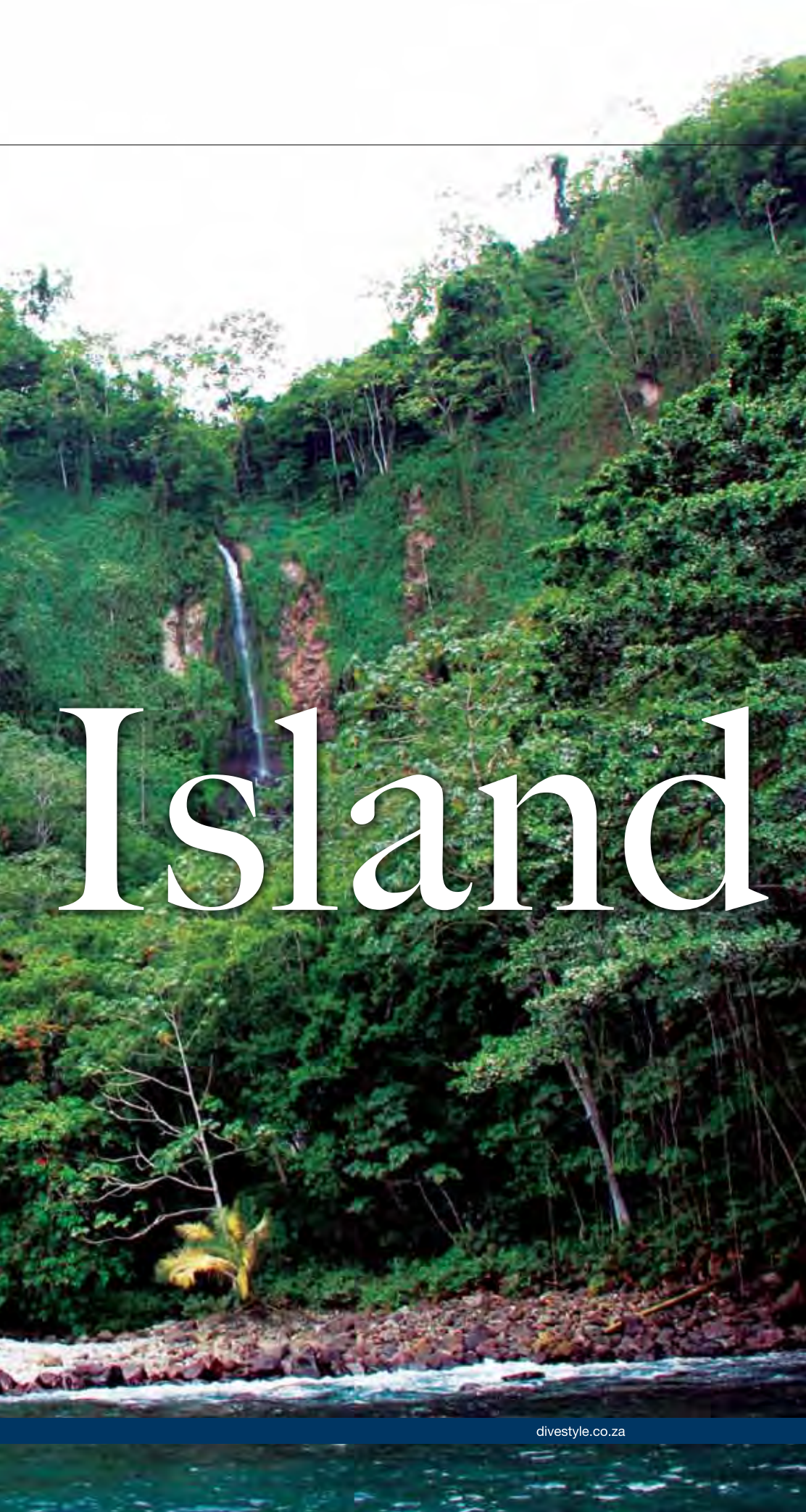


# COCOS

Like diving Jurassic Park



# Island

Wow, wow and more wow. After many years of travelling, people always ask me about the best place that I dived, but I never had an answer. Being fortunate enough to see the world, and after many amazing dive sites, I finally found my answer, and with no doubt it is Cocos Island just off Costa Rica. I knew after this trip that diving would never be the same again if I had to compare it with my 10 day trip there earlier this year.

