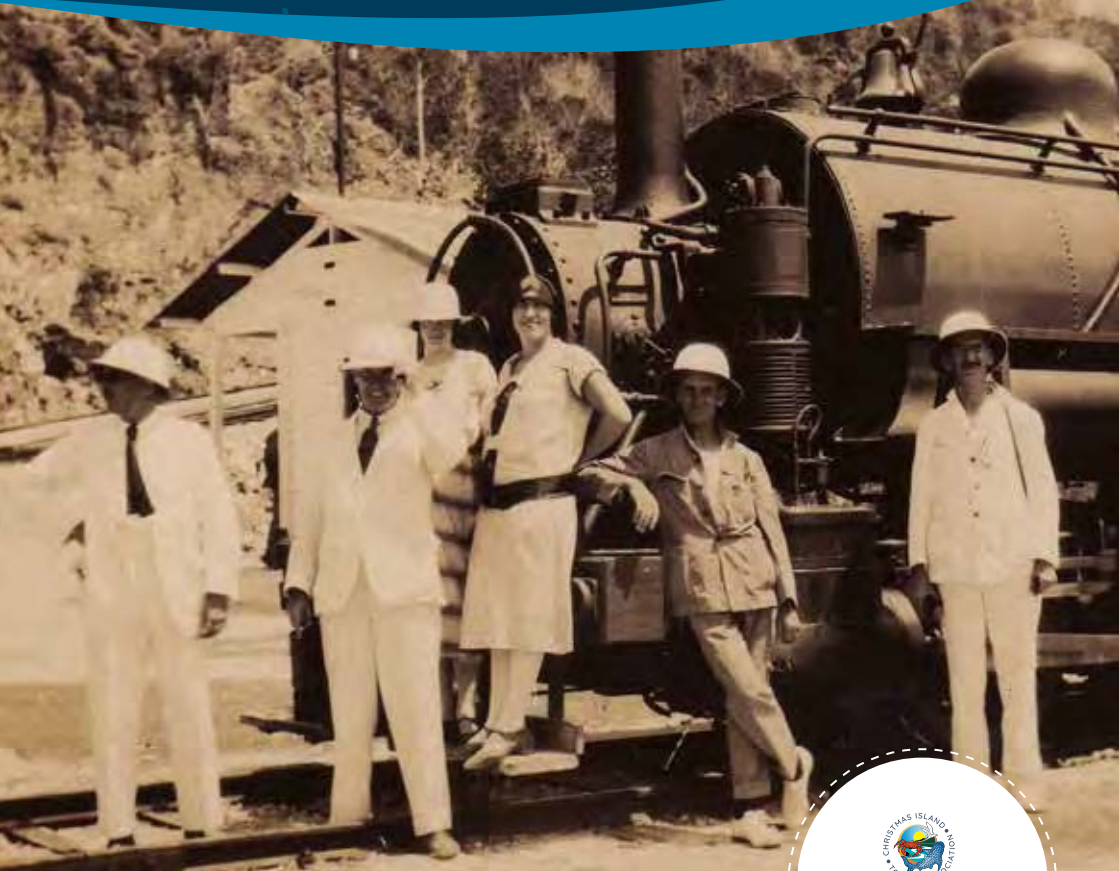


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*Christmas Island*

# THE OLD RAILWAY

— *Self-Guided Trail* —



Christmas Island  
A *Natural* Wonder

# THE OLD RAILWAY



*Shay Number 4 leaving South Point 1937.*

There was once a railway line which stretched from Drumsite to a thriving settlement at South Point.

This trail follows the route of the railway and the story of phosphate; the economic and social foundation of the Island. The trail recognises the men who cut a path through the forest, carved jungle tracks, built a railroad across the plateau to reach phosphate deposits, created a township and the women and children by their side.

Other self-guided trails focus on the historic township in *A Step Back in Time* and culture through *The Spirit of Christmas Island*. These stories are interwoven, overlap and together provide a glimpse into the rich history and culture of Christmas Island.

