



# CHRISTMAS

## in the Tropics

*This festive season, be bold, be naughty, be adventurous. Book your ticket to a radically different week-long holiday on Christmas Island, and discover a side to Australia's Galapagos rarely talked about. Wong Zijia recounts her stay.*

**M**IDNIGHT AT MY BALCONY. The soft boom of Indian Ocean waves breaking onto the rocks. I'm hoping the building opposite my resort, which used to be a morgue, doesn't show any signs of life other than the occasional appearance of its two guests who, in any case, have nothing to worry about since the lady's dad is a mortician.

Yes, it is Christmas Island's offbeat character that makes life in this pretty town unpredictable. Locals proudly point out that the island is shaped like a (male) Scottish terrier. Shops open and shut at odd hours and in no particular pattern—my Microsoft Excel-obsessed tour guide Keith even keeps A3-sized timetables in his car to keep track of their opening hours. Tour highlights for "Australia's Galapagos" strangely include the spanking new AUD\$300 million Immigration Detention Centre for asylum seekers and the derelict Virgins' Castle that used to be the dormitories of single female teachers.

You think the local quirks and the sense of carefree abandon are probably inspired by the giant Frigate birds circling the cobalt blue skies of Christmas Island. The birds, whose wing span can extend up to 1.7 meters, create such an impressive aerial acrobatics display with their freewheeling swoops and dives that narrowly miss the golden bosuns gliding elegantly around with their plumage trailing in the air. Both bird species are endemic to the island, as are a dozen other species and still a dozen more fish species, thanks to the island's isolated position. The

oceanic island is the summit of a submarine mountain that emerged 60 million years ago and underwent three tectonic uplifts; the highest point now is 361 meters above sea level. A drop of hundreds of meters into an abyss in the sea can be as near as 20 meters from the coastline, hence there's no need to venture far for good diving. The nearest land mass is Java, Indonesia, 500 kilometers away.

**MORE TO WILD ABOUT** Local traffic infrastructure and conversations are sculpted by the reputed 120 million red crabs. Sadly, only five appeared during my seven-day stay. Since the world famous crab migration depends on the rainy season, tourists started praying for thunderstorms—probably the first time anyone would have done so on a vacation. But like the shops' opening hours, the rainy season is erratic and had already started in August and January.

I decided to make do with other wildlife such as the native robber crabs. They can grow up to 100 years old and the old ones are as large as a fat cat. The fiendish-looking lot can grind down coconuts with their claws. If they are not ambling along roads, they are resting among the buttress roots or scaling dying palm trees for berries.

The island's wildlife is as aggressive as that. The Frigate birds look invincible but actually starve to death if they land on the ground as their great wings need quite a bit of lift for take off. Those one-pincher blue crabs wave their single pinchers belligerently but they will not attack;





**Take in the sights:** Top: Lily Beach formed by deposits of coral rubble; a brown booby hams it up for the camera; a robber crab; and the famous red crabs on Christmas Island

the golden bosuns nary bat an eyelid; and placid enormous whale sharks gladly swim beside you in the clear waters.

Everything is so picture-perfect I almost started to believe my tours were staged. On my bird tour, I found a brown booby waiting patiently at Margaret Knoll—under a plaque introducing it! On my way to Lost Lake Cave for snorkelling, a pod of dolphins followed the

boat and even did a couple of spins! Nana, my companion who had been diving for days before that sighting, exclaimed in a delightful Japanese-inflected accent, "You're so lucky! This is the first time we see dolphins here!"

To get to the island's best lookout point, traipse around a Chinese cemetery to get to the Golf Course Lookout Point where you'll get a breathtaking aerial view of the sea, town and mountain. I felt like a part of a viewing gallery with curious bosuns hovering in mid-air at an arm's length, studying me before rocketing off in disdain.

The island has a male Jane Goodall in Max Orchard who has looked after up to 40 birds at a time for the National Parks. The ranger, who has been saving and feeding birds that cannot fend for themselves, names all male birds "Eric" and female birds "Erica". Visitors can watch him feeding the birds at 4.30pm every weekday.

The tiny town of 1,500 people does not take long to warm up to new people. I was invited to set a hash run trail at the Pink House, cook

my fresh wahoo (mackerel) fillet at a girl's place and review wanton mee (dumpling noodles) with the resort's housekeeper at Poon Saan, the island's Chinese residential area. You get the latest news at the roundabout where chalkboards declare the latest boat sales and election dates. Keith says jokingly that this is the best way to make announcements, other than telling someone a secret.

While the airport has evolved from a mere "tin shack" since two decades ago, much of the island has preserved the infrastructure left over from the '60s when Singapore owned it. Looking at the locals sharing a laugh at Saturday screenings at the outdoor cinema, zipping in and out of unlocked houses, and drivers waving chirpily at each other, I begin to feel protective about these 135 square kilometers of paradise that I've discovered, and quietly hope that a tourism boom will only be for its own good. ☺

Special thanks to AustAsia Airlines for making this trip possible.

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AustAsia Airlines	1650	1805	Thursdays
Airline	Depart Christmas Island	Arrive Changi	Frequency
AustAsia Airline	850	2205	Thursdays