

# The ultimate Christmas wish

A globe-trotting French family discover the give and take to life at the whim of the oceans in one of the world's most isolated and idyllic island chains

Photography by Pierre Bouras





“THERE ARE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES AND THERE ARE endangered species. The Republic of Kiribati is an endangered country.” So begins Julien Blanc-Gras’ book, ‘Paradis (Avant Liquidation)’.

Way out in the middle of the Pacific, just inside the International Date Line, lies Kiribati, a nation of 32 atolls and a single island. Water-lovers Carine Camboulives and Manu Bouvet brought their young family here in February 2014 for a taste of South Pacific tranquility and adventure.

They found, as the book’s title says, a paradise painted in every shade of blue, from the near-black of the surrounding ocean to the pale, blinding, almost white of the sandy-bottomed lagoons. But the beauty and serenity was made poignant by the ever-present evidence of its fragility.

One of the islands, Kiritimati, or Christmas Island (so named because it was discovered on Christmas Day), now has a weekly direct flight from Hawaii. This has helped lift the nation out of its isolation, but it is the threat posed by rising sea levels that has put the nation more firmly on the map.

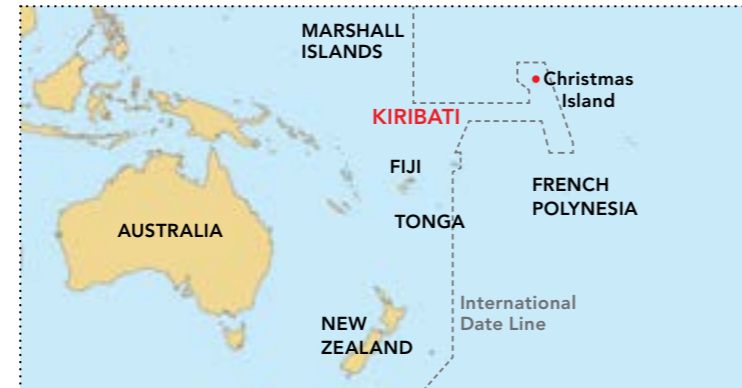
In Tarawa, the capital of Kiribati, the sea level is rising so fast that residents are constantly building walls to protect their homes. Retreat is not an option as nowhere here is further than one kilometre from the ocean. In 2007, the president of Kiribati, Anote Tong, asked the international community to find a host country for his 100,000 citizens, perhaps soon to be among the first climate refugees in history. In 2014, with no offers, he took action, buying 20 acres of land in Fiji as a possible future bolt-hole.

With few sources of income, the government sold the fishing rights to their waters five years ago, first to the Koreans, and then to the Spanish. Now

a ‘mother ship’ is moored offshore beyond the surf and locals complain that where they used to get 20 tuna just by cruising two or three kilometres of reef in front of their house, now they can’t find a single one.

Though locals are disturbed by their uncertain prospects, they take solace in simple, timeless joys: crossing their atoll perhaps to another spell-binding stretch of shoreline to harvest fresh coconuts, or sharing *papio* (trevally) freshly-caught from hand-built *te wa* sailboats with loved ones. Camboulives and Bouvet were touched by the plight of the country but just as touched by these moments and the fun they found among its people.

Life is good, lived in the moment, with almost everything provided by bounteous nature. The only present the Christmas Islanders want is a future.



#### BIRD'S EYE VIEW

The atolls show their precarious hold, jutting barely above the waves. Right: Cook Island is a sanctuary where thousands of birds from as far away as Alaska flit, swoop and hover ceaselessly.







**BANKING ON HELP**  
Locals on Tarawa have had to scar their sea-view with hopeful barriers to slow the ocean's advance.



**WAVE RIDERS**  
Above: Sponsored athletes meet fellow water-lovers. Left: The open invitation presented by warm sun and sea is hard to resist and soon gets everyone smiling.







**PRACTICALITIES**  
**When to go**

Temperatures stay warm year-round but there is a wet season which falls from December to May, perhaps a little earlier in the north and a little later in the south.

**How to get there**

Air Pacific connects Kiribati with Hawaii and Fiji, and Fiji Airways also offers flights to their home base of Nadi. Nauru Airlines run a service to and from Brisbane in Australia, with stops in Nauru and the Solomons.

**Contacts**

For general info on the country see [www.kiribatitourism.gov.ki](http://www.kiribatitourism.gov.ki)

**SLUNG TO SLEEP**  
 Sinking into siesta on another perfect afternoon as others use the waves as more than simply a soundtrack.

**UNCERTAIN SHORE**  
 Beachfront wandering shows nothing obviously amiss and plenty to envy in life here.



**FRIENDLY COMPETITION**  
 Yobu in his handmade te wa outrigger goes up against sponsored free rider Carine Camboulives.

