

the Island Life

Story | HALEY SHAPLEY

COURTESY COOK ISLANDS TOURISM NORTH AMERICA





Find your way to the Cook Islands, a pristine South Pacific getaway loaded with superlative scenery and friendly locals.

When Air New Zealand wanted to create a safety video last year with the women of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, the airline filmed them in one of the most stunning places they fly: the Cook Islands.

"It's the most beautiful place on the planet," model Chrissy Teigen said. "It's pretty unreal."

"I could never imagine a place more beautiful," Nina Agdal added. "This is probably the best place I've been to ever."

That's high praise coming from ladies who are paid to look amazing in the world's most gorgeous locations. And the small South Pacific nation deserves every bit of it. Some say it's like Hawaii before the state became commercialized, and indeed, it feels like you're stepping back in time when you land in the Cook Islands.

THE ISLANDS

Your trip will almost certainly start in Rarotonga, the largest by far of the Cooks' 15 islands and the location of the international

airport. Known as Raro by the locals, this island has plenty to do—although you'd be forgiven if you did nothing but alternate between sunbathing and snorkeling all day. The interior is mountainous, so the road rings the 20-mile circumference of the island. You won't find a single traffic light, but you will find plenty of scooters, the preferred method of transportation. There's also a public bus that travels both clockwise and counterclockwise.

The next most popular island is Aitutaki, beloved by honeymooners from all over the world. While the entire Cooks is the stuff made of postcards, this is the island that will take your breath away. The water is a blue that seems unreal (as Agdal says, "it looks Photoshopped"), contrasted against sand that's sugar white. Add in a brilliantly blue sky and lush palm trees, and you'll find it impossible to take a bad picture here—or have a bad time.

Known as a bird-watching paradise, Atiu is the third-largest island. Even so, there are only about a dozen visitors on the island at any one time, making

this a true escape. It's lighter on the luxury than its big sisters and heavier on the adventure, with caves to explore, birds to spot and forests to hike.

THE OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

At some point, you must go on a snorkeling cruise. The Te Vaka Lagoon Cruise just might be the most beautiful, as it sails from Aitutaki through crystal-clear waters to smaller islands. Get your passport stamped at One Foot Island (yes, the stamp is shaped like a foot) and watch the locals climb a coconut tree faster than you can say "coconuts are delicious."

Bikes are available at many of the hotels, but it's worth a guided tour with Storytellers Eco Cycle Tours on Rarotonga for a crash course in local culture. Along the way, you'll sample fruits you may have never tasted before and hear about life from ancient to modern times. It's all topped off with lunch on the beach, a lovely way to refuel after a morning of pedaling. For more local color, Pa's Treks involve taking a walk with Pa, a local treasure whose stories you'll retell for years to come.

On Atiu, Birdman George will take you in search of the interesting winged creatures that inhabit this island. Don't miss the Anatakitaki Kopeka Bird Cave





Tour to see a species of bird that doesn't exist anywhere else in the world. While you're there, take a swim in a pool lit by candlelight.

THE CULTURE

All over the islands, you'll find traditional performances in the evenings, often at hotels. The Te Nara Nui Village Night Show in Raro is a big and polished production, with dancers and singers performing on a stage set over the water. The hip shaking is mesmerizing, and at the end, you just may get to try it yourself.

To commune with the locals on Atiu in a 2,000-year-old tradition, visit a tumunu. This meeting place is meant for expressing ideas, singing songs

and solving problems, with everyone taking turns sipping the bush beer, brewed in a tumunu (coconut trunk) barrel.

To look the part while you're here, wear an ei katu, a crown of flowers, along with a floral-print aloha shirt or dress. If you're searching for a souvenir to remember your trip, the black pearls are lovely and come in a range of styles—you can also buy them loose to take home and have set by your favorite jeweler. You'll probably want to hang on to at least one of the triangular \$2 coins you run across, a unique shape in the world of currency.

