

COOK ISLANDS

will steal your heart



image by Andy Belcher



by Dave Moran
images Dave Moran
unless credited otherwise



It was surreal - just hanging there - moving ever so slightly forward - it was within millimetres from my mask - it was simply unperturbed by my presence as it continued its stroll across the sparkling sand below its belly.
Turtles do not normally do this!

Swim right up to a diver and say, 'Hi how is your dive going on this beautiful day in sunny paradise?'

Over the years I have swum with a number of turtles but this small lass was an absolute character. It must have been my good looks that attracted her to me!

Taking flight in the opposite direction was not on her menu today. For the first time in my life I had to leave a turtle because my air was running low - it's

amazing what love at first sight can do! As I climbed back on board *The Dive Centre* boat with an unsurpassable smile, I looked at Huw John who runs the operation with his wife Sheryl, 'Hey Huw how long has that turtle been on the pay roll?' 'Dave, I've never see that one before, she's new around here - we get turtles trundling along here all the time!' This was my first dive in Rarotonga and I was over the moon. Not only had we dived with the tamest turtle in the world, we had also been seduced by the velvet movements of a Spanish dancer, this moving appointment is on every diver's must see list. We also hung onto a huge anchor lost from a long forgotten brigantine while a background of tropical fish filled in the marine landscape - amazing. I had come to Rarotonga with a preconceived vision that the diving would be average. This first dive proved just how wrong you can be. As if to prove a point there are four scuba diving businesses situated on this volcanic mountain that sticks its head 658 metres above the South Pacific Ocean. Its neck

circumference of 32 km is ringed by small shallow lagoons and plunging gutters that beckon you to explore.

Also on the legendary island of Aitutaki with its magnificent lagoon is the base for Aitutaki Scuba and Bubbles Below.

There is also a live-aboard operation, Pacific Expeditions which runs *MV Bounty Boy* for divers who wish to experience exploring some of the 14 other islands and atolls that comprise the Cook Islands.

One of the big advantages of holidaying on a small island is that you can usually get in a dive no matter which coast is being hammered by the prevailing wind and the corresponding sea. The dive operators will always find you a spot to get wet!

During my visit we launched in the relative shelter of Avarua Harbour which is situated off the Islands main business/shopping centre. The harbour still bears the scars of the cyclone which smashed ashore in February 2005. The scars dramatically make it very clear the power of a furious Mother Nature. Huge concrete





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sections within the harbour (ie scattered like broken toothpicks). The resourceful Rarotongans are steadily cleaning up the carnage. One of their favorite watering holes, Trader Jack's which overlooks the harbour, is back in operation. A more idyllic spot for a refreshing drink would be hard to find in the vast South Pacific as the day's sun showcases its evening's magic.

I love my wrecks! So when Huw mentioned that the SS Maitai, which was hung onto the reef on Christmas Eve in 1916, was just a short swim out of the harbour I was aboard.

The wreck's huge engine breaks the surface, so there is no trouble in locating her. The wreck is in snorkelling depth and can only be dived when conditions are suitable which is the majority of the time.

Her huge rudder/pinnal still stands proudly in the current as if vainly trying desperately to turn the ship into the oncoming waves. From the rudder you follow her rudderless propeller shaft to where it meets its master, the massive steam driven engine. A family of lionfish has made their home in one of the boilers, which lies on its side creating the perfect retreat. Time was short and I had to return to the dive boat. It was hard to leave such an accessible shallow wreck. I had only time to explore a tenth of its scattered remains.

I could spend a week on this wreck and not get bored but I'm nuts on wrecks!

When I return to Baro the dive site I just have to splash into is the Avaavaroa Passage which is a long blue gut that knives deep through the reef top from the outer edge of the reef to close inshore on the south coast of the island.

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Just off the picture perfect beach in front of the Rarotonga Resort is a fantastic spot to spend a few hours snorkelling and if your children are with you it is an added bonus. Living in this sheltered coral garden are a myriad of tropical fish that will have you spluttering into your snorkel as you marvel at the vista of marine life going about their daily foraging - it's awe inspiring.

