands had over a thousand years to develop its distinctive culture and customs before any Europeans finally pitched up. The first Europeans to sight the islands were both Spanish explorers: Alvaro de Mendaña glimpsed Pukapuka in 1595, and in 1606, Pedro Fernández de Quirós stopped at Rakahanga to take on provisions.

In 1773, the English explorer James Cook sighted the islands from his vessel *The Resolution* (among his crew was a young Cornish sailing master by the name of William Bligh, who went on to lead the infamous mutiny aboard *The Bounty* in 1789). Between 1773 and 1777, Cook charted much of the group, and following a fine English tradition of attaching dull, irrelevant names to wonderful places, dubbed the Southern Group islands the 'Hervey Islands' in honour of a Lord of the Admiralty. Fifty years later a Russian cartographer (Admiral Johann von Krusenstern) published the *Atlas de l'Océan Pacifique*, in which he renamed the islands in honour of Captain Cook.

MISSIONARIES

Once the explorers had sailed on to new discoveries (or sticky ends, as was the case with Captain Cook, who was stabbed to death in Hawaii in 1779), it was left to the missionaries to establish long-lasting contact with the people of the Cook Islands. Reverend John Williams of the London Missionary Society (LMS) sailed from Ra'iatea (near present-day Tahiti) to Aitutaki in 1821. There he left two Tahitian preachers, including a newly converted Society Islander named Papeiha. By the time Williams returned two years later, plucky Papeiha had managed to convert practically the entire island, which spurred Williams on to take the gospel to the rest of the Southern Group.

The Cook Islanders probably wished he'd stayed put. For the next 50-odd years, Williams and his Bible-happy followers ruled the islands with an iron rod, imposing a catalogue of draconian doctrines, which even by contemporary standards seemed ridiculously strict, and frequently bordered on the unhinged (see the boxed text, p49). Offenders were clobbered with heavy fines, ensuring a steady stream of enforced labour for the missionaries' building projects and a handy source of revenue for the local *riko* (police) and judges.

The roles of *ariki*, *mataiapo*, *rangatira* and *tumu korero* survive to the present day. Arguments over who should be holding which title are still as fierce as ever – just check out the daily newspapers.

They Came for Sandalwood, by Marjorie Crocombe, explores the effect the arrival of overseas traders had on the development of the Cook Islands.

During an investiture ceremony for an *ariki*, you'll still see a *ta'unga* performing traditional blessings and prayers – often right alongside a Christian minister.

Vaka: Saga of a Polynesian Canoe, by Sir Tom Davis, is a historical novel based on the story of the *Takitumu* canoe (one of the canoes of the 'great migration' to New Zealand in the 14th century) over a span of 12 generations. *Island Boy – An Autobiography* tells the story of Davis's life up to 1992.

Herbalists specialising in 'Maori medicine', traditional remedies that many Cook Islanders swear by for common aches and pains, are still common in the Cook Islands.

TIMELINE 200 BC – AD 200

Polynesian pioneers reach the Society and Marquesas Islands (now French Polynesia)

AD 500

Settlers arrive on Rarotonga and begin the process of colonising the other islands

1300s

Tangi'ia and Karika, two chiefs from Tahiti and Samoa, conquer Rarotonga and divide the island between six tribes

1773

James Cook sights Manuae and the 'Hervey Group' for the first time

Despite the fact that the Cook Islands bear his name, James Cook never actually laid eyes on Rarotonga and only ever set foot on tiny Palmerston Atoll (most of the time he courageously sent a few subordinates ashore in his place).

The influence of the missionaries wasn't all bad, of course. They left the Cook Islanders with some beautiful churches, mostly built from crushed coral and lime, and often intricately decorated with sennit rope and carved wood. Several of the missionaries (especially William Wyatt Gill, a British missionary who spent much of his life on Mangaia) wrote detailed accounts of their experiences, providing a fascinating window onto life in the Cook Islands in the 19th century. But the arrival of the missionaries also spelled the end for many traditional customs in the Cook Islands. The missionaries were keen to suppress the islands' pre-Christian past (especially anything relating to sticky subjects such as ritual sacrifice and cannibalism). Carved idols and hallowed artefacts were burned, *marae* and *paepae* (meeting grounds) were razed to the ground, and many of the old stories and legends were outlawed or forgotten.

DISEASE, POPULATION DECLINE & SLAVE TRADERS

The missionaries brought more than just Christianity and churches to the islands of Polynesia: they inadvertently also brought devastating new diseases, including smallpox and dysentery, the latter of which killed nearly 1000 people in 1830, and caused a drastic population decline across all the islands. To push their cause further, the missionaries cited the mounting death toll as a message from above, and many islanders desperately abandoned their old religion in the hope that they would be spared. But of course, most weren't – as a matter of fact, the population in Rarotonga fell to about one-third within 30 years, and throughout the 19th century deaths exceeded births in the Cook Islands. It wasn't

CROWNING A CHIEF

Traditionally the *ariki* (high chief) was the first-born son in the royal line and held the highest rank in the tribe. The *ariki* was believed to be a direct descendant of the gods, and during ritual ceremonies was seen as an intermediary between heavenly and earthly realms. The *ariki* commanded huge power, sitting in judgment over family disputes, declaring war and peace with other tribes, and ensuring the continuing welfare of his people.

These days, with a modern democratic system in place in the Cook Islands, the *ariki* is more a figurehead than an actual ruler, but they still command considerable moral authority. The House of Ariki, which consists of all the 24 *ariki* in the Cook Islands, serves to advise the elected government on issues of custom and tribal tradition, but has little say in the actual day-to-day running of the country. The title has also lost its misogynistic overtones: today the *ariki* is just as likely to be a woman as a man (in fact, five of the six *ariki* titles on Rarotonga are currently held by women).

The investiture of a new *ariki* is still an important ceremony in the Cook Islands. The investiture ceremony takes place on an ancient family *marae*. The new *ariki*, *mataiapo* (sub-chiefs) and all the other attendants are clad in the traditional ceremonial dress, and the ancient symbols of office (including a spear, woven shoes, a feather headdress, a woven fan and a huge mother-of-pearl necklace) are presented. You'll see these things in museums, but for Cook Islanders they are not just museum pieces. The ceremonies are also packed with strange quirks: on Rarotonga, the investiture of the *ariki* is for some reason not considered complete until he or she has bitten the ear of a pig, but no-one can quite remember why.

until the early 20th century that the population on Rarotonga began finally to level out, bolstered by migrants from a number of the outer islands.

Disease was not the only thing Cook Islanders had to fear. Brutal Peruvian slave traders, known as blackbirders, took a terrible toll on the Northern Group between 1862 and 1863. At first operating as genuine labour recruiters, the traders quickly turned to subterfuge and outright kidnapping to round up their human cargo. Rakahanga and Pukapuka suffered terribly, but Penrhyn was the 'blackbirders' main port of call – some estimates reckon that up to three-quarters of the entire population was taken from the island. Few of the 'recruits' ever returned – over 90% died either in transit to Peru or during enforced slave labour.

PROTECTORATE, ANNEXATION & INDEPENDENCE

The late 19th century saw a headlong rush of colonial expansion over much of the South Pacific. Following several requests for British protection from Makea Takau, the ruling *ariki* of Avarua, Rarotonga was officially made a British overseas protectorate in 1888, mainly in order to avoid a French invasion. The first British Resident (the representative of the British government in a British protectorate) arrived in 1891, but the relationship soon went sour. As a tiny country of little strategic or economic importance, the Cook Islands held little interest for the British, and following a request from the New Zealand Prime Minister, Richard Seddon, the Cook Islands was annexed to New Zealand in 1901.

The next 50 years were largely quiet ones for the Cook Islands. During WWII the USA built airstrips on Penrhyn and Aitutaki, but the Cooks remained largely untouched by the wider war, unlike many of its neighbours in the South Pacific. In the 1960s, as colonies became increasingly unfashionable, New Zealand leapt at the chance to off-load its expensive overseas dependency and in 1965 the Cook Islands became internally self-governing.

