



## Trip of a Lifetime CHRISTMAS ISLAND

By Joe Rotter

I'm struggling to contain a dreamy smile while relaxing in an economy-class seat on a Hawaiian Airlines flight heading home to Seattle. I'm wedged tightly between two sunburned tourists with sharp elbows, and I wonder if the people around me are wondering what about the irrepressible grin on my face. He should be miserable, they're probably thinking; he probably just polished off a double Scotch.

That part about the Scotch is true, but my perma-smile derives from the incredible memories made during my trip of a lifetime to Christmas Island. To say it's a special place would be a substantial understatement. Christmas Island abounds in fly-friendly fish species, gleaming flats, fertile reefs, steamy lagoons, friendly people, and extraordinary fly fishing. Its remote location helps preserve the integrity of the fishery, and getting there requires commitment. Once there, however, anglers immediately recognize what makes this place so special.

There is no bad time to fish Christmas Island—aka Kiritimati—because this

150-square-mile atoll sits just 140 miles north of the equator, meaning the weather is sunny year-round. Weather forecasts are almost pointless in this solar paradise where the high sun lights up the flats in a way possible only at these latitudes. That was one of the first things that impressed me here. The direct light illuminating the flats is practically supernatural, like some power that simply doesn't exist anywhere else. Or maybe it does: I did fly out of soggy Se-



attle, so perhaps the solar bar has been set low for me—just above ground level. Either way, the deep water along the ledges looks artificially emerald, bedazzling in its brilliance. Postcard-pretty scenes surround you, everywhere you look.

The flats fishing is all done on foot, and you use either boats or custom fishing trucks to access various parts of the island, the northern half of which is essentially one giant lagoon (Saint Stanislas Bay). The flats are seemingly endless, and anglers on my trips have recorded their daily walks at about 6 miles per day as they slowly prowl the flats. It's a liberating sense of freedom to have more water, more opportunity, and more fish than any angler can possible handle. Long days and hardworking guides will fatigue even the most enthusiastic anglers, but it's a wonderful kind of exhaustion.

The two big dogs of the Christmas Island fishery are bonefish and giant trevally (GT). While these sterling game fish rightfully enjoy the spotlight, I've come to realize there are lots of wonderful lesser-known species that are awesome fly-rod targets:

bluefin trevally, golden trevally, triggerfish, queen fish, sweet lips, milk fish, and more. While bones and GTs are indeed special, I am convinced that without all these other species of fish, Christmas Island would just be the answer to some random trivia or quiz question. Combine the tropical beauty with a diverse population of aggressive fish and you have a bucket-list trip for sure.

Bonefish are the primary quarry, and Christmas Island is the best bonefish destination in the Pacific Ocean, earning accolades from famous anglers, writers, and celebrities who fish the same flats you are wading. It's worth every penny, yet the price tag for fishing this destination is surprisingly reasonable. Prowling the hard-bottom flats like a hunter stalking prey, you'll see bonefish in endless abundance. It's an incredible experience, and frequently the only sound is your own footsteps sloshing through the shallow water. No cars, no planes, no white noise, no cellphones, no distractions. A week of fishing at Christmas Island is a wonderful reset for your soul.

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pounds. Two- to 4-pound bonefish are everywhere; no wonder the world's finest anglers love this place. If you fish by truck, you might visit the exposed coastal side of the island near the shipwrecks, or you might venture into the backcountry, which is a beautiful labyrinth of flats and lagoons. I personally enjoy truck fishing

as much as the using the boats, because of the rugged beauty offered by the exposed coastline.

Getting to Christmas Island is easy, with no long drives and no bumpy or bouncy boat rides—just comfortable flights with island-style hospitality. An overnight in Honolulu is required on the front end, but most anglers fly straight

through on the return, so you can leave Christmas Island in the morning and be home that night.

I've enjoyed some pleasant surprises on Christmas Island, such as discovering firsthand that bluefin trevally might just be the most beautiful fish on earth; their electric blue coloration is more vibrant than you can imagine.



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They might also be the fastest, and I'm convinced you can't retrieve a fly too fast. Bluefin trevally are vicious and will crush a fast-moving fly with lightning speed. I've learned that triggerfish will tempt, taunt, and torment you, practically pleading with you to target them with a fly; sometimes they'll even take one. These exotic beauties are easy to see, so you can find and approach them without the aid of a guide, which makes the experience quite rewarding.

Another thing I've learned is that not all giant trevally are giants. The more modest-size specimens might just be the real prizes of a fly-fishing expedition to Christmas Island. They are aggressive, fun, fairly abundant, and exceptional fighters. They swarm and attack flies like a pack of starving wolves, an exciting spectacle. These fish offer plenty of action, and I spent a lot of time pursuing them.

