

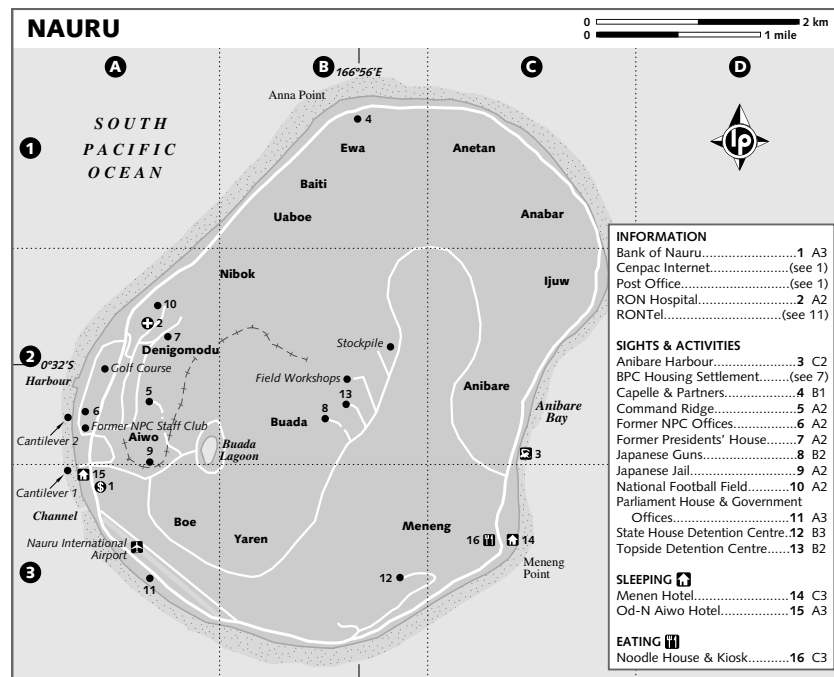
Nauru

The people of the tiny, potato-shaped Republic of Nauru were once among the world's richest. Formerly known as Pleasant Island (and now abbreviated, more prosaically, as RON), Nauru supplied Australia with abundant fertiliser for almost a century after vast phosphate deposits were discovered in 1900. By 2005, in an abrupt reversal of fortune, Nauru was a nearly failed state with an uncertain future, dependent on injections of cash from other countries to keep afloat.

Nauruans are doing it tough. Freight deliveries are rare, and employment is scarcer still. Health care is basic at best. It's a far cry from the heady phosphate-rich days of the 1970s and '80s, and many local people have become reticent in their dealings with visitors.

Nauru is not the easiest place to visit. Access is subject to the whims of transport, weather and the immigration department. With the closing of the phosphate mine, associated hospitality services such as hotels, restaurants and hire cars – where they exist at all – are minimal. Most visitors are politicians, diplomats or development workers – and during the days of Australia's 'Pacific Solution' to the arrival of refugees, extraordinary numbers of security guards and other contractors.

In spite of the present economic gloom, the island still offers glimpses of its former 'pleasantness', with wild surrounding ocean and sea birds swooping and dipping over the green inland cliffs. For WWII buffs there are remnants of the Japanese occupation scattered around the island, and the enormous skeletal remains of mining infrastructure are truly remarkable.



CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Nauru is out of the cyclone zone and 42km south of the equator. It's always hot and humid, with an average temperature of 25°C, though luckily it's tempered by sea breezes along the coast. There's an average rainfall of 206cm despite periods of drought; most rain tends to fall between November and February.

HISTORY Outside Influences

Nauru was first sighted by Europeans in 1798, and the island quickly became a regular whaler port. In 1878, armed with European guns, Nauru's original 12 tribes began a 10-year civil war that reduced the island's population to 900 people. In 1886 Germany assumed control of Nauru, and German administrators and missionaries helped quash the civil war. Thirteen years later Nauru was folded into Germany's Marshall Islands Protectorate and Nauru remained under German control until WWI.

In 1900 Albert Ellis, a geologist with the London-based Pacific Islands Company

(later the British Phosphate Commission, BPC), discovered that his doorstep in London, a stone from Nauru, was actually high-grade phosphate. Mining operations commenced on the previously undeveloped Nauru in 1906.

