

:: GLEN COWANS
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I KNEW THERE WERE HAMMERHEADS OUT THERE BUT STILL I TURNED TO LOOK AT WHAT THE OTHERS HAD FOUND. AS I SWAM TOWARDS THEM THEY STARTED POINTING AT ME, NO NOT AT ME... BEHIND ME... WHAT? WHAT IS IT? I TURNED AND THERE BUT A FEW FEET BEHIND MY FINS WAS THE BIGGEST HAMMERHEAD I HAD EVER SEEN AND IT WAS FOLLOWING ME IN. I TURNED AND BROUGHT THE CAMERA UP BUT IN THOSE FEW SECONDS IT TURNED AND WENT DEEP.

THE BIG REDS ON CHRISTMAS

Corals grow over each other amongst fish soup at the edge of the dropoff.
 Opposite - Attack of the giant red crabs! They cover roads, climb fences, go everywhere. (Image Louise Stazzonelli)

Snorkeling at West White Beach between dives, reveals a huge carpet of Anemones
 Below - Gorgonian fans at 5 meters exist under overhangs at Christmas Island.



I was prepared... wide angle lens ready and pointing into the blue. The wall was amazing, magnificent coral growth and blue clear water. The others had found something tiny on the wall and called me over. I didn't want to go, I was hanging out at an undersea point off the island but reluctantly I did turn away and swam towards them. They all started pointing. Of course I never got the shot, but I'll never forget that hammerhead – it seemed I had to move my head to look from one eye to the other it was so big, but maybe it was just the adrenalin. Had I kept watching the blue, would I have got the shot? Would the hammer have come in if I hadn't turned away?

– this time whalesharks were replaced by large hammerheads. These fantastic sharks are often seen here just before the crab spawning which is also just before the whalesharks. Are the hammers there to feed on any red crabs washed out to sea as they spawn? Like much of Christmas Island, there's a lot happening and we're just starting to learn about it all.

I first visited nine years before in the height of whaleshark season and they were everywhere; we dived with them, snorkeled with them and watched them circle the boat. It was amazing. This trip coincided with the migration of the land-dwelling red crabs to spawn at the water's edge

Christmas Island has been described as Australia's version of the Galapagos. Isolated by sea, it too has unique biodiversity and, like the Galapagos, it's in very deep water and undersea creatures congregate. The island itself is only 135 square kilometres of limestone rock with vertical cliffs interspersed by

a few isolated beaches. The red crabs are the most prolific species on the island. They litter the ground within the rainforest and are normally quite shy of human contact. Once a year, when the first heavy rains of the wet arrive, they gather in huge numbers and





Left - Once the crabs are on the move you cannot stop them, the need to reproduce takes over. (Image Louise Stazonelli)
 Below centre - Barriers are put up alongside the major roads that funnel the migrating crabs through tunnels allowing them to get to the other side without being crushed. (Imag: Louise Stazonelli)
 Below right - Red crabs nestle on the cliff waiting for the highest of tides to cast the spawn which will hatch immediately.



Below, l to r - Schooling batfish hang around the mouth of Thunderdome cave; I was stunned at actually how small these ribbon eels were; Dragon morays are found at various dive sites around the island; Bubble coral and commensal shrimp under the Cantilevers; As the waves meet the cliff, the air in the cave gets compressed, turning to mist and distorting vision; Colourful crinoids hang from the walls and feed in the currents; Huge schools of goatfish at Egeria Pt.

march towards the nearest shore. They climb cliffs, fences, anything to get through and, overcome by hormones, are almost oblivious to human presence. The ground becomes a seething mass of red legs and claws, but the most incredible thing is the sound. The noise of clicking legs rises with the number of crabs marching and it keeps building. Eventually the crabs reach a shore, cliff or beach where they they wait for the highest of tides and when it arrives they shake their bodies and release their spawn on the tide. Some crabs die; as forest dwellers they can't swim and drown if washed offshore. The spawn drifts out to the open ocean and around 30 days later millions of miniature red

crabs (those not eaten by birds, fish, whalesharks or even other crabs) return to shore and head into the forest to begin the cycle again.

Man and roads have severely threatened crab numbers and now island roads are closed to traffic when the crabs move in large numbers. Those roads that can't be closed have plastic guides run out alongside the road to shepherd the crabs into special under-road channels.