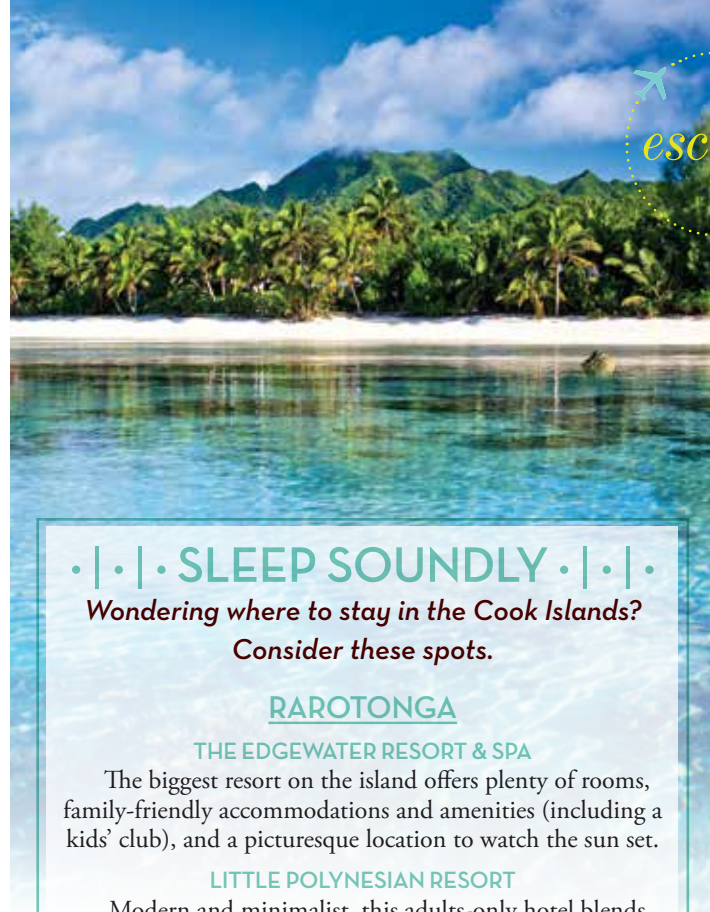
The only downside is that re-entering regular life can be a shock—but it's worth it for a slice of South Pacific paradise. ✦



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escape

•|•|• SLEEP SOUNDLY •|•|•

*Wondering where to stay in the Cook Islands?
Consider these spots.*

RAROTONGA

THE EDGEWATER RESORT & SPA

The biggest resort on the island offers plenty of rooms, family-friendly accommodations and amenities (including a kids' club), and a picturesque location to watch the sun set.

LITTLE POLYNESIAN RESORT

Modern and minimalist, this adults-only hotel blends into its surroundings and is located on one of the loveliest stretches of beach.

RUMOURS LUXURY VILLAS & SPA

Attention to detail makes this resort on Muri Beach one of the most beloved for the luxury seeker. The private pool outside each villa even flows into the interior area, with little bridges leading over the water.

AITUTAKI

AITUTAKI LAGOON RESORT AND SPA

This is the only place you'll find overwater bungalows in the Cook Islands, and they're worth the splurge to be right on the vibrant lagoon.

PACIFIC RESORT AITUTAKI

The height of luxury, this well-maintained resort features personalized service and all the equipment you need to explore the lagoon. On the bed, men will find a complimentary sun hat, while women get a sarong.

TAMANU BEACH

The one-bedroom and studio bungalows at Tamanu Beach are set among a backdrop of lush green hills, each outfitted with shiny wood floors and traditional décor. Take one of the kayaks out in the water and catch the Island Fire show Thursday evenings.

ATIU

ATIU VILLAS

These charming chalet-style villas feature local materials—such as cedar, coconut and mango woods—as well as private verandahs, small kitchens and stacked pantries (use what you like and pay for it when you check out). There's also free Wi-Fi, a rarity in the Cooks.