

Cook Islands: Caves, Cliffs and Makatea

At the very centre of the Polynesian triangle, the Cook Islands consist of 15 islands scattered over some 2 million square kilometers of the Pacific Ocean. It is bordered to the west by Tokelau, the Samoas and Nuie and to the east by Tahiti and the islands of French Polynesia.



The islands north to south, are Penhryn, Rakahanga, Manihiki, Pukapuka, Nassau, Suvarrow, Palmerston, Aitutaki, Manuae, Mitiaro, Takutea, Atiu, Mauke, Rarotonga and Mangaia. With a land area of just 240 square kilometers, the islands range from low coral atolls to the mountainous majesty of Rarotonga, the largest island of the group and home to the capital, Avarua.

Mauke Island

Mauke takes its name from the legendary founder 'Uke who came to the island in search of a peaceful place to live. By today's standards, he certainly chose the perfect island. However, prior to the arrival of Christianity Mauke was dominated by the Atiuans who would often descend on murderous cannibal raids taking many slaves.

Today, Mauke's peaceful existence belies its unsettled past and visitors will find a real Pacific haven on this infrequently visited island. It is often referred to as the 'garden' island of the Cook group and can be found 40 minutes by air northeast of Rarotonga.

Non-commercial and with a relaxed pace of life, Mauke offers peace and seclusion 'off the beaten track'. Three villages - Areora, Ngatiarua and Kimiangatau are close to the western coast of the island, leaving the arable inland area for a variety of food crops and other farming activity.

Visitors should not miss a visit to the Oliveta Church at Kamiangatau, the 'divided church' built where the villages of Ngatiarua and Areora meet. The church has two separate entrances and sitting areas for each village. The reason for this is at the time of construction a conflict arose between the two villages. This is evident in that the interior design clearly shows two very separate artistic expressions and styles. The pulpit railing is also inlaid with Chilean dollars.



Mitiaro Island

Of the cluster of islands in the Southern Group called Nga Pu Toru (Atiu, Mitiaro and Mauke), this island would be the least visited by tourists. Not because it is any less beautiful than sister islands Atiu and Mauke, but simply that it is probably the least known.

Mitiaro is somewhat different to its sisters in that it has two large freshwater lakes in its interior, Rotonui and Rotoiti. These are full of Itiki (freshwater eels) that are considered a delicacy in the Cook Islands and a popular dish on this island. Renowned as one of the friendliest, village life revolves around the Cook Islands Christian Church Betela - where visitors can experience the rousing hymns at Sunday Service.

There are caves on Mitiaro and some delightful subterranean pools which offer a refreshingly cool place to swim. A smattering of small sandy beaches and coves can be found along the coastline.

The small tight-knit community shows its pride in the neatness of the villages, Takaue and Arai. There is a small population of approximately 300 people and private gardens in the village are beautifully kept and neat. Life on Mitiaro is refreshingly uncomplicated.



Atiu Island

Atiu - the island of birds and legends - is the third largest in the group, forming part of the Southern section of the Cook Islands. Atiu is a small volcanic island, with central elevated flat-topped mass of volcanic rock surrounded by a raised coral limestone reef called a Makatea. The makatea runs around the island ranging in width from anywhere between 50 to 100 meters. Low cliffs, 3 to 6 meters high surround the island, but there are many recesses in which small sandy coves are found.

It is a fascinating destination, riddled with caves, makatea, raised coral atoll, cliffs, and white sand beaches. Orovaru Beach is where Captain James Cook landed in 1777. The barrier reef lies close to the shore and the four main villages - Areroa, Tengtangi, Mapumai and Teenui - are grouped together on a central plateau some 71 meters above sea level. A road extending 20 kilometers around the islands is the best means by which to explore.

Learn the legend of lovers Inutoto and Tangaroa and their association with Anatakitaki Cave, which is spectacularly adorned with stalagmites, stalactites and also home to the Kopeka bird. Visit Raka's Cave with its fifteen different chambers and your guide will tell you about the many generations of the Rakanui family who have lived and died in this magnificent hideaway, inside the island's lush rain forest.

A small restaurant trade is developing in Atiu so when visiting ask the locals about any new eateries - Kura's Kitchen which is found on location at Atiu Villas is worth a visit. Kura's Kitchen and bar is open every day of the week except Sunday. Visitors should change money in Rarotonga before travelling to Atiu. Shopping is limited but there are a few small dairy stores, and locals sell crafts from home. Another local custom to take part in is trying bush beer, Tumanu, a local brew made from imported yeast, sugar hops and malt.

Date: 2011-02-28

Article link:

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