

The Northern Group

For real Robinson Crusoes, the Northern Group is a dream destination – a sprinkling of tiny palm-covered islands and remote coral atolls scattered over a vast expanse of sea. It's here you'll find Cook Islands culture at its purest; daily life revolves around the twin forces of the weather and the tide, and family, history and traditional culture are all still highly valued.

But despite the idyllic setting, very few people make it to the islands of the Northern Group, and once you've consulted a few travel agents, you'll start to understand why. There's no getting around it – it takes time, effort and very deep pockets to travel this far north. You could buy a return flight to New Zealand for much less than the price of a flight to the Northern Group, and you certainly won't be staying in luxury accommodation – most people don't even have hot water in their houses, let alone a hot tub.

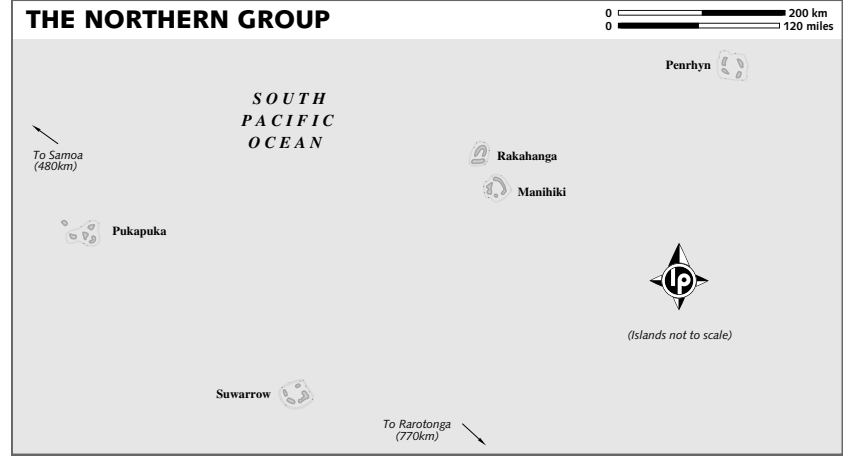
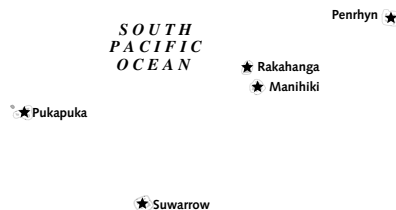
If you're serious about visiting the Northern Group, talk to people who know the islands to find out what you can expect. Each outer island has a hostel in Avarua on Rarotonga (most are near the National Culture Centre) and the hostel caretakers are excellent sources of information regarding their home islands.

To arrange accommodation (which you have to do before you can buy a ticket) talk to a travel agent or contact the relevant island councils (see each atoll's Information section in this chapter).

But don't get too discouraged. The islands of the Northern Group are one of those truly unforgettable, once-in-a-lifetime destinations, and practically everyone who's visited them comes back utterly bewitched. From the vast lagoons and black-pearl farms of Manihiki and Penrhyn to the isolated islands of Rakahanga and Pukapuka, the Northern Group represents an entirely different side of the Cook Islands – one that's just crying out to be explored.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Snorkelling and fishing in the vast lagoon of **Manihiki** (p152)
- Visiting a black-pearl farm on **Penrhyn** (p154)
- Following in the footsteps of the classic South Seas castaway, Robert Dean Frisbie, on the remote island of **Pukapuka** (p156)
- Trying your hand at some traditional craft-work on **Rakahanga** (p152)
- Cruising over to the untouched paradise of **Suwarrow** (p158), the Cook Islands' only national park



History

The Northern Group atolls have the longest history of any of the Cook Islands. They were first discovered about 2000 years ago when Polynesian voyagers set out from Samoa and Tonga towards the unknown east. On the way to discover what are now called the Society Islands (French Polynesia), they found these tiny atolls.

The atolls were not settled until some centuries later. In fact, most were settled by explorers from the Southern Group islands, arriving almost a millennium after the atolls were first discovered.

The Culture

They might be the classic image of a Pacific island – complete with sandy beaches, clear lagoons and swaying palms – but in reality, life is hard on the atolls of the Northern Group. Fish are plentiful, but the soil is poor and the range of produce that can be grown is very limited. Fresh water is always a problem; shallow wells are often the only source of drinking water and the supply is limited and often brackish.

Atoll life has another major drawback – namely sheer isolation. Modern Cook Islanders want economic opportunity, decent education for their children and contact with the outside world. Returning islanders and long-distance phone lines have whetted appetites for the outside world, and the populations of many northern islands are declining faster than anywhere else in the Cooks.

Environment

Of all the Cook Islands, the tiny, low-lying atolls of the Northern Group are most at risk from global warming (see p42). On most atolls, the highest point above sea level is barely 5m, and the vast majority of crops and housing are on land only 1m or 2m high. Severe cyclones have already been known to wash right across these islands (most recently on Pukapuka and Nassau during the devastating series of cyclones that hit the Northern Group in 2005). Over the next century, sea levels look set to continue to rise, and severe storms and cyclones are likely to become more and more frequent.

It's thought that within 100 years, according to even conservative predictions, the Northern Group atolls will probably be uninhabitable, or even worse, may have disappeared under the ocean completely. The people of the Northern Group are understandably anxious about what the future may have in store for their little islands, but like many in the South Pacific, their destinies are almost entirely beyond their own control.

