

‘Around the Corner from Nowhere: The Cook Islands Rediscovered’

like a big oval potato or turnip which is the most widely grown crop in the Cook Islands. Mangaian taro is said to be the finest but its starchy, slightly sweet, slightly nutty flavour is definitely an acquired taste. It is really good for you though, and the leaves and tuberous root provide all the vitamins and minerals a body needs, or so I was told.

Aunty is working in the richly fertile interior of the island where there are taro swamps as far as the eye can see. Their appearance has been likened to paddy fields in the Philippines or Bali. “This is women’s work,” she tells me with not a hint of resentment and a huge smile

There’s no lagoon on Mangaia, but in the south of the island there’s the beautiful Lake Tiriara which opens into a cave in the makatea. The area is teeming with plant and animal life, and there are eels and tilapia in the 8 metre (25 feet) deep waters. For many years though it was neglected until a not-for-profit organisation called ‘Seacology’ cleaned the area up, added boardwalks and viewing platforms and did a deal with the islanders. In return for Seacology’s work, islanders promised to protect the lake by banning pesticides, dumping and the tethering of livestock and having no buildings within 50 metres of the shore.

You reach the swamps by a road near Tava’enga village which is a marvel of engineering. It was blasted through the steep, solid makatea in 1951 using war surplus explosives.

