

Subject/ Area: Cook Islands

After 4 years in French Polynesia, it was interesting to visit a different part of Polynesia! Major differences: people speak English instead of French, are more religious, and more efficient, but less spontaneous. Some prices are cheaper, some more expensive! Yes! We decided to take our time to explore 4 different islands of the Cooks as we had heard so many good reports from friends.

Leaving Mopelia, our last atoll of French Polynesia, we decided to visit Aitutaki first. We waited over a week in Mopelia becalmed, and then only got 24 hrs of wind. Since we hate motoring, we decided to stop at Manuae, an uninhabited atoll on the way. We checked the anchorage mentioned on the charts and found it without problem. We rigged ourselves a temporary mooring on a big boulder in 50ft of water. Doing that, we found some old moorings nearby that we checked and fixed up with a big float so it's hanging about 20ft under the surface. If you stop by, look for it, as it may still be there! (19 15.5'S/158 58.1W) We did a very nice scuba right under the boat on the drop-off. Had a thrill when a mother humpback whale, calf, and escort cruised by several times and as close as 50ft from the boat! Zoetje, our dog, went crazy! There is a small channel cut through the reef to go ashore, but it was too chancy for us to try due to heavy swell. Just as well, since we weren't cleared-in yet!

Just 60 miles west, lies the calm island of Aitutaki. Touted as the second-most touristy island in the Cooks, we expected lots of activity ... but it's a long way from crowded! Arriving over the North end at about 3 AM we slowly worked our way towards the outside anchorage then drifted at a safe distance until daylight. We couldn't see the entrance to the pass so we cautiously motored towards the GPS coordinates (18 deg 48' S/ 159 deg 46'W) but could still not see it clearly so we anchored on the outside, S of the pass, until better light. Our friend Dylan, on "Firebird" checked it out by dinghy. The entrance to the pass is narrow (less than 100 ft across) and unmarked; caution is urged before heading in. The channel into the harbor area has a least depth of only six feet and outflowing tidal currents can reach three to four knots. Best time to enter is just before high tide (least current). Once in the channel, leave the rusty pipes on the port side. Good sunlight is essential. If in any doubt, ask for someone to guide you in. The trickiest and most shallow part is about mid way, where one of the remnants of a pipe sticks further into the channel than the others. "Patriot", with a 6' draft, made it at high tide, no problem. At the end of the channel you have two choices: the main (left) passage leading into the small harbor and the right passage leading to a tight, shallow anchorage. Due to strong tidal currents, it is recommended to anchor fore and aft in the anchorage, as the deep area is narrow. Boats too large or with deeper draft should anchor outside the reef to the south of the channel (the area north of the pass is a real trap for anchors!). In the near future, plans are (starting the end of 2003??), to deepen the pass to 20 ft all the way and enlarge the harbor. Locals cynically say, this is a perpetual promise, but the Prime Minister told one important local, this time it's serious. The Customs & Immigration officer may come out to the boat or you may check with him at his office, in the post office building. Costs: 25NZ\$/ pers for departure tax and 5NZ\$ / day anchored in or next to the harbor (no anchorage fee for boats anchored outside). The health officer will contact you for pratique (his office is on the other side of the island). Fee: 20 NZ\$. Docking in the harbor may be done with permission of the port captain, with the condition to move if required.

Bill Tschan, a Swiss expat, is the cruiser's friend on the island. He took over Father Don's Gold Book and is a great source of information & help. He's lived 35 years in the Cooks so he knows many people. Please contact him to fill in the cruiser's logbook and check his book exchange. He also started a very beautiful and extensive botanical garden and is always on the lookout for new varieties! Ask him for a guided tour! You can find him at his small store: ABC, just North of the grocery store (<tschan@aitutaki.net.ck> or fax 1 775 429 3227)

Activities: we did a lagoon cruise with Bishops Cruises (call on VHF 09). We had a pickup right in the harbor and basically toured the whole lagoon. Visited 3 motus, had good snorkeling in surprisingly clear water and saw giant clams that we never saw in Fr.Pol. Included were snacks, snorkel gear, towels, and a great lunch buffet on famous 'one foot island'. We could never have done it by dinghy and it was well worth it! The personnel were friendly and professional and the boats were new and well designed. A must!

We drove around the island on our mopeds and many cruisers rented motorbikes and bicycles (Rino's is a reliable place rinos@aitutaki.net.ck or 31-197). The roads are in good shape, even if some is unpaved, and you can spend ½ day or a full day exploring the island. On your way, check Angelo's organic garden! He grows some unique kinds of vegetables and we got quite a few greens for the galley.

