





Island Escape

Amidst crystalline blue waters, white sand beaches and spectacular rolling cliff tops, TATYANA LEONOV discovers Lord Howe Island, Australia's hidden paradise.

Savasana is my favourite part of yoga class. After an hour of moving from one *asana* to the next, we all lie on our backs (in what is otherwise known as corpse pose) and close our eyes. It takes me a minute or two to properly close my eyes, as the view from this position is spectacular: soaring pine trees shadow us and through the branches I glimpse puffy white clouds speckled on a canvas of bright blue. It's not every day you can practise yoga in such a pristine outdoor setting.

Welcome to Pinetrees wellness week. Held three times per year with yoga classes conducted by Charlotte Dodson, yogini to the stars (Miranda Kerr and Orlando Bloom are former students), the week-long program offers guests interested in wellness the opportunity to learn what it really means to be well. Hint: balance is key.

There are no restricted diets at Pinetrees (but the food served is both incredibly delicious and healthy); the

fitness excursions are all about enjoying the island's natural attractions while on the move; cooking classes span everything from seafood marinades to chocolate; and the twice-daily yoga classes – and everything, in fact – are optional.

Expectedly, most people who sign up for wellness week do so because they want to try out all the activities. There are 15 of us participating this time around and we all hit it off straight away. We've come from all over Australia for a diverse range of reasons, but our common thread is that we all simply want to feel better. You could come to Lord Howe Island for rest and replenishment any time of the year; it's one of those rare spots where there is no phone reception, so you're forced to unplug and consequently relax while doing so. You quickly get used to – and even welcome – this peculiarity.

The island, about two hours' flight time from Sydney and Brisbane, is only

The picturesque landscape of Lord Howe



11 kilometres long but packs a punch in terms of experiences. It's an idyllic volcanic remnant – a picturesque land mass of mountain peaks and turquoise waters, luscious forests and white sand beaches – and staying here is about soaking up all this ravishing beauty while focusing on your physical and spiritual wellbeing.

But wellness week is not just about yoga. Mornings start with yoga, followed by breakfast, then a fitness activity guided by Luke Hanson, who runs the lodge together with his wife, Dani Rourke (Pinetrees is the oldest accommodation on the island and Dani is a sixth generation islander).

You can choose to lunch at the lodge, or you can ask the lovely Pinetrees staff to pack you a picnic, or they can even deliver a BBQ kit to wherever you plan to be come lunchtime. There are plenty of scenic beaches peppered all around and this is a wonderful option for families and groups travelling together.

Since I'm here on my lonesome, I opt for the packed lunch option each day and head off to explore in the saddle (most visitors rent road bikes to get around the island), usually finding a secluded patch of grass or sand on which to enjoy my sandwich and salad of the day. After

lunch I like to spend my afternoons self-touring the island, swimming, snorkelling and biking to my heart's content.

There are plenty of beautiful beaches on the island, each with their own personality. Old Settlement Beach is a great sandy bank for spotting friendly sea turtles; Blinky Beach offers decent surf; Ned's Beach is a snorkeller's paradise with a plethora of colourful fish darting around the shallow water more often than not. You can rent snorkelling gear and wetsuits here from a shed, where you simply drop your money for the rental in an honesty jar. It's the way things work on Lord Howe Island.

There are, however, timetabled afternoon activities offered as part of wellness week too, including wholefood cooking classes and explorations of the onsite vegetable and herb garden, more yoga, and dinner of course. Guests are encouraged to participate in whatever activities they feel like and most pick and choose depending on how they feel. No one, however, misses dinner – a lavish four-course affair composed of scrumptious soups, beautiful mains (local kingfish is offered as one of the options most nights), tantalising desserts and cheeses to cap off the evening. Sleep always comes easy.



Morning yoga practice by the cliffside

Kayaking in the crystal blue waters



The island is a hiker's paradise with or without a guide, and thanks to the signposted trails, it's easy enough to explore on your own.

I head to the boat shed each morning where Dodson conducts yoga with the backdrop of the sea and mountains. We 'om' our way through class and then 'mmm' our way through breakfast.

We spend a few of the mornings hiking some of the trails on the island, climbing up Malabar Hill and trailing the ridge to Kim's Lookout for epic views of waves slashing against the island's jagged cliffs one day and tackling the lowland rainforest track on Intermediate Hill another.

The island is a hiker's paradise with or without a guide, and thanks to the signposted trails, it's easy enough to explore on your own. I do just that most afternoons, meandering my way through lush tropical terrain or strolling along

quiet beaches while keeping my eye out for muttonbirds, red-tailed tropicbirds, sooty terns and noddy terns, to name just a few of the bird species around (Lord Howe island is a remarkable bird-watching destination with hundreds of bird species visiting or living on the atoll).

