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Exploring the Cocos Keeling Islands in a motorized canoe.

UNDER THE BLUE VAULT OF HEAVEN

A tiny speck in the Indian Ocean, Australia's Cocos Keeling Islands prove to be an ideal destination for big-time adventure.

BY RACHEL LEES



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Two dolphins glide, at speed, through the crystalline water, making a beeline for the dive boat we're on. "Our escort has arrived!" shouts our skipper, Dieter Gerhard, as the pair flank the bow. Other dolphins leap from the lagoon around us. It's a postcard-perfect day: a cerulean sky stretches cloudless above us as we hurtle across an otherwise still ocean. And there's not another boat in sight.

Our vessel isn't much larger than a dinghy, and the water is so clear I can't resist reaching out to the dolphin closest to me. But our playful friend peels off as we approach our snorkel site near Direction Island. Gerhard, who runs a diving operation called Cocos Dive, calls it the "Bottle Dump." We slip into the water, joining a trio of blacktip reef sharks who seem as curious as we are but maintain a polite distance. Convict tangs and Indian triggerfish flit between the coral.

If ever a destination deserved the "paradise" title, it must surely be the Cocos Keeling Islands. When Charles Darwin visited the remote Indian Ocean archipelago aboard the HMS *Beagle* in 1836, he described its main lagoon as a "brilliant expanse" of "shallow, clear, and still water" set "under the blue vault of heaven." Today, the two atolls are an Australian external territory, despite being closer to the Indonesian islands of Java and Sumatra. (The flight from Perth crosses almost 3,000 kilometers of empty ocean.) They comprise 27 tiny coral islands, of which



Above: Arriving at the Cocos Keeling Islands via the twice-weekly flight from Perth. Opposite, clockwise from top left: The islands' traditional Malay food is an attraction in its own right; Tony Lacy (and a friend) at his organic farm on West Island; Cossies Beach on Direction Island.

only two are inhabited: West Island, which hosts a transient population of about 80 people, mostly from mainland Australia; and Home Island, with its vibrant community of around 400 Cocos Malays.

If you've never heard of the Cocos Keelings, you're not alone: most Australians were unaware of their existence until 2016, when a local beach was named the nation's finest by Australian beach expert Brad Farmer. The winning stretch of sand was on the lagoon side of banana-shaped Direction Island, a swath of soft white powder fringed by coconut palms and translucent water. The only drawback was that it didn't have a name, so Farmer christened it Cossies Beach after Sir Peter Cosgrove, Australia's governor-general. Locals continue to refer to it simply as "DI."

"Perhaps they should have called it by the Cocos Malay name," jokes Caroline McCartney, whose husband, Peter, runs glass-bottom boat tours around the islands. "They call it Pulu Tikus, or 'Rat Island,' after the rodents that came off the cargo ships!"

Despite their remote location and myriad empty beaches, the Cocos have an unexpectedly colorful history. Discovered in 1609 by a captain with the British East India Company, William Keeling, the islands remained uninhabited until the early 1800s, when a Scottish merchant seaman named John Clunies-Ross arrived on the scene at about the same time as Alexander Hare, a shady English adventurer with a

taste for Malay concubines and slaves. The two men formed separate settlements and became bitter rivals, with Hare departing a few years later following large-scale desertions from his camp. Shipping in more Malay laborers, Clunies-Ross went on to establish a lucrative coconut plantation that harvested, shelled, and exported copra (dried coconut meat).

Half a century later, Queen Victoria granted the island group in perpetuity to John's grandson, George Clunies-Ross, and his descendants. It thus remained under the rule of the self-styled Kings of Cocos until 1984, when its residents voted for full integration with Australia.

Throughout the years, the Cocos have borne witness to everything from the establishment of an underwater telegraph cable system in 1901, to a visit from Queen Elizabeth II in 1954. The archipelago was the site of Australia's first naval victory, in 1914, when the HMAS *Sydney* disabled the German cruiser SMS *Emden*; during World War II, it hosted a Royal Air Force bomber base.

While they continue to play a role in Australia's defense strategy, the islands today serve mostly as a destination for holidaymakers. The majority of visitors are Australians, yet they're a diverse bunch, from off-the-beaten-path wanderers and passport-stamp collectors, to birdwatchers, divers, and kite-surfers—and even the occasional transmitter hunter in search of radio signals.

Personally, I was just curious—and keen to dip my toes into some saltwater. But the place had me completely spellbound before my plane from Perth had even landed on West Island, whose airport runway does double duty as a golf course. As we made our descent, cotton-candy clouds parted to reveal a fairy tale–like realm, glistening below like a lustrous pearl necklace laid out on a cloak of blue silk.

