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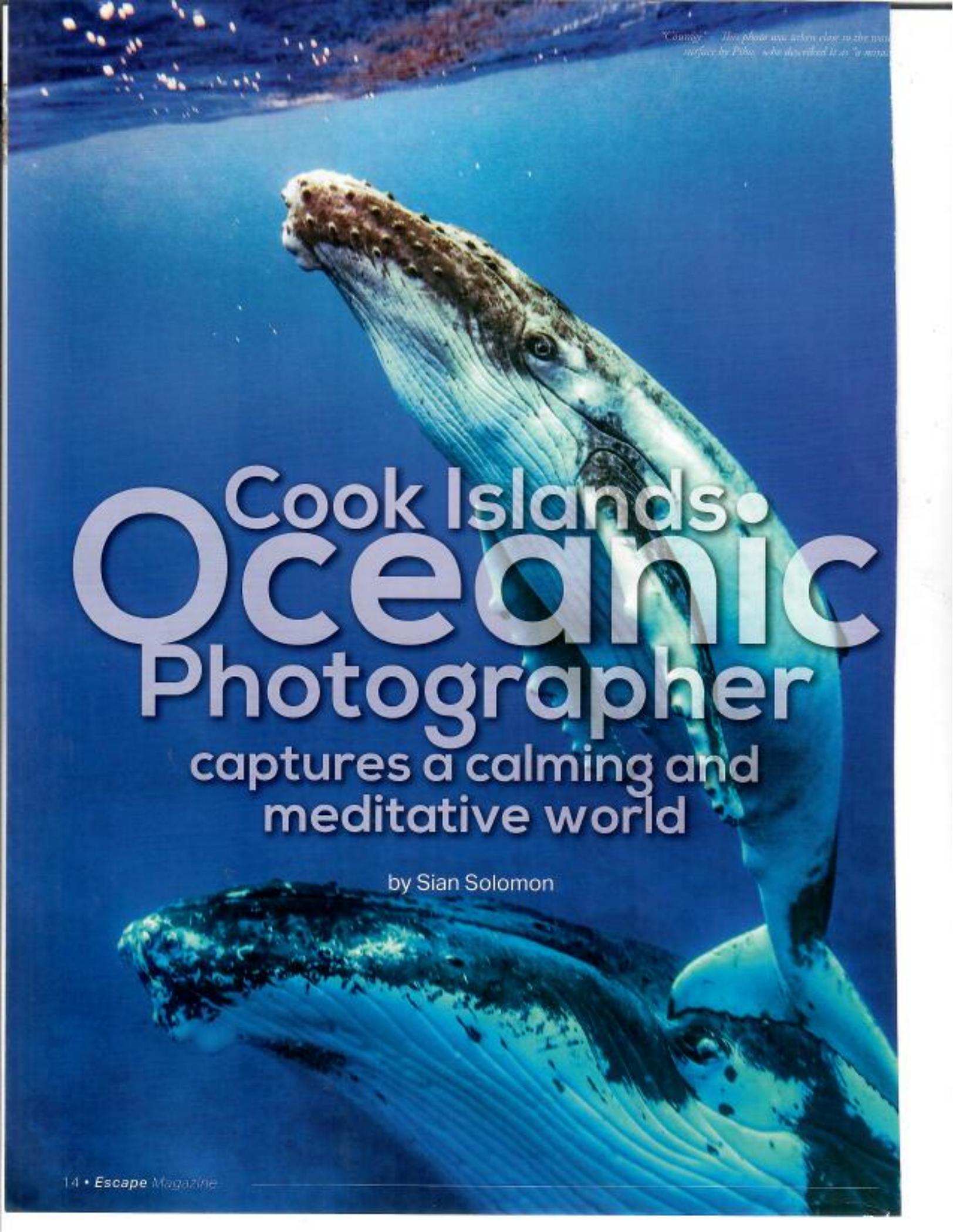
# Escape

Magazine of the  
Cook Islands



Issue 34

*"Counse"* This photo was taken close to the water surface by Pihou, who described it as "a miracle."



# Cook Islands • Oceanic Photographer captures a calming and meditative world

by Sian Solomon



Looking at the photographs in Charlotte Piho's gallery, it's easy to imagine the calming sensation of being submerged. You can feel almost enveloped by cool water and the movement in its expanse of the ocean along with the marine life that occupies it.

Underwater, every sensation is transformed: vision becomes enhanced or dulled, hearing can change and shift with pressure, and your sense of touch is amplified by the unusual weightlessness and resistance of water surrounding you.

