

Cook Islands



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1. Why you should visit the Cook Islands

Are you looking for incredibly turquoise waters and deserted white sand beaches with excellent snorkeling right off the beach in an English-speaking country that you can visit year-round? Do you want to meet some of the friendliest people on the planet?

Look no further, the Cook Islands may just be what you have been looking for all along.



In 1997, the parliament of the Cook Islands passed a Marae Moana (Sacred Ocean) bill which created the largest multi-use marine protected area in the world at that time. It extends over the entire exclusive economic zone of the Cook Islands of over 0.7 mio square miles (1.9 mio square kilometers) and it created 15 marine protected areas extending to 50 nautical miles around each island where only small sustainable commercial fishing or seabed mineral activities are permitted. Large-scale exploitation is forbidden.

As a result, you will find healthy and diverse sea-life populations and endangered sea turtles and reef sharks.

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The lagoons are lined with white sand beaches and often have good snorkeling right off the beach.

Unlike neighboring French Polynesia, the islands of the Cook Islands are usually smaller and don't have such rugged towering mountains on the interior. That means that you can easily explore the islands by bike or scooter.

As the population in the Cook Islands is also lower and there are fewer visitors, finding a deserted beach is usually quite easy.

Rarotonga is the most popular tourist destination in the Cook Islands, followed by Aitutaki which is significantly more rural. Other islands are basically smaller and more rural versions of Aitutaki which contain less or, in some cases, no tourist infrastructure.

In this Cook Islands Purple Guide, we will tell you what you need to know to visit Rarotonga and Aitutaki and we show you the best things to do in these islands and, of course, we show you where the best beaches and snorkeling locations are.

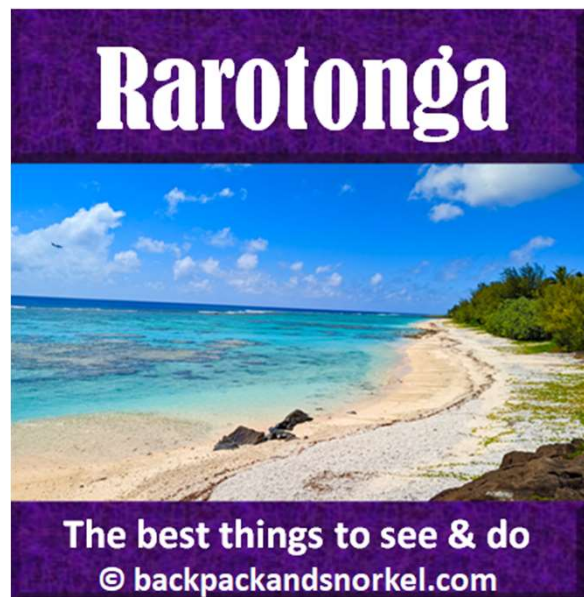
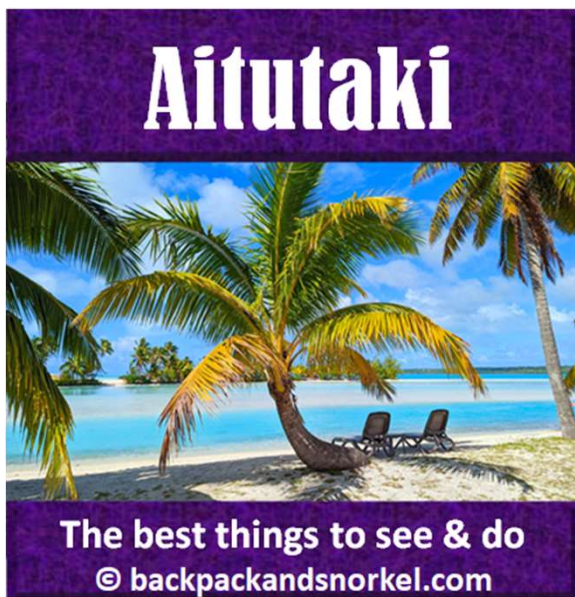
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To help you find out what best fits you, we have added lots of photos and links to google maps locations and additional reviews. Join us to explore the best things to see and do in Cook Islands.