## Cocos Island

If I have to try explain what Cocos Island looks like, I don't know where to start. Go and have a look at the movie Jurassic Park, as that was the inspiration for the original book - forested mountains and thousands of waterfalls are the norm. I did not see any dinosaurs but on every dive I saw the most fish and sharks that I ever seen.

Cocos Island Marine Park is located in the Eastern Tropical Pacific, 550km southwest of Cabo Blanco off the coast of Costa Rica. A rugged and incredibly beautiful island, this World Heritage Site is the crown jewel of Costa Rica's many National Parks. Cocos Island has an irregular coastline, which makes estimation of land area more a matter of opinion than a surveyor's science, but it is roughly 3km by 8km.

The island was formed during a volcanic upheaval about two-and-a-half million years ago and is composed of basaltic rock, labradorite and andecite lava flows. Its landmass is punctuated by four mountain peaks, the highest of which is Cerro Yglesias at 634m. The island has two large bays with safe anchorages and sandy beaches: Chatham is located on the northeast side and Wafer Bay is on the northwest. Just off Cocos are a series of smaller basaltic rocks and islets.

The terrestrial life at Cocos also exhibits a high number of endemic plants. There exist around seventy out of the two hundred and thirty five identified vascular plant species in the world, some twenty five species of moss, twenty seven species of liverwort and eighty five species of fungus. There are upwards of eighty seven bird species, including the famous Cocos Island cuckoo, finch





White tip reef sharks

and untold wealth hidden on Cocos Island continue to this day. The Treasure of León was said to be buried at Chatham Bay, but whether it was later unearthed and removed remains a matter of speculation.

The most valuable treasure said to be buried (or to have once been buried) on Cocos is the fabled Treasure of Lima. According to the legend, in 1821 a Captain Thompson was entrusted with ten years' accumulated wealth mined and pillaged from the South American continent. He was supposed to safeguard this property of the King of Spain by sailing well offshore for a period of time until invading armies advancing upon Lima could be defeated. He was then to return the treasure to its rightful owner. It was supposed to be a charter with an honest sailing ship, with the king's trusted guards in attendance 'just in case'. The temptation was evidently too great. Thompson and his men dispatched the guards and took off with the treasure that had been loaded on board. Naturally, Thompson chose Cocos as the spot to hide the vast treasure, reputed to be worth US \$300 million in today's currency. Thompson was captured at a later date but the treasure has, to this day, never been accounted for.

Piracy was a lucrative industry in the 1800s and none was more successful than Bonito "Bloody Sword". Bonito was a Portuguese sailor turned pirate. After a prosperous run in the Atlantic, and with the British Admiralty actively hunting him, Bonito moved on to the Pacific coast of the New World, plying his trade from Mexico to Chile. The Spanish outposts were simply too far from Europe and thus poorly defended. Tremendous quantities of gold were being mined and

and flycatcher. There are three hundred and sixty two species of insects, of which sixty four are endemic, and two native reptiles. Beneath the waterfalls and in the rivers are freshwater fish that mystify scientists by their very existence.

Because of its remote location and abundance of fresh water, Cocos has long been a favourite stop-over and re-supply station for pirates, whalers and sailors.

Early visitors left pigs on the island as a self-perpetuating source of fresh meat. To this day feral pigs and deer abound, much to the detriment of the island's indigenous ground-nesting birds. These animals, introduced by man, are also responsible for hastening soil erosion by their digging, undermining and degrading the native vegetation.

