

Senior Traveller

Christmas isle big on Chinese New Year

BY LYNN GAIL

"IT'S one of the most astonishing and wonderful sights," Sir David Attenborough once crooned when talking about Christmas Island's annual red crab migration. But there's another equally spectacular event when the tiny volcanic rock is dressed and draped in a dusting of fire-engine red.

Chinese New Year stops the small township in its crab tracks. Though unlike the red crab migration, which is dependent on the wet season and moon phases, this event goes ahead come cyclone or sunshine.

It's as though I've stepped back some 30 years as I watch the locals paint the town red in glittering lanterns and golden garlands. Shops and businesses are closing their doors for four days and people are stocking up.

Magnifying glass in hand I'd searched the Indian Ocean on the world map to spot Christmas Island's tiny 135-sq km mass before boarding a flight. Although an Australian territory, it is closer to Java than Western Australia. But with direct flights from Perth, it takes half a day's travel to reach its international airport.

I've been invited to join in the Chinese New Year's Eve festivities in Poon Saan, a hillside district where the local Chinese make up some 60 per cent of the island's 1400-strong population.

"We're so lucky to be able to mix together as a gelled



FIERY PERFORMANCE: The red lion, Lord Guan - God of War, wards off evil spirits during Chinese New Year celebrations on Christmas Island.

community to celebrate cultural events," says Jahna Luke from Christmas Island Tourism, as we enter a hall where a group of young girls are practicing dance routines.

Outside, young men in martial arts gear momentarily freeze mid-air as they practice their Lion Dance moves. A basketball court is being adorned with blow-up temples and prosperity decorations. Next-door, Chinese restaurant Lucky Ho has prepared a community buffet.

It's the perfect balmy night for a big event on a small island.

Enter the red lion, Lord

Guan - God of War, rearing his fiery head to ward off evil spirits, with the gold lion in close pursuit. Thundering rumbles sound out from the gong. The high-energy performance culminates in both lions standing bolt upright dancing on their hind legs until eventually they flutter downwards.

The following morning, Kung Fu Club president Chris Su invites me to join a troop heading into the forest to bless seven temples on the Lunar New Year.

The blessings begin at South Point Temple - "The Temple of Submission to Heaven". The percussion of

gongs and cymbals resound through the rainforest as the red lion prays to the temple to greet the gods, seeking favour for the new year.

The last temple, Guan Di Temple, once used by Chinese labourers working in the jungle, is barely wide enough for the lion to enter. But the blessing is as powerful as the last.

The energy is so powerful I expect to see an Ox emerge from the jungle. Instead, I spot red crabs scurrying for shade in the midday sun, adding extra magic to Chinese New Year in a forest crowning one of our enigmatic external territories.



DARLING DANCERS: The celebration is a chance for local girls to dance for the island's multicultural community.



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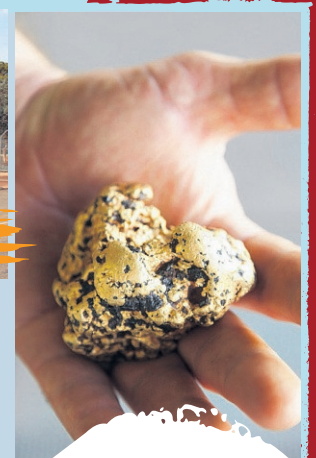
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