

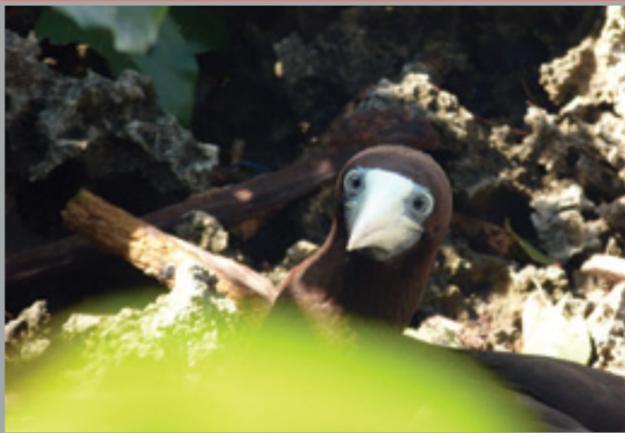
# CRABS & BIRDIES

## THE JOY OF THE CHRISTMAS ISLAND OPEN

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LEFT: Idyllic Dolly Beach is one of the prettiest and most secluded beaches on the island. ABOVE: Unique to Christmas Island, red crab road signs.



**G**olf and crabs do not mix well. I'm only two holes into a weekend's festivities at Christmas Island Golf Club, and already a red crab has my ball firmly in his pincers. And he's edging backwards with a particularly defiant expression about his crustacean features.

In the end, he relents in the face of a few prods with my borrowed 4-iron, leaving me to resume the thankless task of trying to propel the unco-operative ball in the general direction of the hole. It's not long before I begin to wish the crab had gotten away sooner, such is the parlous state of my game.

But the despair can't last long. After all, I'm part of history here. The club is billing this as the first true Christmas Island Open, and it's a big deal in these parts. The small community of permanent residents here sees the new annual tournament as a way to lure more visitors to a place with a foggy and misguided reputation as little more than a haven for boat refugees, crabs and guano-gatherers.

It's working already, even if the only other 'mainland' visitors among this year's 30-odd contestants are a couple of old-timers who lived and golfed here back in the days of dinner dances at the Christmas Island

Club, clothing-optional gatherings at the Grotto and visiting Asians gambling away at the now-defunct casino. They were visibly thrilled to be back for a reunion of sorts, swinging away on an unmistakable (if somewhat revised) patch of golf land wedged between the sea and a dramatic cliff face swarming with frigates and boobies.

But it's not only the course that might interest the visiting mainland player. It's the novelty experience, the chance to blend into the local community. And three days is more than enough time to do that. You don't even need an hour off the plane before you start to see faces you've seen once already. The lady who waves scanning devices over passengers at the airport might well be same one who welcomes you at the Visitor Centre. The instructor from your morning dive in Flying Fish Cove might well be seen careering down the hill at the wheel of the school bus in the afternoon. And the winner of the ladies' division of the Christmas Island Open? Well, she could quite possibly be doing your brunch at the Barracks Cafe in Settlement the next morning.

Wearing multiple hats, with flexi-time for all, seems to be the done thing around here. Three days of golf with the local members means meeting plenty of everyday Christmas Island residents, and if there's



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The common Brown Booby calls Christmas Island home; a rainbow as seen from the course; a red crab takes ownership of the writer's ball; the 18th hole at Christmas Island Golf Club; playing the tee shot on the short par-3 17th hole.



FAIR LEFT: The memorable ocean view from the 2nd/11th hole. LEFT: There is no strict dress code at this course. BELOW: The writer's hammock for his last night stay on Christmas Island.



one thing they all stress, it's the lifestyle. In a place with no discernible rush-hour, one gets the impression that neither money nor work are top priorities.

And why should they be when the local golf course does a passable impression of the sort of track people fly to the Caribbean to play? Alright, so that's an exaggeration: it's really only the brilliant location and humid heat that might compare to Jamaica. The course is mowed by enthusiastic members, so we're talking country conditioning. That said, it's not nearly as bad as my under-promising hosts had prepared me to expect, and during the wet it's greener than a celery milkshake.

The course is an interesting and quirky ten-hole layout. It's essentially a question of playing the same nine twice, although holes 9 and 13 are fundamentally different despite sharing a single green. It's certainly on the short side, with eight par-3s keeping par in the 60s. But players who forget how to use their driver face a shock on the 18th tee, where they are asked to hit over a vast ocean of bush just to get themselves in play on the par-5 closer.