Cocos Island receives an

average of twenty five feet of rainfall per year, resulting in a covering of lush green foliage. Waterfalls abound, of which there are up to seventy of varying sizes during the peak of the rainy season.

The island also supports a verdant, high-altitude cloud forest. Rare for a small island, this is made possible by dramatic topography, abundant rainfall and surplus water stored in the porous reservoirs of the island itself. This extraordinary island ecosystem is unique to Cocos alone, of all the islands of the Eastern Tropical Pacific (Clipperton, the Revillagigedos, the Galapagos Islands, and Malpelo). Due to the heavy rainfall, the island is also prone to frequent landslides, which helps to account for its irregular geography.

The history of Cocos Island is replete with true

tales of pirates and explorers. The evidence is everywhere. It can be found in the archives of Spain and England as well as on Cocos itself. For four centuries, adventurers and sailors have left their mark carved in the numerous stones and boulders along the beach of Chatham Bay.

Portuguese Captain Juan Cabezas is thought to have been the first to have made a written record of the island in 1526, but whether it was 'known' prior to that or if Cabezas could claim to be the first to discover it is still an open question.

In 1685, buccaneers, led by Captain Edward Davis, ransacked the city of León in Nicaragua. They chose Cocos Island as the site to hide their treasure, thus beginning a tradition that continued for centuries. The island's reputation and many enduring legends of ill-gotten



Hammerhead shark



stolen from Mexico by the Spaniards and Bonito and his men successfully took it from them. They had vast amounts of gold and jewels and also the problem that was perpetual to pirates – where to store their loot so that it would be safe from... pirates.

In 1865, however, the answer again was Cocos, which Bonito found perfectly suited as a base for operations. Over the years many treasure-hunters have mounted expeditions to Cocos. A man named August Gissler was granted half-ownership of the island and he spent 19 years and tens of thousands of dollars searching unsuccessfully for the elusive treasures of Cocos.

These factual pirate stories, demonstrating the island's historic role as a covert depository, served as the inspiration for the timeless Robert Louis Stevenson book *Treasure Island*. Here is a case of Cocos lore actually providing the basis for a fictional story and now that fictional story continues to propagate the mystique of the island's enigmatic history. To this day Cocos Island continues to fascinate and inspire mystery.

Many partnerships

have been formed, and these treasure companies have descended upon Cocos using the most modern of technologies available, enduring hardships and expending countless man-hours in search of the 'stuff of legends'. All to no avail! Quite possibly, more money has been spent searching for treasure on Cocos than could realistically be buried there. The only treasure that you will find today on Cocos are its lonely scenic beauty and unparalleled sea life.

and everything that the Sea Hunter Group offers you on this trip is fantastic.

The trip started with two flights – one to Europe and

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## Beneath the waterfalls and in the rivers are freshwater fish that mystify scientists by their very existence

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Cocos Island was always a dream of mine, but I never had the opportunity to dive there. The amount of travelling to get there was always a nightmare, but every hour that you spend to get there and every rand that you pay is worth it. This is the best destination that you will ever dive if you like the big things,

then another to Costa Rica. The other option is to fly to the States and then down. These are long flights, but again, it is worth every mile that you fly. In Costa Rica you land at San Jose airport where the Sea Hunter Group organised my transfers and one night accommodation in a luxury hotel. One thing that

I immediately picked up on was how friendly the people of Costa Rica were. Everyone greets you and they are always willing to help. When I got to the hotel I got a letter that said, "Welcome to the beginning of your Cocos Dive Adventure. The vessel is ready and waiting and the sharks, mantas and dolphins are lined up. We've even put in an order for a whale shark or whale, and all that is missing is you!" When I read this I got goose bumps and knew that this would be the trip of a lifetime. After a good rest and catching up with the jetlag, the Sea Hunter Group picked me up and took us to the harbour in Pota Renas where we embarked on the luxury Argo liveboard.