One day we joined Ngaakitai at Walkabout Tours (call 31-757). He loves to share his knowledge of local vegetables, fruits and medicinal plants, and gave us some as a snack, and some to take home. He showed us a marae that his family cleared recently and maintains.

We hiked on our own to the highest point of Aitutaki, a small mountain, that the Rarotongans accuse the people of Aitutaki of having stolen from the top of their, now flat-topped mountain. Great views of the lagoon and motus!

Dinner/island shows: everyday of the week some restaurant somewhere put up a big buffet and island show. We indulged ourselves in a few. In the upper range: both the Pacific Resort Hotel (call 31-720) and the Aitutaki Lodge & Spa (call 31-201) offer the most extensive buffets and shows. We hadn't seen the likes since our Club Med days! The taste measured up to the looks! The price was 60 NZ\$. You can bike or scooter to the Pacific Resort since it's not too far from the harbor. We made it early and enjoyed the beautiful sunset around the pool and the beautiful white sand beach. If we hadn't be able to anchor in the calm waters inside the lagoon, we would have been really tempted to spend a night at the Pacific Resort (beautiful bungalows blended into the natural scenery; the pool is superbly set with natural rock waterfall!). We also enjoyed the dinner/show at Samade (31-526) at the other end of the island. The buffet wasn't comparable to the upscale ones but the price of 25NZ\$ was right! We dined at Café Tupuna (31-678). What a delightful surprise: gourmet food, a la Carte, in a covered open air setting and at very affordable prices. Tupuna, owner and chef, is a gem! Reserve early as she takes only about 25 guests per evening! Most restaurants and activities can arrange pick-up at the harbor for little or no charge if you ask.

RAROTONGA:

Avatiu Harbor is small indeed and space is at a premium price, but things are improving! We had to raft to fishing boats the first day, then med-moored, Be prepared to leave the harbor or shuffle for a short time to let a big cargo come in or out (happened about 5 times in 3 weeks). John, the harbormaster, is very accommodating and pleasant. A new inner harbor was being completed when we were there and it will be for local small fishing vessels and tourist activity boats. That should make some more room for us in the commercial basin. Fees in the harbor are 2 NZ\$/meter/day for monohulls and \$2.75 for multihulls. Or you could anchor outside Avarua (30'-50' in sand) and have fairly calm seas in E-SE winds.

Traveling around the island is very easy by renting a bicycle, motorcycle, fun-car or car. We took a fun-car (Ph: 22- 426). These fun 2-person vehicles come with canopy to protect from sun/rain and have a trunk to carry stuff. Derek the owner/manager is very friendly and will deliver his vehicle to the harbor to have a chance to chat with cruisers! Don't forget to drive on the left and make sure to

explore every road and every sight on the island! You can also take the local bus all around the island in 1 hour (two buses/ hour during daylight and once/hour in the evening.) Not practical for sightseeing but very convenient to go out for dinner! Rides are \$2.5NZ or buy a 10 ride, sharable pass at \$17NZ. You can get a vehicle at Island Car & Bike Hire (22-632)

Eating out. With prices even lower than Aitutaki, this is a great place to indulge oneself in restaurants. We tried several of them! Had an excellent sushi combo and tempura at Japanese Sushi Restaurant (call: 25-045) in Avarua, at affordable prices. Aoki, the chef/owner is very pleasant and one of only 2 Japanese on the island. Opens 6pm-8pm. It's not too far from the cinema where Tuesday is 2 for 1 night at 5 NZ\$. Movies in English, what a deal! For lunch or dinner, we tried Mae-Jos café (ph:26-621), in Cooks Corner complex in, Avarua. The café is hidden inside the small mall (it's not the one facing the bus stop!). They serve excellent Chinese, Mongolian, Indian and Mexican dishes. Prices are reasonable and you can bring your own alcoholic beverages (without corkage fees). It would be a great place to have a yachtie party. They also do take-out.

Sails restaurant (ph:27-349) at the sailing club is a lot classier than it looks from the road: beautiful sunset on Muri Beach lagoon and excellent meal. The pink cheesecake is to die for! We also indulged ourselves in yet another buffet/ island show, this time at the Rarotongan Beach Resort & Spa (ph:25-800). The underground oven (umu) buffet was copious, and delicious, and the show dazzling! The Nu Bar (ph:26-141), just before the airport entrance has a Mon & Fri special: 10NZ\$ steak with salad & chips (french fries)! Fish& Chips Take-away, right at the harbour is a cheap place for lunch, dinner, or snack.

