ADVERTISING SUPPLEMENT

July 17, 2026

# Cook Islands

## Expanding Its Horizons with California

Cook Islands and the United States formally established diplomatic relations in 2023, strengthening ties across political, economic and development cooperation. In February 2026, the two countries agreed to a Strategic Framework for Engagement and Cooperation, reinforcing a growing partnership built on shared economic opportunities, regional cooperation and long-term engagement.

Kaori Media

# Cook Islands: Small Pacific Nation, Vast Ocean, Big Ambitions

Following 60 years of self-governance, this high-income Pacific nation is diversifying beyond tourism, into finance, fisheries, and seabed minerals, while fiercely guarding the culture, ocean, and community that define it.

Prime Minister Mark Brown has a favorite way of describing his country's footprint in the world. The Cook Islands' resident population today sits below 20,000 people, yet its global community now exceeds 120,000, spread mostly across New Zealand and Australia. "I see this as an expansion of the Cook Islands," he says, a diaspora that has become a bridge of talent, skills, and capital rather than a drain.

That optimism runs through everything as the nation celebrated 60 years of self-governance last year. Over six decades, the Cook Islands has transformed from an economy reliant on agricultural exports into a tourism-driven one, and recently graduated under OECD rankings to high-income status. The milestone is a source of pride, but it has also closed the door on many traditional forms of development aid. "We must now build partnerships with other countries based on mutual benefit," Brown explains, through trade, expanded tourism markets, and strategic collaboration.

His foremost priority is economic resilience: sustaining growth while strengthening the country's ability to absorb shocks like the COVID-19 crisis that froze global travel in 2020. Just as important, he says, is preserving identity, "our own territory, our own ocean space, and a culture that remains central to who we are." Infrastructure is the persistent challenge. Spreading energy, transport, and connectivity across scattered islands carries disproportionately high costs for a small population, which the government is meeting through a mix of domestic financing, climate funds, and private investment.

Connecting those islands falls largely to two gateways. The Cook Islands Ports Authority handles roughly 97% of imports and is widening and deepening the wharf channel at Aitutaki, while studying a costly fix for Rarotonga's narrow harbor entrance. The airport, meanwhile, is "the front door to the country," in the words of Airport Authority chairman Edward Herman, now slated for terminal expansion and safety upgrades to handle larger, more frequent jets. Both gateways face the same squeeze of high capital costs, shrinking donor funding, and rising seas, and both share an ambition that resonates with this readership: re-establishing a direct air link to Los Angeles.

Brown is firm that the Pacific should not be seen as an arena of geopolitical rivalry. "We do not see the Pacific as a region of competition," he says. "We see it as a region of collaboration and cooperation." What matters, in his view, is that relationships with partners, New Zealand, the United States, Australia, and neighboring island states, align with the country's own development goals.

Diversification beyond tourism is well underway. Financial services, a sector the Cook Islands pioneered in the 1980s, today markets itself as a well-regulated, compliant home for legitimate wealth planning; its flagship asset-protection trust is widely regarded as among the strongest in the world. Fisheries, managed through a regional framework, have grown more sustainable and more lucrative over the past 15 years. And the country is carefully studying the critical minerals locked in its seabed nodules, cobalt, nickel, manganese, and rare earths essential to the global energy transition. There, the watchword is caution: regulators stress that no decision to mine has been made, that the work remains strictly in an exploration and science phase, and that any potential footprint would be tiny relative to the nation's roughly 772,000 square miles (2 million square kilometers) of ocean.

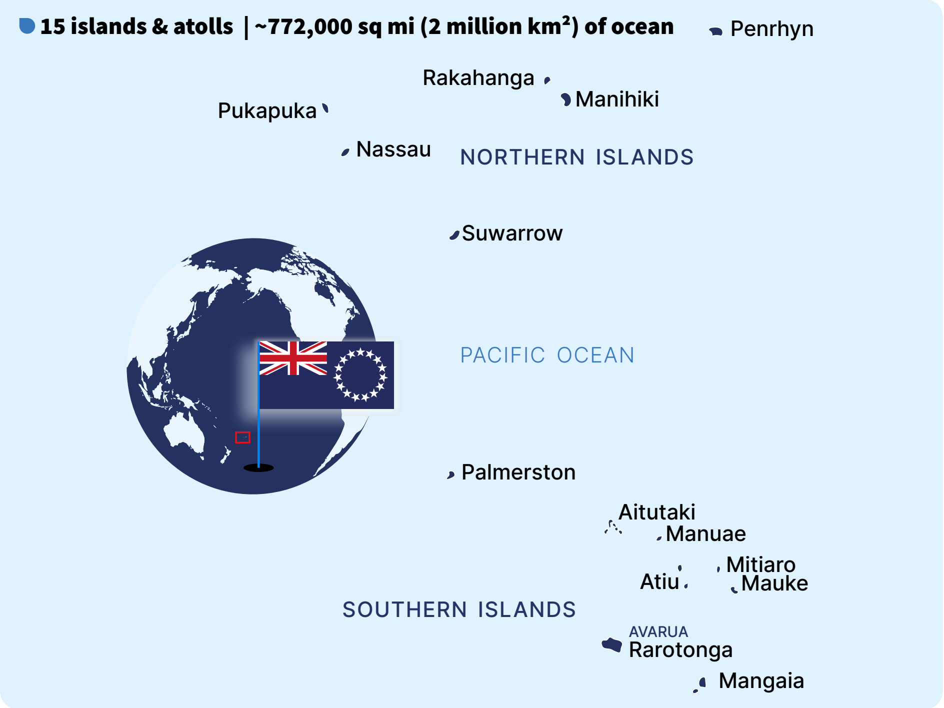
That ocean is the heart of the story. Through the Marae Moana Act of 2017, the Cook Islands designated its entire exclusive economic zone a marine-managed area, banning commercial longline fishing and mineral activity within 50 nautical miles of every island. "Leadership is fundamentally about stewardship," Brown says, describing it as a modern expression of the conservation practices his ancestors used on land and in the lagoons.

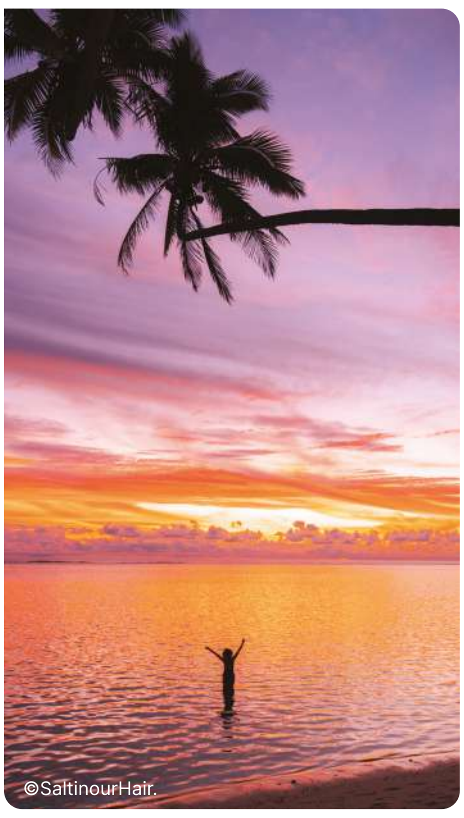
Climate change sharpens every decision. On mitigation, renewable energy now anchors the country's strategy, with solar grids long established on outer islands and Rarotonga and Aitutaki transitioning now. On adaptation, seawalls, cyclone shelters, and emergency financing, the country has often had to pay its own way. Brown cites the World Bank's finding that every dollar spent on resilience saves eight in recovery.

As a member of the Pacific Islands Forum, the Cook Islands has taken on a louder voice at the United Nations and beyond. With the United States, Brown wants stronger air links to the mainland and deeper cooperation in scientific and deep-sea research.

His closing message to readers is an invitation. "The entire island becomes your destination, not just the resort where you stay," he says. Visitors, he notes, return again and again for the lagoons, the cleanliness, and above all the people, "warm, welcoming, and deeply connected to their culture." Come to Rarotonga, come to Aitutaki, and see for yourselves.

MARK BROWN, PRIME MINISTER OF THE COOK ISLANDS



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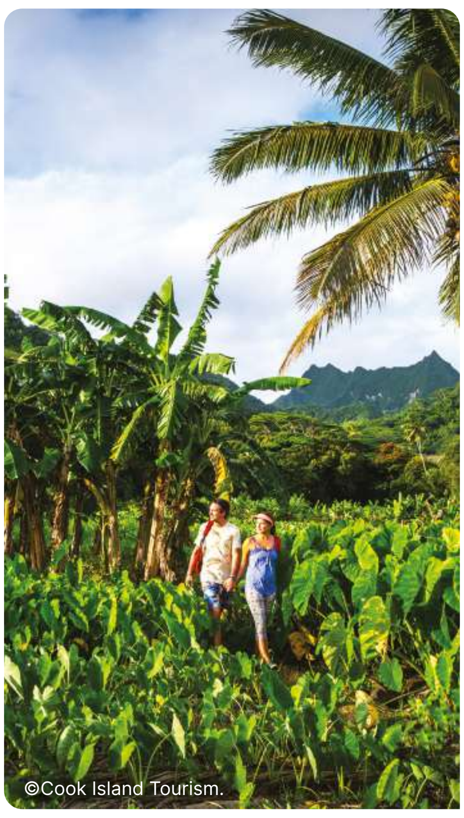

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## OVERVIEW

**GEOGRAPHY & DEMOGRAPHICS**
**Capital:** Avarua, Rarotonga
**Population:** 17,300 residents (2025 estimate); 120,000+ in New Zealand and Australia
**Life expectancy:** ~76 years (World Factbook)
**Currency:** New Zealand Dollar (NZD), supplemented by Cook Islands dollar coins & notes at par
**Heritage:** Cook Islands Māori (Polynesian)
**Languages:** English and Cook Islands Māori
**Traditions:** Wayfinding, 'ura (dance), drumming, 'imene tuki (hymn singing), tivaevae (quilting) and carving.