Sleeping

Although only Manihiki and Penrhyn have guesthouses for visitors, the traditional Cook Islands custom of welcoming strangers remains intact on all the islands, so you're bound to be invited to stay in someone's home. Remember though, that the islanders are often generous to a fault – plan to pay your way, with cash, food or other supplies.

You might also be able to arrange accommodation through the island councils on some islands. Their phone and fax numbers are listed under Information in the individual atoll sections. If accommodation phone or fax numbers don't work (not uncommon), try the island council or Telecom numbers, and ask them to pass the message on.

Getting There & Away

AIR

You can fly to Manihiki and Penrhyn once a week, and to Pukapuka occasionally. Flights take 3½ to 4½ hours from Rarotonga and are really expensive – the cheapest return fare starts at a whopping NZ\$1250.

Bad weather, limited fuel supplies and too few bookings can sometimes cause the flights not to run, or be cancelled at short notice. Take out travel insurance to cover unavoidable delays when you fly to the Northern Group islands, and bring plenty of books just in case.

BOAT

Apart from flying, the only regular way of getting to the Northern Group islands is on the inter-island cargo ships (see p180). They unload and load at the islands by day, so if you're doing a circuit of the islands you'll only spend a few hours at most of them, overnighting only at Manihiki and Penrhyn. If you want to stay longer you either have to wait until the next ship comes by (remembering that voyages are often cancelled, so your one-month stay could become two months or longer) or, on the islands with airstrips, you could always take the boat one way and then fly out. Ask around at the harbour in Avarua to see if there are any yachts or private boats travelling up to the Northern Group – you might just be in luck.

PACKAGES

For more information about the three islands that planes fly to (Manihiki, Penrhyn and Pukapuka), contact **Air Rarotonga** (☎ 22888; www.airraro.com). Travel agents on Rarotonga can arrange flight and accommodation packages to these three islands; Jetsave Travel and Island Hopper Vacations are likely to be your best options (see p56). Such packages usually work out cheaper than buying the flights and accommodation separately.

MANIHIKI

pop 390 / area 5.4 sq km

The black-pearl capital of the Cook Islands, Manihiki is probably the most accessible island in the Northern Group. Its 40 islands, some no more than tiny specks of land, are sprinkled around one of the most beautiful lagoons in the South Pacific: an expanse of glittering blue ocean filled with coral, coconut crabs and, of course, thousands of black pearls. The abilities of the atoll's pearl divers are legendary – they can dive to astonishing depths and stay submerged for minutes at a time, though nowadays the pearls are harvested in rather less romantic ways.

Manihiki's vast lagoon is over 4km wide at its broadest point. The airstrip is located on the northern *motu* (lagoon islet) of Tukao, while the main wharf is on the west side of the lagoon at Tauhunu. Unusually for the Northern Group, Manihiki's *motu* are not just located around the edge of the lagoon, but also in its centre. Despite the *motu*'s sandy soil, many are covered in thick palm groves, used in past centuries to harvest coconuts and copra.

HISTORY

According to legend, Manihiki and Rakahanga (then still joined together) were discovered underwater by a Rarotongian named Huku, and fished up from the waves by the demigod Maui (see p37). When Huku and Maui fought for possession, the land was broken into two pieces – Rakahanga and Manihiki.

Right up until the 19th century, Manihiki and Rakahanga were populated by a single group of people. Most of the time, the population lived on Rakahanga, but would migrate en masse to Manihiki whenever supplies on Rakahanga ran down. Many lives were lost on these inter-island trips when canoes were blown off course.

Manihiki may have been sighted by the Spanish explorer Pedro Fernández de Quirós in 1606, but credit for the European discovery is normally given to Captain Patrickson of the US ship *Good Hope* in 1822. Patrickson and a successive stream of whalers and traders bestowed a series of forgettable names upon the island – Humphrey's Island, Great Ganges, Lider-

ous, Gland, Sarah Scott and Pescado. Fortunately, none of them stuck.

Christian missionaries came to Manihiki in 1849 and left two Polynesian missionary teachers behind (as well as several previously unknown diseases). By 1852 the missionaries had converted most of the islanders to Christianity, and convinced them to settle for good on either Manihiki or Rakahanga.

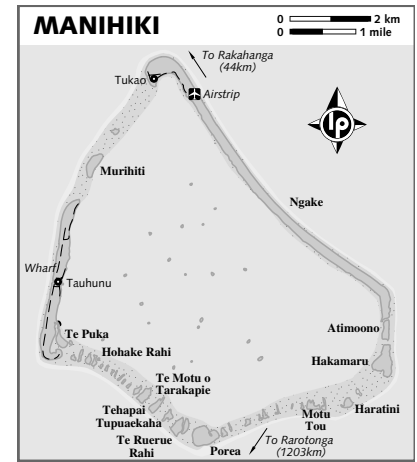
The women of Manihiki were famous for their beauty, a reputation that continues to this day. In the late 19th century, however, that notion led to raids by Peruvian slavers and a variety of Pacific ne'er-do-wells. In 1869 'Bully Hayes' spirited off a number of islanders, supposedly for a visit to Rakahanga; in reality they ended up as sugar plantation labourers in Fiji.

