

2025 - The Cook Islands Celebrating its

# 60th Anniversary

by Glenda Tuaine

**Turning 60 is definitely something to celebrate, and in 2025 the Cook Islands will be doing just that. Indeed our nation is a lot older than 60. If you trace our ancestors who navigated the Pacific Ocean you will learn that we are an ancient people of Māori explorers, pioneers and settlers that date back to the 6th century.**

Over many centuries we have had tourists touch our ocean and shores from the Spanish and Portuguese beachcombers in the 1500's to Captain Cook and his crew in the 1800's, who left his name with us and then claimed the Cook Islands as a British protectorate.

We truly have had many admire our islands and ocean wanting to lay claim. In 1901 the Cook Islands shifted to be a protectorate of New Zealand and then finally on the 4th of August 1965 the Cook Islands gained independence to self govern.

In 2025 that moment is what we will be celebrating. Our self governing status and our independence as a nation with a bright and forward thinking future.

I sat down with our Prime Minister, Mark Brown, to hear more about our journey and our national aspirations as well as the close relationship we still have with Aotearoa, New Zealand.



Honourable Mark Brown  
Prime Minister, The Cook Islands



Above: The DC10 Trijet Liner. The inaugural flight was in 1976 (Photo courtesy: Flying in on a Jet Plane)

“Our journey has evolved, particularly in relation to New Zealand. Since 1901, our paths have been intertwined, a relationship shaped by our status as part of the Realm of New Zealand. Yet, our perception of this relationship has always been distinct.

“Traditionally, we have seen ourselves as the Tuakana – the elder sibling – and New Zealand, including Māori and Pākehā, as the Teina, the younger sibling. However, the colonial framework flipped this dynamic, casting us as the children and New Zealand as the parent.

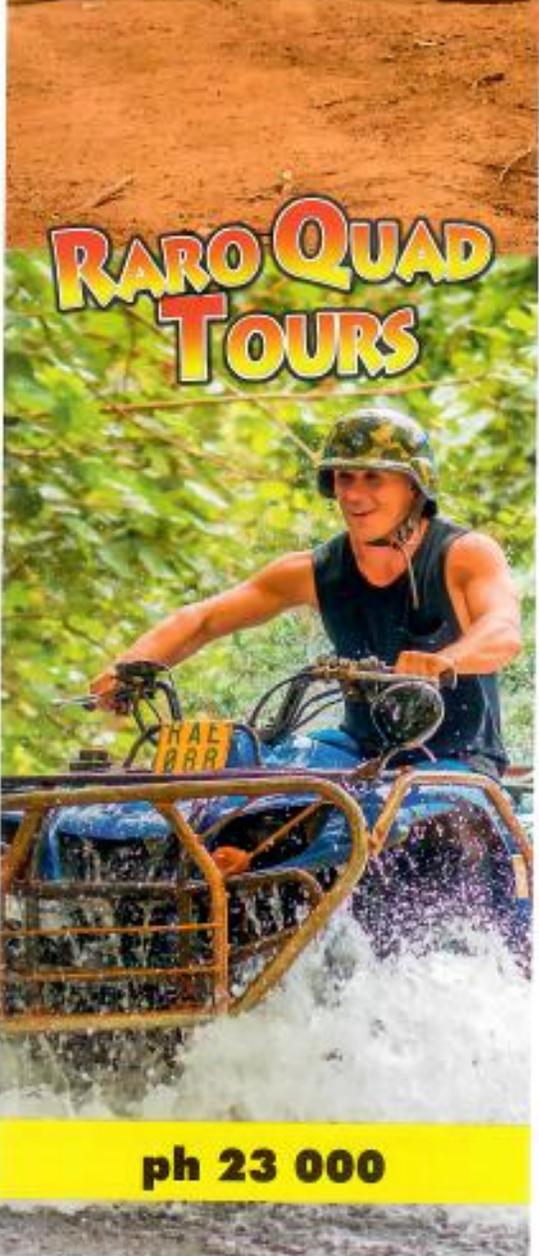
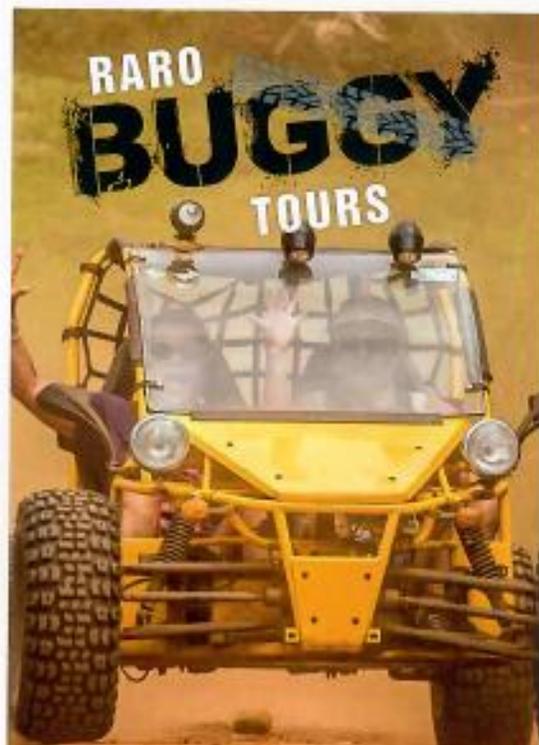
“Despite this imposed structure, one fundamental truth endures: we are family, and like any family, we mature and grow.” Says the Prime Minister who goes on to explain that in 1965, when we achieved self-governance, our people marked that as the beginning of a new chapter as an independent, sovereign nation, as a people with our own islands, land, and ocean.”