This is not an in-depth Cook Islands guide. You can buy those from the big travel guide companies. Our goal is to help you Make Memorable Moments on a relaxing Cook Islands trip and help you build the perfect itinerary for your trip.

Please also check out the other exciting destinations and travel guides on our Backpack and Snorkel [website](#).

We have made some videos about Aitutaki and Rarotonga in the Cook Islands. Please check them out.



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2.1 Disclaimer

In this guide I am doing my best to give you the most accurate information. Over time, however, prices, times, and even attractions are subject to change. Therefore, I and backpackandsnorkel.com cannot be held responsible for the experiences of users while traveling. I strongly suggest that you write or call the attractions you plan to visit for confirmation when you make your travel plans.

Also, please stay alert, be aware of your surroundings and keep an eye on your belongings. Pickpockets and other criminals can easily ruin even the best planned vacation.

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3. General Information about the Cook Islands

The Cook Islands are a self-governing island country of 15 islands which is associated with New Zealand and many of the 17,000 inhabitants are New Zealand citizens.

About 13,000 live on Rarotonga and almost 2,000 on Aitutaki. More than 100,000 Cook Island citizens live in New Zealand and Australia. The total land mass of the Cook Islands is 93 sq mi (240 square km).

Tourism is the biggest industry in the Cook Islands with more than 160,000 annual visitors. Other sources of income are offshore banking, pearls, and export of fruits and seafood.

3.1 Driving a car or scooter in the Cook Islands

Cars and scooters are driven on the left side of the road like in New Zealand and Great Britain. The speed limit is typically 40 km/h in urban areas and 60km/h outside the settlements.

You are not allowed to pump your gas at gas stations. An attendant, often the gas station owner, will pump the gas for you.

More information can be found in the [Rarotonga](#) and [Aitutaki](#) sections of this Cook Islands Purple Guide.

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3.5 Language of the Cook Islands

The two official languages of the Cook Islands are English and Cook Islands Maori.

Please note that Cook Islands Maori is similar but different from the Maori that is spoken in French Polynesia.

Here are some expressions:

Kia Orana	Hi; may you live long
Popongi	good morning
Ka kite	see you later
Ae	yes
Kare	no
Vaka	canoe
Aere ra	goodbye
Vaine	woman
Tane	man
Painapa	pineapple
Meitaki	thank you

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4.2 Getting around in Rarotonga

Visitors either rent a car or scooter (cars and scooters drive on the left side of the road), use the bus, or hire a taxi to get to their destinations.

4.2.1 Rarotonga Bus ([website](#))

Rarotonga has one bus line that runs clockwise around the island (departs every hour from Avarua from 7am to 10pm) and one that runs anti-clockwise (departs on each half hour from Avarua). The anti-clockwise bus has shorter operating times. There are bus stops, but passengers can be picked up and left out of the bus anywhere along the route. At the time of writing, the fare is NZD5 per adult for a single ride or NZD8 for a return ticket and there was (temporarily) no Sunday service.

4.2.2 Rarotonga Taxis ([website](#))

Taxis in the Cook Islands operate differently than in most other countries. In Rarotonga, private taxi companies merged into the Cook Islands Taxi Association (CITA), which operates green taxis. The only taxi stands are at the airport and the cruise dock. Taxis that you see in the streets are most likely hired and trying to hail them will be fruitless. So, if you need a taxi, you will need to call one of the CITA companies ahead of time.

- **AJ Taxi Services**
phone +682 22592
email ajtaxis682@gmail.com

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The taxi fares below were current at the time of writing:

Taxis have a minimum fare of NZD10 during daytime (NZD15 night) plus NZD3 per km driven. There are fixed fares from the airport and cruise dock. To Avarua, expect to pay NZD15 per person and to Muri Beach you will pay NZD40 per person at the time of writing.

A 1h island tour is NZD120.

4.2.3 The best rental car companies in Rarotonga

There are multiple car rental agencies in Rarotonga. From the big global players, only AVIS is doing business in Rarotonga.

Renters need to be 18 years of age and must have a valid driver license from their home country. Drivers with licenses that are NOT from any of the following countries need to have an international driver permit, which translates the local license to English: Australia, Canada, European Union, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, and USA. Please check with your car rental company.

