



TRAVEL

Enjoying the Spoils Swell Lodge on Australia's Christmas Island

By YOLO Traveller

It's been a year of travel plans re-imagined. Of re-discovering the wonders of our own state, and supporting our WA tourism industry. Of embracing "little trips" and local journeys, from Rottnest to the Great Southern to the Kimberley. And all the while being grateful for the isolation of our state and the fact that we can travel (safely) at all.

But if your itchy feet are longing to go further afield, to get your passport out of storage, to catch a plane and fly over the ocean, there is a destination that you can consider now, and it doesn't depend on any borders reopening – Christmas Island, in Australia's Indian Ocean Territories.

Christmas Island is a fascinating destination, with remarkable wildlife, stunning scenery and



balmy tropical waters. And with flights from Perth twice a week, it is remarkably easy to get to this "overseas" Australian destination, which, along with neighbouring Cocos Islands, is the furthest place you can travel from Australia, restriction fee, at this time. But the highlight of a visit to Christmas Island is undoubtedly a stay at the divine Swell Lodge, a luxurious and exclusive eco-lodge within the island's national park.

Christmas Island is famous for its charismatic red crabs, and the extraordinary annual red crab migration. Even Sir David Attenborough called the migration one of the great wonders of the natural world.

It had long been on the travel radar of the wildlife-loving team at YOLO Traveller. But it had never made it to the top of our travel list, in part due to the complete dearth of any appealing (ie. luxurious) accommodation options.

So it was a "you-had-me-at-hello" moment when we first learned of Swell Lodge, a stunningly beautiful, fully equipped, ultra-exclusive eco-chalet nestled on the water's edge, deep within Christmas Island's National Park.

Swell Lodge is the labour of love of two young Australians, Chris

and Jess Bray. Acclaimed travel photographers and worldwide adventurers, the pair guide photography tours around the world, from Greenland to the Galapagos, including the most stunning regions of Australia. On Christmas Island, they soon realised that the available standard of accommodation was no match for the beauty of the island. And the vision of Swell Lodge was born.

Swell Lodge has only two villas, so its exclusivity and privacy is one of its biggest appeals. There is no guest reception desk, no communal buildings, no restaurant. Instead, everything is bespoke for each guest – a private itinerary, private guides, and private meals courtesy of a private, professional chef. It is a sublime experience, each element professionally curated and designed by Chris and Jess, and is perfect for discerning adventure travellers who value such unique experiences.

The villas are described as eco-tents, but this is so much more than glamping. While the sail roof and two sides are made of canvas, inside there are hardwood floors, solid walls and stylish fittings. There is a kitchen with gleaming stone benchtops, a



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coffee machine, a pantry stocked with a wealth of complimentary snacks and a bar fridge full of included wines and soft drinks. The bathroom, with two walls of windowed canvas and two solid walls, is a masterfully executed fusion of style and function – the eco-friendly compostable toilet has a completely normal above-ground appearance, the wide glass-screened shower has a seamless supply of piping hot water, and there are eco-sensitive amenities.

At the front of the villa, beyond the supremely comfortable king bed with its crisp white linen and turquoise cushions, full-length glass doors retract to open onto the wide balcony. Perched on stilts, almost precariously, at the edge of a sheer limestone cliff, the view from here is truly hypnotic. Below the cliff, slabs of red rocks project into the sea, and the azure



waters crash and break over the stone with a soothing rhythmicity. Past the pounding waves, the ocean extends unbroken to the horizon. Frigate birds soar past at eye-level, hovering on the sea breeze, so close we barely need our zoom lenses. And on the forest floor around us, the red crabs mill, softly munching on the fallen leaves, their bright orange claws clickety-clacking as they slowly amble by.

We arrived just in time for sunset. There is a cheeseboard waiting for us, and a bottle of chilled sparkling wine. We settle in on the deck to enjoy the view and the nibbles as the sun descends in a technicolour blaze. Soon we are joined by our private chef, who prepares us a decadent three course dinner, before we retire for the night to the sounds of the crashing waves.

While the mesmerising views from Swell Lodge are hard to beat, Christmas Island has a trove of other treasures begging to be explored. The itineraries designed by Chris and Jess will take you around the island to the most beautiful highlights.

Four or seven days stays at Swell Lodge include a boat tour from Flying Fish Cove, travelling along the coastline with opportunities to swim with a school of giant trevally (and sometimes silky sharks and whale sharks), explore underwater caves and snorkel the pristine coral reefs.

All around Christmas Island are stunningly picturesque, crowd-free beaches. Some, like Merrial Beach, are narrow slivers of bright white sand nestled between rocky cliffs swathed in red crabs. Others, like Dolly Beach, are palm-fringed expanses perfect for picnics, where the breaking open of a fresh green coconut brings a procession of giant primeval robber crabs emerging from the forest to seek out their favourite delicacy. Or at a secret location, not far from the lodge, weather and erosion have created natural infinity pools that fill and fall with the tides.

Inland, there are more beautiful sights to be explored. In The Dales, within the National Park, a series of meandering streams and waterways are filled with blue crabs and purple crabs, while upstream, a picturesque waterfall cascades down the rockface – perfect for cooling off while the robber crabs look on from the surrounding trees. Near Lily Beach, a raised boardwalk traverses the rocky cliff edge, providing close-up views of nesting frigate birds and brown boobies, who are curious and unafraid of humans.

At The Blowholes Walk, the jagged shoreline has been sculpted into tunnels and chimneys, with openings that erupt in magnificent sprays of salt and seawater and haunting melodies.

At The Grotto, a short walk brings you to a stunning cave, filled with crisp, clear, turquoise water

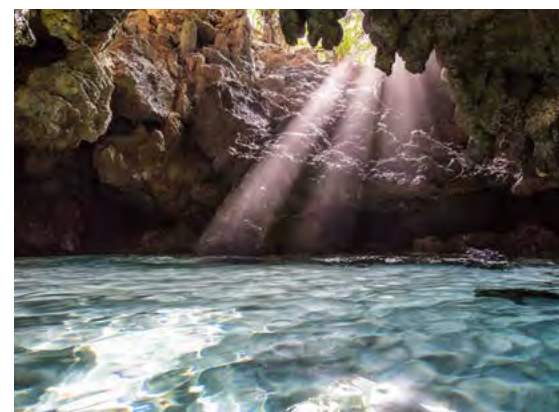
through a passage from the ocean, complete with tiny fish below and dancing sunbeams above.

And all around there are verdant forests with walking paths and hilltop views out over the vast Indian Ocean.

When staying at Swell Lodge, excursions such as these are undertaken as private tours accompanied by knowledgeable and enthusiastic guides, with picnic lunches prepared by your private chef and taken in the most scenic of locales.

It is a very special way to enjoy this very special destination, and one which the team at YOLO Traveller can highly recommend.

To book visit swelllodge.com and mention you heard about the lodge from YOLO Traveller to receive a complimentary bottle of artisan gin (or other libation of your choice). Offer is for bookings made prior to 30 June 2021.



ADVENTURES FOR THE DISCERNING TRAVELLER

Main above: Swell Lodge, Christmas Island and the famous Red Crabs
 Top: Little Nipper Crab
 Middle: Room with a view
 Bottom: The Grotto
 Far left: Robber Crab