The British controlled Nauru during WWI and auctioned off the Germans' shares of the BPC in London for £600,000. At war's end, Australia, New Zealand (NZ) and Great Britain assumed joint trusteeship

NAURU FACTS

- **Capital city:** None
- **Population:** 10,000
- **Land area:** 21 sq km
- **Number of islands:** One
- **International telephone code:** ☎ 674
- **Currency:** Australian dollar (A\$)
- **Languages:** English and Nauruan
- **Greeting:** *Mo yoran* (Hello)

of Nauru, eyeing its phosphate potential. To accommodate soaring postwar demand for phosphate, Nauru's first cantilever was built in the late 1920s.

The Germans shelled the phosphate works early in WWII and damaged the cantilever, causing phosphate operations to halt until after the war. In August 1942 the Japanese vanquished the island and the following year deported 1200 Nauruans to the island of Truk (now the state of Chuuk in the Federated States of Micronesia). The Japanese held on to Nauru until 1945; only 737 Nauruan deportees survived to return in 1946.

Independence

As it groped toward independence in the mid-20th century, Nauru entertained a series of local governing structures: a Council of Chiefs was formed in 1927, replaced in 1951 by the Nauru Local Government Council. Though neither had real power, the symbolism of self-government resonated with the people.

In 1947 Nauru became a UN Trust Territory, administered by the BPC triumvirate of Australia, NZ and Britain. Full independence came in 1968, shortly after the Nauru Phosphate Corporation (NPC) bought the rights to Nauru's phosphate industry from the BPC for A\$21 million.

After independence, exports (and revenue) continued to soar from new markets including Indonesia, South Korea and Japan, although the phosphate was the new nation's sole source of revenue. Landowners leased their land to the NPC in return for a share of the profits and Nauru's people became the richest in the world, with a GNP of US\$21,000 per capita, as annual phosphate exports reached two million tonnes.

Nauru has been a Special Member of the British Commonwealth since 1968, and was admitted to the UN in 1999. It has one of the world's smallest parliaments, elected every three years, which in turn elects a president from its 18 members. As turmoil continues over Nauru's uncertain future and economic failures, no-confidence votes that spur a change of government have become common; in 2003 the presidency turned over six times.

Glittering Past

In the 1970s and '80s Nauruans jetted around the world on the fleet of the nation's five aircraft, while at home water and electricity were free, stores supplied goods of all kinds, luxury cars cruised the island's 18km of sealed road and the government hotel was regarded as one of the best in the Pacific. Few Nauruans sought employment

with the NPC and the country relied on imported labour, mostly from Kiribati and Tuvalu. With most land utilised for mining, the subsistence economy disappeared and was replaced by an unsustainable reliance on imported goods and services.

Traumatic Present

By the early 1990s Nauru's exports fell to 500,000 tonnes, and in preparation for a post-phosphate world the government invested a hefty proportion of mining proceeds. These investments were, to put it mildly, a case study in financial mismanagement, aided by unscrupulous foreign advisors, and the Nauruan people's savings were squandered. Money evaporated in ill-timed real-estate investments around the world (including Honolulu, Fiji and Melbourne) and several million dollars were lost on a dud London musical. An attempt to create an offshore banking tax haven brought accusations of money-laundering in 1999 and a wide-ranging international ban was placed on financial transactions involving Nauru.

By the turn of the 21st century the remaining 30% or so of high-grade phosphate was in hard-to-access locations that required new machinery and mining techniques; mining slowed to a trickle and then stopped. The NPC stopped functioning, equipment was stripped, the country's infrastructure crumbled.

In 2005 the country was on its knees. The one remaining aircraft of the Air Nauru fleet was repossessed in December, the bank had no money, lack of fuel for the generators saw electricity limited to just a few hours a day, drinking water was contaminated and the health system was barely functioning. Many of the long-standing Chinese stores were closing, and restored diplomatic relations with Taiwan included an agreement by Taiwan to repatriate the long-term resident I-Kiribati and Tuvaluan workers who wanted to return home. Payments from Australia to fund its 'Pacific Solution' detention centres for asylum seekers (see the boxed text, p292) provided almost all cash income, and as part of the package (valued by 2005 at A\$58 million) Australians held key positions in the police and finance departments. Tourism, unsurprisingly, was nonexistent.