**ECONOMIC INDICATORS:** (Cook Islands Statistics Office, 2024 & Asian Development Bank)
**GDP (nominal):** ~US$386 million in 2024 (NZD 684.2 million)
**GDP per capita:** US$26,000–30,000 (NZD ~45,000)
**GDP growth:** +4.0% in 2025; growth projected at ~2.7% in 2026 (ADB)

**TRADE DATA** (OEC World)
**Exports:** ~US$34.3 million in 2024
**Major exports:** boats, fish/tuna
**Imports:** ~US$264 million
**Major imports:** boats, fuel, food, vehicles, machinery, construction materials
**Major trading partners:** New Zealand (dominant), Fiji, China, Australia, Japan, USA

**TOURISM** (Cook Islands Statistics Office & Pacific Tourism Organisation, 2025)
**Tourist arrivals:** Record 175,757 (2025)
**Destination:** ~98% in Rarotonga; ~29% also visit Aitutaki
**Tourism revenues:** ~US$270M in 2025
**Annual accommodation occupancy:** 60% to 80%
**Air arrivals:** ~1,250 international flights annually
**Tourism share:** 37.1% of GDP in 2025

**TRANSPORT CONNECTIVITY**
**Rarotonga International Airport (RAR):** Main South Pacific gateway
**Direct international flights:** Auckland, Christchurch (seasonal May–Oct), Sydney, Brisbane, Honolulu and Papeete
**Carriers:** Air New Zealand, Jetstar, Hawaiian Airlines, Air Tahiti & Air Rarotonga

## Highlights

**STRATEGIC POSITION**
- Direct links to New Zealand, the US, Australia and French Polynesia

**GOVERNANCE & ECONOMIC STABILITY**
- 60 years of self-governance in free association with New Zealand (2025)
- Well-established democratic system with stable institutions and regular elections
- Classified as a high-income country by the OECD (2020)

**BLUE ECONOMY**
- ~772,000 sq mi (2 million km²) of ocean EEZ, 99.9% ocean
- Marae Moana (2017): entire EEZ a marine-managed area. No longline fishing or mineral activity within 50 nautical miles of any island
- Tuna stocks made more sustainable and more lucrative over 15 years of regional management
- Seabed nodules (cobalt, nickel, manganese, rare earths) lie ~5 km deep; strictly in an exploration and science phase, with current licenses expiring February 2027

**SUSTAINABLE TOURISM**
- The country's leading industry, built on a high-value, low-impact philosophy
- Growth managed to protect the environment, local communities, and cultural heritage
- Conservation woven into the visitor experience, with the lagoons a central focus

**RENEWABLE ENERGY**
- National target: 100% renewable electricity by 2030
- 13 of the 15 islands have been converted largely to solar-plus-battery; outer islands (Pa Enua) run at ~95–100% renewable
- Flagship project: Te Mana o Te Ra solar farm (960 kW + 5.6 MWh battery) at Rarotonga airport

**FINANCIAL SERVICES**
- 40+ years of expertise; pioneered the first self-settled trust legislation
- Flagship asset-protection trust, foreign judgments aren't automatically enforceable
- FATF- and OECD-compliant; trust model echoed by 20+ U.S. states
- Private banking, insurance, captive insurance, and ship registry

**RESEARCH & INNOVATION**
- Planned Institute of Blue Ocean Science & Sustainability (IBOSS)
- ~27–28 international research partners
- Collaboration with U.S. agencies (BOEM, NOAA), Japan, and the UK
- Ocean data already feeding tsunami modeling, hazard mapping, and early-warning systems

**INVESTMENT ENVIRONMENT**
- Open to responsible, sustainable investment and strategic partnerships
- Strong, transparent regulatory frameworks across finance and seabed sectors
- Climate-resilience focus (World Bank: $1 saved = $8 in recovery)

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# Powering the Future: Solar Energy, Seabed Minerals and a Sovereign Wealth Fund

Reliant on imported fuel yet sitting atop critical minerals the world needs to decarbonize, this remote Pacific nation is turning the global energy squeeze into a strategy for long-term prosperity.


@Cook Islands Finance.

The Cook Islands occupy a paradox familiar to small Pacific nations: 15 islands scattered across nearly 772,000 square miles (2 million square kilometers) of ocean, with virtually no domestic energy resources and a total reliance on imported fuel. Yet the country is emerging from the global energy crisis not as a casualty of high prices but as an economy positioning itself to profit from them.

After a strong post-pandemic rebound, the economy grew 7.2% in real terms in 2024, 14.7% in nominal terms, lifting GDP to US$386 million (NZD$684.2 million), according to the Cook Islands Statistics Office. Growth is now expected to cool as the economy nears capacity, settling into what officials describe as a more sustainable phase. The Ministry of Finance and Economic Management (MFEM) forecasts expansion of around 2.9% in 2026, with GDP projected to reach US$423 million (NZD$748.6 million) in 2025/26.

For Joaquin Vespignani, MFEM's Director of Economic Planning, the more consequential story lies beneath the waves. The Cook Islands sit atop vast fields of polymetallic nodules rich in manganese and cobalt, minerals the International Energy Agency classifies as critical to the global energy transition. As decarbonization, electrification and battery manufacturing accelerate, demand for these inputs is expected to climb sharply.

"These resources are directly linked to clean energy technologies, meaning that as energy prices rise, so too does the value of these exports. This creates a natural hedge for the economy."

That hedge is the strategic heart of the country's plan. Because the Cook Islands import 100% of their fuel, rising global energy prices, driven by geopolitical tension and surging demand from energy-hungry technologies like artificial intelligence, would normally squeeze the budget. By developing minerals whose value moves in the same direction, the country aims to turn an external threat into an export opportunity. There is ambition beyond simple extraction, too: Vespignani points to the possibility of higher-value processing, potentially in partnership with Australia, which could multiply the resources' economic value several times over.

He is emphatic that this will not come at the ocean's expense. The government's approach, he says, is science-led and evidence-based, built on years of independent baseline research and environmental monitoring. Any decision on development, he insists, will be governed by that evidence rather than by commercial pressure.

"Our aim is to demonstrate that a small island state can develop these resources to the highest environmental and scientific standards, protecting the long-term health of the ocean while contributing to the global energy transition."


*
JOAQUIN VESPIGNANI,
DIRECTOR ECONOMIC PLANNING DIVISION MFEM

On energy itself, the strategy runs on three time horizons. In the short term, measures such as free public transport are designed to curb fuel consumption and ease cost pressures on households. In the medium term, the country is accelerating the integration of solar power into its national grid with support from international partners. Over the long term, a comprehensive Energy Efficiency Act will promote energy-saving practices across homes, businesses and infrastructure, aligning the Cook Islands with international standards and, officials hope, making the country more attractive to investors.

Solar, Vespignani argues, is the Pacific's single greatest opportunity. Advances in battery storage and remote monitoring have transformed its viability, and AI-driven diagnostics now allow dispersed island systems to be managed efficiently from afar. A hard-won lesson from earlier projects, he adds, is that energy systems must be tailored to local conditions, smaller islands often being better served by decentralized solutions than by a single centralized grid.

The financial architecture behind all this is just as deliberate. Rather than leaning on royalties or profit taxes, the Cook Islands are drawing inspiration from Norway's model of public shareholding, which aligns the interests of investors and the state so that both benefit from success. Resource revenues, in turn, would flow into a planned Sovereign Wealth Fund designed to insulate the windfall from political cycles and preserve it across generations. The long-term vision is to channel those returns into pensions and education, and, more immediately, to use the fund as a stabilization buffer the country can draw on during crises.

Diversification rounds out the agenda. Beyond seabed minerals, Vespignani sees the strongest long-term potential in financial services and the digital economy, particularly in attracting digital nomads and remote professionals who can lift economic activity with minimal environmental strain. Seabed mining, he notes, could generate substantial early income without requiring a large domestic workforce, while financial services should expand alongside rising incomes. Tourism will remain important, he says, but it will no longer be the primary engine of growth.

Underpinning the forecasts is a quieter push toward digitalization. MFEM is working to integrate data across sectors and, with support from academic and international partners, is adopting AI-based forecasting models intended to sharpen policy and improve the transparency of government services.

Asked what he would tell readers in Los Angeles, Vespignani returns to a theme that runs through every part of the plan: resilience. As a Pacific nation, he says, the Cook Islands have long adapted to natural shocks, producing a pragmatic and forward-looking society. The aim now is to pair that instinct with a clear economic strategy, diversifying the economy, deepening ties across the Asia-Pacific region, and investing in future generations, to build something prosperous, sustainable and durable.


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For a nation of roughly 17,000 people facing some of the world's largest economic forces, it is an unusually confident bet: that the same global pressures threatening small island states might, handled well, become the foundation of their prosperity.

Ministry of Finance
& Economic Management
Government of the Cook Islands

# Cook Islands Finance: Four Decades of Trusted Asset Protection and Wealth-Planning Expertise


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TONY FE'AO,
CEO OF COOK ISLANDS FINANCE

CEO Tony Fe'ao explains how four decades of pioneering trust law, strict regulatory compliance, and deep fiduciary expertise have made the Cook Islands a stable, credible destination for legitimate international wealth planning and asset protection.


Wharf ©Cook Islands Finance.


