

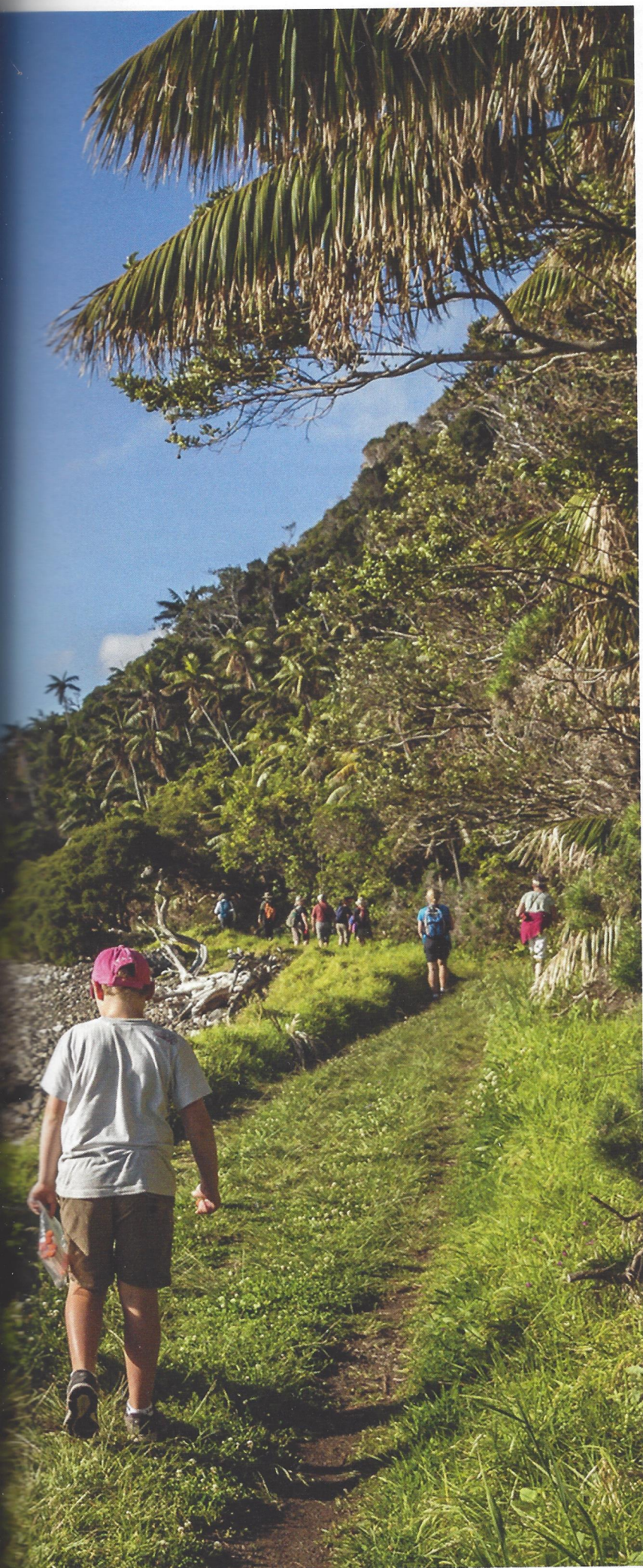
Adventure Island

A week without wi-fi and telly might sound like a challenge for some families, but with so much to see and do, Lord Howe Island makes it easy.

Words Jo Runciman Photos Luke Hanson



Walking back from Little Island following the track below Mt Lidgbird.



I KEPT HEARING people talk about Lord Howe Island. Honeymooners, adventure racers, ocean swimmers, photographers and bird-nerds so when I was invited to host the *Australian Geographic* scientific expedition with my two boys in tow I jumped at the chance.

The mere mention of Lord Howe Island elicits responses like 'Jurassic Island', 'one of the most beautiful places in the world', 'magic' and 'awesome', so I was keen to check it out for myself. The fact that there would be no wi-fi or TV for my kids – Jack, 11 and Tom, 13 – was a bonus; I had been wanting to take them on an adventurous holiday away from screens and devices for some time. With a limited amount of people allowed on the island at any one time, hardly any cars, amazing wildlife, great walking and climbing, great diving and snorkeling, kayaking, bike riding, stunning beaches and beautiful food, Lord Howe sounded like the perfect place for us all to get active.

Part one of the adventure was the propeller-plane flight. I'm not a lover of flying at the best of times, but the boys were excited, and as it turned out it was only two hours from Sydney. We flew over seemingly endless blue ocean then, on approach, we spotted the amazing Balls Pyramid, soaring out of the sea, then Lord Howe itself, with its dramatic volcanic landform.

