

Cook Islands Cruising Info Pitufa

We visited the Cook Islands twice, first on our way back from Tonga to French Polynesia in 2016 and more in detail when we spent 3 months cruising on a north to south island hopping tour through the Cooks in 2018.

The island chain of the Cooks lies widely spread across the South Pacific between French Polynesia and Tonga/Samoa. Almost 800 nm separate the southernmost island of Mangaia (21°S) from the northernmost Penrhyn (09°S). Atolls, raised atolls, volcanic mountains with lagoons or just fringing reefs—their different geology alone makes a visit worthwhile. The flora and fauna of the islands is just as diverse as their climate, and friendly locals with their different traditions add to the experience. Most islands are ports of entry, an advance notice of arrival form must be filled out and sent to the officials in Rarotonga at least 48 before arriving.

Penrhyn (Tongareva)

Tongareva lies north of the SPCZ, which means that the weather is rather stable and the trade winds blow steadily. As it lies N of the usual routes not many yachts visit there.

The W pass into the large lagoon is well marked and easy. The main village Omoka has some small shops, but supplies and also water are scarce, so it's wise to arrive well-stocked. Cruisers are expected to anchor off the two villages, those who want to explore the bommy-strewn lagoon and remote motus must ask the island council for permission first.

- Omoka

The channel from the main pass to the main village of Omoka is marked. The village lies on the W side of the lagoon and is exposed to considerable fetch in the prevailing trade-wind conditions. Anchoring is tricky amidst numerous coral heads that are invisible in the murky water. Anchor in 10-12 m off the dock with a floated chain. Officials come aboard for the check-in.

If strong easterlies make the anchorage inside the lagoon uncomfortable or even dangerous, it is possible to anchor anywhere S of the pass on the outer reef and take the dinghy into the lagoon for check-in. The shelf is very wide, flat and shallow (5-10 m), so anchoring is not too difficult--unfortunately you have to anchor in coral.

- Tetautua

The channel to the smaller village Tetautua on the protected eastern side is marked and the anchorage features large sandy spots amidst coral heads. Anchor anywhere off the village in 5 to 10 m with a floated chain (around 8°57.50'S 157°55.68'W). The villagers are friendly, but visitors are expected to help out with repairs and respect their religious lifestyle, i.e. non-revealing dress code, no work or boat rides on Sundays, etc. The NE pass (1 nm N of the village) with a shallow coral maze teeming with fish and curious reef sharks makes for great snorkelling.

Aitutaki

The hilly main island which is surrounded by a shallow lagoon (not navigable for sailboats) is popular with tourists from NZ and has a well-developed infrastructure.

The main attractions are the long, sandy beaches and snorkelling and diving with turtles and humpback whales (July to October).

- Arutanga

Those lucky enough to draw less than 1.4 m (5¼ ft, check with harbour master, the depths change constantly) can make it through the shallow long pass. Careful, charts have a considerable offset, enter at 18°51.320'S 159°48.412'W and follow the markers in. Keep left to proceed into the harbour basin and anchor inside (e.g. 18°51.909'S 159°48.027'W) or keep right and anchor in the channel that bypasses the harbour southwestwards (around 18°51.847'S 159°48.129'W). There are many shallow bommies between these two anchoring areas. Check in with the harbour master just at the dock and customs and quarantine in town.

- Reef anchorage

Boats that cannot enter the lagoon, can anchor on the outer reef just N of the pass (fairly well protected in trade-wind conditions). The reef is strewn with live bommies and canyons that would swallow anchors forever, so it is advisable to check with goggles before dropping the anchor. Anchor in 10 to 15 m around 18°51.18'S 159°48.38'W.

Palmerston

Palmerston is a little atoll without a pass. Supply ships are rare and visiting cruisers are a welcome attraction—especially those who announced their arrival and asked for a shopping list. Officials come to the boat for check-in (weekdays only) and visitors get free shuttles from and to the village by their host family, are invited to church, lunches, etc. The little community is a bit of a curiosity: In 1863 William Marsters annexed the island, settled down with his three Polynesian wives and sired a dynasty--almost all (about 60) islanders are direct descendants of them, or married to one. The infrastructure is very modern (a solar-panel array provides electricity, cell-phone network and surprisingly fast internet are available), but there is of course no provisioning or other shopping.

Moorings

The local community provides moorings for yachts on the western side (buoy-field 18°02.860'S 163°11.574'W). There is a daily fee, but those who leave material for moorings (or other useful things) or help with the maintenance can use them for free. The buoys are safe in trade-wind conditions, but the sight of a wreck ashore highlights the necessity to leave before the wind shifts around to the north or even west.

Rarotonga

The main island of the Cooks (capital Avarua) is a mountainous island with a narrow fringing reef. The high volcanic mountain range is criss-crossed by hiking trails that lead through lush valleys with sparkling creeks and waterfalls up to rugged peaks. Due to its southerly location Rarotonga gets cool during the southern winter. The well-developed tourist infrastructure makes shopping and exploring easy: buses circle the island, sights and trails are well marked and rental places offer bikes, scooters and cars.

- Avatiu

Yachts (about 50 a year) tie up Med-mooring style in Avatiu harbour (bow anchor around 21°12.265'S 159°47.097'W with two strong lines to the dock). The harbour is well protected from W, S and E, but open to the N--it is recommended to leave when strong northerly winds are predicted.

Upon arrival officials usually show up on the dock, check in with the harbour master in Avatiu first, then customs Avarua. Quarantine officials will inspect the boat.

Suwarrow

The uninhabited atoll Suwarrow is a popular stop-over for cruisers due to its convenient location and the easy pass into the lagoon. Between May and October rangers welcome cruisers and make sure that they respect the rules of this nature reserve, as Suwarrow is an important breeding ground for sea birds and turtles. Suwarrow is not a port of entry, but rangers collect a fee for the nature reserve.

The southern Cook Islands of Atiu, Mauke, Mitiare (east of Aitutaki) and Mangaia (southeast of Rarotonga) are all raised islands that feature “makatea” (coral) cliffs, caves and grottos and would certainly be interesting destinations. Unfortunately the anchorages on their reef shelves require calm weather and only little southwesterly swell, which is rare during the southern winter, particularly as the SPCZ brings unsettled weather and shifting winds every 7-10 days.