The crossing to Cocos Island is about 32 hours, and as you know, that is a long time on a boat. But when I



got on the boat and saw the Argo, it was more than what I had expected – a liveaboard that was more luxurious and had more features than my own house! I even had my own television with a variety of DVDs to make the crossing even shorter, and again, a crew that was willing to do everything for you.

The Argo is a rare combination of workshop and luxury yacht. She was designed from the keel up in 2008 to pamper up to 16 discriminating passengers in seven spacious, well-appointed staterooms. She is a 40m vessel with a full global reach.

Fourteen well-seasoned crew look after the ship, the projects and the guest's every need. Argo was conceived of to serve as the ultimate platform for a deep diving submersible as well as for remote operating vehicle (R.O.V.)

deployment. She offers heavy lift capabilities, stability and ample deck space for any chore imaginable. Extended, multi-task cruises are its forte.

A comfortable and stylish lounge, dining area and sun deck are the social areas. The ambience is completed with original, undersea themed artwork throughout. The well-equipped galley enables the

ship's chefs to prepare fresh, international level, four-star cuisine for meal times.

On board accessories consist of all standard diving gear including scuba, nitrox and rebreather facilities. Three powerful, 24-foot skiffs serve as tender-boats, which perform submersible tracking duties, shepherding of divers to remote sites, ship-to-shore

transfers and any other conceivable recreational or support activities.

The Argo is equipped with Nitrox Gas Blending Systems, Partial Pressure – as well as Membrane Compressor, Nitrox Dive Computers, and other technical diving equipment and supplies to support these operations.

Throughout Argo's hallways, lounges and cabins, you will find hand painted murals by artist Carlos Hiller. Each cabin has a different themed room masterfully drawn directly onto the wall by Carlos.

Believe it or not, my room was about 4m x 4m with my own en suite bathroom. It was not like the bathrooms that you become accustomed to on other liveaboards – this was a big bathroom where you could even do some exercises if you wanted to. This was the best liveaboard that I have ever experienced and I don't think that I will see this type of luxury liveaboard again.

After we got to the island, a long briefing from Rodrigo (Yoyo) Roesch (the cruise director and one of the dive masters) was given to us. The briefing was in detail and went into how the diving was going to work for the next couple of days and the 27 dives that were lined up. I realised how professional this operation was when they told us that safety is their first priority and that the nearest hyperbaric facility in San Jose was a day and a half sailing away, thus they have to maintain a safe diving practice within the recreational diving limits. Decompression dives are thus not permitted and a maximum depth of 40m is set. To increase safety, it was compulsory for nitrox dives and nitrox was included with no extra costs. They even gave all the guests a Safety



White spotted eagle ray



Sargeant fish



Fisherman's bridge



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## Cocos Island

Kit that included an extra-large orange dive sausage, a powerful storm whistle, a special safety light and a Personal EPIRB together with a high-tech Radio Direction Finder from Sea Marshall which can help locate a diver more than five miles away. These electronic units are fixed to the individual divers BCD and an on-board homing receiver guides the vessel towards the missing diver. These units also transmit the international marine distress signal that is monitored by all ships and coastguard vessels.

Many of the crew onboard were Medic First Aid Instructors or trained for basic first aid and as DAN O2 providers. The crew maintains peak performance skills for emergencies like Man Overboard, Lost Diver Searches, Fire at Sea and more.

The dives were scheduled as two dives in the morning, one in the afternoon and a night dive after 6pm, all at different locations. For these dives we were given a short briefing about each dive site from the dive master who led our dive. We were lucky to get Warren Fernández, one of the most experienced divemasters at Cocos.