In 1889, when relations between the British and French in the Pacific were tense, the islanders fell out with their missionaries and asked the French from Tahiti to take over the island. A French warship duly turned up, but the missionaries speedily hoisted the Union Jack and the French opted for discretion rather than valour. Later that year the island was officially taken under the British wing.

In 1901, Manihiki and Rakahanga came under the control of the newly established New Zealand protectorate in the Cook Islands, which ensured improved health facilities and economic stability for the island. A radio station was established in 1937.

In November 1997, Manihiki was devastated by Cyclone Martin. Both of the island's villages, Tauhunu and Tukao, were destroyed, and most of Manihiki's crops were lost. The population raced to save themselves by launching boats onto the protected lagoon, but many boats were sunk, depositing whole families into the sea. Miraculously, considering the extent of the destruction, only 19 lives were lost.

In the aftermath of the cyclone, most of Manihiki was evacuated to Rarotonga. The villages have since been completely rebuilt at great expense, but many families never returned home. Manihiki's current population consists of about 390 people, including many from the Southern Cooks who have moved here to work on the island's pearl farms. The pearl industry was completely wiped out by the cyclone, but has since recovered, and now contributes over NZ\$18 million to the country's economy every year.



Manihikian literary giants are few and far between, but one Manihikian author, Kauraka Kauraka, published a significant number of poetry collections and books exploring the traditional myths and legends of Manihiki. Look out for *Legends from the Atolls* (1983), *Return to Havaiki* (1985) and *Dreams of a Rainbow* (1987) at the University of the South Pacific Bookshop in Avarua (see p54). Kauraka passed away on Rarotonga in 1997 and his grave is on Manihiki.

INFORMATION

Bring insect repellent; all those empty oyster shells make excellent breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

Manihiki's electricity was completely wiped out by Cyclone Martin in 1997, and it was 2½ years before the lights came back on. Now, generators raised high out of harm's way supply electricity from 6am to midday and 6pm to midnight.

Water shortages are common on Manihiki. Showers are usually restricted to a dip in the lagoon or a rinse with a bucket of cold water.

Administration centre (☎ 43103) Manihiki's new centre, rebuilt after Cyclone Martin, located at Tauhunu.

Health centre (☎ 43364) There are centres at both Tauhunu and Tukao.

Hospital (☎ 43664) At Tauhunu; basic facilities only.

Island council (☎ 43123) At Tauhunu; the island's mayor, Kora Kora, is a useful contact for further information.

Telecom (☎ 43680; fax 43683) In Tukao.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

As in the other islands of the Northern Group, life in Manihiki revolves around the huge central lagoon, which in terms of size and spectacle is perhaps even more impressive than the lagoon in Aitutaki.

A visit to one of Manihiki's **black-pearl farms** is essential. Black pearls are now one of the most lucrative industries in the Cook Islands, and the vast majority of the pearls sold on Rarotonga and overseas are grown here on Manihiki. Amazingly, over 99% of commercial black pearls are cultured (farmed) – natural pearls rarely reach the large size or spherical shape demanded by overseas consumers, and they're actually now quite rare.

For NZ\$50 you can take a tour of one of the farms, which includes snorkelling down to check out the oysters underwater, and a visit to the farming platforms, as well as a description of the highly skilled process of oyster 'seeding'. If you're here from September to December, you should be able to watch some of the pearls being harvested.

Lagoon cruises (NZ\$55) are popular for obvious reasons – they might not be quite as organised as the ones on Aitutaki, but they're still well worth doing. The boat trips usually include a visit to fish traps in the lagoon and many of the deserted *motu*, and you won't be surprised to hear that the snorkelling is out of this world. **Fishing trips** are also available, including crab and crayfish hunts and night-time trips to catch *maroro* (flying fish). Prices are around NZ\$50.

Trochus, an underwater gastropod that's prized for its conical shells, was introduced to the Cook Islands in the 1950s, and has become another important industry in Manihiki. For the first time in 20 years, the Manihiki Island Council have introduced a *ra'ui* (conservation area) from Motuhakamaru to Porea in order to preserve fish stocks.

In August 2006, Manihiki is hosting the **Purapura Games**, in which teams of dancers and sportsmen from Penrhyn, Rakahanga, Pukapuka, Nassau and Palmerston will compete against each other. Tauhunu village is currently building a new recreational facility including a full-sized rugby pitch and two hard courts.

Manihiki is also a great place to pick up some traditional handicrafts from the

local farmers and women's groups. Ask at the place you're staying if you're interested in buying something – they'll also be able to arrange any activities you may want to do.

SLEEPING & EATING

Manihiki Lagoon Villas (☎ 43123; www.manihiki-lagoonvillas.com; Tauhunu; s/d NZ\$110/200) This beautiful beachside retreat in Manihiki offers several free-standing self-contained bungalows that sit on stilts overlooking the lagoon, with plain, comfortable furnishings and the obligatory sea-view sundeck. As everywhere in Manihiki, you'll have to get by without amenities like hot water and TV, but with a view like this, who needs luxury?

Tukao Bay Homestay (☎ 43312; Tukao; r NZ\$80) Yvonne and Paaka Hagai, a local Manihikian couple, offer guest rooms in their own house including all meals. If you want to really get involved in village life, look no further.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Flights with **Air Rarotonga** (☎ 22888 on Rarotonga; www.airraro.com) operate between Rarotonga and Manihiki once a week. The cost is NZ\$1250 (return) for the four-hour flight. Depending on demand, the flights may be routed through Pukapuka (1½ hours away) or Penrhyn (one hour).

