

## The closest thing to tropical paradise in Australia

JOHN BORTHWICK

**Y**ou land on a pinpoint of coral, a tiny, turtle-shaped atoll that's closer to Sumatra than Australia. The plane glides in over a lagoon a shade of turquoise that sits somewhere between "postcard" and "absurd". It touches down, even more absurdly, on what looks like a golf course.

Bilingual welcome signs say "Selamat Datang" and "Altitude 10 Feet". A uniformed AFP gent greets us with a few words of friendly caution: "We have the usual road rules here like wear your seatbelt and observe the speed limits. And this isn't Bali – so we don't take bribes."

Thus you enter the remote Australian Indian Ocean Territory of Cocos (Keeling) Islands, "Cocos" for short. Midway between Broome and Sri Lanka, this reef-spangled outlier is smaller, prettier and less controversial than neighbouring Christmas Island, 900km to the east.

The 27 Cocos Islands (only two are inhabited) are magnets to more sea tales than seems credible for their 14sq km of land area. Uninhabited until 1826, they were first settled by an Englishman with a harem of women who, sensibly, soon began deserting him. In turn he departed, leaving Scottish merchant John Clunies-Ross to become the founding Tuan, or lord, of a five-generation dynasty that ruled a coconut kingdom for the next 150 years.

This pelagic Ruritania flourished until 1978, when a United Nations-run referendum and the Hawke government in Canberra pulled the rug from under the family fiefdom. In 1984 the islanders voted to integrate with Australia, with the community of ethnic Malay plantation workers becoming full citizens.

I'm staying in a well-appointed seafront cottage on West Island, home to about 140 mainland Australians. Meanwhile, across the lagoon on Home Island, about 450 Cocos Malay folk occupy their own modern kampung (village). The communities might sleep a short distance apart but the "Westies" and the "Homies", as they are known, meet and work together daily.

Thirty million coconut trees. Thirty thousand turtles. Forty, 50 or more metres of underwater visibility. No taxis, touts, hawkers, hookers, resorts or malls. You wouldn't ankle-tap this place with the cliché of "tropical paradise" but if there's anywhere in Australia that approaches that romantic ideal, Cocos might just be it.

Some days I head out by kayak and on other days by ferry to wander tiny islands inhabited only by day-trippers, hermit crabs and sea eagles. One afternoon I board a glass-bottom tour boat skippered by ebullient, 63-year-old Johnny Clunies-Ross, son of the last Tuan of Cocos. Turtles skitter ahead as he navigates across the lagoon to where the white sand seabed suddenly plunges from 10m to 500m deep. Later, we slip overboard to explore a shipwreck where flash-mobs of fusiliers and parrotfish swirl through the hull's ribcage of coral and rust.

West Island's one road runs 15km from tip to sandy tip. You drive it slalom-style, skirting random crabs and ambling chooks. But this palm-walled corridor boasts an improbably grand title, Sydney Highway. The legacy, surely, of some geographically challenged joker? And then I see the next sign, Emden Walk, and history slaps me in the face. Just offshore, in November 1914, one of Australia's most significant naval battles took place when the cruiser HMAS Sydney hunted down and destroyed the German raider Emden in the fledgling RAN's first major sea engagement.

"We are a raw product, a stepping-back-in-time destination," says the islands' enthusiastic tourism marketing manager, Rik Soderlund, referring without apology to the



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atoll's limited luxury accommodation. "Visitors who want overwater bungalows like The Maldives should try, well, The Maldives," he adds with a grin.

Cocos also gloriously "lacks" billboards, petty thieves (doors are left unlocked, car keys in ignitions), traffic jams, Maccas and much else of mainland importance. There must be downsides, I tell myself. But when you're drift-snorkelling in the rip off untrammelled Destination Island amid a cloud of wrasse and blue-green chromis with perhaps a manta-ray, who cares that there's no hipster baristas serving faux-milk lattes?

