

Cook Islands: The Kiss of Heaven



Rarotonga, Cook Islands

A KISS FROM HEAVEN: WELCOME TO THE COOK ISLANDS

By Kameel Majdali

It was the opportunity of a lifetime. Twenty year old Eddie Daniel from Rarotonga in the Cook Islands was making a journey to Melbourne, Australia. The date was March 2006 and his purpose was to represent his country in boxing at the Commonwealth Games. However, due to a management mix up, Eddie could not compete because he missed getting weighed.

However, he returned home jubilantly. Why? Because he was chosen to meet Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. During the ensuing lunch, he discovered that there was an empty chair next to the Queen. He took the liberty of sitting next to her and even talking about fast-food. "She would never go to a McDonald's" he recalled. Most significantly, however, is that the young man who could not throw a punch at the Commonwealth Games was able to land a kiss on the Queen's cheek.

Though it was against royal protocol, it was very much in order according to South Pacific tradition. The kiss is a mark of respect as well as affection. When asked for the Queen's response to his warm gesture, he shrugged and said "she smiled". Nor should Her Majesty have been surprised, since she visited the Cook Islands back in 1974. His kiss was no more menacing than that which he would have given to his grandmother.

Eddie Daniel received no reprimand for breaching protocol; on the contrary, he returned home to a hero's welcome. Though there was no gold medal, he was able to deliver an important message to the island's Head of State: the Cook Islands are a kiss from paradise.

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**The author with Eddie Daniel, the Cook Islander
Who kissed the Queen**

The Cook Islands are a slice of heaven. Located in the South Pacific halfway between New Zealand and Hawaii, the total land mass of the 15 islands is no more than 240 square kilometers. The population is 21,000, of which just over half live on the main island of Rarotonga. The islands are scattered over an area of 2.25 million square kilometers of ocean, yet this distance does not inhibit their strong bonds through language, family, history, culture, heritage, and Christianity.

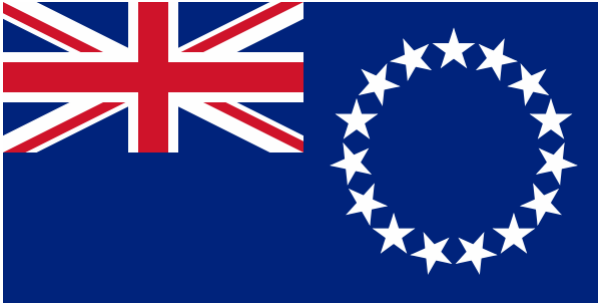


Map of the Cook Islands (CIA)

The islands were named after Captain James Cook, who sighted them in 1770. They became a British protectorate in 1888 and by 1900 administrative control was transferred to New Zealand. On 4 August 1965 the Cook Islands became self-governing in free association with New Zealand.

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The largest and main island is Rarotonga, with a circumference of 32 kilometers. The “capital city” being Avarua. Tourism is the main industry, though it is not as developed as in other places like Tahiti. Most visitors come from New Zealand. A few North Americans do come to The Cooks, but not that many Australians, even though it may be a bit further than Bali, a popular holiday resort. English is widely spoken with Cook Island Maori being the main language.



Cook Island Flag

As is the case with other Pacific Island nations, the Cook Islands faces several significant economic challenges, including a small, dispersed population, limited natural resources, periodic natural disasters, insufficient infrastructure, isolation from foreign markets, and emigration of its skilled people to New Zealand and Australia. The main island is reasonably well off but this is not the case in the outlying islands. Tourism accounts for 40% of its GDP and export of the “black pearl” to Europe, Australia, and Japan, accounts for over 90% of total exports.



Beach at Rarotonga, Cook Islands

Relations with New Zealand

The Cook Islands self-governing status in free association with New Zealand is unique. Among other things, it means the islanders are citizens of New Zealand and use New Zealand currency. The Islands can move to complete independence by unilateral action. In practical terms, the Cook Islands act like an independent country. New Zealand will assist with foreign affairs and defense, if requested.

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Described in the Cook Islands Constitution Act 1965, the government has full executive powers and the power to make its own laws. New Zealand cannot make laws for the Cook Islands, unless invited to do so which, of course, never happens. Due to the country's isolation and small size, New Zealand is responsible for the Cook Islands international affairs and defense. Yet these responsibilities bestow no rights on New Zealand to control the Cook Islands in any way.

It has been said that the Cook Islands are "New Zealand's Hawaii." They are a similar distance from each other (3,100 kilometers) as is Hawaii from the continental United States. The islands serve as a tropical retreat for Kiwis, who share the same currency and passport as the islanders.

Over the years many Cook Islanders have migrated abroad for economic reasons. Due to their special relationship with New Zealand, 50,000 Cook Islanders live in that nation. Their New Zealand passports also give them the right of residency in Australia, where another 15,000 reside. It is among these Australian-resident Cook Islanders that a fervent attempt is being made to reach out to the homeland.

Ministry in Paradise

My purpose in traveling to the Cook Islands was to be a main speaker at the first annual United Evangelism Conference 2006, The Cook Islands, sponsored by Rev. Kapao Kapao and Faith Action Evangelistic Ministries. Kapao (pronounced KAU-poh) is one of my graduates. He brought a big contingent of Cook Islanders from Australia (seven hour plane journey) and enlisted the support of local churches.

One of the first things I noticed on the road between the Rarotonga Airport and my accommodation (the former being in the north and the latter being in the southern part of the island, 16 kilometers away) was the churches. These included the Mormon's, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, and Catholic Church. Where were the evangelicals and Pentecostals? Finally, I found the Assembly of God church, of which there are four on the islands, as well as the shell of a future Youth With A Mission base. The Cook Island Christian Church has several branches and may have started from the London Missionary Society (LMS).

Mormons are reputed to be the biggest missionary organization in the world, followed by Youth with a Mission. Why are the western Bible-believing churches less involved in missions than these groups? While the answer is probably not too hard to guess, the problem is that we are in danger of failing in the Lord's Great Commission. The Mormons and YWAM do well because they enlist the help—howbeit short-term—of the younger people. For the former group, it is almost mandatory that they give a couple years of their life for missions. Such emphasis

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is paying off with impressive growth. People are taught to think missions, do missions, and be missions. We need to go and do likewise.

Ralph Winter has aptly said, *“Unless and until, the future of the world becomes more important than the future of the church, the church has no future!”* This is an imperative. Of interest is that Rev. Kapao brought many younger people (school age) from the Cook Island churches in Australia to help out with this mission. What they and the rest of us experienced will not be forgotten.

The United Evangelism Conference 2006 Cook Islands had a very strong emphasis on evangelism, teaching, as well as practical equipping for the work of the ministry. Night after night there were rallies with vibrant music, dynamic preaching, and altars filled with people hungry for God. Salvations, healings, baptism with the Spirit, prophetic words, became the norm. Prayer at the altar was a powerful yet deeply personal time. Yet paradise pays back. As one pours out to the people in the prayer line, it is not uncommon for them to respond warmly with a grateful embrace and/or tender kiss.

On the last night, something like forty people, including many younger ones, came forward for salvation, including one very prominent man of Rarotonga who has been known for his resistance to Christian things. Plans are underway for The United Evangelism Conference 2007 Cook Islands, to be held 7 to 10 August.

Highlights included my meetings with the Deputy Prime Minister, Dr. Maote, and the Head of State for the Cook Islands, His Excellency Sir Fredrick Goodwin and Lady Goodwin, the Queen’s Representative (known in other countries as the Governor-General). In both cases the content of the meetings included a briefing on “world trends” and talk about the general state of the church. Prayer was offered and gratefully received.

This author also received a warm-hearted invitation to the far-away island of Manihiki, place of the black pearls, where access around the lagoon and atoll is by water taxi. Manihiki is about 1,200 kilometers from Rarotonga and is best reached by a once-a-week three hour flight on a small airplane. Mayor Kora Kora, a tall, powerfully-built but gentle man, reiterated his invitation on two occasions. Around 570 people live on Manihiki. Rev. Kapao did an evangelistic crusade there prior to the evangelism conference in Rarotonga and had a great response. Kora Kora came to the night rally before returning to home and received a powerful prophecy. The Lord was calling him to higher things and he responded with great and prolonged tears of joy, along with hugs and kisses. His last words to me before we parted were “you will come to Manihiki.” If all goes well, the author will meet Mayor Kora on his exquisite island of Manihiki in August 2007.

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Author with the Head of State, His Excellency Sir Frederick Goodwin, The Queen's Representative, and Lady Goodwin

On a fun personal note, Rev. Kapao sent this author on a day-trip to the paradise island called Aitutaki, 220 kilometers north of Rarotonga. This amazing aqua triangular lagoon in the South Pacific is framed by one main island and 15 minor ones. The lagoon is dazzling turquoise and ringed by pearl white sand. Many of the uninhabited islands in the lagoon can be reached by "water taxi" which takes you to your own island and leaves you there to sun bathe, swim, snorkel, or whatever, until you are ready to come home when it picks you up again. They leave you a mobile phone in case there are problems. I visited the island where the Survivor Television series was based and did some snorkeling that was indescribably wonderful.



Famous Lagoon at Aitutaki, island location of the Survivor's TV series

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Nemo, Felix, & Sam from Aitutaki. Nemo & Felix were on the Survivor's Series

Could such a seemingly remote place like the Cook Islands, strongly Christian, take its place in the vast field of the global Great Commission? The answer is a resounding yes! After all, the Cook Islanders are Polynesians and they are very experienced travelers across the sea. Long distance journeys are in their blood!

Whenever and wherever there is a visitation of the Holy Spirit, it is nearly impossible to “stay in the box.” As Cook Islanders surrender to the call of God and anointing of the Holy Spirit, they, too, will minister “*from Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 1:8). Rev. Kapao himself has been to Africa (where he is known as Ka-POW!) and the Lord is preparing to send him to other parts of the world.

The Cook Islands, with its strong Christian tradition, greater openness to the Holy Spirit, and growing evangelistic zeal, can begin to take their place in the great harvest field of the Pacific and the world. And when the Cook Islanders give you a floral garland, their warm embrace—both physically and spiritually—you, too, will understand, like the Queen, what it means to receive the “kiss from heaven.”



Kameel Majdali with Conference hosts Rev. Kapao Kapao & wife Katie (Katai)