

taking off G2

Fine restaurants impress along with fall colors.

tip sheet G3

Add-on fees can quickly become budget-busters.

destinations G5 luxembourg



A queen returns

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travel

STARTRIBUNE.COM/TRAVEL • SECTION G • SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 2012

Off Costa Rica's remote and pristine Cocos Island, a profusion of fish draws divers — and illegal fishermen — to the protected marine area.



Cocos Island National Park rangers constructed this bridge entirely out of fishing line, buoys and other items confiscated from fishermen illegally working in the rich waters around the island nearly 350 miles off the Pacific coast of Costa Rica. **ERIC MOHL • Special to the Star Tribune**

CROSSING INTO PARADISE

BY KAREN CATCHPOLE • SPECIAL TO THE STAR TRIBUNE

Dozen adults gathered on the upper deck of the M/V Argo, straining at the railing of the boat like children at an FAO Schwarz window. After more than 30 hours of travel through open ocean, we'd finally reached land. The sun was rising over Cocos Island, nearly 350 miles off the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, revealing tumbling waterfalls and deeply green hillsides. Frigate birds and brown boobies swooped and called in what we all interpreted as a welcome to their haven.

When Jacques Cousteau first saw Co-

cos, he called it "the most beautiful island in the world." Like so many treasures, pirates claimed Cocos Island as their own — first as a life-saving source of fresh water and wood for ship repairs, then as a bank. Many believe that hundreds of tons of gold, religious artifacts and other riches worth billions of dollars by today's standards were hidden on the island by pirates.

Through the years, hundreds of hopefuls have tried to unearth this loot, including a German named August Gissler who spent more than 19 years treasure-

hunting on Cocos. Between 1889 and 1908 Gissler managed to find only a handful of coins, but that was enough to keep the allure alive. Treasure-hunting expeditions are still being organized, though a permit from the Costa Rican government is now required.

Pirates maintained their unofficial ownership of Cocos Island until 1832, when Costa Rica claimed the land. Cocos Island National Park was created in 1978 and UNESCO named the area a World Heritage Site in 1997.

Cocos continues on G6 ►



The rock-strewn beach in Chatham Bay on the coast of Cocos Island is home to a number of inscriptions left on rocks by visitors, including pirates. **ERIC MOHL • Special to the Star Tribune**



An endangered scalloped hammerhead shark darted within a few feet of photographer Eric Mohl in the shark-filled waters off Cocos Island. **RODRIGO ROESCH DE BÉDOUT • Special to the Star Tribune**

Echoes of Winslow Homer's Maine

• The rugged coast inspired the most majestic works of renowned landscape artist.

By **GERALDINE FABRIKANT**
New York Times

In the summer, when the sun played on the juniper bushes, and in the fall, when the air was clear enough to see to the white lighthouse on Wood Island, and in the winter, when the sea battered the granite rocks, Winslow Homer thrived at Prouts Neck, a spit of land off the southern coast of Maine.

At Prouts, as the locals call it, he had long days to walk the cliffs and study the enigma that would become his subject: the grand rolling Atlantic as it threw itself against the rocky coast.

For the past hundred years or so, the only way visitors could see those cliffs was to stay at the Black Point Inn, the sole hotel on this 2^{1/2}-mile promontory. But as of Tuesday the public will be able not just to observe the ocean as Homer did, but also to visit the two-story clapboard studio where the artist lived and painted what many consider to be his most majestic works.



CHRISTOPHER BECKER • New York Times
Winslow Homer's home and studio opens for tours Tuesday.

This is thanks to the Portland Museum of Art's purchase of the house six years ago when Homer's great-grand-nephew decided to sell it. After Homer's death in 1910 the house was passed down through a series of relatives and ultimately to this nephew, Charles Homer Willauer, who rented it to others for many summers.

Then in 2006 Willauer decided to sell the three-room structure with its shingled roof to the museum for \$1.9 million.

"I felt that the legacy should be able to be carried beyond my lifetime and I was wanting to do something for future generations," Willauer said.

The museum invested \$2.8 million renovating the structure, work that included stabilizing the foundation, restoring the exterior to its original colors of dark green with red trim and re-hanging the second-story porch.

