



JEFF SKILES

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



Inter Island Airways aircraft refueling on Christmas Island, Kiribati.

Christmas Island

A place only imagined

BY JEFF SKILES

THE ABILITY TO FLY has taken all of us to places we could never have imagined — places completely foreign to earthbound humans who have never had the privilege of viewing the world from aloft. Sometimes those places are physical, but in other cases they are only conjured up in our minds, never actually seen but still holding a place in our thoughts.

When I fly over the well-manicured farms tucked among the hillsides of southern Wisconsin, I imagine what it must be like to walk the soil invisible from the nearest road, sandwiched between ridges, only viewed from aloft. A tranquil escape from a frenetic world only known to the farmer — and me.

Christmas Island is only a flat spot amid a vast ocean.

A strip of coral that is of interest only to bone fishermen and the few aviators passing overhead.

Some places can exist both in our imaginations and in reality. When I was a kid, I envisioned flying up a Greenland fjord to Narsarsuaq with Ernest Gann in his classic book *Fate Is the Hunter*. I was enchanted by the adventure of it all. Decades later, I made that flight for real and, thankfully, in decidedly better weather than Gann had experienced.

SOUTH PACIFIC

Flights to the South Pacific are some of the longest and loneliest stretches on the planet. It takes more than 15 hours to fly from Los Angeles, California, to Sydney, Australia. Hours spent entirely at high altitude over endless waves and, due to hopping time zones in a westerly direction, mostly in darkness. Darkness that is except for the flashes of lightning from the massive thunderstorms perennially roiling south of the equator. The growing thunderheads can make night seem like noon as they dissipate their tremendous energy into the sea.

Far from land and comfort, every unusual sound is amplified in your imagination. A vibration, a rumble, or a sound that would be ignored during the light of day can take on great significance at 3 a.m. in the back corners of your mind, with nothing but inky blackness outside the cockpit windows and water tens of thousands of feet deep below.

Unlike the heavily trafficked skies of the North Atlantic, where other aircraft are often in view, here one only rarely encounters fellow aviators similarly suspended in this vast world of air and water.

Pilots of today's airliners on South Pacific routes counter the gnawing concerns about flying in such a remote place by playing the game of what if. Where will we go if the worst should happen? What miniscule strip of pavement would instantly become our primary focus if one of our massive engines should suddenly cease to function?

The Pacific is so vast, and we are nothing but a speck, a dust mote. Hawaii is only the front door to the world beyond. It's a long stretch past Honolulu to the ring of islands made up of Samoa, Rarotonga, and Tahiti. In those many hours of flying, there is only one place to put the jet down: a lone, rarely visited spine of coral rearing itself a mere 20 feet above the water. A mid-Pacific strip of marginally dry land that could be washed clean by even a moderately strong typhoon. Christmas Island.

CHRISTMAS ISLAND

Christmas Island is a coral atoll that thrusts itself barely above the Pacific waves. It is called Christmas Island because it was supposedly first sighted by the noted English explorer Capt. James Cook on Christmas Eve in 1777. Today Christmas Island is part of the Republic of Kiribati. Its official name is Kiritimati Atoll – note that while the names look similar, Kiritimati is only a small part of Kiribati. The name Kiritimati is the result of the translation of Christmas into the Gilbertese language where “ti” is pronounced as an “s.” Kiri“s”ma“s.”

Christmas Island is a sleepy place only 2 degrees of latitude north of the equator and more than 1,300 miles southwest of the Hawaiian Islands. The island also lies within the farthest forward time zone at Zulu (UTC) time plus 14, and therefore it is one of the first places to experience New Year's Day.



Kiritimati Atoll

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You might say it's impossible to be more than UTC plus 12 because UTC plus 13 would be the following date. But, some years back, Kiribati declared that all of its vast island territory would have the same date, if not time, which caused the international date line to veer far to the east.

CORAL

The island is the largest coral atoll on the planet with a shoreline encompassing approximately 100 miles in length, yet it wasn't populated until the 1880s when coconut plantations were established there. Now the island boasts a population of around 5,000 people.

During World War II, Kiritimati, like many Pacific islands, found itself a distant focus of the all-consuming geo-political conflict. A National Guard regiment from Connecticut appeared on Kiritimati's shores to protect the island from Japanese attack and, perhaps more importantly, to prevent the Japanese from building their own air base so close to Hawaii. This effort caused the construction of a 6,800-foot-long runway, which is now Cassidy International Airport (CXI). But for this small strip of pavement, Kiritimati may have remained completely unknown to the transiting aviators flying overhead.

CASSIDY INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Calling Cassidy an international airport might be a bit of overstatement. While technically correct because every takeoff will land in another country, Cassidy is merely a remnant of a war now 75 years past.

Aerial photos of the airport show only a few buildings beside large areas of decaying pavement. I can't imagine what it would be like to land there with 286 passengers, no facilities, no transportation, and few hotels. Probably not something worth thinking too closely about, since if you found yourself there you would simply be happy to be alive with your feet on dry ground.

The airport is marked on our maps with a triangle containing an "E" for emergency. But cautionary text warns that there are no medical facilities. This would not be a place suitable for medical diversion. Those with medical needs are merely put on another airplane and flown to Hawaii or American Samoa.

While familiar to any pilot who flies South Pacific routes, I have found only one who has actually seen Christmas Island from the air. It sits almost equidistant between two airways, B577 and B581. This pilot was diverting far off course to avoid thunderstorms and happened to stumble onto the island with the last rays of daylight illuminating its shores.

FLYOVER ISLAND

While Christmas Island is marked on South Pacific plotting charts by dozens of flights each evening, it is the equivalent of a Midwestern flyover state. In fact, only one scheduled flight per week actually lands on Christmas Island's runway.

The airline publishes a guide we can use with information for offline precautionary landings. This is designed to meet an FAA requirement to develop a "passenger protection plan" for such eventualities. The guide contains information on services, handling agents, hotels in the area to house passengers, fuel availability, etc. On Christmas Island, however, even though it is an authorized emergency field, the guide is silent. Perhaps there is just nothing to say. I understand that the few people to deplane from the once-a-week Boeing 737 service are mostly fishermen who go there only to angle for bonefish in the island's lagoon.

AN ISLAND FAR, FAR AWAY

When one's thoughts drift to such an isolated tropical isle, the mind conjures up images of volcanic mountains thrusting from the sea, expanses of dense jungle unabated from surf to peak, and pristine sand beaches molded by waves that have traveled thousands of miles to crash on its shores. Christmas Island, however, is only a flat spot amid a vast ocean. A strip of coral that is of interest only to bone fishermen and the few aviators passing overhead. A place more imagined than real on the long aerial route to Australia. *EAA*

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