That said, it is a mysterious and, at times, almost strange world. That seems fascinating and familiar, especially when viewed through Piho's work.

"Swimming and connecting with (marine) animals changed my life," says Piho. "So, I would like to show (others) how amazing it is.

"I would also like people to get more confident underneath the water," she says. "I would love to see more unison between people and animals and see a change in that."

Given the nature of ninety percent of her work, it's not surprising that Piho found her confidence underneath the water several years ago. She had paddle boarded outside the reef around Rarotonga when unknown to her, she became surrounded by a school of dolphins and two whales.

Although she was used to being in the water daily, Piho ditched her paddleboard and dived below the water's surface, capturing a vast, aquatic world.

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Her photos show a rare connection between humans and marine life – against a backdrop in which the sky and sea are sometimes difficult to distinguish.

"I love photographing animals and sports people because nothing is staged, and you never know what can happen," says Piho. "They aren't worrying about what they look like while you're trying to capture them in their best light.

"(Also) this photo is one of the most beautiful moments of my life," she recalls, referring to a photo of two whales swimming near the water's surface. (page 14)

"I bawled my eyes out photographing this... because you can't chase whales, you have to let them come to you... and to this day, this moment continues to be where my mind goes when I want to remember what pure happiness looks like."

Piho's images have all the technicolour vibrancy that one would expect from underwater photography. Her photos capture and display the vibrant colours of coral and marine life in the Cook Islands while also conveying a calming sense of trust, freedom, and respect for the ocean, as well as a desire to embrace an open frame of mind when confronted with the breathtaking beauty of these depths.

Some photos - captured at great depths and always in one breath - even evoke the feeling of swimming in the

night sky or wandering through a canyon at the bottom of the sea.

That said, it is this sensation that has compelled Piho to photograph not only the world above the water's surface but also what lies beneath it.

"I've found there are so many amazing benefits to being in the water," says Piho. "It lowers your heart pressure, can help with mental health... and can literally change your life.

"(But) one of the most amazing things I've learned about (marine) animals is that when you're relaxed, animals like eagle rays will sense your flow and your vibe and will flow with your energy," she adds. "It's moments like these (when) I feel a really deep connection and love for the ocean and animals... and when I'm able to replace overthinking with presence and enjoy life."

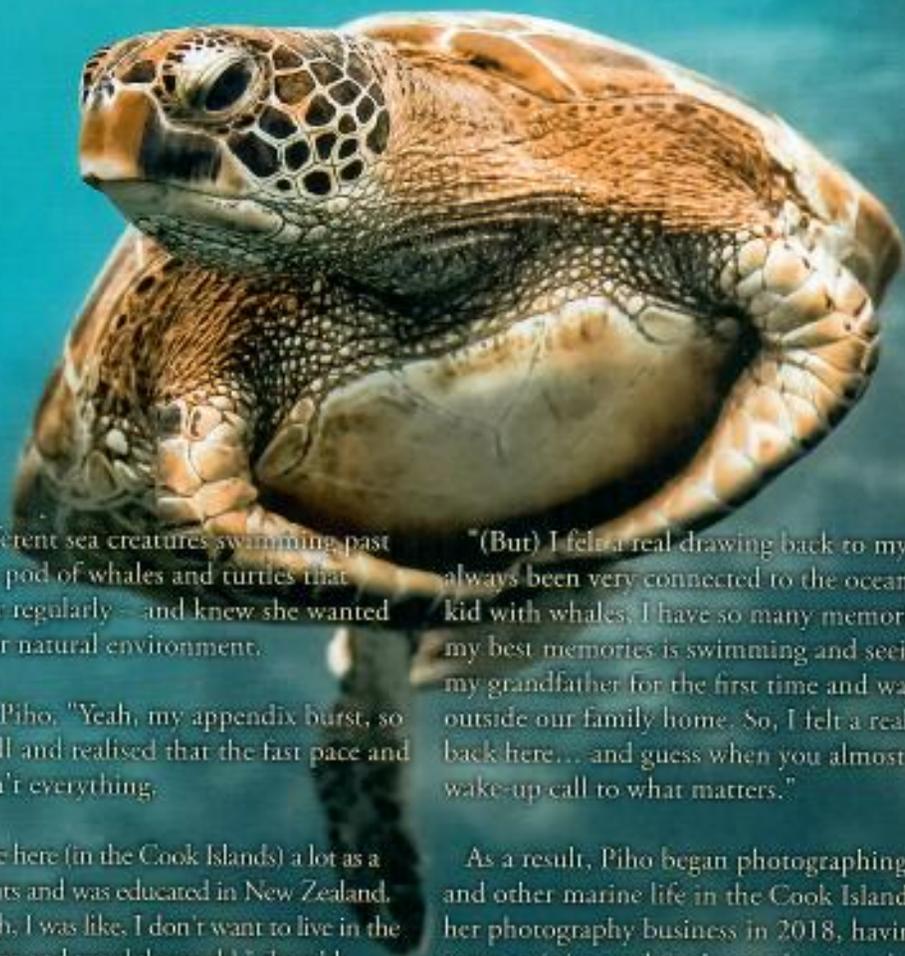
Piho's journey to becoming a multi-international award-winning photographer began following a near-death experience. She recalls that her appendix burst several years ago, which led to her decision to return to Rarotonga after living abroad.