POST-INDEPENDENCE POLITICS

The first leader of the newly independent Cook Islands was Albert Henry, leader of the Cook Islands Party (CIP), who had been a prime mover in the push for self-rule, and was the first in a long line of 'colourful' characters in Cook Islands politics. Sir Albert (he was knighted in 1974, as were many of his successors) did much to unify the country in the initial years of independence, but fell spectacularly from grace during the 1978 elections, when he became embroiled in a massive scandal involving overseas voters (the CIP flew hundreds of supporters back to the Cook Islands in exchange for a vote in the election, bankrolling the tickets with revenue from the sale of postage stamps by the Cook Islands Philatelic Bureau). The election was handed to the opposition party, the Cook Islands Democratic Party, and Sir Albert was stripped of his knighthood. He died soon after, in 1981; you can see his characteristically ostentatious grave in the Avarua CICC graveyard (p58).

Years of the Pooh-Bah: A Cook Islands History, by Dick Scott, is a lively history of the Cooks in the colonial era, packed with plenty of historical photos and illustrations.

The Cook Islands flag consists of 15 white stars (one for each island) on a blue background, with the Union Jack in the top left corner.

Only Cook Islanders can hold freehold land in the Cook Islands, although many sections of land are leased to foreigners (but only for a maximum term of 60 years).

1823

British missionary John Williams lands on Rarotonga; conversion of Cook Islanders to Christianity begins; 'Blue Laws' implemented

1888

Cook Islands established as a British overseas protectorate to avoid French invasion

1901

New Zealand annexes the Cook Islands

1965

Cook Islands becomes 'self-governing nation in free association with New Zealand'

www.ck/history.htm offers a whistlestop tour of the history of the Cook Islands.

Power seesawed over the ensuing years between the two rival parties, and the political landscape of the period is littered with spats, scandals and larger-than-life personalities – notably Dr Tom Davis, author, canoe-builder and zero-gravity medicine specialist with NASA, and Geoffrey Henry (a cousin of Albert Henry), who only lasted a few months in his first period as leader, but returned as an influential prime minister from 1989 to 1999.

FINANCIAL WOES

If there's one thing that the Cook Islands have never quite managed to get to grips with, it's balancing the books. In order to finance domestic growth, successive governments were forced to borrow and borrow...and borrow. A series of bad investments (including the massive Sheraton resort on Rarotonga's south coast, which ultimately fell through and left the government about NZ\$100 million in debt; see p63), and a major scandal involving the country's offshore-banking industry, set the stage for financial meltdown.

In the mid-1990s, foreign debt spiralled out of control, and with bankruptcy looming, the government was forced to take radical action. The economic-stabilisation programme, initiated in 1996, eventually resulted in the sacking of about 2000 government employees – 50% of the public service – a huge proportion of the working population in a country of just 20,000 inhabitants. Masses of redundant workers left the country in search of jobs elsewhere (mostly to New Zealand or Australia) and never returned, and the country was only saved from the brink thanks to an emergency aid package implemented by the New Zealand government.

RECENT HISTORY

The Cook Islands still has an eye-watering trade deficit, importing far more than it exports, but thanks to the huge expansion in tourism over recent years, foreign investment is currently flowing into the Cook Islands and keeps the financial wolf from the door. The issue of offshore banking remains a thorny topic; other pressing matters include the ever-accelerating population decline from the outer islands and the gloomy spectre of global warming, which was brought into sharp focus by the unprecedented number of cyclones that swept through the islands in 2005. But it is the implementation of the Unit Titles Act on Rarotonga in 2005 – an act enabling foreigners to lease specific sections of a property in the Cook Islands, rather than the surrounding land – that has really set the cat among the political pigeons. Present prime minister, Jim Marurai, would do well to strap himself in – he looks well and truly set for a bumpy ride.

The new Unit Titles Act enables foreigners to lease specific parts of a building (or 'unit') in the Cook Islands for the first time. Some people fear that the islands will be swamped by 'timeshare' properties and holiday homes as a result, but so far the act has only been passed on Rarotonga.

www.stats.gov.ck contains all the latest statistical figures for the Cook Islands, ranging from the number of births, marriages and deaths in the last month to the average quarterly rainfall on Rarotonga.

1996

Cook Islands 'economic crisis'; 50% of public service workers sacked and New Zealand rescue package implemented

2005

A record five cyclones strike the Cooks causing widespread damage; Unit Titles Act passed on Rarotonga but rejected by Aitutaki

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Thanks to the islands' close links with nearby New Zealand and Australia, the contemporary face of the Cook Islands is surprisingly modern. The main island of Rarotonga is a sophisticated and cosmopolitan place, characterised as much by neatly tended lawns, Western-style clothing and modern houses as by any overt signs of traditional Polynesian culture. But beneath this strongly Westernised veneer, many aspects of traditional Maori culture survive and inform practically every aspect of the way Cook Islanders live and work. It's in the land system – how it's inherited, how it's managed and how it's leased (but never sold). It's in the way people transact business. It lives on in Cook Islands hospitality, in dance, music and celebration, in the preparation of food, the wearing of flowers, the language, and in many other day-to-day ways of doing things.

It's important to remember, though, that the Cook Islands has only existed as a unified country for a relatively short while – initially as the Hervey Islands, then as the Cook Islands under British and New Zealand rule, and later as an independent nation. Previously, each island was essentially a world apart, with distinct customs, traditions and tribal structures. You'll still find this sense of individual island identity today: though many people collectively think of themselves as Cook Islanders, most still refer to their own particular 'home island' and will happily relate – often at great length – exactly what sets one particular island and its people apart from another.

But in the few short decades since independence, the Cook Islands has developed a remarkably strong sense of self, bolstered by the programme of 'nation-building' implemented by the first prime minister, Albert Henry, which encouraged Cook Islanders to actively participate in forging their new national identity. Politics, sport, dance, music, and the ever-troublesome issues of land and inheritance, are all universal passions, and most Cook Islanders share a collective belief in the importance of community, family and the preservation of traditional values. As the islands' population continues to decline, and fewer young people show an interest in preserving traditional skills, practices and customs in favour of higher wages and easier lives overseas, the importance of shared national values in the Cook Islands promises to become more and more significant.

LIFESTYLE

Contemporary Cook Islanders are a thoroughly 21st-century people. The majority of the islanders live in one-storey bungalows or houses, rented, leased or built on family land. Most people are in regular employment or run their own businesses and earn a reasonable salary (though wages are much lower than in Australia and New Zealand – one of the main reasons for the steady population drain over the past 40 years). The vast majority of children attend school regularly and receive a decent standard of education, and the literacy rate is astonishingly high (somewhere around 99%). Most Cook Islanders are bilingual, with a fluent knowledge of English and Cook Islands Maori. All islanders have access to the national health system, either on the main island of Rarotonga or in New Zealand, or in small clinics on the outer islands.

'Ongi – the traditional Maori custom of pressing noses together – was once practised in the Cook Islands too. *'Ongi* literally means 'to smell the fragrance', and it was customary to sniff hands, shoulders, bodies and even feet as a form of greeting.

The Cook Islands has a Westminster-derived parliamentary system similar to the UK and New Zealand, with a main house of 24 elected members supplemented by the House Of Ariki, who advise parliament on cultural matters.

The further you move away from Rarotonga, the more obvious traditional Cook Islands culture becomes. On many of the outer islands, especially Palmerston and the Northern Group islands, the outside world (and Rarotonga) still feels a long, long way away. You'll find many families there essentially living a subsistence lifestyle – growing and harvesting their own crops, fishing in traditional outrigger canoes, and practising traditional crafts such as basket-weaving and 'ei (traditional garland) making.

But whichever island you're on, family still exerts the most important influence on the way Cook Islanders live their daily lives. Every Cook Island Maori is part of a family clan, which is connected in some way to the ancient system of chiefs – a system that has survived for centuries in an unbroken line. Most people can relate their genealogy over several generations – often in truly bewildering detail – and it's more than just a matter of family pride. The traditional systems of land tenure and title inheritance rely entirely on family genealogy; and as Cook Islands families are generally huge – and the connections, crossovers and intermarriages between families can be astonishingly complicated – it pays to know exactly how you fit into the family tree. Extended families are an everyday feature of most Cook Islanders' lives; you'll often find children living with grandparents, or nieces and nephews with aunts and uncles, and long-term adoption between families is fairly commonplace.