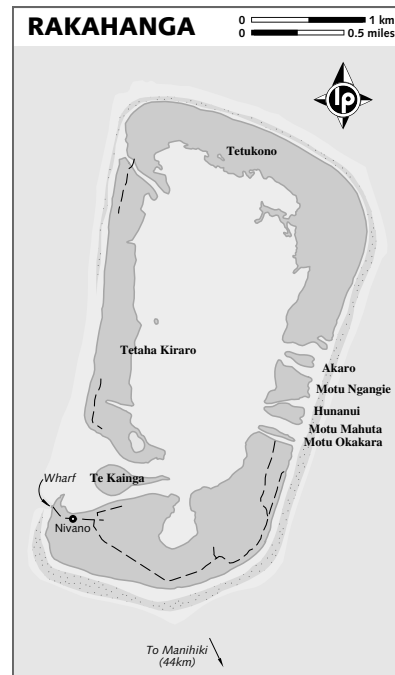
Boat

See p180 for details on travel by inter-island cargo ship to Manihiki. You can get to Rakahanga by boat from here, but it's only recommended if you've got a cast-iron stomach and a few weeks to spare (it's not unusual for people to be stranded on Rakahanga during bad weather).

RAKAHANGA

pop 130 / area 4.1 sq km

The rectangular atoll of Rakahanga shares close links with its sister island of Manihiki, located just 44km to the south. Like many of the islands of the Northern Group, Rakahanga's two major islands and smaller *motu* are dotted around the edge of a large lagoon, about 4km long and 2km wide at its broadest points.



Thanks to the relatively large size of Rakahanga's main islands, it was once much more heavily populated than Manihiki, which was usually only visited during periods of drought or crop failure, but these days it's quiet even compared with the other Northern Group islands. The lagoon isn't suitable for pearl farming, and the only export products are copra, breadfruit and *puraka* (a taro-like vegetable). Rakahanga is famous for its craftwork – the *rito* (bleached pandanus leaf) hats woven on the island are particularly fine, and fetch high prices back on Rarotonga. The population is concentrated in the village of Nivano, in the southwestern corner of the atoll.

HISTORY

Legends tell of a landmass being hauled up from under the sea by a fisherman and broken into two sections, the islands of Rakahanga and Manihiki, during a fight – see p37. A Rarotongan, Huku, won the battle, and with his sister and brother-in-law (and a certain amount of 'keeping it in the family') populated Rakahanga and Manihiki.

On 2 March 1606 the commander of the ships *Capitana* and *Almiranta*, Pedro Fernández de Quirós (who, as navigator to Mendaña, had already discovered Pukapuka 10 years earlier) sighted the island. He reported that the islanders were 'the most beautiful white and elegant people that were met during the voyage'. Furthermore, he continued, the women were exceptionally beautiful and 'if properly dressed, would have advantages over our Spanish women'.

Such reports were no doubt the genesis for many romantic notions of the South Seas. De Quirós was not the only member of the expedition to be impressed. A Franciscan friar on the expedition named Rakahanga the island of Gente Hermosa (Beautiful People).

Over 200 years were to pass before the island was again visited by Western ships – first came a Russian expedition in 1820, which was followed by a series of whalers and trading ships. In 1849 Polynesian missionaries arrived on Manihiki, which, at that time, was populated only occasionally by groups from Rakahanga. In 1852 the missionaries convinced the islanders to divide themselves permanently between the two atolls so that people would no longer be killed at sea while making the dangerous crossing.

The traditional link between Rakahanga and Manihiki was revived in 1997 when Cyclone Martin devastated crops on Manihiki. For a period of time afterwards, Manihiki was dependent on crops from neighbouring Rakahanga (which had escaped the worst of the cyclone).

Rakahanga's communication with the outside world took a great leap forward in 2001, when a new Telecom link brought telephone communication with other Cook Islanders into many homes. (At the time, the entire Rakahanga phone book, only 30 numbers, was published in the bottom right-hand corner of one page of the *Cook Islands Herald*.)

INFORMATION

There is electricity from 6am to midday and 6pm to midnight.

Health office (☎ 44664; Nivano)

Island council (☎ 44036; fax 44035; Nivano)

Telecom office (☎ 44680; fax 44683; Nivano)

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Rakahanga's airstrip is no longer used and has slowly been reclaimed by the jungle and the sea. The only way to get to Rakahanga is by boat. The quickest option is to fly to Manihiki and then take a small boat for the three-hour trip to Rakahanga. However, Manihiki–Rakahanga boats won't run when the weather's rough, so you run the risk of being stranded on Rakahanga until the weather clears. If during that time the weekly Rarotonga–Manihiki flight comes and goes, you'll just have to extend your stay for another week.

PENRHYN

pop 600 / area 9.8 sq km

The far-flung atoll of Penrhyn, often still called by its traditional Maori name, Tongareva, is the northernmost of the Cook Islands, 1364km northwest of Rarotonga and over 360km from the islands of Manihiki and Rakahanga to the southwest. The island sits at the crest of a massive submerged volcano 4876m above the ocean floor (about half the height of Mount Everest), and boasts the largest enclosed lagoon in the country – in fact, it's one of the largest lagoons in the whole South Pacific. Penrhyn was once famous throughout the Pacific for its natural mother-of-pearl, which is still found to this day, but more recently Penrhyn has joined Manihiki as a thriving centre for the cultivation of black pearls.

