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Travel - Ever Dreamed of Running Away to the South Pacific? This Guy Did It

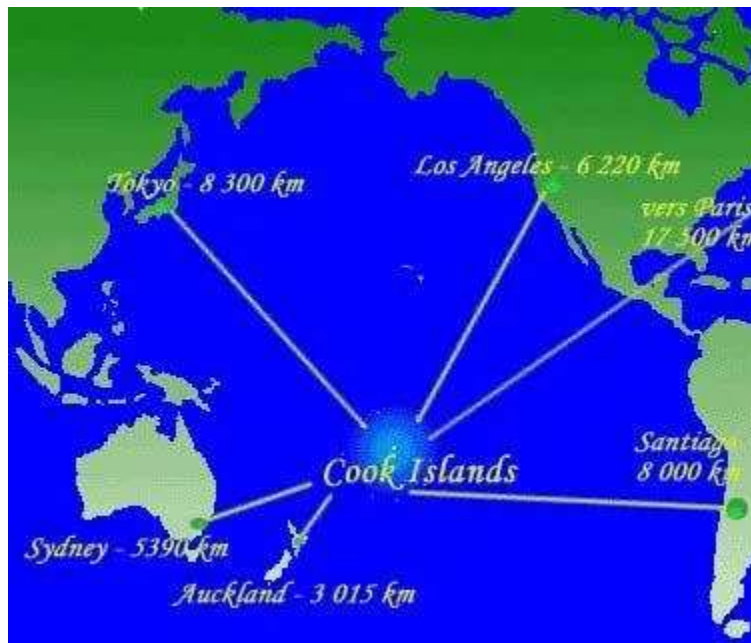
April 1, 2015



The author, paddle-boarding in paradise. (Photo: Craig Redler)

I recently gave up my U.S.-based law practice of almost 20 years. I had been a solo practitioner drafting wills and trusts for about 10 years, after having been a litigator. It was my habit to spend evenings reading an estate-planning listserver. I wasn't looking for a job, but after a particularly bad day at the office, I saw on the listserver a listing for a job at an offshore trust company. (Bad day aside, who hasn't dreamed of selling everything and running away to the South Pacific?)

I sent a résumé, and three months later, I found myself moving to Rarotonga, the largest of the 15 islands that comprise the Cook Islands. The Cook Islands is an independent, English-speaking country in the South Pacific. It's in the same time zone as Hawaii and is as far south of the Equator as Hawaii is north of it. For Australians and New Zealanders, the Cooks are like Hawaii — a winter getaway with beaches and Polynesian hospitality.



(Illustration: Tuchman Travel Guide)

While I didn't come to Rarotonga to sit on a beach (well... maybe a little!) the transition from St. Louis, Mo., in the cold Midwest to a Polynesian paradise was interesting, to say the least.

I kept a diary of some of my experiences, and just past my first anniversary as an expatriate, I share it here:

March 17

The airport: Immediately after getting off the plane, I can tell that the locals hate Americans. They scowl and turn up their noses. I

can sense the vitriol and loathing oozing from every pore. Oh wait, these are my notes from landing in Paris, France — not the Cooks.

Let me start again: Rarotonga, Cook Islands.



This is my new home: Rarotonga. (Photo: Craig Redler)

I left the Midwest, where it was about 20 degrees Fahrenheit. Rarotonga is warm and sunny. A gentleman plays the ukulele in the airport, and customs is a relative breeze. My new employers have an *ei* (in Hawaii, they call it a lei) waiting for me. This place and these people could not be nicer!

March 26

I have a family of chickens living in the yard. Geckos are all over the house. One of them is looking at me as I write this.

I get a Cook Islands driver's license. (It takes 10 minutes to get a license; it will take three weeks to get an ATM card.) The homes here don't have addresses. My driver's license lists my address as "the yellow house near the blue basket." If anyone would like to, they can send me mail there.

MISSING



IF FOUND, PLEASE PLACE
OUTSIDE THE YELLOW HOUSE

Addresses do not exist in the Cook Islands. (Photo illustration: Anthony Hutchings)

March 29

In Missouri, the soil is rich and fertile, but I have never seen anything like this — fruit is everywhere.

My first week on the island, a cyclone passes nearby. Luckily, it turns out to be a dud. While the “cyclone” is a nonevent, it does get pretty windy, and fruit blows all over the place. The good news: I find dinner just lying on the road! The bad news: I get lost coming home. Somebody moved the blue basket.

April 16

Bought a car today! Perfect for the island, a little Cabriolet. It gets great mileage, and with a tail wind, downhill, it could probably hit 50 kilometers per hour. The soft top is mostly water-resistant. Today it rained, and I could sort of tell the difference between being in the car and being out of it (I mean by the precipitation in it, not based on the horrendous engine noise).



Enough said! My new car. (Photo: Craig Redler)

April 30

When I got off the plane after having survived a miserable St. Louis winter, I was pretty much the palest guy on the island. I have been on the island for weeks now and have started to get some color. (Lobster-red is a color, right?)

May 2

I go to a function held by the Cook Islands Law Society. It has only 54 members. (I am pretty sure that I have been on an

escalator in the St. Louis County courthouse with more than 54 attorneys before.) While some of the members are native Cook Islanders, the majority are from elsewhere: France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and of course Australia and New Zealand. I'm the only American. No offense St. Louis County bar, but these guys, while few in number, are far more interesting!

