

Festival celebrates Indigenous culture

Charmaine Petie heads north for one of the biggest Indigenous youth festivals in Australia.

It's 6pm and the sun is only just beginning to set over Thursday Island.

I'm standing atop Fort Lookout with breathtaking 360-degree views of the Torres Strait. It's like something out of a travel brochure. The sky is a rich palette of pinks and oranges and below me tiny islands jut out of the shimmering aquamarine water. The only sound is the wind whistling across the mountain top.

It seems like an eternity since leaving the commotion of Canberra and the contrast from the winter weary city I've left behind is so complete that I find it difficult to imagine that I'm still in Australia.

I am on Thursday Island for Croc Festival and for the next two days I will join more than 40 other

organisations in promoting career opportunities in the region.

Now in its 10th year, Croc Festival has become a key event on the Customs event calendar. This unique celebration of youth and culture is aimed at primary and high school students in regional and remote Australia and represents a prime opportunity to attract more Indigenous Australians to Customs.

Thursday Island is the first stop on Croc Festival's Australia-wide tour that will travel to seven other regional and remote destinations until late October. This year will see Customs attend four of the seven Croc Festival celebrations including Derby and Mullewa in Western Australia and Port Augusta in South Australia.

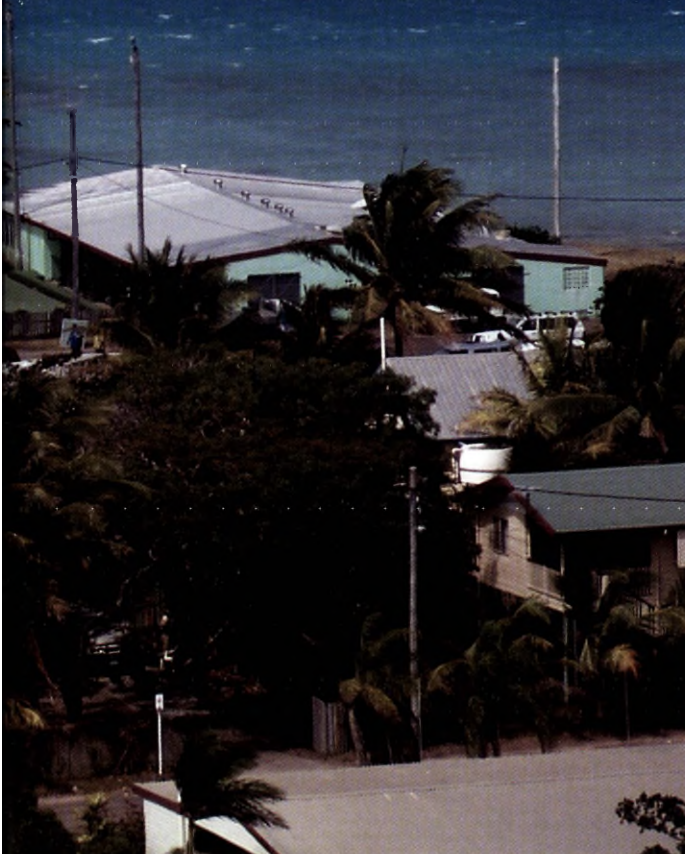




I arrive early for the first day of Croc Festival and I'm immediately blown away by the variety of activities on offer. The Festival schedule offers something to suit all interests from rock climbing and traditional dancing to cricket, writing workshops and a robotics challenge.

By 8:30am I'm standing underneath a wide blue marquee that will soon transform into the Croc Festival careers market for the next two days. Spirits are high and the excitement is palpable as we wait for Croc Festival 2007 to officially kick off. It doesn't take long for the first wave of students to arrive. The Customs stand is consistently busy and officers are kept on their toes as they field a variety of questions ranging from Customs role through to specific jobs within the organisation.

Customs technology—including a snake-eye camera used to search boats and cargo—and





promotional items are a big hit with the students, but the clear strength of the stand is the presence of Indigenous Customs officers. Many of the students from Thursday Island and other islands know the officers working locally—another big incentive to come up and say ‘hello’.

