



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Lord Howe; coral reefs; Arajilla's dining room; entrance to Capella Lodge.

## strictly for the birds

Pristine beaches, teeming wildlife and a leisurely pace are just some of the attractions of Lord Howe Island, a tiny piece of paradise off NSW's coast

**T**here's something quite surreal about flying over hundreds of kilometres of ocean and suddenly spying your destination – a chiselled sliver of land – in the middle of nowhere. It might have something to do with the fact that I watched the recent remake of *King Kong* the night before I left home. Not that Lord Howe Island remotely resembles director Peter Jackson's hellish Skull Island (except, perhaps, for its remoteness). In brilliant sunshine, the mass of Lord Howe fills the plane's cabin windows far more benignly, although the cloud-swathed bulks of Mt Lidgbird and Mt Gower do add a frisson of foreboding to the experience.

Despite its diminutive size (11 kilometres by under three at its widest point), this World Heritage site, 600 kilometres east of Port Macquarie, packs quite a weekend punch. Because of the vagaries of flight schedules, you're not going to get away with a swift two-nighter, and you'll be all the better for it, as the slow-paced, slightly folksy atmosphere seeps into your city-jangled soul. We're here for four nights and by the time we leave, we've adopted that laconic island wave to anyone who passes us by. We're also nodding off at about 8.30pm, but more of that later.

"Where are the keys? They've not left us the room key!" It appears that at

Arajilla Retreat we don't have one, which is pretty much par for the course all over the island. As one local comments, "If someone stole something, where would they go with it? We know everyone here." And she's right, they do. Even at the car-hire place we're greeted like old friends. It's spooky, but in a nice way. The car turns out to be entirely unnecessary, as it takes about 15 minutes to drive around Lord Howe, even at the 25km speed limit (which, after a couple of days on foot, seems quite racy).

Situated towards the north of the island, Arajilla comprises a series of smart, modern suites, with a main dining room and lounge bar that, in daytime, have the feel of an airy plantation residence and at night take on a more exotic, chilled-out feel, with flickering candles and the rustling of the surrounding kentia palms and banyan trees. The food – breakfast, lunch and dinner are included in the tariff – is also uniformly good, with the emphasis on unfussy but imaginatively cooked produce. They'll also rustle up picnic or barbecue backpacks if you're planning a day's walk or boat trip.

Much of the accommodation is full board here and, with a limit of just 400 tourist beds on the island, you're never going to feel like you're crowded out (or be unable to make a restaurant booking). In fact, a gentle warning to city slickers,



most people eat early – and I'm talking 6.30pm – which can be disconcerting, especially when at 8pm everyone else has left and you're just starting your entrée.

At the fabulously chic and luxurious Capella Lodge, however (the only property on the island with dress-circle views of Mounts Lidgbird and Gower), cocktails and a long, drawn-out dinner are definitely the go, but only for guests. Here, chefs Phil Woolaston and Matt

FROM TOP RIGHT  
Pandanus restaurant;  
Ball's Pyramid;  
a masked booby.



## The variety and volume of birds everywhere you look is astounding

stumbles past us on their way back from the renowned (and renownedly challenging) Mt Gower climb. They're exhausted, euphoric and eager for a few sundowners at the Pinetrees resort boatshed on Lagoon Beach.

We're made of less stern stuff, so settle on a morning's walk along the northern edge of the island from Kim's Lookout along the sharp ridge to Malabar Hill and Dawsons Point. The expansive views of the island are spectacular, but more tantalising are the glimpses beyond Mt Gower of Balls Pyramid, an immense triangle of rock that slices up from the ocean about 20 kilometres south east of Lord Howe. We join an afternoon boat trip there with local Jack Shick, another passionate advocate of Lord Howe's natural treasures, spending a couple of saltwater-soaked hours crashing through the swell with dolphins racing ecstatically in our wake.

