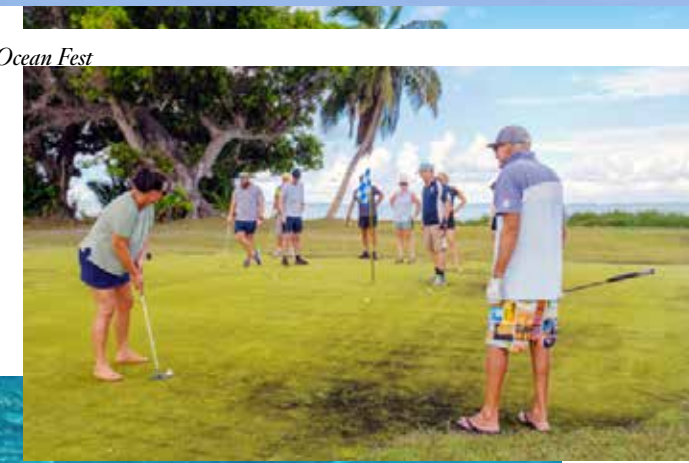




CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Countless palm trees fringe the idyllic islands; Take a dip to admire the colourful marine life; The silky white sand offers postcard-perfect views along the beach.*



In partnership with the Indian Ocean Fest

UNKNOWN UTOPIA

Discover COCOS (KEELING) ISLANDS, Australia's secret *SLICE OF PARADISE*.

Mention Cocos (Keeling) Islands and you'll likely be met with bewilderment. Explain that they're a protected bracelet of 27 beach-edged gems fanning across two coral atolls – the very definition of utopia – and voila: instant intrigue. Add the fact that Cocos (for short) is an external Australian territory, just half a day's flight from Perth's international airport, with a duty-free allowance to boot, and the stage is set.

Why Cocos? Boasting coconut trees by the millions, ocean-reigning turtles in their thousands, and a human population just under 600, the marine-protected islands invented the reconnect-to-nature notion. Dubbed Australia's untouched paradise and likened to the Galapagos, Cocos packs a lot of living into its 14sq kilometres of billboard sandscapes. It's not your typical tourist destination so visitors are few, allowing ecosystems to remain unharmed.

Whether you crave notching up hours in a hammock by a teal-tinged lagoon, snorkelling in crystal waters, or meshing Malaysian spices together in a cooking class, there's a dialled down, laid-back pace where locked doors don't exist and three vehicles on the highway spell peak hour.



SAILOR RIVALRIES

'Paradise' wasn't always the Cocos narrative. In 1826, a group of slaves, mainly of Malay descent, were brought to work in the coconut plantations by dogged British sea merchant Alexander Hare. But it was Captain John Clunies-Ross, a Scottish trader and head harpoonist of Hare's whaling ship, who had first seen potential in the islands, planting trees in 1825. The men forged a business together, yet when Clunies-Ross returned two years later Hare denied any partnership. But in maritime law planting seeds was enough to claim land, and a bitter rivalry



ensued. Hare took 40 of the women, some already married, and built a harem on nearby Prison Island; he was eventually

forced away in 1831. The Clunies-Ross family took control until 1978, when the Australian government bought Cocos for \$6.25 million. Six years later, islanders voted to become an Australian territory.

CHILLING ON COCOS

Of the 27 idyllic isles, only two are inhabited, leaving the remainder as havens for fauna and flora to thrive. West Island, the main tourist township, is home to around 110 expatriates keen to share the dream. It's where water aficionados can delve, dive and drift to their heart's content on

holiday-brochure beaches. Just across the lagoon you can slip your toes into the silky sand at Direction Island. Voted Australia's best beach in 2017, the famous Rip snorkelling spot sits at its tip. Ride the warm current on repeat, sweeping past tropical fish and coral the colour of rainbows until the undercurrent safely swoops you into calmer waters. In deeper ocean, the wreck of the Phaeton, which went down in 1889, is a sea life sanctuary. Ogle at triggerfish, yellowfin goatfish and sergeant major damselfish as they flit through flourishing coral colonies. Life above is all but forgotten as you're drawn into the magic.

Home Island, Cocos' cultural hub, is a 20-minute ferry ride across blue-brushed ocean. In a quiet *kampung* (Malaysian village), around 450 Cocos Malay Muslims continue to practice their religious beliefs. A mini museum houses paraphernalia dating back to the islands' torrid past; its sobering material reflects tough plantation conditions. Connect with locals during a homestay and listen for the soulful call to prayer broadcast from the local mosque.

There are two distinct seasons on the islands. The tradewind season (June to October) yields airtime to kite surfers willing to take off in strong winds; you'll see thrilling action as the sky fills with fluorescent kites. The doldrums (November to May) bring calm silky waters, perfect for snorkelling, as well as dramatic sunsets.

PROTECTED ISLANDS

Cocos and its forested neighbour, Christmas Island, make up the Indian Ocean Territories. The community, working with Parks Australia, has toiled tirelessly to preserve, sustain and promote the environment to



support nature-based tourism. In a historic win in March 2022, Parks Australia declared the area a protected sanctuary. The newly proclaimed Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands marine parks cover 744,000sq kilometres – double the size of the Great Barrier Reef – protecting the ocean health essential to the local ecosystem.

OLDEN DAY FEELS

Most things on Cocos can be counted on one hand: restaurants (no fast food outlets), pub (one), mosques, shops. But when it comes to putting on social events, the community has an event-filled calendar.

Whether you're a golfer or not, join West Islanders on a Thursday afternoon for a friendly nine holes of Scroungers golf. Hire a cart, pack cold bevies and don your thongs and T-shirt ready for tee-off. It's the only place in the world you can play golf across an international runway. By the time the sun swings below the palm trees you'll feel like a local.

It's carefree living, like days of old. Book a stay before those in the know do.

For more details, visit indianoceanterritories.com.au/visitors



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Snorkel the fringing reefs of one of the 27 islands and atolls; Join the locals for a game of Scroungers golf; Follow turtles and other sea life in underwater adventures; The stunning turquoise waters of Cocos.*

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