

DESTINATION ♦ LORD HOWE ISLAND



SPARKLING LAGOON

HOWE'S THE SERENITY
 Discover an island with the air of a country town
 CELESTE MITCHELL

Gower Wilson calls out to his dairy queens by name, each cow dutifully milling in for her turn. He positions the bucket underneath her udder and slowly and methodically pinches and pulls, the fresh milk hitting the bucket in rhythmical tones. Every day, locals place empty glass milk bottles on Gower's fence, with a \$2 coin, for him to refill and return.

"I've been milking cows since I was five years old," he tells me, the small crinkles around his eyes belying his 78 years. Gower grew up on Lord Howe's rolling green hills, one of the three or four landowning families. Asked about change, he says, "I've seen it change with TVs and telephones and electricity before that. But I was pretty young then."

Electricity aside, Lord Howe Island has managed to stay in a blissful time warp – free of mobile phone service, seatbelt laws and shoes at the primary school. It might have something to do with the fact it was pretty much the last island on Earth to be discovered.

Somehow, this nature nirvana remained hidden in the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean until 1788 when it was spotted by Lieutenant Henry Lidgbird Ball, sailing First Fleet ship *Supply* from Sydney to Norfolk Island. No sign of human contact prior has ever been found.

I'd read much about the island – the place Sir David Attenborough famously declared was, "so extraordinary it is almost unbelievable" – but after flying for two hours from Brisbane over the deep blue, the iridescent coral-strewn lagoon beamed up at me as we landed at the foot of primordial peaks, Mt Gower and Mt Lidgbird, and I was rendered speechless.

THE SIMPLE LIFE

"Oh, you don't need your seatbelt here," local tourism representative, Tenelle Meehan says as I instinctively grab at the air near my left shoulder. Never mind the dual cab ute I'm sitting in belongs to the island's only policeman.

"You do need to wear a helmet when riding, though," she adds. That's Lord Howe. You don't get room keys when you check in because no one locks their doors. Keys dangle from the ignition of parked cars. And if your bike isn't where you left it, rest assured, it will show up.

With a resident population of 350 and a maximum of 400 visitors at one time, Lord Howe is like a floating country town. A speed limit of 25km/h is behind the lack of seatbelts, and bicycle racks are scattered over

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7 - 15 April, 2020

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DESTINATION ♦ LORD HOWE ISLAND

YOU DON'T GET ROOM KEYS WHEN YOU CHECK IN BECAUSE NO ONE LOCKS THEIR DOORS

the island for those travelling at their own speed. But perhaps it's the lack of connectivity that really helps visitors slow down.

"I had an experience, in my first or second year here, when a lady came up to me in an absolute fritz asking where she could get mobile reception," Senior Constable Simon Meehan tells me over coffee at The Anchorage one morning. "I just laughed and said, '700km west'. You could almost see her brain explode!

"Two days later it was like she was someone out of Nimbin; the hair was down, she was in a long flowing dress. Now, this is her place where she goes to get away from the world."

A MICROCOSM OF PARADISE

On my first morning, a lone swimmer slices the barely ruffled lagoon. White terns dance overhead as I wander past kayaks lined up in the grass; towering Norfolk pines frame the boat sheds where I meet Anthony from Marine Adventures. A fifth-generation islander, Anthony knows this lagoon inside and out and this morning we're off to spot turtles.

Lord Howe's human story has been a slow evolution but its environment reacts and changes within a lifetime.

Before the runway was built in the late '70s, flying boats used to deliver visitors to Lord Howe Island, taking off from Rose Bay in Sydney. Glamorous though they were with oversized seats and three-course meals served on fine china, they weren't very kind to the lagoon.

In the relatively short time since, coral and seagrass have regrown, and the turtle population is increasing every year. We lose count of the number of green and hawksbill turtles we glide over in our glass-bottom boat before playing hide and seek with surge wrasse and striped catfish snorkelling a shipwreck.

HIKING INTO THE CLOUDS

Jack Shick walks ahead of me, leading one of Australia's most lauded and challenging day hikes. He's a laconic



LITTLE ISLAND TRACK

The island offers stunning landscapes and a simpler way of life; walking trails are everywhere, all with gobsmacking vistas.