He goes on to say:  
 “Today, we stand confidently, forging our own diplomatic relationships with other countries as a sovereign state. But like children who grow up and leave home, our independence doesn’t negate our place in the family. We’ve simply grown into our own identity, while always staying connected to Aotearoa, New Zealand”.

The Prime Minister’s analogy of members of families growing up to become independent is relatable and as we are celebrating 60 years of self-governance we have transformed to become a stable nation, a family member in the Pacific that is building pathways towards a resilient future.

This conversation does make me wonder if these were the same thoughts of our community in the 60’s. What is certain is that our national identity has transformed over those 60 years and in 2025 onwards the sense of pride and ownership of being a Cook Islander is powerful.

Over the past 60 years we have developed as a South Pacific tourism destination. By seizing opportunities, we moved from a subsistence style economy largely focused on agricultural exports to New Zealand and progressed to the tourism-based economy we are today.



**ph 23 000**



Photo courtesy: Ine Sosene, Cook Islands Tourism

"I look back at 60 years ago, and nobody thought we would be getting into things like tourism management, and solid entrepreneurship, it's not until opportunity presents itself" says the Prime Minister. He goes on to outline that 50 years ago when we opened our international airport no one could foresee that the tourism industry would be successful with some of the leaders uncertain that an industry based around tourism would lift the prosperity of our country.

A champion for that prosperity and our tourism sector is Karla Eggelton, the CEO of Cook Islands Tourism who tells me how the industry plays a key role in national pride and strengthening our identity. For her it is about valuing our independence and recognising that the Cook Islands is not just a place to visit—it's a great place to live, work, and thrive.

Her vision for 2025 is to create a tourism sector that offers everyone opportunities, fostering a sense of inclusion and success for all Cook Islanders. That is bringing people back to the industry that sustains us, especially after the challenges of recent years and she believes we can do that by opening tourism up and making everyone feel included creating more opportunities for our people to succeed.

"So, 60 years ago, there was a lot of vision for what the Cook Islands could be, and sitting here 60 years later, just thinking about the journey that we have been through, and just looking at how we have done it, it is quite amazing." Talking to Karla you can tell she is proud of the industry's journey, "...the pioneers of 60 years ago, 50 years ago, 40 years ago, put the Cook Islands on the map, and the

decisions and the sacrifices that had to be made, to make it all happen, wasn't an easy feat!"



Karla Eggelton  
CEO Cook Islands  
Tourism

Karla tells me how a country of approximately 18,000 people were ambitious go getters and that foundational attitude is how we will go forward for the next 60 years.

Her goal is for Cook Islands community led tourism that is designed to build on innovation, technology and transformative thinking by the leaders of next generations. A tourism sector that brings their voice and purpose to showcasing our past, present and future.

