

Cook Islands

Kia Orana. The Cook Islands is in the Pacific Ocean. There are 15 islands in total which are divided into 2 groups. North and South. The Northern group consists of Manihiki, Nassau, Penrin, Rakahanga and Suvaro. The Southern group consists of Aitutaki, Atiu, Mangaia, Manuwai, Maoke, Mitiaro, Palmerston, Pukapuka, Rarotonga, Takutea.

The capital of the Cook Islands is Rarotonga because it is the largest island in the group of islands. Captain Cook who was travelling through the Pacific Ocean discovered the islands and named them Cook Islands after his family name. In October 23rd 1821 Christianity started on the island of Aitutaki. Heathens was the religion until Rev. John Williams from England and 2 Tahitians journeyed to the Cook Islands and took Christianity there. The Cook Islands is an independent nation but is still governed by the NZ Government.

Individually between islands is the hallmark of the culture of the Cook Islands and reflects their varied sources of ancient migration as well as the vast distances between 15 tiny islands scattered over a section of the central South Pacific Ocean as big as the Indian sub-continent.

To the despair of many educated Cook Islanders the expression "culture" in the popular mind equates to traditional festivals, singing and dancing. There is some justification for this since the art of dance is taken very seriously in the Cooks. Each island has its own special dances and these are practised assiduously from early childhood. There are numerous competitions throughout the year on each island and these are hotly contested. The highly rhythmic drumming on the paté and the wild and sensuous movements of both men and women virtually guarantee that Cook Islands teams win all the major Pacific dance festivals. The Hawaiian hula and the Tahitian tamuré are probably better known because those islands have had wider publicity for the last 100 years but the Cook Islands hura is far more sensual and fierce. Every major hotel prides itself on the performance it puts on at least once a week on Island Night when guests, selected by the dancers, are led onto the floor to show what they can do. If there is one outstanding ability which appears to be shared by all Cook Islanders it is music and song. Close harmony singing is highly developed in church music and the power and emotional impact of chants and hymns at weddings and funerals is well known to visitors who attend.

The range and talent of popular singing can be seen at the numerous festivals throughout the year.

The outer islands produce traditional weaving of mats, basketware and hats. Particularly fine examples of rito hats are worn by women to church on Sundays. They are made from the uncurled fibre of the coconut palm and are of very high quality. The Polynesian equivalent of Panama hats, they are highly valued and are keenly sought by Polynesian visitors from Tahiti. Often, they are decorated with hatbands made of minuscule pupu shells which are painted and stitched on by hand. Although pupu are found on other islands the collection and use of them in decorative work has become a speciality of Mangaia.

A major art form in the Cook Islands is tivaevae. This is, in essence, the art of making handmade patchwork quilts. Introduced by the wives of missionaries in the 19th century, the craft grew into a communal activity and is probably one of the main reasons for its popularity.
