

# Kiribati

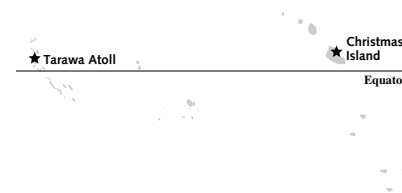
Curving its way above and below the equator, the Republic of Kiribati (pronounced 'Kiribas') encompasses the Gilbert, Phoenix and Line Islands, and was known under British rule as the Gilbert Islands. Measured by land size Kiribati is a tiny nation of just over 810 sq km, but its 33 atolls span a huge 3.5 million sq km of the Pacific. Most atolls surround turquoise lagoons and barely rise above the surrounding ocean, so it's rare to be out of the sight and sound of the sea.

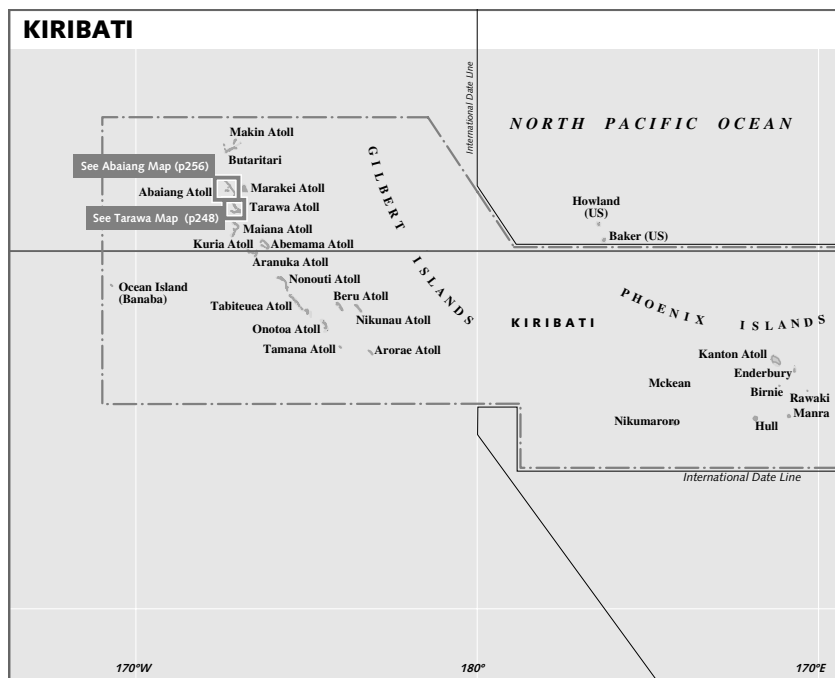
Kiribati's recent colonial and WWII history has had little impact on the outer islands, where the people subsist on coconuts, breadfruit and fish as they have done for centuries. Even on the main island, Tarawa, most locals live in traditional raised thatched huts. Western influence is increasing, though, in the form of cars, bars, movies and the Internet, and inevitably there's an escalating urban drift from the outer islands to Tarawa.

The people of the islands are known as I-Kiribati. Wide-eyed children may chirp a bold '*mauri*' (hello) to passing strangers, while their elders tend towards a laconic raise of an eyebrow in greeting. Nothing happens fast here, so wind down, relax and enjoy living on island time.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Relax with a fresh coconut in one of North Tarawa's **homestays** (p253) on stilts beside the aqua lagoon
- Tour **WWII relics** (p250) from the bloody 1943 Battle of Tarawa
- Watch – and participate! – in colourful and vibrant traditional **dancing** (p245)
- Live the relaxed **outer islands** (p255) lifestyle, gathering coconuts, salting clams or weaving thatch
- Fish for bonefish or watch the astonishing birdlife on **Christmas Island** (p259)





## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Kiribati is always hot and steamy, but its equatorial proximity means that it's out of the way of cyclones. Butaritari consistently has the highest annual rainfall (around 300cm) in the Gilbert Islands, while Washington Island in the Line Islands gets a staggering 750cm annually. Christmas Island is generally drier and less humid.

## HISTORY

The first settlers arrived in the Gilbert Islands over 3000 years ago, most likely from the Caroline and Marshall Islands. The Phoenix and Line Islands never supported permanent settlements, although archaeological evidence suggests occasional pre-European landings.

The early Gilbertese settled in distinct *kainga* (villages), and except in northern Butaritari and Makin Atoll, where centralised chiefs governed, each *kainga* had a *maneaba* (meeting house). Most communities also had a *bangota*, a shrine to ancestral gods. The I-Kiribati were fierce warriors, known for their sharp shark-tooth spears,

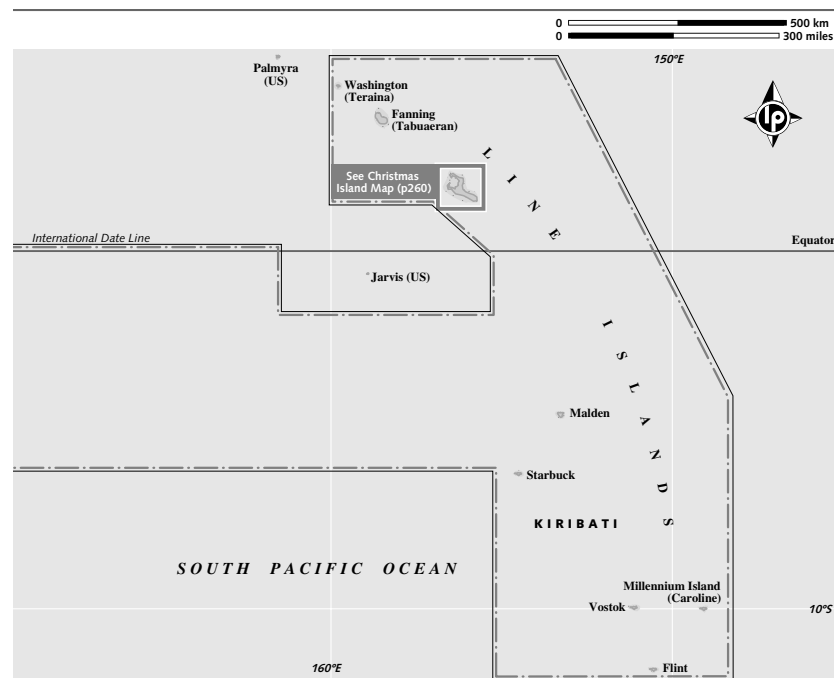
and they fought bloody inter-island battles clad in effective coconut-fibre body armour.

## European Contact

Because of its isolation, Kiribati was largely bypassed by the early explorers. Spaniard Pedro Fernández de Quirós landed briefly in 1606, after which there are no records

### KIRIBATI FACTS

- **Capital city (and island):** Tarawa (Tarawa Atoll)
- **Population:** 96,000
- **Land Area:** 811 sq km
- **Number of atolls:** 33
- **International telephone code:** ☎ 686
- **Currency:** Australian dollar (A\$)
- **Languages:** English and Kiribati
- **Greeting:** *Mauri* (Hello)
- **Website:** www.visit-kiribati.com



until Commodore John Byron put ashore at Nikunau Atoll in 1766. In 1788 Captain Thomas Gilbert sailed past and recorded several more of the atolls that make up the island group that bears his name.

During the 19th century a scattering of whalers, traders and missionaries made their way to the Gilberts. Butaritari was the main trading port, where manufactured goods were swapped for coconut oil and turtle shell. Blackbirders moved in during the late 1800s, taking islanders to work on plantations in Fiji, Australia and Hawai'i.

## British Rule

After some years of informal British involvement in the islands, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands were declared a British protectorate on 27 May 1892 – the Ellice Islands make up present-day Tuvalu (see p732). Three years later Tarawa became the administrative capital because of its wide lagoon passage and good anchorage.

In 1900 geologist Albert Ellis of the Pacific Islands Company (later renamed the

British Phosphate Commission) discovered that unclaimed Banaba (p257) was loaded with high-grade phosphate – 20 million tons of it. He coerced the Banabans into giving away mining rights to the island for 999 years and mining operations swiftly commenced. The British folded Banaba (then known as Ocean Island) into the protectorate in 1901, and the administrative capital was moved there in 1908; Tarawa regained its status as the capital after WWII.

In 1916 the protectorate became a fully fledged colony. Christmas Island and other Line Islands were added in 1919, and the Phoenix Islands joined in 1937.

## World Wars

WWI largely bypassed the Gilberts, and on Banaba phosphate mining continued undisturbed. WWII, on the other hand, brought heavy bloodshed.

A few days after attacking Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Japan bombed Banaba and also took Butaritari, Makin and Tarawa. In mid-1942 US marines raided

### DEALING WITH DIFFERENCE

Being a visitor to Kiribati is hard work, but it can be rich and rewarding once you're past the (literally) hot-and-bothered stage.

Tourism, where it exists at all, is in its infancy here; in fact, as the locals don't really understand why tourists want to visit or what they want to see or do, even the notion of tourism is a bit weird. This, combined with a natural I-Kiribati reticence in the company of strangers, makes it easy for visitors to feel out of place. You'll need to take responsibility for your own enjoyment, but when you show what you're interested in, or say what you want to do, people are usually only too pleased to make it happen.

So, for example, don't worry about lack of language; go over and talk to the toddy-gatherers, or wade out and join a family net-fishing at high tide. Stop, hover and smile when you hear singing and dancing at a *maneaba*; someone's likely to invite you in. If you want to go out on a boat, ask around locally and you'll probably find yourself becoming part of a family outing on the lagoon. If you need other 'outsider' company from time to time, you'll find that most visitors to Kiribati are overseas workers – development workers, diplomatic staff and contractors – who have formed small social networks; drop into one of the high commissions or bars and you'll soon find them.

Kiribati is a place for flexible travellers who can cope with a bit of discomfort and aren't too hung up on organised itineraries and punctuality. You need to be prepared to drink beer and eat fish and rice, instead of drinking gin and tonics followed by a three-course evening meal, but you'll find the sunset is just as beautiful.