The officers’ presence is vital for overcoming the shyness of the students and ensuring Customs recruitment messages make an impression. Students of all ages are drawn to the officers and they seem eager to learn more about how the officers got into Customs and their daily work.

“It’s really important for kids to know what job opportunities are available in the area,” Thursday Island Customs officer Pele Torenbeek says as the morning session winds up.

“Croc Festival is a great event for building awareness and for connecting with the local community.”

Customs Career

Before each new session begins, students are asked what they would like to do when they finish school. A large number of these students select Customs as a potential career.

“They’re real role models,” Pele explains, indicating the Customs Indigenous officers at our stand.

“Girls and boys see people from their community working for Customs and they feel very proud. We get a lot of questions about our Torres Strait Islander Marine Traineeship program.”

It is clear after just a few minutes that these Customs officers are an inspiration to Indigenous youth. It’s also clear what a significant contribution they make towards strengthening Customs relationship with Indigenous communities.

Customs maintains regular contact with the island communities and an understanding of the local

culture and language enables Customs to communicate its key messages more effectively.

Community Relations

Pele is just one of the Indigenous officers at the Thursday Island District Office making a big difference to community relations. A typical day for Pele may include flying by helicopter to the outer islands to attend to a suspicious activity report, clearing boats and aircraft or conducting patrols on a Ready Response Vessel.

“Every day is different,” Pele says. “You never know what to expect. Working on Thursday Island has also really opened my eyes to the different customs in the region. I love meeting people from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds.”

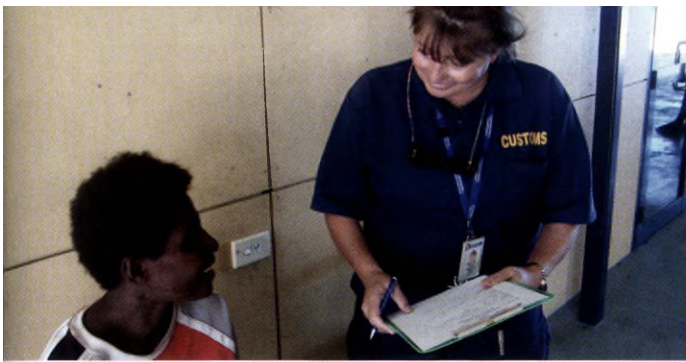
Pele grew up in the Torres Strait on Moa Island and it is apparent that she loves the lifestyle on ‘TI’—as it’s known by the locals.

Water Sport

The pristine waters provide a plethora of options for anyone into water sports from boating and scuba diving to water skiing. Swimming is also popular but it is probably best to consult the locals before you dive in—unless you want to come face-to-face with the resident crocs.

Water sports aside, Pele says the strong community support is a huge highlight of living and working on Thursday Island. This sense of community really stands out for me, and I find that I cannot walk anywhere without receiving a welcoming smile and friendly wave.

As the afternoon shadows begin to lengthen, Croc Festival comes to a close and we head back to Customs House. We drive past stunning natural scenery and a steady flow of pedestrian and vehicle traffic. This quiet island is experiencing something of a tourist boom.



Job opportunities for Indigenous Australians

Customs offers Indigenous Australians some of the most diverse job opportunities of any government agency.

There are a number of career pathways available and Indigenous Australians can join Customs as:

- Customs Trainee
- Customs Graduate Trainee
- through the National Indigenous Cadetship Program
- through general recruitment.

Torres Strait Islanders can also join Customs National Marine Unit on a 12-month program as sea-going crew.

More information is available online at www.customs.gov.au under 'careers and recruitment'.



Hotels are booked out and the ferry between Thursday Island and Horn Island, where the Torres Strait's main airport is located, is running extra services to cope with the increased visitor numbers.

For an island that is just three square kilometres, Thursday Island certainly leaves a lasting impression. As I board the ferry back to the Horn Island Airport I reflect on just how relaxed and carefree the Thursday Island Customs officers seem.

Maybe it is the free rent, the two return airfares a year to visit family, the long, warm sunny days or the picture-perfect scenery. Whatever it is, Thursday Island is difficult to reach but even harder to leave. It is one of those places you continue to dream about long after you have returned home.