



Christmas Island



Background Although Europeans sighted Christmas Island in 1615, it was named for the day of its rediscovery in 1643. Steep cliffs and dense jungle hampered attempts to explore the island over the next two centuries. The discovery of phosphate on the island in 1887 led to the UK annexing it the following year. In 1898, 200 Chinese indentured servants were brought in to work the mines, along with Malays, Sikhs, and a small number of Europeans. The UK administered Christmas Island from Singapore.

Japan invaded the island in 1942, but islanders sabotaged Japanese mining operations, making the mines relatively unproductive. After World War II, Australia and New Zealand bought the company mining the phosphate, and in 1958, the UK transferred sovereignty from Singapore to Australia in exchange for \$20 million to compensate for the loss of future phosphate income. In 1980, Australia set up the Christmas Island National Park and expanded its boundaries throughout the 1980s until it covered more than 60% of the island's territory. The phosphate mine was closed in 1987 because of environmental concerns, and Australia has rejected several efforts to reopen it.

In the 1980s, boats of asylum seekers started landing on Christmas Island, and the migrants claimed refugee status because they were on Australian territory. In 2001, Australia declared Christmas Island to be outside the Australian migration zone and built an immigration detention center on the island. Completed in 2008, the controversial detention center was closed in 2018 but then reopened in 2019. In 2020, the center served as a coronavirus quarantine facility for Australian citizens evacuated from China.

Capital	name: The Settlement (Flying Fish Cove)
Government type	non-self-governing overseas territory of Australia
Area	total : 135 sq km land: 135 sq km water: 0 sq km
Climate	tropical with a wet season (December to April) and dry season; heat and humidity moderated by trade winds
Natural resources	phosphate, beaches
Population	total: 1,692 (2021 est.)
Population growth rate	1.11% (2014 est.)
Ethnic groups	Chinese 70%, European 20%, Malay 10% (2001)

Religions	Muslim 19.4%, Buddhist 18.3%, Roman Catholic 8.8%, Protestant 6.5% (includes Anglican 3.6%, Uniting Church 1.2%, other 1.7%), other Christian 3.3%, other 0.6%, none 15.3%, unspecified 27.7% (2016 est.)
Languages	English (official) 27.6%, Mandarin 17.2%, Malay 17.1%, Cantonese 3.9%, Min Nan 1.6%, Tagalog 1%, other 4.5%, unspecified 27.1% (2016 est.)
Executive branch	chief of state: King CHARLES III (since 8 September 2022); represented by Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia General Sam MOSTYN (since 1 July 2024) head of government: Administrator Farzian ZAINAL (since 11 May 2023)
Legislative branch	legislature name: Christmas Island Shire Council
Diplomatic representation from the US	embassy: none (territory of Australia)
Economic overview	high-income Australian territorial economy; development through government services and phosphate mining; operates Australia's Immigration Detention Centre; increasing tourism and government investments; sustained environmental protections
Exports - partners	Indonesia 30%, USA 26%, Malaysia 12%, Ireland 8%, UK 7% (2023)
Exports - commodities	fertilizers, paintings, amine compounds (2023)
Imports - partners	USA 58%, Australia 40%, Malaysia 1%, Fiji 0%, Singapore 0% (2023)
Imports - commodities	aircraft, refined petroleum, cars, air conditioners, plastic products (2023)