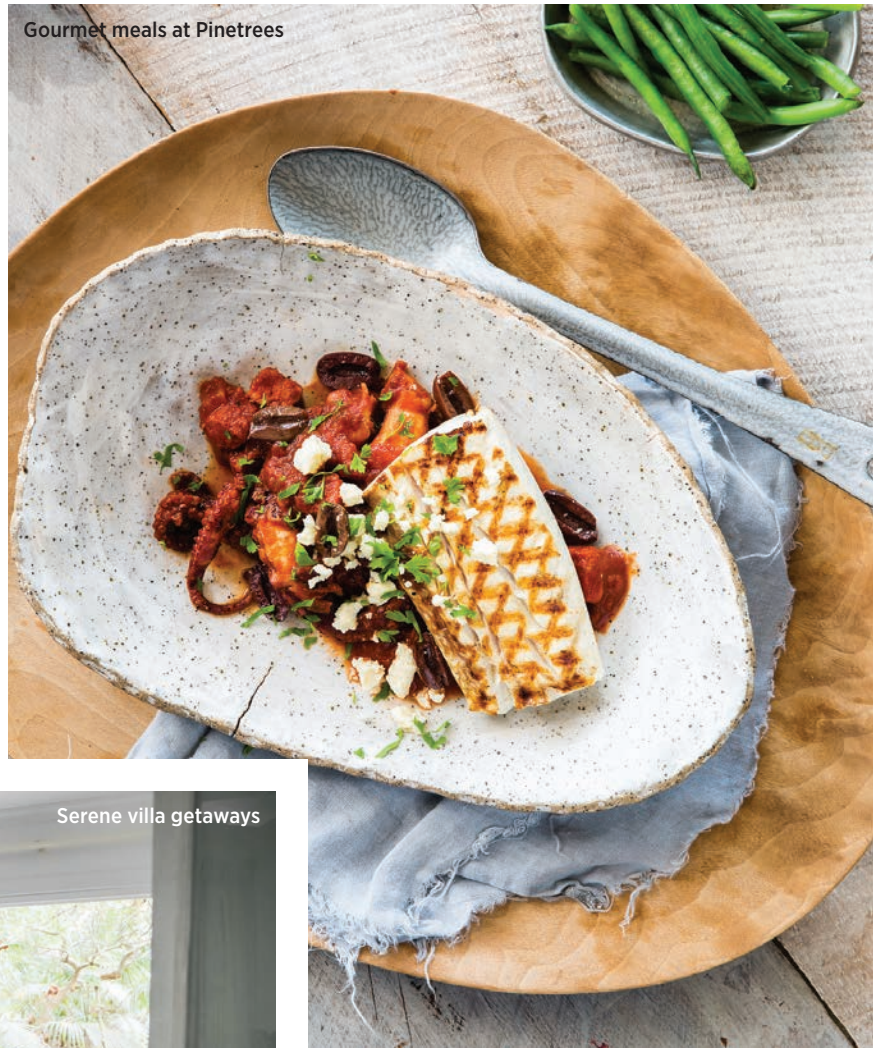
The only walk you can't do on your own is the Mount Gower ascent, a strenuous and challenging climb that can take up to eight hours to complete (including the return). Some of the wellness group participants take the challenge up and book to trek the trail with a guide. They leave before morning yoga and return late in the afternoon with scratches, bruises and good yarns... and they seem to enjoy dinner even more than usual.

One clear sunny day, we go on a kayaking voyage to North Bay. We negotiate the mellow waves easily, hugging the coastline as we paddle to the secluded beach (the only way to get to North Bay is by foot or watercraft).

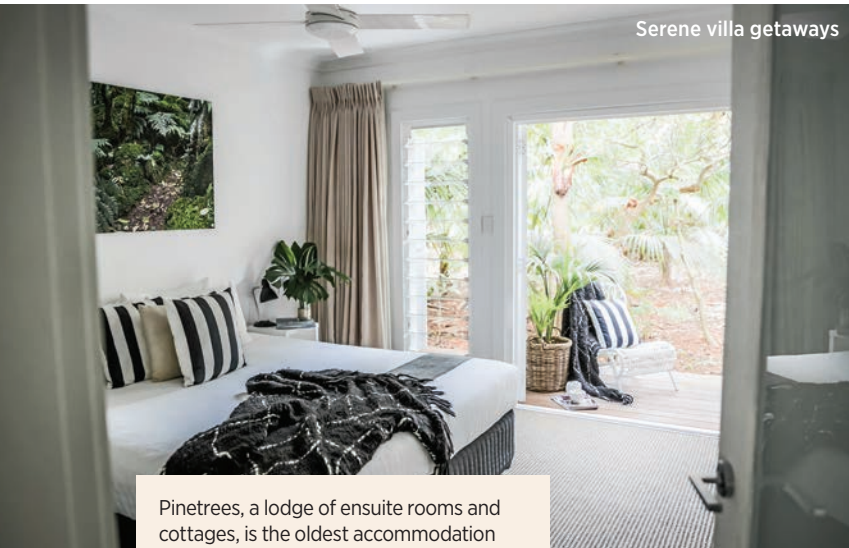
The days roll into one long, happy escapade. There's more yoga with the inspirational Dodson, probably too much delicious food, rewarding hikes, mesmerising snorkelling adventures, cycling trips, and an afternoon nap one rainy afternoon.

When it's time to head home I prolong my packing for as long as I can, knowing that as soon as my suitcase is closed, my holiday will be as good as closed too. But, there's a light at the end of the tunnel. It seems that every second visitor I've met on the island has been here before, and Hanson confirms that many of Pinetrees' guests are repeat customers. So, I decide for me it's only au revoir and not adieu. **ANH**

Gourmet meals at Pinetrees



Serene villa getaways



Pinetrees, a lodge of ensuite rooms and cottages, is the oldest accommodation on Lord Howe Island, managed by sixth generation islander Dani Rourke together with her husband, Luke Hanson. When the pair took over the property, they freshened up the design and implemented a number of changes, including introducing activity weeks – such as photography weeks, ocean swim weeks, food and wine weeks, diving weeks and more. Wellness weeks are one of the most popular options with three scheduled for 2017 – all with yoga classes taught by Charlotte Dodson. Prices start from **\$2,130 per person** (twin share). See pinetrees.com.au

Hiking with a view