Butaritari, forcing the Japanese to flee before pulling out a few days later. Japanese reprisals against both Gilbertese and Europeans throughout the islands were harsh, and Betio, one of Tarawa's islets, became a reinforced concrete stronghold. By 1943 there was a Japanese airfield in Betio, and a seaplane base on Butaritari.

In November 1943 Operation Galvanic saw 5000 US marines attack Betio. After three days of bloody fighting, the marines gained the beaches but lost 1500 men. While the Battle of Tarawa was not of lasting strategic importance, its main contribution was to demonstrate the effectiveness of the amphibious tractors – amtracs – that were used during the battle. Many war relics can still be seen at Betio (p250).

### Independence

Kiribati's independence movement gathered momentum in the 1960s, along with those of the Solomon Islands and Fiji. A series of governing structures based on a Westminster-style parliamentary system were gradually instituted, culminating in an elected House of Representatives (1967) and House of Assembly (1974). On 12 July 1979, a year after the secession of the Ellice Islands, the Republic of Kiribati (consisting of the Gilbert, Phoenix and Line Islands)

became an independent nation, ending 87 years of British rule.

Kiribati is a member of the British Commonwealth and was admitted to the UN in 1999. The 41-member Maneaba ni Maungatabu (House of Parliament) is popularly elected every four years, as is the *beretitenti* (president). Island councils control local government, working closely with the *unimane* (village elders).

It was a cruel – perhaps calculated – irony that the new nation's independence coincided with the exhaustion of Banaba's rich phosphate reserves. Before independence, phosphate mining on Banaba accounted for 45% of Kiribati's GDP and 85% of its exports.

Since then copra has become Kiribati's principal export, almost all of it going to Bangladesh where it is used in the manufacture of cosmetics. Kiribati's principal asset is the 3.5 million sq km Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which earns the country almost A\$3 million annually from foreign fishing licences. About 1700 I-Kiribati seamen work on foreign (mostly German) vessels and send back money to their families. Tourism is marginal, except on Christmas Island and more recently on Fanning Island, where a head-fee for cruise-ship passengers brings in over A\$1 million annually.

### MANEABA

Found throughout Kiribati, *maneaba* (traditional meeting houses) have sloping thatched roofs (or, more recently, corrugated iron) and locally woven floor mats. Typically the largest building in the village, the *maneaba* is a place of strict social hierarchy during meetings and community events, and commands great respect. By design, the pointed roof of the *maneaba* drops below an adult's height, so you must duck respectfully to enter.

The *unimane*, or old men, sit cross-legged in the centre of the building and conduct the meeting; they are always served food before everyone else. If you are invited to enter a *maneaba*, you will be expected to participate by giving a speech and/or singing a song; prepare your best patriotic melodies. *Maneaba* are now often used on South Tarawa to accommodate groups of church or community visitors; elsewhere, people sleep in the *maneaba* only on special occasions.

## THE CULTURE

### The National Psyche

Cultural traditions remain deeply embedded in the I-Kiribati, despite their embrace of many Western influences. The thud of pop music may blare from homes and minibuses, but likewise the thump of feet practising traditional dances and some fantastic singing emanate from *maneaba* across the country. The cash economy is still relatively new, and people live for the day rather than plan for the future, relying on strong ties with extended family for support. Islanders have a tradition of hospitality, and though lack of common language can make them shy, it doesn't stop the children from giggling and chirping '*Mauri i-Matang*' (Hello stranger!) at every opportunity.

### Lifestyle

Most I-Kiribati on the outer islands maintain a largely subsistence lifestyle and live in cool, weatherproof houses (usually variations of a raised platform with screened open sides and a thatched roof). Life here continues pretty much as it always has: people collect toddy and fetch drinking water; they go fishing and preserve the catch for sale by salting or smoking; they cut and make thatch; and they dry coconut for copra. In the heat of the day, you'll see people sitting in the shade mending fishing nets and weaving mats, or snoozing and chatting in groups on hammocks. Even in crowded South Tarawa, a modified traditional lifestyle continues in family compounds where, for example, spare parts for motorbikes sit beside piles of just-woven thatch, and cut-down 44-gallon drums become fire-pits above which flying fish are hung to dry at the side of the road.

### Population

Kiribati's population pressure is severe, as there's an average of 4.5 children per family. An internal resettlement programme is shifting people from overcrowded South Tarawa to the Phoenix and northern Line Islands, particularly Christmas Island.

### RELIGION

I-Kiribati are split fairly evenly between the Roman Catholic Church and the (Congregationalist) Kiribati Protestant Church. Other faiths, including Baha'i, Seventh Day Adventists and Mormons, are represented.

### ARTS

Typical I-Kiribati crafts include wooden baskets, mats and conical fishermen's hats made out of pandanus, carved outrigger canoes, woven bags and purses, and necklaces of fibres and shells. Most are made on the outer islands and shipped to Tarawa.

### Dance

Kiribati's colourful, rhythmic chants and dances are one of the highlights of Micronesia, and dance remains an important part of local culture. Regular dance performances are held at the region's two largest hotels: on Tarawa the Otintai Hotel (p253) and the Captain Cook Hotel (p261) on Christmas Island.

### Literature

There's no tradition of local writing but several visitors have written accounts of their stays in the islands.

Robert Louis Stevenson, the early master of Pacific writing, visited several of the Gilbert Islands in the late 19th century; you'll find those accounts in the widely available

### THE MEDIUM & THE MESSAGE

Down an alleyway and upstairs in a building behind the bank in Bairiki, the office of A Nei Tabera Ni Kai (p248) is chaotically welcoming. The business of this small, not-for-profit organisation is community development through documentary and drama. With funding from several international donor agencies, the enthusiastic local film crew and cast make movies about issues affecting I-Kiribati.

One of the most successful movies is a drama about urban drift which follows two young friends as they move from an outer island to the bright lights of Tarawa. The film reveals their (mostly unhappy) experiences as they learn to live in a cash economy, look for work and get their first taste of alcohol abuse and sexual violence, before they eventually decide that life was better before and return home. The film was taken on tour to the outer islands, and one community watched it again and again until the generator ran out of fuel overnight! Documentaries on health issues are an effective means of relaying the importance of breastfeeding, for example, or safe sex and the use of condoms. It's a great way to deliver messages in what is mostly a culture that doesn't read, and the use of local language, locations and situations strengthens their impact.

A Nei Tabera Ni Kai also produces some souvenir videos in English, covering local WWII sites and stories, Kiribati culture and history (the millennium celebrations looked sensational!).

Robert Louis Stevenson – *His Best Pacific Writings*, compiled by Roger Robinson. They're a window on to both how much and how little has changed.

*A Pattern of Islands* by Arthur Grimble remains a classic account of the islands during the British colonial era. It's a book of its time, but Grimble was an exceptional colonial officer (he was in the islands for almost 20 years from 1914) who clearly loved the islands and their culture. His account of being traditionally tattooed – a practice that no longer exists in Kiribati – is extraordinary.

Fijian writer Daryl Tarte's *Islands of the Frigate Bird* is a fictionalised account of the settlement of Kiribati and the effects of colonisation in general and phosphate mining on Banaba in particular; it's the only novel of its kind.

Despite the misleading title, J Maarten Troost's *The Sex Lives of Cannibals* is an irreverent and often very funny account of his two-year stint as a house-husband on Tarawa in the 1990s. The book is deeply unpopular with locals, and by reading it you'll learn more about one expat's life rather than the life of I-Kiribati.

Inspired by Robert Louis Stevenson, Pamela Stephenson made her own ocean voyage in 2005 and wrote *Treasure Islands – Sailing the South Seas in the wake of Fanny and Robert Louis Stevenson*. It's not riveting reading, but there are some interesting Kiribati cameos among the islands-less-travelled, and yachties will enjoy the nautical flavour.

### Painting

Look for the artwork of Teweiariki Teaero, an I-Kiribati artist who illustrated Daryl Tarte's novel *Islands of the Frigate Bird*. You're more likely to see his work in the Oceania Arts Centre in Suva, Fiji, than in Kiribati.

### LANGUAGE

English is the official language of Kiribati, but the indigenous language, also called Kiribati, predominates. Even on South Tarawa many locals know only a smattering of English.

The most difficult aspect of pronunciation concerns the letters 'ti' at the end of a word; they should be pronounced 's' – which is why Kiribati is pronounced 'kibas', and Kiritimati 'Christmas'.

The name Kiribati is a transliteration of Gilberts, after the British name for the islands. Older locals sometimes refer to the Gilbert chain by its original name, Tungaru.

### Gilbertese basics

Hello.	<i>Mauri.</i>
Goodbye.	<i>Tia bo.</i>
How are you?	<i>Ko uara?</i>
I'm well (thanks).	<i>I marurung (ko raba).</i>
Please.	<i>Taaoka or bubuti.</i>
Thanks.	<i>Ko raba.</i>
Yes.	<i>Eng.</i>
No.	<i>Tiaki.</i>

### ENVIRONMENT Geography

Kiribati's oceans stretch 3870km from east to west. The country is composed of three main island groups: the 16 atolls of the Gilbert Islands chain, north of Fiji; the eight atolls of the Phoenix Islands, southeast of the Gilberts; and the Line Islands chain, further east. Banaba, 400km west of the main Gilberts chain, is a raised coral atoll. The other islands are flat coral atolls with central lagoons and long, spindly islands. The Line and Gilbert Islands are split by the equator; the Phoenix Islands lie just south of it.

### Ecology

Coral atolls are fragile environments (see the boxed text, p63), with a shallow freshwater 'lens' lying just below the surface. They can support hardy plants like coconut and breadfruit but not plants – or big numbers of people – that require a constant supply of freshwater. Increasing population pressure means that that water is being used and polluted faster than the water lens can cope with.

