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by **Fiona Harper**

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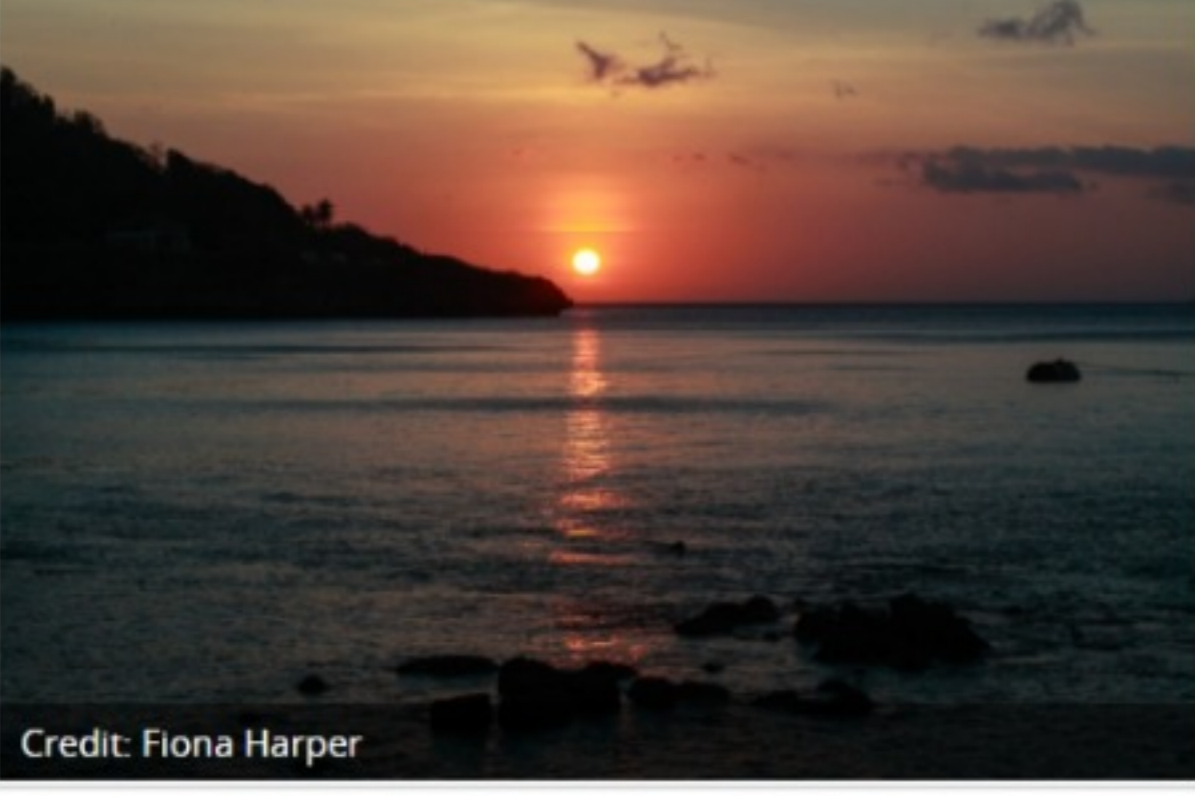
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Christmas Island gets a lot of bad press. For all the wrong reasons. Long before the remote island starting appearing on TV screens as a haven for desperate refugees, island residents were hoarding their own secrets. No easy task when you've got tens of millions of crabs clamouring for attention.

Travel writer Fiona Harper dropped in to see what all the fuss is about, and gave us her seven reasons for visiting the island.

1. Balmly Tropical Climate

Think of Christmas Island as the summit of a volcano of similar altitude to Mt Everest Base Camp and you'll go some way to understanding its unique landscape. Rising almost vertical from the seabed 5 km below, Christmas Island is not your average tropical island. Yes there are palm trees swishing in the breeze. There's also an abundance of dazzling sunshine. In fact it's hot. Real hot. Straddling latitude ten degrees, or about 1,000 km south of the Equator, the temperature in these parts doesn't change too much, whether wet season or dry.



Credit: Fiona Harper

2. Crabs, crabs and more crabs.

Crabs rarely make it onto those warm and fuzzy wildlife 'must see' lists. Which I think is a little unfair. Sure they're not cutesy like koalas but they do have character in a hard-shelled crustacean sort of way. And they're actually pretty photogenic, with attention-seeking colours like red, blue and purple that show beautifully in photos.

There's around twenty species of crabs on Christmas, the most famous of which are the red crabs. Mostly concealed in underground burrows all year, come the first rains of the wet season (usually in November) combined with the last quarter phase of the moon, tens of millions emerge big time. The red crab annual migration as they make their way to the sea is one of nature's most amazing spectacle. As one local put it, 'like the parting of the Red Sea, come here for your Moses moment'. Don't miss it.