It is a simple place, set with a view out to the sea. From its garden one can look across to Bluff and Stratton Islands in Saco Bay. Looking through the trees to the right, visitors can glimpse the home next door, which once belonged to Homer's father, Charles Sr.

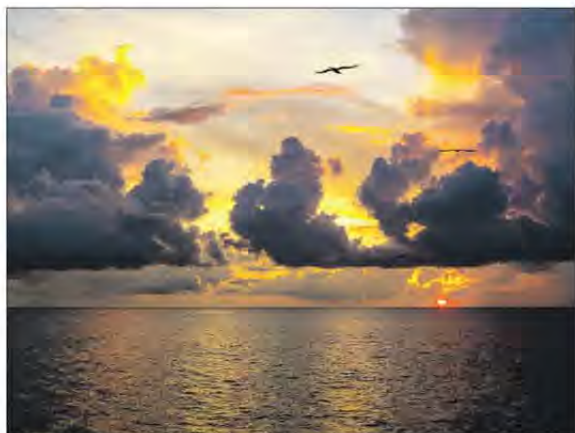
The Homer clan was instrumental in developing this tiny community of 108 homes, and several Homer family descendants still have houses here. After Winslow's younger brother, Arthur, came for his honeymoon in 1875, he decided to set down roots and build a home. With its tranquil beaches to the north and the sea to the south, the setting soon caught the imagination of Charles Sr., who bought a property large enough for his extended family, christening his seaside home "The Ark." Just down the road from the studio, visitors can

Homer continues on G4 ►

Crossing INTO paradise



Just a fraction of the fishing hooks confiscated by Cocos Island National Park rangers from fishermen caught illegally plying the rich waters around the island.



The sun sets over Cocos Island National Park, home to scores of seagoing birds.

IF YOU GO

Unless you have your own vessel, the only way to visit Cocos Island National Park is on a live-aboard dive boat. I traveled to Cocos Island on the Argo, operated by the Undersea Hunter Group. The boat has a complete scuba diving facility, eight private cabins and fully staffed kitchen (\$5,965 for an all-inclusive 10-day trip, excluding airfare and national park fees; last-minute discounts are sometimes available www.underseahunter.com). The Argo also carries the DeepSee, a multimillion-dollar custom-built submersible that can be booked for trips down to 300 feet or 1,000 feet for a very different perspective on the rich marine environment around Cocos Island.

For more information about visiting Costa Rica, go to www.visitcostarica.com.

◀ COCOS FROM G1

The area's rich waters and the rocky outcrop's remoteness, jagged angles, 300 waterfalls and deep green lushness have inspired others beyond Cousteau and pirates.

President Franklin Roosevelt made three trips to Cocos Island. In 1935, during his first visit, he caught a 110-pound sailfish. The fish was shipped back to the United States, where the avid fisherman had it mounted and hung in the White House.

Staffers aboard the Argo, my home during a week of diving and island exploration, pointed out one particularly elegant waterfall, which, they said, appears in the opening scenes of the original "Jurassic Park" blockbuster. Robert Louis Stevenson's "Treasure Island" also may have been set on Cocos Island.

While hiking on the island it's easy to imagine rogue dinosaurs and Long John Silver lurking in the cover of the large-leaved guaruma trees, giant ferns and vines that thrive in the rain-forest climate. Despite its name there are few coconut palms on Cocos Island. Cocos is used as a resting and nesting spot by many species of migratory and seagoing birds and one of the island's only endemic species, a tiny, drab thing called a Cocos finch, is also easily spotted.

Underwater treasures

An even greater number of species take refuge in the waters around Cocos Island, which is sometimes called Shark Island because of the dense concentrations of tiger sharks, silky sharks, scalloped hammerhead sharks, enormous manta rays, reef sharks, Galapagos sharks and even whale sharks.

Those lucky enough to dive around Cocos are virtually guaranteed close encounters with all of these exciting

sea creatures. I spent time underwater with hundreds of hammerheads, enormous rays, jittery reef sharks, beefy tigers, sleek silkies and lumbering Galapagos sharks, all at close range. Though manta rays and whale sharks were seen by other divers in my group, they eluded me (this time).