Rising sea levels have mildly eroded some atolls (see the boxed text, p66), and coral bleaching, pollution and overfishing have degraded many reefs. The lagoon is used as a latrine and rubbish dump, and in highly populated Tarawa it has extremely high levels of bacteria; a successful waste disposal and recycling programme called *kaoki mange* is helping to address this issue. Elsewhere the islands' lagoons remain a rich and beautiful marine resource.

Until recently Christmas Island had one of the largest groupings of seabirds in the tropics, possibly in the world, estimated at 25 million birds of 18 species. The resettlement of several thousands of migrants from Tarawa has already caused a noticeable decline in both bird numbers and marine life.

## TARAWA ATOLL

pop 41,000 / area 64 sq km

Shaped like a two-sided triangle, Tarawa Atoll is the administrative centre of Kiribati. The atoll is divided into North and South Tarawa; the south is the locus of all government activity and services, while the rural north approximates an outer-island experience. South Tarawa is home to more than a third of Kiribati's population, most of whom live clustered in open-sided huts on the islet of Betio at the westernmost tip of the atoll. Betio was the site of a bloody victory over the Japanese by US marines in 1943; it still has huge guns along its beaches and rusting tanks just offshore.

South Tarawa is hot, noisy and chaotic, but don't be overwhelmed. Look a little closer and it's also vibrant and friendly, with many I-Kiribati retaining modified traditional lifestyles in the face of continuing urban drift.

### ORIENTATION

A system of causeways links Betio with Buota in South Tarawa, a distance of about 35km along a narrow sealed road. Bairiki,

### A DATE WITH HISTORY

The International Date Line has moved many times since early European circumnavigators of the globe complained of losing a day on the trip.

The Date Line used to split Kiribati down the middle – until 1 January 1995 when the Republic of Kiribati (quite legally) shifted part of the Date Line eastward. The stated purpose of the move was to unite Kiribati's dispersed atolls on the same side of the Date Line. Previously, when it was Friday on Christmas Island, it was already Saturday on Tarawa.

In the run-up to 2000, this move propelled tiny Kiribati onto the cutting edge of global millennium fever. Being so far east, Kiribati's Line Islands simultaneously start each new day (and, therefore, each new year) one full hour before anyone else, and a special BBC/AAPT link ensured that Kiribati's millennium celebrations were beamed worldwide.

However, because of the earth's tilt, Kiribati doesn't always see the first sunrise. The first spot of land to see the sun rise each New Year's morning is near Victor Bay on the Antarctic coast. Caroline Island (recently renamed Millennium Island and where the celebrations took place), one of Kiribati's uninhabited southern Line Islands, is the second land to see the sunrise.

between Bikenibeu and Betio, has the majority of the government buildings. The airport is at Bonriki, on the eastern tip of South Tarawa, about an hour's drive from Betio.

## INFORMATION

### Internet Access

**Telecom Services Kiribati Ltd** (TSKL; Map p249; ☎ 20 702; tskl@tskl.net.ki; Bairiki; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) The only public Internet access on Tarawa; you can also make phone calls here.

## Medical Services

**Tarawa Hospital** (Map p248; ☎ 28 097, emergency 999) The hospital is near the airport. There's no public pharmacy on Tarawa.

## Money

**ANZ Bank** (Map p249; ☎ 21 095) The main branch is in Bairiki, with branches in Betio and Bikenibeu. All have ATMs.

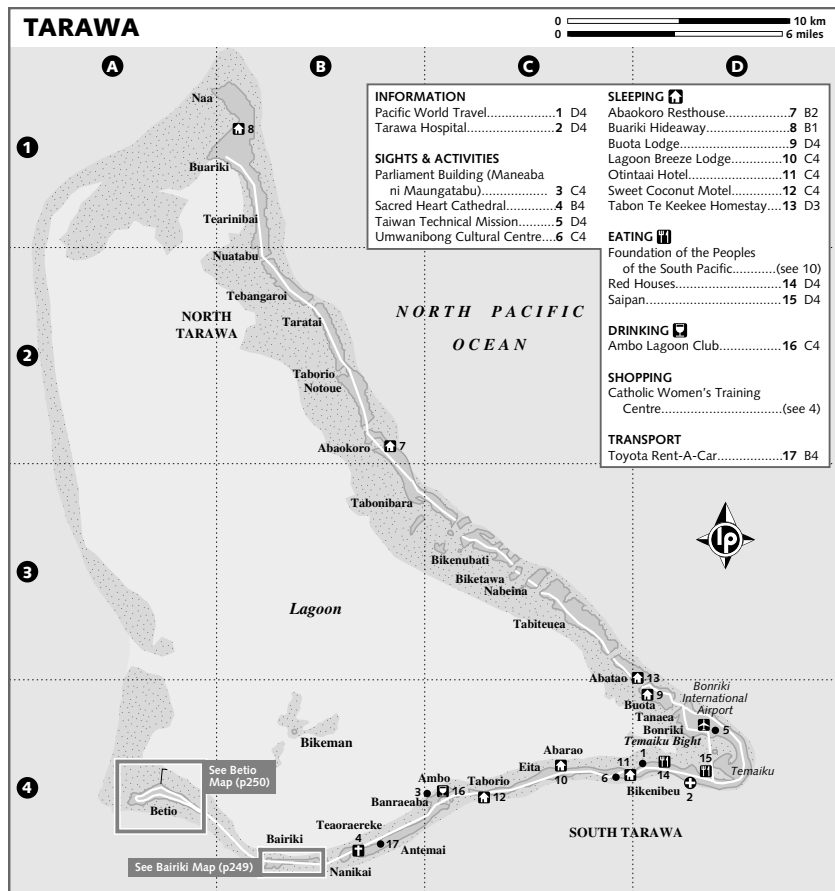
## Post

**Post office** (Map p249) The main post office is in Bairiki, with branches in Betio and Bikenibeu. The philatelic office is attached to the post office in Betio (Map p250).

## Tourist Information

**A Nei Tabera Ni Kai** (Map p249; ☎ 21 747; kirivid@hotmail.com) Run by Linda Uaan and John Anderson (see the boxed text, p246), who can provide information on the outer islands.

**Visitor information centre** (Map p250; ☎ 26 003; sto@mict.gov.ki) Next to the post office in Betio, the office has details of private shipping companies that serve the outer islands.



## Travel Agencies

**Pacific World Travel** (☎ 28 715, 90 369; www.kiribati.holidays.com) Just past the Otintaa Hotel towards Bikenibeu, Pacific World is the Air Nauru agent and can help with outer-island air and accommodation bookings.

**Tobaraoi Travel** (Map p250; ☎ 26 567; www.tobaraoi.com) Above the ANZ Bank in Betio, this company handles outbound travel. It's the partner agency to Pacific World Travel.

## TRANSPORT

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

Tarawa's airport is in Bonriki, about an hour's drive from Betio. The domestic airline, **Air Kiribati** (Map p249; ☎ 21 550, 21 227; www.kiritours.com; Tarawa), has an agent in Bairiki's shopping arcade; see p255 for details of scheduled services, and allow yourself plenty of leeway between your schedule and theirs. For international flight information see p264.

#### BOAT

A privately run, fast-service **Supercat** (☎ 22 538), based in Betio, started operation in 2005. Its schedule is somewhat erratic, but when we visited it was servicing Maiana, Kuria and Abemama to the south of Tarawa, and Makin to the north. Sample fares include Tarawa to Abemama A\$40, and Tarawa to Butaritari A\$55.

If the Supercat breaks down it can take a while to get spare parts, so it's best to have

an alternative transport option in mind if you're on a tight timetable.

**Kiribati Shipping Services Ltd** (KSSL; Map p250; ☎ 26 195; kssl@tskl.net.ki) sends supply and passenger ships to service most of the outer islands at roughly monthly intervals. From Betio, sample fares are Abiang A\$7, Maiana A\$15, Abemama A\$33, and Tab North A\$39. KSSL can also provide information about the irregular services between Kiribati and Fiji and Tuvalu.

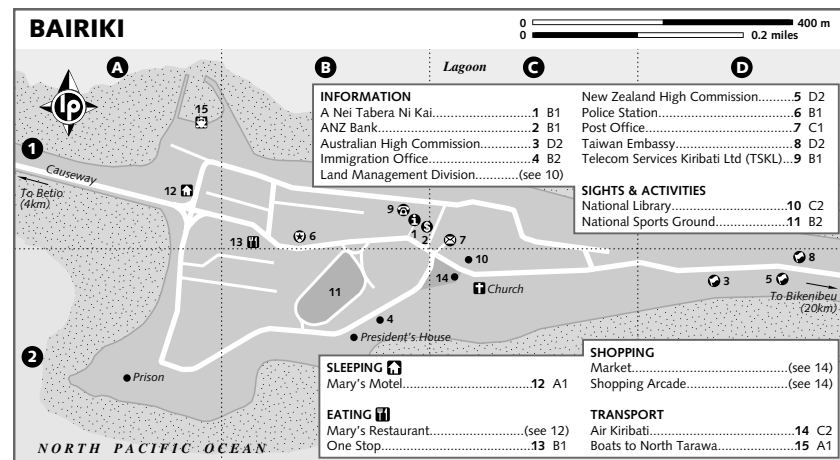
Visiting yachts can anchor in Betio Harbour for a fee of A\$2.

## Getting Around

Tarawa's one main road extends the length of South Tarawa – the islets are linked by causeways – and into the southern tip of North Tarawa at Buota. From there you can catch a canoe ferry to North Tarawa at high tide (a five-minute, 50c trip; holler and someone will paddle across and collect you), or walk across at low tide. North Tarawa's islets are connected by causeways and are accessible by canoe or at low tide on foot. There are a few trucks and motorbikes on the bigger islets.

## TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Most hotels will arrange a transfer. If you're hiring a car ask for it to be waiting at the airport. Public minibuses run from the airport along the length of South Tarawa (A\$1.50). They are invariably crowded, so your baggage will travel on your knee. There are no taxis.





### INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

In April 1944, afraid that the graves they'd dug on the orders of the Japanese were to be their own, seven young men from Nikunau, south of Tarawa, hurriedly gathered a few coconuts and escaped in three canoes. One canoe became separated, but the other two went on.

Days went by, and their sails were destroyed by bad weather. With a feather bait they caught and dried fish, used coconut shells to collect rainwater, sometimes caught sharks and drank their blood.

Weeks went by, and another canoe drifted away. One of the two young men remaining disappeared when the final canoe capsized. Righting it, the lone survivor, Nabetari, found himself alone on the ocean.

Months went by, and in November 1944, almost eight months after leaving Nikunau, Nabetari washed up near Manus, Papua New Guinea, weak and exhausted. He was looked after by local people and made a complete recovery. Nabetari was flown back to Tarawa after the war.

a good flush-through of ocean water into the lagoon at these points. It's *really* inappropriate to wear Western swimming gear anywhere in Kiribati. Women should swim in a T-shirt and baggy shorts or sarong; men in baggy shorts.

### Diving

There were no dive operators in Tarawa in 2005. Several locals and expats dive, and if you ask around you may get lucky and be asked informally to join them. You'll need to know how to look after yourself underwater, and how to check the gear that's offered you; bring your own regulator if you can. Bear in mind that your travel insurance almost certainly won't cover any mishap.

### Other Activities

The tiny **National Library** (Map p249; ☎ 21 254; ☎ 9.30am-3.30pm, closed Thu & Sun) is in Bairiki. There's a small Pacific book collection, and it's a good place to cool off in air-con and dip into Arthur Grimble's *A Pattern of Islands*, his memoir of 1920s life in the Gilberts. If you've run out of reading matter, A\$4 buys you membership of the eclectic lending library section.

The Otintai Hotel (opposite) runs a **Biketawa Picnic** boat on pay-week Saturdays if enough people (around 15) book; the cost is A\$10 which includes lunch. Biketawa is a small islet a third of the way along North Tarawa, where there are shady, rustic picnic tables and good swimming. The boat leaves and returns on the high tide.

A local **track group** meets on Tuesday and Thursday at 5pm at the national sports

ground in Bairiki (Map p249); everyone, including kids, is welcome to join in the informal training. If you like to **walk**, take a picnic and catch the canoe ferry from Buota and explore the islets of southern North Tarawa until you're tired; return the same way. If the tide's right, you can charter a boat to drop you further up North Tarawa, and walk your way back down to Buota.

A few people **surf** one or two decent breaks in South Tarawa; ask around locally.

### SLEEPING & EATING

#### South Tarawa

**Sweet Coconut Motel** (Map p248; ☎ 21 487; Taborio; r A\$25-45; ☎) The only accommodation on Tarawa that's set directly on the ocean beach has very small rooms that could do with a lick of paint, but they're all clean, as is the well-equipped shared kitchen and bathroom. More expensive rooms have air-con and private bath. It's good value for the price and the view from the back veranda is gorgeous. There's no sign, but it's the two-storey building off the road a few hundred metres east of the petrol station at Taborio; ask there if you get lost.

**Mary's Motel** (Map p249; ☎ 21 164; Bairiki; s/d A\$80/85, old wing A\$55/70; ☎) At the start of the causeway to Betio, this is a good location if you've got business in Bairiki or Betio. There are several simple new rooms with refrigerator, shower and clean bathrooms; skip the run-down older rooms. The attached Mary's Restaurant and bar remain popular, with a long menu and a daily specials board (often offering local fish) from which you can eat well for A\$10. Another restaurant was due to open next door in late

2005, and planned to serve European and traditional Kiribati food; see if it's up and running when you arrive.

**Otintai Hotel** (Map p248; ☎ 28 084; otintai2@tskl.net.ki; Bikenibeu; s A\$70-80; ☎) Business travellers tend to stay at this hotel, but it's fairly charmless: the carpeted rooms smell musty, the water supply can be dodgy and you'll need earplugs to survive the Friday- and Saturday-night disco. However the lagoon-side bar and dining room has a happy hour from 6pm, and the food is decent; go for the always-reliable fish and chips (A\$8), the Tuesday- and/or Thursday-night BBQ or Friday's 'cheap cheap' food night (A\$5.50), when local dancers often perform. If you don't have transport, you may feel a bit marooned here.

**Buota Lodge** (Map p248; ☎ 28 906; Buota; r A\$50) Stay a night here and you'll feel you've had a week away from the bustle of the rest of South Tarawa. Three self-contained cottages with private but detached bathrooms sit on the edge of one of the channels between the lagoon and the ocean; it's nice to swim at high tide then loll on your cottage's cool veranda. There are picnic tables and BBQs on the edge of the water, and everything is set in a shady garden.

Chinese restaurants abound on Tarawa, serving pretty much identical and very ordinary food. The best of the bunch are Red Houses, near the hospital; its partner Ocean (Map p250), in Betio; and Aboy's Kitchen (Map p250), also in Betio, which serves decent noodles. All are accompanied by loud TV or videos. On the corner of the main road, just before the airport turn, is

the whitewashed Saipan restaurant – there's no sign – which serves a good lunch of tuna, rice and veggies for about A\$3.

For self-caterers, the best grocery selections are at One Stop (Map p250) and Moel's Trading Co (Map p250) in Betio; there's a smaller One Stop (Map p249) in Bairiki. The bakery (Map p250) by the Betio Theater bakes the usual slightly sweet bread, as well as regular bread. Fruit and veggies come from Australia by ship at roughly monthly intervals and often look a bit tired by the time they hit the shops. You can always find fresh greens for sale from the vegetable garden of the Foundation of the Peoples of the South Pacific (FSP) in Abarao; drop by during office hours.

### North Tarawa

**Tabon Te Keekee Homestay** (Map p248; ☎ 90 369; karea@tobaraoi.com; s/d A\$45/55) These three charming cottages on the southern end of North Tarawa, a three-minute canoe-ride from Buota, are built in local style: open-sided with palm-frond screens and pandanus thatch. There's a clean, roofless bathroom and woven-walled loo. All cottages face the lagoon, and are on the edge of a cheerfully chaotic family compound whose various members look after you well. Rates include dinner, bed and breakfast.

**Buariki Hideaway** (Map p248; ☎ 26 250; buariki@kiritours.com; s/d A\$60/80) At the far end of North Tarawa, about an hour by boat from South Tarawa, this group of small local-style cottages is tucked into a private stretch of lagoon beach, with two more breezy structures extending over the water at high

### DAY TOURING TARAWA

The order in which you do this day tour will depend on where you're staying. You can do it by public minibus, but a hire car is much, much easier!

Start the day at Betio with a **WWII tour** (p250), then head to Bairiki to drink refreshing coconut water (50c) at the tiny **market** and have fish and chips for lunch at **Mary's Restaurant** (opposite). In the afternoon take the main road to Bikenibeu and check out the **Umwaniobong Cultural Centre** (p250). Loop around Temaiku and drop in to the Taiwan Technical Mission's **agricultural centre** (Map p248); the mission is training local people in gardening, and producing fabulous fruit and vegetables to supply the hospital. Retrace your steps and go on to **Buota** for a taste of life outside the urban strip. If you time it right it'll be high tide, so **take a dip** in the channel by the bridge then head up to the canoe crossing.

If you don't have to be in town the next day, take the canoe ferry and stay overnight at **Tabon Te Keekee Homestay** (above) or **Buota Lodge** (above). Otherwise, turn around and stop off at the **Otintai Hotel** (above) for sunset drinks on your way home.

### THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Lagoon Breeze Lodge** (Map p248; ☎ 28 942; lagoonbreeze@lycos.com; r A\$55-70 🍷) In Abarao, this is a good choice for self-caterers, with fresh veggies always available from the garden in front. The main building has tatty but clean rooms, there's a spacious shared kitchen and veranda, and all rooms have fridges. Two stand-alone cottages, with a total of three rooms, face the water and are completely self-contained. The fixtures and fittings can be a bit Fawltly Towers, so be prepared.

Set on the lagoon, with good-sized grounds, the lodge is small and local enough to feel you're in Kiribati (you're likely to see the neighbours shimmying up a coconut tree to collect toddy when you pull the curtain in the morning) but cool, quiet and comfortable enough for overnight recovery from tropical enervation.

tide. Owned by Swiss-German transplant Mike Strub, the place had been closed for a while when we visited but had been well maintained and was due to reopen in 2006. Room rates include all meals. A one-way trip by boat costs A\$50 regardless of the number of passengers.

**Abaokoro Resthouse** (Map p248; ☎ 31 012; r A\$30) Halfway along North Tarawa, the resthouse is run by the island council. There are several simple concrete rooms and a shared bathroom. Generator power runs the much-needed fans for a few hours at night. Rates include three meals.

### DRINKING

**Royal Saloon** (Map p250; Betio) Betio's tatty but popular Royal Saloon is the hot and humid haunt of some eccentric local and expat characters. There's often a tall tale for a willing ear, and crowded dancing at night; after 9pm there's an entry fee of A\$3 for men and A\$1 for women. It also serves decent food.

**Emperor Bar** (Map p250; Betio) Also in Betio, the Emperor Bar plays Pacific disco hits (lots of Samoan music) and has similar entry fees to the Royal Saloon. (It's underneath the Golden Star Chinese restaurant, which wasn't quite open when we visited but the locals were eagerly anticipating quality food.)

**Ambo Lagoon Club** (Map p248; Tarawa) An expat favourite with a pool table and plenty of cold beer, the Ambo is a popular venue for a Sunday afternoon drinking session. Visitors must purchase a temporary membership (A\$10).

Any number of dark and steamy seaman's bars cluster around the port area; best go with a local or not at all. Clean toilets aren't the strong point of any of these places, and remember that minibuses stop running around 9pm.

