Coconut palms overhang the pristine shoreline of Direction Island, home to Cossies Beach, the winner of Australia's best beach award, 2017.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY LYNN GAIL

Talking turquoise

This arc of 27 idyllic tropical islands creates a passageway to paradise in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

Early morning sunlight dances across the lagoon's rippling waves, casting disco-ball zigzags.

It's as though the ocean is flirting with us.

A green turtle pulls its distinctively patterned shell through waters on the southern end of the islands. Turtles can often be spotted throughout the islands' lagoon areas and in the shallow waves coming into shore.

The lines keep morphing into patterns resembling the shells of the turtles we are trying to find. But each turtle-shaped teardrop mound we spot turns out to be a solid rock, as if these gentle giants are turning into stepping stones on our approach. "There's usually tons of turtles this early in the morning," my guide, Kylie James, whispers as she cuts the canoe's engine.

We begin searching, drifting quietly through crystal-clear water in the South Lagoon (Telok Kambing) of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. At the sound of Kylie's voice, a mammoth green turtle darts past, flapping its flippers like a pinball machine – and it doesn't turn to stone. It stays within metres of the canoe, ducking and diving through the gentle waves, as its powerful limbs propel its hulking mass through the water. It comes so close I can study the splendid shell, reminding me of a far-reaching Australian landscape, sectioned into rustic-red cattle yards.

Less than 12 hours ago I'd pressed against the aeroplane window after a four-and-a-half-hour flight from Perth, searching for any sign of the islands, an external Australian territory, when the pilot announced, "Cabin crew – please be seated for landing." Landing? Where? The Indian Ocean lay beneath us, devoid of any coastline. A horseshoe pitted with tiny gold gems gradually came into view, but the jet's wingspan appeared wider than the sliver of runway we were approaching on West (Pulu Panjang) Island – the largest of the 27 islands making up the Cocos. The pilot lifted the nose skywards towards the end of our descent until a sudden thud confirmed we had successfully made contact with land, and not the turquoise ocean edging the runway.

KEEN TO SPOT more turtles, we head to the southern end of West Island where we anchor our canoe. Being February and the doldrum season – the calmer of the islands' two seasons – the water is like that of a bathtub at 29°C. "Are you a competent snorkeller?" Kylie asks. "There's a strong current – stay with it!" she shouts as she's swept off by the undertow and I'm pulled into an aquarium packed denser than a pet shop fish tank. Suddenly I'm on fast forward, speeding past hundreds of powderblue surgeonfish and yellowfin goatfish, all feeding off plants below a coral shelf. Above, I catch glimpses of garfish shooting through the water like bullets heading towards a target. We are observers passing through their world – leaving nothing but our rippling wake. The current slows to where we can stand, and we see one last turtle before heading back.

We talk turtles en route, Kylie telling me females mate every 2–5 years, while males can mate annually. "Imagine having something weighing 120kg and 1.5m long on your back having sex, maybe three or five times in a row," Kylie says, clearly passionate about the turtles who grace her 'office' of 20 years.

A gentle breeze whips waves against our canoe as we chug along, wrapped in a half-moon hug of two coral atolls with 27 islands, covering 1420ha, edged by powder-soft sand. I imagine it's easy to permanently drop anchor here where palm trees are taller than buildings and fast food means a chicken parmi at the local club on a Tuesday night. I'm keen to know if "living the dream" is truly possible here.

Now aged in her early 50s, Kylie travelled here with her husband Ash in 1990 on a scuba diving holiday. They were so taken they soon moved to West Island, where they started and built up Cocos Islands Adventure Tours. "Look at this," she says, throwing her tanned arms wide, "I can leave my door unlocked and the keys in the car – at the end of the day, it'll still be here, exactly as I left it."

I wonder about rearing children in such an isolated community. "Children have such a sense of freedom growing up here," Kylie says. "When my eldest daughter left for boarding school for Years 11 and 12, she phoned me crying, 'Mum! You didn't tell me the world wasn't a nice place!' She'd led such a sheltered life here. At first, real life was a huge shock, but after studying and teaching on the mainland she's returned home to teach while studying for her masters in mental health."