When we got outside for the first dive all our diving kit was already loaded on the dive skiffs for us. Skiffs are heavy-duty, fibreglass dive cruisers which provide the stability and safety that is essential at Cocos Island. There were six divers plus Warren and we had all the room we needed plus a solid and stable ladder to make the boarding easier. All

your dive gear stays on the skiffs for the duration of the trip (they even do the gas filling on the skiffs – how easy do you want it?) The skiff driver remains on the skiff and follows the group throughout the entire dive with all the safety equipment and extra dive gear.

After a short ride it was time for the check-out dive. This was the most boring dive of the trip and we only saw about 100 white-tip reef sharks, 50 marble rays and some hammerheads. There were also thousands of fish all over the reef in 26°C clear water. I could not believe it – this was the best check-out dive I had ever done!

The place blew my mind after only the first dive and I could not believe what I had seen. I could not wait to see what else was in store for us.



Coco's



Hammerhead sharks

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# Cocos Island

## Travelling tips

The Undersea Hunter Group can arrange everything for you.

**Clothing** – We recommend casual and cool cotton attire while on board. Nights can be chilly and/or drizzly. A sweater, light jacket or windbreaker should be sufficient on a cool evening.

**Travel documents and VISAs** – Passengers must have a valid passport for entry to Costa Rica, which must be valid for at least six months. South African citizens do not need a VISA for Costa Rica.

**Baggage** – Pack lightly since you will be dressing for warm tropical weather. At customs there are no limitations on the personal equipment such as diving, camera and video equipment as well as computers that are for personal use.

**Currency** – Hotels and banks will accept and exchange US Dollars for Costa Rican Colones. US dollars, traveller's cheques, VISA and MasterCard are accepted on the vessel (American Express is temporarily not accepted). We do not accept personal checks onboard.

**National park fee** – There is a National Park fee of \$35 per person, per day of diving. This must be included with your final payment. This fee is subject to change.

**Diving** – You have to be at least an advanced diver with a dive computer. Nitrox fills are free for nitrox certified divers.

**Water temperature** – You will be diving in water about 78-83F (26-29°C), although it can be a few degrees lower under the occasional thermocline.

**Dive gear suggestions** – 3-5mm wetsuit, mask, fins, snorkel, regulator with visible pressure gauge, a mandatory dive computer, buoyancy compensator, depth gauge, dive gloves, weight belt (without weights) and dive watch. It is recommended that you mark each piece of gear with waterproof paint or tape. It is suggested that you put all or most of the above items in a carry-on bag. There is ample storage space for your diving equipment, including your own personal locker. They provide you with 12-litre tanks and weights and have a limited supply of 15-litre steel tanks. If you would like to rent one, make sure to reserve it well ahead of time. Please note, the tanks are standard yoke (INT), not DIN. Full ScubaPro dive gear is also available to rent. It is important to let them know prior to the trip if you need to rent gear.

**Certification cards** – All divers must bring proof of certification by a national certifying agency and all divers must be certified prior to the trip. The dive master will request to see your certification before you are allowed to dive. Make sure to bring all of your diver certifications (nitrox, rebreather and so on).

**Dive insurance and other insurance** – All passengers must have valid Divers Alert Network or DiveAssure (or similar) insurance designed to evacuate divers in the event of an accident.

**Health** – No inoculations are required to travel to Costa Rica.

Cocos Island is the only point above sea level of the Cocos Ridge, which runs from Costa Rica almost to the Galápagos. This is a line of otherwise submerged volcanoes formed over the margin of the Cocos and Pacific Tectonic Plates, which is being actively subducted under the Caribbean plate. The island rises thousands of metres from the ocean floor in the middle of nowhere, and the strong currents push the colder, deep waters against the island, bringing plankton, which in turn brings the big animals. Cocos Island was declared a Costa Rican National Park from 1978 and

you can see why the National Park works – it is guarded 24 hours a day.