### ENTERTAINMENT

**Hash House Harriers** (☎ 26 409) The social running/drinking club beloved of many expats in many places meets at 6pm every Wednesday. The location changes every week; call John Brown for details.

**Betio Theater** (Map p250; A\$3) The rather grandly named Betio Theater shows five DVD movies a day (admission price will get you in for one only) on a big screen in an air-conditioned hall. If the projector's out of order, it shuts up shop until the spare parts arrive.

### SHOPPING

If you're in search of I-Kiribati crafts, be sure to check out the Catholic Women's Training Centre (Map p248) between Bairiki and Bikenibeu; if you're lucky, you may find women from the outer islands making craft on-site when you visit. The quantity and quality of the work can be a bit hit and miss, but it's as authentic as you'll get.

The centre also sells *tibuta*, the hand-smocked tops worn by local women that are only found in Kiribati. You'll see them for sale all over the place, but look for hand-smocked and embroidered ones (about A\$15 to A\$18) rather than the machine-made imports from, oddly, Indonesia. *Lavalava* (Kiribati sarongs) are also widely sold on Tarawa.

Pacific World Travel in Bikenibeu features an excellent selection of quality handicrafts, and – along with Tobaraoi Travel in Betio – is the only place that stocks two beautiful coffee-table books of photographs by Tony and Joan Whincup. *Kiribati* (A\$30) contains photographs only, and *Akekeia! Traditional Dance in Kiribati* (A\$85) has detailed text

and photographs. The shop also has a small selection of posters (A\$20) for you to choose from.

Stamp collectors will find everything from Kiribati lobsters to Japanese seaplanes on stamps at Kiribati's **Philatelic Bureau** (Map p250; ☎ 26 515) beside the post office in Betio.

English-language or English-subtitled DVDs on Kiribati culture and history (A\$20 to A\$30) are available at A Nei Tabera Ni Kai in Bairiki (p248); it'll be much easier to show than to explain your Kiribati experience to family and friends when you get home!

## OUTER ISLANDS

Beyond Tarawa, packaged Western products are a rarity and life is more relaxed. People live off fish and coconuts, and occasionally earn revenue by selling copra abroad. Women sit by thatched huts weaving pandanus or salting clams to send to Tarawa. People don't have much, and they share what they do have; if you're staying with locals, take contributions of food for your hosts and small gifts for their children.

Rarely are there more than a few trucks on these islands, and communications are limited to contact with the outside world by radio-phone. Be prepared to hang around for days, sometimes weeks, if planes or ships are delayed. Health care is minimal at best.

The outer Gilberts are inhabited, and some of the better-known or more easily accessible islands are described below. Except for Kanton's 30 people the Phoenix Islands are uninhabited. Among the Line Islands to the east, only Fanning, Washington and Christmas Island are settled.

### Transport

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

##### Air

**Air Kiribati** (Map p249; ☎ 21 550, 21 227; www.kiri-tours.com; Tarawa) flies to most outer Gilberts at least weekly. There is no air service to the Phoenix or Line Islands except Christmas Island (see p261). The following one-way fares are for flights originating from Tarawa.

Destination	No of flights weekly	Fare
Abaiang	3	A\$30
Abemama	4	A\$45
Aranuka	3	A\$50
Arorae	1	A\$155
Beru	1	A\$120
Butaritari	3	A\$65
Kuria	3	A\$50
Maiana	2	A\$30
Makin	2	A\$70
Marakei	2	A\$35
Nonouti	2	A\$80
Onotoa	1	A\$120
Tabiteuea North	5	A\$95
Tabiteuea South	1	A\$105

### Boat

The Betio-based **Supercat** (☎ 22 538) started operation in the Gilbert Islands in 2005, travelling on a somewhat loose schedule south to Maiana, Kuria and Abemama (A\$40), and north to Abaiang, Marakei, Butaritari (A\$55) and Makin. It's best not to rely on the Supercat if you're travelling on a tight schedule.

**Kiribati Shipping Services Ltd** (KSSL; Map p250; ☎ 26 195; kssl@tskl.net.ki; Betio) sends supply-cum-passenger ships to most of the outer islands at roughly monthly intervals. The visitor information centre in Betio (p248) has a list of other private shipping companies that serve the islands. Of the outer Gilbert Islands, only Abaiang, Maiana, Tabiteuea South, Onotoa and Abemama have lagoons that can handle large boats – at other islands small dinghies or canoes transfer people and goods from ships at anchor outside the lagoon.

Yachts may be required to pay a fee to island councils.

## OUTER GILBERT ISLANDS

### Abaiang Atoll

pop 5794 / area 17.5 sq km

Four hours by boat or 15 minutes by plane from Tarawa, Abaiang is the most accessible of Kiribati's outer islands but offers a typically remote experience. A pretty sand road runs the 25km length of the atoll, alongside which you'll see bundles of palm-frond thatch being woven and stacked to go by truck to Tarawa; women drying fish and salting clams; and cut coconut drying into copra in family compounds. Also check out what's happening in the lagoon-side boat-building



shed, south of the airport. Ask around to hire either a bicycle (about A\$5 a day and lots of stamina) or a motorbike (A\$20).

The boat usually docks just north of Taburao, a few kilometres from the airstrip. Hitch a ride with one of the church, council or school trucks that come to collect passengers, mail and supplies from the boats and planes. There was no island resthouse in 2005, although privately run accommodation was under construction in the island's north and the two island schools (attached to the Catholic and Protestant churches) have guesthouses where you might be able to stay. Ask at Betio's visitor information centre (p248) about the current situation. Boats head to Abaiang every

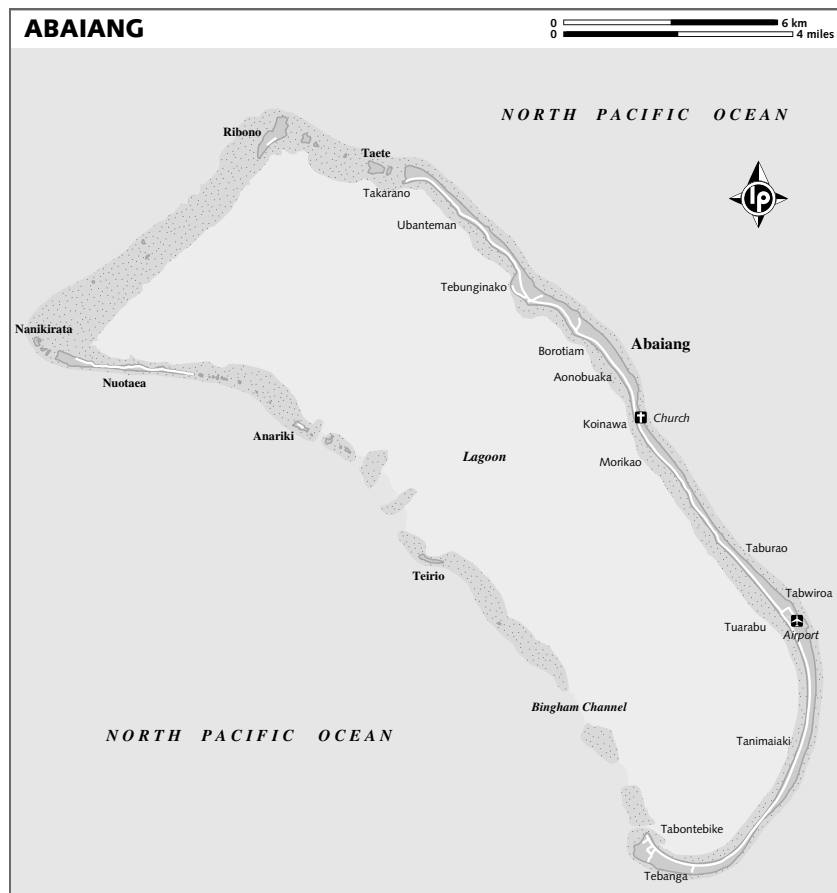
Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 10am (A\$7) from Betio on Tarawa.

### Abemama

pop 3142 / area 27 sq km

Robert Louis Stevenson spent time here during his voyage aboard the *Equator* in 1889, and wrote of his encounter with the king of Abemama. Alone among the outer islands, there is still a royal family on Abemama that retains the title, if not the power, of king. The island was considered as a possible capital for the Gilberts, along with Butaritari and Tarawa, but the British colonial government deemed its lagoon passage too dangerous.

In addition to the Island Council **resthouse** (☎ 41 014), the privately run **Central**



**Oneness Rest House** (s/d incl meals A\$40/50) was due to open in late 2005 on the lagoon at Kauma. Check with Linda Uaan at **A Nei Tab-  
era Ni Kai** (Map p249; ☎ 21 747; kirividi@hotmail.com) in Bairiki to see if it's up and running.

### Butaritari Atoll

pop 3464 / area 13.5 sq km

Butaritari is Kiribati's greenest and most fertile island, thanks to its abundant rainfall. Robert Louis Stevenson arrived in Butaritari in July 1889 to find the entire island drunk in the wake of the 4 July celebrations hosted by the resident American traders. The experience of seeing a man lose his earlobe in a barroom brawl encouraged him to lobby for temperance – at least from hard liquor – in the islands.

Butaritari was the first of the Gilberts to be occupied by the Japanese during WWII, when 300 troops landed in Ukiangang in the south of the island in December 1941. A temporary victory by the Americans in 1942 angered the Japanese, and their retaliatory air raid killed 41 villagers at Keuea. It's likely that more Gilbertese men would have been killed but for the intervention of Kansake, a Japanese trader long resident in Butaritari who pleaded for their lives. In a second counter-invasion on 20 November 1943, the US won back the island from the Japanese. An annual celebration on 20 November called the Remembrance of Underground Cave Openings commemorates the day when the village elders were able to emerge from their cave hideouts.