There are two main settlements: Omoka and Te Tautua, which sit facing each other on opposite sides of the lagoon. The lagoon is so large, 233 sq km and 14km across, that from Omoka, Te Tautua isn't visible except for its church roof. Unlike most of the other atolls in the Cooks, Penrhyn's encircling reef is punctured by three passages that make excellent harbours, a fact that made the island hugely popular with whalers and traders during the 19th century.

HISTORY

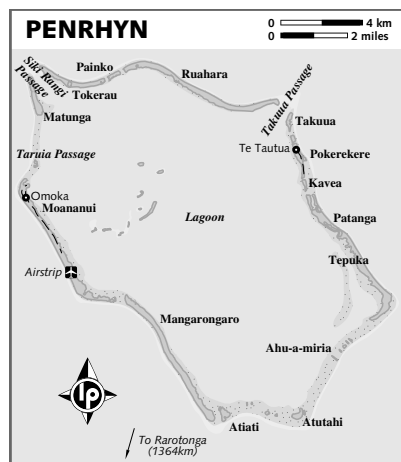
Polynesian legends relate that Penrhyn was fished up from the depths of the ocean by the god Vatea, in 'Avaiki. He used a fish-hook baited with a star, but when that did not work he tore a piece of flesh from his

thigh, baited the hook with it and promptly pulled up the island from the deep. He then hung the hook in the sky. The tale of an island fished out of the sea is a common legend in Polynesia, most often associated with the demigod Maui (see p37).

Penrhyn was discovered by settlers from the Samoan islands as they sailed towards Tahiti and the Society Islands. It's believed that the island's Maori name, Tongareva (Land Floating in the South), refers to the discovery of the island from Savai'i (Samoa) in the north. Various legends tell of explorers who visited on their way from Samoa to Tahiti or vice versa.

The atoll takes its European name from *Lady Penrhyn*, the British ship that dropped by in 1788 on the way back to England from Australia. *Lady Penrhyn* was one of Australia's 'First Fleet' – 11 ships that carried the original convict settlers to Sydney.

The earliest Western accounts of Penrhyn all comment on the unusual fierceness and erratic behaviour of the island's inhabitants. None of these early visitors dared to go ashore and neither did they let islanders on board their ships – preferring to keep them at arm's length. Despite these impressions, when the American ship *Chatham* ran onto the reef in 1853, the crew and passengers, to their surprise and relief, were treated well. Some of them remained on the island for almost a year before being rescued.



EH Lamont, the trader who had chartered the vessel, wrote *Wild Life among the Pacific Islanders* about his time on the island. He obviously entered into island life wholeheartedly, because he married three women while he was there! In his account, Dr R was the Dr Longghost of Herman Melville's *Omoo*.

The first missionaries arrived in 1854 and those warlike and terrifying islanders quickly became obedient churchgoers. So obedient that the four Polynesian teachers landed by the missionaries 'sold' their flock to Peruvian slavers in 1862 and 1863. They netted NZ\$5 a head and went along to South America as overseers for a salary of NZ\$100 a month. The slavers gratefully dubbed Penrhyn the 'Island of the Four Evangelists'. The disastrous slaving foray left the atoll with a population of only 88 – down from an estimated 700 before the trade began. None of those who left for Peru ever returned to Penrhyn.

The population had rebounded to 445 by 1902, but the entire chiefly line disappeared during this period, and today Penrhyn is the only island in the Cooks with no *ariki* (high chiefs).

The island was used as an American airbase during WWII and, as a result, has an airstrip, near Omoka village. The wreck of the *Go-Gettin' Gal*, a four-engined WWII bomber, sat beside the airstrip for many years before it was whittled away for use as scrap metal. The largest remaining piece forms a unique oven in the centre of town.

Pearls now dominate the island's economy, although not to the same degree as on Manihiki. Penrhyn's lagoon produces about 12% of the Cook Islands' pearls, including small, golden *pipi* pearls. The national government has occasionally suggested that Penrhyn's lagoon could produce many more pearls, but the fiercely independent locals argue for restraint.

INFORMATION

There is electricity from 6am to midday and 6pm to midnight.

Hospital & health centre (☎ 42083; Omoka)

Island council (☎ 42116, fax 42100; Omoka)

Police station (☎ 42499; Omoka)

Public health centre (☎ 42317) Across the lagoon at Te Tautua.

Telecom office (☎ 42680; fax 42683; Omoka)

SLEEPING

Penrhyn isn't really geared towards catering for visitors as they're so few and far between, but if you arrive on the island you're sure of a really fabulous welcome – the whole island still turns up to meet the weekly plane, and a new face is bound to attract a good degree of interest. The only accommodation is provided by local families, so the facilities can be pretty basic. It's also quite hard to contact the islanders by phone, so you'll probably have to book through a travel agent back on the main island of Rarotonga.

Soa's Guesthouse (☎ 42018; fax 42105; Omoka; r NZ\$95) Soa Tini, a local fisherman and pearl farmer, has a three-bedroom family house in the centre of Omoka village where you're invited to live right alongside his family. There's only cold water and the toilets are shared, but rates include three hearty meals and during the day Soa can organise trips around the lagoon.

