



#BLISS #ISLANDTIME

# Treasure islands

The independent Australian Cocos (Keeling) archipelago may only be a few hours away from Perth, but it's another world when you arrive. *By Lynn Gail*

“K

EEP SCOOPING!” KYLIE JAMES from Cocos Islands Adventure Tours hollers from the helm as she steers our motorised canoe into gusty winds. Salt spray slaps my cheeks as we slam into oncoming swell, dumping ocean over us. Scooping is futile – for every bucket of water tossed out, another boomerangs back on the wind, filling our narrow vessel in the process. Wet and windswept, we finally slide our canoe up the sand at Pulu Blan Madar,

one of 27 islets in the Cocos (Keeling) archipelago. Sunlight has replaced the storm, and now all around us, green turtles glide through the lagoon like reigning kings.

Draw a straight line heading west from Darwin and you'll discover this remote Australian territory, about pen-nib size, peeking out of the Indian Ocean. Deserted beaches fan out across two coral atolls and are fast becoming a haven for travellers hankering after an 'overseas' getaway. There's even a



duty-free allowance when you depart Perth’s International Airport on the 4.5-hour flight.

NATURE WRIT LARGE

At dawn, our group of eight stood on Canoe Beach on the archipelago’s capital of West Island, watching as a heavy curtain of cloud approached, threatening our outdoor excursion. Where had the promised sun-draped sand and dreamy days gone? A brief sliver of silver-blue sky breaking the clouds convinced us to embark on our expedition. It was just half an hour, after all...

Surviving the swell, we find ourselves in a wilderness wonderland. Turtles aside, the beach we land on is blanketed by hermit crabs, which scuttle from surrounding thicket. Because of the islands’ isolation and sandy soils, some plants struggle to survive here; others introduced during colonisation, and by chance arrival from neighbouring Asia, have thrived.

“Find yourself a crab – the redder the better – for speed.” Ash James – the other half of Cocos Islands Adventure Tours – is calling us to action from the circular racetrack he has drawn in the sand. Sounding like a sports commentator, he bellows from the sidelines: “Racing on Cocos is a-go!” Crabs take off in every direction until Ash announces the winner. “Through our sponsorship, you have won a trip overseas. In fact, you all have – everyone has won a trip back to Canoe Beach.” Most things on the islands can be counted on one hand: restaurants (no fast-food outlets), shops, pub (one), mosque (one). So when it comes to entertainment, the community here has become inventive.

Better than winning the crab race, though, is the picnic champagne breakfast consisting of salmon bagels and chocolate gâteau – I think of it as refuelling before we head out snorkelling. We leave the crabs fighting over crumbs and head to the palm-encrusted isle of Pula Maraya to dive in. The absorbing underwater world is dense with yellowfin goatfish, stripey butterfly fish, and iridescent blue clams with lips so luscious you’d swear they were blowing kisses. I drift aimlessly, completely mesmerised, until Kylie wolf-whistles us back aboard our canoes.

A RICH HERITAGE

Only two of Cocos’ islands are inhabited: West Island, with 110 expatriate residents; and Home Island, the history hub of the archipelago, where 450 Cocos Malay Muslims live in a neatly kept *kampong*

(typical Malaysian village). We visit the community with guide Shakirin ‘Shak’ Keegan, who regales us with stories of tragedies and turmoils that islanders have faced. During the early years of settlement, when sea merchants John Clunies-Ross and Alexander Hare fought for control over the coconut plantations, Home Island endured its fair share of heartache. Thankfully, peace now prevails on its quiet shores.

A visit to the tiny, intriguing museum uncovers stories behind the Cocos Malay, a culture not found anywhere else in the world. The Clunies-Ross family were ingenious at making money – they literally printed their own. Banknotes and coins that were used to pay plantation workers are displayed in a cabinet. The money had no value; hired hands exchanged it for goods sold by the Clunies-Ross, thus returning it to their pockets.

On a brighter note, Shak tells us how the Clunies-Ross family introduced Scottish line dancing. It’s now a Cocos Malay tradition, performed every year during Self-Determination Day, marking the anniversary the islands became a self-governing territory of Australia in 1984.

REEF RESPITE

When it comes to adventure, the small islands deliver. We meet up with Dieter Gerhard, a burly local from West Island and owner of Cocos Dive. Dieter’s one-liners have us smiling all the way to deeper waters where we snorkel wrecks and coral reefs visible to the ocean’s floor. The *Phaeton*, which sank in 1889, is home to countless tropical fish that glide beside us while we explore its rusted hull.

We cruise on to the silky sands of Cossies Beach on Direction Island. A golden crescent stretches before us. It’s as though a shiny poster, proclaiming paradise, slid from a billboard and landed ashore. The island’s fast-running rip lies at its tip. Apprehensively, I stare into the current. In contrast to our earlier snorkel, it’s a gushing, horizontal waterfall. Dieter hands me a powered-up sea scooter as I tentatively enter the ocean. “To make the experience an extra zippy one,” he winks, as the current pulls me into its undertow.

I’m whisked past colourful seabeds where noduled plants peek through spaghetti-like tentacles and exotic fish dance through algae the colour of rainbows. I spot Nemo the clownfish, resplendent in his vibrant orange and white striped suit. By the end, all anxiety has dissolved, and I jump back in to do it again.

TEE TIME

The locals have a knack for creating recreational events. Scroungers Golf, played every Thursday at the airport, is a nine-hole round, fun whether you’re a fan of fairways or not. Not to mention the bragging rights: it’s the only place in the world you can play across an international runway.

Dressed in thongs and T-shirts, we hire clubs and bags, and, following protocol, pack a few cold bevies in the front pocket ready for tee-off. By the time the sun swings below the palm trees, we feel like locals. The beer and banter back at the club after the ninth hole are a hoot.

The islands wouldn’t be complete without an art and coffee hideaway. Once overgrown with dense tropical jungle, the now manicured, palm-fringed entrance to the Big Barge Art Centre – housed in a restored old barge – not only entices modern-day visionaries, but also creatives who fashion artwork utilising recycled and washed-up waste.

Along the path to the gallery, trash-turned-treasure includes driftwood hand-carved into fish, frayed ropes knotted into garden knick-knacks, and ornamental sea glass glistening in the sun. The boho-styled cafe here, built using repurposed boat timber, is a recent addition. It’s where locals pull up recycled crates that double as coffee tables, and, dressed in their Sunday best – thongs and boardies – watch waves roll in. Woven mats, recovered armchairs and plump pillows dot the foreshore. My only decision is where to sit and what to order: the chickpea slice or ‘Big Barge’ brownie? Chai latte or cappuccino?

Real life feels far away. I could get used to this footloose existence. ☺



TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE  
[virginaustralia.com.au](http://virginaustralia.com.au)

STAYING THERE  
[cocosvillagebungalows.com](http://cocosvillagebungalows.com)

EXPERIENCES  
[cocosislandsadventuretours.com](http://cocosislandsadventuretours.com)  
[cocosdive.com](http://cocosdive.com)  
[homeislandhire.com.au](http://homeislandhire.com.au)  
[bigbargartcentre.com.au](http://bigbargartcentre.com.au)

INFORMATION  
[cocoskeelingislands.com.au](http://cocoskeelingislands.com.au)

OPENING SPREAD: West Island. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Hermit crab; snorkelling wrecks © Markus Eleyshia; resident turtle; Direction Island; dreamy SUP-ing. All other images © Rik Soderlund