In addition to the island resthouse, there's the family-owned **Pearl Shell Resthouse** (per person A\$30), fronting a good swimming and snorkelling area in Onomaru village. The owners, Ioanna and Bakaati, speak good English, and can arrange local tours. Call **Tematoro** (☎ work 21 185, home 21 597) in Tarawa to book.

### Banaba (Ocean Island)

pop 276 / area 6.3 sq km

Banaba, Kiribati's only uplifted limestone island, rises to 78m above sea level, so it's quite different in feel and appearance from the rest of the country. The island's former English name comes from the ship *Ocean* which visited in 1804.

Like its neighbour Nauru (and also Australia's far-distant Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean), Banaba's fate was sealed

in 1900 by the discovery and extraction of high-grade phosphate (see p243) by geologist Albert Ellis of the Pacific Islands Company, later renamed the British Phosphate Commission (BPC). Banaba's story forms the centerpiece of Daryl Tarte's novel *Islands of the Frigate Bird* (see p246).

The Japanese arrived in 1942 to find that the phosphate works had been sabotaged in expectation of their arrival, and most Banabans and Gilbertese had been relocated. In August 1945 an order to kill the 160 Banabans remaining on the island was issued; they were forced to kneel blindfolded at the top of a cliff before being shot and toppling over the precipice. A survivor, Kabunare, crawled from his cave hideout months later to recount the horror.

The postwar years saw a boom in phosphate which wasn't reflected in the islanders' income. Becoming politicised, Banabans fought for a higher percentage of mining royalties, which were a shameful 15% in the 1960s but which rose to 50% by the 1970s. Banabans also, reasonably enough, wanted money to rehabilitate the now barren minefields. After a lengthy legal battle that saw islanders appear in the High Court in London, A\$500,000 was awarded. Another A\$10 million was on the table, but Banabans would not accept it without an agreement on self-government, separation from the Gilberts and free association with Fiji. The British delayed making a decision and in 1979, just as Kiribati received independence, Banaba's phosphate ran out. The resultant lack of resources made Banaban independence – always strongly opposed by central government in Tarawa – impossible; see [www.banaban.com](http://www.banaban.com) for information on Banaba's independence movement.

Banaba today is a graveyard of rusting equipment and industrial infrastructure, and the ghost settlements and houses of the former BPC managers. Set in a sort of time warp, it's as if the BPC staff simply upped and left, leaving invoices in offices and walking away from machinery where it stood. There's talk of bringing in a drilling rig to explore the possibility of mining second-grade phosphate from the stockpiles, but even simply landing on the island is a major challenge.

Despite this, a small settlement of islanders remains, living off the ocean and the

### RABI ISLAND RESETTLEMENT

After WWII ended, the widespread destruction of Banaba made it impossible for the hundreds of deported Banabans to return, so they agreed to resettle for two years on the island of Rabi (pronounced 'ram-bi'), off the coast of Fiji's second-largest island, Vanua Levu. Rabi had been bought for £25,000 in 1942 by the British Phosphate Commission with Banaban phosphate trust money. The first Banabans arrived on 15 December 1945 and within two years they voted to remain on Rabi. Now citizens of Fiji, the Banabans on Rabi have become a separate community, closed to tourists and accessible only by sporadic ship. They have one representative in the Kiribati parliament. To visit Rabi you must obtain permission from the Banaba Island Council on Suva.

land; mango trees imported by BPC staff thrive, and the island is generally greener than the low-lying atolls. Drinking water can be a problem – limestone is porous and doesn't support a water lens – so rainwater is collected. The island resthouse is near the harbour and access is by government supply ship only; Banaba is not a port of entry for yachts.

### Other Gilbert Islands

**Makin** is the northernmost of the Gilbert Islands. At its northern tip is **Nakaa's Beach**, the traditional point of departure for I-Kiribati spirits heading to the underworld. Arthur Grimble's *A Pattern of Islands* has a spooky account of his visit there in the 1920s, a story reworked in Daryl Tarte's novel *Islands of the Frigate Bird*.

**Tabiteuea** is known for its bloody battle of 1881, when fierce fighters from the pagan north of the atoll fought with – and nearly annihilated – the Christian southerners; people from Tab North are still regarded with a degree of trepidation by many other I-Kiribati. The atoll has never had a chiefly system in place; 'Tabiteuea' literally means 'forbidden to kings'.

To the south, **Onotoa** is known for its handicrafts, particularly *te wii ni bakua* – the shark-tooth *tibuta* (hand-smocked tops) – and *te koroti n Onotoa*, a crocheted pattern based on the Onotoa rose. Its neighbouring

island to the south, **Tamana**, is a Protestant island whose church was visited by Robert Louis Stevenson during his Pacific voyages.

### LINE ISLANDS

#### Washington Island (Teraina)

pop 630 / 7.8 sq km

Washington is unique in that it encloses a large and completely landlocked freshwater lagoon surrounded by peat bogs and reeds; it looks a bit like the Florida Everglades with coconut palms. The lagoon is fed by an almost daily dump of rain, a huge 750cm a year. The northernmost of the Line Islands group, it was named in 1798 by Captain Fanning (see below) in honour of the first US president.

There's a small island guesthouse, but there are no channels into the lagoon; supply ships and yachts moor in often rough and unpredictable weather off-shore. Email [chuck@fanning-island.com](mailto:chuck@fanning-island.com) for more information.

#### Fanning Island (Tabuaeran)

pop 2000 / area 34 sq km

One of the northern Line Islands, ring-shaped Fanning hasn't always been settled; when the whaler *Betsy* came through in 1798, captained by Edmund Fanning, there were no inhabitants. Traces of Polynesian *marae* have been dated to between 600 and 1200 years ago and suggest earlier temporary settlements; they can still be seen.

Some kilometres north of the harbour is an overgrown runway, site of the 1902 cable station that was part of the remarkable first trans-Pacific cable that ran from Australia to Fiji and Fanning, through to Vancouver. In 1914, the German cruiser *Nuremberg* cut the cable but it was later restored and in use until the 1960s.

Fanning has enjoyed something of a surge in its economy of late, with port calls three times a month by **Norwegian Cruise Line** ([www.ncl.com](http://www.ncl.com)). In 2003 the US\$6 per person visitor fee brought just over A\$1 million into the Kiribati economy, not to mention the boom in sales of handicrafts by the islanders and job opportunities for the locals.

The few other visitors to Fanning include surfers, divers (there's a long and spectacular narrow-pass drift dive through the channel and into the lagoon), scientists and radio hams (amateur radio operators) who mostly fly to Christmas Island and

then charter the boat owned by **Chuck Corbett** ([chuck@fanning-island.com](mailto:chuck@fanning-island.com); two weeks' live aboard US\$7000, not incl bottled water and beer). Chuck is a mellow surfer (American by birth and now a citizen of Kiribati) who has lived on the islands for years. He is *the* person to contact for information about Fanning and Washington, either via his website ([www.fanning-island.com](http://www.fanning-island.com)) or by email.

Fanning is a port of entry, and yachties pay a one-off anchorage fee of A\$10. Don't expect to replenish goods here; the government supply and passenger ship comes roughly every three months and food supplies are often scarce.

#### Christmas Island (Kiritimati)

pop 3431 / area 388 sq km

Pincer-shaped Christmas Island contains 48% of Kiribati's land area and is the world's largest coral atoll. Flying in over its multiple shimmering salt flats and lagoon shallows is a wonderful experience: the dry, windswept landscape of salt bush and coconut palms is glaringly bright and dusty, and impressively desolate. The island is one of the world's great seabird sanctuaries, home to millions of birds of 18 species, and the lagoon hosts a dazzling array of marine life.

Christmas Island has a colourful history. Captain Cook arrived for a brief visit on 24 December 1777, hence the island's name. Cook found remnants of early Polynesian visitors but no sign of permanent settlement. Largely unvisited until the 1850s, the island was then variously worked (unsuccessfully) by American phosphate interests and a New Zealand (NZ) copra and pearl-shell company. In the 1880s it came under the umbrella of British interests in the Pacific, and officially became part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands colony in 1919.

French former priest Emmanuel Rougier was granted a coconut-plantation licence in 1914. He named his now-deserted settlement Paris, and ruled the island and his Pacific workers with an iron hand until the 1930s. (Poland was named after his Polish mechanic and the township of London came later, across the channel of course!) In 1941 the British authorised the employment of a manager and Gilbertese workers to take over the plantations, initiating the island's permanent settlement.

Between 1957 and 1962 Christmas Island was the site for high-altitude hydrogen bomb tests, first by the British and then by the Americans. Millions of birds were instantly blinded and later died in the immediate aftermath; both civilians and military workers have since experienced ongoing health problems. The tests had no obvious long-term environmental effects on the island and background radiation is now lower than normal levels. A massive cleanup campaign funded by the British between 2005 and 2006 has removed almost all visible traces of this part of the Cold War.

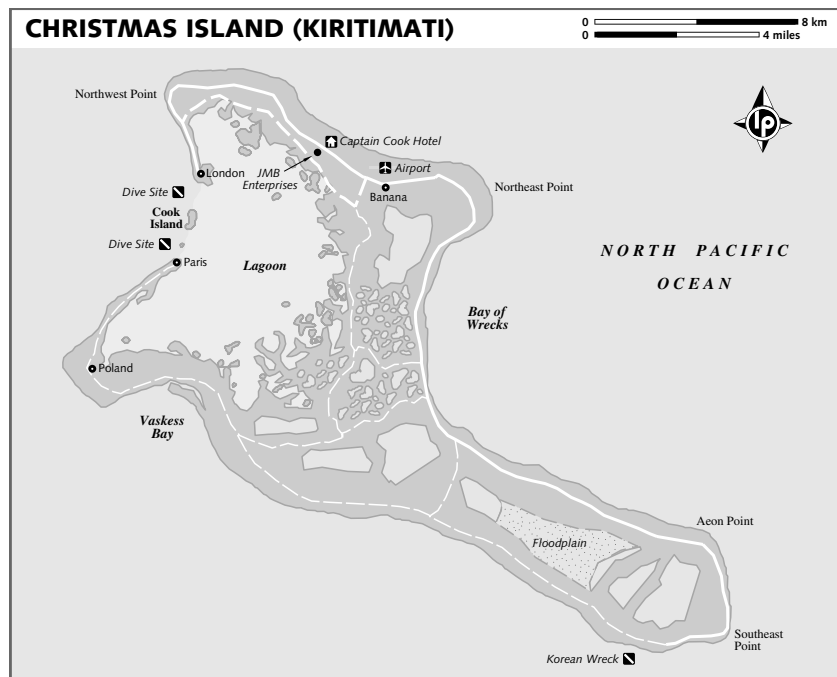
More recently, Christmas Island has become the focus of a government initiative to resettle several thousand I-Kiribati from the crowded atoll of Tarawa, which is having a marked impact on the island's wildlife. Less permanent visitors include sport fishers, mesmerised by the large bonefish that lurk on the sand flats. When air services are running regularly, Christmas Island's tally of around 1500 annual visitors far exceeds Tarawa's slender tourist numbers.