Currency ©Cook Islands Finance.

The Cook Islands may be best known for turquoise lagoons, but for more than four decades the South Pacific nation has quietly built one of the world's most respected international financial centers. At its heart is a pioneering idea: legislation, introduced over forty years ago, that created the first self-settled trusts and established the country as a global leader in asset protection. The laws were a response to a real problem, in the 1980s, many American professionals were losing their fortunes to litigation, including frivolous and vexatious claims, and the Cook Islands designed a framework to guard against exactly that.

"We developed trust legislation that was the first of its kind," says Tony Fe'ao, CEO of Cook Islands Finance. The flagship Cook Islands Asset Protection Trust is widely regarded as among the strongest legal shields available anywhere. A defining feature is that foreign judgments inconsistent with local law are not automatically enforceable, requiring fresh proceedings in the Cook Islands. Supported by underlying entities such as LLCs, the framework has been tested across decades of case law and has since inspired similar statutes in more than twenty U.S. states, though few can match the islands' longer legislative history.

Yet Fe'ao is quick to separate the jurisdiction from dated offshore stereotypes. Several years ago, the Cook Islands made a deliberate choice to be a responsible participant in the global financial system, aligning with anti-money-laundering, counterterrorism-financing, tax-transparency, and information-exchange standards. "If someone is looking to avoid regulation or oversight, this is not the place for them. Compliance is fundamental to how we operate," he says. Rather than treating compliance as a burden, the sector embraces it, maintaining a low tolerance for high-risk business and a strong emphasis on due diligence. The old idea that assets can simply be hidden, he notes, is virtually impossible in today's regulatory environment.

The appeal runs deep on the U.S. West Coast, where advisors have long relied on Cook Islands structures for high-net-worth clients, family offices, and entrepreneurs seeking proven, tested wealth-planning tools. In an era of geopolitical uncertainty, Fe'ao argues, clients want stability and legal certainty above all. Beyond trusts, the country offers private banking, insurance, a growing captive-insurance sector, legal and accounting services, and ship registry.

The sector is also a pillar of economic resilience. Tourism remains the largest industry, but when the pandemic halted it almost overnight, financial services kept running, indeed, uncertainty often increases demand for estate planning and asset protection. The knowledge-based industry delivers professional careers in law, accounting, and banking, with salaries competitive with, and sometimes exceeding, New Zealand's, drawing young Cook Islanders home. With its low environmental footprint, it also offers a sustainable path to growth.

Looking ahead, Fe'ao plans to expand wealth-management, fiduciary, and succession services while carefully monitoring digital assets; many trusts already hold digital wallets on behalf of clients. Governance remains central, with licensing, ongoing monitoring, and a "fit and proper" standard for professionals. His message to Los Angeles Times readers is simple. "In uncertain times, stability, legal certainty, and expertise matter more than ever," he says. With clear laws and forty years of proven experience, the Cook Islands offers a credible home for legitimate global wealth.

Cook Islands
FINANCE

# Love Our Little Paradise: How the Cook Islands Is Redefining Tourism Success

## CEO Karla Eggelton on how the Cook Islands is redefining tourism through local ownership, destination stewardship, cultural guardianship, and a commitment to value over volume.

**At a time when many destinations are struggling with overtourism and outside-owned development, the Cook Islands is taking a different path: growing tourism in a way that protects its people, its culture and its little paradise.**

### A TOURISM MODEL THAT PUTS PEOPLE FIRST

The Cook Islands is not chasing tourism growth at any cost. It is asking a more important question: what kind of growth serves the country, its people and its future?

For Karla Eggelton, CEO of the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, the answer begins with community. Tourism is the country's leading economic driver, but its success is measured not only in arrivals or receipts. It is measured in how well tourism supports Cook Islands families, protects the environment and strengthens culture.

"Our overarching aspiration is that tourism benefits our people above all else," says Eggelton.

That principle is shaping a national shift from volume to value. The Cook Islands welcomed a record number of visitors, with tourism receipts reaching US$273.4 million (NZD$473.5 million). But rather than pursuing mass tourism, the country is choosing a more deliberate path.

This matters because the Cook Islands tourism economy is different. There are no international hotel chains, no franchises and no large-scale resort corridors. Much of the accommodation sector is locally owned, with visitors staying in holiday homes, villas, boutique properties and family-run places that keep more of the visitor dollar in the domestic economy.

For travelers, that means the experience feels personal. For the Cook Islands, it means tourism can remain a tool for economic resilience rather than a force that extracts value from the community.

"What was once considered an obstacle to growth is now one of our greatest strengths," says Eggelton. "We are a Cook Islands-owned industry, and visitors come precisely for that genuine, authentic experience."


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KARLA EGGELTON,
CEO OF COOK ISLANDS TOURISM CORPORATION

> "The Cook Islands is choosing to grow on its own terms, protecting its environment, preserving its culture and ensuring tourism continues to benefit its people."

This is the heart of the Cook Islands story. The destination is not trying to become bigger, louder or more commercial. It is choosing to remain itself.


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## Cook Islands Tourism: At a Glance

- **A locally owned tourism economy**
  No international hotel chains or franchises, with much of the accommodation sector Cook Islands-owned.

- **Tourism as national economic resilience**
  Tourism receipts reached US$273.4 million (NZD 473.5 million), supporting jobs, businesses, families and communities across the country.

- **Value over volume**
  The Cook Islands is focused on attracting visitors who stay longer, spend more and respect the destination.

- **A strong West Coast opportunity**
  California is the largest North American source market, making Los Angeles a natural audience for the Cook Islands story.

- **High visitor satisfaction**
  98% of visitors would recommend the Cook Islands and 93% would return.

- **A rare travel proposition**
  No high-rises, no traffic lights, no mega-resorts, no franchises — just culture, nature and five-star hospitality.

- **A brand built on guardianship**
  "Love Our Little Paradise" reflects Kia Orana values and Mana Tiaki, the cultural ethic of care and protection.

- **Connectivity through the Pacific**
  Access from the West Coast is supported through Honolulu and Papeete, opening opportunities for deeper Polynesian travel.

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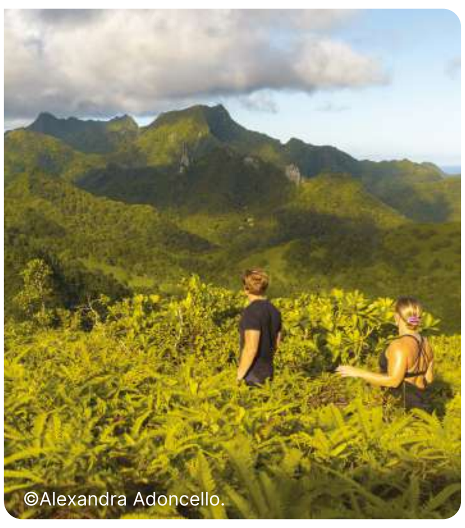

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### WHY THE COOK ISLANDS MATTERS TO WEST COAST TRAVELERS

For American travelers, especially those on the West Coast, the Cook Islands offers something increasingly rare: a place that still feels human, uncrowded and deeply connected to its people.

California is already the largest North American source market for the Cook Islands, and U.S. visitors are among the destination's highest-value travelers. They stay longer, spend more and often explore beyond a single island.

But the appeal is not only economic. It is emotional.

The Cook Islands offers no high-rises, no traffic lights, no mega-resorts and no global franchises. Instead, visitors find lagoons, culture, hospitality and a slower rhythm of life that feels far removed from algorithm-driven travel.

The national brand, "Love Our Little Paradise," captures that responsibility. It asks visitors not simply to consume the destination, but to care for it. Rooted in the values of Kia Orana and Mana Tiaki, the message is about shared guardianship between hosts and guests.

"Our lagoons are truly the jewel in the crown of the Cook Islands product, and preserving them is essential for our future," says Eggelton.

That is what makes the Cook Islands relevant now. In a world where many destinations are becoming crowded, commercialized and interchangeable, the Cook Islands is protecting what makes it different.

# The Hosts of the Cook Islands: Inside Homegrown Hospitality

Across Rarotonga and Aitutaki, a constellation of family-owned resorts, boutique villas, and first-of-their-kind ventures, each occupying its own distinct niche, shows how hospitality leaders are investing in people, place, and authentic experience for the long term.

Little Polynesian Resort ©David Kirkland Photography.

On most Pacific islands, the biggest hotels carry names you already recognize. The Cook Islands took the opposite path. Of roughly 715 licensed properties on the books, only about 40 are classified as hotels and resorts; the rest are villas, holiday homes, and small lodges, and almost all of them, large or tiny, are owned by Cook Islanders or by operators who have made the islands their home. The private sector here isn't a cluster of franchises. It's a community of families and founders, each running a distinct kind of welcome.

Jerry Crump, group general manager of Island Hotels Limited, runs two of Rarotonga's larger properties and is candid about what sets them apart. "We're not an offshore chain parachuting a standardized product into a beautiful location," he says. "We're embedded here." His company splits the market deliberately: Edgewater Resort and Spa is the full-service family flagship, built for grandparents, parents, and children "creating memories across generations," while Club Raro Resort is an adults-only retreat for couples and independent travelers who simply want to switch off. Between the two, Crump says, the group covers the full spectrum of visitors to Rarotonga, and the destination's health and the company's are, in his words, "genuinely inseparable."

