

1

*Christmas Island*

2

# THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS ISLAND

3

— *Self-Guided Trail* —



Christmas Island  
A *Natural* Wonder

# THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS ISLAND



*Kompong drumming.*



*Buddhist ceremony.*

The spirit of Christmas Island is everywhere in the nature, the built landscape, the street art and the people. Its strength is derived from remoteness, community, family, beliefs, culture and traditions. Christmas Island is a place where different beliefs and traditions are welcomed and celebrated. In fact, Christmas Island is the only place in Australia which recognises Christian, Islamic and Chinese celebrations with Public Holidays.

This self-guided trail explores some of the different beliefs, traditions and cultural practices which make up the community through some of the places of worship.

Other self-guided trails focus on the historic township in *A Step Back in Time* and mining in *The Old Railway*. These stories are interwoven, overlap and together provide a

glimpse into the rich history and culture of Christmas Island.

Grab a map from the Visitor Centre. Check times for worship, celebrations and local events. The complete trail, including South Point would take a couple of hours or just look at a few places, starting at the Mosque in the Kampong. Some roads outside the settled area are dirt and some could be closed during the red crab migration.



Grab a map from the Visitor Centre.



Approximate duration  
2 - 4 hours



During the red crab migration some of the roads will be closed.

# 1. THE MOSQUE – KAMPONG

This Mosque was built in the 1960s by the British Phosphate Commissioners and shows Islamic architecture on a typical mining company building.

Generally, Sunni Islam is practised by the Malay population on Christmas Island and follows the scriptures in the Koran and the way of life embodied in the Five Pillars of Islam. Muslims:

- believe there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his last messenger (Tawheed)
- pray five times per day facing the holy city of Mecca (Salaat). The live call to prayer can be heard across the Kampong and Flying Fish Cove
- give money to help people in need (Zakat)

- fast during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic year (Sawm or Siyam). Ramadan ends with a holiday called Eid al-Fitr marked by a special service and celebrations with families and friends
- make the pilgrimage to Mecca, the holiest city of Islam (Hajj).

When visiting the Mosque, it is appropriate for men and women to wear loose modest clothing and women should also cover their heads. Shoes are left at the door before entering.

A Medrassa (Islamic School) is behind the Mosque and was formerly labourers' barracks erected in the post war period.



## Malay Culture

Community and Malay celebrations often include the sights, sounds and tastes of Silat, Kompang drumming, traditional dance and Malay food. Silat is a traditional form of martial arts offering protection from spirits. Kompang drumming is a living tradition and provides a connection with the past, the present and the future. Preparing food often involves a gathering where women and men cook in a communal kitchen. These traditions and related stories are passed down to the children to keep culture alive and relevant.

### → NEXT STOP

The Catholic Church and steps to the Shinto Shrine at Club Rd.





## 2. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH – SETTLEMENT

The Catholic Church welcomes all to their house of worship and gardens.

The Church building dates from the late 1960s and was formerly quarters for Malay workers (old Kampong) and later the community library. When the building was abandoned in the late 1980s the Catholic community repaired and modified it to be used as a place of worship. The Church is open during Sunday services, held in English and Chinese, and celebrations. The main celebrations are Christmas and Easter. Christmas commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ and is a time when family and friends gather. Easter recognises the resurrection of Jesus from the dead following his crucifixion.

Christianity is based on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Christians believe Jesus is the Christ, whose coming as the messiah was prophesied in the Hebrew Bible, called the Old Testament and chronicled in the New Testament.



*Steps to the Shinto Shrine – Settlement.*

The church pews are from an old church in Perth. The altar is made from floorboards removed from a nearby warehouse. The pulpit is from recycled timber made by Sri Lankan refugees. Many refugees have found solace in the services held here.

The garden is a place of peace, built into the slopes and is open to all to wander through. The garden is a labour of love by many volunteers with most of the work done by hand over many years. Please take only photos and leave only footprints – that is don't pick the flowers!