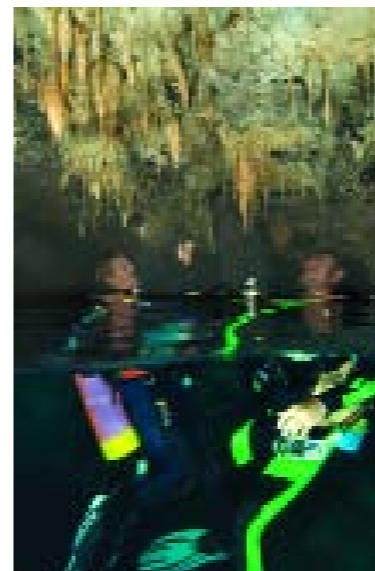
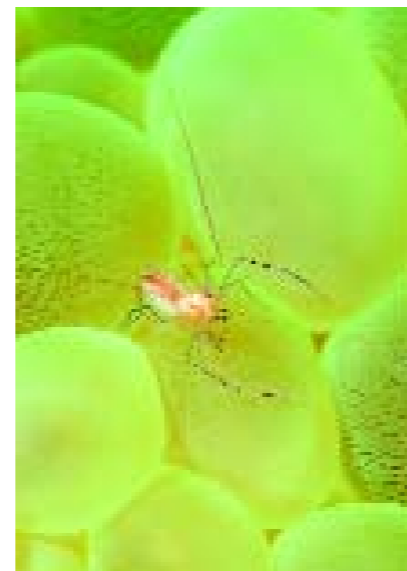
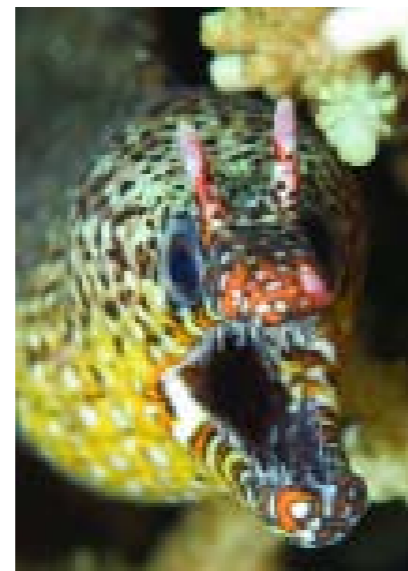
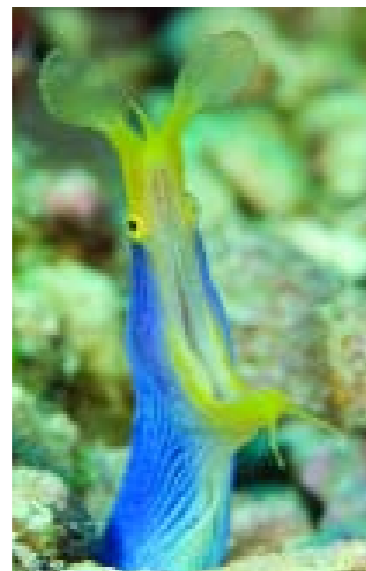
Along with the crabs, there's bird life everywhere on Christmas especially when out on the water – various frigate birds, boobies, the golden bosun tropicbird and many others.

Underwater Christmas Island is as unique as it is above. The cliffs step outwards slightly at around five to 10 metres depth where they shelve out from the island anything from one to 300 metres. This creates spectacular hard coral gardens before they again plummet vertically into abysmal ocean depths. The walls are lined with anemones, seawhips, hard coral plates, huge gorgonians and soft corals. A fish soup of anthias and other prolific schools swarm the dropoff edge, constantly disturbed by sharks, trevally, barracuda and just about everything else that fancies small colourful tasty fish.

Both at water level and below, the cliffs are dotted with caves, many leaching

crystal clear freshwater into the ocean which creates a fuzzy disturbance as it meets salt. These caves and overhangs deliver some spectacular and unique diving experiences. Perpendicular Wall has large gorgonian corals growing in the shadow of a big overhang at just five metres. Seeing a large gorgonian complete with the bright blue under-surface of the water is something I've never seen before – it's breathtaking. Another cliff opening is Boat Cave, so big that the boat actually moors up in the mouth of the cave and even though you do an amazing wall dive you'll start and/or finish your dive exploring the cave mouth. Thunderdome is so called because during large swells the waves compress air into

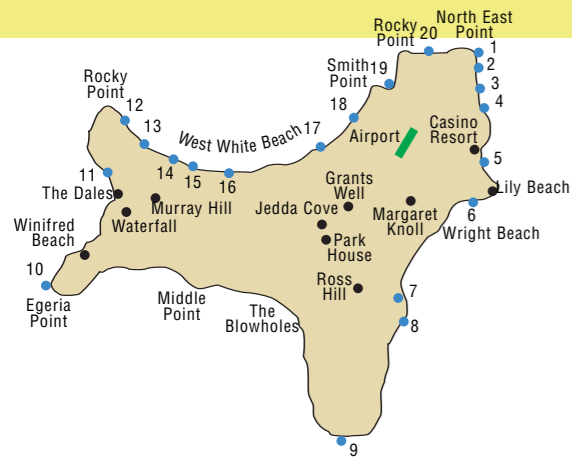
the top of the cave with the sound of a thunder clap. If you're experienced in overhead environment diving (deco or cave/wreck) this is worth doing. You swim through the cave and stalagmites and stalactites until the end of the entry. Here you surface, removing scuba gear, then trek around 30 metres into the cave to a clear brackish lake. Turning off torches reveals lantern fish in the water and if you submerge your hand, bright red sightless Austrian shrimp (named for Marcus the owner of Indian Ocean Dive Academy) collect on your hand for a complete manicure. They even tugged at my beard as I submerged to photograph Louise's hand being 'cleaned'!