We pull the canoe up the beach, and covered in sand, head back for a siesta. ►

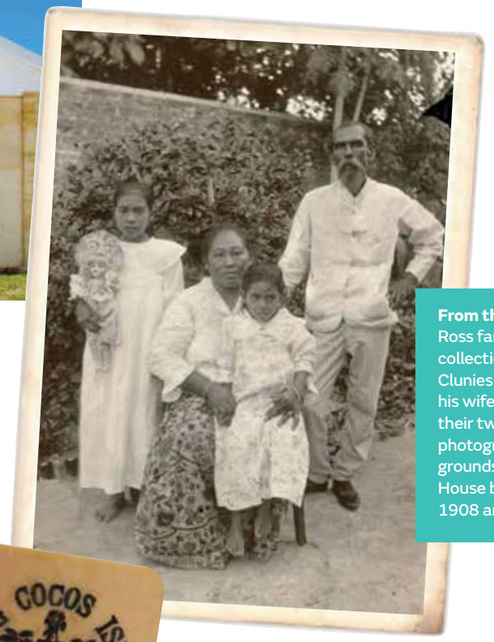
Pulu Maraya is surrounded by shallow waters where snorkellers can explore a lively rock pool full of vibrant marine life. At low tide it's possible to walk to the uninhabited island from Scout Park on West Island.

These canoes are used for exploring the lagoons and islands around the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

▲ **Giant clams**, which occur in abundance throughout the coral reefs around the islands, shut their blue lips tightly when approached.

▲ **Striking powderblue** surgeonfish are easy to spot when snorkelling around the islands' healthy coral reefs.

The Pulu Cocos Museum on Home Island houses the Cocos (Keeling) Islands' historical memorabilia, showcasing its cultural identity and tumultuous past.



From the Clunies-Ross family photo collection, William Clunies-Ross and his wife, Clara ,with their two daughters photographed in the grounds of Oceania House between 1908 and 1921.

The money used to pay workers was made of ivorine (plastic) in seven denominations: 1, 2 and 5 rupees, 5c, 10c, 25c and 50c.

By THE NEXT day, I'm imagining living here as I walk with friendly locals along Rumah Baru Jetty to catch the ferry to Home Island, where about 450 Cocos Malays live. From the open-air top deck, I watch as sunlight pierces stormy clouds, drawing silver-grey lines beneath outlying islands as if to highlight their significance in the expansive Indian Ocean. The sea reflects the storm, and during the 20-minute ferry ride I contemplate the turbulent past of the Cocos Malays. The present Home Islanders live a mostly peaceful existence, but their history is littered with rebel rulers and human tragedy.

In 1826 a group of slaves, mainly of Malay descent, were transported to these islands by British sea merchant Alexander Hare to work in the coconut plantations. But Captain John Clunies-Ross, a Scottish trader who was acting as head harpoonist of Hare's whaling ship, had already surveyed the islands in 1825. Seeing potential he'd dug wells and planted fruit trees, agreeing to forge a partnership with Hare. In the maritime community, sowing seeds was enough to have stakes on a land. But when Clunies-Ross returned with his family in 1827, Hare denied any partnership agreement and a bitter rivalry ensued. Also known as the English White Rajah of Borneo, Hare bundled up about 40 women, some already married, some barely teenagers, and built himself a harem on nearby Prison Island.

Clunies-Ross and the Malay men became angry at Hare's treatment of the women and plotted to expel him from the islands. With his finances in turmoil and knowing his days were numbered, Hare tried in 1830 to flee with as many slaves as he could, but without papers his mission was futile. The only people he was able to take with him were his chief concubine and two other women. He was seen sailing away from the islands in 1831, returning to Batavia (now Jakarta), where he died in 1834.