At the rear of the Church Garden is a set of steps leading to the site of the Shinto Shrine. This was built during the Japanese occupation in World War II. The Shrine came to signify the oppressors and once the Japanese left, the Shrine was destroyed. Most Shinto rituals keep away evil spirits by purification, prayers and offerings.

 **NEXT STOP**

Temples along Gaze Rd, Settlement.



### 3. CHINESE TEMPLES

There are both Taoist and Buddhist temples on Christmas Island. There are also many small shrines in the industrial, retail and residential areas.

Followers of Taoism believe a spiritual force underlies the universe and is found in all things. It is the 'way'. Taoism recognises many gods and goddesses. Each temple is dedicated to a god or goddess and celebrates their birthday annually with prayers and offerings. Visitors are welcomed at many of the celebrations.

Buddhism encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and spiritual practices largely based on original teachings attributed to the Buddha.

All are welcome to visit and photograph the temples. Incense can be lit as offerings. As a guide place three sticks in the altars. It is considered bad luck to touch the statues and any offerings. A donation box is usually near the incense which helps the upkeep of the temple.

#### Chinese New Year

A 15-day celebration to mark the New Year, commencing with family gatherings on New Year's eve. On the first morning of the new year, the Chinese community visit temples and pray for good health and prosperity. During the celebrations, Ang Pows (small red envelopes containing money), mandarins and oranges (symbolising gold) are given. There are many lion dances, bringing blessings across Christmas Island. The final night (Chap Goh Mei - Lantern Festival) is a large community celebration.

#### The Hungry Ghost Festival

According to traditions the seventh month in the lunar calendar is when the gates of Hell are opened allowing restless spirits to roam the earth. The spirits are appeased and the ancestors worshipped through offerings and prayers.



### 3.1. Guan Yin Monastery – Buddhist – Settlement

The temple dates from 1970 and is dedicated to Guan Yin Pusa, the Goddess of Mercy. She is worshipped in both Buddhism and Taoism.

Monks and nuns visit the Monastery and participate in the traditional ceremonies such as the Filial Piety Dharma Assembly and Guan Yin enlightenment.



### 3.2. Di Zang Pu Sa Dian Temple – Buddhist – Settlement

This temple is dedicated to Di Zang Pu Sa one of the four principal bodhivistas in Mahayana Buddhism and honours carpenters and boilermakers.

### 3.3. Tai Pak Kong Temple – Taoist - Temple Court - Settlement

Built in 1931, this building replaced the earliest Christmas Island temple constructed on the same site around 1902. The temple reflects the continuing presence of a significant Chinese population and is placed on Feng Shui principles; built on high ground, with the protection of the escarpment at the back and uninterrupted views to the sea. It reflects a centuries old connection between spiritual beliefs, ancestor worship and the landscape. The building was influenced by the Hung Men Brotherhood, a Chinese workers' fraternity, evidenced by the symbolic floor plan and distinctive roof design.

Tai Pak Kong's Birthday is celebrated on the twenty fourth day of the eighth lunar month.

#### ➔ NEXT STOP

Si Mian Fo Temple Taman Sweetland passing by the Christian Fellowship at the Community Hall.

## 4. THE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP – POON SAAN

The Fellowship is a community church based on the belief that Jesus Christ, the son of God, died for our sins. All are welcome to join the services held at the Community Hall on Sundays.



## 5. SI MIAN FO TEMPLE– BUDDHIST – POON SAAN

The large banyan tree at the edge of the forest has great spiritual significance for Buddhists. It is customary to pray and leave offerings at its base. There is a red altar placed in a niche under the tree. An octagonal covered shrine houses a statue of Si Mian Fo (Four Faces Buddha).



### ➔ NEXT STOP

San Chye Loh opposite the outdoor cinema off Poon Saan Rd. The Zhen Jian Tong Xiu Hui temple is on the left (this can also be accessed from Murray Rd) and Jeng Fo Gong Xiu Hui is at the end of the road.