On the other hand, massive mature giant trevally are

brutal, shameless thugs and flat-out scary when they push their prey up onto the shallow flats. If a school corrals a group of baitfish near you, the sound of the attack is nearly deafening. Such attacks are violent, unforgiving, and unforgettable. The raw speed and power of these marauding behemoths is something you will never forget. They attack and gobble down anything in their path.

Big giant trevally are no easy marks despite their rapacious appetites. Catching one requires extreme patience, stealth, and accurate casting. Chances at these fish don't happen every day, and when the opportunity does arise, the first thing you must do is settle your nerves for

the work ahead. The challenge is what makes them so alluring as fly-rod targets.

Unlike mature giant trevally, the aforementioned bluefin trevally are common. They behave differently from giant trevally, preferring smaller flies. They seem to have better vision than their brutish cousins and sometimes circle anglers as if curious what manner of creature has invaded their flats. Wading the flats of Christmas Island,



probably with bonefish on your mind, or maybe scanning the water for giant trevally, you're likely to be startled by the sudden appearance of bluefin or giant trevally. You simply have to cast at them. They will eat a bonefish fly, but it is much better to have a smaller baitfish pattern ready on a 9- or 10-weight rod.

Because of the chance for a massive giant trevally, a 12-weight rod is hardly overkill on these flats. Keep one at the ready with a big fly and stout tippet. The best tippet for bluefin trevally and smaller giant trevally is 40-pound fluorocarbon. I've experimented with much heavier tippet, and it seems to make these bluefins suspicious: the local guides tell me bluefin trevally have much better close vision than giant trevally, and I've seen these fish act leader-shy.

Of course, fly anglers visit Christmas Island for its spectacular flats fishery, but if you want a break, try blue-water fishing, primarily trolling with teasers to bring fish into fly-casting range. The action is fabulous, with a variety of available species: wahoo, tuna, bonita, giant trevally, sailfish, marlins, and more. Some of these fish make outstanding sashimi back at camp each night. Half a day of resting your feet and sipping beers with a fun group a little way offshore is a wonderful break. There are fish in the deep water that have grown old and don't want to be caught. You should meet these fish.

Each angler seems to enjoy different aspects of the Christmas Island experience. Many, like me, especially revel in stalking fish on foot on the extensive flats. Each step you make carries a potential consequence. It's like hunting deer, in the sense that a step too loud or too soon will spook your prey. Fishing the flats exposes a primal instinct that is buried within all of us. Knowing when to move slowly, move quickly, or simply wait for fish to expose themselves is the allure for me. My instincts are sometimes wrong and I'll blow fish off the flats, resulting in me cursing myself for a few minutes. But when it all comes together and I get the shot I have been waiting for, the adrenaline surges and unforgettable moments are forever etched into my soul.



**Where is Christmas Island?** About 3 hours south of Honolulu by jet plane.

**Do the guides speak English?** While the official language is English and the guides communicate fishing commands quite well, most of the locals speak Gilbertese, a Micronesian language unique to Christmas Island.

**What's the weather like?** It's the equator, so plan for mid-80s every day, year-round.

**What form of currency do they use?** The preferred currency is Australian dollars, but U.S. dollars are welcome, too.

**How do you get there?** Assuming you are coming from the United States, fly into Honolulu on a Monday for an overnight and then fly to Christmas Island on Tuesday. There is only one flight per week in and out of Christmas Island.

**What is the food like?** Most of the lodges offer an American-style breakfast of bacon and eggs, sausages, and toast, along with some cereals. For lunch, it's sandwiches and snacks, and fruit when available. Dinners are great, with fresh tuna, snapper, lobster, rice, and other local favorites.

**What does a trip cost?**

Lodge prices orbit around \$2,800 to \$3,000 per week, plus tips for the staff (\$300 to \$500), airfare, and typically a few add-on expenses for alcoholic beverages, laundry service, and/or any additional activities you might partake in.



I love stalking fish on Christmas Island. It's the perfect pedestrian fishery. The endless flats are firm, easy to walk, and harbor incredibly diverse opportunities. This isn't to say that simply covering water and walking a long way is the best strategy. To the contrary. Your guide will know when to move fast through dead water, slow down when the tides are right, and surge ahead when opportunity is spotted in the distance. The game constantly changes during tidal shifts, and being in the right spot at the right time is both critical and fascinating.

I'm convinced there isn't a richer saltwater flats experience than Christmas Island.