

## Christmas Island

The plane broke through the low, wispy clouds and there just a couple of thousand feet or so below was the first sight of land in over an hour: steep cliffs rising 10-50 metres above the crashing surf as the translucent blue sea pounds the unforgiving rock. Christmas Island, a formidable rock sitting all alone in the Indian Ocean some 360km from Java - the next nearest land mass. It should not to be confused with the Pacific island of the same name, this island was not used in atomic experiments in the 1950s-60s. That island is 1,000s of miles away, which at least one ship carrying atomic goods found out too late!

First named in 1643 it was not until 1688 that man first landed on the island. Few managed to scale the basaltic cliffs which descend to the sea, and those who did faced further difficulty in conquering the island, as a second series of cliffs, coral topped - attesting to their oceanic origin, rise out of the tropical jungle within a short distance. Whilst visited in-between, it was not until 1888 that the island was first settled by man and claimed for Britain as part of the Straits Settlements. Occupation of the island followed the discovery of rich phosphate deposits and the finding of a suitable anchorage at Flying Fish Cove - named not after some of the fish that can be seen in the surrounding seas, rather after the name of the Royal Navy survey vessel of that name which discovered the anchorage in 1887. A decade later phosphate was being mined by Chinese coolies brought in via Singapore.

Phosphate mines scar the landscape, producing a fine, powdery orange dust of phosphate and lime which blankets open spaces and gets everywhere. Phosphate mining has dominated the island for the last 100 years though until very recent times the lot of the Chinese miners was not a happy one. Only in the 1980s did they succeed in obtaining a reasonable living, through the efforts of a renegade Englishman - Gordon Bennett, who helped them form a trade union in 1975. The activities of the trade union culminated in the mines closing in 1988, only to be re-opened in 1990 with the miners, through the union, actually owning a large equity stake in the company. The name of Gordon Bennett is still revered by the Chinese on the island, and his tomb can be seen, as the largest and most ornate pagoda style, in the Chinese cemetery. It was, however, not the mines I had come to see.

Being such a remote island, formed through volcanic and other earth crust activity over the last 60 million years, the island is home to some endemic and rare species of life, most notably the crabs. An island with a human population of only 2,500 it is also home to some 135 million land crabs, give or take one or two. We did not have to wait long to see our first: whilst queuing at immigration a red crab slowly walked through the terminal building on its way to mate in the sea.

As we left the building and drove along the dusty, rutted, limestone roads [four-wheel drive vehicles are essential to reach the more outlying areas] there was plenty of evidence that the red crabs had made their initial run to the sea. Living year round in the jungle, at the start of the rainy season [end-November] they march, into, over, through anything in their path on their way to the sea to mate. Over the next month or so the return journey is undertaken, firstly by the males, then the females and finally by the millions of new-born. Man's arrival on the island has, however, made this journey more dangerous than it already was, as he has cleared large tracts on the

island for roads and mines, built houses and generally denuded some 35% of the land of its tropical forest covering. Caught in the open without shade, the crabs soon dehydrate and die, not to mention those that cannot be avoided as one drives along white roads turned red by the sheer numbers on the move. A lemming-like determination ensures that both journeys are completed in the shortest time possible; if some-one has built a house in the way of the traditional route then the crabs will walk straight through should the unfortunate owner have forgotten to close the windows or doors.

Whilst the red crabs are the most populous they do not have the island to themselves. Shore-line burrows reveal ever present ghost crabs, whilst sharing the jungle with the reds are crabs of all colours - blue [which dominate the one or two areas where there is surface water], brown, purple and yellow crabs as well as various types of nippers. The rarest of them all, and specially protected, is the robber or coconut crab. Seen in selected jungle areas these large arthropods have the reputation, gained primarily from a comment by Charles Darwin, of being able to open and eat coconuts. This reputation is, however, questioned, though after looking at the size of their claws one can readily believe that this feat is possible. Compared to other tropical jungles the floor is relatively clean of debris, few low level shrubs survive as the abundant crabs vacuum all.

Besides its land living crabs, Christmas Island is also home to many different bird species, their guano, coupled with marine deposits, accounting for the rich phosphate sediments. Three sea-birds are endemic - the inimitable Christmas Island Frigate-bird, which circles around the sea-shore, its forked tail creating the impression of a modern pterodactyl; the rare Abbotts Booby, its last nesting place being this island where it builds its nest on the fringe of the jungle, whilst the Golden Bo'sun streaks through the skies above. White-eyed 'sparrows', red-breasted thrushes, Imperial and Emerald pigeons are included in the count of eleven land birds on the island, of which seven are also endemic.

Christmas Island has for many a millennia been the home of these rare species, man's exploitation coming only in relatively recent times. Today the phosphate mines still operate, though now with man's ever increasing sense of preservation, extraction is followed by restoration and regeneration of the jungle, to retain the natural habitat so all can benefit.

The seas around the island also provide a wealth of life. Game fish such as the blue marlin, the sailfish and yellow-finned tuna, abound in the clear, turquoise-blue sea. Corals are home to fish of all colours of the rainbow, attesting to the island's reputation of being one of the foremost diving spots in the World. This underwater world is reached by stepping off the edge as the sheer cliffs descend some 4,600 metres down to the sea-bed.

These same seas have relentlessly pounded the hard rock cliffs over the years, seeking out dissolving and eroding away their weak points. This constant erosion has produced an area of blow-holes where the waves fight their way into the cliff face and through holes in the surface, metres above. As the surf crashes against the undermined cliffs it is forced through these holes, geyser-like, rising 20-30 metres and showering the surrounding rock with a fine salt spray.

The island's 2,500 people live in and around the settlement of Flying Fish Cove which grasps what little level ground there is between the sea and the inland cliffs. Dominated by a five kilometre conveyor belt which brings the phosphate to the ships at anchorage, the settlement is laid out in "Raffilian" fashion, a kampong area for the Malays, a Chinese township at Poon Saan and an area for Europeans. The menus in the small cafes reflect the diverse cultures seen in the small population.

Tourism is now catching up with the island following the recent opening of a four-star resort and casino. Once outside the grounds, however, four-star comforts can be forgotten, the few beaches there are can only be reached by scrambling down rocks after a jungle trek. However, for those who wish to see nature in its rawest state and are prepared for that bit of adventure, this island is certainly worth a visit.

If you do decide to go don't forget your golf clubs. There is a small 9 hole, 18 tee course of picturesque beauty: fiery red flame trees, frangipani and other colourful plant-life, the cliffs, the sea and a large Australian welcome await those who play. As for the crabs which invade the course - just treat them as a natural hazard!

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