## 6. ZHEN JIAN TONG XIU HUI TEMPLE COMPLEX- BUDDHIST – POON SAAN

A former residential building was repurposed as a Buddhist temple in the 1990s. It has since been developed with a covered forecourt and elements in the surrounding area.

Visiting Grand Masters perform ceremonies such as the Bardo Deliverance and Purification.

The octagonal shrine to Si Mian Fo (Four Faces Buddha) is surrounded by elephants in a protective stance and connected to a three-tiered metal pagoda built in 2015. The entry is flanked by Christmas Island's iconic crabs: the Red and the Robber, added in 2019.

## 7. JENG FO GONG XIU HUI TEMPLE- SAN CHYE LOH – BUDDHIST – POON SAAN

Jeng Fo Gong Xiu Hui honors Guan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy. The temple has its roots in this area since the 1970s. This building dates from the 1990s.



### ➔ NEXT STOP

Goddess of Mercy Temple near the outdoor cinema at Poon Saan Rd.



## 8. GODDESS OF MERCY TEMPLE – BUDDHIST – POON SAAN

This temple to Guan Yin, Goddess of Mercy has been relocated twice. Initially it occupied an alcove in the old single men's quarters on Poon Saan Rd. In the 1990s the buildings were used by staff of the Christmas Island Resort and Casino and the temple temporarily relocated to the outdoor cinema projection room. This traditionally designed, free standing temple was opened in 1996.

The Goddess Guan Yin's birthday is celebrated on the nineteenth day of the second lunar month.

### ➔ NEXT STOP

Sheng Wong Temple and Baha'i Centre on Jalan Ketam Merah (Red Crab St) Drumsite passing near the Temple at the Old Dryers.

## 9. TAI PAK KONG TEMPLE – TAOIST – OLD DRYERS

One of three temples to Tai Pak Kong. It has a long association with the Island's workforce due to its location near the Incline and the storage bins (dryers) built in front of it in 1959. The temple's age is unknown, it may date from around 1911-1915 when the Incline was built.

This temple is in an active mine work site and can only be accessed during celebrations.

Tai Pak Kong god's birthday is celebrated on the sixteenth day of the twelfth lunar month. Offerings are made during the Hungry Ghost Festival in the seventh lunar month.





## 10. SHENG WONG TEMPLE – TAOIST – DRUMSITE

The temple is devoted to the God Sheng Wong. Sheng Wong is both the City Magistrate, protector of the island and community and the Chief Magistrate of Hell, who receives prayers and offerings for the ancestors.

At the beginning of the Hungry Ghost Festival, Sheng Wong opens the gates of Hell to allow the souls to wander free for a month. This is marked by prayer and burning offerings.

Sheng Wong's birthday is celebrated in the eleventh day of the fifth lunar month.

## 11. BA'HAI CENTRE – DRUMSITE

The Centre was originally a shop serving the Drumsite Labour Quarters, replaced by the nearby apartments for government workers in 2012. The building has also been a railroad office and training room for the staff at the nearby railway workshops.



There are relatively few followers of Ba'hai on Christmas Island. Ba'hai teaches the essential worth of all religions, and the unity and equality of all people. The faith was established in 1863 and grew in Persia and parts of the Middle East. This Centre was a place of solace for many Middle Eastern refugees held in detention during the early to mid 2010s.

➔ **NEXT STOP**

Old LB4 near corner North West Point Rd and East West Baseline.

## 12. DATO KONG SHRINE – OLD LB 4

Dato represents a spirit of the place and may be a legacy of early animism that infused Malay and Chinese religions.

This modest red temple was erected to protect the land and the workers from workplace accidents. On the altar is a small statue of a soldier-warrior and behind is a wall banner in the deep green of Islam with his name – Muhaji Muhammad in

Chinese and Malay. All offerings at this temple are halal in respect to its diety. Behind the temple at the base of a Tahitian chestnut is a small shrine to its datu (guardian spirit) for further protection.