Once she was back in the Cook Islands, Piho revealed that she chose to live at her family's home near the ocean, where the marine environment drew her in.



*This photo is taken by Piho on one single breath, 20+ metres in the clear depths of the ocean.*

"Turtle Flugs" is one of the first underwater photos Piho ever took, which inspired her to photograph animals underwater.



She recalls seeing different sea creatures swimming past her home - including a pod of whales and turtles that would interact with her regularly - and knew she wanted to capture them in their natural environment.

"I almost died," says Piho. "Yeah, my appendix burst, so I had a real wake-up call and realised that the fast pace and money (overseas) weren't everything."

"I used to come and live here (in the Cook Islands) a lot as a child with my grandparents and was educated in New Zealand. But once I was old enough, I was like, I don't want to live in the Cook Islands - I want to go and travel the world," she adds.

"(But) I felt a real drawing back to my roots, and I've always been very connected to the ocean here. Even as a kid with whales, I have so many memories. (And) one of my best memories is swimming and seeing turtles with my grandfather for the first time and watching whales outside our family home. So, I felt a real drawing to come back here... and guess when you almost die, it gives you a wake-up call to what matters."

As a result, Piho began photographing turtles, eagle rays, and other marine life in the Cook Islands before launching her photography business in 2018, having previously done some training and freelance photography in Australia.



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She shares that she was fortunate when learning photography because she was taught by some of the best photographers in the world – including her former partner, who is an award-winning wedding photographer.

Piho reveals that had it not been for her former partner, with whom she maintains a good friendship, she never would have learned the basics of photography which are essential to taking good photos in the water.

"He was very technically learned, and I feel like you can't be a good water photographer unless you learn the basics," she says. "You need to learn how to take really good photos outside of the water and connect with people first... So, I was lucky to be trained by him and then Warren Keelan, one of the top water photographers in the world.

"I've always been interested in the ocean and animals, and I guess photography... and amazingly, I took a photo of this turtle that looked like it was kind of hugging itself, and they put it on the front page of the Daily Telegraph in Australia, and other news media outlets shared it," she adds.

"So that was one of my first understandings of how things can go "viral" and how you can connect to a very wide audience. Which allowed me to build a career in the Cook Islands on an international level and understand the importance of the messages I was trying to portray."

Documenting the aquatic environment and providing leading underwater tours has allowed Piho to live her dream life in the Cook Islands, and connect with the ocean, animals, and people in a way she never thought possible.

She reveals that three months into launching her photography business, Canon Australia celebrated her work

for International Women's Day and asked her to judge a nationwide animal photography competition for the company.

In December 2021, Piho was named New York photographer of the year in the category nature/underwater. While in 2020, she placed third in the same category for the Paris photographer of the year awards - PX3 Prix De La Photographie Paris - which is regarded as the most prestigious photography award in Europe.

Her other recent accolades include being named a finalist in the wildlife category of the Worldwide Photography Gala Awards and receiving an honourable mention as a finalist at the highly prestigious IGA international photographer of the year awards.

