



ALMOST IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

For a nation few have heard of, the territory covered by the Cook Islands is enormous.

More than 3,000 kilometres north-east of New Zealand, the land area of this Polynesian archipelago is half the size of the Isle of Man, but it is spread over an area of the South Pacific almost as big as the European Union. The capital is Avarua, on the small circular island of Rarotonga where seventy-five per cent of the population of 10,000 live. The only other island with any infrastructure of which to speak is Aitutaki, a very long boat ride away. There are sixteen other islands, of which the northern group is hundreds of kilometres further afield, and are largely untouched by modernity.



Outrigger beyond the surf

On my first morning in Rarotonga, waking in a noisy, friendly hostel at the end of the airport's single runway, I borrowed a bike to go into Avarua to find a bank. After half an hour of humid cycling clockwise around the sandy coast road, vast blue waves smashing onto pristine coral reefs to my left, I stopped at an isolated

electronics shop to ask the laconic Kiwi proprietor where the bank might be. "Five kilometres back the way you came, mate," he said. "Did you by any chance blink and miss our capital?"

I normally research travel destinations thoroughly before I arrive, but here I knew nothing at all: at the last minute I had been offered a stopover somewhere between Auckland and Los Angeles, and asked the travel agent to choose my destination for me. Over the next week, this is what I learned:

The history of the Cook Islands is one of 'almosts'. The islands were almost colonised by the British: a bunch of missionaries arrived in the 19th century, converted everyone to Christianity, and set up a de facto theocracy. The population was almost totally destroyed both by diseases brought by the missionaries, and a Peru-bound slave trade. It was formally declared a 'protectorate' by the UK in 1888, but Britain couldn't quite work out which islands were to be included in the grouping. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it almost became a colony of New Zealand, then it didn't quite get independence in the 1960s: it still relies on New Zealand for foreign relations, defence and currency, and its oddly-shaped currency, bearing images of Polynesian gods, is pegged to the New Zealand dollar. It is now a country but not quite: it is still not recognised by the UN.

However, it is self-governing and democratic, with a parliamentary national government and a system of local tribal governance. Imports heavily outweigh exports, of which only black pearls are significant, and only tourism, offshore banking and donations from Australia and New Zealand prop up the economy.

The country is poor, but the native population is full of *joie de vivre*—and food. It's not terribly sensitive to point this out, but the majority of islanders are quite large, a quality that is prized as desirable in Polynesian culture. I pondered whether it was genetic or dietary, but the state of the mostly Kiwi expatriates I met tipped the balance of probability towards the latter.

According to tradition, Rarotonga is where the Maoris boarded their ocean-going canoes to populate New Zealand, eight hundred years ago. I booked a ride on an outrigger from the very

lagoon from which they had departed, in order to go deep sea fishing. The driver skilfully negotiated a small channel in the reef between the huge waves, and with a last massive pitch over the surf we were in calm blue water beyond the vast breakers, casting our lines beyond a plunging continental shelf. We caught nothing in three hours, but saw the island in its glory from all sides.

19th century sailors complained (probably not too loudly) about the sexual aggression of the women of the island, and when at a popular dance I politely declined two vast, jolly ladies who asked if they could come back to my hotel with me, I suspected that this cultural phenomenon may not have been entirely quashed by the imposed Christian morality.

On the stage nubile girls—not yet having succumbed to the effects of the traditional *kaikai* feasts—demonstrated hip-swivelling in grass skirts, while lithe boys performed complex leg movements. Both styles of dance involve swan-like frenetic movement below the waist while the top half of the body remains stationary. Such erotic gyrating was regarded with horror by the missionaries, who tried to ban it, telling the locals it caused cyclones.

Cyclones are indeed an annual worry. Nearly every year, buildings are flattened by wind or destroyed by storm surges, and various innovations have been adopted to cope with this. One local restaurant has its kitchen on the back of a truck, which can be driven into the hills in the event of danger. So powerful is the fear of storms that the traditional dancing does indeed cease during cyclone season.

Even though Rarotonga's diameter is only ten kilometres and the maximum ascent over Te Kou, the island's central peak, is only 588 metres, the walk from one side of the island to the other is the toughest trek I've ever done. It was a scramble up using tree roots and branches as footholds on a trail that kept disappearing. The summit was enveloped in cloud, so it was too cold and wet to linger, and as I descended it began to rain in torrents and I started to slip dangerously in the thick fluid mud pouring down the trail. Hours later and exhausted, back on the coastal road, I hitchhiked back to my hostel, but was so covered in mud that the huge, friendly Rarotongan who stopped for me insisted I ride with his pigs in the back.



Approach to Te Kou mountain

Just before I left, I dived for several hours in the coral 'Mushroom Forest'. In gin-clear water I spotted a giant conger eel snarling from a hole in the coral, and followed a hawksbill turtle that soared away from me like an eagle framed by a deep blue sky. Back on shore, warming up with hot chocolate, I heard a shout, and there, where I had just surfaced, was a humpback whale in mid-air, crashing down in a torrent of spray. It was the perfect end to a wonderful visit.

Neither as snooty as Tahiti nor as expensive as Fiji, the Cooks are a rough, ready and friendly taste of South Sea life that, while modernised, is both accessible to tourists yet less affected by that same tourism. For the adventurous, the smaller islands offer unspoiled glimpses of Polynesian culture. Though I had arrived in complete ignorance, I left completely in love.

Jim Whittle