### → NEXT STOP

Guan Di – Taoist Grants Well along North West Point Rd and Grants Well Rd.

## 13. GUAN DI TEMPLE – TAOIST – GRANTS WELL

This temple is the only temple on Christmas Island dedicated to Guan Di a soldier and sage. The temple was used by workers at the nearby railway camps as well as the people at Grants Well. Religious rituals helped to sustain workers' spirits in the harsh conditions of the day. In the 1980s a ceremony was held to ask the Grants Well Temple gods to move to the recently refurbished South Point temple. Guan Di, replied he was happy at Grants Well and would remain. As one of Taoism's most important deities, his wish was honoured.

This temple was originally built in the 1920s. It was rebuilt and expanded in 2003 on the original site. The table for offerings and a barricade to stop the marauding robber crabs from entering were added at this time.

The door panels read from left to right and reads Camp 4 Grants Well Soon Tian Kong.

Guan Di's birthday is celebrated on the twenty fourth day of the sixth lunar month.

### → NEXT STOP

Tham Kong Sheng Ye Temple. Turn right onto a small track about 200 metres along the Blowholes Rd. The temple is about 100 metres along this track.







## 14. THAM KONG SHENG YE – TAOIST – CAMP 5 LB3 BLOWHOLES RD

This small Taoist temple dedicated to Tham Kong Sheng Ye served the workers at nearby railway Camp 5.

Dedication to Tham Kong Shen Ye provides evidence of the workers' origins from small coastal communities of south-east Asia, where he is revered. Tham Kong Shen Ye is a sage, healer of the sick and forecaster of the weather and was called upon to protect workers from harsh conditions and weather extremes.

The naming of the temple and the reuse of discarded items provide a time capsule to the local work environment and daily life in the 1910s and 1920s. The Temple was renovated in 2019.

Tham Kong Sheng Ye's birthday falls on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month.



➔ **NEXT STOP**

Temples at South Point.



## 15. SOON TIAN KONG – TAOIST – SOUTH POINT

Soon Tian Kong Temple is dedicated to the Kang Tian Tai Di, a god known for his fairness and protection of the needy. The temple confirms many Chinese workers came from the southern area of China where Kang Tian Tai Di is revered. The roof shape and highly symbolic floor plan relate to traditional initiation rituals of the Hung Men Brotherhood, a Chinese workers fraternity. The temple was built in 1936, and renovated in 2017, on feng shui principles; on high ground, with an uninterrupted view of the sea. It replaced the old temple located in the residential area at South Point. The ceremonial gate was added later. The mural on the gate show the Eight Immortals, who gained immortality by devoting themselves to understanding the universe and its primordial truths. They are drawn from all walks of life to demonstrate the possibilities and include a farmer, military commander, sage, beggar, alchemist, maid and an official.

Kang Tian Tai Di's birthday is celebrated on the twenty fifth day of the tenth lunar month. As part of the celebrations, devotees may speak to the spirits through a medium who is possessed by the Third Prince, a Taoist deity. Devotees believe the Third Prince did not reach old-age and this is represented in the medium's dress and child-like behaviour. During the ceremony a soft whip is cracked to ward off uninvited spirits. A wooden red Fortune Bridge may be crossed to bring fortune, blessings and positive energy.

## 16. TZE YUN – TAOIST – SOUTH POINT

This is both a workplace and community temple to Tze Yun, Cloud of Loving Kindness. The temple is also known as the 'Ladies Temple'. The three statues are to Guan Yin the Merciful, bringer and protector of children. Prayers are also offered to the fertility goddess Zhu Sheng.

Guan Yin has three celebrations on the nineteenth day of the second, sixth and ninth lunar months.



## 17. TAI PAK KONG – TAOIST – SOUTH POINT

This is the second temple dedicated to Tai Pak Kong, the provider of prosperity and protector from illness and accidents.