Robber crabs (otherwise known as coconut crabs) are the islands other crustaceans, thriving thanks to their protected status. Road signs everywhere warn drivers to 'Slow down, drive around.' With claws strong enough to rip a coconut apart, these guys have also been known to carry away anything not nailed down. There's one story doing the rounds that has a robber crab pilfering firearms from the army but the defence forces are keeping Mum. Whether true or false, there's no doubt the little blighters are strong and resilient. See them at Hugh's Dale waterfall or on fossicking on Dolly Beach.



Credit: Fiona Harper

3. Multi-cultural melting pot

Declared an Australian territory, possession of Christmas Island has been passed around like a hot potato at a summer BBQ. Britain named it, Japan occupied it, and Singapore supported it before Australia finally claimed it, bringing it into the Aussie fold 56 years ago. Wandering around settlements with names like Poong Saan (meaning 'middle of the hill' in Cocos Malay language) and Kampong, it's hard to tell whether you're in Asia or Australia. Chinese and Malay restaurants dominate the cuisine thanks to a population roughly 60% Chinese, 25% Malay & 15% European. Territory Week celebrations (which actually run for 10 days but who's counting) are a melting pot of festivities showcasing the vast cultures, religions and traditions of the 3,000 or so inhabitants (October)

4. Bird watchers contain yourself

Like any self-respecting island popping out of the middle of the ocean, Christmas Island is a haven for birds. Twitchers (bird watchers) flock to the island, notepad and pencil in hand to tick off rare species touching down on annual migratory routes. Brown boobies live on the harsh lava, red footed boobies are easily spotted by their obvious red feet while the rare and endangered Abbotts Booby nests high in the forest canopy. Researchers estimate there's roughly 8,000 Abbotts Boobies left on earth, with Christmas Island their only known habitat. See them soon before they disappear entirely.

Others regularly ticked off on avian thrill seekers lists include white and red tailed tropicbirds, common noddies, frigate birds, the island thrush, Christmas Island Goshawk and emerald dove. 80,000 seabirds nest annually along with 23 resident species so that the island sings to an avian song no matter where you find yourself.



Credit: Fiona Harper Photography

5. Swim in a grotto, scramble in a cave

Legend has it that a Chinese sea dragon swimming past Christmas Island (as they do) heard Chinese voices emerging from the land. At The Grotto, which is an intimate swimming hole fed by surging seawater that rushes in beneath craggy limestone, the legend acts as a sort of modern day safety net. When the dragon's roaring, it's too dangerous to plunge into the turquoise coloured pool. There's an unwritten rule amongst locals that if there's one car parked on the roadside, you don't walk down the path to the private plunge pool - it's a favourite hangout for romance.

Thanks to the limestone landscape, the island is dotted with caves. Daniel Roux Cave near Flying Fish Cove is the best known and most accessible. Striking stalactites hang from the ceiling while stalagmites rise from the floor, their crystallised formations sparkling in torch light. Ask any of the adventurous locals and you'll hear stories of cave diving and cave camping, like Thundercliff Cave where divers can surface within a stunning crystal-lined cave.



Credit: Fiona Harper

6. Run & Swim

For a small remote outpost Christmas Island fights above its weight when it comes to sports events worth travelling for. The Christmas Ocean Swim (September) takes place in the gin-clear waters of Flying Fish Cove. Distances from 500m to 5km are on offer so it's suitable for novices through to pros. Flying Fish Cove is also home to one of the island's best snorkelling spots so the Ocean Swim is sort of like a 'power snorkel'.

If running is more your thing hang around until late September for the Christmas Island Marathon. www.marathon.cx This is definitely one run that promises immense bragging rights with your running buddies back home. Hot, dusty and somewhat lonely given the small field of competitors that crisscross the island, the last 3km offers one of the most spectacular home straits this side of Olympia. With the vast Indian Ocean dominating the horizon all the way to Africa, it's worth 39 km of pain for 3 km of glory. Runners doing shorter distances also get to admire this kick-butt view. Just do it.



Credit: Karen Singer

7. Dive on a volcano

With 42 km of marine reserve offering 60 dive sites, Christmas Island is no shrinking violet when it comes to dive sites. Visibility is clearer than gin, water temperature rarely drops below a healthy body temperature year round. Warm clear waters showcase more than 200 species of coral with their delicate kaleidoscopic tendrils of colour. Feather stars and fan coral capture polyps drifting by on ocean currents. The world's biggest fish, the whale shark, also pop by annually (November to May) - swimming with these gentle giants is a rare treat.

More information www.christmas.net.au

Fiona Harper is a travel writer specialising in cruising, active and soft adventures. Follow her at www.travelboatinglifestyle.com

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