“ Christmas Island is 2800km west of the Northern Territory city of Darwin, closer to Indonesia than to Australia. It has a warm tropical climate and the locals are Malaysian, Chinese, European and Australian, a fantastic melting pot of cultures with many temples and shrines and festivals. Technically you’re in Australia, with Australian infrastructure and laws, but it feels like an exotic overseas location. ”

C H R I S T M A S I S L A N D

FACT FILE



Christmas Island has a ton of wide angle action, but also has great macro. Dragon and blue ribbon eels, leaf scorpionfish and nudibranchs are all found in known locations. Flying Fish Cove is an excellent shore or night dive with anglerfish and nudibranchs. The cantilevers that load phosphate mined on the island into ships are also an excellent muck dive (only

allowed when no ships are in the harbour) full of nudibranchs, lionfish, shrimp, bubble corals and more.

Traveling to dive sites, while always watching for whalesharks, spinner dolphins swarm the dive boat. You quietly enter the water, with only blue depths below; the boat circles you while dolphins frolic at the bow and stern, so preoccupied they often swoop within metres of your mask. All you can hear is incessant clicking and squeaks, an amazing experience. At times the pods can number hundreds. And though we didn't see whalesharks – they were seen the week after we left – it's worth remembering you could happen on one anytime between October and April.

Christmas Island is in deep ocean and large ocean swells can occur at any time,

but there's always a lee side with protected calm water and great diving. Predominately the settlement side is calm and the boat leaves from Flying Fish Cove, but even if the conditions turn and the cove becomes rough, there's now a ramp on the other side of the island making for safe water entry and no need to traverse rough seas. This makes Christmas Island virtually a year-round diving location.

When we first dived Christmas and Cocos Islands, we were new divers and we thought "That was good... where to next?" But now, with eleven years of dive travel under our belts, we realise just how special both places are. Now its "When can we get back here?"

CHRISTMAS ISLAND is covered by tropical rainforest and it gets a lot of rain especially in the wet season, the start of which is when the red crabs migrate. Rain and rainforest create a rich environment and the island is home for 20 species of crabs plus prolific bird life – frigate birds, boobies and golden bosun birds are just a few. It even has flora totally unique to the island with 16 endemic species of plants. Even if you didn't dive, there's enough on Christmas to keep outdoor and nature lovers busy for a week and still not see it all. Many mangrove and rainforest walks are now boardwalked where necessary to keep both you and the environment happy. Visit exotic waterfalls, see the crabs as they go about their lives in the forest. The giant robber crabs with frighteningly big claws actually wave you away with the large spiked legs used to tear coconuts apart. It all feels a bit prehistoric, almost like a Jurassic park.

GETTING ABOUT

Christmas Island is far too big to see without a 4wd hire car and these are easy to obtain on the island and relatively cheap. The rainforest does have resident mosquitoes so

take repellent as a lot of walking is needed to see all the best stuff.

MUST SEES: The lookout over Flying Fish Cove, the waterfall at the Dales (with flying foxes in the trees), the Blowholes, Dolly Beach, The Grotto.

ACCOMMODATION & EATING

Accommodation on the island is plenty and varied, from luxury resort-style and self contained houses or units to budget backpackers. The island also has a supermarket and it is possible to purchase food. For eating out, in the settlement near Flying Fish Cove, the Rumah Tingi offers a western style bar/restaurant reminiscent of the best of Bali with an ocean view to die for. There are several Australian and Asian or Malaysian restaurants and you can also travel up to the top settlement of Poon San and take your fill there.

For full information on Christmas island visit www.christmas.net.au

SCUBA DIVING CONTACTS

Indian Ocean Diving Academy
www.ioda.cx

email: office@ioda.cx

Christmas Island Wet & Dry Adventures

www.divingchristmas.com.cx

email: diving@christmas.net.au

TRAVEL

Australian departure for Christmas Island is from Perth International Airport; though the island is an Australian Territory it feels as if you are traveling to another country. Travel from Perth is uniquely via National Jet Systems twice a week.

Christmas is on the same flight plan as the Cocos Islands and if visiting one for a week then consider a week on the other as they're completely different but go together like two sides of a coin. But if you only have time for Christmas this is still possible with visits working around the twice weekly flights allowing various choices of duration for your holiday.

National Jet flies twice weekly:

Circuit loop Perth - Cocos - Christmas - Perth on Thursdays.

Circuit loop Perth - Christmas - Cocos - Perth on Mondays.

Baggage limits apply: 5kg hand luggage and 20kg checked luggage. This can usually be varied – when booking make sure either the agent or Christmas Island Diving Academy pre-confirm excess luggage allowance.

Travel can be arranged through Dive Adventures

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