



Cook Islands



Background Polynesians from Tahiti were probably the first people to settle Rarotonga -- the largest of the Cook Islands -- around A.D. 900. Over time, Samoans and Tongans also settled in Rarotonga, and Rarotongans voyaged to the northern Cook Islands, settling Manihiki and Rakahanga. Pukapuka and Penrhyn in the northern Cook Islands were settled directly from Samoa. Prior to European contact, there was considerable travel and trade between inhabitants of the different islands and atolls, but they were not united in a single political entity. Spanish navigators were the first Europeans to spot the northern Cook Islands in 1595, followed by the first landing in 1606, but no further European contact occurred until the 1760s. In 1773, British explorer James COOK spotted Manuae in the southern Cook Islands, and Russian mapmakers named the islands after COOK in the 1820s.

Fearing France would militarily occupy the islands as it did in Tahiti, Rarotongans asked the UK for protectorate status in the 1840s and 1860s, a request the UK ignored. In 1888, Queen MAKEA TAKAU of Rarotonga formally petitioned for protectorate status, to which the UK reluctantly agreed. In 1901, the UK placed Rarotonga and the rest of the islands in the New Zealand Colony, and in 1915, the Cook Islands Act organized the islands into one political entity. It remained a protectorate until 1965, when New Zealand granted the Cook Islands self-governing status. The Cook Islands has a great deal of local autonomy and is an independent member of international organizations, but it is in free association with New Zealand, which is responsible for its defense and foreign affairs. In September 2023, the US recognized the Cook Islands as a sovereign and independent state.

Capital	name: Avarua
Government type	parliamentary democracy
Area	total : 236 sq km land: 236 sq km water: 0 sq km
Climate	tropical oceanic; moderated by trade winds; a dry season from April to November and a more humid season from December to March
Natural resources	coconuts (copra)
Population	total: 7,761 (2024 est.)
Population growth rate	-2.24% (2024 est.)
Ethnic groups	Cook Island Maori 77.4%, part Cook Island Maori 8.3%, Fijian 3.6%, New Zealand Maori/European 3.4%, Filipino 2.9%, other Pacific Islands 1.8%, other 2.6% (2021 est.)

Religions	Protestant 55% (Cook Islands Christian Church 43.1%, Seventh Day Adventist 8.3%, Assemblies of God 3.6%), Roman Catholic 16.7%, Church of Jesus Christ 3.9%, Jehovah's Witness 2.2%, Apostolic Church 2.1%, other 4.5%, none/unspecified 15.6% (2021 est.)
Languages	English (official) 86.4%, Cook Islands Maori (Rarotongan) (official) 76.2%, other 8.3% (2011 est.)
Executive branch	chief of state: King CHARLES III (since 8 September 2022); represented by Sir Tom J. MARSTERS (since 9 August 2013); New Zealand High Commissioner Catherine GRAHAM (since 8 September 2024) head of government: Prime Minister Mark BROWN (since 1 October 2020)
Legislative branch	legislature name: Parliament
Diplomatic representation from the US	embassy: none (self-governing in free association with New Zealand)
Economic overview	high-income self-governing New Zealand territorial economy; tourism-based activity but diversifying; severely curtailed by COVID-19 pandemic; copra and tropical fruit exporter; Asian Development Bank aid recipient
Real GDP (purchasing power parity)	\$401.155 million (2024 est.) \$364.686 million (2023 est.) \$306.285 million (2022 est.)
Real GDP per capita	\$29,800 (2024 est.) \$25,700 (2023 est.) \$19,700 (2022 est.)
Exports - partners	Japan 33%, Thailand 15%, Greece 15%, France 11%, China 8% (2023)
Exports - commodities	fish, ships, garments, shellfish (2023)
Imports - partners	NZ 44%, Italy 26%, Fiji 9%, China 7%, Australia 3% (2023)
Imports - commodities	ships, refined petroleum, cars, plastic products, additive manufacturing machines (2023)

Population Pyramid