Clunies-Ross and his descendants took control of the islands until as recently as 1978, when the Australian government bought the Clunies-Ross land (apart from Oceania House and 5ha surrounding it) for A$6.25 million. In 1984 the people of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands voted to become a territory of Australia.

Their history is littered with rebel rulers and human tragedy.

ARRIVING AT THE end of Home Island jetty I'm greeted by Shakirin, a burly Cocos Malay man. "Call me Shak for short," he says, showing me around the island's museum. There, among paraphernalia dating back to the settlement years, he points to a machine that looks like it's been stuck together with old plastic tubes and rusted flotsam. Steel pipes are glued around the edges, and inside, flat pads have been connected to an assortment of archaic looking tools. "What do you think this does?" Shak asks, then explains the Clunies-Ross family invented the machine to print plastic money with which to pay the workers, but it was virtually worthless. The plantation workers would use the money to pay for goods, thus giving it back to the Clunies-Ross empire. "I bet it's worth something now though," Shak muses. "My dad, he's 60 years old now, got paid in plastic money not so long ago. At 16 he would get up at 3am, go to the outlying islands and husk his quota of about 500 coconuts per day."

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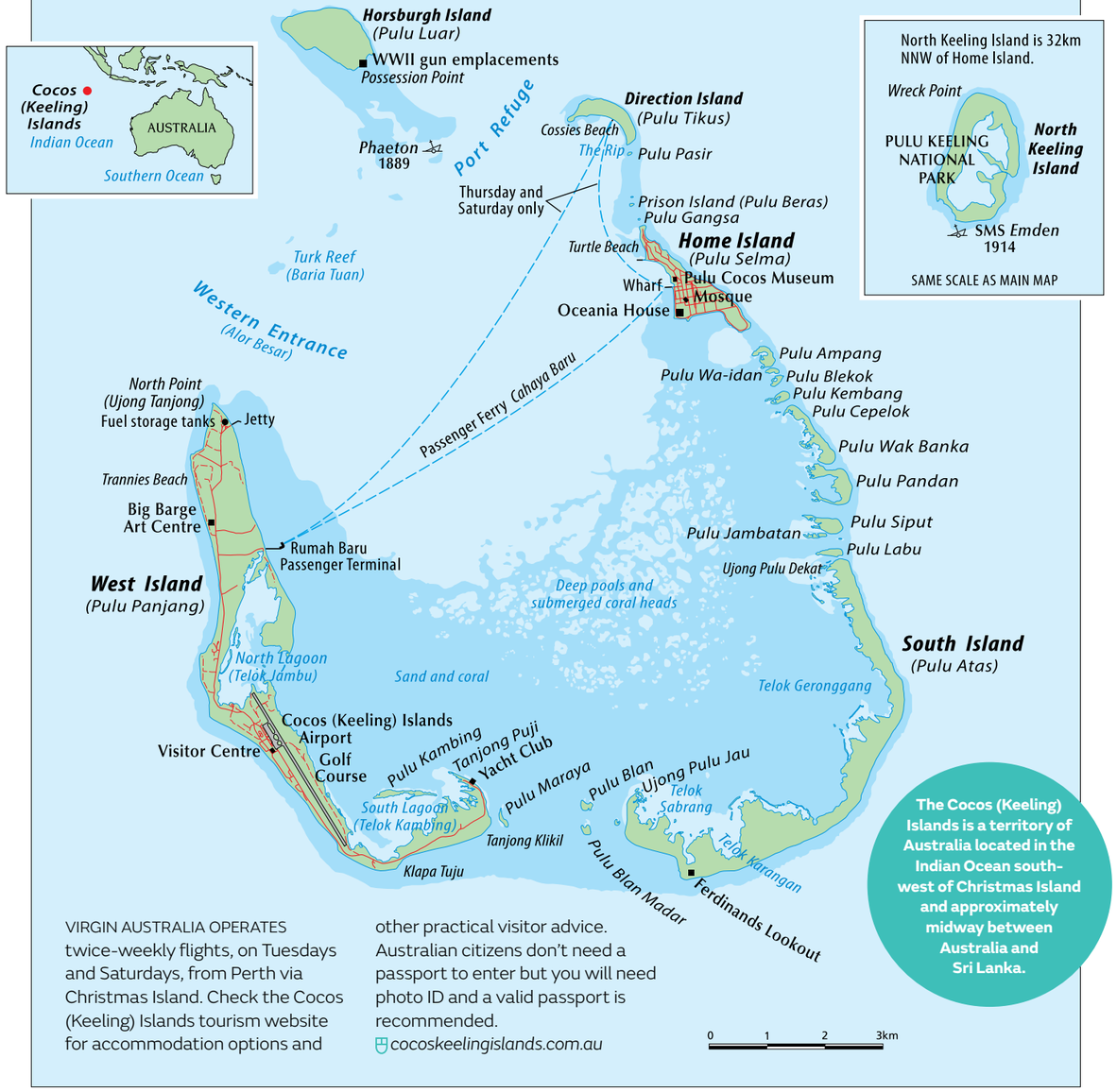
PHOTO CREDITS, PLASTIC COINS: NAOMI ANDRZEJESKI/MUSEUMS VICTORIA