Up close, Balls Pyramid is everything a feverish *King Kong*-affected imagination could desire. A few reckless souls have climbed to its summit, including Dick Smith – twice – but now its towering rock faces are out of bounds to all but the thousands of Kermadec petrels that breed here. And that's Lord Howe in a nutshell: from the complete absence of any sign of the usual 21st-century litter to the fearless curiosity of a wild animal, nature comes first, even if it means being late for dinner because you've had to coax a muttonbird to safer sleeping quarters. **VE+T**

Upton (both ex-Fins in Byron Bay) ensure we bide our time over dishes such as Peruvian ceviche of kingfish and brioche with Hervey Bay scallops and a white miso and ginger sauce.

But it's nature, not nightlife, that makes Lord Howe Island memorable. The variety and sheer volume of birds everywhere you look is astounding, whether high on coastal cliffs, in the undergrowth, perched photogenically on a gatepost or, if it happens to be a muttonbird, having a snooze in the middle of the road.

At Neds Beach, we wade into the shallows to feed scores of kingfish and bluefish so large they're in danger of knocking us over. Then we put a few dollars in the honesty box, grab snorkels and fins, and swim straight out from the shoreline to glide through the brilliant coral gardens that form Australia's southernmost tropical reef.

Late one afternoon we walk to Little Island with naturalist Ian Hutton, where he 'calls down' the teeming, swooping masses of Providence petrels from the summit of Mt Gower. As we perch on the rocks at the base of the mountain, gaping at this aerial ballet, a trail of walkers



## + LORD HOWE ISLAND FILE



**Details** For more information, contact Tourism NSW, 132 077, [visitnsw.com.au](http://visitnsw.com.au). Qantas flies direct to Lord Howe Island from Sydney and Brisbane, 131 313, [qantas.com](http://qantas.com).

**Where to stay** **Arajilla Lodge**, Old Settlement Beach, 1800 063 928, [arajilla.com.au](http://arajilla.com.au). **Capella Lodge**, Lagoon Rd, bookings and enquiries, (02) 9918 4355, [lordhowe.com](http://lordhowe.com). **Earl's Anchorage**, Anderson Rd, (02) 6563 2029, [earlsanchorage.com.au](http://earlsanchorage.com.au). Set in a clearing among the kentia palms, with breezy ocean views, these six beautifully furnished modern bungalows (four with one bedroom; two with two bedrooms) are self-catered.

**Where to eat** Much of the island accommodation is full board, but many properties welcome visitors for dinner. Transport is generally provided free to and from your destination.

**Pandanus**, Anderson Rd, (02) 6563 2400, [pandanus-lhi.com.au](http://pandanus-lhi.com.au). A daily blackboard menu is the starting point at this city-style restaurant. You then fill out a form divided into 'starters for two', 'mains' and 'sides'. Specialties are thin-crust pizza, pasta, great seafood and lush desserts. **Humpty Mick's Café**, Neds Beach Rd, (02) 6563 2155. Good breakfast and lunch, and the locals are as prevalent as visitors.

**What to do** There are numerous options for all ages and levels of fitness, whether it's walking, snorkelling, diving, fishing, boating, cycling or just lazing about on a pristine beach. Contact **Lord Howe Island Tourism Association**, 1800 240 937, [lordhoweisland.info](http://lordhoweisland.info). **Lord Howe Island Nature Tours**, (02) 6563 2447, [lhitours@bigpond.com](mailto:lhitours@bigpond.com). Ian Hutton offers a range of guided tours, from a half day to eight days.

**Mount Gower Guided Walks**, (02) 6563 2218, [seatosummit@bigpond.com](mailto:seatosummit@bigpond.com). Jack Shick regularly escorts groups on one of Australia's best day walks. He also organises fishing and diving trips to Balls Pyramid. **Wilson's Hire**, (02) 6563 2045. Many properties, such as Arajilla, provide guests with bikes, but you can hire these, cars and more here.