Examples of that are in 2025 we will be showcasing our traditional knowledge and methods around food security and safety, bringing back our Tiare festival, the festival of flowers, and engaging in youth debates on what they see as the future.

In 2025 our pinnacle event will be our Te Maeva Nui Celebrations, which are held every August since 1965, and is a week-long national culture and dance festival run by the Cook Islands Ministry of Cultural Development, Tauranga Vananga. This is an event not to be missed. Emile Kairua the Secretary for Cultural Development has great plans to make sure our Cook Islands dance and Māori Language the stars of our 2025 celebrations.

He expresses to me that a key part of promoting our culture and language is making sure it feels natural and easy for people to embrace. We should be able to borrow words from within our own islands before looking beyond, ensuring our language reflects the richness of our shared heritage. He

explains language belongs to all Cook Islanders, and borrowing words from one another strengthens our unity. In 2025 Emile is activating programmes to reignite and sustain our language and as he states, it is so important because without language, we lose our identity. He also feels that same way with our cultural expressions like dance.

“As Tahitian and other influences blend in, we must ensure that what we celebrate as Cook Islands culture remains authentic and true to its roots” says Emile. What resonates for him is that feeling of bringing our family together in 2025.

“If you were celebrating your 60th you want your close friends and family around you, 2025 is about bringing our people together. You know, it’s bringing the diaspora back, looking them in the eyes, and saying, okay, that’s what you look like. That’s, who your children are, and your children’s children. Bring your culture, bring your song, bring your dance, whatever that looks like.”

So as we celebrate 60 years of independence, a milestone that feels much like a family gathering for a 60th birthday, it’s a time to reflect on the journey – how we’ve grown, matured, and found our own path while staying deeply connected to our roots. Just as a family honours its history and the wisdom gained over time, this anniversary is a chance for the Cook Islands to celebrate its achievements, acknowledge the challenges overcome, and look forward to a future filled with new opportunities. It’s a moment of pride, unity, and collective gratitude for the independence that has allowed us to shape our destiny.

As we look to the future and as I finished my interview with Prime Minister Mark Brown, his final statement I think really summed up how in the Cook Islands we take pride in reaffirming the importance of family and the connection to home for all of us as we turn 60 and look to our future.

“ Young people today have an incredible opportunity to pursue what they love, with the freedom to choose whether to live here in the Cook Islands or spend time abroad, knowing they always have a home to return to.

No matter where life takes them, every Cook Islander has a place to stand, a piece of land to call their own. This sense of belonging gives them the courage to chase their dreams, with the comfort of knowing home will always be there if they need it. Not many people in the world can say that.”

In 2025 we all invite you as family and friends to come and join us celebrate our 60th.