> **"We're not an offshore chain parachuting a standardized product into a beautiful location. We're embedded here."**
>
> JERRY CRUMP | GROUP GENERAL MANAGER OF ISLAND HOTELS LIMITED

That sense of stewardship shows up most vividly in how operators treat their own people. Ani Thompson, chief operating officer of Pacific Resort Hotel Group, began her own career through a school work-experience placement at the company when she was 14. Today she oversees four beachfront properties across Rarotonga and Aitutaki under a philosophy she calls "simplicity with purpose," and she has resisted adding a single room in 18 years to protect the gardens, streams, and village around her flagship. What animates the stay, she says, is that "every department contributes to the guest experience", chefs cook alongside visitors, the engineering team leads activities, and one of the resort's most popular hosts is a mama who "barely speaks English" yet runs a beloved weekly flower workshop through gestures and smiles. The group now operates structured internships with Tereora High School, rotating students through every department. "Tourism," Thompson notes, "is much bigger than hotel jobs alone."

The middle of the market tells the same story from a different angle. Tere and Mike Carr bought Lagoon Breeze Villas out of receivership in 2011, reroofed it, added units, and rebuilt it into a 25-villa property they describe as "a place where guests can truly feel at home", spacious, affordable, and staffed entirely by locals. Set on four acres, it is pitched squarely at families and multigenerational groups who want room for children to roam safely. The Carrs believe the islands offer Americans "what Hawaii may have felt like 50 years ago," and they point to a quietly important trend: more Cook Islands families are now building villa accommodation on their own land, keeping tourism revenue, and young Cook Islanders, at home.

At the more ambitious end, two operators are stretching what the private sector can be. Tata Crocombe has built an integrated ecosystem around his Aitutaki Lagoon Private Island Resort and the Rarotongan Beach Resort, folding in tours, insurance, real estate, and the AI venture traveltech, while running coral-restoration programs with marine biologists on staff. "When you restore the reef, everything comes back," he says, pointing to a guest Net Promoter Score near 96 at Aitutaki as evidence that warmth, not scale, is the real product. Brett Baudinet, meanwhile, has opened what he bills as Rarotonga's first five-star resort, The Grand, securing full buyouts from a major U.S. luxury operator "before we even had doors on the building." His companion venture, Smartie, is a Pacific "super app" for transport, food, tours, and payments. Liana Scott brings the widest lens of all. As general manager of Muri Beach Club Hotel and president of the Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council, she speaks for operators large and small, pressing the case that the smallest village lodge and the grandest resort must both hold to the same standard. "If I want my own businesses to succeed," she says, "the entire ecosystem has to succeed." That cooperative instinct runs deep: several operators describe deliberately stepping back from weddings, lagoon cruises, and cultural evenings as specialist local businesses emerged, choosing to refer guests onward rather than compete. Her pitch to visitors is refreshingly unpretentious: "You'll be treated like family, not a tourist."

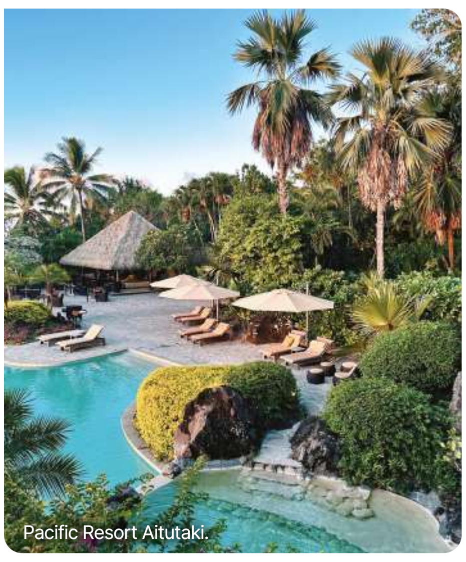
> **"You'll be treated like family, not a tourist."**
>
> LIANA SCOTT | GENERAL MANAGER OF MURI BEACH CLUB HOTEL AND PRESIDENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS TOURISM INDUSTRY COUNCIL

Sustainability here is less a marketing program than a condition of survival, and the private sector has often moved ahead of regulation. Pacific Resort installed a sewage-treatment system in the 1990s and now turns garden waste into compost through a village association; Muri Beach Resort has run partly off-grid on solar for 13 years; The Grand powers its air conditioning entirely on solar; and Lagoon Breeze leans on the ancestral Raui system of temporary marine and land closures that let reefs and fish stocks replenish. "Protecting that," as Crump puts it, "is enlightened self-interest as much as it is conscience."

What unites this mosaic, family resorts and adults-only retreats, value villas and a first five-star, a super app and a coral nursery, is ownership that stays close to the ground and a hospitality that simply can't be franchised. California already sends the largest single share of the islands' North American visitors, and the operators here are betting that more will follow, drawn less by spectacle than by the increasingly rare feeling of being genuinely welcomed somewhere. "Kia Orana," Crump says, " is not a marketing line but a standard the team holds itself to every day."

Edgewater Resort & Spa.

The Grand Resort Rarotonga.



Pacific Resort Aitutaki.

Te Manava Luxury Villas ©David Kirkland Photography.

## Nautilus Resort Rarotonga: An Island Experience, Not Just a Stay

Boutique luxury meets genuine Kia Orana hospitality, immersing guests in the culture, cuisine, and natural beauty of the Cook Islands.

When Jane Pearson set out to develop Nautilus Resort Rarotonga, she had one guiding principle: guests should leave remembering the Cook Islands, not just a hotel that could sit on any beach in the world. That commitment to an authentic Polynesian experience shapes everything at the boutique property, from high-quality furnishings to the farm-to-table restaurant supplied by the resort's own market garden.

Pearson, co-owner and manager, says luxury here is measured in service and sincerity rather than scale. Edible gardens of local flowers and fruits grow outside guest doorsteps, and personalization begins simply, staff greet every visitor by name and learn their dietary needs, celebrations, and preferences before arrival.

For American travelers, especially those from the West Coast, the appeal lies in genuine cultural immersion.

"Guests are invited into the island lifestyle and the Polynesian way of life, which creates a much deeper and more memorable travel experience."

Sustainability runs deep, too: UV-treated, bottle-quality water has slashed plastic waste, phosphate-free products protect the lagoon, and solar power keeps operations off the grid.

> **"Guests are invited into the island lifestyle and the Polynesian way of life, which creates a much deeper and more memorable travel experience."**
>
> JANE PEARSON | OWNER AND MANAGER OF NAUTILUS RESORT RAROTONGA

What endures, Pearson insists, is the Kia Orana spirit, the warmth of Cook Islanders. "It's the kind of beauty you never tire of seeing."

# Aitutaki: The South Pacific Lagoon Where Luxury Means Space

Aitutaki ©Cook Islands Tourism.

A short flight from Rarotonga, this Cook Islands atoll has built its appeal on restraint, capping crowds, keeping ownership local, and selling the one thing the modern Pacific rarely offers anymore: room to breathe.

Most destinations measure success in arrivals. Aitutaki has started measuring it in ownership. On this small Cook Islands atoll, roughly 97% of tourism businesses are in local hands, and the island's leadership talks about pushing that figure to 100% the way other places talk about hitting record visitor counts. To the people steering Aitutaki's future, the headline number is not how many tourists land each year, it is how much of the money they spend stays with the families who live here.

That priority is written into a long-term blueprint, a 30-year community plan called Te Papa Tau o Araura, drawn up about four years ago. It took shape during the pandemic, when the island's tourism operators, large and small, suddenly had time to weigh what had been working and what had not. The plan that emerged rests on a few stubborn principles. One is captured in a phrase the island uses for itself, "Aitutaki for Aitutaki": the idea that residents own both the successes and the failures of their tourism economy. Another is that no one gets left behind, which in practice means growth is paced so that ordinary families can keep up. Move too fast, the thinking goes, and the gap between those who profit and those who don't widens into social tension.

The tools for managing that pace are unromantic but effective: licensing and caps. The island limits the number of lagoon operators and the number of hotel rooms, deliberately spreading opportunity across many households rather than concentrating it in a few large hands. Boats face licensing requirements, and some areas are kept for tourism while others are reserved for residents, so locals retain access to the land and lagoon that outsiders come to enjoy. Running through every decision is a single, almost philosophical question that the island keeps returning to: how much is enough?

It is a question the wider Cook Islands is now asking, too. The country welcomed a record 175,757 visitors in the 2024/25 financial year, with tourism receipts of around US$273.4 million (NZD$473.5 million) and tourism accounting for well over a third of the national economy. Yet the national tourism office has openly concluded that arrivals alone are no longer the right measure of success, and is shifting toward a model it describes as value over volume, higher-yield visitors, longer stays, benefits spread more evenly across islands and seasons. Aitutaki, in many ways, has been living that philosophy for years.

Part of what makes the approach work is a wariness about who owns the island's beds. Local leaders are openly cautious about absentee ownership and the holiday-home market, for a straightforward reason: profits earned by owners who live elsewhere tend to leave with them. People who actually live on Aitutaki, by contrast, are accountable to their neighbors. The same logic explains why the island insists that public policy, not unchecked private investment, set the direction. Let investment lead without guidance, the island's leadership warns, and you risk losing public access to the very places that make the destination special.

Pacific Resort Aitutaki - Bungalow Aerial.

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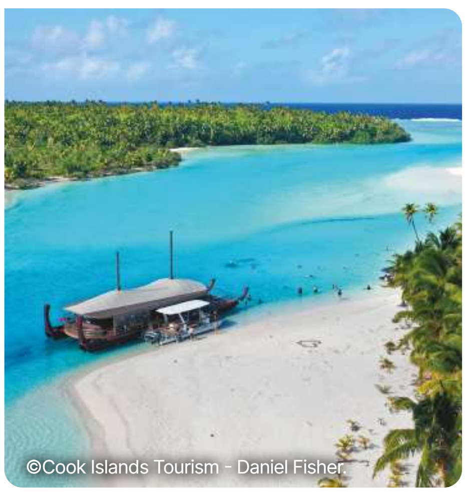

©Cook Islands Tourism - Daniel Fisher.