THE DIVE CENTRE
 Cook Islands Premium Diver Centre

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 DIVES, TRAINING
 AND EQUIPMENT

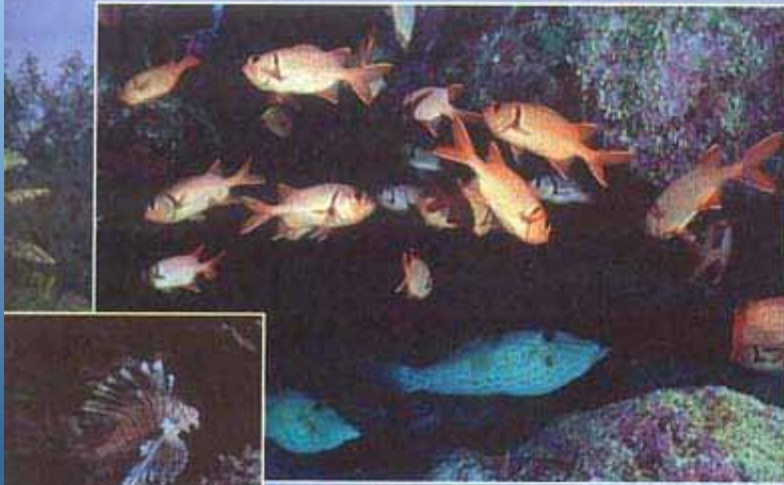




Find us at:
Aroa Beach
Marine Reserve
(on the
south west corner)



Free call 0800 80 80 mobile 55238
www.thedivecentre-rarotonga.com



Traveller tips:

Visit: www.cook-island.com When travelling from New Zealand and Australia you travel across the International Date Line. Local time is 10 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (GMT).

Flights: Air New Zealand. Visit: www.airnewzealand.co.nz. Domestic flights: Air Rarotonga. Visit: www.airraro.com

Currency: New Zealand dollar. **ATM:** Service available.

Temperature: Warm and sunny year round. April to November, dry season, 20°C – 26°C. December to March, wet season, 22°C – 28°C.

Humpback whales: Usually from July to October.

Diving info: Full gear hire is available. PADI, CMAS, NAUI training is available. Try Dive: Available. Night diving: Available. Nitrox: Available with some operators. Visibility: 20 – 60 metres. Water temperature: 23 – 33°C. Accommodation: A full range of accommodation is available, from backpacker to five star luxury. Camping: is not permitted in the Cook Islands.

It is also a popular place where the various dive operators do Discover Scuba or refresher courses.

If you are a patient diver and don't mind hanging around for an hour or two with 1000s of metres of water below your belly and you can find someone to drop you on one of the FAD (Fish Aggregation Devices), you may experience a breath-stopping event. On my dive an hour had passed and all was quiet except for a few skipjacks passing through – no mahi mahi had showed as we had hoped for – then out of the 40m plus visibility a large moving object caught my eye as it cruised up from the depths below. Its body flashed iridescent blue and white stripes as if it was plugged into a power socket!

The two metre plus sailfish pushed up to me for a better look – my heart stopped – it was one of the most awe-inspiring sights I have ever seen diving.

Rarotonga is the most tidiest/cleanest tropical destination I have ever had the pleasure to visit. It is abundantly clear from the people's houses and connecting streets that the people of Rarotonga have a passion for their island and vigorously maintain a level of cleanliness that must be the envy of their South Pacific neighbours.

Restaurant city! After a day's diving or exploring the numerous walking tracks (a hike to the summit of mount Te Kou at 588m is a must for my next visit, I believe the view is stunning!) there is absolutely nothing better than settling into a cosy restaurant by the sea with family and friends and new diving buddies and having laid before you an evening meal that is of an impeccable standard.

There are numerous restaurants dotted throughout the island and I was never disappointed. They provide excellent service and their yummy menus have you wondering, for a moment, am I in Paris?

For a break from your daily chores and as a treat to yourself, loved ones and family I personally recommend you plan to pack your bags and escape to the place that will steal your heart for many years to come. Raro, I'll be back!