Uncertain Future

A young, reformist government elected in 2004 pledged change, including a salary ceiling of just A\$140 per fortnight for all Nauruan public servants up to the president; it was still in power in late 2005.

The best-case scenario for Nauru may be the reopening of the phosphate mine, but this would involve huge injections of cash (and presumably control) from overseas. Perhaps Australian and other overseas assistance will help Nauruans strengthen their society by upgrading the schools and hospital (where dedicated teachers and nurses continue to work in extremely difficult conditions) and by re-establishing long-forgotten sustainable agriculture and fisheries practices. The worst-case scenario may be depopulation, a plan that was first mooted in 1964.

THE CULTURE

Traditional Nauruan society was divided into 12 matrilineal tribes, but little else is known about the pre-European Nauruan culture, which was successfully erased, first by missionaries and later by the focus on phosphate. Most Nauruans are Christians, with fairly even numbers of Catholics and Protestants; evangelical churches are increasingly popular.

Ethnic Nauruans, with a mix of Polynesian and Micronesian ancestry, account for 70% of Nauru's population. The balance comprises other Pacific islanders, Asians (predominantly Chinese and Filipinos) and a few Europeans. I-Kiribati (Gilbertese) and Tuvaluans made up the majority of unskilled workers in the phosphate industry.

Few traditional cultural practices remain, though the *Nauru One Hundred Years Ago* series of booklets convey a good idea of how life used to be. Covering the use of pandanus, fishing, games, sports and oil processing, the booklets are translations of the notebooks of German missionary Alois Kayser, who lived on Nauru from 1904 to 1944. You may be able to find these books for sale at the Menen Hotel gift shop (p294) – in fact, they were the only things for sale at the gift shop when we visited.

Examples of Nauru *ekawada* (string figures) are occasionally on display. These are complex versions of the children's game of

PHOSPHATE FRENZY

The origin of Nauru's high-grade phosphate is generally accepted to be guano – bird poop – laid down over tens of thousands of years by tens of millions of seabirds. Periodic submergence of the island washed away impurities and left 85% pure phosphate lime. Phosphate is used in fertiliser, and looks undramatic – like light brown soil – lodging in cavities between coral pinnacles.

Mined initially by pick and shovel, the first shipment of 2000 tonnes left Nauru in 1907. By 1908 the vast industrial architecture required to support the growing mechanisation of the industry began to be installed: overhead cableways, a train line, conveyor belts, crushers and dryers. Between the world wars, the first of two huge cantilevers was built on the west coast, its swinging arms enabling phosphate to be loaded onto the ships more efficiently. After the hiatus of WWII the demand for phosphate rose dramatically; by the 1960s a second cantilever was in operation and Nauru accounted for 60% of all phosphate imported in to Australia.

For all the wealth brought by phosphate, mining has left Nauru physically a wreck. Trees have been removed, and much of the interior – called 'Topside' – consists of lifeless, grey-white coral pinnacles. With this in mind, Nauru filed a suit in the Hague-based International Court of Justice against Australia in 1989 for the damages caused by mining while the island was under Australian jurisdiction. In 1993 the suit was settled out of court for A\$109 million. Part of the agreement binds Australia to assist Nauru with rehabilitation and development of its landscape of crumbling infrastructure and skeletal machinery, reminders both of what the country once had, and what it has lost.

THE PACIFIC SOLUTION – NO SOLUTION

Nauru's period of economic distress coincided with Australia's hardened stance on immigration. Australia negotiated the so-called Pacific Solution, which involved paying Nauru millions to host a processing centre for boatloads of Australia-bound asylum seekers, fleeing the contemporary terrors of – mostly – Afghanistan and Iraq. Between 2001 and 2005, a total of 1232 traumatised men, women and children found themselves surrounded by Australians in uniform and dumped on a barely functioning nation.

