

CHRISTMAS ISLAND

// *Manu, banking.*

The Fragile Present

Carine Camboulives and Manu Bouvet are deep on a mission of natural discovery and right now there is a sense of urgency. Their latest anchorage, an island nation sprinkled out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean called Kiribati, is slowly disappearing under water due to global warming. It's on Christmas Island, and the island of Kiribati, that the family sets foot.

WORDS MANU BOUVET // PHOTOS PIERRE BOURAS

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“ There are developing countries and there are endangered species. The republic of Kiribati is an endangered country” This is how Julien Blanc- Gras’ book - Paradise (before clearance), begins. Lost in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, these nation-islands will be engulfed by the rise of water level due to global warming. It so happens that one of them, Christmas Island (so called because it was discovered on Christmas day) is now a weekly direct flight from Hawaii. This has liberated Kiribati from its isolation, but it is the climatic threat that has brought this whole nation out of its anonymity.

The strange thing with global warming is that even though the responsibility of humans is now proven by the international scientific community (the IPCC - Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is upfront about it) there are still some people in denial. The French ex-Secretary of Education Claude Allegre, also known as a “serial blunderer” is at the head of this party. As a surfer, hence fascinated by waves, I was especially amazed and astonished when, asked about his denial of global warming, he said: “ why worry about a rise in water level of 1 meter on a global scale, when waves 10 meters high unfold every year...” Fabulous, isn’t it ? And to say he was responsible for the country’s education... A rise in sea level of 1 meter on a global scale would lead to the exodus of over one million people. Tarawa, the capital of Kiribati is eerily prescient as it’s inhabitants’ exodus already started.

The sea level is rising so fast that residents are constantly building walls to protect their homes from the ocean. In 2007 the president of Kiribati, Anote Tong, launched a call for help that turned fiction into reality. He asked the international community to find a host country in view of the exodus of his fellow citizens, thus making them the first climatic refugees in history. In an effort to make himself heard, he asked rich countries to face their responsibilities, reminding them that, backed up by scientific proof, the rise of sea level is due to greenhouse gas emissions. A form of pollution unknown to his country, as it has forever been devoid of any industry.

Our host Timei eagerly waits for us as we exit the plane. He left Tarawa six years ago to escape an uncertain future and living conditions made worse by the relentless rise of sea level and overpopulation. Incidentally, he waited for us on the same flight one week ago, in vain. “I mixed up the dates” he says laughing, showing a bright white smile that contrasts with his dark Polynesian skin.

“Our family is so impatient to show you our little piece of heaven. Christmas Island is a true gift of the gods” he says mischievously, as we pile up in his rundown minivan. “ I want to show you why I love this island so much, it’s the largest atoll in the world...and I believe I know where to find what you are looking for” he concludes, enigmatic, as we drive along the only asphalt road on the island. It runs through a forest of coconut trees, surrounded by water. On one side the deep, dark blue of the Pacific ocean, and on the other, a pale and blinding blue, almost white, characteristic of a sandy lagoon.

Between the two is a narrow stretch of coral. Scattered along are pile dwellings built almost entirely out of coconut trees. The trunks form the structure and foundation, and dried and weaved palm leaves make the roof; all in perfect harmony. Under the shade, women are cooking over wood fires, men are logging bunches of coconuts and kids interrupt their games to call out to us: “Imatang, Imatang” (the white men, the white men). Our arrival seems to be quite an event. We are indeed on an island lost in the middle of the Pacific ocean. And that’s exactly what we were hoping to find.

To better understand the level of isolation in which these islands live, an anecdote that Sita, a friend of Timei’s, tells us, says more than any statistics ever could: “ When I left Kiribati for the first time, I went to Honolulu. Friends of mine had forewarned me about the culture shock I was in for. They had advised me not to shout out in surprise at every “ wonder” of the modern world.

“ *The swell has been pumping for days. I am surfed out like I haven’t been in a long time* ”



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// Biggest tube shot we've
featured in this mag.

*“ We knew roughly where the ship was,
but in the vast wilderness I couldn't help
but think of all of the stories of small planes
going down never to be heard of again... ”*



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“*The rise of sea level is due to greenhouse gas emissions. A form of pollution unknown to this country, as it is devoid of any industry*”

The employee of the hotel I would be staying at accompanied me to my room. Once in the elevator, noticing the small space, I couldn't help but ask with surprise "but where is the bed?"