The Cocos (Keeling) Islands

An aerial view of the horseshoe-shaped archipelago.



The Cocos (Keeling) Islands is a territory of Australia located in the Indian Ocean south-west of Christmas Island and approximately midway between Australia and Sri Lanka.

VIRGIN AUSTRALIA OPERATES twice-weekly flights, on Tuesdays and Saturdays, from Perth via Christmas Island. Check the Cocos (Keeling) Islands tourism website for accommodation options and other practical visitor advice. Australian citizens don't need a passport to enter but you will need photo ID and a valid passport is recommended.

cocoskeelingislands.com.au

Postcards from the Cocos (Keeling) Islands

The locals were abuzz when Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh came to visit.

AS WELL AS its tumultuous past, the Cocos (Keeling) Islands also boasts a historical event that is still fondly remembered by the older generation of today's Home Islanders. In 1954 Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh sailed to the islands to meet the Cocos Malay people.

The visit followed the royal couple's tour of mainland Australia, their party departing from Fremantle in Western Australia and sailing north-west to the islands on the liner SS *Gothic*, arriving on 5 April. It was reported to be a typical Cocos day – sunny with a few fair-weather clouds scudding along in the south-east trade wind. The royals invited on board for lunch a party that included John and Daphne Clunies-Ross, descendants of the first settler and developer of the islands' coconut plantations, and Claude Lillicrup, the islands' administrator, who'd been integral in setting up the visit, and his wife, Bunty.

Later that day the royal party and their lunch guests boarded a naval launch to go ashore on Home Island (pictured), where they were greeted by the entire local population. As the royal party walked along West Road (Jalan Pantai) to Oceania House, the stately home of the Clunies-Ross family, they were greeted by cheering islanders dressed in their finery, and young children waving Union Jack flags.

Just ahead of the royal party, a silat (an aggressive martial arts dance) was performed to clear any evil spirits.

On reaching Oceania House, the Queen made Lillicrup a Member of the Victorian Order, an award established by Queen Victoria that is given to people who have been in personal service to members of the royal family. She also gifted a signed photograph of herself to John and Daphne Clunies-Ross.

Everyone on the islands had been invited to a garden party at Oceania House, and after the ceremony, the royal party moved to the garden area, where they were introduced to the island's two oldest residents, Daherun and his wife, Beattie. The Queen and Duke of Edinburgh chatted with residents from Home and West islands before watching cultural dances in the garden marquee.

The royal couple were presented with models of HMAS *Albatross* and other local handicrafts to recall their visit. Islanders lined the jetty to wave them off as they returned to *Gothic* to continue their tour, heading to Ceylon (Sri Lanka).

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the royal visit to the islands, four Australian stamps were printed showcasing photographs of the Queen during her stopover, which, for the tiny territory, had been a memorable historic event.