Grab a map from the Visitor Centre, a picnic and head to Flying Fish Cove. The complete loop will take three to five hours and involves some dirt driving. An all-wheel drive or 4WD vehicle is recommended. During the red crab migration some of the roads will be closed.



Grab a map from the Visitor Centre.



Approximate duration  
3 – 5 hours



An all-wheel drive or 4WD vehicle is recommended.



During the red crab migration some of the roads will be closed.

# 1. FLYING FISH COVE

Christmas Island rises from the depths of the Indian Ocean. It is rich in phosphate which is a soil nutrient vital to agriculture. Christmas Island phosphate is believed to be from sedimentary marine deposits left over millions of years and more recently from seabird excreta.

The port at Flying Fish Cove provides the vital link between Christmas Island and the phosphate markets. All phosphate exported from Christmas Island has moved through the port.

In 1895, the first shipment of twenty tonnes of phosphate was sent to England. In 1899 the first coolies arrived from South China and large scale mining began. The workforce soon grew to over 1,000. Later workers from South East Asia replaced contracted coolies from China.

Mining ceased in 1987 due to effects of drought, low phosphate prices and industrial unrest. Many workers were offered resettlement to Asia or mainland Australia.



*The port 1945.*



*Loading phosphate 1973.*

Phosphate production restarted in September 1990 when a company formed by the Union of Christmas Island Workers processed stockpiles from previously mined areas. This mining practice continues to this day.

Mining methods have changed over the years but basically phosphate is dug from an open cut mine, loaded onto vehicles to be crushed and dried and then transported to the wharf for shipping.

The original wharves were made of timber. Phosphate was tipped from small mining trucks directly into the ship. This was replaced by a system of conveyor belts in about 1912 and eventually by a cantilever system in 1963. These two arms can load up to 600 tonnes per hour directly into a ship's hold. At peak production 700,000 tonnes of phosphate is exported per annum.

Before regular flights, all imported goods and supplies including the railway tracks and locomotives were delivered to the port. Most locomotives were shipped to the Island in parts. Parts were then lifted from the ship onto barges and then by derrick to the shore before assembly. The ships were unloaded near the cranes which are now used to discharge the supply ship every 4 to 8 weeks.

#### **NEXT STOP**

Follow Jalan Pantai (Beach Rd) to the roundabout, once a thriving railway hub, and take Murray Rd up the hill to the George Fam Centre on the right to the Incline.

The Incline is accessed by the steps next to the water tank at the George Fam Centre. This part of the Incline is now a footpath to the suburb of Silver City, named for the aluminium cladding on the original houses.

## 2. THE INCLINE

The plan to link South Point to Drumsite by rail and then to the wharf by the Incline started with the first survey in 1908 – 1910 by Sir John Murray, the first Chairman of the Christmas Island Phosphate Company.

Work on the incline started in 1911 and was completed in 1915. It was a feat of engineering and construction to build a single lane concrete road with standard gauge railway track on both sides. The gradient varies between 1 in 6 to 1 in 7. Large gangs of coolies (Chinese workers) blasted the cuttings, built embankments and laid the sleepers and track between Drumsite and the shunting yards near the Cocos Padang on Gaze Rd.

At the top of the 1,120m Incline was a control tower to monitor the wagons travelling up and down the hill and the large winding drums. The drums, at the head of the Incline (the area now known as Drumsite) was part of the classic gravity cableway - heavy loaded cars descend and haul the empty cars back up.



*Looking down The Incline 1937.*



*The Incline.*



*Loading phosphate 1973.*



*Loading phosphate 1973.*

The Incline originally carried people to work at the Phosphate Hill deposits in a small open-sided carriage, called a Rake. The steep hill was compensated by the sloping bench seat, by the time the steepest part of the incline was reached people were sitting upright.