We sometimes feel that we may not be given the priority as human being to live freely to be together with our love one and pass one minute in peace freedom, now we have become worse than sheep at least sheep can be use to its meat but we are for nothing.

For more than three years they were rarely allowed to leave Topside Camp – in arid, scorching pinnacle fields – and State House, on a dead-end road above the coastal strip.

I know whenever you receive letters from Nauru, they only contains hopelessness and sadness. Though our pain is double than what you can see in our letter but we express the rest to the air of Nauru, those times at mid night while we see no one around and sighs that what the world has come to for us. It is indeed impossible sometimes to go to outside, I just feel awkward and agitated to think of anything or doing anything in Nauru. As perpetually I only suffered and have been traumatized in Nauru, therefore now I even started to hate the gloomy aura of Nauru and it has become painful for me to think of anything that had happen to me in Nauru.

Culturally adrift, and largely ignored or resented by the local population, with remoteness and the increasing difficulty of communication

adding to their stress, the detainees waited while their cases were heard and accepted, rejected, appealed, delayed or all of these. Some self-harmed, or went on hunger strikes; all became severely depressed.

This world is really so strange, I didn't ever think about hunger strike and didn't know that what it means but I have been in hunger strike the thing that I didn't know about, I forgot all tragedy that I suffer in Afghanistan, all the risk that I felt in dreadful voyage from Indonesia to Australia, but tears on Nauru will be unforgettable.

In October 2005, 25 of the remaining 27 men were told they would be leaving Nauru. In an ironic twist, after more than four years and countless immigration interviews, most were granted refugee status – temporarily at least – in Australia, the country that had tried so hard and for so long to refuse them admission.

Right now I'm living in the peaceful environment with growing new confidence, experiencing lovely winter season making new relationship with lovely and generous people in Australia...this is the lovely morning cool and chilly for me because years I have been living in the same in which all seasons were hot neither winter or spring which was really boring...actually life is very beautiful with all different colorful seasons and I'm experiencing the new chapter of my life through new winter after such a long time hardship situation.

Arif Ruhani was a boy of 17 when he left Afghanistan in 1999, which was the last time that he saw his family. He was in immigration detention on Nauru between 2001 and 2005 and is now living and working in Sydney, under the mixed blessings of a temporary protection visa. Virginia would like to thank Abbas, Ali Jan, Arif H, Ashraf and Sagar, who gave her a surreal guided tour of the island from the viewpoint of detainees. In late 2005, all were granted temporary protection in Australia.

an account, with illustrations, of this rarely seen cultural practice.

Sport – particularly weightlifting and Australian Rules football – is a national obsession.

NODDY HUNTING

Grilled noddy is a Nauruan delicacy, and hunting black noddy birds still happens on the slopes above the coastal ridge. Hunters don camouflage clothing and head out after dark. In earlier centuries they would make noddy-like whistles to attract the birds; these days they bring stereos with pre-recorded noddy songs. The hunters then snag the noddies with a net attached to a long bamboo stick; the birds are plucked, gutted and cooked whole, served with their heads tucked under and claws still attached, laid out on a platter like sardines in a tin.

LANGUAGE

Although English is used for official government transactions, Nauruan – a language with both Polynesian and Micro-nesian influences – dominates conversation. You will hear a smattering of other Pacific languages as well.

Nauruan basics

Hello.	<i>Mo yoran.</i>
Goodbye.	<i>Tarowang.</i>
How are you?	<i>Wo reit ed?</i>
I'm well.	<i>Mmo kor.</i>
Please.	<i>Magada.</i>
Thanks.	<i>Tubw.</i>
Yes.	<i>Em.</i>
No.	<i>Keo.</i>

ENVIRONMENT

With a land area of just 21.3 sq km, Nauru is a stunning sight from the air – an isolated blot of land with an interior of grey-white coral pinnacles.

