

(Granville & Tokalau, 2021)

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## Emotional scenes as first quarantine-free flight from Rarotonga lands in Auckland

Alan Granville and Torika Tokalau · 14:33, Jan 21 2021



It was an emotional and cheerful reunion for those that gathered at Auckland Airport arrivals on Thursday, to greet friends and families who arrived in the first quarantine-free flight from Rarotonga.

Air New Zealand Flight NZ941 departed at 7.43am local time from the Cook Islands and landed in Auckland at 11.06am.

It is the first flight out of Rarotonga in New Zealand's first travel bubble since the coronavirus lockdown.

The bubble, although one way for now with New Zealanders still expected to undergo managed isolation on the island, is the first quarantine-free travel from the Pacific.

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A dozen people, families of friends of the 100 plus passengers onboard, waited eagerly for the visitors to come out of arrivals.

Rimu Ioane who was waiting for his 16-year-old niece, said everyone was excited about the bubble.

"Finally, we're finally here and this is finally happening," he said.

He came to New Zealand for a medical visit during lockdown and hasn't seen his niece since.

"She was lucky to get a seat after the bubble was announced, so she will be here for two weeks and the first thing she wants to do is go eat McDonald's."

About 100 people are said to be on board, according to *Cook Islands News*.

Vivien Bennett was waiting for her best friend Fiona who had been trying to get into New Zealand for a while.

"She's here to see her sick mum so it's a very emotional time for all of us. We just want her to get her home to reunite them."

Aupuni Rota, 22, who was there to greet her aunt, said a big feast was being prepared at home.

The passengers from Raratonga trickled in slowly out of arrivals. Ioane's niece, Nirvana Puna, was one of the first ones out, and she let out a scream of joy when she saw her grandfather and her aunt.

Tears flowed freely as they hugged.

"I also haven't seen my mum for two years, so I'm here to surprise her as well," Puna said.

"But first, a double cheeseburger meal from McDonald's because I've been looking forward to that."

Air New Zealand chief executive Greg Foran says bookings have been strong since the bubble was announced, especially for January and February.

"The first couple of flights inbound have had a strong uptake, which is terrific," Foran said.

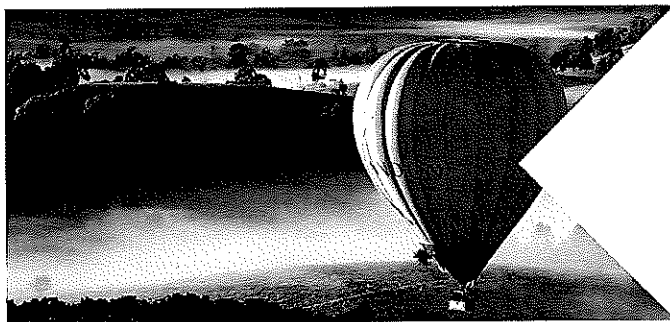
"We knew there was pent-up demand for Cook Islanders waiting to come to New Zealand without quarantining."

Chief operating officer Carrie Hurihanganui said they will be looking at increasing flights out of Rarotonga based on demand.

Two-way quarantine-free travel between the two countries was on track to resume within the first three months of the year, she said.

On Wednesday, Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown said the first flights from the Cook Islands to New Zealand would be packed with students, their family members, and people in need of long-delayed health checks.

Brown said that while the quarantine-free agreement has been "a long time" coming, "we're very pleased that it is now commencing this week.



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"There will be a lot of very grateful people that will be coming through to Auckland very soon," he told *The AM Show*.

Cook Islanders will be able to travel to New Zealand without having to quarantine upon arrival, but New Zealanders will have to wait for a two-way agreement.

## Conditions to travel bubble

To be eligible to enter New Zealand, people in the Cook Islands must not have been overseas in the past 14 days, must not have had contact with a confirmed Covid-19 case within the past 14 days, and must have maintained physical distancing at the airport from any person who did not arrive from the Cook Islands.

Public health officials would be undertaking random temperature checks of passengers on all flights arriving from the Cook Islands into New Zealand, while Auckland Airport would use a "safe travel path" to separate passengers from the Cook Islands from other arrivals.

Before returning to the Cook Islands, passengers would need to take a Covid-19 test within 96 hours of their flight departing.

Air New Zealand said it would operate two flights per week, departing Rarotonga on Wednesdays and Saturdays using the airline's A320 fleet.