We also went to a BBQ buffet at the Paw Paw Patch (ph:27-189). The décor, local music and decontracted ambiance made it a very nice evening. Another great place is the buffet at the Crown Beach Resort (ph:23-953): beautiful sunset and fun entertainment by James and his family (he is also one of the main characters at the Cultural Village). The food was very good and we had another great evening.

If you liked Bloody Mary's in Bora Bora and a good ole time, (more for locals with movie posters and other nautical items, good job Eric!), try the fabulous seafood platter at the Tumunu Restaurant (ph:20-501). Jackie raves that it was reminiscent of the great seafood platters at San Francisco Fisherman's Wharf 20 yrs ago!

Activities: A visit to the super friendly & knowledgeable people at the Cook Island Tourism Corp. in town is a must. Get all the brochures and ask any question, they will help you with a smile! A visit to the Cultural Village (ph:21-314 <viltours@oyster.net.ck>) is truly a must! This is many times better than the cultural village of Moorea. Learning about different aspects of Cook Island life in a friendly and hands-on way with a dance show and a Polynesian meal at the end was fun and informative. It's no wonder they won a Kodak Cultural award for excellence in Tourism! Even we learned a few things, after 4 yrs in Fr.Pol.! We went on a very informative guided tour with Raro Eco Tours (ph:26-270). Paul, the owner, takes pleasure in his work: at the beginning, you make an umu (traditional pit oven) then tour in a/c van and finish by eating the meal! Well worth it! He also does a unique bike/kayak tour at low cost, and is revving up to do a hover craft tour soon. We also enjoyed a more traditional 4x4 tour with Raro Safari Tour (ph:23-629). One of Luc's favorite activities was to take a 30 min flight in a Microlight (ph:55-311). What incredible views from the sky! He got great video shots. Went scuba diving with the friendly Rarotongan Dive Center (ph:20-238 <scuba@rarotongandivecentre.co.ck>) and with Cook Island Divers (ph:22-483), both well run operations. The coral is not so vibrant, but we saw enough different and varied things (some unique nudibranchs) to keep it interesting...Dive Rarotonga (ph:21 873), a PADI Dive Center, also caters to

cruisers in a family ambiance. They all use rigid boats launched from trailers at different ramps around the island depending on wx. Rarotonga Ocean Adventure (ph:23-777) buzzed us around on very fun, high-speed, but surprisingly smooth, circumnavigation of the island in their great RIB, stopping to give highlights, and photo opportunities.

At the Bond Liquor store (ph:21-007), Mon-Thu at 2pm, you get a free brewery tour. I make my own beer on board so it was interesting to speak with the brew master who runs the entire production by himself. We all got to taste the only local beer in the Cooks! Duty-free liquors available there! Every other Saturday, you can hop a ride on the only train on the island at the loco shed! Learn how that Polish train made it to the island and ride the 100m long railway! (ph:23-56)

Two natives we enjoyed meeting were Piri Puruto III (ph:20-309) and Pa (ph:21-079). Piri does several shows per week where he climbs a tall coconut tree and gives a startling demonstration on how to start a fire by kindling a spark as his grandfather did. Ex-boxing champion, Piri, at over 50, is quite a character! Will be a loss when he's too old for his shows, no young ones use those skills anymore! Pa, another colorful native, does guided walks across the island and a medicinal plant walk. Without him we would have been lost on the network of different tracks. He's very knowledgeable, friendly and well organized, even carrying a nutritious lunch for us on his mountain walk. He showed us a medicinal plant that he says cures ciguatera...if it does, this info alone, makes the trip worth it! A must!

Shopping:

The public market on Friday and Saturday is a good place to get veggies and see island arts & crafts, although the richness of choice and quality don't rival those of French Polynesia. But check out Tokerau Jim, the very talented black pearl carver. He does intricate engravings on pearls, shells and mabe. He can engrave your own black pearls if you bring some with you from French Polynesia. Meatco Ltd (ph:27-652) situated down from the Budget Car Sales/Rental at the roundabout in town, sells groceries and more, retail and wholesale. They were very accommodating and delivered to the dock at no charge. CITC Building materials (opposite harbor): very nice and helpful people. Good selection of hardware and wood. Michigan Motors: nice fellow there and good selection of automotive parts.