In 1958 the settlement was linked to Drumsite by a new road which cut the Incline in two. Phosphate was then transported by a conveyor belt system which ran from Drumsite down to the dryers and storage bins above the loading point and cantilevers.

### ➔ NEXT STOP

Continue along Murray Rd to the Community Hall at Poon Saan. On the side is a large mural.

### 3. RAILWAY MURAL – POON SAAN

The mural, taken from a photograph, shows a train being hauled up the Incline on 1 December 1921.

The locomotive is Shay Number 4. It arrived on Christmas Island in early 1916 and was the second train in the fleet, the first arriving in May 1914. A Shay was a wood-burning steam train built in America to haul large loads at low speeds.

This engine was in service until the Japanese occupation in World War II (March 1942- August 1945) when it was damaged during a bombing raid.

The social makeup of the Island in 1921 can be glimpsed in the mural with a European manager at the front dressed in white and a worker behind.



*From the same era - 1921.*

#### ➔ NEXT STOP

Drive past the Old Dryers. This is part of the working mine and can only be seen from the road or twice a year when the small Taoist Temple at the Old Dryers is open as part of the Hungry Ghost festival and God's birthday celebrations.

## 4. OLD DRYERS

The main line from South Point ended at the Drumsite railway yard, which had a covered siding, weighbridge, workshop and three rail tracks. The centre track was on a bridge to enable phosphate to be dumped for drying. Phosphate is wet and heavy when extracted and is dried for ease of transport. The remnants of this track is visible.

Phosphate production was measured by the number of full ore cars transported daily on the railway. In the years before World War Two these phosphate cars carried around 25 tons of ore each, 20 cars a day was good day.



*Covered siding 2019.*

*Dryers 1950s.*

### ➔ NEXT STOP

Along Murray Rd are glimpses of the old railway line. These are most visible outside the Christmas Island Phosphates Office. Stop near the mine office on Lam Lok Loh.



## 5. RAILWAY LINES AT DRUMSITE

With the closure of the mine in 1987, most tracks were pulled up and sold overseas for scrap.

The railway was about 17.5km long (11 miles), standard gauge and laid in 27kg (60lb) rail which was bolted to steel sleepers then packed with limestone ballast.

The first trains (Shays) were steam and mainly used to build the railway to South Point hauling rails, sleepers and other material. Once the railway was built these trains moved phosphate at the top and the bottom of The Incline.

The main track was overhauled in the 1960s. Prior to this all track maintenance was done by hand. A report in 1932 says 'in several places the (train) line has sunk slightly due doubtless to burrowing crabs'.



*Hauling Phosphate.*

## 6. MINE OFFICE

This office, still in use, was built in 1967 for the British Phosphate Commission.

By 1900, phosphate mining was underway and many labourers were recruited from China through the Straits Settlements (now Singapore and Malaysia) to work a six-day week. Housing and food were supplied and although conditions were harsh it was better than the poverty back home.

In the early 20th century Christmas Island, along with the Pacific island territories of Nauru and Banaba (then known as Ocean Island.) monopolised the global phosphate market.

Mining operations were disrupted during World War Two when the Japanese occupied Christmas Island.

The Australian and New Zealand governments took over the Christmas Island mining lease in 1948 under the management of the British Phosphate Commission. The British Phosphate Commission had extraordinary power over everything on the Island from food, accommodation and if a person fell out of favour they left the Island with their documents stamped NTR – Never to Return.

Ten years later, on 1 October 1958, Christmas Island became a Territory of Australia.



*Mine Workers 1950s.*



*Mine Workers 1950s.*

Production increased in the 1960s and 1970s. More low paid workers were hired from South East Asia. In 1975 the Union of Christmas Island Workers (UCIW) was set up to address social and wage inequality between mainland Australian standards and the low paid Christmas Island workforce. For the first time the mine management faced a unionised workforce and a long and bitter fight ensued. Success came for the UCIW and the Asian workers, but was short lived with the closure of the mine in 1987.