Here is a list of the best rental car companies in Rarotonga in alphabetical order:

- **AVIS ([website](#))** is located at the airport and in Muri Beach near the Pacific Resort
- **Go Cook Islands ([website](#))** has is a small rental company with one location in Vaimaanga, right next to Wigmore's Superstore. They offer airport pick-ups and drop-offs.
- **Island Car & Bike Hire ([website](#))** has locations in Avarua and Muri Beach. We like that they offer free accommodation pickup - airport pick-up and drop-off are charged extra.

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5.1.1 Muri Beach ([map](#), [reviews](#)) at Muri Lagoon

The most popular beach on Rarotonga is Muri Beach. Muri Beach is bordering Muri Lagoon, which is approx. 1.4 miles (2.2 km) long and 0.6 miles (1 km) wide. Muri Lagoon starts at the Avana Passage in the north and ends at Motu Taakoka in the south. The three motus Motutapu, Oneroa, and Koromiri are part of the lagoon.

Despite its small size, it is Rarotonga's largest source of tourist income.

Muri Beach lines the central and southern part of the lagoon. If you don't stay in any of the beach-side hotels or resorts, then there is only one public access next to the Muri Beach Club Hotel.

The beach at the hotel is beautiful and well cared for. If you want more solitude, go a few feet north of the hotel and you will likely be all by yourself. The beach here is not groomed and narrower, but definitely well worth a visit. The trees provide sufficient shade.



Swimming and snorkeling are generally good. The water depth is max. 5 ft (1.50 m), but be aware that there is a current parallel to the beach that you can swim against, but it can tire you out.

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Muri Lagoon is a victim of its popularity. Many years of neglect and construction activity without insufficient investment in infrastructure have led to the lagoon becoming heavily polluted from agricultural runoff and leaking septic tanks. In 2015, the local government declared the environmental condition of the lagoon a **national disaster**. Quite a bit of work to clean up the mess has been performed, but permanent major damage is done. You will see several colorful fish when you are snorkeling, but the vast majority of the corals are bleached and the water is a little hazy in several areas.

You can get into the water without water shoes, but we advise you to wear water shoes as there are quite a few rocks and sea cucumbers in the water, and to make matters worse, there is a possibility of stepping on a stonefish. Stonefish are one of the most venomous fish in the world. When you step on them, they can inject you with toxic venom that can cause excruciating pain or even death.



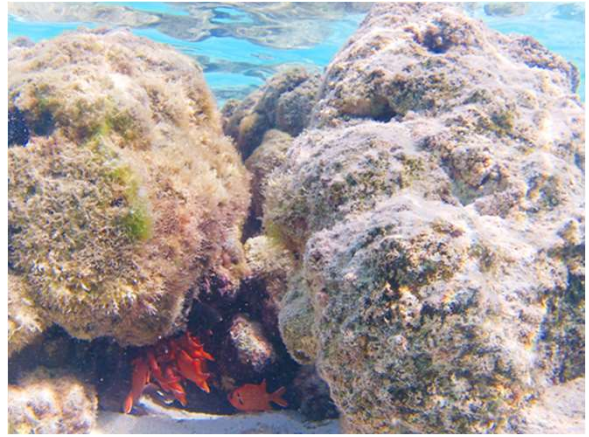
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5.1.2 Titikaveka Beach ([map](#), [reviews](#))

Titikaveka Beach lies 2 miles (3.2 km) south west of [Muri Beach](#) outside the Muri Lagoon. It is often chosen as an alternative to Muri Beach as it has good swimming and snorkeling. We liked the beach better than Muri and we appreciated that it is much less visited. As a matter of fact we had it almost all for ourselves.



Snorkeling here is comparable to Muri Beach, but not as good as there are fewer fish. The corals here appear to be a little healthier, but not by much.

The trees provide ample shade, if needed.

