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

**CROSSING INTO PARADISE**

BY KAREN CATCHPOLE • SPECIAL TO THE STAR TRIBUNE

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The ride is not for the faint of heart. The waters are rough, and the boat rocks side to side. But the view is worth it. The island is a coastal paradise, a place where marine life is abundant and untouched. The waters around Cocos Island are home to some of the world’s most amazing creatures, from the largest fish in the sea, the blue marlin, to the smallest, the pygmy squid.

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 Crossing Paradise

The skies over Coco Island National Park, home to scores of nesting birds.

IF YOU DO

Unless you have your own vessel, the only way to visit Coco Island National Park is by a four-hour boat trip from the nearby Isla Contadora, operated by the West End Explorer Group. The boat has a complete deck of white canvas slip seats and fully staffed with bilingual guides, all with more than 10 years’ experience, including naturalist and national park fans. The trips are sometimes sold out, so make reservations in advance through www.morenaturaleza.com. The trip also carries the Deepeche, a multimillion-dollar carbon-fuelled vessel that is the closest the tour boats get to 200 feet. It provides a completely different perspective on the rich marine environment around Coco Island. For more information about sailing Costa Rica, go to www.wilsonsatlas.com.

+ COCOS FROM G1

The area’s rich waters and the rocks offshore are home to a variety of marine life, including hundreds of species of fish, rays, sharks, and turtles. The area is also home to a variety of sea creatures, including several species of hammerhead sharks, remora rays, and pilot whales. Two of the most common species are the reef shark and the longfinned pilot whale.

Underwater treasures

An euc gaspari, a member of the sponges family, is often seen on the reef. These sponges are known for their unique shapes and colors, and they are often found near coral reefs. They are also known for their ability to attract fish.

Scalloped hammerheads, lots of blacktip reef sharks, and several species of rays are often seen near the reef. These animals are known for their speed and agility, and they are often found near coral reefs. They are also known for their ability to attract fish.

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The walls are sometimes referred to as "sea cliffs." The rock cliffs are home to a variety of birds, including frigatebirds, terns, and pelicans. The birds are often seen fishing near the cliffs.

A chief full of treasure

Inside an enormous cave near the ranger station on Coco Island, I found huge beds of soft corals stretching for miles. Fifty-five gallons drums filled with huge steel bodies lined the walls. A remaining space was stuffed with bins. Rangers explained that the fishing gear had been collected over the years and represented just a fraction of the illegal fishing activity going on around the island. Rangers believe fishermen tell their lines and dump their gear overtime 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. When a skipper is on a site called "Dirty Rock," our group found ample evidence of illegal fishing. Just a few minutes into the dive, we discovered a section of the reef draped with hundreds of feet of line, affixed with black plastic balls. We spent most of the dive carefully removing the line and balls, which we then took to the surface and added to the collection in the ranger station.

Visitors to Coco Island, primarily scuba divers, certainly have an opportunity to observe 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 corals or marine life. Trips to a popular night dive site were recently restricted because divers’ underwater lights were disturbing the sealife. The walls are sometimes referred to as "sea cliffs." The rock cliffs are home to a variety of birds, including frigatebirds, terns, and pelicans. The birds are often seen fishing near the cliffs.

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