



CHRISTMAS *in paradise*

JURASSIC WONDERLAND AND TRAVEL BUCKET-LIST TRUMP CARD, CHRISTMAS ISLAND IS FAR MORE THAN JUST CRABS AND ASYLUM SEEKERS. BY RICHARD ASHER.

I am witnessing a stranger's life change forever. A piercing, chilly rain slices across the penetrating beam of the truck-mounted floodlight. The ocean is raging tonight. It dashes against the slippery boat ramp, flinging the dinghy every which way. Two men in waterproof pants are trying to steady it, but timing is key if the woman is to disembark safely.

She makes it onto dry land with only a light moistening of her abaya – a victory in this squall. Two children follow her onto Australian concrete. Like the others, they will sit on the ground in the rain. They will be searched. And then they will be on a bus. Destination: Christmas Island Immigration Detention Centre.

I've not come here to write about refugees, but the arrival of a vessel full of hopeful new Australians is something I have to see. It's poignant: boat people just became real for me.

I'm soaked, shivering and doubting the tropics. But the rest of my week here will be witheringly sunny. Soon this tempestuous first night will seem as a dream.

I've come to Christmas Island out of curiosity for a far-flung outpost few could pinpoint on a map. Way out in the Indian Ocean, you can only get here via Perth or Jakarta.

Though it has been Australian territory since 1957, customs at the tiny airport do their best to confuse Perth arrivals by making you fill out a standard 'Arrival in Australia' card. Most of the questions are nonsensical, considering Australia is where you've just come from. The staff chuckle, and tell me nonsensical answers will be fine.

As soon as I clear the aerodrome, I start learning. Why is Christmas Island so named? Because Captain William Mynors was the first European to spot it, on 25 December 1643. I learn what a golden bosun is: a graceful endemic bird that lends its name to the island's main pub. I'm also informed that there's no tax on alcohol and cigarettes.

The clutch of settled villages have curious names: Drumsite, Poon San, Flying Fish Cove and, uh, Settlement. These places, at various contours along a serpentine road that plunges down the terraced north of the island, are where everyone lives.

The rest of Christmas Island is human-free jungle. And what magnificent jungle! Phosphate mining has gone on for years here, but it has left little in the way of visible environmental damage. The island is a truly isolated ecosystem, and I've never seen one more intact. No wonder: 63 percent of it is national park.

Not even rookie birders could fail to notice its wheeling boobies and frigates, but the crabs are the show-stealers. The 45 million little red ones, famous for their annual reproductive dash from the moist forests to the ocean, are everywhere. Especially after rain.

But it is the robber crabs that haunt my thoughts all week. These crunching great soccer ball-sized crustaceans can smell food a mile off and crack open coconuts with their pincers. It's uncomfortably reminiscent of *District Nine*.

It is a strange thing indeed to pick your way across a forest floor scattered with brightly coloured life that looks dramatically prehistoric and peers at you with sinister intent, but makes hardly a sound.

That pregnant silence is keener in darkness. I spend my final night in a hammock on Dolly's Beach. And I have it all to myself – bar the robber crabs. All possessions must be hung out of reach, for their thievery can even extend to shoes. My dinner is a challenge, taken on the run as two determined, spidery silhouettes keep marching in the direction of my picnic.

A fitful night's sleep follows and I'm up with the sun, relieved to find that the crabs have retreated into the forest. Crusty-eyed, I notice a commotion along the beach: a turtle laying eggs.

In some places you'd have to buy a ticket for this, so I creep up breathlessly and try to give her space. Her flip-flops are clumsy at digging. Her breaks lengthen. Is she exhausted? Will she die here on land? Would it be – heaven forbid – because I've put her off?

I'm relieved when finally she decides she's done enough and wriggles seawards. Standing in choppy waist-high surf, I attempt to catch her submersion on camera. Then she swims straight at me; I narrowly avoid an ungainly collision with nature. Then, grinning, I hit the trail back to the 4x4. In 40 minutes – failing to completely avoid crabcide on the infested forest road – I'm back in Flying Fish Cove.

There's time to kill before my flight out, so I wander into Australia's furthest-flung post office. Next door is the island's only bank. There's no ATM.

Down the hill, behind the beach, is Kampong, Christmas Island's answer to the Bo Kaap. The island never had an 'indigenous' population, so everyone here is a settler. Many are Malay or Chinese, and their culture abounds.

I gaze at Kampong's modest mosque. It's close enough to the water that you can hear the call to prayer even while snorkelling among the coral off the jetty.

It had felt strange to be admiring pipefish and parrotfish, while keeping an eye out for nasty triggerfish, just metres away from the place I'd seen such drama on my first night. But that's how it is here: Christmas Island is just another tropical island at heart. Unless you're seeking asylum, you come to dive, fish, explore, bird-watch or hike.

Before my flight, another rainstorm. There's just time to admire a magnificent, unencumbered rainbow across Flying Fish Cove. Beneath it floats the ever-present Royal Australian Navy boat, looking out for today's refugee vessel while yesterday's burns. But all of that pales beneath the beauty of the rainbow. It's nature's way of reminding me that she remains the drawcard on Christmas Island. **G**



CHRISTMAS ISLAND HAS MILLIONS OF RED CRABS – literally. They're a part of daily life, especially during their celebrated annual breeding dash from the forests to the sea.

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