





# Too many Cooks

**Spoilt for choice, most passing cruisers face a tough decision over which Cook island to visit – we managed four in two months, write Birgit Hackl and Christian Feldbauer**



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 islands' flora and fauna are just as diverse as their climate, while friendly locals with a variety of traditions add to the experience.

Due to their widespread location, most passing cruising yachts on their way west stop at only one of the Cook Islands, and find it hard to choose. We wanted to see more and spent two months during the southern winter 2018 exploring four of them. We found each destination alluring in its own way, from natural gem Penrhyn, via turquoise-mint Aitutaki, to remote, unique Palmerston, and on to bustling Rarotonga.

### Penrhyn/Tongareva

In August 2018 we left behind the unstable winter weather of the Society Islands (French Polynesia) and sailed up to the northernmost atoll of the Cooks. Penrhyn (old name Tongareva) lies north of the South Pacific Convergence Zone (SPCZ). The weather is usually sunny and warm in winter and the trade winds blow steadily, so we had a swift sail up. The east pass into the big

lagoon is well marked and easy, so we were surprised when the officials told us that hardly any yachts come here. To clear in, yachts can either anchor outside the pass or off main village Omoka, on the western side of the lagoon, which is exposed to considerable fetch in trade-wind conditions. We arrived with light easterly winds and decided to anchor inside the lagoon, but took a while to find a spot amid the numerous coral heads that are unfortunately invisible in the murky water. After the friendly officials had come to our boat to clear us in, we walked through the little village, bought some prepaid Internet cards and checked out the shop where basic supplies are available. Knowing that supply ships were rare, we had stocked up beforehand in Tahiti. Water is also scarce and may not be available during dry spells, so boats without a watermaker need to ration.

The channel to the smaller village of Te Tautua, on the protected eastern side, is well marked, with a pretty and sandy anchorage. The villagers are very friendly to visiting cruisers, but expect them to respect their religious lifestyle, ie a non-revealing dress code, no work or boat rides on Sundays and so forth. Mechanics, electricians, plumbers and anyone with a welding machine are especially welcome, but less dexterous cruisers are of course also invited to Sunday lunch after church. The northeast pass, just a mile north of the village, features a fantastic, shallow coral maze teeming with colourful swarm fish and curious reef sharks.

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Anchored in an 8ft deep swimming pool in Penrhyn

**ABOVE LEFT**  
The narrow and shallow pass into the lagoon of Aitutaki

**ABOVE**  
View from Aitutaki's highest hill over the turquoise lagoon

**BELOW**  
Penrhyn's church – religion is a dominant force in village life here

Most cruisers stay close to the two villages, but we were there for a month and wanted to see more of Tongareva, so we (obsequiously) asked at the village council and got permission to explore along the eastern, southern and northern barrier reef with *Pitufa*. We are used to sailing in coral-strewn lagoons, but we found navigation here especially challenging. Countless coral heads dot the deep parts of the lagoon, while, along the eastern side, a wide, shallow and murky area stretches out, criss-crossed by bommies and coral barriers. This also turns anchoring into a challenge – we always floated our chain. We were pleasantly surprised to find uncultivated *motus* [Polynesian reef islets] covered in endemic trees and shrubs, and home to thousands of nesting sea birds – such nature refuges sadly have become a rare exception in the South Pacific, especially on inhabited atolls.



PHOTOS: BIRGIT HACKL AND CHRISTIAN FELDBAUER



## Aitutaki

Aitutaki lies 600 nm south of Penrhyn and we could feel the temperature drop with every degree we sailed south. The volcanic mountains of the island have been smoothed down to low hills and a lagoon has formed around the main island. Unfortunately, it is not navigable for sailboats, only a shallow pass on the western side leads to a basin off main village Arutanga. Those lucky enough to draw less than 1.6m (5ft 3in) can make it inside (about 40 yachts a year), while all others must remain outside. The anchorage on the reef just north of the pass is fairly well protected in

trade-wind conditions, however. We anchored just north of the pass in 12m (39ft) and were rather comfortable, with a bridle to the anchor chain to keep aligned to the waves. Meanwhile, a southeasterly was blowing 25 knots for a week.

Arutanga is a quiet village, but there are several supermarkets and some fresh, local produce is available weekdays in the market hall next to the port. We knew beforehand that Aitutaki was popular with tourists because of its turquoise lagoon and motus with sandy beaches, but we were still surprised by the number of hotels and resorts. Several flights a day connect the island with

**ABOVE**  
The quiet village centre at Palmerston

**BELOW**  
Grandmothers who teach the schoolchildren Maori songs

Rarotonga. Dive operators take tourists to sites just next to the outside anchorage to swim with turtles. Unfortunately, the reef was damaged badly during the last El Niño episode and was still in a bad shape during our visit, although there was some new growth visible. From July to October humpback whales visit the waters around the island and it was a great experience to have them almost constantly around the boat. When we could not see them, we still heard their singing vibrating through the hull. As the water is cool in winter and the wind-chill factor in the strong southeasterly was considerable, we did not join them in the water.