Kristine's Lodge (☎ 42020; Omoka; r from NZ\$65) This simple lodge in Omoka village is run by Kristine and Alex Maretapu. There are two bedrooms, a small kitchen with stove and fridge, and a private toilet and cold-water shower.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The airstrip on Penrhyn was disused for many years, but **Air Rarotonga** (☎ 42888 at Omoka; www.airraro.com) now operates weekly flights between Rarotonga and Penrhyn. The flight takes just under four hours to get here and the cost is NZ\$1380 (return). Flights tend to be booked up quite a long time in advance, and generally only run if there's enough freight to justify the trip, which means you could be stuck on the island for a while if Air Rarotonga decides to cancel your flight. Planes usually stop at Aitutaki on the way north and on occasions they are routed through Manihiki as well.

Boat

Penrhyn is served by inter-island shipping services (see p180 for details). It is the only atoll with an entrance large enough for ships to actually enter the lagoon.

The island is an official port of entry to the Cooks.

PUKAPUKA

pop 530 / area 5.1 sq km

One of the most remote and isolated of all the Cook Islands, Pukapuka lies 1150km north of Rarotonga, and it's just about as far as you can get from the outside world. It's an island steeped in mystery and romance, legendary for its stunningly beautiful girls and liberal ways, and has been a beacon for South Seas runaways since the American author Robert Dean Frisbie arrived here in the 1920s and immortalised the island in his fascinating memoir *The Book of Pukapuka*.

Shaped like a three-bladed fan, Pukapuka atoll has an island at each 'blade end' and another in the central hub. The northernmost island, Wale (*wah-ley*; *wale* is Pukapukan for 'house' – closely related to the Samoan word *fale*), is also called Pukapuka Island. The only landing place is reached by narrow passages through the reef on the western side of Wale. There are three villages on Wale – Ngake, Roto (the largest) and Yato. Two of the other islands are quite large – Motu Ko is at the southern edge of the atoll and is the site of Pukapuka's tiny airstrip, while Motu Kotawa sits in the centre. The tiny sandbank of Toka lies out at the far-western edge of the lagoon.

Pukapuka sustained severe damage during the cyclones that tore through the islands in 2005; only 10 houses survived the storms without major damage, while many other buildings were practically destroyed or had their roofs blown off, including the main school and part of the hospital. *Taro* crops were washed away and many of the island's drinking sources were contaminated, prompting a huge rescue package to be implemented by the Cook Islands government and aid agencies from New Zealand and other countries. The island is only just beginning to stagger back onto its feet, and it could take two years before the *taro* plantations and water sources have fully recovered.

HISTORY

Early legends relate tales of the island rising from the deep with men inside it, and of great voyages from the west. Unlike the southern Cook Islands, which were settled by Society Islanders, Pukapuka was discovered 2000 years ago by Samoan and Tongan

voyagers on their way to the Society Islands. However, it wasn't until about 700 years ago that Pukapuka was permanently settled.

One legend of Pukapuka tells of a great tsunami about 400 years ago that swept over the atoll, leaving only two women and 15 men alive. With considerable effort (on the women's part!) they managed to repopulate the island. It was during the rule of the fourth chief following the great disaster that the first Western visitors arrived.

The Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendaña, with his navigator Pedro Fernández de Quirós, arrived from Peru in 1595 and named the island San Bernardo. Over 150 years later, two British ships sighted the island and didn't attempt a landing, due to the high surf. They named the atoll the Islands of Danger (a better name than most from the English explorers); Pukapuka is still sometimes referred to as Danger Island.

Pukapuka's isolation and reputation as a dangerous anchorage kept visitors away, and probably saved the ancient Polynesian religion for a few decades after the rest of the Cooks had been converted to Christianity. It wasn't until 1857 that Polynesian missionaries landed, although Pukapuka was converted almost immediately. Soon afterwards, the island was devastated by slave raids from Peru – 145 of the population of about 450 were taken; only two ever returned.

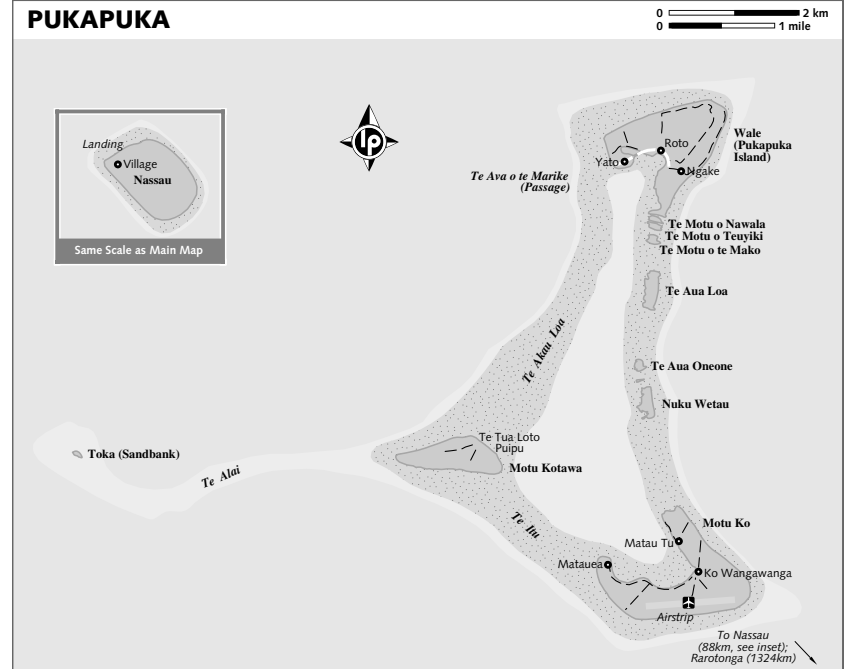
In 1924 the author Robert Dean Frisbie (see the boxed text, p159) arrived on Pukapuka to run a small shop. He married a local and raised children here before moving on to Suvarrow and Manihiki. He died on Rarotonga in 1948 – you can see his grave at the Cook Islands Christian Church (CICC) in Avarua. Inspired by her father's work, Florence 'Johnny' Frisbie also wrote of the island in *Miss Ulysses from Puka-Puka*. Modern maps of Pukapuka are still based on Robert Dean Frisbie's 1925 survey.

