

Polynesian PANTRY

Cooking in the far-flung collection of coral atolls that make up the Cook Islands means beach barbecues of chilli mud crab, slow-roasted pork and tropical fruits, charred fresh off the trees. Welcome to the land of coconut milk and honey, says Marc Millon

PHOTOGRAPHY BY EWEN BELL

‘We call the coconut palm the tree of life,’ says Papatua, a tribal chieftain and our guide. Using a long tool, he hooks down a green coconut, slices the top off with a machete and hands it to me. The tree-cool coconut water is fresh, lightly sweet and invigorating. ‘It is beneficial to us at every stage. Green coconuts are *nu* and their milk is nourishing,’ he explains. ‘When the coconut becomes brown it’s *akari* and we eat the meat and grate it to make coconut cream, which seasons everything. The *uto* is the sprouting coconut, with a heart that is soft and spongy.’ The coconut is an abundant source of life here in the Cook Islands. Papatua and his people get oil for cooking, weave baskets from the leaves, and burn husks as fuel. The coconut is a metaphor for a way of life that hasn’t changed in hundreds of years.

The Cook Islands are abundant in every way. Comprising 15 main islands poised roughly midway between New Zealand and Hawaii, this self-governing South Pacific nation is indeed a land of coconut milk and honey. Tropical food falls from the trees; not just coconuts but bananas, plantains, jackfruit, pineapples, paw paws, mangoes, avocados, pomegranates, native lemons, kaffir limes and much more. Island root vegetables such as taro, arrowroot, manioc and sweet potato grow easily in the fertile volcanic soil and form the staples of the diet. Wild chickens roam freely everywhere, and many households keep a pig tethered in the garden.

We come to truly appreciate the fecundity of the island when we visit Louis Enoka and Minar Purotu Henderson at their colonial-style plantation house that dates from 1854. After a





Previous page:
cruising the lagoon
on Aitutaki. This
page, left to right:
lunch with Captain
Moko; Crown Beach
Resort & Spa; fun
at the Punanga Nui
Cultural Market.
Opposite, clockwise
from top left: palms
offer shade; Crown
Beach Resort;
shopping at Punanga
Nui; Hidden Spirit
Café; its delicious
fare; Pacific Resort;
taking to the water;
vibrant island
colours; beaches
and boats
at every turn

Travel INFORMATION

The Cook Islands are approximately 30 hours' flying time from London. Currency is the New Zealand dollar, with additional local notes and coins in circulation. These cannot be used or exchanged anywhere else in the world, so are something of a collector's item. November to March are the warmest months, with occasional tropical showers expected. Temperatures in December range on average from 22°C to 28°C.

GETTING THERE

Air New Zealand offers daily flights from London Heathrow to Auckland via Los Angeles. Flying time is about 26 hours. There are also regular flights from Auckland to the islands of Rarotonga and Aitutaki, which take about four hours. airnewzealand.co.uk

RESOURCES

Cook Islands Tourism is the official tourist board for the Cook Islands and its website is a first port of call for information on the destination, with inspiration on places to visit. cookislands.travel

FURTHER READING

An Island to Oneself by Tom Neale (Ox Bow Press, £12.40). This autobiography will certainly get you in the mood for an island escape. It was written by a New Zealand bushcraft expert who spent 16 years living by himself on the island of Anchorage in the Suvarrow atoll.

CARBON COUNTING

Return flights from London to Rarotonga will produce 5.27 tonnes of CO₂. You can offset your emissions for the trip with Climate Care. The cost for this trip is £39.56, and your donations go towards supporting environmental projects around the world, from protecting forests and wildlife by replanting trees and restoring natural habitats, to clean water schemes for those in need and clean-energy projects. climatecare.org

professional life in food and hospitality mainly in Australia, the couple had returned to the largest island, Rarotonga, where once or twice a month they open their house to the public for a garden tour and plantation dinner. 'We enjoy welcoming people into our home to experience how we live and eat. Minar loves cooking – she does it all herself,' says Louis proudly. After a tour of the extensive organic plantation guests sit down at a communal table to enjoy a sumptuous plantation feast prepared with produce almost entirely from the garden. 'The pork is from our own pigs. We brine it in seawater then slow roast it in coconut milk. The fish also comes from our own boats. The *wahoo* you'll eat tonight, steamed in banana leaves with sweet chili and coconut, was swimming just hours ago.' It brings new meaning to living off the fat of the land.

