

Sunset over Flying Fish Cove in Kiritimati. The island is host to the first Rotary club in the Republic of Kiribati.

Rotary on Pacific time

Rotarians from Colorado, USA, visited Kiritimati for the charter ceremony in August.



The Rotary Club of Kiritimati received its official charter in August, adding the Republic of Kiribati to the more than 200 countries and geographical areas already on the Rotary map.

“Rotary will have an important and positive impact on improving the lives of people in Kiritimati,” says club president Ruta Uatiao. “Rotary represents leadership, something we are excited to adopt here.”

Kiribati (pronounced KEER-ah-bhass), with a population of 110,000, consists of 33 Pacific islands scattered across the Equator. The three main groupings are the Gilbert Islands, the Phoenix Islands, and the Line Islands, one of which is Kiritimati, formerly known as Christmas Island.

In 1995, Kiribati drew international attention when it petitioned to move the International Date Line, which ran through the nation, dividing it into two time zones with a 23-hour difference between them. The entire nation now lies west of the date line, which zigzags around the easternmost islands.

Kiribati derives a large portion of its income from remittances from overseas workers, development assistance, and tourism. “Our people are used to being on the receiving end of help,” says Uatiao. “With the first Rotary club here, our members can now be on the giving end.”

The 35 Kiritimati Rotarians, along with guests from District 9920 (American Samoa, Cook Islands, Fiji, French Polynesia, New Zealand, Tonga, and Samoa) and the United States, held their first official meeting on 23 August, kicking off a week of festivities.

Members of the Rotary Club of Commerce City, Colo., USA, who have led multiple World Community Service (WCS) projects on Kiritimati, were instrumental in introducing Rotary to the island. George Maybee, a member of the Commerce City club, and his wife, Sharon, had vacationed on the island for years. During a trip

in 2006, Maybee became convinced his club should get involved there. A year later, the club launched a WCS project to bring improvements in medical care, water quality, and educational opportunities.

The club then joined efforts with Past District 9920 Governor Warwick Pleass, who was already working with RI to get a club chartered in Kiribati. Maybee and members of the Rotary Club of Suva East, Fiji, made several trips to Kiritimati to provide assistance to the provisional club.

Projects in the works for the Kiritimati club include completing upgrades to the Banana Village Medical Clinic, installing working toilets at all six schools on the island, and distributing dictionaries to elementary school students.

Maybee predicts that Rotary will be so successful on Kiritimati that the club will soon be joined by others in Kiribati. “I’m very much looking forward to seeing the Kiribati flag at the RI Convention in Birmingham,” he says. — **RYAN HYLAND** ♦