

# Cook Islands

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The Cook Islands are a self-governing parliamentary democracy in free association with New Zealand. The Cook Islands are situated in the South Pacific Ocean, north-east of New Zealand, between French Polynesia and Fiji. There are fifteen major islands, spread over 2.2 million square kilometres of ocean, divided into two distinct groups: the Southern Cook Islands, and the Northern Cook Islands of coral atolls. The total land area of 240 square kilometres (92.7 sq mi), but the Cook Islands Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) covers 1.8 million square kilometres (0.7 million sq mi) of ocean.

In 2008 the population is estimated at 21,923. The main population centers are on the island of Rarotonga (estimated at 10,000), where there is an international airport. There is also a much larger population of Cook Islanders in New Zealand, particularly the North Island; in the 2006 census, 58,008 self-identified as being of ethnic Cook Island M ori descent.

With over 90,000 visitors traveling to the islands in 2006, tourism is the country's number one industry, and the leading element of the economy, far ahead of other activities that include offshore banking and trust business, precious pearls, marine and fruit exports.

Like many other South Pacific island nations, the Cook Islands' economic development is hindered by the isolation of the country from foreign markets, the limited size of domestic markets, lack of natural resources, periodic devastation from natural disasters, and inadequate infrastructure. Agriculture, employing about one-third of the working population, provides the economic base with major exports made up of copra and citrus fruit. Black pearls are the Cook Islands' leading export. Manufacturing activities are limited to fruit processing, clothing, and handicrafts. Trade deficits are offset by remittances from emigrants and by foreign aid, overwhelmingly from New Zealand.

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