"In fact, the food arrangements can be a bit Fawltly Towers," says Jack, a visitor from Perth who can't find anywhere open for lunch today. Not that he's bothered. After days of spectacular windsurfing and diving, he's accepted the sometimes-arbitrary opening and closing times of the few restaurants. He's equally resigned to their prices, bulked-up by

**Turtles skitter ahead as (my host) navigates across the lagoon to where the white sand seabed suddenly plunges from 10m to 500m deep**

with the locals call "paradise tax".

"We pay \$10 freight per kilo on everything shipped here, the most expensive freight rates in the world," explains Soderlund. With that in mind, tonight I'll aim for grilled local coral trout (\$35) at open-air Saltmakers by the Sea restaurant. Tomorrow it can be the generous buffet (\$33) at the Tropika. I'm more than happy to pay this paradise tax for the privilege of being on Cocos, but I'd still kill for a fresh salad.

Cathedral archways of palms shade the



Idyllic Cocos beach, main; island sign, above; ferry terminal, below left; local children, below right; exploring by road, inset

**IN THE KNOW**

Virgin Australia flies twice weekly from Perth to Cocos (Keeling) Islands. Photo ID but not passport is required, plus online-issued passes for the Australian Indian Ocean Territory and Western Australia. West Island accommodation ranges from motel-style rooms to top-end holiday homes; nightly rates from \$170 to \$550. Mid-range includes B&B accommodation (\$350 a couple) and self-catering cottages such as the one-bedroom Birds Nest (\$250). Car hire from \$80 a day.  
[cocoskeelingislands.com.au](http://cocoskeelingislands.com.au)

PICTURES: RIK SODERLUND

# COCOS



side-roads to empty beaches but I head to the West Island pier for the morning ferry to Home Island. It's about the only thing here that runs on time, I've been cautioned. Once the domain of the Clunies-Ross dynasty, the 95ha island remains home to the Cocos Malay community and their neat kampung of cyclone-proof houses.

Local guide Shakirin Keegan shows me around the idyllic, changing island. Oceania House, formerly the Clunies-Ross grand mansion, was sold off long ago and the coconut plantations are abandoned. The institutions that define life today include the museum, mosque, supermarket, Centrelink and cemetery. Religious matters, so I've been told, reflect the influence of conservative visiting imams with, for instance, most Cocos Malay women now clad in Middle Eastern-style abayas and hijabs instead of the tropical sarongs and tops of earlier generations. Keegan introduces me to 82-year-old

Cree Haigh AO, who was a community spokesman in Washington and Canberra during the 1980s UN negotiations. He recalls when workers like him harvested 500 coconuts a day and were paid in plastic "Cocos rupee" tokens. The world copra market slumped decades ago and jobs on Home Island have remained limited. Meanwhile, Haigh still reminds his community's youngsters to "cherish the freedom we achieved for you".

Back on West Island I find the Big Barge Art Gallery and Cafe, housed in a beached, broad-bellied old trading barge. Now colourfully refurbished and bristling with local artworks – paintings, jewellery and clothing – and serving delicious snacks, this is the most creative place on Cocos.

Meanwhile, the most sporting place is the golf course right beside Cocos Airport, a runway with fairways, or vice-versa? Every Thursday afternoon locals and visitors play golf here under curious rules known as Ambrose, if not "anything-goes". Toting beers, they sprint across the tarmac and thereafter drive, putt, slice and progressively party around the nine-hole course until sunset. I'm watching for an incoming Airbus but someone reassures me, "If the airport manager is playing you're pretty sure a plane isn't about to land".

And then it's time for a farewell toast to this extraordinary place, this unlikely raft of offshore Oz. Like most matters of importance, it takes place at the island nerve centre, the Cocos Club bar (thongs and beach shirts de rigueur), from where it's just a few reluctant paces to the airline check-in counter. There, looking down, I notice that for the first time in a week I have actual shoes on my feet.

John Borthwick was a guest of Tourism Australia and Cocos Keeling Islands Tourism Association.  
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