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Living in Kiribati

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Introduction

Welcome to *Living in Kiribati: A Guide for Expats*. This book is designed to provide anyone considering a move to Kiribati—whether for work, adventure, or a new way of life—with practical information and thoughtful insights about what to expect and how to thrive in one of the world's most unique island nations.

Kiribati, a remote republic spread across the equator in the central Pacific, is more than just a string of atolls and ocean vistas. It is home to a vibrant people, a rich cultural tapestry, and a way of life profoundly shaped by the sea. The peacefulness, resilience, and community spirit of the I-Kiribati set the tone for everyday existence, from the bustling Maneaba gatherings to the gentle rhythm of the tides that dictate so much of daily life. For newcomers, this environment offers an unparalleled opportunity to immerse themselves in traditions that have been handed down over generations, where respect, modesty, and connection to land and ocean shape identity and interaction.

At the same time, living in Kiribati challenges even the most seasoned expats. The country's remoteness means access to goods, services, and amenities is limited compared to many countries. Infrastructure is basic, healthcare and education options are few, and supplies are often more expensive and harder to find. The islands face pressing environmental risks, particularly from climate change and rising sea levels, making resilience and adaptability essential qualities for those who choose to call Kiribati home. Yet, within these challenges, there are unique rewards: the slower pace of life, unspoiled natural beauty, and the chance to be part of a close-knit community.

This guide aims to present a balanced, comprehensive view of living in Kiribati. From understanding the nuances of local customs and language, to navigating the healthcare system, finding accommodation, and exploring professional opportunities, each chapter digs deeper into the realities of expat life and offers practical advice based on the experiences of those who have made the move before you. Whether your stay is short-term or indefinite, being prepared for the realities of daily life—both the challenges and joys—will help you to integrate seamlessly and enjoy the journey.

Throughout this book, you'll find insights into how to foster meaningful relationships with local people, participate in community life, and respect the values and traditions that shape Kiribati society. You'll also discover tips for enjoying the natural wonders that surround you, whether through diving, sailing, or simply soaking up stunning sunsets on the beach. We address areas that may warrant extra caution—like health, safety, and adapting to limited resources—so you can make informed decisions as you settle into your new home.

Ultimately, *Living in Kiribati: A Guide for Expats* is your companion as you navigate the exciting, sometimes challenging, and always rewarding path to life in this Pacific island nation. Whether you arrive seeking adventure or tranquility, opportunity or community, Kiribati offers something distinctive for every expat willing to embrace its rhythm and culture. Welcome to your new adventure—may your experience in Kiribati be as enriching and memorable as the islands themselves.

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CHAPTER ONE: Understanding Kiribati: Geography and History

Kiribati, officially known as the Republic of Kiribati, is an island nation whose very existence seems to defy the vastness of the Pacific Ocean. Comprising 32 atolls and one raised coral island, Banaba, this nation sprawls across an astonishing 3.5 million square kilometers of ocean. To put that into perspective, imagine a country covering an area larger than India, yet with most of its land barely rising above sea level. Of these 33 islands, only 21 are inhabited, giving you a sense of the remoteness and untouched beauty that awaits. The sheer scale of its maritime territory, combined with its minuscule landmass, makes Kiribati a unique geographical entity. Its location in the central Pacific means it's about as far from, well, almost everything, as you can get, which is precisely its charm for many expats seeking a tranquil escape.

The capital, South Tarawa, bustles with a concentrated population, hosting more than half of Kiribati's total inhabitants. It's nestled within the Gilbert Islands, which form the western part of the nation. For most international arrivals, South Tarawa is the first glimpse of Kiribati, serving as the primary hub for flights and essential services. This narrow strip of land, barely wider than a few hundred meters in places, is a vibrant mix of traditional life and the slow creep of modernity. The Gilbert Islands are just one of the three main island groups that constitute Kiribati; the others are the Phoenix Islands and the Line Islands, stretching thousands of kilometers to the east. This vast dispersion contributes to the unique challenges and diverse landscapes found across the nation.

To truly understand Kiribati today, one must appreciate its profound connection to the ocean and its remarkable history. The earliest inhabitants of Kiribati were Micronesian, arriving thousands of years ago, navigating the vast Pacific in outrigger canoes, guided by the stars and ocean currents. Their knowledge of seafaring was unparalleled, allowing them to settle these remote atolls and establish thriving communities. Life was intimately tied to the sea, providing sustenance, pathways for travel, and shaping their spiritual beliefs. The isolation of these islands fostered distinct cultural practices and traditions that have endured for centuries.

European contact began in the 17th century, though it wasn't until the late 18th and early 19th centuries that sustained interactions occurred, primarily with whalers and traders. These encounters, while introducing new goods and ideas, also brought diseases that devastated the local population. The islands gained more widespread attention when they were charted by British naval officers, and in 1820, the entire group was named the Gilbert Islands by Russian hydrographer Adam von Krusenstern,

after Captain Thomas Gilbert, who had crossed the archipelago in 1788. This period marked the beginning of a shift in the traditional way of life, as external influences started to permeate the isolated communities.

By the late 19th century, the British Empire began to formally assert its influence in the region. In 1892, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands (now Tuvalu) became a British protectorate, primarily to curb the exploitative practice of "blackbirding" (forced labor) and to maintain order among European traders. This colonial administration brought a new layer of governance and introduced elements of Western education and religion, significantly impacting the social fabric of the islands. Missionaries played a crucial role during this era, spreading Christianity and establishing schools, which gradually altered traditional belief systems and social structures.

Phosphate mining on Banaba (Ocean Island), discovered in the early 20th century, became a significant economic driver for the British colony. The wealth generated from phosphate exports, however, primarily benefited the colonial administration and foreign companies, with limited returns for the Banaban people whose land was being stripped bare. This exploitation led to displacement and grievances that continue to resonate today. The strategic importance of the islands, particularly during World War II, further highlighted their global significance. The Battle of Tarawa in November 1943, a brutal and bloody conflict between American and Japanese forces, remains a poignant reminder of the war's devastating impact on these peaceful islands. The scars of this battle are still visible in parts of Tarawa, serving as a solemn historical landmark.

Following World War II, the British continued their administration, but the winds of change were blowing across the Pacific, as former colonies began to agitate for self-determination. The Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony slowly moved towards greater autonomy. In 1975, the Ellice Islands separated to become Tuvalu. The Gilbert Islands continued on their path to independence, and on July 12, 1979, the Republic of Kiribati was born, taking its name from the local pronunciation of "Gilberts." This marked a momentous occasion for the I-Kiribati people, ushering in a new era of self-governance and national identity.

Since gaining independence, Kiribati has faced the challenges inherent in being a small island developing state. Its economy has largely relied on fishing licenses, copra exports, and remittances from citizens working abroad. The country has also grappled with the legacy of its colonial past and the ongoing environmental threats posed by climate change. As a nation composed almost entirely of low-lying coral atolls, Kiribati is acutely vulnerable to rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and saltwater intrusion into freshwater lenses. These existential threats are not abstract concepts but daily realities for many I-Kiribati, shaping their present and future.

Despite these challenges, Kiribati has maintained its unique cultural identity and its

people continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability. The country has sought international cooperation to address its developmental and environmental concerns, often advocating for stronger global action on climate change.

Understanding this rich tapestry of geography and history is crucial for any expat stepping onto Kiribati soil. It provides the context for the daily rhythm of life, the challenges faced by the nation, and the enduring spirit of its people. The islands are not just picturesque destinations; they are living testaments to centuries of human endeavor, resilience, and a profound connection to the vast, powerful Pacific.

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