While shuffling through the airport alongside smiling Malay women in hijabs and equally cheerful Aussies wearing flip-flops and shorts, I realized this



Getting There
Virgin Australia
(virginaustralia.com) is the only airline that flies to the Cocos, departing twice a week (on Tuesdays and Fridays) from Perth.

Where to Stay
Cocos Village Bungalows
cocosvillagebungalows.com; doubles from US\$170, minimum three-night stay.

What to Do
Cocos Dive
cocosdive.com.
Cocos Islands Adventure Tours
cocosislandsadventuretours.com.

was an archipelago unlike any other. The Cocos combine the idyllic beaches and reefs of the Maldives with the laidback camaraderie of an Australian country town. Everywhere you go, people greet each other with a smile and a wave.

However, unlike in the Maldives, where resort guests are pampered and cocooned, in the Cocos, visitors are vastly outnumbered by and swiftly absorbed into the local community, as the ubiquitous self-catering accommodation options attest. But like so many of the world's lesser-known locales, it's the people who make the place. Throughout the week, three different residents offer to lend me their snorkels; the town nurse gives me a lift to the jetty when she sees me waiting for the bus; and, on my last day, after I've checked my bags in for my flight, the young woman I rented my scooter from lends me a swimsuit and takes me for one last dip in the ocean—then she lets me shower at her place, and ensures I'm back at the airport with ample time to board the plane.

Snorkels and swimsuits are West Island's unofficial uniform, given that most of the activities center on the water. Gerhard from Cocos Dive offers sea scooter tours that cater to all-comers, from amateur snorkelers to seasoned divers. After our earlier introduction to the Cocos' dolphins and sharks, he also takes us to a shipwreck some believe to be the remains of a World War II battle cruiser, though locals know it affectionately as the "coal barge." It's thick with fish.

The islands are home to an incredible array of marine life, including more than 500 species of fish and 100 hard corals, along with myriad mollusks, crustaceans, and echinoderms. There are manta rays and dolphins—both common and spinner—plus the 30,000 or so hawksbill and green turtles in the lagoon.

If you'd rather stay dry, Peter McCartney's glass-bottom boat tours are a must. During my morning



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with him and his family on the water, a pair of gray reef sharks chase each other below the glass panel. McCartney explains the Cocos Malay code of shark conduct: “They don’t eat us, so we don’t eat them.”

It seems to be working: no shark attacks have ever been recorded in the Cocos. This makes it hard to understand why these incredible creatures are so feared, especially if you’re snorkeling alongside half a dozen blacktip pups in the shark nursery off Pulu Maria. Another of the Cocos’ 25 uninhabited islands, it’s best visited on a motorized canoe safari with Cocos Islands Adventure Tours.

But it’s well worth taking a break from the water in favor of land-based activities. A half-hour ferry ride brings you to Home Island, where you can see the original Clunies-Ross mansion, built circa 1890. However, it’s the tour offering an insight into local Malay life that is most fascinating—and includes an hour or so with sparkly-eyed 74-year-old Edrie bin Austin, a hunter, fisherman, soap- and salt-maker who demonstrates how to weave a basket using palm leaves, while chatting about his childhood on the island.

Back on West Island, bin Austin’s salt is sold in the airport and visitors’ center, and used as a not-so-



Left: Resort-style accommodation at Cocos Village Bungalows. Below: A Home Island resident.

On a tour of his farm, Lacy is trailed by a line of devoted, coconut-eating ducks as he explains his vision to create a sustainable industry on the island.



secret seasoning at the weekly gourmet pizza nights at Saltmakers café. A jack of many trades, entrepreneur Tony Lacy helps bin Austin package and promote his product; he also works as Saltmakers’ pizza chef. But his passion project is manufacturing roasted coconut chips, which he hopes to export internationally.

On a tour of his farm, Lacy is trailed by a line of devoted, coconut-eating ducks as he explains his vision to create a sustainable industry on the island, one that he hopes will help generate an income for both West and Home islanders. Lacy currently employs two Cocos Malay women, Norhayati and Sumanti, who are as passionate as he is about the business, and who will succeed him in running it when he one day moves back to the mainland.

The chips are a far cry from the samosas and curries the women grew up eating, but the islands’ Malay cuisine isn’t in any danger of being forgotten. For the last two years, the local high school has run cooking classes that bring together students, their mothers, and grandmothers to teach visitors how to make curry puffs, chicken curry, and banana fritters.

It’s a fun, hands-on workshop, and everyone benefits from the interaction. Ayu and Fifi’s faces beam from their hijabs with the enthusiasm you’d expect from girls attending their first year of high school, as they explain each step in the cooking process. They tell me that next week, they start surf lessons—and suddenly we are all transported to that white sand, the sun glistening on the vivid aquamarine water just a stone’s throw from the school. Surely this must be paradise. ☺