◀ **A Qantas Lockheed** Super Constellation, *Southern Sun*, is refuelled at Cocos Islands Airport, c. 1957. In September 1952 Qantas Empire Airways (QEA) inaugurated the first regular air service between Australia and South Africa. This followed a survey flight in 1948 and a route-proving flight in July 1952. The route went from Sydney to Perth then the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Mauritius and finally Johannesburg. The former strategic WWII airforce base on West Island was converted to a passenger airport in 1951 and became an important refuelling stop for passenger flights across the Indian Ocean.

PHOTO CREDITS, TOP: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA; BOTTOM, COURTESY OF ALAN JENKINS/CIVIL AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTION

◀ **Coconuts have** a variety of uses on the islands. Here, Home Island Elder Ederie Austin grates coconut flesh to make coconut cream used by the Cocos Malays as a curry base.

"So slavery here is as recent as the 1970s?" I ask.

"I'm not saying it's not slavery because I wasn't there," Shak replies guardedly. "But at 16 I was playing soccer and computer games."

We jump into a golf buggy, Home Island's main mode of transport, and head to meet Ederie Austin, an island Elder who still practises traditional customs. "Meet Ederie Austin, as in Austin Powers," Shak says, laughing. Ederie's face is deeply weathered; his smile is warm and welcoming. Aged 80, his dexterity is that of someone half his age. In 10 minutes he weaves palm fronds into a shoulder bag strong enough to carry a bunch of coconuts.

I find myself wishing that my Malay-speaking abilities could match his weaving skills as I sit alongside him repeating "Bagus, bagus" (good, good) and "Terima kasih" (thank you) when he passes me a fresh, thirst-quenching coconut.

Ederie continues to show me how many ways there are to break down a coconut and by the end of his highly skilled demonstration I'm convinced humans could survive from coconuts alone. I sample fresh coconut cream and a coconut apple – a sweet yet salty-tasting fruit with a mealy texture. Ederie is quite the salesman, and I leave carrying handmade coconut soap and handcrafted cooking utensils.

In 10 minutes he weaves palm fronds into a bag strong enough to carry a bunch of coconuts.

▼ **An Aussie surf** lifesaving rescue board is ready for the unlikely event a rescue is needed from the calm waters at Direction Island.

▼ **Ederie Austin deftly** weaves coconut fronds into a strong shoulder bag using traditional techniques; the bag can hold several kilograms.

UPON MY RETURN TO West Island I'm invited to join Scrounger's Golf. Played every Thursday afternoon, the team-only, nine-hole game is open to anyone who wishes to join in. It's the the only place in the world you can swing a golf club across the runway of an international airport.

Running late from the return ferry, I cross the runway, unwittingly committing a fineable island faux pas. "You're lucky no-one from over there spotted you," says a local carrying a beer in one hand and a golf club in the other, laughing as he points to the pint-sized police station I'd sauntered past oblivious of any restrictions. Apparently, unchaperoned, you can be fined $5000. Thankfully, the group had just pulled their golf carts across the tarmac. They're a friendly, casually dressed bunch, and before long I'm digging holes in the turf trying to connect with a golf ball while getting to know some of the island's 110 residents.

The majority, I learn, are expatriates who make up a mixture of teachers, public service workers, tradespeople and tourism operators. Almost a quarter are out on the golf course. Clearly comfortable in each other's company I hear typical golf comments, "The hole's over there, not in the palm trees!" and "Mate, that ball will be in with the snakes and crocs", as we search for far-flung missiles. The friendly banter continues into the evening with the players reliving mishaps from the game as they announce team winners, awarding tickets for a beer or a golf ball to replace those lost on the course. Nothing is far away on an island measuring only 9km long by 1km wide, and within a couple of minutes ▶

▼ **Horsburgh Island** was named after a hydrographer who mapped the area in the early 1800s. The Australian Army established a base there during WWII to protect the islands.

▲ **Locals on West Island** take to the golf course every Thursday afternoon to play Scrounger's Golf, a fun nine-hole game conducted across the airport's international runway.