The coastal strip is comparatively lush and green, with coconut palms, pandanus and salt bush fringing the ocean, and banyan fig trees and wild papaya on the slopes behind. Frigate and tropicbirds soar overhead, noddies and exquisite fairy terns chatter in the treeline, and wading birds glean on the tidal flats. In freshwater Buada Lagoon, tucked in the centre of the island, stone walls mark out local milkfish farms.

The mining industry has wreaked havoc on Nauru's rainfall. The interior rock exposed by deforestation reflects the sun's

rays upwards and chases away the clouds and rain, so periods of drought are increasingly common. Deforestation combined with this 'oven effect' is driving away many native birds, including the frigate birds and Nauru's beloved noddies (see the boxed text, left).

ORIENTATION

An 18km sealed road circles the island, and a road into the interior branches off near the NPC office buildings and loops around to the coast near the Menen Hotel. Across the runway from the airport are the government offices, requiring a circle around the runway to get there. The road is closed for a few minutes when arriving aircraft taxi from the runway to the parking apron.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

WWII relics are scattered across Nauru. Most impressive of these are the **gun emplacements** that now overlook the Topside detention centre, and the **Japanese jail** built into and around phosphate pinnacles near Buada Lagoon. **Command Ridge** is Nauru's highest point, with rusted guns and bunkers remaining. These are all tricky to find; ask for directions, and tell someone where you're going if you want to poke around on your own.

Drive into the interior to see the industrial archaeology of the phosphate mining operations and the resulting moonscape of coral pinnacles. Back on the coast, the two giant **cantilevers** built offshore to expedite ship loading are an impressive sight. Wander around the old **BPC housing settlement** above the hospital, and check out the view from the ruins of the once-splendid **former Presidents' House**, burned down in 2001 by a local mob who were furious at the government's mismanagement of funds. On the coastal strip behind the cantilevers are rows of decaying **barracks** that used to house the phosphate workers, many now sheltering colourful I-Kiribati outrigger fishing canoes.

The water around Nauru is generally treacherous for swimming, although you can swim and snorkel in the harbour off the boat ramp at **Anibare**; if it's calm, there are fish to see along the back of the harbour wall. You can walk out onto the reef flats behind the Menen Hotel at low tide. Sport-fishing charters can be organised through

cat's cradle, where string stretched across the hands is configured into formal patterns to tell traditional stories, often based around the 12 original tribes. *The String Figures of Nauru*, by Honor Maude *et al*, is

WARNING

We visited in late 2005. Given Nauru's precarious economic situation, expect facilities and prices to change – for better or for worse – more quickly than normal. If you can, check details before you go.

Capelle & Partners (☎ 444 3280; cppurchasing@cenpac.net.nr) when the boat and skipper are available.

The **golf course**, spanning the main road, is barely recognisable as such but if you can find a set of clubs it is playable. While there's still an expat community on Nauru, there's a weekly Hash House Harriers running/drinking meet; ask locally. Confrontational local teams play Australian Rules football most weekends on the packed-dirt football field beside the hospital.

SLEEPING & EATING

Od-N Aiuo Hotel (☎ 444 3701; s/d A\$65/75; 🏠) It's a concrete block, but it's right in town, looks out over the water and has 30 clean but plain rooms with fridge and TV. Check out the traditional Nauru string figures on display at reception.

Menen Hotel (☎ 444 3300; fax 444 3595; s A\$85; 🏠) This government-owned place, on the coast 4km east of the airport, has seen much better times and needs a major overhaul; expect the minimum in service and facilities and you won't be disappointed.

Capelle & Partners (☎ 444 3280; cppurchasing@cenpac.net.nr; r A\$90; 🏠) Sophie Oppenheimer – a member of the original Capelle family who started the shop in 1965 – manages Capelle's shop, above which are three rooms for rent. They're absolutely the best option on the island if they're available. Capelle's is the main island store, selling everything from hardware to clothing and computer accessories, and a wide selection of dry goods, drink and (hallelujah) fresh fruit and vegetables. Prices aren't as unreasonable as they might seem, given that fresh goods are air-freighted in.

A few Chinese stores, selling very basic goods, are dotted around the island and Chinese restaurants of varying quality abound; ask which one is currently recommended when you arrive. There's a small kiosk and noodle house opposite the Menen Hotel.