In 1989, the Christmas Island National Park (established in 1980) was extended to 63% of Christmas Island to protect the unique habitat and endangered species, notably the Abbott's Booby. These conservation measures have restricted access to phosphate for mining, while

enabling tourism and other industries to develop.

Following tense negotiations with the Australian Government, a company owned by members of the Union of Christmas Island Workers recommenced phosphate mining in 1990.

Over time, shares were sold and now the mine is operated by Phosphate Resources Limited (PRL), trading as Christmas Island Phosphates. PRL and its parent company have diversified into maintenance, fuel and marine services on Christmas Island and palm oil in Malaysia.

**➔ NEXT STOP**

Walk along the train lines to the Old Railway Station a short way along Murray Rd on the left.

## 7. MURRAY ROAD RAILWAY STATION

During the 1950s and 1960s a large community of mine workers and families lived at South Point. This railway station was used by the children going to and from school. Prior to 1968 this station was just a wooden platform.

By the 1960s, the School Train was a fleet of Wickham railcars. The carriages had wooden benches, side panels, open doors and open windows. Over time safety improvements were made to the rail cars. The journey could take up to one and a half hours as they had to give way to phosphate trains. Due to the long journey the children could not participate in after school activities at Drumsite.

The settlement at South Point was closed in 1971 and the people re-located, mainly to the flats at Poon Saan.



1963 school train at Drumsite.

### ➔ NEXT STOP

An old train is about 1.5km along Murray Rd, on the left just past the crab bridge. During the red crab migration this bridge helps the crabs safely cross the road and the traffic to pass freely below!

Along the way, look for the new dryers on the right where the rails cross the road. These dryers have been operating since 1969 with trucks and road-trains delivering the phosphate for processing.

## 8. OLD TRAIN ON MURRAY RD

The railway continued along Murray Rd. The remains of the Whitcomb Locomotive Number 8901 sits on rail tracks, slowly becoming at one with the jungle.

This American made engine was one of two which arrived in early 1947. It is a classic centre cab twin engine yard shunter fitted with two V8 Caterpillar diesel engines coupled to two Westinghouse generators and four Westinghouse traction motors. It was painted yellow with black and yellow dazzle stripes. The train arrived in parts and was assembled on Christmas Island to take phosphate between South Point and Drumsite.

### → NEXT STOP

Drive the old railway route across the central plateau. Continue along Murray Rd for 4km then turn left towards the Pink House and continue along to the East West Baseline.

Along the route of the railway line cuttings and embankments are clearly visible as well as:

- a stop/go sign on the left just after the turn
- a telephone box on the right in 300m
- rail tracks cross the road in 100m
- rail lines are still visible at the Pink House turnoff, continue straight towards the East West Baseline. The Pink House was part of Camp 4 and is part of the Christmas Island National Park.



*Whitcombe locomotive number 3 hauling full phosphate hoppers at South Point 1952.*

## 9. CENTRAL PLATEAU

The track was laid over fairly level terrain in comparison to the Incline. The main tasks were clearing vegetation by hand, creating a level track, laying the track bed, positioning steel sleepers, dropping rails in place and then bolting it together.

There were 8 fettlers camps built along the line during construction. Once the railway was completed the track gangs were relocated to South Point and Drumsite. Camp 4 (the Pink House) continued to be used for rail maintenance and Camp 5 (no longer visible) by the wood cutters.

Both phosphate, passenger and the weekly supply trains used the railway.

The Shays took two hours to journey from South Point to Drumsite with 20-30 minutes on each journey to refuel with wood and water. Water was sourced from Grant's Well.

Before the School Train was in service, wagons were converted to transport people and goods. The carriages were spartan with bench seats against the walls and hauled behind the dusty open phosphate hoppers. As well as the school run, the wagons conveyed theatre goers from Drumsite and Camps 4 and 5 to South Point for the Saturday night open air cinema.



*Building the railway 1914.*



Camp 5 1952.