Sadly, the island is being washed away by a rising sea.

Prison Island (Pulu Beras), once home to early settler Alexander Hare and his harem, is slowly being eroded by rising tides. Now, all that remain are two palms and a dead tree where people who come ashore hang washed-up thongs.

walk I'm back at my bungalow, ready for a good night's sleep. I'm up with the sunrise the following morning, when I head back to the jetty to join a handful of locals heading out with tour operator Pete McCartney to explore the surrounding islands on his glass bottom boat.

Our first stop is Horsburgh (Pulu Luar) Island, located at the northern entrance of the lagoon. The island was named after hydrographer James Horsburgh, who mapped the area in the early 1800s after learning Captain William Keeling had discovered the string of islands on a voyage to Java in 1609. Horsburgh christened them the Keeling Islands after the captain, with Cocos being added later when coconuts became the islands' main export.

We stroll along the shoreline where Pete points to two heavily corroded World War II artillery guns. The Australian Army, he says, placed them at the mouth of the lagoon to defend the islands from possible attack and takeover. "Not many visitors come to Horsburgh, but it's an important part of the islands' history, and a reminder life here wasn't always so tranquil," Pete says.

AFTER EXPLORING HORSBURGH, we pull anchor and cruise the silky waters of the lagoon to Direction (Pulu Tikus) Island, home to Cossies Beach – the gem that took out Australia's best beach gong in 2017. It was named after former Australian governor-general Sir Peter Cosgrove, after he'd fallen for its paradisiacal shoreline.

I can see why. I feel as if I'm strolling into a double-page spread pulled straight from a glossy travel brochure. Delicious velvety sand stretches before us – the perfect backdrop to uncork a bottle of champagne, sit in the ocean and listen to stories about island life.

Too soon, we depart Direction Island to swing past Prison (Pulu Beras) Island, where Alexander Hare built his harem, a two-storey wooden hut where he kept all the women he enslaved downstairs, regularly summoning them up to take 'turns' with him. I imagine a ramshackle building full of Malay women wearing Baju Kebaya (long traditional dress) in a hot humid climate – all there to serve and service one man. It's an uncomfortable thought.

Sadly, the island is being washed away by a rising sea. Among the little that remains are two skinny palms pointing skywards as they cling to life on the last vestige of sand that now covers an area barely larger than a footy field. We walk around the edges, collecting washed-up thongs and hanging them alongside others on the spindly branches of a dead tree; rare signs of human life here on the once-occupied island.

On our way back we don masks and fins to explore one of the islands' wrecks in the South Keeling lagoon, the *Phaeton*. Lost at sea in 1889, it's believed the captain deliberately ran the ship aground when a raging fire in the hold had become uncontrollable. Its rusted hull, a composite of copper alloy, timber and metal, now lies on the shallow seabed, a haven for ocean life and a spectacular snorkelling site.

More than 1500 marine species thrive in the lagoon and I try to spot some I know. Pete throws a handful of burley in the water and I'm instantly surrounded by a shoal of black-finned triggerfish, their mouths pursed together as if they're blowing bubbles.

They flit out of sight, diving down into the hull of the blackened wreck. I follow, awestruck by the exotic underwater world of white-cheeked surgeonfish, clams that seem to be dusted with sequins, and sergeant major damselfish, which are minute when compared with the blacktip reef shark swimming so close I can almost reach out and touch its fin. Time slips away, and we jump back on board, listening to a chilled ocean playlist as we head back across the lagoon.

My last afternoon is spent soaking up the sunshine on the southern tip of West Island. Long afternoon shadows dance across the sand, crisscrossing like ballerinas performing *Swan Lake*. Throwing caution to the balmy breeze I spin around, pirouetting, reassured that no-one is watching.

I have the beach to myself, and like a mild fever, bliss sets in as the last of the sunlight sends a brilliant burst of bright yellow rays through the low-lying clouds. AG

LYNN GAIL THANKS Cocos (Keeling) Islands Tourism for its generous assistance with this story.