PICTURES: AIRLOFT, JACKSON ARKADIEFF

bloke. Fit and wiry, wearing a T-shirt that says, "I climbed Mt Gower and survived". And sandals.

To be fair, he replaces them with shoes to demonstrate his palm-climbing technique – a skill he picked up from his father who earned his living in the days of kentia palm exports.

With a strap of canvas looped around his feet, he shinies up the trunk and back faster than you can say cooee. "Bit of spit in your hands, boys, that's the trick," Jack nods to the two youngest of our climbing crew.

While there are walking trails everywhere, all with gobsmacking vistas, the thigh-burning full-day hike to the summit of Mt Gower sits atop many bucket lists. Jack's been guiding climbs for 26 years and has clocked up more than 2027 trips to the top.

"I don't think I'll hit 3000 somehow, that's another 15 years of work," he tells me. "I'd like to be retired."

The mountains here almost have their own weather system and today we're battered by wind, clutching guide ropes as we look down on to

palm trees and crashing surf. By the time we reach The Saddle – our 500m mark – Jack's barefoot.

Soon, we're swaddled by the cool, damp air of the cloud forest. "It's a pretty special forest; lots of endemic species you won't find anywhere else but on Mt Gower," Jack says. As we walk, he points out the mountain rose, which bursts with red blossoms at Christmas time, blue plums, mountain apples and hot bark trees.

But it's when Jack cups his hands and performs a warbling call, and a trusting providence petrel comes thudding at his feet, that we're given even more privileged proof of Lord Howe's magic. Soon, up to 40,000 of this dark grey beauty's mates will fly in from their massive migration from Siberia, to breed here.

Once they leave, Jack says, "they don't touch land until they come back again. They just feed off the ocean."

AN OPEN (TEXT) BOOK

This protected pocket of the planet offers up such an intense hit of

nature, "It's like living in a David Attenborough documentary," says Ian Hutton, naturalist and curator of the excellent Lord Howe Island museum (lhimuseum.com).

Ian came to the island for what he thought would be two years for work and never left. The qualified plant ecologist has since started Friends of Lord Howe Island – leading more than 83 weeding eco tours. He's also written more than 20 books, leads weekly reef walks and delivers five lectures on the island every week. He's a living, breathing encyclopedia of Lord Howe.

On my final morning, my host, Sharon, pops over to let me know my flight is running to schedule, after bad weather caused cancellations the two previous days, and I feel a rush of disappointment. Like Lord Howe's endemic, endangered flightless wood hens, my feet could very well become rooted here.

THE WRITER WAS A GUEST OF LORD HOWE ISLAND TOURISM

ESCAPE ROUTE

LORD HOWE ISLAND

GETTING THERE

Qantas flies direct to Lord Howe Island from Sydney and Brisbane (Saturdays only) but brace yourself for long-haul prices due to limited seat availability and weather-dependent cancellations. It pays to invest in travel insurance. qantas.com

STAYING THERE

Everything – from the freshly ground coffee right down to the hand soap – at Waimarie Apartments comes with a story and the personal touch of owner, fifth-generation Lord Howe Islander Sharon van Gelderen. From \$320 a night. waimarielordhoweisland.com.au Go all-inclusive at Arajilla Retreat near Old Settlement Beach. As a fellow diner tells me: "It's like being on a cruise ship but on land; everyone is so friendly." Leave time for an ayurvedic massage in the spa. Rooms from \$750 a person a night. arajilla.com.au

DOING THERE

Join Anthony for Marine Adventures' 3½-hour glass-bottom boat tour to North Bay, including turtle spotting in the North Passage, snorkelling, guided seabird walk, and a walk to the top of Mt Eliza, for \$70 a person. marineadventures.com.au Peter from Islander Cruises has lived on Lord Howe for 24 years but to some locals, he's still, "from Sydney". Join his snorkelling tour to the lagoon's southern sanctuary zone (\$60pp) or try a guided Aquascoter tour (varying prices for shore, lagoon and offshore tours). islandercruises.com.au Jack Shick from Sea to Summit Expeditions offers twice-weekly guided walks to the top of Mt Gower for \$100 a person. lordhoweislandtours.net

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