Pukapuka's isolation was ameliorated in 1994 when an airstrip was built on Motu Ko. Telephones came to Pukapuka in 1999.

THE CULTURE

The culture of Pukapuka, like its language, is more similar to Samoa than to any of the other Cook Islands. Samoan pastimes such as *kilikiti* (a form of 50-a-side cricket) are popular here. Protected by its isolation, Pukapuka is one of the most traditional of the

PUKAPUKA



Cook Islands – it is particularly renowned for its rather liberal (some would say licentious) ways. Some old-fashioned bed-hopping customs, unseen elsewhere in Polynesia since the missionaries turned up in the 1800s, are still supposed to be practised on Pukapuka.

Daily life in Pukapuka is dominated by fishing and farming and the harvesting of local crops such as coconuts, bananas and papayas. Most of the produce is consumed here on the island, with the remainder being exported back to Rarotonga.

Pukapuka's dancers are deservedly famous. Each year for the Constitutional Celebrations, Pukapuka brings a team that again and again wins the hearts of the Rarotongan crowds, if not those of the competition judges. Cynics, and many of Pukapuka's womenfolk, say that the men of Pukapuka are such accomplished dancers because they have so much free time to practise.

INFORMATION

There's no organised accommodation on Pukapuka. You might be able to arrange a homestay with a local family, but tourists

have understandably become a low priority in the aftermath of the cyclones. The **island secretary** (☎/fax 41712) should be your first point of contact; alternatively contact the **island council** (☎ 41034).

Hospital & health centre (☎ 41644) Tiny; located in Rota, on Wale.

Telecom office (☎ 41680; fax 41683) In Rota, on Wale.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Flights to Pukapuka have been initiated only recently; the island's airstrip was officially opened in early 1994. **Air Rarotonga** (☎ 22888 on Rarotonga; www.airraro.com) flies to Pukapuka infrequently, perhaps once every few months. Flights between Rarotonga and Pukapuka take 4½ hours and cost NZ\$1380 return. Check with Air Rarotonga to see when the next flight is.

Boat

Pukapuka is served by the inter-island ships coming from Rarotonga; see p180. Given Pukapuka's proximity to Samoa, there is also some boat traffic between the two.

NASSAU

pop 100 / area 1.3 sq km

The tiny island of Nassau is often called a suburb of Pukapuka (88km to the north). Uniquely in the Northern Group islands, Nassau has no lagoon. It's not an atoll, but a coral cay; a tiny (500m-long) island encircled by a narrow fringing reef. There's only one village, peopled by a transient population from Pukapuka who tend the dense coconut plantation, and about 18 resident families.

Nassau fared even worse than its sister island during the 2005 cyclones. Eighty per cent of homes were shattered or rendered uninhabitable by the hurricane-force winds that swept across the island during Cyclone Percy, but miraculously no-one was killed. Like Pukapuka, Nassau has since been the subject of a large-scale relief effort but it will take some time before all the homes and buildings have been completely rebuilt.

HISTORY

Nassau has always belonged to nearby Pukapuka. The great ancestor Mataliki, who rose out of the ocean with Pukapuka, put a man named Ngalewu in charge of tiny Nassau, commemorated in the island's traditional name Te Nuku o Ngalewu. The island was later known as Motu Ngaogao (Lonely Island), and was still uninhabited when the American whaler Nassau visited in 1835 and lumbered it with its present name.

There were brief periods when Nassau had a permanent population. A group from Manihiki lived there in the 1860s, and an American farmer attempted to grow coconuts and other plants in the 1870s. Other short-lived European attempts to farm the island were made in the 1910s, '30s and '40s.

Finally, in 1945, the island was sold by the last of those farmers, to the New Zealand government for £2000. The government sold it back to the chiefs of Pukapuka for the same figure, and on 2 June 1951 a party from Pukapuka landed on Nassau, reclaiming their 'suburb' after several centuries.

Groups from Pukapuka, working the coconut plantation started in 1945, have become a virtually permanent population. They are among the most isolated of Cook Islanders, although the island is used as an unofficial stopoff for some Asian fishing vessels.