Services:

Internet access: see Cyber.net right next to tourism office in town, they have great prices, and many computers and they will let you connect your own laptop! (<cyber.net.ck@lyccos.com>) Computer repairs & sales: see Pacific Computers (sales@pacific.co.ck), opposite cinema. Call them in advance, as they are often frustrated with yachties having no time to get parts shipped in! Refrigeration & AC: see SouthCold behind the post office, they are open 24h (27-037 <teretai@southcold.co.ck>). We were very lucky to meet Alberto, the skipper (former owner) of the day-charter catamaran 'Hotel California'. Very nice guy, and a mine of information. He helped get our ripped genoa repaired and found sail material at an upholsterer's at a very reasonable price.

If you need any fiberglass repair or construction, see Ken at Upwind Fiberglass (26 668). He was repairing a damaged boat when we were there.

To fill butane tanks is really easy and less expensive than in FP: right next to the harbor is the Origin Energy depot where they fill any tank while you wait (US/ French camping gas and more)!

In conclusion, both Rarotonga and Aitutaki are super places to do many great activities and to eat out, as the choices are abundant. We really went wild. The Cooks has much more conscientious and polished service compared to the "laissez-faire" attitude in the Societies, for about 30% less money. But the shopping selection and prices on basic foods are often better in French Polynesia (subsidized by the French). Luxuries like beer and sodas are cheaper here, as are fresh veggies and meats.

Prices for wine are about the same, but selection is NZ and Auzzie, not French. If you like chutneys, pickles and other 'British' specialties, load up here until NZ. Get your Noni Juice 30% cheaper here! Diesel and gasoline are as, or more, expensive than in Tahiti.

PALMERSTON:

Due to better-than-expected speed sailing from Rarotonga, we were only 20 miles out by 7pm. We knew that local people monitor VHF channel 16 around the clock, as they use VHF to communicate together. It makes it very convenient for visiting boats to contact them too. Whoever answers your call first is going to host you during your stay and other families are not going to interfere, as they do not want to offend each other. We spoke with Paul and Ed (Alpha Sierra) and learned that (1) the generator running lights on the main settlement (West motu) is shut down at midnight (2) we could tie up to their private mooring in the anchorage situated around (18 02.78'S/163 11.48'W) and that we could swing 360 without touching the close fringing reef (3) that they come out (even in a gale on a black night) to guide us in with their spotlight! After an exhausting trip, their spotlight was like a beacon of hope! And we tied to the mooring just as the dawn was breaking. That afternoon, after a short rest and diving on the mooring to check it, we were ready to go when they came to get us to visit their home and family. They shared their lunch with us and later 2 of their kids (John & Simon) gave us a guided tour of the island. Nice people, more like the Polynesian families in French Polynesia than the people we met in Rarotonga and Aitutaki! We had a great sleep in a calm anchorage despite the 30+ kts of wind howling from the East and SE. It only got roly when the wind went ENE.

This remote atoll is one of the friendliest places we've encountered during our 18-year voyage. The descendants of William Marsters, who settled this atoll in 1860 with his 3 wives, then 17 kids and 54 grand-kids, have traditionally welcomed and given aid to seafarers, and it's a refreshing change to what we sometimes experience in other ports these days.

This is not an official port of entry. Check with local police officer if not cleared in the Cook Islands yet.

We visited the local school, had a dance show specially for us since the cruise ship (one of two/yr) that was to come did not show up, and we spent lot of time speaking with people and helping them at one project or another. People are relaxed, but do many work projects that show a lot of education in their background, and close families live happily together (with some problems with rival families ... but that's normal)

We met Bill Marsters who created the Palmerston Island Yacht Club. He is so friendly to cruisers that he offers many services, free of any charge! The only thing he sells is T-shirts and beer & drinks at his bar! (When he has any in stock!) He is happy so he doesn't want to be a businessman. You are welcome to do your laundry (check that they have enough rain water), take hot showers, organize potlucks, anything, just ask!

The only income people have is selling parrotfish fillets to Rarotonga. People get supplies from the cargo boat that come only irregularly so any basic supplies like rice, flour, sugar, fruit & veg or any food and clothing you can bring with you will be welcome. Many items you carry on your boat and may not need could be priceless to these very generous and welcoming people. They don't especially want charity; they will buy or trade for things. You can contact them in advance by calling their public phone: (682) 37 684 or fax: (682) 37 683, especially if you are in "Raro" or Aitutaki where they have relatives who can give you supplies for them.

We could only stay 4 days this time, as we had a friend to visit in Pago Pago but we may come back some day to do some scuba and lagoon exploration and spend more time with these friendly people.

November 2003

Luc & Jackie on s/v Sloepmouche