We were also pleasantly surprised upon discovering our 100% green bungalow. Outside, the sun shines on the ground covered in dead coral pieces which makes it almost unbearable to look at. A plantation of young coconut trees separates our bungalow from the sandy beach. It's as if it has been sprinkled with flour. The largest atoll in the world stretches in front of us as far as the eye can see and the absence of relief almost makes it disappear into the horizon. It creates a huge lagoon, 1 meter deep, with sands bars and small islands here and there. On the other side of the island, reef cuts, passes and islands all create amazing surf potential. Nature's wonder, a SUP paradise!

The next morning boards are already out the bags for a family excursion into the lagoon. Yesterday was new moon so the low tide is big this morning. There is little water in the lagoon, just enough for our paddles, sometimes scraping the sandy bottom. These are ideal conditions for the kids Lou, 8 and Shadé, 2. She is getting all excited on the nose of my board looking at this huge natural swimming pool. She can jump off the board at any moment at no risk.



A little further out into the lagoon we pass by an outrigger sailing canoe. We stop by next to it as its captain was getting ready to set up his rig. We can sense a mutual curiosity. He introduce himself as Yobu, he is proud of his Te wa (the local name of the boat) that he built himself. "I get my boat out pretty much every morning to get the Papio that are all over the lagoon. They make Christmas Island famous to fishermen all over the world" he says. "We came to surf some waves on those boards" replies Carine while showing her SUP, "and to discover Christmas Island and its people. This lagoon is amazing, looks like a great place to fish". "Yes...but the fishing used to be better. I used to fish on the other side, in the open ocean. I could get up to 20 tuna within a 2 mile stretch along the reef, in front of the village. Since a fishing permit has been issued to a Spanish fleet 6 years ago, they're all gone. I don't even try anymore. You'll see; the mother ship is anchored year round, behind the break where you can surf. It makes me sad to see that ship there because it makes our lives harder here on the island. Food is hard to get you know, the ocean is the main provider and on top of that this fleet is killing everything with its huge nets".

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A GLIMPSE OF EDEN

Since our arrival Timei has been telling us about the camping trip he’s planned for us on the other side of the island. We’re off for one magical week, on an arm of sand, under the shade of a coconut plantation. On one side the sand stretches out about 50 meters away from the coast to create an idyllic channel for smooth paddling. On the other side, the reef ends right in front of our camp, letting a right-hander unfold in the lagoon. A few hundred meters further down the beach, another pass offers a long right and a shorter but hollower left. As if it wasn’t already perfect, half a mile offshore, Cook Island is a true bird sanctuary. They come here from as far as Alaska to reproduce. A long left-hander peels in the middle of the bay. At sunset, thousands of silhouettes flit around in the incandescent red light of the sky. Needless to say that there is no one around, for miles.

Timei came with the whole family: wife, daughters, cousins, to share this 5 star camping trip. It took two boat trips to get everything here. Lou and Shadé are learning to weave mats out of coconut leaves. The biggest ones are used as tablecloths, for an afternoon nap or as a mat at the entrance of our tents. Smaller models are used as plates. The young kids climb up to fetch some coconuts. Nothing beats this delicious water to quench everyone’s thirst. We drink huge amounts of it. We become aware of the important role the coconut tree plays on this island. It really is the tree of life.

In the water, the Papio (Trevally) are responsible for Christmas Island’s reputation amongst fishermen, and our delight at every meal, as much as the giant lobsters we catch everyday after crossing paths with a school of dolphins. These are images of an earthly heaven in which I believe and that I witness when nature is protected, splendid and generous. When you are in contact with nature everyday, as you are here, and it nourishes your body and your soul, it entertains you, warms you, dazzles you, I know you are one with it.

I understand how important it is not to separate mankind from nature, otherwise he will keep destroying it and himself along the way.

I come back to the campsite after a nice session in the pass with Carine. The swell has been pumping for days, yesterday we had solid 6 footers all day. Today was a bit smaller but perfect. I am surfed out like I haven’t been in a long time. I see Timei barely waking up from his nap, Shadé at his side, still half asleep, on the beautiful woven mat. In the background Carine and Lou are joking around with Timei’s daughters. He notices my delight and says: “ You understand why Christmas Island is a true gift?” I smile back in answer. ^{SUP}

// Extra curricular activity.

