

DESTINATION
COOK ISLANDS

Tiny island, big heart

Craig Tansley returns to Mitiaro after 30 years and finds his childhood memories of carefree days and heart-warming hospitality unchanged.

If you take a plane ride to the outer Cook Islands, it's likely you will be packed like a mule; weighed down with biscuits, lollies and potato crisps, toilet paper, children's toys, cosmetics, electronics – even animals, occasionally in cages. The rule is no more than three kilograms of hand luggage on Air Rarotonga's 10-seat Cessna but then rules never did count for much in the Cook Islands.

The elderly Polynesian woman checking in behind me is loaded so heavily with lollipops, chocolate bars, corn chips and cans of Sprite, I can barely tell where her enormous belly ends and the supplies for its next feast begin. She smells of frangipani, as sweet as candy in the outrageous humidity of a Rarotonga afternoon.

Ours will be the last flight to the island of Mitiaro for four days. Aside from Air Rarotonga's twice-weekly inter-island service, there's only an occasional supply ship willing to navigate the reef that protects the island's tiny wharf – more a slippery boat ramp, barely wide enough for a dinghy, than a docking station – to make sure the island's 170 residents don't starve, or that Mitiaro's five cars don't run out of fuel.

I'm carrying enough loaves of bread to feed an army, though the Cook Islands doesn't have one. But it's my other goods that are far more precious: two family packs of the softest toilet tissue in Rarotonga and two containers of burgundy-brown hair dye. Today, I'm the official courier to the Queen ("Ariki") of Mitiaro, Mii O'Brien. But we may call her Auntie because visitors invariably stay in her house, the only accommodation on the island.

The flight to Mitiaro – a 45-minute meander north-east of Rarotonga across an inky, eerily empty ocean – has no flight attendant but the elderly Polynesian lady shares her lollipops with the passengers, even her Sprite, straight from the bottle. When we see Mitiaro – no more than a tiny flat speck in the ocean – she starts to moan.

Lost pigs, I will learn, start many conversations on Mitiaro.

A chubby man strokes her fleshy arm. "Sshhh mumma, sshhh mumma," he whispers to her. "I'm going home to my island, boy," she says.

Our wheels hit the white-coral landing strip; it's as dimpled as a golf ball, litres of Sprite fly into the air, a child shrieks like the Polynesian roosters that used to wake me at dawn and I'm back, almost 30 years to the day since my last visit.

It was April 9, 1980. My family chartered a plane from our home in Rarotonga and although foreigners had visited – government types, mostly – we might have been the first tourists to land on the island. I remember the angry sea that broke close to shore and a white-washed limestone and coral church that seemed the centre of existence. I despised that old building as I sat inside sweating; I was desperate to swim instead but it was forbidden on the sabbath.



Cook Islands warmth ... (clockwise from main) children watch the twice-weekly plane leave Mitiaro; fresh coconut juice; dress code at a community meeting; a flame-red sunset on Mitiaro; butterfly fish off Rarotonga.

Photos: Andrew Harris, Getty Images

We'd watched *Grease* the evening before on the island's single video player. It was the first movie ever shown on the island and it seemed as though all of its then 400 inhabitants had come to watch. I barely heard John and Olivia singing above the giggling outside the louvres and the hot breeze rustling the coconut palms.

Before we disembark, it's worth knowing that the Cook Islands is 15 tiny islands spread across an area of the Pacific Ocean larger than western Europe – that is, about 2 million square kilometres. Fewer than 13,000 people live here, about 8000 of them on Rarotonga, the capital, and nearly 2000 on Aitutaki, the islands' most fashionable holiday destination – leaving just 3000 or so inhabitants on the other 13 islands. There were once many more but Cook Islanders have an open visa arrangement with New Zealand and Australia and more than 100,000 have left their pawpaw patches for life there.

On Mitiaro, the population has plunged to 170 – mostly children, who will inevitably leave, and the elderly, who return home because Polynesians have a penchant for being buried in their front yards. Of the 170 Polynesians left on Mitiaro, at least 50 are at the airport this morning. I'm the first tourist to visit in a month and as I make my way across the tarmac to the tiny windowless airport, children giggle and wave, babies stare in wide-eyed wonder from their mothers' hips and old ladies throw necklaces of frangipani around my neck.

I'm loaded, with my luggage, into the tray of a prehistoric Datsun utility, from which I wave. We drive slowly along a bumpy, white-coral road that rings the island, past flowering flame trees, blood-red against the perfect blue of the South



Pacific sky. We reach Mitiaro's single village and I see then that it's the same place I left 30 years ago. Lawns are as immaculate as I remember, hedges trimmed, rubbish burned; as if Christian tidiness might somehow appease the restlessness of the ocean surrounding us. But then there are those things unmistakably Polynesian: piglets wandering through front yards; chickens and cats sauntering on the road; small children playing in the car-less street.

Auntie Mii is waiting for me, an octogenarian in a white-and-green printed dress. Behind her, I



can smell the Polynesian feast roasting for my arrival. She shuffles over and wraps me in a warm embrace, the smell of coconut oil so strong and familiar. "You're back!" she says and suddenly 30 years don't mean a thing.

