

# Is this Shangri-la?

Words and photos by **Kia Koropp**

Away from the Indian Ocean's conventional cruising route, the Chagos Archipelago offers majestic swimming and diving – and some uncomfortable history.



O ther than a few fallen ruins, Chagos is untouched by human development and offers a sanctuary like no other on earth for the myriad of creatures which inhabit her shores. I've just seen my first – and probably my only – sight of the long-forgotten world I've dreamed of experiencing, and it is truly a blessed parallel universe.

It is a place where the seas hold a healthy balance of marine life, and a place where a visitor can cavort with a wide diversity of marine animals. Here, the wildlife does not seem so wild after all. They seem curious, trusting, innocent, friendly. For me, life in Chagos was akin to playing the part of an enthusiastic naturalist.

Our days were surprisingly filled with adventure, unlike anything I could have dreamed of in this remote, abandoned archipelago, and watching wildlife became a central part of our daily activity.

Blacktip reef sharks shadowed me. Streamlined and sleek, a subtle yet sinister threat was implied in their surveillance of me and the kids who frolicked in the water only yards away. Initially I was wary, but we soon became accustomed to their continual presence. They followed us like puppies; curious, eager, attentive.

Our fear soon dissipated and I welcomed them as one would a familiar friend. Swinging in my hammock I watched them patiently circle our hull. Driving our dinghy, we were followed by a trail of blacktips breaking the surface.

We jumped into the water, and side by side, we played in the shallows as they circled, the occasional feel of sandpaper brushing our flesh. Acceptance. Beauty. Bliss.

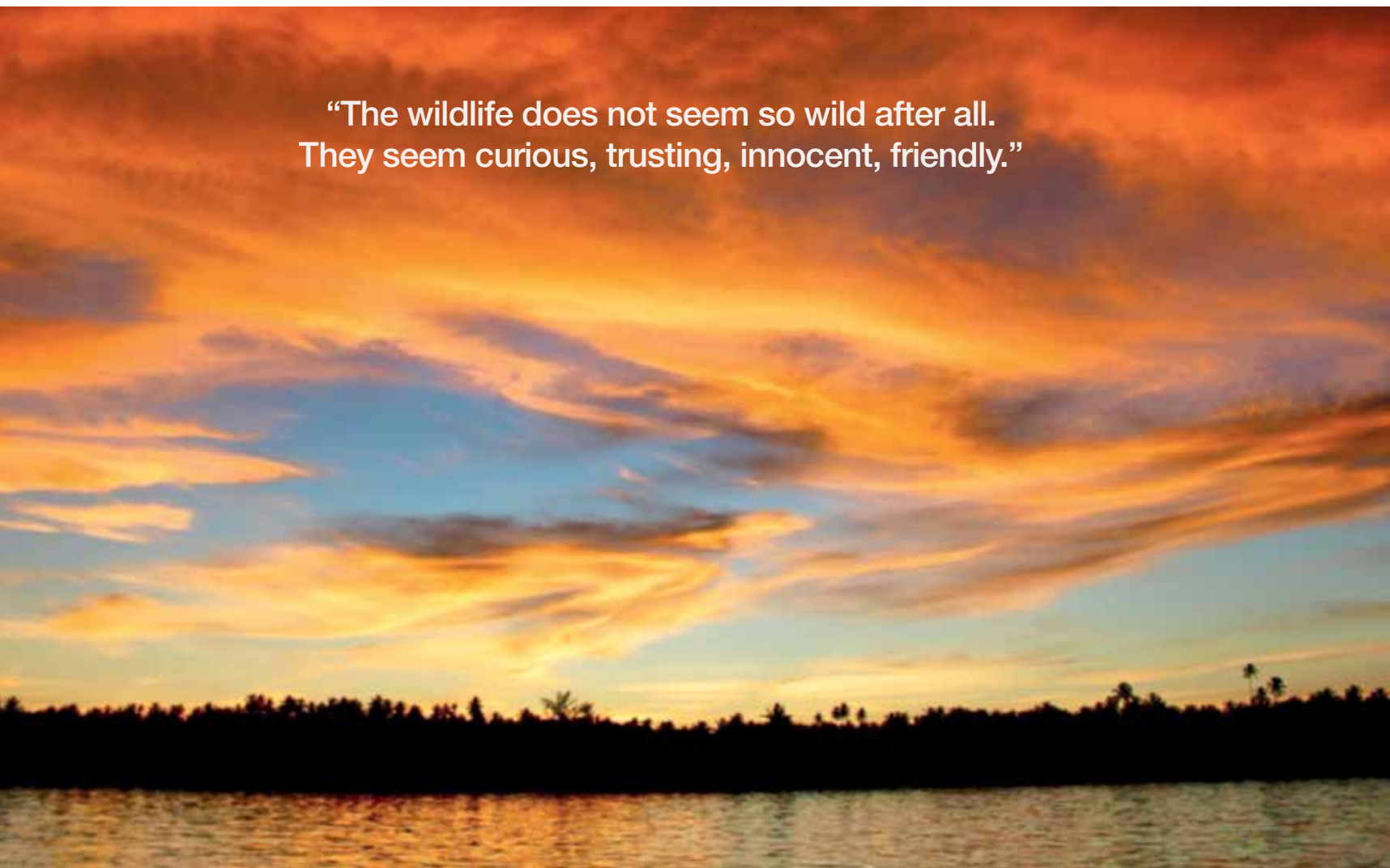
Back ashore we found the rivet of a turtle track. It led me to five

