

## Tourism: Reading

I was told Coconut Island was developing fast. Presumably this meant it was a once pristine island on the downhill slope to environmental ruin caused by uncontrolled tourist development. Perhaps they meant it in a more positive light. I wasn't sure. I went there to find out.



Driving down the east coast expressway, you don't see much. The landscape is pretty flat most of the way with just a few trees and roadside shacks selling pineapples. Oh, and of course the usual construction teams in the never-ending process of widening and 'improving' the road. However, once you get to the end of the road and the ferry terminal, you look across the sea and see a huge mountainous, almost forbidding, island rising up in front of you. I felt a frisson of excitement, or was I just a bit nervous, as I had also just seen a rusting car ferry approaching the small pier?

We crossed without mishap, but left the ferry stuck behind a convoy of trucks carrying construction materials ready to concrete over this beautiful island. From the ferry stop, the road rises abruptly over a small hill and then as it comes down the other side we enter tourist land. Although we knew the sparkling white beach was just metres from the road, we were denied a first sight for quite some time. Not by rows of palm trees but by rows of shops selling tourist tat. We couldn't even see these too well because of all the dust thrown up by the trucks. Fortunately the tourist shops thinned out within 20 minutes and shortly afterwards we arrived at our destination: Seaview Resort. We weren't disappointed. We had been promised fine white sand and clear turquoise water and we got it. Only problem was there was just a few feet of white sand and that was mostly covered in beach towels from the overweight European tourists who had got there before us. Ah well not to worry, we could explore the beach for a quiet spot later. We checked out the rooms and facilities and everything was just as you would expect from a mid-range hotel. It also had quite a nice little restaurant right on the beach and therefore great for a cold beer and our first sunset - perfect!

The following morning after cold bacon and eggs for breakfast it seemed that the same people from yesterday were hogging the sun beds and beach space again so we decided to walk down the beach and explore a little further afield. In actual fact I was very pleasantly surprised. I was expecting the whole beach to be lined with resorts packed side to side but actually on this beach there was still plenty of space for developers. The closest buildings to us were a couple of beachside family-run cheap and cheerful restaurants with bamboo chairs and tables. At 300 metres away, they were also just too far away for most of the package tourists. And this was generally where we spent most of our days. An added bonus was that at the shack - White Sands to give it its official name (the name was on a piece of driftwood tacked to a nearby palm tree), the food was far, far superior to the resort. Whereas the resort chefs had removed any local flavour from their creations, the White Sands staff had managed to keep their food authentic.

So, most of our days were spent relaxing by the sea but one day we went with the imaginatively titled 'Fun' cruise for a trip round the islands further south. We were ready at the appointed place and time (8.40) and sure enough at 8.40 local time (9.15 by my watch) the boat appeared to pick us up from the beach. We climbed aboard to see it was already quite full. More room for everyone cries the captain - plenty of room on the floor! It wasn't an auspicious start but I must admit it got better throughout the day.

We steamed south. From the sea we could see the extent of the development on Coconut Island. There were plenty more resorts being built, the backdrops of swaying palms had become construction sites and the lush green hillsides had become bare red scars soon to be covered with tourist developments. However, our day was spent steaming from one little island to the next with plenty of opportunity for snorkelling and swimming. At four we turned around and were dropped off at our hotel just after sunset. I'm usually sceptical of these organized trips but I would certainly recommend this one. Not too bad for the price - Oh, I forgot to mention the lunch on board was excellent also.

Before too long our sojourn on Coconut Island was over. Overall, I was pleasantly surprised. Okay, it's getting developed but you can still find pristine beaches by spending a little bit more effort to get there. In general most of the development is on the beach and so the interior is still magnificent. It'll take another few years yet to spoil it, so my advice is to enjoy it while you can.