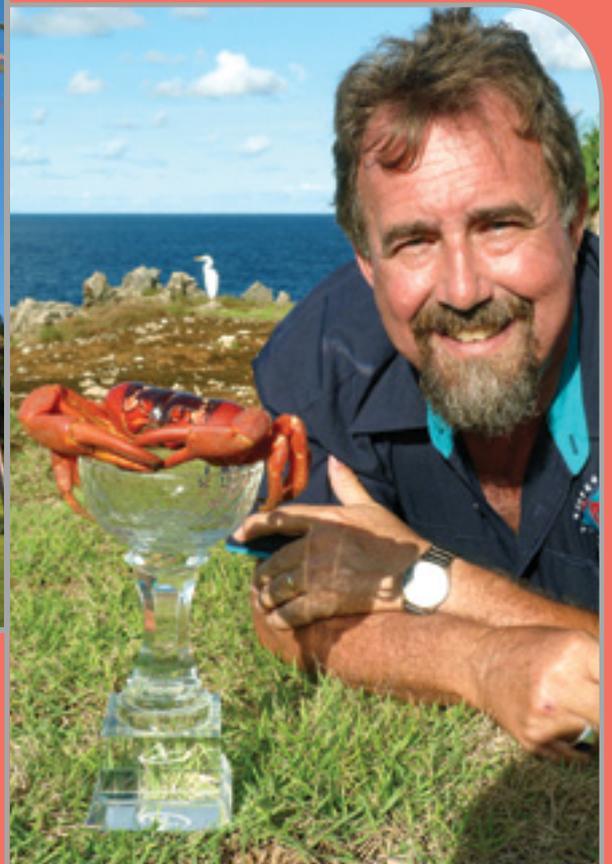
While some holes around the foot off the bird-ridden cliff provide ample opportunity to kiss goodbye to poorly directed shots, the meat of the course has a tropical postcard feel with just a few coconut trees to get in the way. And speaking of postcards, the signature hole is surely

the 2nd/11th, which sits all on its lonesome across the road from the rest of the course. There's good reason for this, though: the par-3 is right up against the shoreline and is the best place to soak up the island scenery. Hitting the green here is a relief, too, because missing it probably means another crab-prodding expedition into the coastal vegetation. And that's if you're lucky.

The 8th/17th, another of the short holes, is also a stunner. You hit downhill towards the ocean, aiming at a small putting surface with steep drop-offs on two sides. And it would appear that if you're playing in the Christmas Island Open, you'll also have to contend with the distraction of the nearby food and drinks station. Which in my case, owing to stupid speed-wolfing of a Coke and hot dog, leads to a chronic, round-ruining bout of hiccups.

During my three days on the course and in the laid-back clubhouse, I discover that most members at the golf club seem to be teachers.

“When you spend time on Christmas Island, it is the memories of a natural wonderland that you will take home.”



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Coconut palms line most of the fairways through the meat of the course; Open winner Alan Thornton with the trophy, and a red crab; the field gathers for the first Christmas Island Open; there are thick pockets of scrub around the course that will claim mis-hits.



And it is none other than the local school headmaster, Ian (also known, bewilderingly, as Frank), who serves me my ice-cold ginger beer at the bar. His 11-handicap deputy principal Al Thornton – the eventual tournament winner with a net 59 in the main strokeplay event on Sunday – kindly lends me his spare set of clubs for the weekend. I try to imagine the top brass at my own high school serving drinks and playing golf, but my mind isn't that agile.

Then there's Matt, who tells me he's the local locksmith. Given that he'd moved from Perth to settle on an island where a lot of people don't lock their doors, I had to chuckle out loud at his business prospects. But like everyone else here, he seems to get by – and has a good time doing so. He eventually finished as runner-up to Thornton.

Also smiling at the end of the awards dinner in Poon San is the island's top business tycoon, Chin Soon Kheong, big boss of the Acker concern and sponsor-in-chief of the fledgling tournament. He doesn't play golf and it's hard to imagine that he needs to market his company's multitudinous services in a place this small. I get the feeling he enjoys giving back to the island as much as he enjoys demonstrating painful self-defence techniques on this writer after a few post-prizegiving beverages.

The golf done, I decide to spend my last night in a hammock strung up between two coconut trees on a deserted beach. There aren't many places where you can claim a spot as idyllic as this all for yourself – or so I thought. Once I begin tucking into my picnic tea, it quickly

becomes clear that I am not alone. Ghostly outlines right out of *District 9* advance with intent in the deepening dusk: hungry robber crabs. Dinner was quite literally taken on the run that evening.

I rise in time to catch a turtle laying eggs in the sand, a particular treat when you don't have to share it with anyone. But it's my final morning and there's a lot to cram in. I take a two-minute plunge into the spooky but unique waters of the Grotto, which I can best describe as a cavern that sounds like it has a whale living in it. I check out the small Malay area of Kampong, and the mosque whose prayer call was loud enough to confuse me underwater while snorkelling the fabulous, fish-infested coral just metres off Flying Fish Cove beach. On and off, it rains, but after the storm comes a vast, beautiful rainbow stretched right across the bay into which stream so many 'refo' boats every week.

Nothing could better sum up the contradictions of Christmas Island. When you spend time here, it is the memories of a natural wonderland that you will take home, whether it be rainbows, prehistoric crabs, parrot fish or more unspoilt jungle than you know what to do with. Like the famous Detention Centre itself, the less savoury side is only there if you go looking for it. Or if you hit your golf ball into said jungle. ●

For more information on playing in the 2014 Christmas Island Open, contact the Christmas Island Tourism Association on (08) 9164 8382, or email [cita@christmas.net.au](mailto:cita@christmas.net.au)