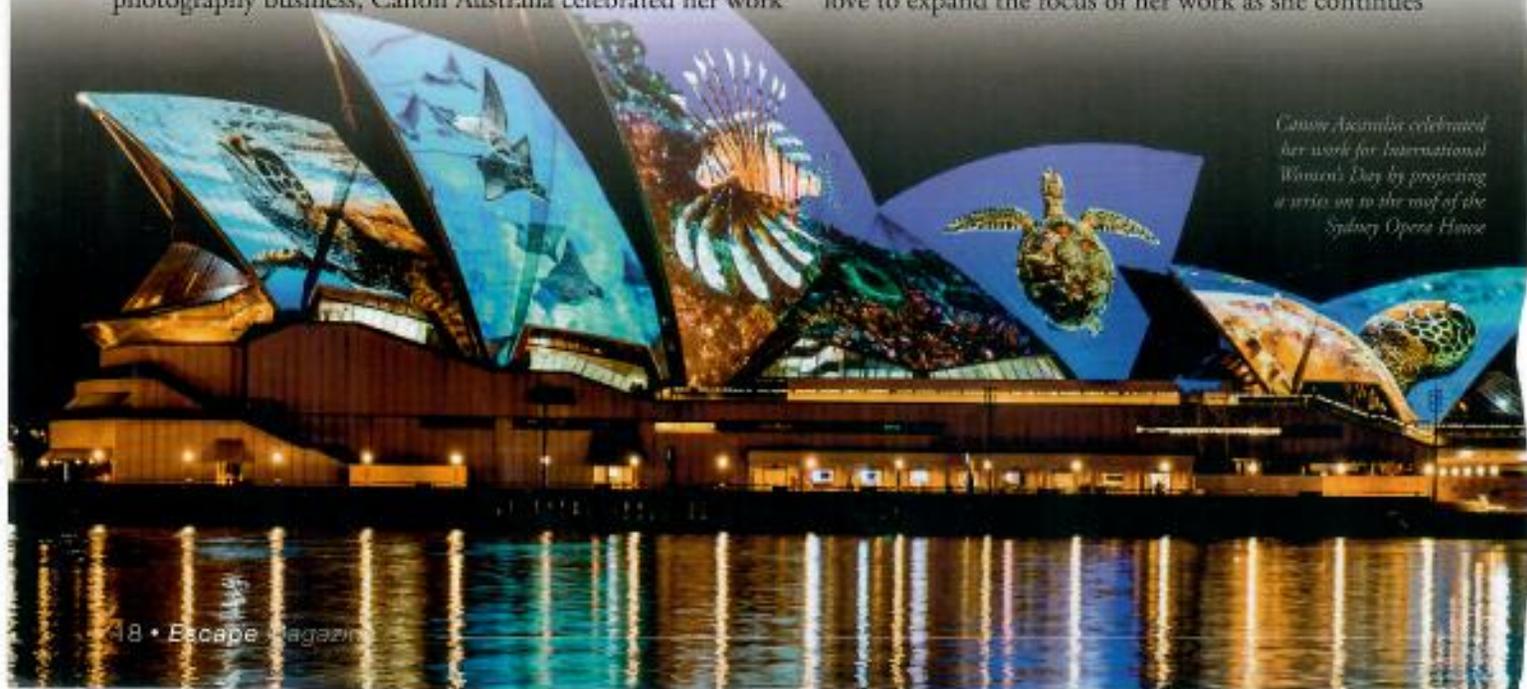
"I was really lucky because I had two really great companies Canon Australia and AquaTech solutions think that I was talented and backed me from day one," says Piho. "That support really made me believe in myself as a photographer, especially because it was over on a small island.

"I've had a lot of amazing opportunities but having my work on the Sydney Opera House was absolutely amazing," she adds. "That was in honour of Valerie Taylor, who is at the forefront of underwater photography and is a massive role model for me."

With that passion, Piho continues to explore different aspects of the undersea, both in personal and professional projects, capturing the surprising acts and beauty of the ocean alongside the immense grace of whales, leisurely speed of turtles, and swiftness of eagle rays.

Though ocean-bound for now, she shares that she would love to expand the focus of her work as she continues

*Canon Australia celebrated her work for International Women's Day by projecting a series on to the roof of the Sydney Opera House*





*"Breathe" is a reminder by Piho to breathe slowly, and make every breath count.*

to document and explore the marine environment – revealing that throughout her career, she has experienced several essential and magical moments.

"I've had so many special moments, and every single photo I take means so much to me, and it's quite emotional," says Piho. "The first time I swam close to a whale was amazing, and then learning more about animals and how we need to treat and respect them is really important.

"At the moment, I'm looking at getting into documentaries and film, and really trying to inspire and educate a wider audience, and wanting to make a difference with animals and the environment," she adds.

"Because I've been really lucky in my career to have lived a really awesome life, and now I'm trying to think of ways to take a step back, grow and develop in ways that are better for the environment."