From the air, it does indeed look like the island out of *Jurassic Park*. The boys were already excited as the plane approached the little runway jutting from the island. Once landed we were met with a friendly welcome from our host Dani, a fifth generation Lord Howe islander who with her husband runs the family friendly Pinetrees Lodge – a business that has also spanned the generations on Lord Howe. The first things to strike you as you walk out of the airport are the two mountains Mt Lidgbird and Mt Gower. They rise up steeply, covered in vegetation apart from their bare vertical volcanic rock walls. The other noticeable sight was the huge cattle grazing the fields adjacent to the runway.

DAY 1 – MOUNTAIN HIGH

We caught a shuttle bus to Pinetrees Lodge, had a quick bite to eat and decided to try and climb a mountain on our first day. You need a guide to take on Mt Gower, which has some very challenging sections and takes quite a bit of time, so the boys and I settled on a shorter climb to Goat House Cave on Mt Lidgbird. We set off on our hired bikes (the island's main mode of transport) along the relatively flat roads to the start of the walk, then washed our feet in the National Parks cleaning station. Lord Howe is World Heritage Listed and there are a number of on-going environmental protection projects to ensure the preservation of the environment, and these stations help prevent the spread of fungi into the rainforest that could be lurking on mainland shoes.

We started the ascent up to the ridge, which proved pretty easy for the boys as they ran up the steps. Then we walked along a ridgeline to commence the climb to Goat House, through lush rainforest. Some of the steep sections were made easier thanks to ropes on the side of the track and although the climb was a challenge, we were all enjoying it. Finally we burst out of the rainforest to be greeted by the spectacular view looking back the full length of the island.

We scaled the last section of the climb and sat down to survey the view as three red-tailed tropicbirds circled above. Hearing their calls and seeing their spectacular ▶

the tail feathers trailing behind them, we really felt as though we were in a prehistoric scene.

DAY 2 – FRIENDLY FAUNA

On our second day we tackled the 5km track from Soldiers Creek to Mutton Bird Point. It winds through distinct forest types, with some interesting volcanic rock formations along the coast. It was a very low tide and we had been advised to head to Middle Beach in the afternoon to see the exposed rock pools and coral reef. A rock pool enthusiast since childhood, I had never seen such a stunning array of life and diversity of creatures; we immediately spotted some blue lipped clams, so vivid in colour, and there was live coral in the larger pools, along with black clown fish, sea slugs, a huge array of other colourful tropical fish, crabs, all sorts of shell fish, sea urchins and anemones. We spent a good two hours completely fascinated and engaged, mindful only to remember that the tide would come in eventually.

Lord Howe is famous for its birdlife, they say, due to the island never having been settled prior to the arrival of Europeans, so the birds are relatively unafraid of humans allowing visitors to get nice and close. At the end of Middle Beach we walked up to a colony of nesting sooty terns. Amazingly, we were able to sit only four metres from the colony and could clearly see the little newborn chicks and the unhatched speckled eggs that the birds were sitting on. This too could have easily stretched to hours of entertainment, but dinner beckoned and we started to make our way back to the lodge.

DAY 3 – SPECIES SPOTTING

Day three saw us venture to the island's far end by boat. Family run businesses offer charters and their friendly, casual approach is so refreshing after Sydney's craziness. A glass-bottomed boat took us across to North Bay where once again we saw a huge colony of nesting sooty terns.

A carefully trodden path through these squawking birds took us onto a walking trail that led to a small rocky inlet called the Old Gulch on the other side of the island. We then walked around the rocks to Herring Pools – a series of coral-lined rock pools nestled among red basalt dykes. I was interested to see both my boys challenge themselves physically by climbing and jumping, but I was just as impressed by their interest in the birdlife and the nature around them. As well as the striking blue water, we were surrounded by thousands of wheeling seabirds: sooty terns, red-tailed tropicbirds and brown noddies. I had suggested making a species list of all the creatures they saw, which, of course, they saw as an excuse for a competition; a great way for them to actively seek out the abundant wildlife around them.

The afternoon finished with snorkeling on the wreck of the *MV Favourite*. The coral was fantastic, visibility was excellent and once again Tom and Jack were completely engrossed in the experience.

We were promised turtle sightings on the return trip by Lord Howe's turtle guru, Pete Busteed, and we were rewarded when we spotted eight large turtles – both green and hawksbill species – in the North Passage. We watched as turtles lying on the bottom had their shells cleaned by fish, and were stoked to spot a stingray resting in a sandy patch.

DAY 4 – ISLAND HOPPING

Luke from Pinetrees took us on a walk on day four, through an ancient forest of banyans and kentia palms to Little Island – one of his favourite places below the cliffs of Mt Lidgbird – where we explored the coastal boulders.