Photo Courtesy: Ministry of Cultural Development

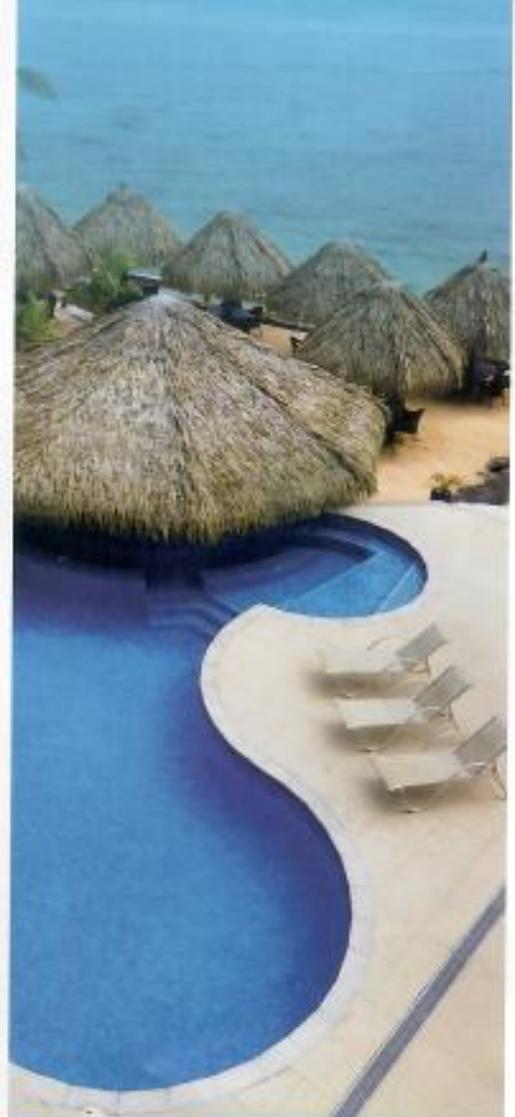


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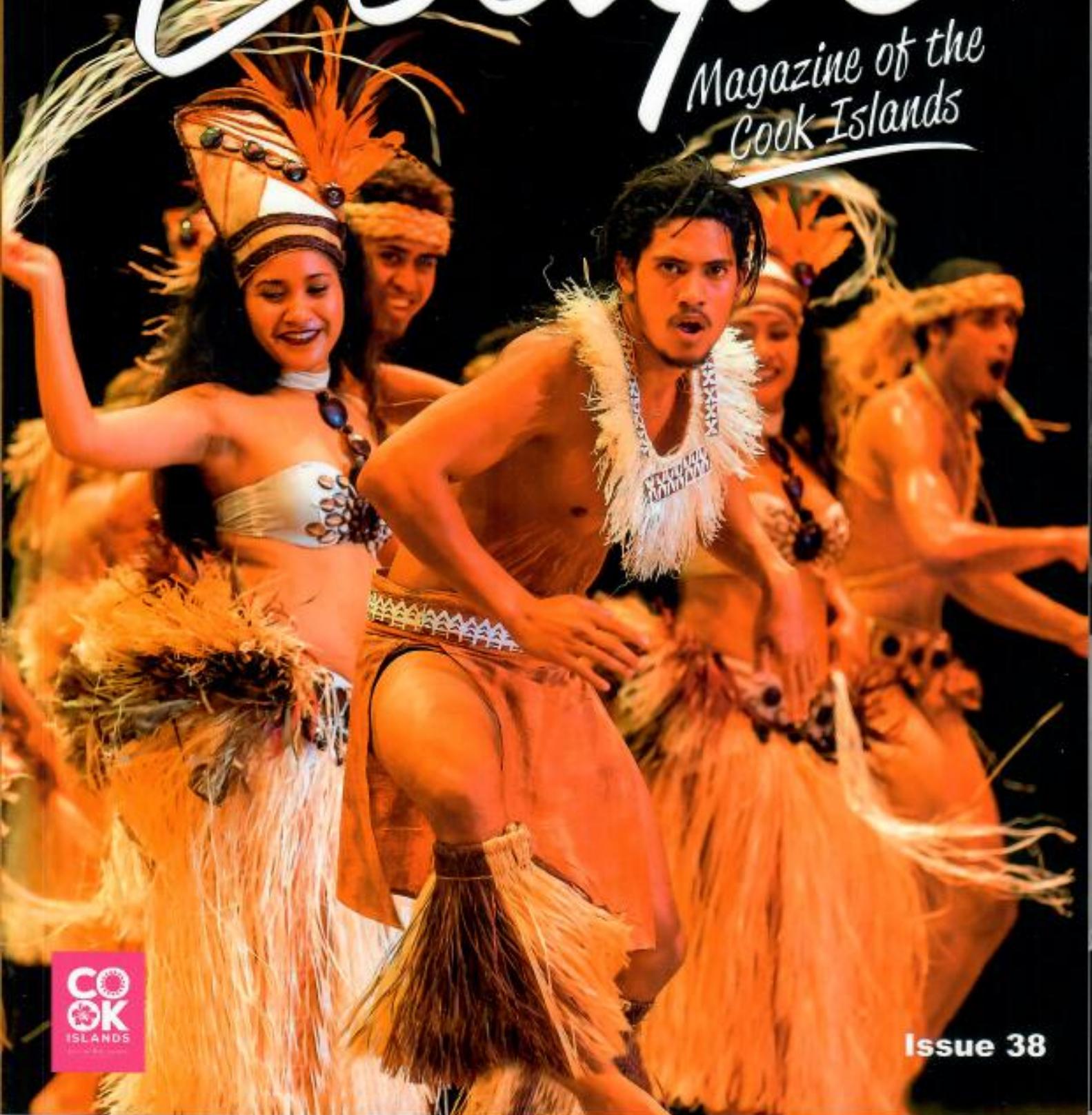
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