Another major influence on contemporary life is undoubtedly the church. Since the missionaries arrived in the mid-18th century, Cook Islanders have embraced Christianity with an enthusiasm rarely equalled anywhere else in the South Pacific. Many people regularly attend church on a Sunday, and often the odd prayer meeting or Bible reading during the week on top of that. You only have to pay a visit to a Sunday service to realise just how important it is to the islanders, who all turn out in their Sunday finery and often spend much of the day in hymn practice and Bible study. Even if you're not a believer, remember that you're a visitor in a devoutly Christian country – be modest and respectful in dress wherever possible, and make sure you keep beachwear firmly confined to the beach. Women should refer to p173 for further tips on appropriate dress.

Friendliness, hospitality and respect for others are traits that are highly valued in Cook Islands culture. It's important to be courteous, especially towards old people and children – rudeness will definitely get you nowhere. A greeting and a smile before anything else will often smooth the way – but don't stress yourself too much about behaving correctly in the Cook Islands, especially on Rarotonga. Tiptoeing around them will only bring on howls of laughter and encourage them to have you on (although Cook Islanders rarely need any encouragement to pull your leg!).

The last concept that you'll have to get to grips with is 'Cook Islands time'. Perhaps it's the tropical climate, or the relaxed South Seas lifestyle, or the fact that you can circumnavigate the main island in less than an hour – but the Cook Islanders' attitude to time is rather different to the one you might be used to back home. If you're genuinely in a hurry (ie catching a plane) it can be extremely frustrating, but you'll get there faster if you learn to take it in your stride. So sit back, order another smoothie, and make sure you book your taxi half an hour earlier than you think you'll need it. Come to think of it, better make that an hour...

Cook Islands Custom is a short book based on the writings of William Wyatt Gill, and contains first-hand accounts of many traditional Cook Islands customs, including birth, marriage practices, magic rituals and funeral rites.

Several missionaries recount that one of the traditional greetings in the Cook Islands was to tip back the head, slightly elevating the eyebrows at the same time. Look out for it – it's still a relatively common gesture.

POPULATION

The population of the Cook Islands is estimated at around 14,000 (having lost up to 3000 people to New Zealand in recent years, mostly due to the poor economic situation). The story of the Cook Islands' population is one long tale of continuous migration: from the outer islands to Rarotonga and from there to New Zealand, and to Australia. Over 90% of the Cook Islands' population lives in the Southern Group, with over 50% of the country's population on Rarotonga alone.

Around 90% of the population is Polynesian (Maori). There's also a small minority of people of European descent, principally New Zealanders, and some Fijian, Indian, Filipino and Chinese families.

There are often subtle differences between the islands. The people of Pukapuka, for example, are more closely related to the people of Samoa than to the people of the other islands of the Cooks group.

SPORT

Cook Islanders are enthusiastic sportsfolk, indulging in many sports from sedate lawn bowls to distance running to *vaka* (ocean canoe) racing.

The two major sports in the Cooks are rugby, which is played with full-blooded passion from May to August, and cricket, played over the summer months, particularly from January to April. Each village has a team vying against the others in tournaments, and the competition can be intense – even the seniors compete in 'Golden Oldies' rugby and cricket tournaments! Though the tournaments are played by organised teams, you're bound to come across a casual game – don't be shy about asking if you fancy joining in.

Netball is as popular among women as rugby is for the men, and inter-village rivalry is equally fierce. Soccer is becoming increasingly popular, especially among younger Cook Islanders.

The Manea Games is a regular tournament held every other year between the islands of the Southern Group, except Rarotonga, which has its own tournament (the Tumutevarovaro Games, usually held every July). Netball, rugby, soccer, athletics, volleyball and darts are some of the featured sports.

Any time there's any game on, everyone is welcome to go and watch. Check out the local newspapers for announcements of upcoming games.

CANNIBALISM IN THE COOKS

At some point most of the Cook Islands practised cannibalism, but there's some debate about exactly how widespread it was, and according to oral history the practice was only commonplace under certain chiefs. As in many other South Pacific cultures, cannibalism was usually enacted as a mark of victory in war or as a fearsome punishment. Cannibalism ceased in the Southern Group with the advent of Christianity, although it had apparently already been outlawed by Manganian chiefs by the time the missionaries arrived.

The favoured method, according to the missionary William Wyatt Gill, was to skewer the unfortunate victim with a long spear from end to end, and then barbecue them over an open fire in order to remove the hair and cuticles. The body was then steamed in an underground oven and distributed among the warriors of the tribe (women and children were never allowed to join in). The intestines and thighs were the choicest cuts, but the islanders apparently weren't fussy – the only bits of the body that remained at the end of the feast were the bones and nails.

It's estimated that over 80,000 Cook Islanders currently live overseas – about 65,000 in New Zealand, half that number in Australia, and several thousand more in French Polynesia, the Americas, Europe and Asia.

MEDIA

There are two newspapers in the Cook Islands. The **Cook Islands News** (www.cinews.co.ck) is published daily except Sunday, and combines local news with international stories sourced from overseas news agencies. The weekly **Cook Islands Herald** (www.ciherald.co.ck), which is also published as the *Cook Islands Times*, usually has longer, in-depth features (invariably detailing the latest minister to be exposed for dodgy dealings and financial misdemeanours). The two newspapers also make sure they devote at least a few pages every week to a spot of petty sniping at each other (this is journalism, after all).

The daily *New Zealand Herald* is usually available on Rarotonga the day after it's published. A selection of foreign magazines is also available, principally at the Bounty Bookshop (p51) in Avarua.

Rarotonga has two radio stations. **Radio Cook Islands** (www.radio.co.ck) broadcasts at 630kHz AM from 6am to 11pm (until midnight Friday and Saturday). Apart from local programmes (in Maori and English) it also broadcasts Radio New Zealand's and Radio Australia's overseas world-news services. Radio Cook Islands reaches all of the Southern Group islands and some of the northern islands (where it's received on car radios with wires strung between coconut trees). Rarotonga's second station, KC-FM, broadcasts at 103.8MHz during similar hours; it can be received only in the northern part of Rarotonga. Outer-island radio stations also operate, mostly on a volunteer/part-time basis.

Cook Islands Television (CITV) broadcasts on Rarotonga only. Most of the programmes are soaps, documentaries and dramas imported from Australia and New Zealand, but there's also a daily news broadcast in Maori and English, and international news programmes from New Zealand. The local adverts, which usually star a few well-known local characters and generally look like they've been cut together on a home computer, are often more entertaining than the main programmes themselves. ABC Asia Pacific programmes are broadcast via CITV after 11pm through the night. Many outer islands have their own satellite dish and TV mast, and mix-and-match programmes downloaded from satellites with local news and announcements. What you watch is decided by the local TV operator, so don't be surprised if the channel gets switched in the middle of your favourite soap when the operator gets bored.

At publication time, a new private television station had just been granted a five-year broadcast licence in the Cooks; transmission is expected to start in late 2006.

RELIGION

Few people today remember much about the pre-European religion of the Cook Islands, with its sophisticated system of 12 heavens and 70-odd gods. See p34 for a whirlwind tour of premissionary religion, or, better yet, sit down with a *tumu korero* (a tribe's 'speaker') and ask about the old days.

Many early missionaries held pagan beliefs in such contempt that they made virtually no effort to study, record or understand the traditional religion. They did, however, take great pains to wipe it out and destroy any heathen images they could find. Fortunately, some fine pieces of religious art were whisked away from the islands to European and American museums (unfortunately, most of them are still there while Cook Island museums have to make do with photos or reconstructions).

The Cook Islands today is overwhelmingly Christian – in fact, visitors who haven't been to church for years suddenly find themselves going back to church just for fun! The major local denomination is the Cook

Islands Christian Church (CICC). Founded by the first LMS missionaries who came to the islands in the early 1820s, it's a blend of Church of England, Congregational, Baptist, Methodist and whatever else was going on at the time – Roman Catholicism excepted. Today the CICC attracts about 70% of the faithful; the remaining 30% is split between Roman Catholics, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals and the Church of the Latter-day Saints (resplendent as ever in white shirts and ties).

The CICC is still an integral part of village life and local politics. Each family in a congregation contributes a monthly sum to the church fund, which goes towards church costs. The minister is appointed for a five-year period, after which he moves to another church. He gets a small weekly stipend, supplemented by a weekly village collection.