### CUTTING TODDY

Kiribati's local brew is *kaokioki*, or sour toddy; it fills the niche of the kava drunk on other Pacific islands. Essentially, it's fermented sap tapped from the coconut palm; if you glance up at the palms when you're walking along the road you'll see the innocuous glass bottles hanging from the trees. The syrupy 'sweet toddy' skips the fermentation stage.

'Cutting toddy', as the extraction procedure is called, is done by I-Kiribati men and requires technique and skill. The men shimmy up the coconut palms, collect the full bottle from the previous shift, make a new nick in the stem of the coconut frond, and bend a leaf to form a spout from which the sap will continue to drip into a new bottle. Most men cut their toddy twice a day, in the early morning and again at dusk.

Sour toddy is ubiquitous but you won't find it in restaurants or bars. Instead, just ask a local to point you to the nearest toddy purveyor. A word of caution: toddy is often diluted with tap water, which is not likely to be boiled; ask for 'boiled toddy' for a refreshing nonalcoholic drink.



## INFORMATION

Most government services are in tiny London, at the tip of the island's northernmost pincer.

The post office, ANZ/Bank of Kiribati, and TSKL telecommunications centre (with Internet access) are next door to each other. **Tobaraoi Travel** (info@kiribatiholidays.com) has a small travel agency in the TSKL building. The bank will change US, UK and Fiji currency and travellers cheques – and some others – but at dreadful rates and for a hefty fee; you're far better to change cash at JMB Enterprises, opposite the Captain Cook Hotel.

The Wildlife Conservation Information and Marketing Office, close to the bank, issues permits to visit the four restricted wildlife areas.

The island is a prized destination for radio hams (radio call sign T32).

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Birdwatchers come to Christmas Island to see the endemic Line Islands warbler, as well as 18 species of nesting seabirds in

huge numbers. **Cook Island**, in the channel between Paris and London, is a Mecca for nesting sooty terns. Along with the islets of **Motu Tabu**, **Motu Upua** and **Ngaon te Taake**, it's a protected closed area and you need a wildlife guide to land. Even if you decide not to land, you can swing by and marvel at the noisy thicket of birds. You'll need to hire a boat from Dive Kiribati (see opposite) to see these, plus a guide and permit (A\$10 per person per island) if you decide to land. Try to locate a copy of the hard-to-find *The Birdlife of Christmas Island* by H Lee Jones (2000).

At the end of the sealed road beyond Southeast Point is a **Korean wreck**, about a two-hour drive from London. The coast road goes through gorgeously wild and desolate country alongside the (not dive-able) **Bay of Wrecks** and, further south, through bird-nesting colonies. The interior consists largely of desolate salt flats where the legendary bonefish abound. It is extremely easy to get lost in the flats, so be sure you don't venture in without a guide.

## Diving & Sport Fishing

The abundance of bonefish makes Christmas Island a highly desirable fishing destination; one fisherman was making his 15th trip when we were visiting! Divers and snorkellers will see a variety of marine life, and may get the chance to swim with manta rays and dolphins.

Most visitors come to Christmas Island on sport fishing and/or diving packages. Flights originate in Fiji, although Christmas Island is more accessible from Australia and NZ. A few tour operators have shown increasing interest in Christmas; search the Internet for options. There's a permit fee of A\$35 for diving and for fishing; this will be included in the package price.

**Christmas Island Outfitters** (www.prflyfishing.com) Offers guided scuba-diving and fishing tours with accommodation at the Mini Hotel Kiritimati from US\$1695 per person.

**Dive Kiribati** (☎ 81 139, sat phone 881631442811; divekiribati@juno.com) The only international-standard dive operation on the island, run by long-term Californian transplant Kim Andersen (a goldmine of information). Offers package deals, one-/two-/three-tank dives for US\$80/100/125, the only offshore fishing opportunity and boat rental for around US\$100 per half-day for snorkelling and birding trips.

**Frontiers Travel** (www.frontierstravel.com) Based in the US, and the largest inbound tour operator. Sport fishing and/or diving trips with accommodation at the Captain Cook Hotel start around US\$3000.

## SLEEPING & EATING

Christmas Island has three accommodation places, but none of them are luxurious; add 10% tax to the rates below.

**Captain Cook Hotel** (cchxmas@tskl.net.ki; r A\$80; 🍴) Close to the airport and a 30-minute ride from London, the Captain Cook is fabulously located on the ocean, with a long sweep of beach in front. Service is friendly but consistently average, rooms are cleanish and adequate, and the food is filling. Check the locks and windows, as attempted break-ins are increasingly common. Buffet meals are served, with breakfast/lunch/dinner costing A\$10/8/20. The Saturday-night luau with spit-roast pig and local dance performance costs A\$40.

**Mini Hotel Kiritimati** (☎ 81 371; minihotel@tskl.net.ki; s without/with air-con A\$35/70, d A\$35/95; 🍴) Eri and Agnes' friendly place, close to the boat

ramp in London but away from the water, has a few basic, clean rooms with shared bathrooms. If you're not on a package Agnes will cook on request (breakfast A\$7, lunch A\$7, dinner A\$10 to A\$15).

**Dive & Sport Resort** (☎ 81 364; r A\$60) This place in London has four clean and simple rooms with private bathroom, set in a small compound around a courtyard and dining area. A filling dinner is served for A\$8.50.

**Kristena's Restaurant** Also in London, Kristena's serves decent lunches of meat, chicken or fish with rice for A\$3.

Food on the island is simple, and the supply of fresh fruit and veggies is limited. Very basic supplies are available; you might want to bring some rations with you, though no fresh food can be brought in. Snack items (and, usually, cold beer) are available at a couple of small stores in London and Banana, and at JMB Enterprises near the Captain Cook Hotel.

## DRINKING

Friday and Saturday nights see some wild drinking and dancing sessions at the local bars, particularly Big Eddie's near the Captain Cook Hotel. Things kick off around midnight and continue all night; women on their own should steer well clear.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Transport to Christmas Island can be erratic at best, and months can go by with no regular air service. The airport is a 15-minute drive from the Captain Cook Hotel and a 45-minute drive from London.

In 2005 **Air Pacific** (www.airpacific.com) began a much-needed weekly flight from Nadi, Fiji, to Christmas Island and on to Honolulu. The return fare from Nadi to Christmas Island is around A\$1500, and from Honolulu to Christmas Island around US\$1100.

## DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU'RE GOING TO?

Several unfortunate visitors have confused this Christmas Island with the other Christmas Island in Australia's Indian Ocean Territories, famous for its annual red-crab migration. It's a time-consuming and costly mistake to make!

**Kiribati Shipping Services Ltd** (KSSL; Map p250; ☎ 26 195; [kssl@tskl.net.ki](mailto:kssl@tskl.net.ki); Betio) sends a supply and passenger ship from Tarawa to Christmas Island at roughly monthly intervals.

Yachtsmen pay a A\$10 customs fee, but there are no other official fees if moored off the jetty; email [chuck@fanning-island.com](mailto:chuck@fanning-island.com) for current information.

### GETTING AROUND

Hotels arrange transfers to and from the airport. Several minibuses run between Banana and London (A\$1.20) from about 7am to 9pm; just flag them down.

You can hire vehicles informally for around A\$65 per day; ask at JMB Enterprises near the Captain Cook Hotel, the Dojin store in London, or at your hotel. Watch out for the near-invisible speed bumps. You might be able to find a bicycle for hire.

### PHOENIX ISLANDS

The eight atolls of the Phoenix Islands, lying south of the equator, are remote and – with the exception of tiny Kanton – uninhabited. Occasional supply ships visit on the way to the Line Islands.

## KIRIBATI DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATION

Tarawa has a handful of hotels and Christmas Island has three, but don't expect luxury. There are homestays on some outer Gilbert Islands, and most islands have a council resthouse. A government tax of 10% is payable on all room rates; check whether or not it's included in the price.

### PRACTICALITIES

- A weekly news leaflet, *Uekera*, is printed in Tarawa in English and (mostly) Kiribati.
- Kiribati received its first TV broadcasts in 2005. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC Asia-Pacific) and CNN are available in Tarawa, as are local-language programmes. Radio Kiribati airs brief English-language news broadcasts, and the BBC World Service is on 100 FM in Tarawa.
- DVDs have superseded videos in Kiribati and are widely available for hire.
- Electricity is supplied at 240V, 50Hz AC, and an Australian-type three-slot plug is used. On Christmas Island some plugs are US two-prong style and the voltage may also differ.
- Kiribati uses the metric system. See the Quick Reference page for conversions.

### ACTIVITIES

Diving is only available on Christmas Island (see p261). There's no organised diving anywhere else in Kiribati, though if you bring your own gear to Tarawa you'll probably find someone to take you shallow-diving in the lagoon. World-class bonefishing and bird-watching are available on Christmas Island.