### ➔ NEXT STOP

**South Point:** Turn left towards South Point at the East West Baseline then follow the signs to the Old South Point Railway past both old and active mining leases.

### ↗ DETOUR

The energetic may wish to walk or ride a bike along the 7km Telegraph Track following the route of the railway between the Blowholes Rd and South Point. The trail starts 800m from the junction on the left past the rail tracks which cross the road.

A small Taoist temple dedicated to Tham Kong Sheng Ye is on the track on the right 200 metres past the Blowholes Rd turn off. This temple served the workers at nearby Camp 5 and was believed to protect them from harsh conditions and weather extremes.

## 10. SOUTH POINT

Now in ruins, South Point was once thriving community that lasted around 60 years. It was established in 1914 to provide a workforce for the nearby phosphate mines.

The train station, railway lines, loading gantries, the walls of a 100,000 gallon water tank are still visible.

The settlement grew to become a significant population centre, accommodating the largest part of the mine workforce. At its peak there were several hundred people living at South Point, many with families and children. There were houses, a kongsi store, a dispensary, a police station with lock up, a discreetly located brothel, playing fields and an outdoor cinema showing English, Mandarin, Cantonese and Tamil language films and of course the railway station and mine infrastructure. The Chinese Literary Association ran cultural evening classes and night school for the children.

In the early days, mining phosphate at South Point was hard work performed by an army of Chinese contract labourers. After the rainforest was cleared the top 2 metres of soil was removed and dumped in a nearby fields. The phosphate was dug with a hoe leaving behind an array of limestone pinnacles. These are clearly visible across the Island as fern and rock fields. The phosphate was loaded into baskets and when full, tipped into trams hitched to a small locomotive.

The narrow gauge quarry trams ran to the top of the loading bridge, originally a steel frame with a timber deck and tipped the product into the chute that loaded directly on the standard gauge phosphate hopper wagons for transport to Drumsite.

The first exports from South Point occurred in 1923 and by 1926 South Point was producing 100,000 tons a year.



*The School Train at South Point.*



*Railroad and Gantry 1927. The long building was the Chinese Manager's house until World War Two. After the War it was occupied by the European South Point Manager.*



*Loading at South Point before World War Two.*

A covered siding was built in 1928 for storing loaded phosphate hoppers in an effort to keep the phosphate dry.

The mine operated six days a week. During the 1940s and 1950s, on Sundays the engines were maintained at the Drumsite workshop and returned to South Point to begin work on Monday at 6:00am. A supply train operated on Saturday afternoons providing food and general supplies.

Between 1950 and 1953 a new loading bridge at South Point was installed and then upgraded in the 1960s. To improve efficiency, phosphate was dumped in stockpiles rather than directly into the railway wagons.

By the end of May 1972 the settlement of South Point was bulldozed and the phosphate it was sitting on mined. Most of the people moved to Poon Saan but South Point will always be 'home'.

### HISTORICAL TALE

On 21 September 1922 a solar eclipse cast its shadow across the British Empire with Christmas Island in its path. Two expeditions (British and German) were mounted to view the eclipse and test Einstein's Theory of Relativity. A large telescope was mounted at South Point but the weather was against them and the voyage unsuccessful. However, those watching from Settlement had clear views.



*Expedition plaque now at the Christmas Island National Park Nursery.*

### NEXT STOP

Before heading back to town along the North South Baseline stop at the nearby temples. See *The Spirit of Christmas Island* for information.



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# Christmas Island

A *Natural* Wonder



Australian Government

**BUILDING OUR FUTURE**

*Produced by the Christmas Island Tourism Association with support from the Australian Government. 2019*

*Photos are from the Collection of the National Archives of Australia, Christmas Island Past and Present and personal collections.*

## For more information:

 [christmas.net.au](http://christmas.net.au)

 [ChristmasIslandTourism](https://www.facebook.com/ChristmasIslandTourism)

 [ChristmasIsland](https://www.instagram.com/ChristmasIsland)

## Other self-guided trails:

