

COOK ISLANDS THE LAST PARADISE

By DOMINICK A. MERLE



Multi-talented Papatua Papatua

RAROTONGA, Cook Islands - This tiny island nation in the heart of the South Pacific has taken a most unusual approach to combat the current world recession. It's declared itself---by law---off limits.

Just a clever marketing scheme? "Absolutely not," said Tourism Minister Wilkie Rasmussen. "We're expecting a 10 percent increase in vacationers this year while every other country is in the minus column.

"We've done our homework, and that's why we passed the legislation designating the Cook Islands as the world's first 'Recession Free Oasis.' We're sick and tired of all this gloom and doom talk."

First, a location check. The Cook Islands are comprised of

15 tiny islands splashed in the center of the Polynesian Triangle, sandwiched between fabled Tahiti to the east and Samoa to the west. There are only about 20,000 residents in the island chain, the bulk in the capital of Rarotonga.

The land area of the entire chain is less than 250 square kilometers, but if you connect the dots between the scattered islands, it would cover some 2 million square kilometers—that's roughly the size of India!



Aitautuki beach (framed)

Lady
market
vendor



It goes without saying that it's far off the beaten track and far less known than its fancy neighbors. The very name Cook Islands also doesn't have an exotic ring to it, like Tahiti or Fiji or Bali. And that's what makes its tourism success all the more astonishing.

New Zealanders and Australians are flocking here in record numbers, lured by the pristine beaches, untapped islands and low prices compared to Tahiti and Fiji. And now Europeans, primarily the German and French, are following suit.

While an independent country, the Cook Islands have a special relationship with nearby New Zealand, sharing its currency as well as its citizenry. Every Cook Islander is an automatic New Zealander.

The islanders speak several dialects of Maori as well as English, not the Queen's English but the English more pleasing to the North American ear. Frankly, with no disrespect to the New Zealanders and Aussies, the islanders were much easier to understand for me than their heavily-accented neighbors.

Besides the Cook Islands government, Air New Zealand is another major player and investor in jumping on the tourism bandwagon. The airline now has nonstop flights to Rarotonga from Los Angeles, along with connecting flights to some of the other islands.

We checked in at the Crown Beach Resort in Rarotonga and were met by our tour guide, a colorful Jack-of-all-trades named Papatua Papatua (double names are common here). Besides being a longtime tourism representative, Papatua

wears many other hats--singer, dancer, master of ceremonies, spiritual leader and raconteur. He's well known throughout the entire chain.

"Relax," Papatua said. "You've just entered the last remote paradise. Feel free to call me by my first name."

Rarotonga is dominated by high mountain peaks and rain forests that cascade to the palm-fringed shore. The island is encircled by a reef, which harbors a lagoon of clear turquoise waters and white sand beaches.





Exotic house mural

While it is the business center of the Cook Islands and contains half the population of the entire chain, Rarotonga is only 32 kilometers in circumference, and getting around is easy. But Papatua took the more adventurous path, taking us through rain forest dirt roads on a muscle jeep---sometimes making roads where there were none---spiraling to the tops of mountains for spectacular sweeping views. Avarua, the capital of Rarotonga, is where all the tourist shops are

and the nightlife happens. And each Saturday morning the Punanga Nui Marketplace bursts alive with practically the entire population on hand enjoying the cultural shows and playful bargaining with the vendors.

The undisputed prize possession is the black pearl from the northern island of Manihiki. If it's the real deal, there is little room for negotiation. If the price fluctuates widely and swiftly, beware.

From Rarotonga, we took a 45-minute flight north to Aitutaki, the island that Cook Islanders believe will be the new Tahiti, or at least what Tahiti used to be. Aitutaki has 1700 people, 4 horses, 2 cows, a whole bunch of cats---and no dogs.

Legend has it that the son of the prime island chief was bitten by a dog many years ago and the chief promptly cleared the island of all canines and there hasn't been another since.

"This is one of the most Heavenly places on earth," Papatua said, "so beautiful, it's almost sinful," he laughed.

We checked in at the Pacific Resort, an intimate collection of 27 beachfront hideaways secluded among lush palms. The view from our bedroom to the tri-color aqua waters was so spectacular that we never closed the drapes during our entire 3-day stay.

Yet as tranquilizing as that sight was, our next day's boat ride into the lagoon was even more breathtaking. The clear waters changed hues several times, we stopped at several tiny island strips (one appropriately named "Heaven"), Papatua sang and strummed his ukulele, and each



Tribal
chief

of us secretly wished, I suspect, that the day would stretch longer.

The first European discovery of Aitutaki was by Captain Bligh sailing on the *Bounty* in 1789, and the first missionary was John Williams, who visited Aitutaki before any other islands in the group.

Way back then, several Cook Island tribes had the nasty habit of cannibalism (along with tribes in many other parts of the world including Tahiti and Fiji), and that was one of the first orders of business for the missionaries.

Today, it's sushi and steak.

Back at the resort the next day, we headed for the beach, but not before reading a printed advisory in the lobby about the reef stonefish, described as "the ugliest and deadliest fish in the world" that can grow to three feet long. Even worse, they camouflage themselves on rocks and strike with lightning speed.

"Don't worry," Papatua smiled, "we have antidotes today."

He said some of the locals even hunt for them. "They're delicious if they're done right."



Cultural show dancer

Fire dancer



TRAVEL TIPS

A valid passport is all that's required for North Americans.

The climate is warm and sunny year-round with June to August the cooler months.

Although dress is informal everywhere, nude or topless bathing is prohibited.

The unit of currency is the New Zealand dollar, but Cook Islands also has its own currency including a 3-dollar bill and odd-shaped coins.

For further information on the Cook Islands, try www.recessionfreeoasis.com and www.cookislandsexperience.com. For Air New Zealand, www.airnewzealand.com.