#### Chagos Archipelago (British Territory)





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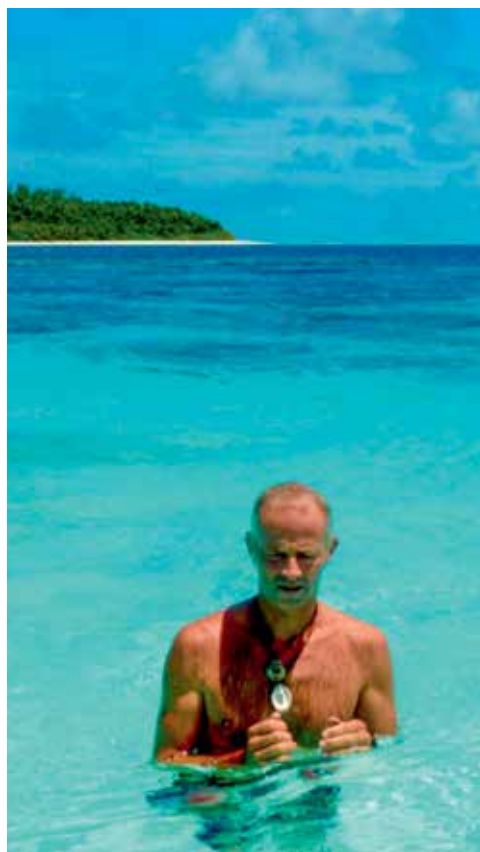


nests in the sand, and we realised we'd found turtle hatching grounds.

Terns squawked as we disturbed their silent congregation, and ahead frigate birds swooped for a meal. A single fish wriggled in a steel-vice clamp, fighting for release. Upward the bird soared, spiraling. And just as my shutter clicked – release and free-fall. I captured the fish in an unexpected moment of freedom.

Spotted eagle ray and giant stingray basked in the warmth of the shallow water. I slid my feet, inching toward them, trying not to stumble into the large ditches they'd carved into the sand. They could disappear in the blink of an eye, but warily they let me approach. They are large pale dishes, two-metres across, wings fluttering and shifting a circle of sand that pockmarks the flat seabed.

Moray eels hunted in the shallow crevices, crammed into tight nooks in the rock. Nearby, crabs scurried about on wet rocks. Quick as a flash a moray rips the arm off one and darts away, centimetres from my toes.



Letting nature wash life's clutter from your shoulders.

We tip-toed quietly through a booby-bird sanctuary. I had an audience. Thirty beaks, yellow eyes curious, turned toward me as I wandered under the branches. Some flew overhead to get a better look.

Back on our yacht, the wildlife came to us. Terns rested on *Atea's* bowsprit, their delicate feathered features casual and unperturbed by my approach. Reef fish schooled under our hull, attracted to the protection and shade, and ever hopeful for an occasional meal.

Perhaps this is the crux of Chagos. It is not one unique encounter, but encounter on top of encounter on top of encounter that makes the islands so unique.

Braca, my son, who six months ago would not put his head in the water of the hotel swimming pool, is now jumping and frolicking in the water, twisting and turning like a fish, snorkelling without a lifejacket and asking to be pushed down to the reef for a closer look.

Ayla has similarly progressed, and though less proficient than her brother, she is fearless and will happily paddle off into the blue water calling out “I’m fine!” as the black tips circle curiously.

