

By: Sachin 2008, Science Editor

Christmas Island

And its red crabs

You may have heard about Easter Island and its enigmatic huge stone heads. But there is also a Christmas Island. It belongs to Australia, but because of its remote location of the Australian mainland, many people in the motherland ignore it or simply do not know about its existence. Christmas Island is located in the Indian Ocean, northwest of Australia, but much closer to Indonesia (just 360 km (225 mi) off the Java Island). With a surface of 135 square km (54 square mi) and a width varying from 5 to 19 km (3 to 12 mi), the island is the top of a shut off volcano the size of the Everest Mountain. The island was baptized by the British captain William Mynors, who discovered it in 25th of December, 1643. But the land was not explored until the end of the 19th century, due to the surrounding coral reef and the rocky promenade, up to 30 m (100 ft) tall, forming a natural barrier at the sea level, like the wall of a medieval fortress. The climate of the island is influenced by the monsoon. The fauna is rich in bird species, and the waters around the island abound in fish, like tuna and trevally, appreciated by sport fishermen. The Christmas Island is famous for its red crab (*Gecarcoidea natalis*), a species of terrestrial crab endemic to it and to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the Indian Ocean. Up to 120 million red crabs live in Christmas Island, being the most abundant of the 14 terrestrial crab species on Christmas Island. The red crabs eat mostly fallen leaves and flowers, but even other animals, including other red crabs. During the breeding migration to the shores, the crabs cover the routes to the coast so densely that they can be seen from the air. Millions of crabs get crashed on the streets during this period. [img=2]The island would have been a natural paradise if the phosphate mine had not been opened in 1899. In 1958, after being the first British colony administered from Ceylon, then from Singapore, the Christmas Island was transferred to Australia. Today, the island is administered as an external territory, its 1,800 inhabitants obeying the laws of the state of Western Australia, but usually voting the representatives of other states, like Northern Territory, during the federal elections. The inhabitants of the Christmas Island have European, Chinese and Malay roots, the various settlements being dated during the colonization time with workers for the phosphate mines: Settlement (the Europeans' city), Poon Saan (the Chinese town) and Kampong (the Malay town). Even if the mine was the base of the economy of the island, it was closed in 1987, being re-opened three years later, as it was bought by its ex-workers. Today, the mine is exploited by 130 owner-miners. The Christmas Island Resort is a luxury casino functioning at less than 20 % of its capacity. It is the 14th casino in Australia, property of the Indonesian dynasty Robby Sumampow. The island is connected to Perth and Singapore by air. There are more cars than humans on Christmas Island, yet on the streets there are no semaphores, nor parking tickets and bottlenecks and accidents are rare. Delinquency is very low on the island.