Not surprisingly for an island people, the catching and eating of the freshest seafood is a way of life. At low tide, Cook Islanders venture into the shallows of Rarotonga's lagoon to search for edible treasure: sea urchins, sea cucumbers, clams, sea snails, seaweed and much more. Beyond the reef, the seabed quickly plummets to a depth of some 180m or deeper and the waters are ripe with a rich catch. All along the main road that circumnavigates Rarotonga, fishermen hang up their daily catch on vertical lines in front of their homes to sell to passers-by. At the weekly Punanga Nui market, whole yellowfin and skipjack tuna are on display alongside huge wahoo and colourful mahi-mahi. There are buckets of octopus and trays of still-live crayfish. Driving around the west side of the island, we see a sign for 'smoked marlin' and meet Dave, who tells us that he cold smokes the local fish and sells it from his home. 'Mate, it's flying out the door,' he chirps. 'Visitors and locals love to buy a pack or two and enjoy this with a chilled bottle of sauvignon blanc sitting by the water watching the sun set.'

At Trader Jacks, a popular wharfside diner in the capital, Avarua, I enjoy a plate of *ika mata*, a sort of Polynesian ceviche. It's the local skipjack 'cooked' in lime juice then served in a coconut cream with mango, passion fruit, onions, red pepper and chili. When seafood is this fresh, it's hard to beat.

Later, I see just how fresh when I go deep-sea fishing with Captain Moko. It is blowing a Force 6 and the seas outside of Rarotonga's lagoon are incredibly rough. We've got six fishing lines baited with flying fish wired onto huge hooks trailing out behind the boat. Moko's assistant Tom, a young, tattooed





'Not surprisingly for an island people, the catching and eating of the freshest seafood is a way of life'



'Visitors and locals love to buy a pack of smoked fish and enjoy it with a chilled bottle of sauvignon blanc'





'With its large head and long, muscular body glistening an iridescent spectrum of green, blue, yellow, gold and silver, the mahi-mahi is one the most visually arresting of all fish'



rugby player, looks after the lines. 'Where are the birds?' barks out Moko. '11 o'clock. Six white ones,' replies Tom. The boat heaves in the sea and we turn back towards the frigatebirds, which apparently are markers that indicate the presence of the game fish we seek.

Suddenly, the line of one of the big rods is screaming. Moko turns the boat again, and the butt of the rod is thrust into a gimble that I've strapped on. I lift the rod to take up slack, reel in as quickly as I can, trying to keep a finger on the reel to stop the line from bunching up. Moko is screaming at me, and it feels like I have Moby-Dick on the end of the line. Suddenly, terribly, it all goes slack. 'Bring it in,' says Moko. Tom holds up the remains of the flying fish bait. 'Mahi-mahi,' says Moko, with the shake of the head. 'A big one.'

That one may have got away, but luckily there are plenty more where it came from. On our return to shore, a fisherman has just landed one of these beauts and is cutting it up. I now see what I was up against. With its large head and long, muscular body glistening an iridescent spectrum of green, blue, yellow, gold and silver, the mahi-mahi is one of the most visually arresting of all fish.

It is also one of the most delicious. At The Mooring Fish Cafe, a popular beachside diner housed in a shipping container, I am able to sample it prepared simply and expertly by Jill, Captain Moko's wife. People head here after snorkelling or sailing in the lagoon, and sit barefoot at outdoor tables enjoying food that they eat with their hands. The mahi-mahi has pure white flesh that is dense, solid and sea-fresh. Jill marinates it in lime, then cover with breadcrumbs and pan-fries, serving with salad and lime mayonnaise.

