

Atiu

Re-discovering nature on 'the island of birds'



There are few places left in the world like Atiu, an island with just over 350 people and acres and acres of untouched rainforest and coastal bush. There are no western bars (apart from the small one at Atiu Villas), bright neon lights or busy roads. For travellers searching for an island paradise, Atiu is it.

Most overseas visitors to Atiu lament on departure that they wish they'd organised a longer stay on this unspoiled island gem, full of captivating history, scenery and friendly people. The Anatakitaki Cave walk is the perfect offering for visitors who want an unforgettable nature experience. The tour is run by Ben Isaia who owns Kopeka Cave Tours.

Reasonable fitness and covered shoes are needed for the trek through tropical forest that resembles a fantastically overgrown garden. Regarded by environmentalists as a national treasure, Anatakitaki Cave is home to the Kopeka bird, a swiftlet, unique to Atiu, which like a bat, navigates its way in the pitch black caverns using sonar. The towering limestone caverns contain cauliflower coral, proving that the caves were once beneath the sea, as these coral formations only occur underwater. There are huge stalactites reaching to the cavern floor and massive stalagmites sparkling as though they are embedded with millions of diamonds. The magnificence of the caverns is breathtaking.

George Mateariki, better known as Birdman George, takes us on his morning tour – first stop is to catch a glimpse of the endangered Kakerori bird. We are a bit startled as George begins loudly beeping his car horn as we near the nesting ground.

He explains that being inquisitive birds, Kakerori are drawn to unusual noises. He calls to them, walking through the picturesque bush and making kissing noises.

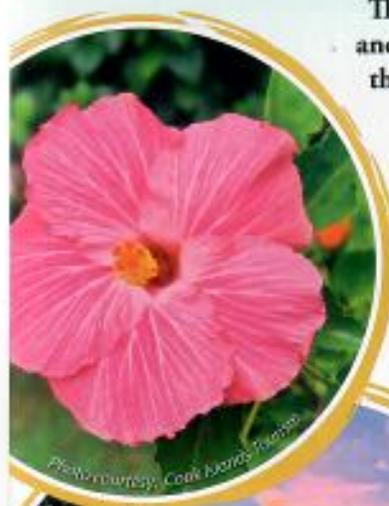


Photo courtesy: Cook Islands Tourism

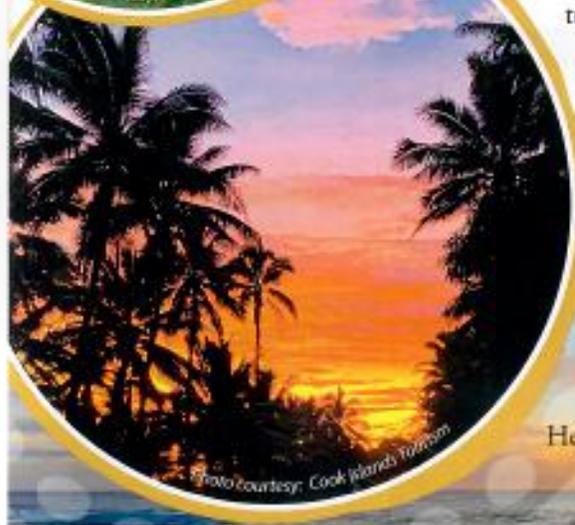


Photo courtesy: Cook Islands Tourism





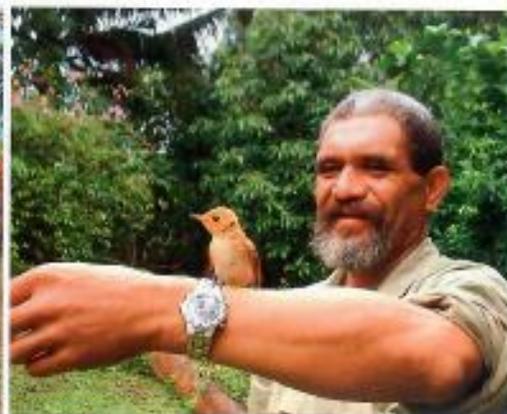
The birds do not disappoint, replying with their call sounds. To see Kakerori so close is a real treat, as they were once on the brink of extinction.

Along the way, George points out medicinal plants and how they are used to treat various ailments. "I love my history and everything I know about Atiu was taught to me by my grandfathers," says George.

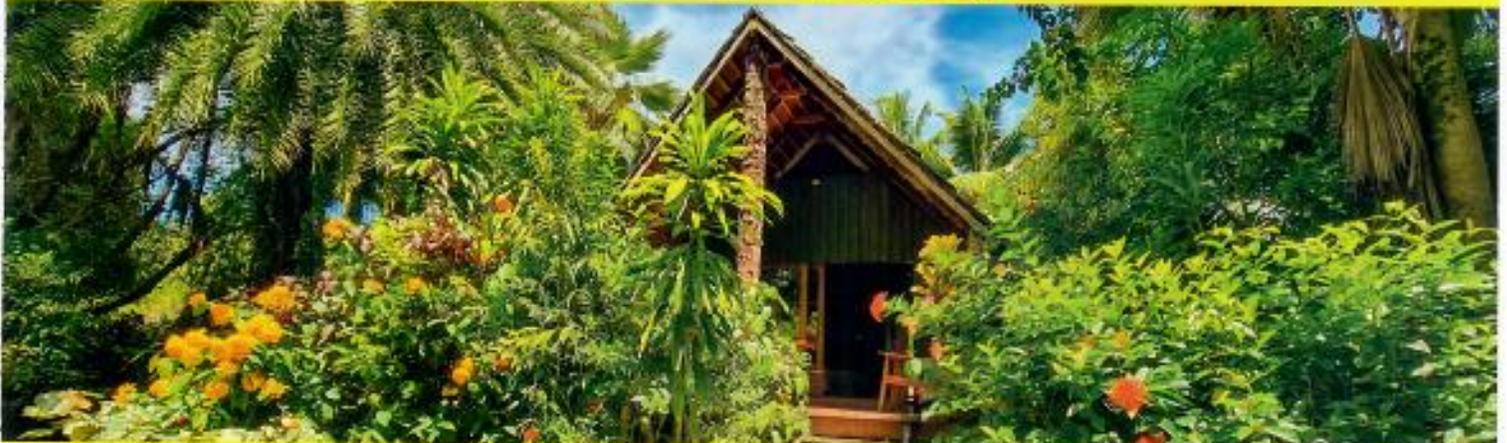
A fun experience is a visit to one of the legendary Atiu tumunu – 'clubs', where local men gather to drink homebrew and chat about island affairs, with clear rules about conduct. Often there's a string-band for added entertainment. Visitors are always welcome to stop in, partake of a cup of the local brew and meet the locals.

"There's money in the land," says Mata Arai, pointing to her coffee bushes laden with ripe berries. Mata is an industrious Atiuan woman who produces the 100 percent Atiu Island Coffee using a technique she learnt from her grandmother as a child. It's a process all done by hand. Atiu Island Coffee can be purchased from Mata's home, in Atiu stores, or supermarkets on Rarotonga.

For more information on all these tours and activities contact Jackey at Atiu Villas.



Atiu Villas



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