Our next activity was bike riding and kayaking out to Rabbit Island, which sits just inside the lagoon. The mutton birds have their nesting colony here and it took Tom and I about half an hour in a two-man kayak to paddle over to the island. Admittedly, the kayak had a clear window to look through, so we took our time looking at coral outcrops along the way. Once landed, we followed a narrow path that leads up to the top of the island; every foot or so on either side of the skinny path is a mutton-bird burrow. Tom was a bit disappointed not to be able to see the birds, as evidently their burrows are quite deep, but we heard their eerie cat-like calls and wondered at the sheer number of them.

DAY 5 – BUCKET LIST TICK

Jack wanted to go snorkeling again so we headed to famous Neds Beach where there is an honesty box system; just pay the fee, choose your wetsuit and snorkeling gear, and away you go. Neds Beach is famous for fish feeding; as soon as you enter the water you are surrounded by species including mullet, wrasse, garfish, silver drummer, spangled emperor and metre-long kingfish. The snorkeling off Neds Beach is also spectacular; so calm it's like swimming in an aquarium. With excellent visibility once again, it was easy to spot more black clown fish, as well as a back and white striped clown fish.

Jack had heard about a spot where you could dive/snorkel with Galapagos sharks so he headed off with Luke and some of the *Australian Geographic* scientific expedition group who were happy for him to tag along. It was a very excited boy who returned later that day, saying how he had ticked diving with sharks off his bucket list.

We all loved riding around the island on our bikes; it was so great to share such a beautiful, pristine and wild place with my boys. It was really special for them to experience true adventure here, and both said it was the best holiday they have ever had. They extended themselves physically and learnt a huge amount.

Lord Howe Island is unique in so many ways. the geology, geography, wildlife, history and lovely people make it a place you really should add to your bucket list. 

THE ESSENTIALS

How to Get there: QantasLink flies directly to Lord Howe Island daily from Sydney, twice weekly from Brisbane and weekly from Port Macquarie.

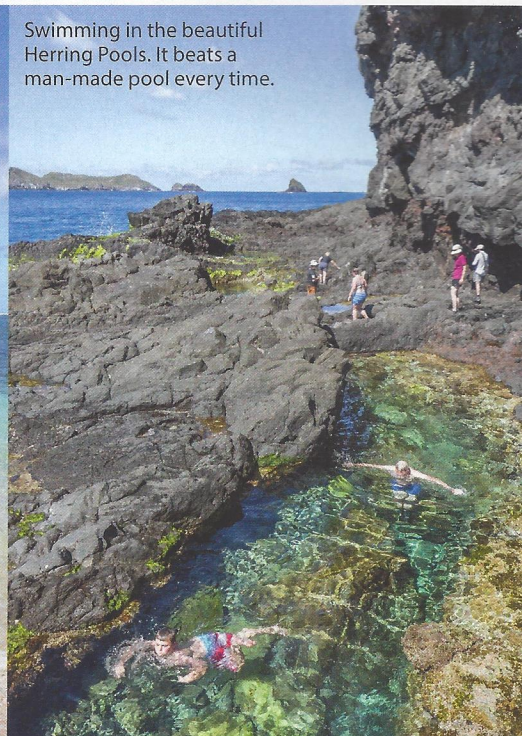
Best time: Summer/autumn, due to the warm ocean waters. This makes it ideal for snorkelers and divers. Spring is also nice with plenty of birdlife and perfect bushwalking conditions. Pinetrees is closed during the months of Jun, Jul and August each year.

Accommodation: We stayed at Pinetrees Lodge www.pinetrees.com.au (open Sept-May)

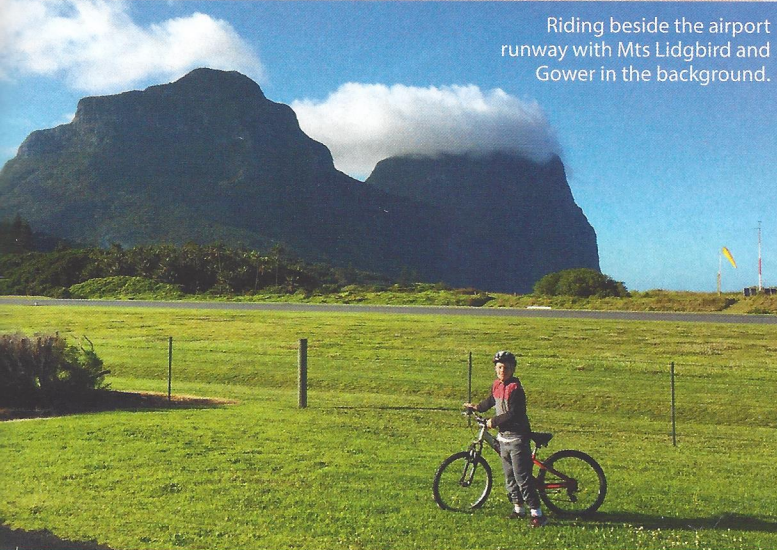
More Adventures: Pinetrees host a number of events during the year that have accommodation packages attached. More details available on the [pinetrees website](http://www.pinetrees.com.au)



Magnificent views, a deserted beach and clean, clear water makes for the perfect island escape.