Visitors are more than welcome to attend a Sunday service, and it's a fantastic way to immerse yourself in Cook Islands culture. The service is usually in Maori, although if there are any *papa'a* (foreigners) present there will be a token welcome in English and parts of the service may be in English as well. The islanders all dress in their Sunday best and the women wear their distinctive wide-brimmed hats, often handmade from *rito* (coconut fibre). Remember to observe a few simple rules of dress: no shorts for men or women and no bare shoulders. CICC services throughout the islands are held at 10am on Sunday, with other services held on Sunday evening and early on several mornings throughout the week. Stay after the service for morning tea, which is specially put on by the parish for visitors at almost all CICC churches.

The missionaries ultimately won the war in the Cooks; traditional Polynesian religion is dead and buried, and poor old Tangaroa has been reduced to selling bottle openers and novelty fridge magnets – though interest in the 'old ways' is enjoying something of a resurgence, and you'll find lots of amateur historians scattered throughout the islands who will be more than happy to share their knowledge of ancient legends, characters and long-lost *marae* (ancient meeting grounds).

Echoes of the ancient religion are evoked, however, in many traditional ceremonies – particularly the investiture of a new *ariki* (high chief), which involves ancient chants to Tangaroa and other pagan deities, despite the fact that almost everyone present is likely to be Christian. Similarly, you'll see many graves of the ancestors beside modern houses – an ancient practice that has survived several centuries of Christian disapproval.

ARTS Dance & Music

If there's one activity that really gets the Cook Islands fired up, it's dancing. Cook Islanders are reputed to be the best dancers in Polynesia (even better than the Tahitians, say the connoisseurs). You'll have plenty of opportunity to see them strut their stuff – particularly at the ubiquitous 'island nights', which combine a traditional meal and dance performance.

Cook Islands dancing is wonderfully suggestive and, unsurprisingly, met with stern disapproval from the first European visitors. William Wyatt Gill, perhaps the most observant of the early missionaries, archly reported:

I do not believe it is possible for any European to move the limbs as a Polynesian loves to do... Respecting the *morality* of their dances, the less said the better; but the '*upaupa*' dance, introduced from Tahiti, is obscene indeed.

William Wyatt Gill, a British-born minister who spent most of his adult life in the Cook Islands (mainly on the island of Mangaia) recorded many ancient legends and stories in his fascinating book *From Darkness to Light in Polynesia*, available from the USP bookshop in Avarua (p54).

Visions of the Pacific is a sumptuous coffee-table book published to commemorate the 1992 Festival of Pacific Arts held on Rarotonga. It's packed with glorious full-colour photos and is accompanied by some excellent explanatory text, and is especially good on local customs and Cook Islands culture.

A few centuries on, things haven't changed much. The sensual nature of Cook Islands dance is rooted in its history, when dances were performed to tell legends and celebrate auspicious occasions such as marriages, coming-of-age ceremonies, religious events and victories in war.

Traditionally, there are many types of dances, all used for specific occasions, including the *karakia* (prayer), *pe'e* (chant), *ura pa'u* (drum dance), *ate* (choral song), *kaparima* (action song) and *peu tupuna* (legend). Each island has its own songs, chants and dances, and aficionados can usually identify where a particular dance originates from by its style, technique and rhythm. Men stamp, gesture and knock their knees together, while women twitch and waggle their hips in an unmistakably suggestive manner. Dancers range in age from senior citizens right down to toddlers – quite often you'll see some tiny tots practising their moves along with the main dancers.

Dances are usually accompanied by musical instruments (generally guitars, ukeleles and various wooden drums) and the combined spectacle is really something to behold – particularly if you happen to catch a performance that includes fire-juggling and a spot of acrobatics thrown in for good measure.

Wallflowers be warned, however; a feature of almost every island night is dragging some unsuspecting *papa'a* up on stage to perform. Don't be shy – you'll get a lot more out of the evening if you just lose your inhibitions and get those hips shaking. It's also good practice if you're planning on exploring the island nightlife – head for any nightclub and you'll see disco, pop, rock'n'roll and sometimes even ballroom dancing spiced up with hip-swaying, knee-knocking and other classic island moves.

If you happen to be on Rarotonga during Constitution celebrations in August, look out for the annual dance championships, which are usually held at the National Auditorium in Avarua.

Cook Islanders are also passionate singers and musicians. The close harmony singing you'll hear at any of the islands' church services is moving and utterly memorable, and should definitely not be missed – but the islanders also love their pop music, and you'll often hear the latest Cook Islands tune blasting out of the nearest radio. Polynesian string bands, usually featuring guitars and ukeleles, are a regular feature at local restaurants and hotels, and you'll probably see a few locals singing along with the more popular songs.

Traditional Arts & Crafts

In the pre-European period the art of the small Northern Group atolls centred on practical objects – domestic equipment and tools, matting, and inlaid pearl shell on canoes and canoe paddles. In the south, however, a variety of crafts developed, with strong variations between the individual islands.

Many arts and crafts are still practised today. See p170, and the Shopping sections in regional chapters, for an idea of the arts and crafts you might still see on the islands.

WOODCARVING

Figures of gods carved from wood were among the most widespread art forms in the Cook Islands, and were particularly common on Rarotonga. These squat figures were usually dedicated to a specific god (Tangaroa, the god of sea, fishing and fertility, was a particularly popular subject).

Staff gods (wooden staffs with figures carved down their lengths), war clubs and spears were other typical Rarotongan artefacts. You can view some examples in the small Library Museum in Avarua (p51) and in the National Museum (p59).

CEREMONIAL ADZES

At first, the *toki* (ceremonial axes) of Mangaia probably had an everyday use, but over time they became purely ceremonial objects and more stylised in their design. In many cases *toki* came to represent a particular god (Tane was popular), just as Rarotonga's human statues represented Tangaroa. Each element of a *toki* was beautifully made – from the stone blade to the carefully carved wooden handle and the intricate sennit binding that lashed the blade to the handle. Some of the best examples of Mangaian *toki* are on exhibit in British museums. The art of making *toki* has not quite died out on Mangaia – there are woodcarvers who still make them in the traditional way.

CANOES

Vaka (canoes) were carved with great seriousness and ceremony in pre-European times. Not only did the canoes have to be large and strong enough for long-distance ocean voyages, they had to be made in accordance with strict religious rules. *Ta'unga vaka*, experts not only in canoes and woodcarving but also in spiritual matters, had to guide every step of the process. A suitable tree had to be found, chosen and cut, with proper supplication to the god of the forest. Once cut, the carving had to proceed in a certain manner, all the way to the launching of the canoe, which once again had to be done in accordance with all the proper spiritual and physical laws.

None of those pre-European canoes survive today, but you can often see modern reconstructions at Avana Harbour on Rarotonga. These modern *vaka*, sailing from island to island using traditional navigation methods, have helped fine-tune many theories about ancient Polynesian settlement. On a smaller scale, Mitiaro's outrigger fishing canoes are some of the most beautiful canoes made today.

BUILDINGS

Traditionally, houses and other buildings were made of natural materials that decayed rapidly, so no ancient buildings survive and very few buildings of traditional construction remain on any of the Southern Group islands. Woodcarving was only rarely used in houses, although some important buildings, including some of the first locally built mission churches, had carved and decorated wooden posts. Artistic sennit lashing was, however, found on many buildings: since nails were not available, the wooden framework of a building was tied together with carefully bound sennit rope, often forming special patterns and designs with religious significance.

TIVAEVAE

Colourful and intricately sewn, these appliqué works are traditionally made as burial shrouds or bedspreads, and smaller ones for cushion covers. You'll occasionally see them for sale, but like most Cook Islands arts and crafts they're mostly made for personal use. See the boxed text, p117, for more information.

The Cook Islands ukelele is traditionally made from coconut shells and carved wood (usually wild hibiscus or mahogany). It's noticeably smaller and tuned to a higher pitch than ukeleles in Tahiti and Hawaii.

www.culture.gov.ck is the official website of the Ministry of Culture on Rarotonga.