Sharks are drawn to this area because of unique mini mountains on the sea floor called the Las Gemelas seamounts. When deep currents hit these seamounts, nutrient-rich water is pushed toward the surface, attracting schools of fish and the predators who love them. Fishermen favor the area for the very same reason. Fishing is banned within 12 nautical miles of Cocos Island, but the seamounts lie outside that restricted zone and fishermen ply the waters for lucrative tuna and shark fins.

Scalloped hammerheads, listed as endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), are often targeted for their valuable fins. Leatherback turtles, listed as critically endangered by the IUCN and whose numbers have plummeted by 90 percent in Costa Rica over the past 20 years, are accidentally captured and drowned in nets. While the Las Gemelas seamounts have been fished with lines, the area has never been trawled, so the habitat is still fairly unspoiled. Marine biologist and ocean explorer Sylvia Earle calls areas like these "hope spots" because they represent places where we can hope to see improvement in the ecosystem if it can be protected.

More hope on the horizon

Costa Rica, an early adopter of green policies and ecotourism, had officially protected a quarter of its land but only 1 percent of its oceans. That changed in March 2011 when,



Photos by ERIC MOHL • Special to the Star Tribune

One of more than 300 waterfalls on Cocos Island, Cascada Genio is the perfect place to cool off after hiking the trails in the national park. The island's lushness and pristine waters attract visitors primarily interested in scuba diving.

after six years of planning, President Laura Chinchilla Miranda created Costa Rica's Seamounts Marine Management Area, increasing the existing Cocos Island protected zone fivefold. The area now includes 2 million acres or nearly 4,000 square miles. It's larger than Yellowstone National Park and is the second-largest marine protected area in the region after Galapagos National Park.

Still, environmentalists are concerned about enforcement of regulations over such a vast area. Daily patrol responsibilities lie with the nine rangers assigned to Cocos Island National Park and their three small patrol boats. It's an impossible task, and the fishermen know it.

A shed full of contraband

Inside an enormous shed near the ranger station on Cocos Island, I found bags full of fishing line stacked to the rafters. Fifty-five-gallon drums filled with huge steel hooks lined



Source: ESRI, TeleAtlas

Star Tribune

the walls. Any remaining space was stuffed with buoys. Rangers explained that the fishing gear had been collected over the previous two months and represented just a fraction of the illegal fishing activity going on around the island. Rangers believe fishermen cut their lines and dump their gear overboard if they suspect there's a patrol in the area. Under current regulations, unless fishermen are found with gear in the water in active use, they can't be arrested.

During a dive at a site called Dirty Rock, our group found ample evidence of this practice. Just a few minutes into the dive, we discovered a section of the rock draped with hundreds of feet of line, studded with massive hooks. We spent most of the dive carefully removing the line and hooks, which we then brought to the surface and added to the collection in the rangers' shed.

Visitors to Cocos Island, primarily scuba divers, certainly exert wear and tear on the marine environment, as well. Park rangers brief all new arrivals and "shadow" each group's first dive to make sure everyone understands how to dive without damaging formations or marine life. Trips to a popular night-dive site were recently restricted because divers' underwater lights were altering the nat-

ural feeding behavior of white tip sharks.

But the presence of tourists also does some good. In 2011, 3,528 people visited Cocos Island National Park, each paying a daily \$32 national park fee. The mere presence of the live-aboard dive boats, on which most visitors arrive, and their small zodiacs used to get to dive sites acts as an additional patrol fleet, further deterring would-be fishermen.

For the last dive of my trip, our group returned to Dirty Rock, descending to a cleaning station at nearly 90 feet. Sharks regularly cruise through these spots where cleaner fish congregate, ready to gently remove parasites from the predators' skin. As we settled in, the hammerheads slowly overcame some of their natural shyness. We floated motionless and mesmerized for nearly half an hour as more than 25 hammerheads ventured closer and closer until they were near enough to make eye contact before gliding away. It felt like they were saying goodbye. And thank you.

Writer Karen Catchpole and photographer Eric Mohl have spent more than five years on the road, traveling through North and Central America on their way to South America. Follow their journey at www.trans-americas.com.



Chatham Bay on the coast of Cocos Island, which legendary marine explorer Jacques Cousteau called "the most beautiful island in the world." Robert Louis Stevenson's "Treasure Island" also may have been set on the island.