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The Pacific islands that greet the New Year

Thanks to a kink in the date line, the Chathams see in the new year before the rest of the planet. John Malathronas went to the edge of the earth

I couldn't believe it. Here I was, in the middle of the Pacific, more than 450 miles from the nearest inhabited landmass, one of only 12 people on the flight to Chatham Island, and Air Chathams had lost my luggage. "It must have happened in Wellington," said the stewardess, who doubled as ground staff. "We'll pick it up on our next flight."

"Your next flight to Wellington is on Wednesday," I reminded her. "This is Monday." I didn't relish the thought of having to buy even a toothbrush in this place. Everything has to be imported via flights from Christchurch, Auckland and Wellington, and goods are marked up to Harrods-hamper prices.

My host, a thirtysomething Kiwi named Tracy, pointed at an unclaimed bag lying by the luggage trailer. I hesitated — it looked like mine, but it wasn't. Tracy unzipped it and looked inside with that problem-solving boldness that characterises frontiersmen and -women the world over. For Chatham Island is the ultimate frontier: if the earth were flat, this would be the edge of it. In fact, it lies beyond the edge: at 44°00'S, 176°30'W, it rests within a kink of the International Date Line.

"This belongs to Sharon," Tracy said triumphantly. "She must have been too excited about meeting her boyfriend, and picked up your bag instead. Jump in the car."

We drove from the airport to Waitangi, the largest settlement on the island, through a flat, Orcadian landscape. There were only a few kopi and akeake trees, remnants of the cleared Pacific bush, anglepoised away from the western winds. The reason for its disappearance was easy to spot: cows grazed for as far as the eye could see toward the horizon, a horizon interrupted by a black dot, growing as it rapidly approached us.

"That's Sharon's car," Tracy said. "That's your luggage."

As the two cars stopped side by side, and the other woman driver started blurting effusive apologies, I knew that the bush telegraph had worked.

The Chatham Islanders are a community of 700 or so resourceful individuals who know each other as well as a tightly knit family unit. Nothing happens here without being broadcast to all corners, as if by the force of the wind. Along with their luggage, visitors have to unload some of their lifestyle habits on arrival, such as privacy and choice — mostly choice — and face a world where such indulgences are unheard of. On Chatham Island, you can buy only whatever is sold in Waitangi's two general stores: the grocers and the off-licence. This is a place where a new variety of Pot Noodle is a must-buy.


I was staying at Tracy's Chatham Motel, on the larger of the two inhabited islands of the archipelago (the other being Pitt Island, 14 miles southeast). Chatham Island — at 350 square miles, less than half the size of Greater London — is mostly flat, of volcanic origin, with the highest point standing at a little more than 600ft. The main commercial activities are farming and fishing. Only recently have these isolated folk entertained the idea of a tourist industry. It becomes hectic at year's end: the Chathams lie almost dead on the date line, so this is where the sun rises first.

The penny dropped at the millennium, when the Chathams lost out to Gisborne, on "mainland" New Zealand, and Tonga, both of which were more adept at advertising their sunrise primacy. Determined not to be beaten again, the islanders became more tourist-friendly: there is now a cafe (though I never caught it open), a takeaway (open noon-2pm) and a restaurant at Hotel Chathams. The restaurant, at least, gives you that rarity, a choice: of two starters, two main courses and two desserts. There is also the sparkling new Te Kopinga marae, more a museum than a gathering place for the island's native Moriori tribe.

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that there are no pure-blooded Moriori left. The last one, Tame Horomona Rehe, popularly known as Tommy Solomon, died in 1933.

The Moriori were a Pacific tribe who left hundreds of petroglyphs and dendroglyphs on Chatham Island. They had discovered a novel way — for humanity, at least — to survive in their splendid isolation: they stopped fighting one another. They elevated non-aggression to a religion, passed down to them by a prophet-like figure — which is why they offered no resistance to a party of Maori who arrived in 1835 in their war canoes. The Maori, then notorious cannibals, not only enslaved the Moriori, but farmed them as livestock; it is said that the fine beach that fans out like a seashell at Waitangi was still covered with human remains 50 years later. Non-violence is a wonderful concept, as long as the other side appreciates the wonderfulness of it.

The Maori acted like every other colonial power: they considered themselves naturally superior, and interbred with the natives they didn't, well, consume. The maltreatment of the Moriori continued until their extinction. The British considered the matter an intertribal war, and left the Maori to their custom.

It was in the 1980s that the full extent of the Moriori tragedy was unearthed by historians, and Tommy Solomon's grave honoured: his statue was unveiled by David Lange, then New Zealand's prime minister, in December 1984. The new marae, inaugurated in January 2005 by Helen Clark, is a belated recognition of the suffering of these unfortunate people, and is dedicated to the peace they so diligently pursued.

Today, the news from the Chathams is of environmental achievements such as the successful breeding of the rare black robin. A plaque at the airport commemorates "Old Blue", the last breeding female. By 1980, there were only five birds left in the world, but with the help of New Zealand's Department of Conservation, which employed the technique of cross-fostering with tits' nests, Old Blue became the saviour of her species. About 250 of her descendants now live on two predator-free islands nearby.

Another success has been the taiko — a kind of magenta petrel that breeds in burrows up to 15ft long. Once common, and a staple of the Moriori diet, it was thought extinct for more than a century until it was rediscovered in 1978. Now its population is 150 and rising.

The greatest draw of Chatham Island is, ultimately, its geographical position. On my last day there, I woke up at dawn. It was a glorious occasion of pinkish clouds and birdsong. There may be six billion people on our planet, but at that moment, I was one of the first to see dawn. With a self-satisfied feeling, I returned my rented Nissan to Tracy.

"I've become a 4WD convert," I said to her as she checked the car. "So easy to drive. I only stalled it once."

"I heard," she replied, unfazed. "Outside the bottle store, wasn't it?"

Getting there: the only flights to the Chatham Islands are from Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington, operated by Air Chathams (00 64 3 305 0209, www.airchathams.com). Return fares start at £229, and you must have accommodation booked before the flight. Air New Zealand (0800 028 4149, www.airnewzealand.co.uk) flies from Heathrow to Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington via Los Angeles or Hong Kong; from £619.

Where to stay: near the main settlement of Waitangi is Chatham Motels (00 64 3-305 0003, www.chathammc.co.nz), which has self-catering doubles from £35. Or try Hotel Chatham (305 0048, www.hotelchatham.co.nz), which has a restaurant and comfortable doubles from £42.

Further information: visit www.chathams.co.nz. There are no ATMs on the island, and mobile phones do not work.

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