COOK ISLANDS

MYTHS & LEGENDS

Errol Hunt & Oliver Berry

Pre-Christian religion was remarkably consistent between islands scattered over the entire, vast Polynesian area. Gods such as Vatea, Tangaroa, Rongomatane and Tane, and demigods such as Maui and Rata, were known to Polynesians everywhere from Hawaii to Easter Island to Aotearoa (New Zealand).

It was the prodigious navigation and voyaging feats of the Polynesians in their long *vaka* (outrigger canoes) that made such homogeneity of religion possible, although in many cases the driving force behind *vaka* sailing off to settle new lands was religious dissent.

ATI & THE UNDERWORLD

Ati was a farmer who lived on the island of Rarotonga, near the village of Arorangi. He lived alone, with no wife and no children, and spent most of his days carefully tending his plantation, where he grew fruit, vegetables and *taro*. Ati was a careful and meticulous farmer, and his crops were some of the finest and tastiest on the whole island, but one day just before harvest time, he arrived at his plantation to find most of his plants, vegetables and fruit trees had disappeared. Angrily Ati confronted his neighbours and demanded that they own up to having stolen his crops, but no-one knew anything about the theft.

As he sat looking out across his barren fields, wondering what had happened to his crops, a plan formed in his head. He decided to lie in wait to see if the thief would come back. Night after night Ati slept beside his plantation, waiting for the culprit to appear, but there was no sign of the thief. Then one night, when the moon was high in the sky and Ati had just about given up hope of ever catching the thief, he was awoken by splashing sounds coming from the pond near his *taro* patch. Crawling forward he saw several pale figures emerging from the water. They were *momoke*, the legendary creatures of the underworld, almost identical to normal people apart from their bone-white skin. Ati watched angrily as they helped themselves to his remaining crops, and then disappeared back into the pool as dawn broke across the fields.

On the night of the next full moon, Ati lay in wait for the *momoke* to return, and trapped one of them using a fishing net. Looking closely at his net the next morning, he realised he had caught a beautiful, pale-skinned woman, and decided to make her his wife. Though she was very unhappy at first, and could not go outside because the sunlight hurt her eyes, slowly she grew accustomed to Ati's world and began to love him, eventually bearing him a son. The child had pale skin like his mother, and for a time the family were very happy; but before too long Ati's wife began to long to return to the underworld to see her family, and tell them about her newborn child. Finally Ati agreed, but only if they all went together.

So one night the family went back to the pool and dived into the murky water, but no matter how hard he tried, Ati could only hold his breath for so long before having to return to the surface for air. Eventually on his fourth dive, Ati lost his grip on his wife, and she disappeared into the depths of the pool, never to return. Grieving for his lost love, Ati named



Detail of wooden carving

PETER HENDRIE

his son 'Ati've' (separation). You can still see Ati've's descendants in the Cook Islands today; if you ever find yourself wondering why some of the islanders have much fairer skin than others, then just remember the tale of Ati and his beautiful pale-skinned wife from the underworld.

GODS

Tangaroa was known as the 'creator' deity across much of the Pacific. Also known as Ta'aroa, Tangaloa and Kanaloa, he was worshipped as the father of the gods. Tangaroa's children were so-called 'departmental' gods, responsible for fields such as the forests (Tane) and agriculture (Rongo).

In the Cook Islands (and Aotearoa), however, Tangaroa was not the father of the gods, but one of the kids. He was, though, the most important of the departmental gods, even more important than his father, Vatea (also known as Te Tumu) and mother, Papa (The Earth). Tangaroa was the god of the seas (no lightweight job in a culture where the sea was so important) and fertility.

Only on Mangaia, southeast of Rarotonga, did Tangaroa lose his position as pre-eminent god. On Mangaia, they say, when Tangaroa's parents discussed their children's inheritance, Vatea wanted to give all the food to his first-born, Tangaroa, but his wife, Papa, suggested giving Tangaroa only the 'chiefly' food, ie only the food that was red. Vatea thought this was a fine salute to his favoured son, but the red food turned out to form only a tiny heap; Rongo's share, by contrast, was so plentiful that his huge pile of food kept falling over! Papa was happy, because although she was forbidden to eat with her first-born by the complex rules of *tapu* (the laws that define what is sacred and what is not), she was permitted to share Rongo's huge stash. Tangaroa, unsurprisingly, was not happy – storming off to sea, he left Rongo to rule Mangaia. Ever after, when human sacrifices were made to appease Rongo, a piece was always thrown aside for the hungry Papa.

Carvings of Tangaroa were very popular in the Cook Islands in pre-Christian times and are the most common carving you'll see on the islands today. There's no doubting, when you see the carvings, that Tangaroa was the god of fertility.

Cook Islands Legends, by Jon Jonassen, is a short anthology of many traditional myths and legends, told in a lively and engaging style. The book also explains the origins of many place names in the Cook Islands; you can usually buy it at the USP bookshop in Avarua (p54).

Ana Takitaki, by William McBirney, is a long verse poem that tells the story of the *kopeka* cave on 'Atiu – you'll hear a different version if you take a tour to visit the cave.

DEMIGODS & HEROES

Myths and legends can serve many purposes, such as preserving historical facts, explaining natural phenomena or just entertaining the troops.

The oldest legends are the most widespread, such as that of the god Tangaroa. If Tangaroa ever existed, he must have lived millennia ago, before Pacific islanders became so scattered. In comparison, the most recent, 'local' stories are those about heroes such as Tangi'ia, who almost certainly existed (since many people on Rarotonga can trace ancestry back to him and his fellow travellers).

Between gods such as Tangaroa and heroes such as Tangi'ia, there is a continuum of 'demigods'. Of these, Maui Potiki is the most famous.

Atiu Weathered – carved wooden figure of the God Tangaroa (the most common carving found in the Cook Islands).

ERRÖL HUNT



MAUI POTIKI

The only legendary Polynesian figure who rivals Tangaroa for his widespread fame is the trickster known as Maui Potiki. A cross between Prometheus and Brer Rabbit, Maui achieved his great feats (such as slowing the sun, bringing fire to people and creating the first coconut) in a very Polynesian way – not through the use of force, but by cleverness and trickery.

Maui's most famous achievement, remembered in legends all over the Pacific, was to fish an entire island out of the sea. The Tongans say the island was Tongatapu, the New Zealand Maoris say it was the North Island of their country, but in the Cook Islands they say it was the twin islands of Manihiki and Rakahanga.

Long ago, three brothers, all named Maui, held a fishing competition near an underwater coral outcrop. The first two caught only everyday fish, but Maui Potiki (Maui the Last Born) had arranged things beforehand with a woman, Hine i te Papa, who dwelt on the sea bed. She hooked Maui Potiki's fish-hook into the coral outcrop and Maui was able to pull it up above the surface to form a large island. Maui Potiki, ecstatic, jumped onto his catch and taunted his brothers about his fishing prowess.

Now if you know anything about Polynesian legends, you'll know that something always goes wrong...

A Rarotongian named Huku had already discovered the underwater coral outcrop, and returned at once to demand 'his' island. Maui Potiki was a trickster, not a fighter; he sprang into the air to escape, unfortunately breaking the island into two pieces as he leaped. Huku was left in possession of the two islands, which he named Rakahanga and Manihiki.

Maui is the archetypal Polynesian hero. Besting one's enemies (or brothers) through the use of cunning and – let's face it – downright cheating, seems to appeal to something in the Polynesian storyteller. Maui was a clown as well as a hero. This was a prankster so irritating that his brothers forbade him to go fishing with them, meaning he had to disguise himself as an insect to sneak aboard their boat. No Hollywood-style hero, Maui is fondly remembered in the region as being particularly ugly.

'INA & THE SHARK

On one side of the Cook Islands \$3 note is an illustration of a beautiful woman riding a shark, and holding a coconut up in the air. The woman is 'Ina, who lived on Rarotonga and loved a man from Mangaia, and that coconut got her into a lot of trouble.

Desiring to visit her lover but with no canoe to get her there, 'Ina asked Mango, the shark, to take her to Mangaia. Mango agreed and the two set off, with 'Ina clutching a stash of coconuts for sustenance on the long journey. After a while she became hungry and, lacking a stick to open one of the coconuts, smashed it, instead, on the head of the shark. Mango was not impressed; he flipped 'Ina into the sea and promptly ate her. According to the legend, that's why all sharks today carry that large dent in their foreheads.