Swimming in the beautiful Herring Pools. It beats a man-made pool every time.

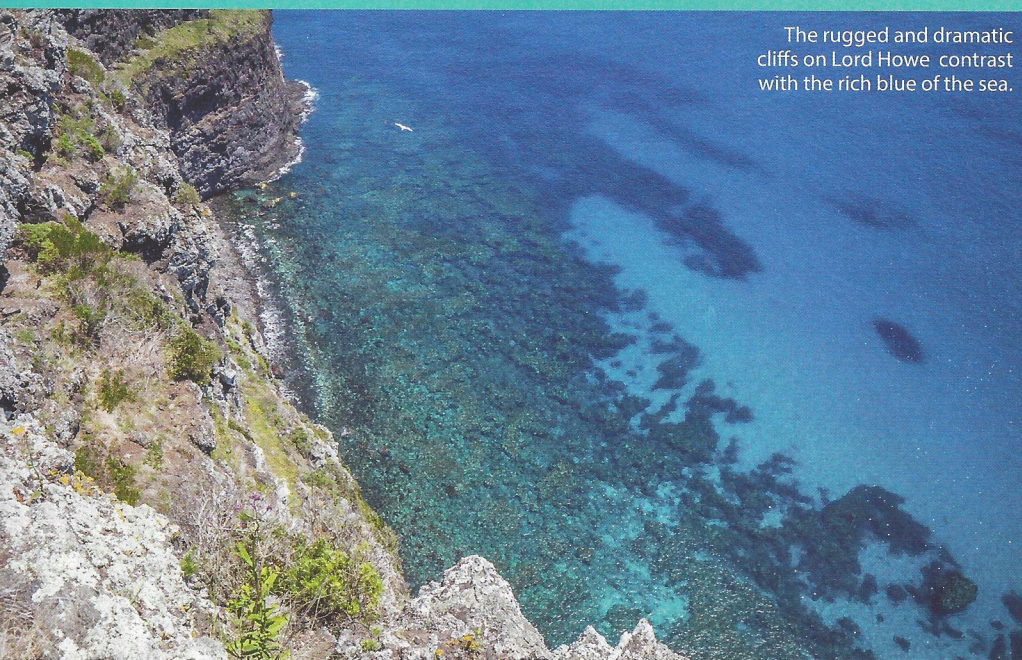


Riding beside the airport runway with Mts Lidgbird and Gower in the background.

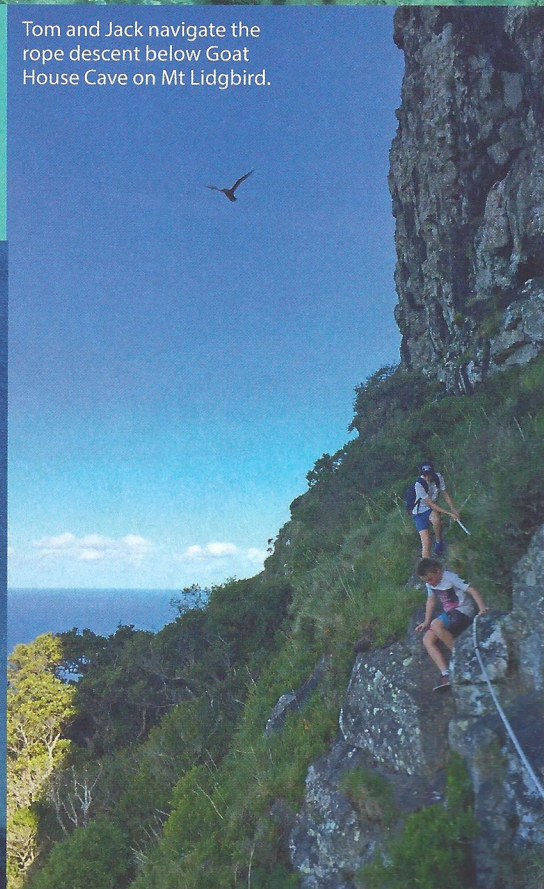


Snorkeling at Neds Beach, enjoying the clear water and friendly fish.

Lord Howe's unique geology, geography, wildlife, history and lovely people make it a place you should add to your bucket list.



The rugged and dramatic cliffs on Lord Howe contrast with the rich blue of the sea.



Tom and Jack navigate the rope descent below Goat House Cave on Mt Lidgbird.