©Cook Islands Tourism.

None of this is framed as a new idea. The island's leaders point out that sustainable resource management is older than tourism here by a thousand years, embodied in raui, the traditional practice of closing off an area or protecting a species when it needs time to recover. Today's language of regenerative tourism, in other words, describes something Aitutakians have practiced for generations. That continuity gives the island's stewardship a credibility that marketing slogans elsewhere often lack.

Of course, restraint is easier to preach than to fund, and Aitutaki's ambitions run straight into the hard limits of being a remote island. Energy and water sit at the top of the list. Leaders want to push the island toward a solar capacity well beyond its current needs to cut its dependence on imported fuel, an effort begun nearly a decade ago, though delays mean some of the technology is already dated. Water is its own story: the island has discovered abundant natural drinking water with ideal fluoride levels, a genuine public-health advantage, but it still needs the infrastructure to distribute it properly. An upgraded harbor, essential to both resilience and the economy, is also on the agenda. Everything on a remote atoll runs on longer timelines, supplies are stocked in months, not days, and that reality, the island notes, breeds a certain self-reliance.

Where the plan looks furthest ahead is in who it wants to bring home. Aitutaki's leaders argue that future partnerships should make room first for returning Aitutakians and other Cook Islanders living abroad, creating space for the diaspora to come back and invest. Build too fast with outside money, they caution, and you risk shutting your own people out of the economy they would otherwise inherit. It is a notably different pitch from the usual courtship of foreign capital.

Then there is the longer horizon still: the seabed. The waters of the Cook Islands hold significant mineral wealth in the form of nodules, and the island's leadership views the opportunity with a mix of interest and caution. The decisive question, again, is not whether the minerals can be extracted but how much the country actually needs. Managed responsibly, leaders suggest, such resources could fund world-class healthcare and education; but only if the Cook Islands remains a genuine partner across the entire value chain and environmental impacts are kept to a minimum. It is the same restraint that governs the lagoon, applied to the deep ocean.

What ties it all together is a refusal to treat tourism as something that simply happens to the island. On Aitutaki, it is something to be shaped, paced, and, when necessary, slowed, so that the people who call the place home remain its owners, its hosts, and its first beneficiaries. In an industry built on chasing more, an island that keeps asking how much is enough is making a quietly radical bet: that the surest way to protect paradise is to decide, in advance, what you are not willing to sell.

EDWARD HERMAN,
CHAIRMAN OF AIRPORT AUTHORITY

NIKAU TANGAROA,
CEO OF AIRPORT AUTHORITY

JOSEPH NGAMATA,
ACTING CEO OF AIRPORT AUTHORITY

# Gateway to the South Pacific: How Cook Islands Is Rebuilding for the Next Decade of Travel Connectivity

As larger jets arrive more often and the ocean creeps toward the runway, the Airport Authority of the Cook Islands is racing to expand capacity, harden its defenses against climate change, and reopen a direct link to California.

Airport Authority.


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Air Rarotonga - ©Cook Islands Pocket Guide.

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Airport Authority.

In the Cook Islands, an airport is never just an airport. Spread across 15 islands in roughly 772,000 square miles (2 million square kilometers) of the South Pacific, this nation of around 17,000 people depends on aviation the way other countries depend on highways. Visitors arrive by air. Goods move by air. Families separated by hundreds of miles of open ocean stay connected by air. When the planes are flying, the country is open for business. When they are not, almost everything else waits.

That is the lens through which Edward Herman, Chairman of the Airport Authority of the Cook Islands, and Joseph Ngamata, its Acting CEO, view their work. For them, the terminal at Rarotonga International Airport is less a piece of transportation infrastructure than the threshold of the entire nation.

"In the Cook Islands, the airport is essentially the front door to the country. It's how people arrive, how trade happens, and most importantly, how families and communities stay connected." - Edward Herman, Chairman.

"Our role is straightforward but critical," Herman says. "We must keep that door open, operating efficiently and safely at all times. We are the gatekeepers, ensuring access while also striving to reflect our culture and identity through the gateway experience."

Ngamata puts the economic stakes more bluntly. "If flights stop, the economy stops. That's the reality," he says. "Airport operations are not just about aircraft, they are about livelihoods. The entire economy depends on connectivity." It is a dependence that shapes every decision the Authority makes, because in a small island economy there is little margin for disruption and no easy alternative when a link goes down.

The challenge facing the Authority is the welcome kind: growth. As tourism and trade expand, the airport has to expand with them, and the leadership is candid that the infrastructure is straining to keep up. "There must be strong alignment between economic growth and airport capacity," Herman says. "As tourism and trade expand, the airport must evolve alongside them. That creates challenges, but also shapes our long-term strategy."

Several modernization projects are now underway at once. The Authority is expanding the terminal to ease congestion and improve the passenger experience, while still, Herman is careful to note, showcasing Cook Islands culture rather than scrubbing it away in favor of generic airport sheen. It is upgrading safety infrastructure, extending runway end safety areas to meet evolving international standards, and planning to relocate the control tower so it can better manage larger and more frequent aircraft.

Of these, Ngamata singles out the terminal as the most pressing. "The terminal expansion is particularly urgent," he says. "Planning must look five to ten years ahead. If you already feel congestion, you're often behind." That forward-looking discipline runs through the Authority's master planning, which ties each infrastructure decision to specific traffic thresholds, both passenger numbers and aircraft movements.

The pressure is already visible on the ground. Larger aircraft, including Boeing 787s and Airbus A321s, are arriving more frequently, and sometimes simultaneously, which strains the airport's apron capacity. "Flexibility is a key issue," Herman says. "Even small delays can disrupt operations because our infrastructure is limited. Domestic and international operations also share space, which adds complexity." The upgrades, he acknowledges, are essential, and they require significant investment.

For Herman and Ngamata, one route looms larger than any other: a direct connection to the U.S. mainland. "The U.S. connection is critical," Ngamata says. "It provides access not only to North America but also to Europe and beyond." Today, the only nonstop Cook Islands runs from Honolulu, leaving California travelers to connect through Hawaii or Tahiti.

> "In the Cook Islands, the airport is essentially the front door to the country. It's how people arrive, how trade happens, and most importantly, how families and communities stay connected."
>
> EDWARD HERMAN | CHAIRMAN OF AIRPORT AUTHORITY

Re-establishing a direct route to Los Angeles, Herman says, "would be highly beneficial for tourism and economic resilience." While the final call rests with the government, the Authority sees itself as the enabler. "Strategically, we strongly support U.S. connectivity," he says. "The airport plays a key role as the gateway." For a destination still relatively unknown to American travelers, a direct West Coast link could be transformative.

No account of Cook Islands aviation is complete without Air Rarotonga, the country's flag carrier. Founded in 1978 with a single Cessna, the privately owned airline has built nearly half a century of uninterrupted service into the connective tissue of the nation. From its hub at Rarotonga International, its Saab 340B+ turboprops and Embraer Bandeirantes link the capital to the scattered islands of the Southern and Northern Groups, some with short, unpaved strips that larger aircraft cannot touch, while a Cessna Citation jet handles charters and the occasional medical evacuation. Air Rarotonga carries tens of thousands of passengers a year and also flies internationally to Tahiti, knitting the Cook Islands into the wider Pacific.

> "We cannot raise the airport, so we must innovate to manage water flow and protect operations. This will require long-term planning and global cooperation."
>
> EDWARD HERMAN | CHAIRMAN OF AIRPORT AUTHORITY

Its role extends well beyond its own flights. Air Rarotonga is also the ground handler for the international carriers serving Rarotonga, including Hawaiian Airlines, the only airline operating a nonstop service between the United States and the Cook Islands, on its route from Honolulu. That makes the local airline a quiet but essential partner in the very U.S. connectivity the Authority is working to expand: every American visitor who steps off that Honolulu flight is met by Air Rarotonga's ground crews. In a market this small, such overlapping roles are not redundancy but resilience.

If growth is the opportunity, climate change is the existential threat, and at Rarotonga, it is not abstract. "Our runway is close to the ocean, so storm surges are a real threat," Ngamata says. The Authority is strengthening coastal protection and hardening infrastructure to withstand increasingly severe weather. Sea-level rise is already affecting the airport's drainage systems, and the geography offers no easy fix.

"We cannot raise the airport, so we must innovate to manage water flow and protect operations. This will require long-term planning and global cooperation." - Edward Herman, Chairman.

On emissions, the Authority is working through environmental certification programs and has begun measuring its carbon footprint. It already runs a solar energy partnership and is exploring further renewables, including panels on terminal roofs and parking areas. But here, too, the constraints of a small island bite: limited land and strict aviation safety standards cap how far solar can expand.

Delivering all of this, in an era of shrinking donor funding, means rethinking how projects get financed. The Authority is exploring private-sector partnerships and innovative financing models, and Herman is emphatic that it cannot go it alone. "Partnerships, with airlines, government, investors, and regional stakeholders, are essential," he says.

Yet for all the talk of aprons and runway safety areas, both men return to something less tangible. "Investing in our airport is not just a financial decision, it's an investment in a culture and a people," Herman says. "While returns may not always be measured purely in financial terms, the social and cultural value is immense."

The message to readers in Los Angeles is, finally, an invitation. "You cannot truly understand it from afar, you have to experience it," Ngamata says. "The Cook Islands offer something genuinely unique in the Pacific." Herman agrees: every visitor, he hopes, leaves remembering the warmth, pride, and authenticity they found just beyond the front door.