Mangaian, adding the rustic 'sting' that the Maori so love in their stories, say that the shark had further reason for making a meal of its ungrateful hitchhiker: before the incident with the coconut, 'Ina had relieved herself while sitting on the shark's back (which is why, they explain, shark flesh sometimes tastes of piss).

Tales Of Manihiki, by the much-loved Manihikian poet Kauraka Kauraka, is a collection of 10 fascinating stories related to the author by some of the island's older residents; the stories are printed in the traditional Manihikian dialect with an accompanying English translation. Look out for his other book *Legends From The Atolls*.

Mangaianians traditionally believed the universe was shaped like the inside of a vast coconut shell.

Detail of
stone carving

PETER HENDRIE



TANGI'IA & KARIKA

The story of Tangi'ia and Karika is Rarotonga's most famous legend. Tangi'ia was a Tahitian who quarrelled with his brother, Tutapu, an *ariki* (chief) of Tahiti. Tangi'ia took his people and fled in a large voyaging canoe across the ocean, visiting many nearby eastern Polynesian islands. At sea, Tangi'ia met another voyaging canoe, this one under the command of Karika, a Samoan. The two crews fought at first, but when a man was killed they were shocked, stopping the fight at once and declaring peace.

Still at sea, Tangi'ia asked Karika for directions to the renowned island of Tumu Te Varovaro (the ancient name for Rarotonga). However, Karika had plans for that island himself, so gave Tangi'ia inaccurate instructions, sending him deep into the south. When Tangi'ia found cold seas and no land, he realised he had been cheated and turned back, finding Karika already settled on the island that Tangi'ia (according to this particular legend) named to commemorate having erroneously sailed so far down (*raro*) to the south (*tonga*).

Putting their differences behind them, the two chiefs joined forces to defeat the incumbent population of Rarotonga, and then allied again to fight Tutapu, who had pursued his brother at the head of a Tahitian war fleet. After defeating Tutapu, the two chiefs then divided Rarotonga between them by sailing off in opposite directions around the island and meeting again on the other side to establish their two tribes' boundaries. Today, Rarotonga's Pa and Tinomana *ariki* titles descend from Tangi'ia's people, while the Makea *ariki* descend from Karika.

Environment

THE LAND

The Cook Islands has a total land area of just 241 sq km scattered over about two million sq km of sea. The Cooks are all south of the equator, slightly east of the International Date Line, and sit roughly midway between American Samoa and Tahiti. Rarotonga is 1260km from Tahiti and 3450km from Auckland, New Zealand.

The 15 islands are divided into the Northern and Southern Groups, separated by as much as 1000km of empty sea. The Northern Group islands are all coral atolls, with an outer reef encircling a deep lagoon ringed with *motu* (small islands). Atolls of this type began life as volcanic islands fringed by an outer reef. Over time, the volcanic island sank below sea level, while the coral rim grew upwards to remain close to the sea's surface. All the Northern Group atolls are very low – waves can wash right over them in cyclones and you have to be very close to see them from a ship – but many, such as Penrhyn, sit at the very top of massive submerged volcanoes.

The Southern Group islands, which constitute about 90% of the total land area of the Cooks, are all volcanic in origin. Some of the islands are very old indeed – in fact, Mangaia is thought to be the oldest island in the whole South Pacific.

Four of the Southern Group islands – 'Atiu, Ma'uke, Mitiaro and Mangaia – are 'raised islands'. They were formed by volcanic activity in the distant past and gradually became encircled by coral reefs. Over time the volcanic cones in their centres sank as the volcano cooled and the Pacific plate moved on. About two million years ago, during another period of seismic volcanic activity, Rarotonga appeared, causing a buckling of the nearby ocean floor and raising the first four islands above sea level. This exposed their fringing coral reefs, which became jagged, rocky coastal areas known as *makatea*. The process is perhaps most obvious on Mangaia, where the *makatea* ring reaches 60m in places and encircles a deep, fertile bowl in the island's centre, now filled with *taro* and vegetable plantations. As the *makatea* is almost entirely made of limestone, it's often riddled with spectacular caves.

WILDLIFE

Animals

MAMMALS

The only land mammals native to the Cook Islands are Pacific fruit bats (flying foxes), which are found only on Mangaia and Rarotonga. The bats were already present on Mangaia when Polynesians arrived, but were introduced from Mangaia to Rarotonga in the 1870s.

Pigs, chickens and goats were introduced to the islands by the first Polynesian settlers. Today there are many domestic pigs, which are usually kept by the simple method of tying one leg to a coconut tree. Rarotonga also has many dogs, some cats and goats, and a few horses and cattle. The islands of Aitutaki and Ma'uke have the unusual distinction of having no dogs at all.

Rats and other rodents also arrived with the first settlers and ultimately had a much more damaging effect on the islands' endemic wildlife. The black (ship's) rat was particularly destructive, raiding the nests of many native birds and driving some, such as the *kakerori* (Rarotongan fly-

<http://cookislands.bishopmuseum.org> is the online portal of the Cook Islands Biodiversity Database, an excellent resource if you're interested in finding out more about wildlife in the Cooks.

There are over 200 types of crab in the Cook islands, including both land- and sea-dwelling species.

catcher), to the brink of extinction. Uniquely for the major islands of the Southern Group, 'Atiu is entirely free of the black rat, and the island is now playing an important part in the recovery programmes for several native bird species.

BIRDS

There are a number of native land birds in the Cook Islands, as well as several endemic species that are only found on one or two islands in the group. These include the cave-dwelling *kopekā* ('Atiu swiftlet), which lives only on the island of 'Atiu; the *ngotare* (chattering kingfisher), resident on 'Atiu and Ma'uke; and the *tanga'eo* (Mangaian kingfisher). The most colourful endemic bird is undoubtedly the *kukupā* (Cook Islands fruit dove), found in the inland areas of Rarotonga and on 'Atiu. If you really want to appreciate the Cook Islands' bird life, you'll have to head for one of the protected islands such as Suvarrow (p158), which is home to huge colonies of migratory seabirds, or Takutea (see the boxed text, p122), which supports one of the largest colonies of *tavake* (red-tailed tropic birds) in the Cook Islands. The *tavake*'s crimson tail feathers were once highly prized for use in traditional headdresses.

A less welcome long-term visitor has been the Indian mynah bird, which was introduced in 1906 to control coconut stick insects. The birds have since flourished, and they're now by far the most common birds in the Cook Islands – in many places they've caused a sharp decline in the populations of many native birds. Today the mynah is found across the Southern Group islands, except Mitiaro (the coconut stick insect, on the other hand, is almost unknown).

The country's most spectacular ecological success story has been that of the *kakerori*. Until recently on the verge of extinction, the *kakerori* is now making a comeback thanks to an intensive rat-elimination programme and the establishment of a dedicated reserve. The *kakerori* population has grown from a terrifyingly low 29 birds in 1989 to over 250 in 2005, supplemented by a back-up population of around 10 breeding birds on 'Atiu. The *kakerori* are quite territorial – you'll often hear them calling and flying around overhead when you enter their nesting area. You can see the *kakerori* on guided walks within the Takitumu Conservation Area (see p67) or on Birdman George's tour on 'Atiu (p119).

MARINE DWELLERS

The Cook Islands' most spectacular wildlife is undoubtedly found beneath the waves. The coral reefs (especially in the lagoons of Rarotonga and Aitutaki) support a variety of tropical fish and other marine animals, and in the deep water outside the reef you'll see all kinds of underwater life – from eagle rays and sea turtles to butterfly fish and black-tipped reef sharks. Fortunately for swimmers, sharks are not a problem – the

MOKO

There are no snakes or poisonous animals of any kind in the Cook Islands, but there are plenty of *moko* (geckos) – you'll see them running up and down the walls throughout the Cooks, chattering and squeaking while they hunt down moths and mosquitoes. There are two types – the larger and more aggressive house gecko, and its smaller spotted cousin, the 'mournful gecko'. Bizarrely, all mournful geckos are female; each baby is an identical clone of its mother, hatched from unfertilised eggs without the need for any male input – a fact that perhaps explains their rather peculiar name.