### BOOKS

*Tarawa – the Aftermath* by Donald K Allen is a recent account of WWII in the Gilbert Islands which puts the war and its effects into a contemporary context. The book's associated website ([www.tarawatheaftermath.com](http://www.tarawatheaftermath.com)) allows readers to add their own stories.

*Kiribati – Aspects of History* is recounted and written by I-Kiribati; it's a good read, if a bit dated (published 1979).

For a history of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands' failed marriage, read *Cinderellas of the Empire – Towards a History of Kiribati and Tuvalu* by Barrie Macdonald.

*The Christmas Island Story* by Eric Bailey gives a good overview of the island's history, including the nuclear testing of the 1950s and '60s. For other recommended reading, see p245.

### BUSINESS HOURS

Typical office hours are Monday to Friday from 8am to 4.30pm, while banks and post offices are open from 9.30am to 3pm; it's prudent to anticipate some flexibility around the scheduled 12.30pm to 1.30pm lunch break. Most shops and kiosks are open early and keep long hours; 8am to 8pm is common.

### CHILDREN

If your children are hardy and healthy, can cope with being a constant focus of attention and are good at keeping themselves entertained, they'll be just fine in Kiribati. They should never drink tap water anywhere in Kiribati, and rainwater must always be boiled before drinking. Also bear in mind that fresh food is minimal and health care is very limited.

### EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

#### Kiribati Embassies & Consulates

**Australia** (☎ 02-9371 7808; fax 9371 0248)

**Fiji** (☎ 679-330 2512; [kiribatihighcom@connect.com.fj](mailto:kiribatihighcom@connect.com.fj); Kiribati High Commission)

**Germany** (☎ 40-3614 6112; fax 3614 6123)

**Japan** (☎ 03-3201 3487; fax 3214 1884)

**New Zealand** (☎ 09-419 0404; fax 419 1414)

**UK** (☎ /fax 1873 840375)

**USA** (☎ 808 834 6775; fax 253 0824; Hawai'i)

#### Embassies & Consulates in Kiribati

**Australia** (Map p249; ☎ 21 184) High Commission.

**New Zealand** (Map p249; ☎ 21 400) High Commission.

**Taiwan** (Map p249; ☎ 22 557) Embassy.

### INTERNET ACCESS

There's one Internet café in Bairiki (p248) on Tarawa and one on Christmas Island (p260). The Internet can go out for weeks at a time.

### INTERNET RESOURCES

**Fanning Islands** ([www.fanning-island.com](http://www.fanning-island.com)) A great resource for travellers to the Line Islands.

**Jane's Oceania** ([www.janeresture.com/kirihome](http://www.janeresture.com/kirihome)) A fantastic site for Kiribati tourism, history, culture and many other recent and archival resources.

**Kiribati Tourism** ([www.visit-kiribati.com](http://www.visit-kiribati.com)) The official website of the Kiribati National Tourism Office.

**Stephen Trussel** ([www.trussel.com](http://www.trussel.com)) The website of a Micronesian linguist, with an eclectic bibliography and a good selection of Kiribati articles and photos.

**Tobaraoi Travel** ([www.kiribatiholidays.com](http://www.kiribatiholidays.com)) The travel agency's website is still under development as we write, but the email link is active and the company will respond with accurate in-country travel information.

### MAPS

Decent topographic maps of single atolls are available – if they're in stock – from the **Land Management Division** (Map p249; ☎ 21 283; Bairiki) of the Department of Environment, Lands & Agriculture Development; it's upstairs in the

unsigned grey building beside the library in Bairiki. Each map costs around A\$8.

### MONEY

Kiribati's currency is the Australian dollar (for an exchange rates table, see the Quick Reference page), although some transactions on Christmas Island are in US dollars. Credit cards are accepted only by the Otintaa Hotel, Toyota rental cars and Tobaraoi travel agency on Tarawa; there's a fee charged. Credit cards are not accepted on Christmas Island, and prices are slightly higher there than elsewhere in Kiribati.

The ANZ/Bank of Kiribati, with three branches on Tarawa and one on Christmas Island, exchanges some foreign currencies and travellers cheques; rates are dire. There are ATMs in Bikenibeu, Bairiki and Betio on Tarawa but do not assume they will be working. Take plenty of cash with you.

Tipping is not usual.

### TELEPHONE

Kiribati's international telephone code is ☎ 686; there are no area codes. Only Tarawa, Abemama, Maiana and Christmas Island have landlines. The remaining outer islands have radio-phones; you can book a call or send a message from Telecom Services Kiribati Ltd's telephone offices in Betio, Bairiki or Bikenibeu on Tarawa. International calls are very expensive; one minute to Australia costs A\$3.

### HOW MUCH?

- **Insect repellent:** A\$8
- **Shampoo:** A\$4
- **Can baked beans:** A\$3
- **Overnight DVD hire:** A\$3
- **Small bag M&Ms:** A\$4

### LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol:** A\$1.03
- **1.5L bottled water:** A\$2
- **Can of XXXX beer:** A\$1.50
- **Souvenir T-shirt/tibuta:** A\$15
- **Drinking coconut:** 50c

## Mobile Phones

Mobiles were introduced to Tarawa in 2005, and they can be used only in South Tarawa. SIM cards (which can be bought at TSKL in Bairiki; see p248) are available for visitors.

## Phonecards

Cards are available at TSKL and at a few petrol stations and stores on Tarawa.

## TIME

Tarawa is 12 hours ahead of GMT. When it's noon on Tarawa it's noon the same day in Fiji, 10am the same day in Sydney and 2pm the previous day in Hawai'i.

Christmas Island is 14 hours ahead of GMT. When it's noon on Christmas Island it's 10am in Tarawa and Suva, 8am the same day in Sydney and noon the previous day in Hawai'i.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist information is available at the visitor information centre (see p248) at Betio on Tarawa.

## VISAS

Citizens of Britain, Canada and NZ can enter visa-free for a 28-day maximum stay; check before you leave home though, as the visa situation is pretty fluid. Citizens of other countries, including the US and Australia, need prearranged visas (A\$40 single entry, A\$70 multiple entry). As of 2005, visas are no longer granted upon entry and people have been turned back on arrival.

Academic researchers and commercial photographers be warned: you are officially required to pay a hefty A\$350 fee to the Ministry of Environment, Lands & Agriculture Development. Noncommercial photographers who take serious camera gear may find themselves arguing about this at the airport.

## WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Kiribati is not the safest place for women. Some of the most genial I-Kiribati undergo a Jekyll-and-Hyde transformation during

### DEPARTURE TAX

Tarawa and Christmas Island each have an A\$20 departure tax.

Friday and Saturday night binge-drinking sessions. Pay days are particularly scary, and bars and their general vicinity should be avoided by women unless in a group. Don't travel alone on minibuses at night, and make sure your accommodation is secure. Follow the dress code of local women – wear baggy clothes from shoulder to knee, and swim in shorts and a T-shirt, uncomfortable as it is. The outer islands are generally OK, but be wary on Tarawa and Christmas Island.

# TRANSPORT IN KIRIBATI

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Only Tarawa and Christmas Island are serviced by international flights.

The flight to Kiribati is usually operated by **Air Nauru** ([www.southpacific.org/map/airnauru.html](http://www.southpacific.org/map/airnauru.html); [melb\\_sales@airnauru.com.au](mailto:melb_sales@airnauru.com.au)), but things are in flux since its only plane was repossessed in late 2005. At the time of writing Air Pacific was running a weekly return flight from Nadi to Tarawa (around A\$1500), but this may well change.

**Air Pacific** ([www.airpacific.com](http://www.airpacific.com)) has a return weekly service between Nadi, Fiji, and Honolulu via Christmas Island (see p261).

### Sea

Supply ships occasionally go to Fiji and Tuvalu. Contact the operations manager at **Kiribati Shipping Services Ltd** ([kssl@tskl.net.ki](mailto:kssl@tskl.net.ki)) for prices and information about any planned departures to Tuvalu and Fiji.

Tarawa, Christmas and Fanning Islands are currently the only islands in Kiribati with formal harbour dues and all are ports of entry for yachts; island councils elsewhere may charge a fee. Tarawa, Fanning and some of the outer Gilberts have good channels and harbour facilities.

### Tours

**Valor Tours** ([☎](tel) 415-332 7850, 800 842 4504; [www.valortours.com](http://www.valortours.com)) is a US-based company that specialises in WWII history and can help arrange a trip to Tarawa. **Pacific World Travel** ([☎](tel) 28 715; [www.tobaraoi.com](http://www.tobaraoi.com); [karea@tobaraoi.com](mailto:karea@tobaraoi.com)) in Tarawa can organise transport and accommodation throughout Kiribati, including Christmas Island.

Most tourists to Christmas Island go on package sport fishing or diving tours; see p261 for details.

## GETTING AROUND

### Air

#### AIRLINES IN KIRIBATI

**Air Kiribati** (Map p249; [☎](tel) 21 550, 21 227; [www.kiritours.com](http://www.kiritours.com); Tarawa) flies to most outer Gilberts at least once a week; see p255 for destinations, fares and frequencies. Air Kiribati's planes are regularly grounded for lack of fuel or encounter some other trouble, so it's wise to allow a bit of extra time if you're planning a visit to one of the outer islands.

### Boat

Most of the outer Gilberts are serviced by supply ships from Tarawa every month or

two, and ships go occasionally from Tarawa to Christmas, Fanning and Washington Islands (see p255). There is a regular boat from Tarawa to Abaang (A\$7 one way), the closest of the outer Gilbert Islands.

### Bus

Tarawa and Christmas Island have efficient minibus services.

### Car & Motorcycle

Formal car rentals are available on Tarawa (p250). Bring your home driving licence and ask about insurance. Informal rentals are available on Christmas Island. Driving is on the left-hand side of the road.

On the outer islands you may be able to rent a bicycle or motor scooter or get a boat ride, but there won't be too many trucks.

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