## Palmerston

Around 200 nm West of Aitutaki lies the little atoll Palmerston. There is no ship's pass into the lagoon, but the local community provides moorings for yachts on the western side. The daily fee is 10NZD, but those who leave material for moorings (or other useful things) on the island, or help with the maintenance of the moorings, 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.

Supply ships are rare and visiting cruisers are a welcome attraction – especially those who announce their arrival and ask for a shopping list beforehand. In return, visitors get free shuttles from and to the village by their host family, are invited to church and lunches, and generally included in village life. The little community is a bit of a curiosity. In

## Infobox

### Clearance and Fees

Yachts must send an 'advance notice of arrival' beforehand. Officials inspect the boat at the port of entry, while itinerary and inter-island clearance are required before moving to the next island. Fortunately, almost all islands are ports of entry. The initial visa is valid for 31 days, and an extension can only be obtained in Rarotonga (70 NZD/person/month). However, we got a written permission and explanation from the police in Tongareva permitting us to visit other islands before applying belatedly for the extension upon arrival in Rarotonga.

**Fees for clearance in Penrhyn** (August 2018; other islands may differ slightly)

**Entrance fee:** 20 NZD

**Customs fee:** 58 NZD

**Quarantine and health fee:** 30 NZD (for two people)

**Harbour fees:** Penrhyn 2.50 NZD/day; Aitutaki 5 NZD/day (only in the harbour); Rarotonga 2.30 NZD/ft/day for mono hulls

**Exit fee:** 71.50 NZD/person





1863, ship's carpenter 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 Marsters, or married to one. The locals live off the land and, nowadays, big freezers allow the export of fish to Rarotonga, which has subsequently led to overfishing. The infrastructure is very modern – a solar panel array provides electricity, there is a mobile phone network and surprisingly fast internet available, but, of course, no provisioning or other shopping.

## Rarotonga

The main island of the Cooks (capital Avarua) is a mountainous island with a narrow fringing reef. Yachts (about 50 a year) tie up Med-mooring style in Avatiu harbour, which is well protected from the west, south and east, but open to the north – it is recommended to leave when strong northerly winds are predicted.

We used the opportunity for serious provisioning in Avarua's well-stocked supermarkets and at the daily veg and fruit market next to the harbour – Saturdays are busiest, with

food stands, and some local dancing and drumming next to fresh greens. The Cook Islands are closely associated with New Zealand, and Rarotonga seems very 'Kiwi' – the accent of the locals, fish 'n' chip stands and numerous tourists from New Zealand add to that feeling.

The high volcanic island 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 quite cool during the southern winter, and that climate is ideal for hiking. The well-developed tourist infrastructure makes exploring easy: buses circle the island, sights and trails are well marked, and rental places offer bikes, scooters and cars.

And there are more destinations awaiting that we did not manage to include into our tour.

Up in the northern group, the neighbouring atolls of Manihiki and Rakahanga, and Puka Puka further west await adventurous cruisers. All three have no pass into the lagoon, but anchoring on their outer reefs is possible. On such remote islands, visiting yachts are still a bit of a

**ABOVE**  
Spectacular views from the mountains of Rarotonga

**BELOW LEFT**  
Med-style mooring in the harbour of Avatiu

sensation and their crews can be sure to get a royal welcome and some insight into traditional communities.

Uninhabited atoll Suwarrow is a popular stopover 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 seabirds 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* [South Pacific coral reef] cliffs, caves and grottos and would certainly be interesting destinations.

Unfortunately, the anchorages on their reef shelves require calm weather and only slight southwesterly swell, which is rare during the southern winter, particularly as the SPCZ brings unsettled weather and shifting winds every seven to 10 days.

The Cook Islands have a bad reputation for fees and bureaucracy and after the relative freedom of French Polynesia, the sudden need for inter-island clearances and itineraries took some getting used to – but it turned out the officials on the smaller islands were very friendly and understanding. The entry and exit fees (see info box) are especially pricey for crews who visit only one island briefly, but when you take the chance to see more islands and stay longer, the fees (apart from harbour fees) stay the same and seem more reasonable. Whether you are hikers, whale-watchers, hobby ornithologists or just want to enjoy a Kiwi beer on a white beach, there's a tailor-made Cook Island for every taste.



**AUTHORS**  
Birgit Hackl, Christian Feldbauer and their ship's cat Leeloo (above) set out from the Mediterranean in 2011 and have been cruising in and around French Polynesia, the Cook Islands and Tonga for six years. Visit their blog [pitufa.at](http://pitufa.at) for more info.