Guide to Cook Islands Birds, by DT Holyoak, has colour photos and text to help you identify a number of local birds.

Three species of marine turtle are regularly seen in the Cook Islands: the green turtle, the hawksbill turtle and the loggerhead turtle.

islands of the Southern Group generally have such shallow lagoons that sharks and other large fish cannot enter, although Penrhyn and Suvarrow's lagoons are both packed with sharks.

You'll be able to see plenty of fish just by snorkelling around the lagoons, but if you want to see the islands' larger marine life, you'll need to strap on some scuba gear. Cook Islands Reef Life, a colourful poster printed in 1992 by the Cook Islands Natural Heritage Project, is helpful for identifying species. You should be able to pick it up from any of the island bookshops (including Bounty Bookshop, p51), and a few of the dive-shops.

Humpback whales visit Rarotonga and other Cook Islands every year between July and October. In season, whale-watching trips are available (see the boxed text, p72).

Plants

The Cook Islands is famous for its rich variety of tropical flowers, but astonishingly, almost all the colourful flowering plants you'll see (and smell) all over the Cook Islands are introduced species, including the *tiare Maori* (gardenia), the Cook Islands' national flower, and the frangipani, which is often used in making 'ei (traditional garlands). The bright orange-red flowers of the flame tree are another distinctive sight in the Cook Islands.

Rarotonga has a wide range of natural habitats, from valley floors up to cloud forest; the damp, mountainous central part of the island is densely covered in a luxuriant jungle of ferns, creepers and towering trees. The *makatea* islands of the Southern Group also support many different types of vegetation, from dense bush on the *makatea* itself to areas of volcanic soil and boggy swampland, where you'll often find the islands' taro plantations (which, in bygone days, was the islanders' main source of food. Other important plants include the 'ara tai (pandanus), whose leaves are often used in traditional handicrafts and to make thatched roofs; the 'aute (paper mulberry), used to make *tapa* (bark cloth) for clothing; the *tuitui* (candlenut), which was burnt for light; and the ironwood and *toa* (casuarina) trees, which provided the material for weapons and carved idols. Many other plants had uses in traditional medicine, including the *ava* (Pacific Banyan) and the juice of the *nono* (still widely taken as a Cook Islands cure-all; see boxed text, p46).

On the atolls of the Northern Group the soil isn't much good for agriculture, although the islands are often covered in thick groves of coconut – a useful source of copra and food in previous centuries.

NATIONAL PARKS

The Cook Islands has just one national park, Suvarrow (p158), established in 1978. Suvarrow's status was confirmed in 2001, after public protests forced the government to guarantee that it was 'permanently safe from the spectre of commercial exploitation.

Traditional conservation areas (*ra'ui*) have done much to protect the natural environment of the islands throughout their history; several *ra'ui* are currently in place around Rarotonga and the lagoons of Aitutaki and Manihiki, as well as on other islands. Manuae (see the boxed text, p111) has been designated as a marine reserve owned by the people of Aitutaki, and Takutea (see the boxed text, p122) is a seabird sanctuary owned by 'Atiu. There's also the Takitumu Conservation Area (p67), home of the once-threatened *kakerori* and run by the landowners.

Many shells, especially coral and large conch shells, are protected under international law and you might need a CITES certificate in order to export them. You can get one for NZ\$10 at the Environment Service office (☎ 21256; resources@environment.org.ck), behind the Empire Cinema in Avarua.

Rarotonga's Mountain Tracks & Plants, by Gerald McCormack and Judith Künzle, is an excellent guide to the mountain tracks of Rarotonga, as well as a general guide to the island's flora. *Rarotonga's Cross-Island Walk* is by the same authors.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Waste management is a big issue in the Cook Islands. Limited land space doesn't allow the problem to be swept under the carpet (or into landfills, as happens in larger countries). Glass, plastic and aluminium are collected for recycling, but there's still a lot of other rubbish left over. Water supplies and water management are another big concern, both for agriculture and domestic use, especially on the smaller islands, which have no natural rivers and have to rely on underground wells or rain tubs for their water supplies.

But the biggest environmental problem facing the Cook Islands is the issue of global warming. Like many islands in the South Pacific, the Cooks are already feeling the effects of global warming: coral bleaching, rising sea levels, changing seasons and increasingly unpredictable weather. An unprecedented five cyclones swept through the Cook Islands in early 2005, causing widespread devastation, especially on Rarotonga, Pukapuka and Rakahanga, and it's likely that events such as these will become more frequent and more severe as the world's climate spins out of control. Even more worryingly, many of the islands of the Northern Group barely rise 5m above sea level, and could be entirely submerged beneath the waves within 100 years if current predictions are anything to go by.

www.environment.org.ck is the main website of the Cook Islands Environment Service, which looks after the country's environmentally protected habitats and oversees many conservation projects in the Cooks.

Food & Drink

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Thanks to its temperate climate and rich volcanic soil, things grows with abandon on Rarotonga – from majestic palms to groves of paw-paw, mango and orange trees. However, somewhat surprisingly, when the original settlers arrived on Rarotonga 1500 years ago, they found remarkably few edible plants. Luckily the settlers had come prepared, and their canoes were stuffed with all kinds of crops and fruit trees that quickly flourished throughout the islands.

Traditionally, the Cook Islands diet revolved around a few staples – fish, pork, coconuts, fruit and the all-purpose *taro* plant. These days the choice is much more varied – as anyone who’s visited the Cook Islands will tell you, if there’s one thing the locals are definitely not short of, it’s food.

One of the culinary highlights in the Cooks is the fantastic seafood. There is a huge variety of fish and shellfish around Rarotonga’s shores, and you’re unlikely to find fresher fish anywhere in the South Pacific. Most restaurants offer a ‘catch of the day’ (usually a deep-sea fish such as *mahi mahi*, wahoo, swordfish or tuna), but you’ll also often find crab, lobster, crayfish and oysters on the menu. Fresh fish and seafood is sold in most Rarotongian supermarkets – on the outer islands you’ll have to catch your own or strike a deal with one of the local fishermen at the wharf.

Locally grown fruits and vegetables are available in local shops, supermarkets and at the Punanga Nui Market (p59), and you can often pick up local produce very cheaply at roadside stalls. Local vegetables are generally reasonably priced, but in the supermarkets the vegetables have come

According to a recent survey by the World Health Organization, 77.6% of people in the Cook Islands are considered clinically overweight.

Check out some traditional Cook Islands recipes at www.ck/food.

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

Rarotonga is a cosmopolitan place these days, and you’ll find most national cuisines are well represented on the main island, from pasta houses to sushi bars to Pacific Rim restaurants. Ironically, traditional Cook Islands cuisine can be rather harder to come by. If you’re looking for a spot of home-grown cooking, your best bet is to head straight for an *umukai* – a traditional feast cooked in an underground oven, which usually includes fish, pork, chicken and vegetables steamed under a blanket of coconut or banana leaves. The main meal is often accompanied by other island dishes, including *rukau* (*taro* leaves), *eke* (octopus, usually curried or cooked in its own ink) and smoked fish.

The quintessential island snack is *ika mata* – strips of fresh raw fish marinated in lime or lemon juice and coconut cream – which you’ll find on most restaurant menus, usually served as a starter.

Unga, the huge coconut crab that has been almost eaten to extinction on Rarotonga and Aitutaki, is still fairly abundant on most of the other islands. In season, you might even be able to go out with some of the local boys on a crab hunt – ask around. Crayfish is often served on Rarotonga and the outer islands.

Wild pigs roam the undergrowth on most of the Southern Group islands, and many people keep a few domestic pigs and chickens for personal consumption. Pigs are generally fed on coconuts, which means they often have a generous layer of fat alongside the meat (not to everyone’s taste).

On Mangaia, look out for the unusual purple *taro* that’s grown on the island – locals swear that it’s much tastier than the normal grey-white variety.

COOK ISLANDS' TOP FIVE RESTAURANTS

- Vaima Restaurant & Bar (p85) – gorgeous beachfront restaurant on Rarotonga's south coast.
- Café Salsa (p85) – top spot for coffee, light lunches and delicious wood-fired pizzas.
- Trader Jack's (p85) – not necessarily the best for food, but the provenance is hard to beat.
- Tamarind House (p85) – probably the first choice for fine dining in the Cook Islands.
- Café Tupuna (p108) – the best food and atmosphere on Aitutaki.

straight from New Zealand and are more expensive than in New Zealand or Australia. Bread and doughnuts are baked locally on most of the islands.