The temple was originally located in a quarry and became known as Wash Screen Plant Tai Pak Kong until it was moved to enable mining of the phosphate it was sitting on. Tai Pak Kong was consulted through mediums and agreed to move to higher ground facing east towards the sunrise. This temple was completed in 1990.

Tai Pak Kong god's birthday is celebrated on the second day of the second lunar month.

### ➔ NEXT STOP

While at South Point take a look around the old railway station, part of The Old Railway trail. Then to Mar Chor Nui Nui on Golf Course Rd via the North South Baseline Rd.

## 18. MAR CHOR NUI NUI – TAOIST – GOLF COURSE RD, WATERFALL

Mar Chor Nui Nui, Goddess of the Sea is a revered deity. The temple's location by the sea is to thank the Goddess for safe passage from China and continued protection of Christmas Island.

This is not the original location. The temple was moved in the 1990's to enable the building of the Christmas Island Resort and Casino at Waterfall Bay. The Goddess did not agree to the move and to atone for the disrespect, a large Earth God altar was built nearby to invoke his protective powers. It is said that Ma Chor Nui Nui, in a divine act of retribution, destined any new structure on her original temple site to fail repeatedly until it was

ultimately reclaimed by the sea. The Resort and Casino operated for only four years, closing in 1998.

The main altar has five statues. The central statue is Ma Chor Nui Nui. She is flanked by followers who are listening or watching out to sea. They can hear and see up to 100 miles away. There is an altar to the left side which houses the goddess for fertility.

Mar Chor Nui Nui birthday is celebrated on the twenty third day of the third lunar month.

### ➔ NEXT STOP

Return to Settlement passing the Cemetery on Golf Course Rd.







## 19. CEMETERIES

There are three main cemeteries on Christmas Island: the Old European Cemetery at Club Rd, the Old Chinese Cemetery at Phosphate Hill and the Cemetery on Golf Course Rd.

Historically, most deaths on Christmas Island were from accident or disease as most European supervisors and Chinese and Malay labourers were on short-term contracts and left before they became ill or old. The exception is the beri beri epidemic of 1900-1904 when death rates were high amongst the Chinese workers. Many were buried near the original hospital at Rocky Point.

The Old Chinese Cemetery, located near the mining area at Phosphate Hill was the second cemetery to be built and was used until the 1920's. A Direction Stone on Quarry Rd (off Phosphate Hill Rd) marks the steep winding track to a flat area. Graves are marked by polished stones inscribed with Chinese characters.

The Old European Cemetery is above Flying Fish Cove at the end of Club Rd near the ruins of the Christmas Island Club and a chief engineer's residence. The cemetery contains marble and stone Christian monuments and the original 1942 burial site of the Unknown Sailor from the HMAS Sydney.

The cemeteries at the edge of Settlement were established in the 1950's by the British Phosphate Company. They are still used for burials and are divided into different ethnic and religious groups. They contain memorials to the Coolies (Chinese workers) and Gordon Bennett, the Union of Christmas Island Workers leader.





**YOUR SAFETY IS IMPORTANT**  
**IN AN EMERGENCY**  
 Phone 000

**MOBILE PHONE COVERAGE IS LIMITED.**  
 When exploring, borrow a Personal Locator Beacon (EPiRB) from the Police Station. They are free.



- Route from Airport to town**
- Turn right out of airport car park
  - Take the first right onto Phosphate Hill Road and follow signs to township



# Christmas Island

A *Natural* Wonder



Australian Government

**BUILDING OUR FUTURE**

*Produced by the Christmas Island Tourism Association with support from the Australian Government. 2019*

*Photos are from the Collection of the National Archives of Australia, Christmas Island Past and Present and personal collections.*

## For more information:

 [christmas.net.au](http://christmas.net.au)

 ChristmasIslandTourism

 ChristmasIsland

## Other self-guided trails:

