

WORDS *by* LYNN GAIL


A gift in the making

Christmas Island, with its many untapped treasures, is an under-explored, off-the-grid gem rising from the depths of the Indian Ocean.



Clockwise from left: The red army takes over Christmas Island; Dolly Beach is one of the prettiest on the island; tropical jungle at its finest.



I can hear the forest breathing. Crackle. Crunch. Munch. In the distance a splintered branch snaps, waking the wildlife, as it plummets to the damp earth. “Krrroo-krrroo, krrroo-krrroo,” a bird calls out as nature’s soundtrack begins to play. I think I catch the trumpet call of a baby elephant searching for its mother deep within the jungle, but it can’t be. I’m standing in Christmas Island National Park staring skywards through a velvet canopy of Tahitian Chestnut trees, and there are no four-legged animals to be found on an island which is, ironically, shaped like a dog. In fact, the only park residents I’m likely to see have eight legs, ten if you include their razor-sharp claws. Crabs, it seems, are the main caretakers of the national park, which covers almost two-thirds of Christmas Island. Impressive, when you consider this lush uncut volcanic gem, topped with its healthy forest, sits open to the elements some 2600km north-west of Perth in the Indian Ocean. But even more impressive is the £2.8 million (\$5.1 million) price tag Australia paid Singapore in 1958 to claim it as a territory.

Christmas Island boasts some of the world’s best snorkelling spots. The reefs are just offshore, tropical fish abound and you’re likely to see turtles and dolphins.

Getting crabby

My visit was in February, the middle of the wet season, and the Christmas Island red crabs are out in force. Although I’ve missed the annual spectacular red crab migration – which occurs at the beginning of the wet season in October or November – there’s plenty of activity. On our approach, their beady eyes rise like periscopes as they lift their meaty thighs,

preparing to bolt sideways in a commando sprint.

“Their migration is triggered by the wet season, if the rains are late, predicted dates get pushed back,” my guide, Lisa Preston, from Indian Ocean Experiences, tells me as we tread lightly around them. “We’re dealing with nature and can only forecast the annual migration by the phases of the moon, but I can tell you I’ve been here for over 20 years and it’s literally the greatest show on earth!” she says, clearly fond of the ridiculously rich-red critters dotted around us like red bobby pins on a world map.

I imagine millions of them migrating as one heaving red carpet, climbing over anything in their path to mate in burrows, dug by the males near the ocean. While



the red crabs take out the island’s come-visit-us trophy, the extraordinary robber crab, a hinge-like articulated arthropod that can grow to a metre long, easily takes second place. Named robber crab for stealing shiny objects, it’s also called a coconut crab – it can crack a shell clean open with its powerful pincers. “Don’t worry, they look fierce, but never attack humans on the island,” Lisa says, as I gingerly step away from a mass that has congregated nearby.

Wild, wet and windy

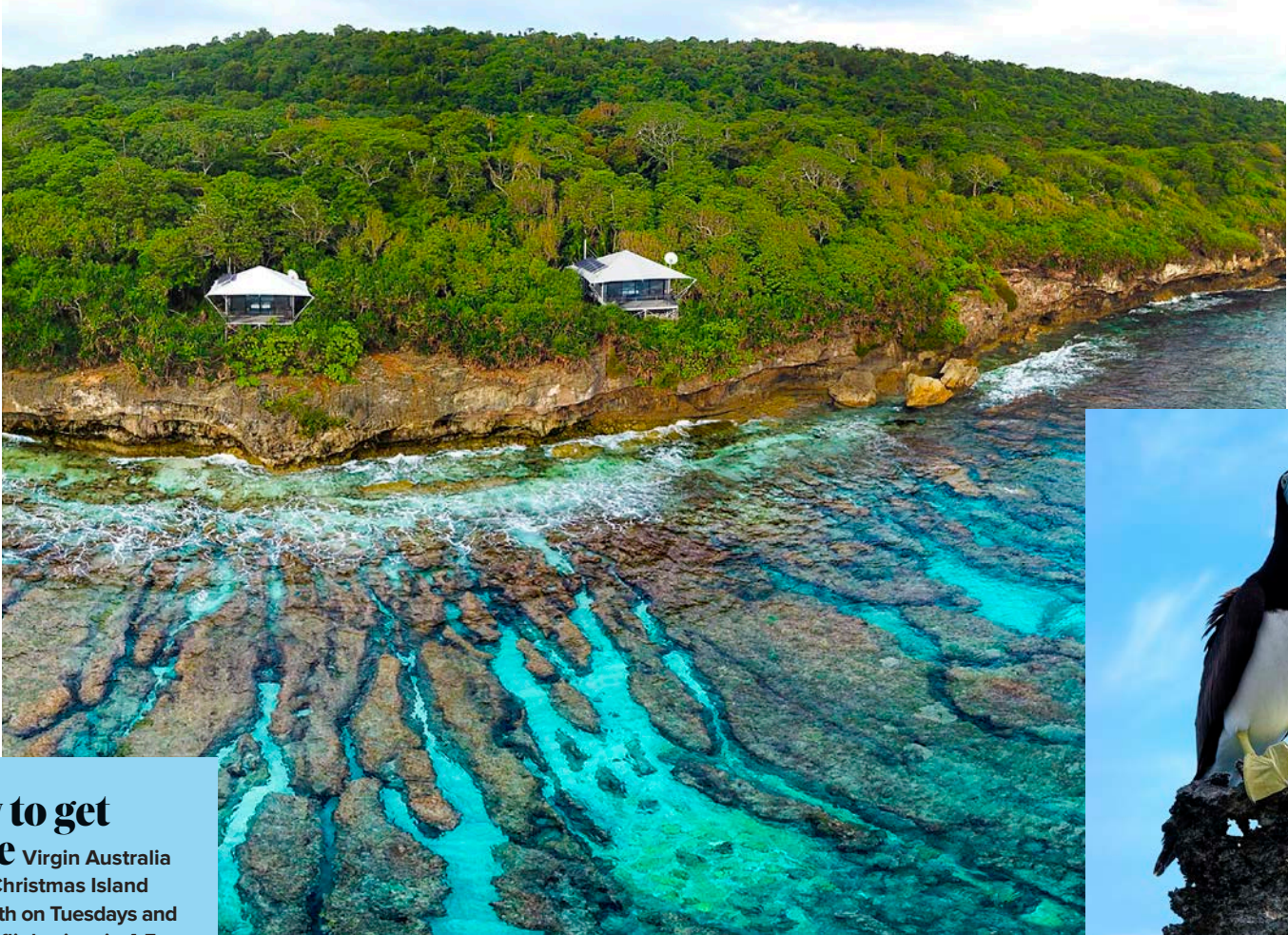
It’s a sweaty 28°C as we head along the park’s raised boardwalks to Hughs Dale Waterfall, a permanently free-flowing water source feeding the forest. The local Chinese believe the falls are the centre of the Earth’s water universe and one of the world’s most spiritual places. I expect to see them there, praying to the gods, but it’s just us, standing under the invigorating falls soaking up the no-technology tranquillity before we head to The Blowholes.

I hear them before I see them. Raw, untamed, thundering surges of water pushing upwards underneath jagged limestone rocks. Rising from the depths of the volcano some 5000 metres from the ocean floor (higher than Mt Fuji), the roaring water shoots through the rock sending salt spray skywards, soaking me in its downfall. It’s better than a shot of caffeine, and I’m instantly re-energised as I gaze along the island’s rugged coastline. It looks like a fortified castle and I wonder how ships ever dropped anchor and came ashore.

“During the wet season, the ocean can be pretty perilous,” Lisa says. “One captain, William Mynors, named the island when he arrived on Christmas Day in 1643, but the seas were too rough, it was Captain Swan on the Cygnet ship who finally landed back in 1688.”

Close-knit community

On an island measuring 19km long and 14km wide, it doesn’t take long to get anywhere. Soon we’re back at Flying Fish Cove, the island’s main community hub, faster than a flying fish. The multicultural population of Chinese, Malay and Caucasians who make up the 1400-strong population live here in settlements first developed by colonists. “Even though the Malays live in the Kampong, the Chinese in the Poon Saan area up on the hill, and us Australians in the Settlement, we’re one unit,” Lisa says. “As a living culture, we celebrate religious events such as Hari Raya, Chinese New Year and Christmas together, as well as attend each other’s weddings.”



From top: privacy is assured at Swell Lodge; a majestic brown booby; tasty fare at Idah’s Kitchen; Hughs Dale Waterfall is a popular cooling off spot.



How to get there Virgin Australia flies to Christmas Island from Perth on Tuesdays and Fridays, flight time is 4.5 hours. See virginaustralia.com.au for pricing and info.

When to go For drier weather, visit during August and September; around October/November for the crab migration.

Where to stay Villa Papaya for a tropical treat; Sea Spray Villa to hear the roaring ocean; Swell Lodge – the world’s most exclusive eco-lodge.

Visit Tai Jin House, a grand colonial heritage-listed building and museum overlooking Flying Fish Cove, to learn about the island’s fascinating past.



I pop into Idah’s Kitchen next to the island’s gold-embossed coastal mosque and enjoy a delicious curry-cum-roti before meeting up with local bird photographer Hugh Crisp for an afternoon of twitching. The authentic no-frills Malay cafe sets the perfect example of a meshed community; there is no divide, just a fusion of fellowship.

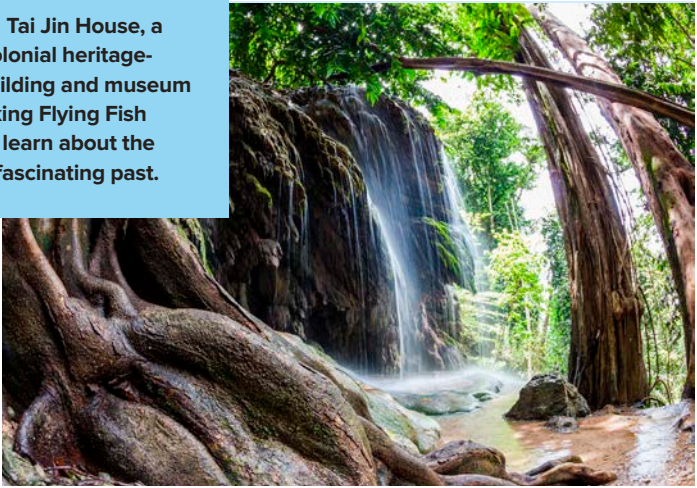
Twitcher’s paradise

Hugh’s been on the island for only two months, but he’s twitched in all the right areas and knows where to find the winged wildlife. “With 23 breeding species and up to 80,000 seabirds nesting annually on the island, it’s the Galapagos of birding,” he says as we drive to Ethel and Lily Beach, two pristine bays and known locations for spotting golden bosun, brown boobies and frigatebirds.

On our arrival, I spot two brown boobies standing majestically on pin-sharp limestone, puffing their plumes. I’m not much of a birder, but I know a mating ritual when I see one. There’s ducking and diving, widespan wing flapping and beak-to-beak pecking until the male flutters up, delicately landing on the female’s back. Hugh tells me you can see them mating anytime; but witnessing the brown boobies performing nature’s ‘dance’ is a first for me, and on an island called Christmas, it’s the perfect gift – no fancy bow or wrapping paper needed. **AWW**

More information at christmas.net.au

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