Food on Rarotonga is generally pricier than in New Zealand, Australia or North America, and costs are higher again on the outer islands. The selection also becomes more limited the further you travel from Rarotonga – fine if you're partial to corned beef and tinned mackerel, but not so great if you're accustomed to a more varied diet. If you're travelling to the outer islands, you'd be wise to take some supplies with you, especially luxury items such as snacks, crisps and biscuits. In the Northern Group and Palmerston, where there's almost no formal accommodation, it's polite to supply as much food as you eat and some more besides.

If you're planning on bringing supplies with you from abroad, remember that all food imports must be declared on arrival. Although fresh produce is prohibited, you'll have no problem with packaged goods.

DRINKS

Nonalcoholic Drinks

The truly local drink is coconut water, sweet and refreshing on a hot tropical day. The *nu* (young coconuts), green and still hanging on the tree, are the drinking nuts. The older, yellow nuts fall from the trees and are used for their meat.

There are two brands of Cook Islands coffee, both grown and processed on 'Atiu. Both varieties are sold in various shops around Rarotonga, and are also served in some restaurants. If you visit 'Atiu, you can take a tour of both the coffee plantations and sample the coffee after the tour. The Café (p88) in Avarua also roasts its own coffee beans, which you can try by the cup or buy by the bag.

Fresh fruit juices and smoothies are a tropical treat – there are lots of combinations to try, from orange, apple and mango to even more exotic flavours such as papaya, pineapple, coconut and passionfruit.

Several companies produce bottled mineral water on Rarotonga – the main label is *Vaima*, which you can buy at all the main supermarkets around the island.

Alcoholic Drinks

Cooks Lager is brewed on Rarotonga and can be bought all over the island, either by the glass or by the bottle. A wide variety of New Zealand, Australian and European beers are also available, Steinlager and Red Lion being the favourites. A can of lager costs around NZ\$2.50 in shops, NZ\$3.50 to NZ\$4 in bars – draught lager by the glass is usually around NZ\$3.50 to NZ\$5, depending on the variety.

Red and white wine (generally imported from Australian and New Zealand) are widely available from supermarkets and restaurants on

The Flame Tree Cookbook, written by Sue Caruthers, founder of the much-respected Flame Tree Restaurant on Rarotonga, contains some of the author's quintessential island recipes. The book is available either at her new restaurant, Tamarind House, or from www.tamarind.co.ck.

The Cook Islands banana is smaller and sweeter than the ones you might be used to back home, while the Cook Islands orange is actually green-skinned – a fact that made it rather unpopular on the international market, and ultimately contributed to the collapse of the island's orange industry.

Rarotonga. Alcohol is on sale from most supermarkets and local stores from Monday to Saturday.

Liqueurs made from local products (coconut, pineapple, banana, mango and 'Atiu coffee) are made on Rarotonga and sold at The Perfume Factory (p92) and at Perfumes of Rarotonga (p92).

If you go to 'Atiu, check out a *tumunu*, or bush-beer drinking session (see the boxed text, p120) – the Cook Islands equivalent of the *kava*-drinking ceremonies you might see in Fiji or Samoa. 'Atiu is the best place in the Cooks to experience this custom – *tumunu* on the other islands tend to be merely a bunch of people gathering around for some home-brew (plenty of fun, but not exactly authentic). Other islands where you might find *tumunu* include Mitiaro and Mangaia (where the *tumunu* is usually just referred to as the local 'pub').

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Most restaurants on Rarotonga prepare food to an extremely high standard – a knock-on effect of the booming tourist industry and the high number of local chefs trained overseas. Aitutaki also has a couple of decent restaurants, but elsewhere the choice of places to eat is much more limited. Many restaurants and bars are closed on Sunday.

Most accommodation places will either offer self-catering or provide your meals for you – but if you're cooking for yourself, remember the choice of supplies is pretty slim, and you'll probably find yourself opening a lot of cans (bring a good can opener). Turnover can be pretty slow in some outer-island grocery stores, so check those use-by dates; some cans have been on the shelf since Tangi'ia was a boy.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Restaurant menus on Rarotonga are dominated by fish, seafood and meat dishes, though there are usually a few salad and pasta dishes that are meat-free. If you're self-catering, you'll have much more choice. The selection of vegetables and fruits is fantastic, and the main Rarotongan supermarkets are well-stocked. If you're staying somewhere where your meals are cooked for you, especially on the outer islands, make sure you tell your hosts you're vegetarian to avoid any awkward moments later on.

DOS & DON'TS

- Tipping is not customary in the Cook Islands.
- Meals are often preceded by a short grace – be polite and bow your head, and don't start eating till everyone else does.
- On the outer islands, meals are sometimes eaten in the traditional way – ie without cutlery – but most people will understand if you prefer to use a knife and fork.
- Look out for dishes that have been marinated in coconut cream, especially in markets and at village meals – dishes are often prepared the day before and coconut cream goes off rather quickly.
- If you're served crayfish, make sure you remove the black strip running down the centre of the tail, unless you want an extremely nasty bout of indigestion.
- Be wary of eating reef fish (parrot fish, snapper etc) – several of the islands have a problem with ciguatera poisoning, see p187. Stick to deep-sea fish (tuna, *mahi mahi*, wahoo) if you're worried – these are generally the only fish served in restaurants anyway.

Most of the edible plants that now grow in such abundance in the Cook Islands were originally introduced from Asia and the East Indies – but the *kumara* (sweet potato) is actually South American, suggesting that Polynesian settlers travelled on to South America after settling the South Pacific.

The Cook Islands Cook Book, by Taiora Matenga-Smith, offers a selection of over 50 Cook Islands recipes in both Maori and English.

COOK ISLANDS WONDER JUICE

While you're travelling around the Cooks, you're bound to spot the distinctive white, spotted fruit of the *Morinda citrifolia*, or *nono* (known as *noni* in many other parts of the South Pacific). The fruit grows wild all over the islands and for centuries has been used as a traditional herbal remedy and general cure-all. Scientific studies have shown that the juice has a beneficial effect on the immune system, and in recent years *nono* has become one of the islands' most lucrative exports – you'll find bottles of *nono* juice in alternative health stores across the world, from Switzerland to Japan (usually at astronomically inflated prices). You can buy *nono* juice in most of the main supermarkets on Rarotonga for around NZ\$25 a bottle.

Many Cook Islanders still take a daily dose of *nono* juice to ward off ill-health, and the fruit is sometimes still used to treat cuts, grazes and other skin ailments. The bitter, jet-black juice is something of an acquired taste, however – the flavour is variously described as somewhere between slightly off blue cheese and corked wine. And as the locals rightly say, anything that tastes that bad just HAS to be good for you.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Food Glossary

<i>ahi</i>	tuna
<i>eke</i>	octopus, often served curried in coconut cream
<i>ika mata</i>	raw fish, marinated in lemon or lime juice, mixed with coconut cream and
<i>other</i>	ingredients
<i>kumara</i>	sweet potato
<i>kuru</i>	breadfruit; spherical fruit that grows on trees to grapefruit size or larger. It is more like a vegetable than a fruit and can be cooked in various ways (eg cut into french fries)
<i>mahi mahi</i>	dolphin fish (quite different to dolphin!)
<i>maniota</i>	arrowroot
<i>maroro</i>	flying fish
<i>nono</i>	<i>Morinda citrifolia</i> , a fruit widely used throughout Polynesia for its health properties
<i>poke</i>	pawpaw or banana pudding, mixed with coconut sauce and arrowroot starch to give it a gummy texture; pronounced <i>por-kay</i>
<i>puaka</i>	suckling pig
<i>rukau</i>	<i>taro</i> leaves (which look and taste much like spinach) cooked and mixed with coconut sauce and onion
<i>taro</i>	all-purpose tuber vegetable; the roots are prepared rather like potato
<i>umukai</i>	traditional feast cooked in an underground oven
<i>unga</i>	coconut crab
<i>wahoo</i>	ocean barracuda; <i>ono</i>