After Rarotonga, the most visited of the Cook Islands is Aitutaki, located about 220km to the north and a 45-minute flight away. This tiny island is considered to be one of the most beautiful in the South Pacific; a coral atoll made up of a triangular reef that bounds a gorgeous turquoise lagoon and a collection of idyllic uninhabited islets known as *motus*. Most who visit this tropical paradise are day-trippers, but if you've come all this way, it is well worth staying for at least a few days. There is accommodation at all levels, from self-catering, to bed and breakfasts and five-star luxury. Probably Aitutaki's best hotel, Pacific Resort offers truly

Opposite, clockwise from top left:
stretching out on Rarotonga;
a roadside fish stall; fishing with Moko;
pick up the latest catch; preparing
dinner; smoked fish for sale. This page:
landing at One Foot Island



Where TO EAT

Prices are for three courses excluding wine, unless otherwise stated.

Garden Tour and Plantation Dinner Louis and Minar open their homes once or twice a month so that visitors can tour the extensive gardens and plantation, before sitting down together at a communal table in their home for an island feast. The food is prepared by Minar, almost entirely from their own organic produce. Highlights include skipjack tuna ceviche with lime, coriander and chilli; wahoo steamed in banana leaf; and habanero chillies stuffed with mahi-mahi. £49. *On eastern side of the island, between Avarua and Muri, Rarotonga. 00 682 22821*

Hidden Spirit Café Dine in the magical surrounds of the sprawling Maire Nui Tropical Gardens, a calm, relaxing, almost spiritual spot. Organic vegetables, fruits and herbs are picked fresh from the garden to go into a range of light salads at lunch; in the evenings there is an Asian fusion grill to enjoy. To finish, don't miss Terito Macquarie's famous cheesecake. £22. *Main Road, Titikaveka, Rarotonga 00 682 22796*

Nautilus Resort The restaurant of this brand-new eco-resort is already being hailed as one of the best on Rarotonga. Enjoy cocktails overlooking Muri's stunning lagoon, then dine on a Polynesian-inspired menu based on the freshest local produce, which is organic wherever possible. Dishes include gluten-free rukau and feta agnolotti; shredded duck salad with tropical fruits and coconut; and fragrant steamed parrot fish. The extensive wine list is particularly strong in small New Zealand estates. £48. *Muri Beach, Rarotonga, 00 682 25125, nautilusresortrarotonga.com*

Rapae Bay Restaurant The restaurant of Aitutaki's Pacific Resort is a destination dining venue, the place to eat while watching a sunset over the turquoise lagoon. The cuisine is stylish and wholly local: share a

seafood platter, or enjoy skipjack tuna that's barely kissed the grill in a miso broth with noodles, or seared wahoo with tropical fruit chutney, rukau and coconut rice. £39. *Aitutaki, 00 682 28140, pacificaitutaki.com*

Samade on the Beach Dine barefoot with your toes almost in Aitutaki's incredible blue lagoon in this deceptively casual beachfront restaurant. Chef and owner Thomas Koteka, one of the pioneers of Cook Islands tourism, offers a changing daily menu with dishes such as a grilled catch of the day, seafood curry, or braised belly pork. The bar is great for sunset cocktails. £29. *Aitutaki, 00 682 31526, samadeonthebeach.com*

The Mooring Fish Cafe Located in an old shipping container just up from the beach near Muri, this is the place to come for the freshest fish sandwiches and salads. Much of the fish is caught by owner Jill Stanton's husband, Captain Moko. The crumbed mahi-mahi with lime mayonnaise is sensational. Wash down with fresh nu – coconut water. £11. *Avana Fishing Club near Muri, Rarotonga 00 682 25553*

Trader Jacks This popular casual diner is unpretentious and no-frills. It has a wonderful wharfside position though this means that it has been destroyed by cyclones on three occasions. Eat out on the deck watching whales in season, or drop in for laid-back sunset cocktails and simple meals such as the delicious ika mata (salad of raw fish) or macadamia-crusted wahoo. £22. *Avarua, Rarotonga, 00 682 26464*

Tupuna's Restaurant This dirt-floor eating house is widely considered one of the best restaurants on Aitutaki. Though her restaurant is completely casual and laid back, Tupuna knows how to cook as well as the greats. Start off with a bowl of seafood chowder, then move on Tapuna's spectacular mud crab (worth ordering in advance) or an alternative favourite signature dish, seared tuna baked in a banana leaf. £33. *Aitutaki, 00 682 31678*



'The island is one of the most beautiful in the South Pacific, a coral atoll made up of a triangular reef that bounds a turquoise lagoon and a collection of idyllic uninhabited islands'

luxurious and secluded accommodation in beachfront suites and villas overlooking the lagoon. As a significant added bonus, its outstanding restaurant makes creative use of the island's produce.