The circuit court judge only gets here from New Zealand once a month. His name is Sir Hugh Williams. An actual knight! Not only that, but he is a Queen's Counsel, a status conferred by the Crown, and the highest honor a lawyer can achieve in a Commonwealth country. Members wear silk gowns and wigs. It's an honor meeting him. Despite my begging, he will not let me wear his wig.

May 17

The yellow house formerly by the blue basket has a washer, but no dryer. I am still living out of a suitcase. I only have a week's worth of clothes. (No 24-hour Walmarts here.)

A week's worth of clothes is OK — except when it rains. I have never lived in a humid region without a dryer before. I learn quickly that stuff hung to dry on a humid day... well, sometimes it just doesn't dry. Not only that, there are children (and goats) all around this neighborhood. Not sure what scares me more, a kid running away with my drawers, a goat eating them, or having to wear wet clothes.

May 22

After days of rain, it gets sunny and hits 29 degrees Celsius. Not even sure what the heck that is, but it feels kind of warm. At least my clothes finally dried.

May 30

Amazing dichotomy. I communicate all day with people all over the world: Switzerland, Hong Kong, Singapore, every major city in the United States. True masters of the universe types who probably do not think too much about trash (or for that matter, about goats eating their underwear). Contrast that to the Cook Islanders, who waste nothing. To behave otherwise would cause a problem — quickly. There is no room for mountain-sized landfills. (There is a pile of garbage on the Illinois side of St. Louis that is probably bigger than Rarotonga itself.) There are few garbage disposals in the homes, and the islanders only put out recyclables for collection. Leftover food is tossed into the jungle or put into a bucket for the neighbors' pigs. (A habit I will, to the chagrin of my future neighbors, keep up if I ever find my way home.)

I'm pretty sure most of my clients do not keep slop buckets for pigs.

June 18

Here is a sentence I thought I would never put together, even if I lived to be 100: I think a gecko defecated in my sink.

June 28

I discover that my yellow house formerly by the blue basket has a really nice coconut tree. So what does a pale Midwesterner who wants to open a coconut do? Buy a machete, of course!



The aftermath: my first coconut. (Photo: Craig Redler)

April 18

Today, a cat kind of moved into my yellow house formerly by the blue basket. She could be feral, or she might belong to someone. Either way, she doesn't want to leave. Before I left the States, a friend joked that moving to an island, I would need a "Man Friday," like Robinson Crusoe. Since it's Friday, I decide to call my cat "Friday." On the other hand, maybe I should name her something more American, like Billy-Ray, Smith & Wesson, or Pizza Hut.

April 29

I apparently made the list of chumps in the cat community. My cat Friday found a way out of the house with the door closed. (I still have no idea how she does it... probably the same way the geckos come in.) She was gone this morning when I got out of bed. I heard her pounding on the door. When I went to let her in, she was there with two other cats. All three of them sat at the door just looking at me. I think she's spreading the word that she found a gullible one. Or are they sizing me up for a hostile takeover?

May 1

Just another day in the Cooks: I had to stop twice driving to work this morning. Once for pigs crossing the road, and once for, I kid you not, chickens crossing the road.

Btw: I am not sure why they were doing it.

May 2

The price of gasoline on the island is quite high (like, holy-crap-I-want-to-ball-up-in-the-fetal-position high) relative to the United States. Consequently, scooters are very popular. I broke down today and bought one. (I haven't driven a motorbike of any kind for decades.)

May 10

Out of coconut. I am going to open another one with my trusty machete. Between that and my new scooter, I don't see any way I am not going to the ER this weekend.

May 15

Elections are going on here in the Cooks. Among the candidates, there are three lawyers. One of the two newspapers here is concerned that if they all win there won't be enough

attorneys on the island. (Attention American attorneys: opportunity!)

June 2

Friday the cat has turned into a stone-cold, homicidal, gecko-slaughtering maniac. She starts with the precision of a surgeon — methodically taking them apart. Now she employs the “heavy hammer” approach. My house is covered with streaks on the floors made of former geckos.

July 4

On Independence Day, it amazes me just how little Americana there is here. There are no Burger Kings or Nikes. There is no NFL or MLB. No Chevys or *Simpsons*. No Ralph Lauren or Marc Ecko (thank goodness!). Hell, there aren't even Levi's jeans. I have never been anywhere so untarnished by the pop culture machine that is the U.S. of A.

While that is refreshing, for the bad news: Yours truly will be the impression of Americans for many Cook Islanders. Someone please send me an assault rifle, a GMC pickup, a Merle Haggard CD, and a tall, red, white, and blue hat.

September 6

I mentioned before the appalling lack of Americana. Well, today I see a box of Special K at a grocery store! I have to stop to salute it. (Lucky it wasn't a box of Froot Loops. I would've had to break into “The Star-Spangled Banner.”)



All signs point to... (Photo: Craig Redler)

November

Find out I am getting transferred! In all seriousness, the Cook Islands are beautiful. The people are warm, and welcome visitors. The beaches make Hawaiians blush. The Cooks are one of those rare places where sometimes you just have to stop whatever you're doing and get out the camera. It should come as no surprise that moving back to a country with first-world annoyances like parking meters, auto insurance, and lots of attorneys doesn't excite me. Be that as it may, New Zealand is

another exceptionally nice place where goats don't eat your underwear, where it is perpetually spring, and where (so I hear) hobbits live.

I am keeping a new diary, and will let you know. In the interim, I am trying hard not to run over any hobbits while I reacclimate to traffic lights.

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