NAURU DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Nauru has two hotels, but do not expect luxury. Tax is included in the room rates given in this chapter.

BOOKS

The Phosphateers by Maslyn Williams and Barry MacDonald is a detailed history of the BPC in its heyday of mining on the three great phosphate islands of Nauru and Banaba (Ocean Island) in the Pacific, and Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean.

Read Michael Gordon's *Freeing Ali – the Human Face of the Pacific Solution* (2005) for an insight into the detention of asylum seekers on Nauru.

BUSINESS HOURS

Opening hours are whimsical, but most offices will be open for some hours between 10am and 4pm. Expect a long lunch hour. Kiosks and restaurants operate any time between 7am and 10pm.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES**Nauruan Embassies & Consulates**

Australia (☎ 03-9653 5709; fax 9654 4738; 50th fl, 80 Collins St, Melbourne)

Fiji (☎ 331 3566; fax 330 2861; 7th fl Ratu Sukuna House, MacArthur St, Suva)

USA (☎ 212-937 0074; 800 Second Ave, Suite 400 D, New York 10017)

PRACTICALITIES

- There are no local newspapers or magazines in Nauru.
- Nauru has three TV stations: CNN, a local station that intersperses sport and movies with live proceedings from Nauru's parliament, and Australia's ABC Asia-Pacific channel.
- There are no videos or DVDs available for hire.
- Nauru runs on 240V, 50Hz AC electricity and plugs are Australian style with three flat prongs.
- Nauru uses the metric system. See the Quick Reference page for conversions.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet is available at Cenpac in the Bank of Nauru building and, sometimes, at RON-Tel in the government offices complex.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Read the briefing paper 'Nauru: between a mined-out rock and a hard place' (www.uniya.org/research/view_nauru.htm) for background information on the relationship between Nauru and Australia.

MONEY

Nauru's official currency is the Australian dollar (for exchange rates, see the Quick Reference page). The cash-strapped Bank of Nauru is not functioning, and it is not possible to exchange or access money on Nauru. Bring (preferably more than) the amount of Australian dollars you think you'll need.

There are no credit-card facilities and no ATMs.

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol:** A\$2
- **1.5L bottled water:** A\$3.30
- **Can of VB beer:** A\$3.50
- **Souvenir T-shirt:** Souvenirs aren't available on Nauru
- **Head of celery:** A\$12

TELEPHONE

The international telephone code is ☎ 674 and there are no telephone area codes. Faxes can be sent and received at RONTel and, when the line is working, expensive international calls can be made there.

It's only possible to make overseas calls from public phones using an Australian Telstra Phoneaway card. If you're caught unprepared, ask Australian friends to buy a card, scratch the back of it, and email you the PIN number and Nauru access code.

There is no mobile phone service.

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DEPARTURE TAX

Nauru has a departure tax of A\$50.

TIME

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

VISAS

It's a frustrating and lengthy process to obtain a visitor visa for Nauru. Visas *must* be approved before arrival and you must bring a letter of confirmation with you. Visas are free for official visitors; others pay A\$100 on arrival, at which point you give your passport to the immigration authorities and pick it up, with visa stamped, from the **immigration office** (☎ 444 3133; fax 444 3832) in the government buildings the next working day. Ask for Ernest Stephen, the helpful chief immigration officer, if you have problems on arrival.

TRANSPORT IN NAURU

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Following the repossession of the airline's plane in late 2005, **Air Nauru** (www.airnauru.com.au) has been contracting an aircraft to run a weekly service between Brisbane (Australia), Honiara (Solomon Islands), Nauru and Tarawa (Kiribati). This is an interim measure only; check the Internet for updates.

Yacht facilities are nonexistent.

GETTING AROUND

The hotels may send a vehicle to meet you at the airport, or they may not. Be prepared to hitch or walk.

There is no public transport or formal car rental on the island. During fuel shortages it is difficult to hire a car; ask around locally, and expect to pay around A\$80 per day plus fuel. Many locals ride scooters. The coast road is a hot but flat bicycle ride, if you can borrow a bike. Driving is on the left.