

{KIRIBATI}

// Manu tearing into the bone-crunching Kiribati reefs.

NO GIFTS FOR CHRISTMAS ISLAND

Story MANU BOUVET // Photos PIERRE BOURAS

Carine Camboulives, Manu Bouvet and their young family pursue their quest for new spots, to better live their passion for nature and quench their thirst for discovery.

This time there is a sense of urgency. Kiribati, a nation lost in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, is slowly disappearing under the water due to global warming. It is on Christmas Island, one of the islands of this nation, where the family sets foot – and sail.



{KIRIBATI}

PARADISE BECOMING LOST

‘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 Liquidation)’, begins. Lost in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, these nation-islands are bound to be engulfed by the rise of water level due to global warming. It so happens that one of them, Christmas Island (named so because it was discovered on Christmas day and nothing to do with Santa Claus) now enjoys a weekly, direct flight from Hawai’i. This has liberated Kiribati (its local name) from its isolation, but it is the climatic threat that has brought this whole nation out of its anonymity.

HOTTING-UP

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, is at the head of this party in Europe. As a surfer, hence fascinated by waves, I was especially amazed/astonished when, asked about his denial of global warming, he said: “why worry about a rise in water level of one metre on a global scale, when waves 10 metres 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 metre on a global scale would lead to the exodus of over one million people. Tarawa, the capital of Kiribati is actually already living in the future as its inhabitant’s flight has already started. The sea level’s rising so fast that residents are building walls to protect their homes from the ocean. They cannot go very far in any case as there’s no way to live further than 1km away from the sea here. 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 forced migration of his fellow citizens, thus making them the first climatic refugees in history. In an effort to make himself heard, he ask 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, which is devoid of any industry.

GIFT FROM THE GODS

Our host Timei eagerly waits for us as we exit the plane. He left Tarawa 6 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 from 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, which is 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 of 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.



“THE SEA LEVEL IS RISING SO FAST THAT RESIDENTS ARE BUILDING WALLS TO PROTECT THEIR HOMES FROM THE OCEAN”

{KIRIBATI}

// A Drone's-eye view of Cook Island.



Between the two, a narrow stretch of coral. Scattered along are pile dwellings almost entirely built from coconut trees. The trunks for the structure and foundation and dried and weaved palm leaves for 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, the anecdote that Sita (a friend of Timei's) will tell us, says more than any numbers 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 up for. They had advised me not to shout out in surprise at every 'Wonder' of the modern world. 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?'"

ALL ABOARD

We are also pleasantly surprised upon discovering our 100% green bungalow. Outside, the sun shines on the coral soup (ground covered in dead coral pieces) and 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's 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 draws a huge lagoon, in water a metre deep, blown by 20 knots of trade winds. Nature's wonder, a freeride paradise!

The next day the wind's blowing strong. The WindSUP is going non-stop, with all the neighboring children on board. Indeed they didn't hesitate much before accepting our invitation to go for a ride. I'm speeding along with one of the kids on the nose of the board. As soon as we're planing, he literally goes insane. He yells, his eyes wide open. I'm cracking up and so excited to be sharing that sensation with him. After seeing one of them, more daring, stand up, all of them give it a go. I realise, after an inevitable fall, that some of them cannot swim.

// Paradise found - but nearly lost.



{KIRIBATI}



Local kids discovering the joy of windsurfing.

Mouth open, arm reaching out, like a statue of liberty, they slowly go down until I catch them. Lucky the water is shallow - and clear.

There is a general hysteria on the beach. The following days the wind is never-failing, just as the children who are waiting for their daily ride. Lou is so proud to show off how she can pull her gear up and take off on her own. I'm also really proud and happy for her, but I would be even more happy if she could come back on her own. She still can't quite manage the ride back so I have to walk in the lagoon with water up to my waist for a kilometre. "I don't like it on the other tack - and it doesn't work anyway!" she proclaims to justify her lack of perseverance. "And if I put my head under water, the strand of hair that I dyed pink will lose its color!" It's the ultimate argument. We cannot reasonably take that risk, of course, so I pull back the gear with Lou on it. While she's doing her hair...

SCHOOL'S, OUT - FOR, EVER

Today we've decided to visit the local school where we'll be showing a slide show of our different trips and also where we've decided to enroll Lou for a few days. I'm not really a stickler for discipline, but honestly it's real chaos here. The kids are so out of control we can barely make it to the Principal's office. Shadé is close to being stamped on and Lou to being scalped. (Serves her right for having pink hair.) All this in a joyful atmosphere!

Not only is there an Imatang family in the school, but all the kids that live close by our place were sailing with us yesterday. There's serious chatting going on. I imagine the newbie riders are recounting their aquatic prowess. There seem to be a few sceptics among the crowd and in a youngsters language it must sound like:

"Ya right! He thinks he's Kelly Slater or something, now that he knows the Imatang. "Shut up, you just don't get it" seems to answer the defendant

"You better hook us up next time, you loser or I'll kick your ass!"

The Principal arrives just in time and sets things straight immediately. She takes us to a classroom where the white lagoon stretches endlessly behind the windows. 60 or so kids are getting ready to rehearse the songs for the independence celebration that will take place five months from now. It must be a pretty serious affair for them to start so early. Indeed, when the singing begins, it is a choral perfectly set like clockwork with impeccable style. The kids are placed in triangles, three-by-three, holding a wooden stick in each hand. They bang them together at an incredible speed playing a wild rhythm. Lou is rapidly included in one of the groups, but is struggling to keep up with the rhythm. The performance of lice jumping (in rhythm?) from one head to another is also quite astonishing. Lou is no longer very motivated about going to school. Lice aren't really a good fit for her pink hair ...

Once the rehearsal's over, the teacher invites us to pull out our computer and take the children on a world tour of our travels: Mozambique, Peru, France, West Papua - and more - illuminate the beaming faces on which you find as many varied features as in those of South Americans, Polynesians, Micronesians and many Asians.



Windsurfing - the best education ever!



A VISION 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. Here we go 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 metres away from the coast to create an idyllic channel for freeriding. On the other side, the reef ends right in front of our camp, letting a right-hander unfold in the lagoon, ideally oriented for windsurfing. A few hundred metres further down the beach, another pass - this time protected from the wind - offers a beautiful right, perfect for SUPing. 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.

Timei came with the whole family: wife, daughters, cousins, to share this five-star camping experience. 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 for 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 among 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. You know you are at 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 camp site with my gear on the head after a nice session in the pass. The wind was exceptionally sideshore and the sets were close to mast-high. 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 gift of the Gods?" I smile back in answer. He laughs and concludes with: "Here, everyday is Christmas Day". **MB**

"CHRISTMAS ISLAND IS A TRUE GIFT FROM THE GODS"