AIRPORT AUTHORITY COOK ISLANDS

# At the Edge of the Pacific, Cook Islands Harbors Balance Trade, Tourism and the Tides of Change

CEO Okesene Moananu oversees the harbors that handle 97% of the nation's imports. As cruise tourism surges and ambitious upgrades take shape, the Cook Islands Ports Authority is steering toward a more connected future.

OKESENE MOANANU,
CEO OF PORTS AUTHORITY

For a nation of 15 islands scattered across nearly 772,000 square miles (2 million square kilometers) of the South Pacific, almost everything begins at the wharf. The Cook Islands Ports Authority handles roughly 97% of the country's imports, making its two international harbors, at Rarotonga and Aitutaki, the lifelines that keep store shelves stocked, building sites supplied and resort kitchens running.

"The Ports Authority serves as the main gateway for goods entering the country," says chief executive Okesene Moananu. From those two hubs, domestic ferries carry cargo onward to the outer islands, 14 of which are inhabited. "Our role is essentially to ensure that goods, supplies and resources reach communities across the entire country."

That mission is inseparable from tourism, the engine of the Cook Islands economy. Moananu points to a tight link between the volume of cargo arriving and the number of visitors stepping off planes and ships. Much of what the ports receive, food, equipment, building materials, ultimately serves the hospitality sector. The harbors also welcome cruise traffic during a season that runs from August to May, though here the country confronts a stubborn constraint: with no dedicated cruise wharves, ships must anchor offshore and ferry passengers ashore by tender.

Equity is a guiding principle. To keep essential goods affordable for remote communities, the Authority waives certain marine and berthing fees for domestic vessels serving the outer islands. Operators still pay for facilities such as cargo sheds, but reducing port fees, Moananu explains, helps keep supply chains affordable, a quiet subsidy that holds the archipelago together.

Avatiu Harbour Rarotonga - Cook Islands Tourism - Daniel Fisher.

Behind the scenes, the logistics are unrelenting. The Authority manages 100% of sea cargo entering an import-dependent economy; outbound containers, Moananu notes, are mostly empty. Two domestic ferries distribute construction materials, food and supplies purchased from Rarotonga's wholesalers to the far-flung islands.

Modernization is well underway. In Aitutaki, a three-year project to widen and deepen the main channel, expand the operating basin and enlarge the cargo hardstand is nearing completion, work that will let larger domestic vessels berth directly rather than offloading to barges. Rarotonga poses a tougher puzzle. Its harbor entrance measures just 54 meters across, a tight squeeze for larger ships navigating strong currents. The Authority is weighing options drawn up by a New Zealand consultancy to widen the entrance and improve the turning basin, though the price tag could run into the tens of millions of dollars.

Cruise ambitions are bigger still. Aitutaki has separated cruise operations from cargo handling to create a more visitor-friendly environment, and Rarotonga's tender system works adequately for now. But Moananu's vision, bringing cruise ships alongside a pier, would demand an estimated US$56 million (NZD$100 million). "At the moment, that level of funding is beyond our reach," he concedes.

Resilience, meanwhile, has demanded steady investment. Over three years the Authority has upgraded its cargo-handling equipment, knowing that a single breakdown can stall the entire supply chain. It works closely with a stevedoring partner and participates in regional systems linking customs, immigration and shipping agencies to streamline clearance.

Looking outward, Moananu sees opportunity. Expansion toward the sea could one day accommodate larger vessels and bring cruise ships alongside. Seabed mineral exploration is another emerging frontier; research vessels increasingly call in Cook Islands waters, and with the right infrastructure the nation could become a regional hub for scientific and exploration missions.

None of this, he stresses, comes at the expense of the ocean. The Moana is central to Cook Islands culture and livelihood, and every project must clear rigorous environmental review. "Development and environmental protection must go hand in hand," Moananu says. Healthy reefs and clear lagoons are, after all, what visitors come to see.

The challenges are real, a small revenue base tied to fluctuating visitor numbers, debt from past investments, scarce local technical expertise and supply lines that stretch back to New Zealand, where a single missing part can take weeks to arrive. Yet Moananu's pitch to American readers is warm and confident. The Cook Islands sit about five hours from Hawaii, four from New Zealand and only an hour from Tahiti, remote, perhaps, but well connected.

"It truly is an island paradise," he says. Small in landmass but ambitious in outlook, the Cook Islands, and the harbors that sustain them, are steering steadily toward the future.

COOK ISLANDS PORTS AUTHORITY
TE APONGA TAU AVA O TE KUKI AIRANI

Port Authority.

Port Authority.

## Telecommunications

# Vodafone Cook Islands: Powering Connectivity in the Heart of the Pacific

Across 772,000 square miles (2 million square kilometers) of ocean, the nation's premier telecom keeps every island, and 175,757 annual visitors, reliably and seamlessly connected.

Few telecom operators face a challenge quite like the Cook Islands. Fifteen islands, around 17,000 residents, and roughly 772,000 square miles (2 million square kilometers) of ocean between them. For three decades, Vodafone Cook Islands has been the country's premier provider, delivering fixed-line, mobile, broadband, IPTV, and even postal services under a single government license, a true full-service operator in a market that, while competitive on paper, remains very small.

That breadth of coverage was no accident. It traces to an early-1990s government decision to grant the incumbent, then Telecom Cook Islands, an exclusive license carrying a mandate to connect every island under universal service obligations. In a tiny, remote market, that approach proved more effective than competition would have. The company maintained exclusive control over fixed, mobile, and international services until 2019 reforms, when the Telecommunications Act ended the monopoly and introduced an independent regulator, and it rebranded as Vodafone Cook Islands in January 2020. By the company's own account, the original universal-service model had already delivered, and competition has not significantly changed service levels, particularly in the remote outer islands.

> "Connectivity comes first, without it, there's no AI or digital innovation."
>
> PHILLIP HENDERSON | CEO OF VODAFONE COOK ISLANDS

Connectivity began with satellite in the mid-1990s and was transformed by undersea cable. In 2020 the Manatua One Polynesia cable reached Rarotonga and Aitutaki, linking the Cook Islands to Niue, Samoa, and Tahiti and dramatically expanding international bandwidth. The cable is owned and operated locally by Avaroa Cable Limited, a state-owned enterprise, with Vodafone as the anchor customer. Today every populated island has 4G mobile, broadband, and national TV and radio, with bandwidth the company says rivals Australia and New Zealand. Combined with both satellite and cable systems, that means citizens can participate fully in the digital economy, even where transport infrastructure is still catching up.

Now the operator is modernizing aggressively, rolling out fiber-to-the-home modeled on Australian and New Zealand systems, launching 5G, and running three purpose-built data centers for hosting and disaster recovery. Digital inclusion, in the company's view, means affordable access and letting people decide how to use it rather than forcing adoption. Notably, the Cook Islands is a well-banked nation, so some solutions like mobile payments haven't taken off as quickly as elsewhere, a reminder that moving too fast technologically can create its own challenges.

PHILLIP HENDERSON,
CEO OF VODAFONE COOK ISLANDS

> "We want you to enjoy your time here while staying effortlessly connected."

That infrastructure underpins tourism, the economy's engine. With just 17,000 residents but some 175,757 visitors a year, the network is built for a far larger scale: hotels connected by fiber, "hospitality-as-a-service" solutions, and travel SIMs and eSIMs that visitors activate before they ever land. The goal is to make connectivity seamless so guests can focus on enjoying the islands rather than hunting for a signal.

Reliability shapes the company's partnerships, too. As one of the smallest telcos in the world, it is highly selective, favoring partners who can scale solutions to its size and commit for 15 to 20 years over the latest startup innovation, however exciting. Cybersecurity follows the same disciplined logic: industry best practices, collaboration with regional and global telecom organizations, and secured data centers and cable systems, with the small nation's modest profile sometimes an advantage.

The guiding philosophy puts infrastructure ahead of everything else. The company sees artificial intelligence as a workforce multiplier rather than a threat, valuable for an economy facing workforce constraints, but only once the groundwork is laid. As its leadership frames it:

"Connectivity comes first, without it, there's no AI or digital innovation."

Once that foundation is in place, the company believes, innovation can flourish and the whole economy grows more efficient. For now, the vision is high-speed, low-latency coverage across every island through a mix of fiber and satellite, a base on which everything else can be built.

For travelers, the advice is refreshingly simple. Arrive with an unlocked phone, and the rest takes care of itself:

"We want you to enjoy your time here while staying effortlessly connected."

After thirty years of keeping a scattered nation online, Vodafone Cook Islands offers visitors a promise that matches, or exceeds, what they're used to at home.

# How the Cook Islands Is Rewriting the Rules of Seabed Mineral Exploration

**Cook Islands sits atop one of the planet's richest deposits of the metals that power batteries and clean energy. Seabed Minerals Authority Commissioner Beverly Stacey Ataera explains why her nation is moving slowly, letting science, not market pressure, decide whether anything is ever mined.**

Spread a map of the Cook Islands across a table and you will notice something unusual: there is almost no land. Fifteen small islands, home to roughly 17,000 people, sit scattered across an expanse of the South Pacific so vast that the nation is, relative to its population, one of the largest ocean states on Earth. Its waters cover about 772,000 square miles (2 million square kilometers), an area that, counting the seabed of its recently recognized extended continental shelf, reaches roughly 888,000 square miles (2.3 million square kilometers).

"About 99.9% of the Cook Islands is ocean," says Beverly Stacey Ataera, Commissioner of the Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority (SBMA). It is a statistic that frames everything her office does. The Cook Islands is not a country with a coastline. It is a country that is, almost entirely, the sea itself.

And resting on the floor of that sea, roughly five kilometers beneath the surface, lies a resource that has drawn the attention of governments, scientists, and investors around the world: polymetallic nodules. Small, black, and about the size of a golf ball, these formations have accumulated on the abyssal plain over millions of years. Inside each one are the metals that modern economies increasingly cannot do without, cobalt, nickel, manganese, copper, and rare earth elements.

"These minerals are essential for the global energy transition," Ataera explains. "They're used in batteries, solar panels, wind energy systems, and high-efficiency jet engine technologies." The scale of future demand is difficult to overstate. By her account, the world is expected to consume as much cobalt over the next 15 years as it has across the previous 120. Land-based mining, she notes, is unlikely to keep pace with that surge "without considerable environmental and social consequences."

That tension, rising global need set against the limits of terrestrial supply, is what places a nation of 17,000 people unexpectedly close to the center of one of the defining industrial questions of the century. But Ataera is careful never to let the conversation race ahead of itself.

"The real question is not simply whether the resource exists. It clearly does," she says. "It's whether it can be accessed responsibly and in an environmentally acceptable manner. Today, we don't know if that is the case."

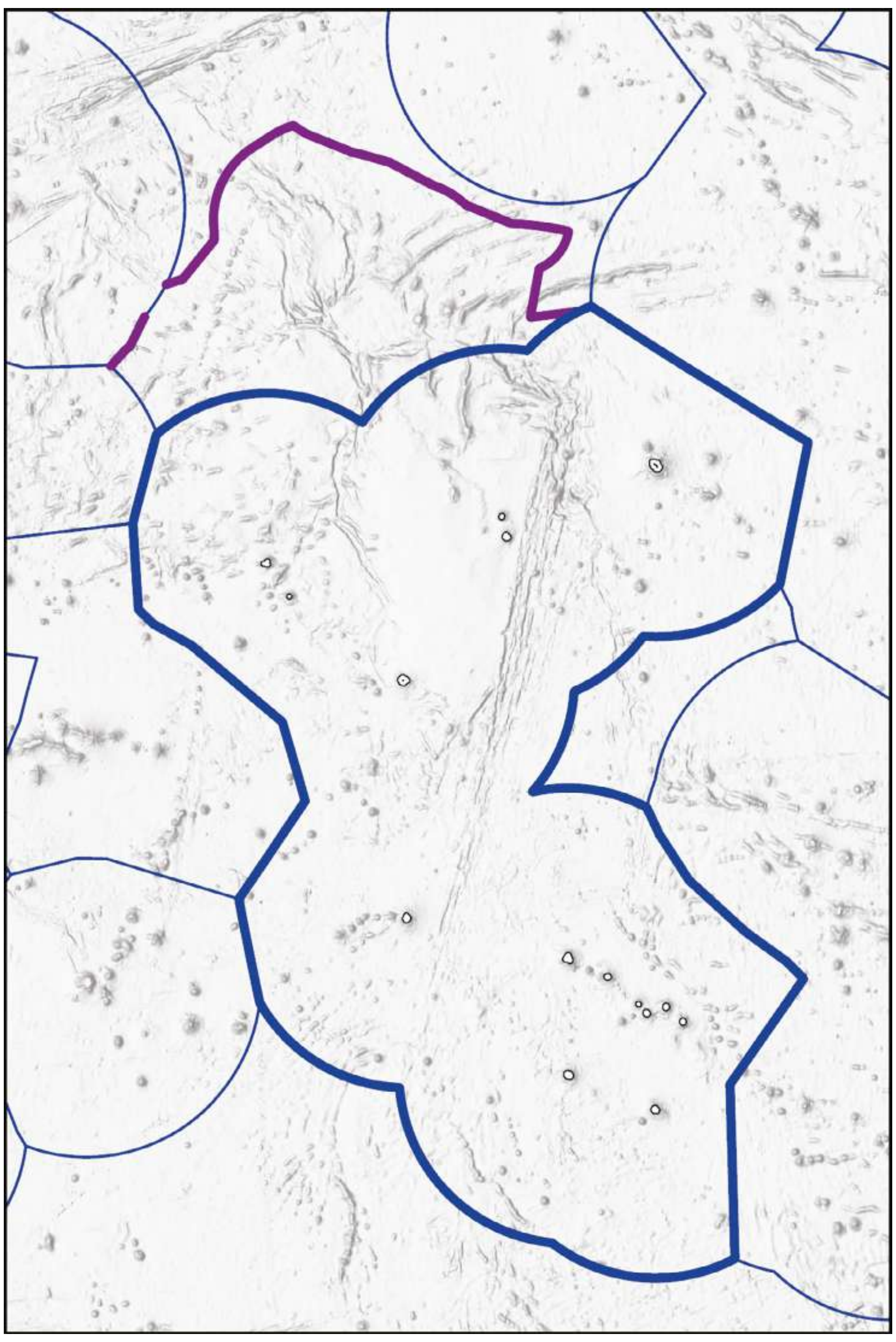
It would be easy to mistake the SBMA for an agency built to launch an industry. It is not. The Authority is a national regulator, and Ataera is emphatic about the distinction.

"At this stage, we are strictly in the exploration phase," she says. "No decision has been made on whether the Cook Islands will proceed to mineral harvesting or mining." The SBMA's job, as she describes it, is to design and enforce the governance systems that oversee exploration, setting the rules, holding licensees to them, and building the body of knowledge that any eventual decision would have to rest upon.

The requirements placed on license holders are extensive and, importantly, public. Operators must complete environmental baseline studies, collect and submit scientific data, demonstrate commercial viability, and meet detailed operational reporting and compliance standards. The SBMA places inspectors aboard research vessels, requires continuous reporting, and reviews all activity against the country's long-term interests.

What makes the framework distinctive is that economic and environmental questions are not weighed separately or sequentially. Through a joint mandate with the National Environment Service (NES), they are assessed at the same time.

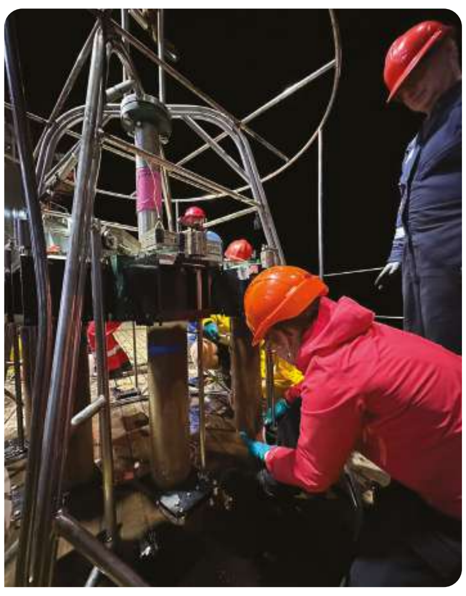
"It's not simply a question of economic opportunity versus environmental risk," Ataera says. "If operators cannot demonstrate that the activity is commercially viable while preserving environmental integrity, then it is unlikely to proceed." In other words, a project that pencils out financially but damages the deep ocean fails the test, just as surely as one that is environmentally sound but commercially hollow.



Cook Islands EEZ Map | EEZ | ECS | Islands |

Anuanua Moana Research.

> **"Our approach is based on the precautionary principle. Science first, evidence first, and no decisions without robust environmental data."**
>
> BEVERLY STACEY ATAERA | COMMISSIONER OF SBMA



BEVERLY STACEY ATAERA, COMMISSIONER OF SBMA

> **"We work from a position of knowledge. Our principle is simple: if science does not support it, we do not proceed."**

For the Cook Islands, the appeal of getting this equation right is considerable. The national economy leans heavily on tourism, supported by external aid and a handful of other sectors. The pandemic exposed how dangerous that concentration can be.

"As we saw during COVID-19, that limited diversity can expose us to severe economic shocks," Ataera says. A responsibly developed minerals sector could, in principle, transform the country's finances and broaden its economic base for generations.

Yet she returns again and again to a single, non-negotiable condition: environmental stewardship. And she is quick to dispel a common misunderstanding about what seabed mining would and would not touch.

"There's often a misconception that deep-sea mining would somehow affect our lagoons or visible coastal areas," she says. "That's not the case." The nodules lie far offshore in the deep ocean, well away from the turquoise lagoons that visitors picture when they imagine the Cook Islands. The country has also established marine protected areas as an added safeguard.

To convey the true footprint of any potential activity, Ataera offers an analogy that has become something of a signature. "Imagine our entire Exclusive Economic Zone as a rugby field," she says. "The total area that could potentially be mined over 30 years would be roughly the size of the scrum in the middle of the field." Against more than 772,000 square miles (2 million square kilometers) of ocean, the potential disturbance is, by that measure, vanishingly small.

The Authority is also developing habitat-focused conservation policies and marine spatial planning frameworks designed to protect biodiversity and ecosystem function across the many different types of seabed environment within its waters. Underpinning all of it is a single guiding idea.

"Our approach is based on the precautionary principle," Ataera says. "Science first, evidence first, and no decisions without robust environmental data."

That principle is more than rhetoric. The Cook Islands' seabed minerals legislation and regulations have already been revised three times since 2012, each revision, Ataera says, reflecting how much the country's understanding has evolved.

The Authority invests in baseline environmental data, seabed mapping, oceanographic research, independent scientific validation, and external technical review. A dedicated in-house science team, which includes award-winning Cook Islands scientists, interprets the findings. "We work from a position of knowledge," she says. "Our principle is simple: if science does not support it, we do not proceed."

Perhaps the most striking part of the program is that its value is already being realized, regardless of whether a single nodule is ever harvested. The same seafloor mapping and oceanographic research being gathered for minerals assessment is now feeding directly into tsunami modeling, hazard mapping, early warning systems, and fisheries infrastructure planning.

"Even if extraction never happens," Ataera says, "the science and knowledge of investment are already strengthening national resilience and public safety." For a low-lying Pacific nation acutely exposed to natural hazards, that dividend is not incidental. It is, in many ways, the point.

It also reframes how the country thinks about its place in the world. As a Pacific island nation, Ataera notes, the Cook Islands is already on the front line of climate change, with rising seas posing a direct threat. That

Image by: Emergency Management Cook Islands (EMCI).


Source: Ocean Exploration Trust/DeepSea.

reality cuts two ways: it gives the country a stake in the clean-energy transition that seabed minerals could help supply, and it sharpens its insistence that any contribution must never come at the cost of its own environment.

"We feel a responsibility to explore whether we can contribute to the global shift towards renewable energy," she says, "but only if it does not create unacceptable risks for our own environment."

No country of 17,000 people can shoulder deep-ocean science alone, and the Cook Islands has not tried to. The Authority currently works with some 27 to 28 international partners, including institutions in the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom.

The American relationships, Ataera says, have been especially productive. Collaboration with U.S. agencies such as the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has been "exceptional," and the partners are jointly developing a strategic research plan.

These connections feed into an ambition that reaches well beyond minerals. The Cook Islands is advancing a concept it calls the Institute of Blue Ocean Science and Sustainability, or IBOSS, a plan to turn the country into a global hub for deep-sea research and blue-economy innovation.

"The vision is to make the Cook Islands a global hub for deep-sea scientific research," Ataera says, "where researchers from around the world can come to conduct fieldwork, complete doctoral research, and collaborate on ocean science." If it succeeds, IBOSS could become a durable, knowledge-based source of economic growth, one that does not depend on extraction at all.

Running through every part of the program is a commitment to public trust, which Ataera treats as a precondition rather than a nicety. The Authority practices open dialogue, public consultation, and full

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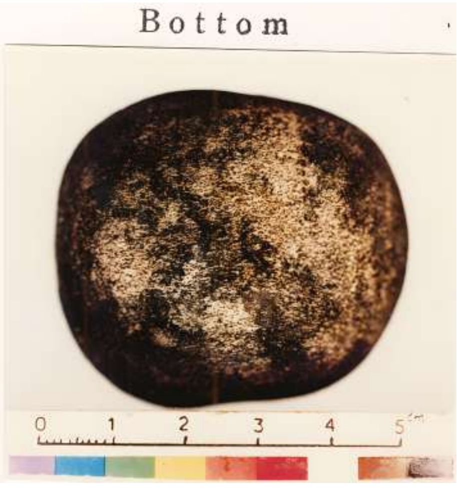
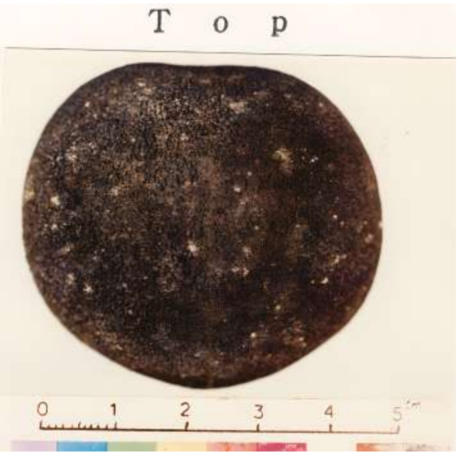
>
> BEVERLY STACEY ATAERA | COMMISSIONER OF SBMA


Image by: Emergency Management Cook Islands (EMCI).





> **"We only get one chance to get this right."**
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data transparency, and all of its environmental data is made publicly accessible. Communities are updated regularly on where the process stands.

She is also careful to clarify the limits of her own office's authority, a point she clearly considers essential to honest public engagement.

"The SBMA does not decide whether the Cook Islands proceed with extraction," she says. "There's a governance process around that. Our role is to ensure that the information and governance framework are in place so that the people of the Cook Islands and their government can make an informed decision." The regulator builds the evidence and the rules; the nation makes the choice.

"Transparency is the foundation of trust," she says.

For now, the work remains firmly fixed on exploration and understanding. The current five-year exploration licenses expire on February 20, 2027, and renewal, Ataera stresses, is not a formality. License holders must reapply and again satisfy scientific, environmental, and operational criteria.

Some operators may eventually move toward trial mineral harvesting, a testing phase, she is careful to note, that is still not commercial extraction. Its purpose would be to determine whether the technology can operate effectively while protecting the environment.

In parallel, the country is thinking through the broader national readiness any future industry would demand: airports, roads, hospitals, and the regulatory capacity to govern a sector of real scale. "For a nation of only 17,000 people, this is a major undertaking," she says.

Asked what she would want readers in Los Angeles to take away, Ataera does not reach for promises. She reaches for principle.

"The Cook Islands are approaching seabed minerals with care, discipline, and responsibility," she says. "We understand what is at stake, economically, environmentally, and for future generations. Our approach is grounded in science, governance, transparency, and long-term sustainability."

A decision to proceed, she adds, would come only if the sector meets the highest environmental and scientific standards and delivers lasting benefits to her people. "But every part of that equation must be acceptable."

Then she offers the line that has, in effect, become the country's governing philosophy, a phrase as much about humility as ambition.

"We only get one chance to get this right."

## Highlights

- **99.9% OCEAN:** The Share of the Cook Islands' territory that is sea rather than land, across roughly 888,000 sq mi (2.3 million km²) of waters that now include its extended continental shelf.
- **5 METALS + RARE EARTHS:** Each golf-ball-sized seabed nodule holds cobalt, nickel, manganese, copper, and rare earth elements, core inputs for batteries, solar panels, wind systems, and jet engines.
- **15 YEARS = 120 YEARS:** Projected global cobalt demand over the next decade and a half is expected to equal the total consumed over the previous 120.
- **A SCRUM ON A RUGBY FIELD:** The maximum area that could be mined over 30 years, set against the entire Exclusive Economic Zone, a measure of how small the potential footprint would be.
- **FEBRUARY 20, 2027:** Expiry of the current five-year exploration licenses; renewal is not automatic and requires operators to re-meet scientific, environmental, and operational criteria.
- **STATUS: EXPLORATION ONLY:** No decision has been made to proceed to mining. The SBMA builds the evidence and governance framework; the people and government of the Cook Islands make the final call.


SBMA Inspector Junior Tapoki.

Seabed Minerals Authority
Runanga Takere Moana
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## DISCOVER THE PA ENUA

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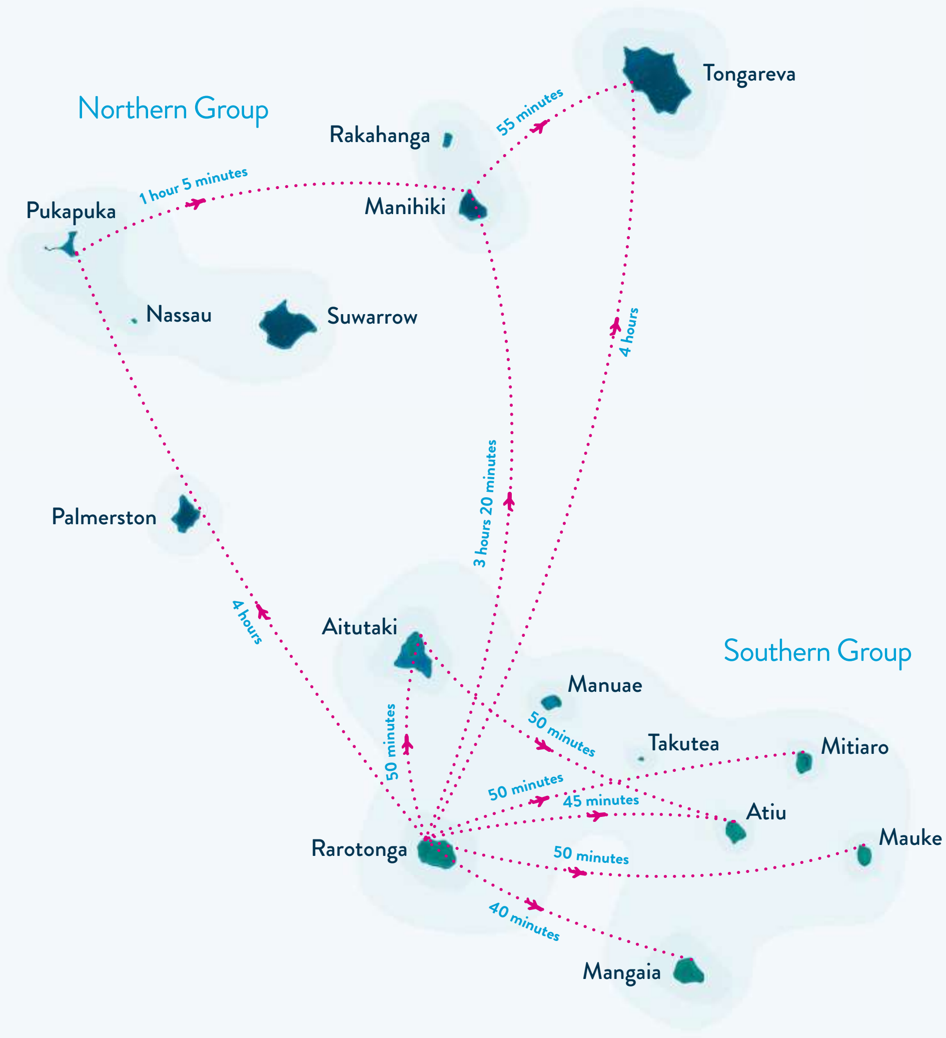



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