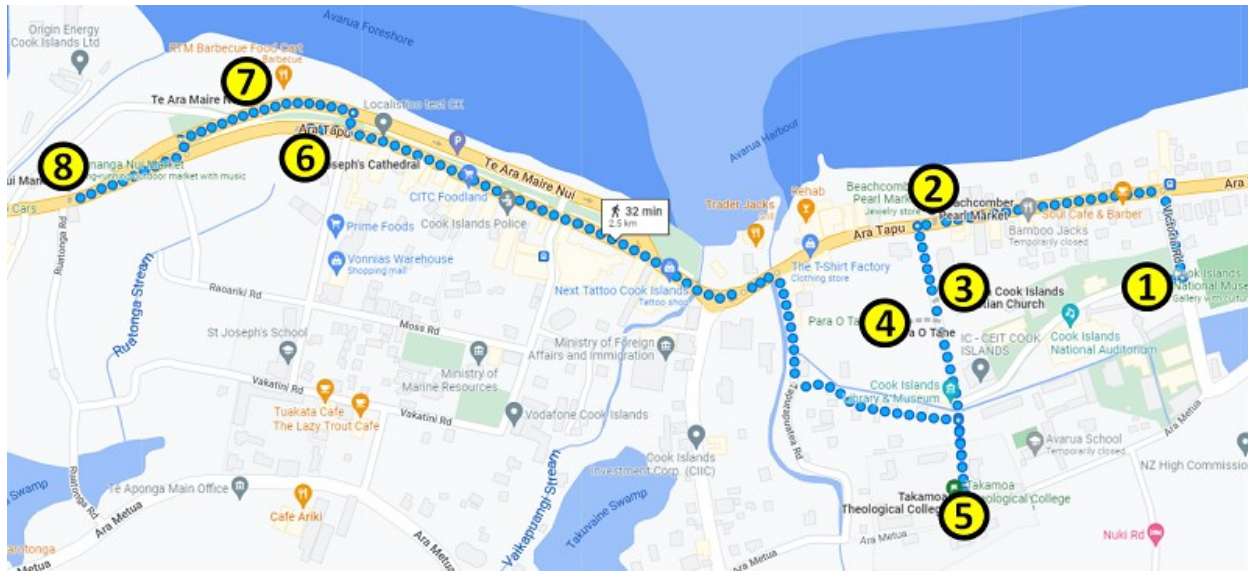
There are fewer rocks and sea cucumbers compared to Muri Beach. Due to the potential presence of stone fish, we recommend to wear water shoes when you get into the water.

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5.2 Self-guided tour of Avarua

Avarua means **Two Harbors** and is the capital of the Cook Islands. It is where the Cook Islands' international airport is located.

While Avarua can be explored on foot, it is definitely easier to have a rental car to see the sights.



- 1 - Cook Islands National Museum
- 2 - Beachcomber Pearl Market
- 3 - Avarua Cook Islands Christian Church
- 4 - Para O Tane Palace
- 5 - Takamoa Theological College
- 6 - St. Joseph's Cathedral
- 7 - Terevete Park Water Station
- 8 - Punanga Nui Market

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5.2.1 Cook Islands National Museum ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

Start your day at the Cook Islands National Museum. This small museum is housed in one large room. It has no air conditioning and admission is NZD5 per person. Many of the displayed items are replicas and the inscriptions are often quite subjective.

In general, we thought that the museum is definitely worth the admission as it gives some interesting insights into life on Rarotonga in the old times and it provides good details about the Christianization of the Cook Islands.



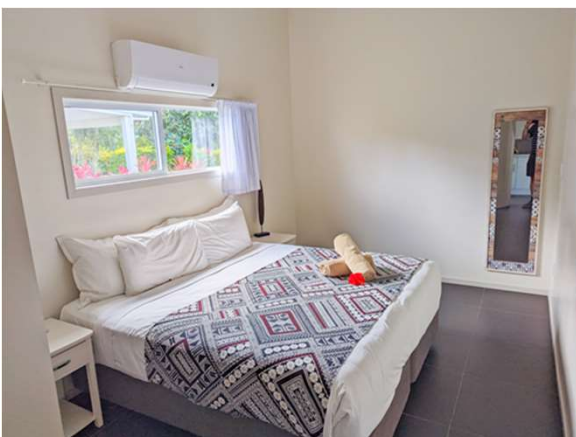
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5.2.6 St. Joseph's Cathedral ([map](#), [reviews](#))

St. Joseph's Cathedral is the mother church of the Catholic Diocese of Rarotonga and the cathedral of the Bishop of Rarotonga since 1966. It is nicely decorated on the inside and worth a quick visit.



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7. Aitutaki in the Cook Islands

Aitutaki is the second most populated and second most popular tourist destination in the Cook Islands after [Rarotonga](#).



The AI in Aitutaki is pronounced as in BUY, the U as in RULE, the TA as in TUB and the I as in WEAK.

7.2.3 Scooter rental companies in Aitutaki

All of the [car rental companies listed above](#) also rent scooters.

Additionally, some hotels also rent scooters to their guests, so please check with your hotel.

To rent a scooter, please be advised that you will need to be at least 16 years old (some companies require you to be at least 18 or 21 years of age) and you will need to bring a license from your home country that allows you to operate a scooter. Unlike in Rarotonga, you will not need to take knowledge or driving tests, but you will still need to get a local license from the police station in Arutanga ([map](#)), which costs you NZD2.50.

Here is a list of the best scooter rental companies in Aitutaki in alphabetical order that we are aware of:

- **Aquila Rentals Ltd.** ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))
phone 682 31 668
email aquila@aitutaki.net.ck
- **Popoara Rentals** ([map](#), [reviews](#))
phone +682 31 379
email rentals@popoara.co.ck
- **Ranginui's Retreat Rentals** ([map](#))
phone +682 31 657
email ranginui@aitutakiretreat.net
website <https://www.ranginuisretreat-aitutaki.com/about-aitutaki>
- **Rino's Rentals** ([map](#))
phone +682 31 197
email reservations.rinosaitutaki@gmail.com

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8.1.2 Marine Research Centre Beach ([map](#), [reviews](#))

The Marine Research Centre Beach is often described as the best place to snorkel on Aitutaki's main land. There is a lot of truth in this statement. The water is mostly crystal clear and the reef is fairly healthy and has lots of colorful fish.

The beautifully turquoise water is not very deep and ideal for snorkeling but not so for swimming.

The beach is unmaintained and you will find a mix of sand and stones and coral pieces.

We advise to use water shoes to make it easier get over the rocks and coral pieces into the water, but mostly to avoid stepping on dangerous stonefish that may hide in the water.



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8.1.3 Beach near The Boat Shed ([map](#))

Probably the second best snorkeling on the Aitutaki mainland can be found in the channel that divides the Ootu Peninsula and the privately owned Motu Akitua where the Aitutaki Lagoon Private Island Resort is located. A good access point is by the parking lot of The Boat Shed. The reef here is mostly healthy and has lots of fish. The water here is crystal clear to slightly hazy. Be advised that there is a current going into the lagoon and my advice is to get in the water near the beginning of the channel, let the water carry you into the lagoon while you enjoy snorkeling. You can then either swim back against the current if you are a good swimmer or just walk back on the beach.

Again, please wear water shoes for your own comfort (walking over stones and coral pieces) and safety (avoid stonefish stings).

Please be advised that there is a small ferry ([map](#)) that frequently crosses the channel to bring passengers from and to the Aitutaki Lagoon Private Island Resort. Make sure that the ferry operator sees you and stay away from the ferry.



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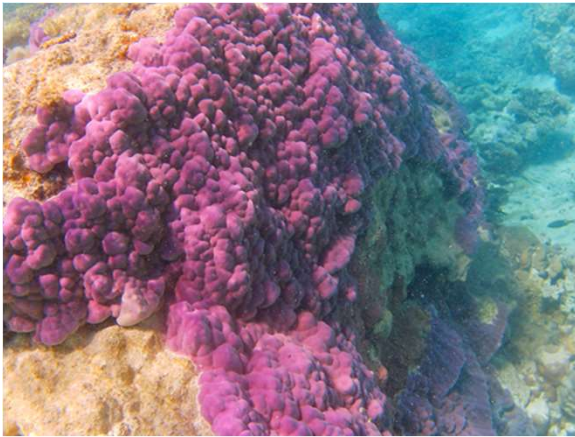
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8.3 Takurua Island Feast at the Tamanu Beach Resort ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

The Takurua Island Feast or short Island Night is not as spectacular as in Rarotonga and sadly there was no fire juggling as was advertised, but it was still worth seeing.

The Island Night starts with a real tasty and plentiful buffet at 7pm and god live music by a local band that sings in Cook Island Maori. The 30min dance show starts at around 8:30pm.

At NZD75 per person, this show is a bit overprized, but if you have not seen the show elsewhere or in Rarotonga, then it is still worth seeing it.



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8.4.2 Vodafone Store with Post Office and ATM ([map](#))

Across the intersection from Aitutaki Market lies a building that has the Vodafone Store on the left, a BSP (Bank of South Pacific) ATM in the center and a Bank of Cook Islands on the right. The Vodafone store also acts as the post office.

The store is open from Monday – Friday from 8am to 4pm.



8.4.3 Arutanga CICC Church ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

The Arutanga CICC (CICC = Cook Islands Christian Church) was built in 1828 and is the oldest church in the Cook Islands.

Behind it is [Arutanga Park](#).



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9.1 Ranginui's Retreat ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

We opted for Ranginui's Retreat as we wanted to be close to the best snorkeling spots and to the airport and were planning to prepare most of our meals.

Ranginui's Retreat is located 1.5 miles (2.4km) south of the airport near [Ootu Beach](#). The owner welcomed us at the airport with a lei for me and one for my wife (thank you very much!) and returned us to the airport at the end of our 5 night stay for free.

We had a Deluxe Beachfront Bungalow, which consisted of a great room that included the kitchenette, dining room and living room, a bedroom, and a bathroom with an outdoor shower. On the covered front porch were a barbeque, a table and two chairs.

The views from the bungalow on the lagoon and Aitutaki Lagoon Private Island Resort were spectacular.

Ranginui's Retreat has shared free loungers for the beach, free kayaks and even a pool.

The sandy beach is lined with palm trees and right by the channel where you can swim. At low tide, a sandbank becomes visible that you can walk on. Behind the sandbank is another channel and then comes the Aitutaki Lagoon Private Island Resort with its beautiful seafront. Honestly, I think the views from Ranginui's Retreat are much better than the views from the resort.

[Ootu Beach](#), [Koru Café](#), [Popoara Rentals](#) and The Boat Shed are only short walks away.

Long story short: We would definitely stay here again.



10. Closing Remarks

ABOUT RUDY FROM BACKPACK & SNORKEL

I was born in Germany and emigrated to the US in 2003. My wife and I are a truly multinational couple: I, with my German background, and she with her Chinese heritage. Both of us live in the USA.

Sadly, working in the US means we have much fewer vacation days compared to other countries like e.g. Germany and thus we cannot travel very frequently.

Through a lot of trial and error, we have found our ideal travel and vacation style. **Making Memorable Moments** by focusing on important destinations, planning time for meeting the locals and, of course, for relaxation are our priorities.

We have also learned to appreciate local foods and try to eat as many local dishes as possible. Just for fun, we try to eat at one Chinese restaurant in each country we visit. It is absolutely amazing how different Chinese food is all over the planet.



MAKING MEMORABLE MOMENTS

You may take 10,000 photos during your vacation, rush from one attraction to the next, but what you will remember in your heart is how you were **Making Memorable Moments**.

For me, that was e.g. Spider Rock in Canyon de Chelly (ever heard of this US National Park?). When I first saw it, I was blown away by this majestic natural obelisk and the beautiful canyon that it sits in. I have been there two more times and still feel the same.

Or think of Isla Mujeres, a small island outside Cancun, Mexico. On the surface, Playa Norte is supposedly Mexico's most beautiful beach and it is always crowded and the boats that anchor there play loud music. Below the surface, Isla Mujeres is very relaxed, quite walkable and it has friendly locals, good authentic Mexican food and good international cuisine and is often very affordable.

Isla Mujeres is our personal paradise!



PACK YOUR BACKPACK & SNORKEL AND LET'S GO

Our travel style has evolved over the years. We are packing light these days when we travel and typically only need a small backpack per person - see my [Traveling Light Guide](#).

With this guide, I want to provide value to you and help you plan your own relaxing vacations with the goal of **Making Memorable Moments!**

Please contact me if you have any questions or comments.