Young executive chef Matthias Beer, originally from Munich, explains: 'Aitutaki is so small and so far away from anywhere else that it is essential to develop very close relationships. The fishermen

call me as they come back to let me know what they have caught. This means our guests can be enjoying the freshest fish just hours out of the sea. The hotel's night guard brings me mud crabs that he catches himself. One of our housekeepers supplies me with *rukau*, the leaves of the taro plant, which is like our island spinach. We have our own kitchen garden. I'm proud that the majority of the ingredients I cook with come from Aitutaki.'

Matthias's background working in Europe, Asia and now the South Pacific means that his dishes show a variety of influences. We enjoy wahoo straight off the boats, simply seared and served with a mango and chilli chutney, coconut rice and *rukau* while his Bavarian roots shine through in a stunning banana strudel. 'Most of all,' he says, 'I feel my cuisine is a showcase for this beautiful island.'

Aitutaki's biggest draw is its gorgeous lagoon. You simply can't believe that colours like this really do exist, the aquamarine shading to a deep turquoise hue that is simply out of this world. We explore the lagoon on the *Titi ai Tonga*, a 21m Polynesian-style catamaran that lands at deserted islands and takes us to the best snorkelling spots where we swim and dive on coral reefs, and see huge tropical fish and giant clams.

Appetites worked up from our exertions, come evening we have the chance to sample Aitutaki's most famous speciality, the mud crab, gathered by canny fishermen directly off the bed of the lagoon at low water. The place to sample this, almost everyone agrees, is Tupuna's Restaurant, a simple, dirt-floor eating house in the middle of the island. 'Most island people simply boil mud crab and season it with coconut cream,' explains Tupuna. 'I prefer to do it my way.' With that, she dispatches a live crab (stunned first in a freezer) with some mighty blows, cracks the shell with a volcanic stone, then simmers the crustacean in deliciously spicy sauce of ginger, garlic, chillies, wine, tomatoes and coriander. It is simply sensational. The meat from the mud crab is so creamy, succulent and sweet; a dish to be eaten with the hands, sucking every morsel out of the shell, the sauce mopped up with crusty bread, and all washed down with copious quantities of cold New Zealand sauvignon blanc.

Back in Rarotonga, we are impressed by the industry and entrepreneurship of so many people that we meet. Susan Wyllie has returned to her Cook Islands roots together with her New Zealand husband Robert and the couple have

Where TO STAY

Crown Beach Resort & Spa Located just 10 minutes from the international airport, Crown Beach offers thatched beachside villas and suites, set within beautiful manicured botanical gardens. Leaning palm trees add shade to the beach and there is some of the best snorkelling on the islands to be found in the adjacent lagoon. One-bedroom villas from £280 per night (minimum stay three nights). *Main Ring Road, Arorangi, Rarotonga, 00 682 23953, crownbeach.com*

Nautilus Resort This newly opened eco-friendly beachside resort offers spacious, beautiful accommodation in individual luxury villas with their own salt water plunge pools, as well as outdoor decks and showers. The restaurant is one of the best on the island. One-bedroom villas from £223 (minimum stay seven nights). *Muri Beach, Rarotonga, 00 682 25125, nautilusresortrarotonga.com*

Pacific Resort The island of Aitutaki is a special place indeed and this secluded luxury complex is a fitting place to enjoy the incredible natural environment. The spacious and private luxury bungalows, villas and suites all enjoy views over the beautiful lagoon, with direct access to the beach. There are the facilities of an exclusive resort and the Rapae Bay Restaurant is a must-do in the Cook Islands. It makes this a real gourmet retreat for anyone who takes quality of ingredients and their provenance seriously. Premium Beachfront Bungalow rooms from £531. *Aitutaki, 00 682 28140, pacificaitutaki.com*