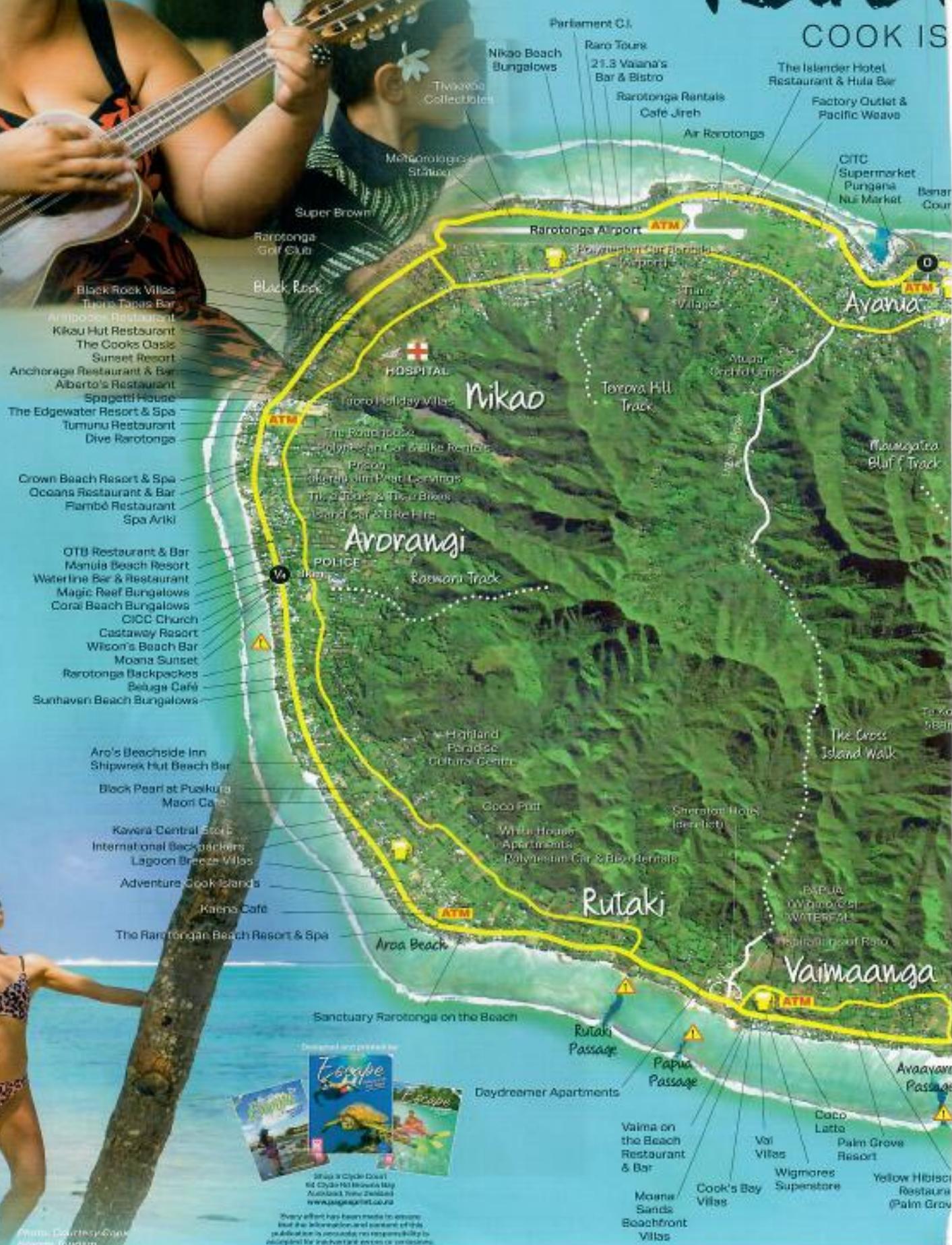
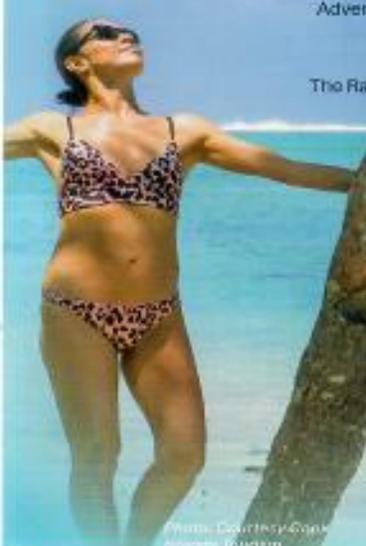
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