INFORMATION

Nassau is governed by the Pukapuka island council (p157). There are no guesthouses, but the island council on Pukapuka should be able to arrange something if you're really keen to go. To contact people on Nassau you must use Telecom's high-frequency radio link; phone ☎ 020 to arrange it.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The only way to get to Nassau is via Pukapuka – a three-day journey by boat. You'll have to get to Pukapuka first, by sea or air, then arrange transport with Pukapuka's island council.

SUWARROW

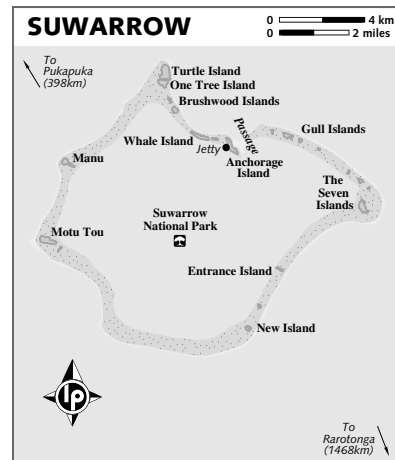
pop 2 / area 0.4 sq km

Tiny, inaccessible and remote as it is, Suvarrow is bizarrely perhaps the most famous of all the Cook Islands – thanks almost entirely to one man. New Zealander Tom Neale lived as a virtual hermit on the island over three periods between 1952 and 1977, and his book *An Island to Oneself* has become a South Seas classic. Nowadays Suvarrow is the Cooks' only national park, and is a paradise for nature lovers: thousands of seabirds roost on the islands dotted around the gigantic lagoon, which is large enough to sink Rarotonga with room to spare. It contains rich marine life, from sea turtles and coconut crabs to tropical fish and sharks. It's also one of the few accessible lagoons in the Northern Group, making it popular with yachties.

Two atoll managers live here for half the year, monitoring the thousands of birds that breed here, and ensuring that visiting yachties behave themselves. The managers live in Neale's old house on Anchorage Island; one room still furnished just as it was back then. There's nowhere to stay on the island, and you're unlikely to be granted permission to stay anyway – so your only option if you want to visit is to hitch a ride on a yacht or private boat from Rarotonga.

HISTORY

In pre-European times, Suvarrow was visited by Polynesian voyagers (remains of their camps have been found), but a permanent settlement was never established. It is thought that the atoll was the land



known as Malo in the legends of nearby islands. Suvarrow's curious modern name is neither English nor Polynesian – the atoll was named by the Russian explorer Mikhail Lazarev in 1814 after his ship *Suvarov*.

Suvarrow has developed a reputation as a treasure island. In the mid-19th century, after the American whaler *Gem* was wrecked on the reef, a salvage ship found a buried box containing many thousands of dollars worth of 18th-century gold coins. In 1876 another visitor found Spanish coins dating from the 1600s. Where these caches came from has never been satisfactorily explained, but other evidence of an early European visit – signs of habitation, skeletons and various artefacts – have also been unearthed. The

SUWARROW STORIES

Tom Neale wasn't the first writer to live on, and write about, Suvarrow. American-born Robert Dean Frisbie survived a terrible cyclone here in 1942 and wrote of it in *Island of Desire*. Although the lagoon is large, the scattered islands of Suvarrow are all very small and low-lying, and the Frisbies only survived the huge waves whipped up by the cyclone by tying themselves to a coconut tree! Frisbie's daughter Florence 'Johnny' Frisbie wrote about the same cyclone in *The Frisbies of the South Seas*.

Partly inspired by Frisbie's writing, New Zealander Tom Neale – perhaps the world's most famous hermit – first moved to Suvarrow in 1952, living alone on the island, in the building abandoned by the Kiwi coast-watchers, for two years. He returned from 1960 to 1963 as the government-appointed island caretaker, and his classic memoir *An Island to Oneself* was published shortly afterwards in 1966. Neale returned to Suvarrow in 1966 and remained there until 1977, when he was evacuated from the island after complaining of severe stomach pains via inter-island radio. He died soon afterwards, and is buried in the cemetery beside the Returned Servicemen's Association, opposite Rarotonga's airport.

remains of shipwrecked Spaniards? Or of the English crew lost on a small boat from the ship *Pandora*, sent to the Pacific in 1791 to search for the *Bounty* mutineers?

There was an unsuccessful attempt to farm pearl shell here in the early part of the 20th century, and in the 1920s and 1930s coconuts were farmed until a devastating termite infestation halted production (the termites are still here – don't collect coconuts from Suvarrow during WWII and the remains of their buildings can still be seen on Anchorage Island).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The only option for most travellers wanting to visit Suvarrow is the extremely infrequent cargo ships, which will visit only when the atoll managers need supplies or a new manager is arriving.

You are extremely unlikely to get permission from the **Ministry of the Prime Minister** (☎ 25494; fax 20856; govmedia@pmoffice.gov.cu) to stay on the island, but if you're on the cargo ship when it visits you will be able to have a look around while they unload.

Many visitors arrive by private yacht. Although Suvarrow is not an official port of entry, you're tacitly permitted to turn up at Suvarrow if you haven't cleared customs. Speak to the atoll managers, in Tom Neale's old house on Anchorage Island, when you arrive. They'll charge you US\$50 for a two-week stay (and US\$5 per day for every day after the two weeks). Note, this is just an anchoring fee; you can't stay onshore.

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