The rich coral reef, volcanic tunnels, caves, massifs and deeper waters surrounding Cocos Island are home to more than 30 species of coral, 60 species of crustaceans and 600 species of mollusks as well as over 300 species of fish. These include large populations of yellow-fin tuna, giant mantas, sailfish and sharks, such as the white-tip reef shark, Galápagos sharks, black-tip reef sharks, silver-tip sharks and silky sharks. The largest of all species of fish is also present; the whale shark. Other large marine animals



White-tip reef sharks





## We saw hundreds of hammerheads and rays, thousands of white-tip reef sharks and millions of reef fish

include humpback whales, pilot whales and bottlenose dolphins. The reptiles include hawksbill turtles, green turtles and olive ridley turtles.

But the one thing that everyone comes to this part of the world for is the thousands of hammerhead sharks that visit Cocos every day to get cleaned by the butterflyfish. Every day, schools come past there for a cleaning and we had numerous encounters with dozens, if not hundreds of these amazing animals on nearly every dive. Each dive just gets better and better and encounters with large schools of jacks up to 100 000 is normal on the dives. This island's world-renowned waters explode with life, including innumerable white-tip reef sharks, schooling hammerhead sharks, dolphins, mantas and marbled rays, giant moray eels, sailfish, and of course, the occasional whale shark. Others which are common include silky sharks, silver-tip sharks, marlin, Creole fish, green turtles and octopus. We even had some

encounters with tiger sharks and Galápagos sharks.

But one of the things that I really liked, and the highlight of the whole trip, were the three night dives that we did with white-tip reef sharks while they were hunting. These shallow dives up to 15m attract literally hundreds of sharks that use your light to hunt. White-tips come from everywhere, and as soon as you shine your torch on a fish they attack it like a pack of wolfs. Sometimes the fish look for shelter behind, and the white-tip reef sharks have only one thing in mind for supper... it is not you, it's that little red fish behind you, so you need to make sure that you are not in the way. This is an experience that you will never get anywhere else in the world, and it reminded me of the movie "Island of the Sharks".


On some of the dives we saw hundreds of hammerheads and rays, thousands of white-tip reef sharks and game fish and millions of reef fish. The scenery also changed on



every dive – we saw pinnacles sticking out of the water and some just below the surface, we swam through arches created by volcanoes many years ago, and it's a place that I will always remember and dream about returning to.

Today I understand why Cocos Island was named as one of the 10 best scuba diving spots in the world by

PADI and why the famous oceanographer Jacques Cousteau visited the island several times. In 1994 he aptly called it, "the most beautiful island in the world." It doesn't matter what your current diving dreams are, Cocos has to be one of them.

For more information about this trip, visit [www.underseahunter.com](http://www.underseahunter.com) or email [info@underseahunter.com](mailto:info@underseahunter.com) 

### Other activities

Several excursions on the island can be planned during your trip. Most popular is the visit to the isolated Ranger Station at Chatham Bay where pirates, whalers and yesteryear's visitors left their ship's names carved in stone on the numerous boulders along the beautiful sandy beach.

Other excellent options are walks to one of the beautiful waterfalls where, after a short hike through the impressive tropical jungle, you can take a treasured bath in one or several fresh water pools.

Also available, depending on the weather, are guided tours of the trail linking Chatham and Wafer Bays. This hike offers marvelous panoramas of Cocos shores and a rare glimpse of the island's dense rainforest. One of Cocos endemic birds, the Cocos finch, is a common and curious companion along this trail.

For the serious hikers among us, a long 8-hour trek to Cerro Yglesias summit, the highest peak in Cocos, can be planned with prior arrangement and the permission of the National Park rangers. A visit to the main park ranger installation at Wafer Bay and its adjacent stream and forest can be arranged when sea conditions and weather permit a safe beach landing.

In between dives, ask a crew member to launch one of the stable Ocean Kayaks for your enjoyment. Paddling along the Cocos shore offers a fantastic and relaxing experience during which hidden waterfalls and countless nesting sea birds will reveal themselves.

*Information supplied by The Undersea hunter Group and wikipedia.org*