Chagos offered us time as a family – unfiltered and uncomplicated by outside influences. We had no access to news of the outside world and no other distractions. Without Internet, television or phones, it was family life stripped bare. We live each day with just three other people to consider. How often does life offer such purity?

## HISTORY

I don't know if we will ever again walk Chagos' shores, but if we do I am sure it will not be the place it is today. To understand this impending sense of change, one has to understand recent political history.

While Chagos was once like so many other island nations, inhabited by a small local population and supported by subsistence living, life changed in 1968 when international politics saw the local population deported to Mauritius, the Seychelles and other distant territories.



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A 1966 agreement between the British and American governments stipulated that all inhabitants be removed from the territory for the installment of a US military base on Diego Garcia. The British, then in command of the archipelago, agreed.

The forced eviction of 1,500 people from Diego Garcia and the six other atolls that form the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) was completed in 1973. Since then, there has been a volley of lawsuits, compensation claims and resettlement petitions that have been won and overturned in the battle between human rights violations and political interests.

In 2010 the British government established a marine nature reserve protecting the world's largest coral area (544,000 km<sup>2</sup>), creating the largest swathe of protected territory ever established.

But the establishment of this reserve became embroiled in heated debate when Wikileaks released documents that linked

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The writer and her family.

the establishment of the reserve to a tactical move to restrict the return of Chagossians to their native land. Time will tell.

The end of 2016 marked the end of the 50-year agreement – but the contract will automatically extend 20 years if neither side chooses to terminate it. That said, resettlement claims by the Chagossians and reclamation demands by Mauritian Prime Minister complicate matters; the fate of Chagos continues to be played out in the battlefield of international politics.

I stand out of the dispute, morally caught in the middle of a tug-of-war between human rights and ecological conservation. Walking through the ruins you can't help but feel for the people who had been expelled.

In 2006 previous inhabitants of the Salomon atoll were permitted a short visitation and a cross was erected and dedicated to the memory of ancestors buried on the island. Standing in front of it you can't help but feel the injustice.

I understand the need for humans to belong to a place, and in

society ancestral ties play a significant role in defining culture. The removal of the Chagossians from their native land strips them of this basic ethnic foundation.

I also appreciate the irony of being granted permission to visit a land that the indigenous population is banned from re-entering. While visitors are not permitted to enter any of the British Indian Ocean Territories, a private yacht sailing across the Indian Ocean may apply for a permit to enter two of the seven atolls that make up the Chagos archipelago.

Only a handful of these applications are approved each year – if you can't get there yourself, you can't get there at all. If you do get permission to visit, there are only four approved anchorages within the sixty tropical islands. It was this permit that granted us a one-month stay in Chagos, apparently one of just 11 issued this year.


Yet, despite the injustice of the islanders' exclusion, I am awed by the experience of witnessing the Eden of an ecosystem void of human interference. Reading the accounts of sailors from






antiquity, I've often wondered what it would be like to see the oceans teaming with life as reported in their journals.

Chagos has given me a looking glass into a world we have denied ourselves. It is the epitome of a cruiser's ideal destination: remote, pristine, beautiful. That we were able to experience it without any other cruisers only amplified these traits and made the isolation absolute.

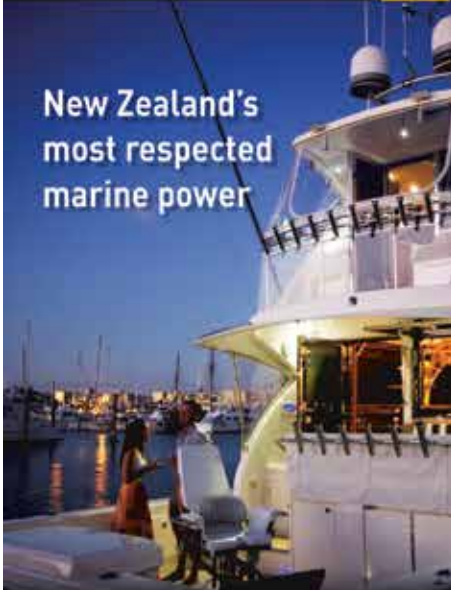
Herman Melville wrote in *Moby Dick*: "I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote. I love to sail forbidden seas." He might have had Chagos in mind when he wrote these words, for no words speak of a lust for a place so accurately. 

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