Samade On The Beach Modest but comfortable accommodation in 12 individual garden bungalows just a few steps from the best swimming beach on Aitutaki. The Pacific-inspired beachside restaurant serves delicious tropical breakfasts, as well as top-notch food throughout the day and evening. Bungalows from £144 per night. *Ootu, Aitutaki, 00 682 31526, samadeonthebeach.com*

Opposite: hopping aboard;
clear blue skies; Pacific
Resort. This page,
clockwise from top: Hidden
Spirit Café; at the Saturday
market; One Foot Island;
Pacific Resort; its idyllic
location; cocktail from
Samade on the Beach;
approaching from the air;
blissful view of land and sea



'Atitutaki's biggest draw is its gorgeous lagoon. You simply can't believe that colours like this really do exist'



'A catamaran lands at deserted islands and takes us to snorkelling spots where we can dive the coral reefs'





This page, clockwise from top left: visiting a Cook Islands farm; into the fields; the local brewery; the freshest crustaceans are dished up at Tupuna's; the big blue

'Locals know when he's open for business when he puts a traffic cone on the road outside his house - and the flavours are indeed good enough to stop traffic'



Opposite, clockwise from top left: Crown Beach's natural paradise; view towards Muri Beach; dinner is ready at Tupuna's; Pacific Resort; fruits of the land; Papatua prepares a traditional *umu*; the family helps out; a tern takes a rest; doing a spot of shopping, island-style

started Rito, a business making organic cold-pressed coconut oil to sell to the island's high-end restaurants as well as a range of beauty products. This pure, creamy oil, either plain or flavoured with chilli or lime is not only exotic and delicious, but incredibly healthy. Matutu Brewing Company is a microbrewery started by James Puati and Eric Newnham who wanted to create beers that would become a recognisable product of the Cook Islands.

Neil Dearlove, meanwhile, roasts coffee in tiny batches from a small roaster in front of his house to supply the cafés and restaurants of Rarotonga. Locals know when he's open for business when he places a traffic cone on the road outside his house. And the flavours are indeed good enough to stop traffic. We meet Fram Koteka who is having far too much fun experimenting with making banana wines and outrageously potent, but delicious, vanilla and coconut vodka.

If it feels like exciting things are happening in the Cook Islands today, this is also a place where people know how to kick back, relax and live simply and well, island style. Back at Papatua's house, we have the chance to experience an *umu*, or earth oven. When we arrive, a fire is blazing in a pit lined with volcanic stones. Neighbours Lindsay and Suzanne have come over to help, weaving baskets out of coconut fronds, grating the coconut to make the ubiquitous cream. Suzanne places a glistening, whole octopus in a basket; two barracuda heads go into another; in another, a pair of flying fish. She has peeled pieces of taro and arrowroot, cut into chunks, and simply wrapped in leaves. There's a pot of *poke*, the typical island

dessert, made from banana and grated arrowroot seasoned with (again) coconut cream. It is then spooned into banana leaves to steam. Leaves of rukau are laid over the baskets, both to insulate and to be cooked into island spinach. Papatua rakes out the burning wood, lines the pit with more leaves laid over the hot stones. The packets of food are then laid over the leaves together with a couple of bunches of bananas, just cut from the tree. Yet more banana and coconut leaves go on top and tucked around the walls of the pit to keep in all the steam and heat. Finally, Lindsay places a tarpaulin over the top of the whole pit, and seals down the edges with shovelfuls of dirt.

Some four hours (and several beers) later, the men carefully open the *umu*. They lift out the steaming, leaf-wrapped packets of food, and Suzanne unwraps them. The octopus, cut into pieces and seasoned with more coconut cream, is tender and delicious. The pit-roasted taro is soft and rather sticky, and the rukau island spinach is deeply flavoured. This is food born from earth and sea, food that you eat from a plate on your lap with your fingers, sitting under the shade of a coconut tree, washing down the simple repast with coconut water or ice-cold local beer. It is food as simple, as delicious, as genuine as you will ever find anywhere on Earth. It is food that reflects the deep-rooted warmth and intrinsic love of the land characterised by the people of the Cook Islands. □

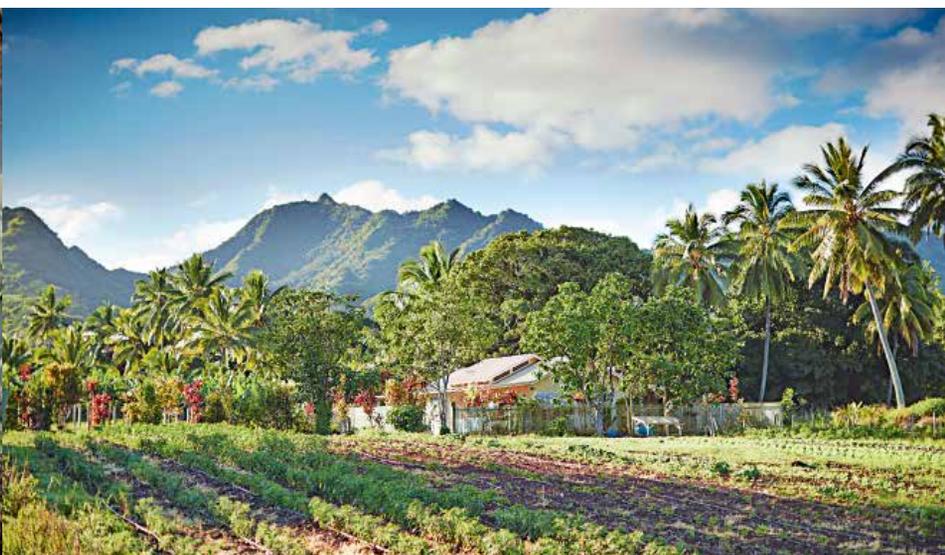
Marc Millon and Ewen Bell travelled courtesy of Cook Islands Tourism. Visit cookislands.travel



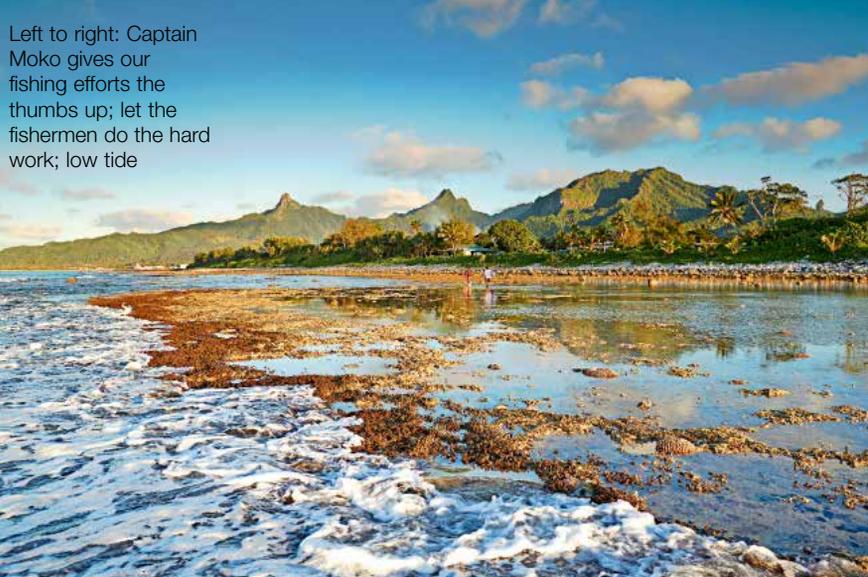
'The octopus, cut into pieces and seasoned with more coconut cream, is tender and delicious'



'Under the shade of a coconut tree, wash down the simple repast with coconut water or ice-cold local beer'







Left to right: Captain Moko gives our fishing efforts the thumbs up; let the fishermen do the hard work; low tide

Where TO SHOP, what TO DO

Aitutaki Secret Garden tour Bill Tschan has been cultivating a rare tropical garden on Aitutaki since 2003. Gathering the seeds of tropical plants from around the world, he has created a collection of over 100 fruit trees and flowering plants, all cultivated organically. Visitors are given a guided tour of the garden by Bill himself. [00 682 31010](tel:0068231010)

Captain Moko's Fishing Charters Captain Moko promises to take you on a 'real fishing experience, not a tourist trip' – as I can personally confirm. Maximum four to six people. From £72 per person for half a day, morning or afternoon. [00 682 20385](tel:0068220385) or [00 682 73083](tel:0068273083), fishingrarotonga.com

Cook Islands Coffee Company When a traffic cone is on the road outside his house, Neil Dearlove's informal 'café' beside the coffee roaster is open for business (mornings only, Monday to Saturday). Stop here for coffee, as well as croissants and pastries freshly baked by Neil's son. [Rarotonga, 00 682 50646](tel:0068250646), cicoffeecompany.wordpress.com

Matutu Brewing Company It may be small but this ambitious island micro-brewery makes beers with a big taste. Stop for a brewery visit and a tasting of their excellent lager and pale ale, and be sure to look out for

these hand-crafted beverages in local bars and restaurants when out and about. [Tikioki, Rarotonga, 00 682 26288](tel:0068226288), matutubeer.com

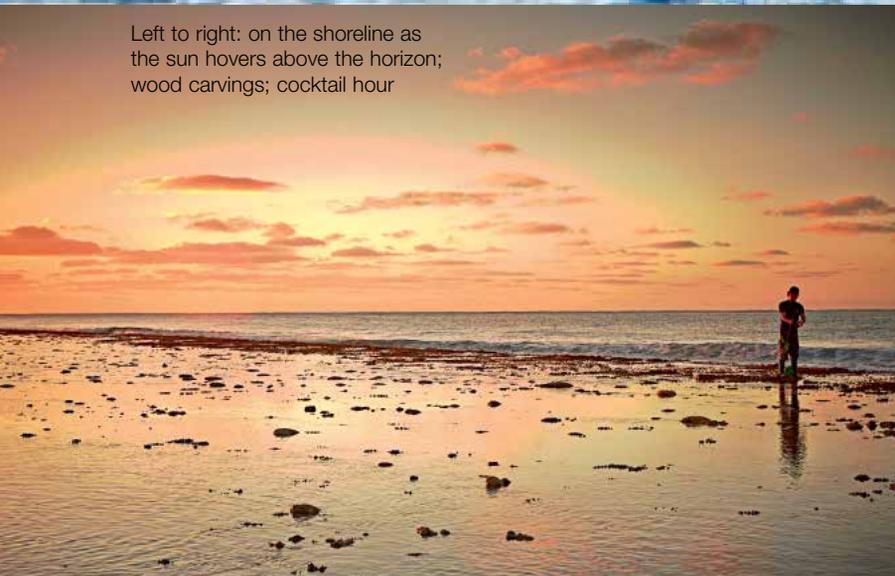
Punanga Nui Cultural Market On the edge of Avarua, Rarotonga's main town, this daily market (closed Sundays) is a regular event not to be missed. Open from early morning until around midday, it is at once a serious food market for locals and those who are self-catering, as well as a craft market that is the best place to pick up souvenirs, including shell jewellery, clothing such as sarongs, wood carvings and much more. punanganuiculturalmarket.co.ck

Rito Cook Islands A company that produces cold-pressed virgin coconut oil and hand-produces it in small batches alongside a range of cosmetic and skincare products. Stop to see how it is made and to pick some up to take home. [Tikioki, Rarotonga, 00 682 20134](tel:0068220134), ritocookislands.com

The Vaka Cruise Aitutaki's incredible lagoon has been called the most beautiful in the world. The best way to experience and enjoy it is by boat. The Vaka Cruise is a day excursion on the lagoon on a traditional Polynesian catamaran, with snorkelling and lunch cooked onboard. The price includes free transfer to and from your hotel. £61 per person. thevakacruise.com



Left to right: on the shoreline as the sun hovers above the horizon; wood carvings; cocktail hour





TUPUNA'S MUD CRAB

Mud crab from Aitutaki is roughly the same size as the North Atlantic brown crabs we get in the UK. Though the texture and flavour of the meat is somewhat different, this is still a wonderful way to cook and serve crab, Cook Islands style.



IKA MATA

This Polynesian 'ceviche' is made in homes and restaurants throughout the Cook Islands. Everyone has their own special recipe.

RECIPES START ON PAGE 123