My days on Mitiaro invariably start with a swim among the coral and always end beside a coconut tree staring at the stars. The hours in between I spend on a motorbike, driving around and around the island, sightseeing. The island has two unique freshwater lakes full of itiki – freshwater eels – and subterranean pools, where

stalactites plunge dramatically into chilly water. But it's the people I meet who make the place special. There are no friendlier souls on Earth than Polynesians.

It's my intention to drive nonstop around the island – a 30-minute ride – but I never do it. Something, or someone, stops me every time. On my first day, Pua asks if I'd like him to take me to the highest point on Mitiaro. We drive for a kilometre, climbing less than three metres. Pua stops. "We are now on Mitiaro's highest point," he says proudly. He asks if I've seen his pigs. Lost pigs, I



will learn, start many conversations on Mitiaro. "You know my pigs – I killed one for you to eat," he says. "They come when I toot my horn but today they are hiding."

Pua is about to turn 60 and grew up on Mitiaro. I ask if the island has changed. "No," he answers. "There's TV now – just one channel – but that's all. But that's a good thing, we watch CNN, New Zealand news, Australian news but we don't want the internet. We want to know what's going on in the world but we don't want to be part of it."

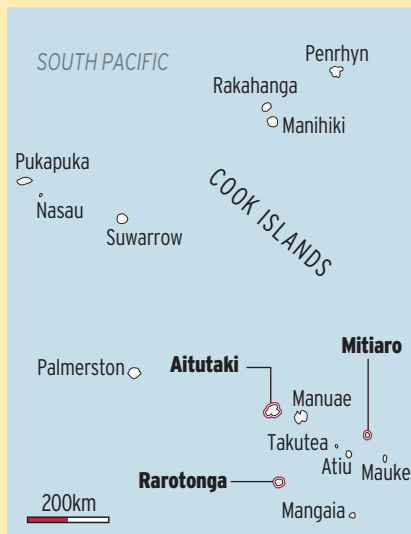
Later, the only white man living on the island stops me on the road. "Have you seen my pigs?" he asks. He offers to show me Mitiaro's best beach, a wide strip of sand that glows in the setting sun. Mitiaro doesn't have the lagoons that other Cook Islands are famous for but we walk across coral and find a gap in the reef as big as a hotel swimming pool. I jump into the warm water; colourful fish, some half my size, swim around me. I hold my breath and dive into narrow caverns and wonder if I'm the first visitor to swim here.

It's the lagoons of the Cook Islands that have made the island group world-renowned, especially Aitutaki, with its gigantic triangular lagoon dotted with empty motu (small islands) and perfect sandy beaches that the American TV series *Survivor* inevitably discovered. But no amount of publicity could change Aitutaki, or any of the Cook Islands.

The main island of Rarotonga – with its striking mountainous interior and lagoons that closely resemble Tahiti's Bora Bora and Moorea but with none of the tourist fanfare – is the same as it was during my childhood in the 1970s. My father has lived on Rarotonga for 44 years. I'm only now understanding the contentment he has found. A famous former resident, the American writer Robert Frisbee, says: "I chose to live [here] because life moves at the sort of pace which you feel God must have had in mind originally when he made the sun to keep us warm." On Mitiaro, too, time stands virtually still. The sun rises and then it sets but it's of little consequence.

I spend a morning on the reef fossicking for limpets with a stranger I met on the road. We fill a bucket. I notice that each time I eat one, fresh from the shell, she's never tempted. "Yuck," she says. "I hate the taste. I don't eat them but I've got to feed two big mummies. Here, we share our food with everyone."

I ask her if she minds my company. "No, stay, stay," she urges. "We like visitors. This year,



FAST FACTS

Getting there Air New Zealand flies to Rarotonga from Sydney and Melbourne for about \$530 with an aircraft change in Auckland. From July 4, there will be a new direct service from Sydney (6 hours). Virgin Blue flies to Rarotonga from both cities with a change in Auckland for about \$439. (Fares are one way, including tax.) Air Rarotonga flies to Mitiaro for about \$NZ239 (\$190).

Staying there Auntie Mii's Mitiaro Homestay has lodging for families, couples or singles and all meals for \$NZ90 a person a night. Phone +682 36 106. For more information see gocookislands.com.au.

there's been lots of you; there's been – let's see – 10, 12, 14 and with you that makes 15."

Four days on Mitiaro pass too quickly, which is odd considering there are no restaurants, cafes or bars and no other travellers. Occasionally, I'm reminded of the sad fact that Mitiaro's population is dwindling ("What can we do, stop the young people leaving?" Auntie Mii asks rhetorically, "go and cry at the airport?"). For the most part, the island seems as fanciful now as I remember it being as a child.

For the first time since 1980, I attend a church service and I return to the same limestone church. And when 100 proud, strong Polynesian voices rise in hymn, I pray that if there is a heaven, please God let all these people in. And I notice Auntie Mii sitting in the front pew looking proudly at her people, that Polynesian smile resplendent on her face.

I fly out on a Monday with the same fanfare that heralded my arrival. Locals who had barely got to know me cry, while the children who had taken me swimming at their favourite waterholes skip school to see me off. Maybe I've touched their lives, but they've certainly touched mine.

Craig Tansley travelled courtesy of Cook Islands Tourism and Air New Zealand.