

Walking the spectacular
Lower Road along the cliffs of
rugged Mt Lidgbird.

A Local's Guide to Lord Howe Island

Adventure Playground

Words & Photos **Luke Hanson**

Once the destination of choice for honeymooners and retirees, Lord Howe Island is finally being recognised as the adventure playground it's always been.

Dedicated to Ken Hisco





Snorkellers contemplating the swell and current before entering the Eye of Roach.

I HAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE: I live on Lord Howe Island, and as a co-owner of Pinetrees Lodge, I spend about half of my time guiding guests over our rugged volcanic peaks and through our pristine coral gardens. So, in a sense, I'm biased, but there's a backstory to this.

I'm an outdoors fanatic. Ever since I was a teenager in my school outdoors club, I've spent most of my spare time bushwalking, skiing, kayaking, surfing and mountain climbing, and when I had to get a job, I became an ecologist and worked in Papua New Guinea, Nepal, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Australia. The more remote, the better. Fast forward a decade, through a quarter-life crisis and a period of 'settling down', and I now find myself on Lord Howe Island with a beautiful wife (and sixth generation islander), two girls, 35 staff, 75 guests and a big fat mortgage. Talk about a reality check!

Despite the dramatic shift in lifestyle and career, there is a method to my madness (and, ah, in addition to the very deep love of my wife, Dani) because Lord Howe Island is a world-class adventure playground. Other than Innsbruck, Wanaka and Telluride, I can't think of anywhere in the world that rivals Lord Howe as serious outdoors town. It's not one of those destinations where one activity is great, but the 'down day' options are limited – think of surf trips to Indonesia with no waves, ski trips to Japan with no powder, or hiking trips to Europe with lunchtime thunderstorms. Every outdoor activity on Lord Howe is as good as you'll find anywhere. The surfing rivals the Mentawais, the lagoon snorkelling is better than the

Great Barrier Reef, the diving is comparable to West Papua, the fishing attracts people from as far away as Norway, the hiking is as challenging as the 'via ferrata' routes in Italy, and the ocean swimming is the best in the world – just ask surf lifesaving legend, Trevor Hendy, who visits for four weeks every year.

Lord Howe is also blissfully benign. There are no snakes, no crocodiles, no box jellyfish, and no Irukandji jellyfish. Apart from the humble honey bee, our most dangerous animal is you, depending on how you manage some of the airy, exposed ledges on Mt Gower, but we'll come to that. We rarely experience extreme weather events, and our sea surface temperatures and daytime air temperatures vary between 19-26°C, on average, all year round. You really have to try hard to feel uncomfortable on Lord Howe, but we'll come to that as well.

Local Intel

One of the problems with living and working in an adventure playground is that we spend most of our time listening to how good other peoples' days were – "the surf was pumping", "we dived with at least 30 sharks", "I swam with the biggest turtle I've ever seen", "thousands of Providence petrels were flying around our heads", "that's the best day of my life", and so on. But just as in any outdoors town, we all escape for a few hours on most days and, over time, we get to experience everything Lord Howe has to offer, sometimes in perfect conditions, and can share that knowledge with our guests. For the first time,



Jumping into the 'spa pool' at the Herring Pools.

Climbing one of many ropes high on Mt Gower.



and much to horror of my wife, I'm going to share some of our secrets with you, so in theory, you can come to Lord Howe armed with a complete itinerary and stay at some of our wonderful self-contained apartments such as Earl's Anchorage, Lagoon Landing, Bowker Beach House and Howeana. In practice, though, I really hope that you stay with us at Pinetrees – because our food, service and staff are amazing – but that's enough self-promotion. Lord Howe is about the adventure, not about the base camp.

Irrespective of when you come, there are some 'must do' adventures that will drop you into the heart of our World-Heritage wilderness. Most of these require getting hot, sweaty, salty and perhaps a little bit scared, but each will be absolutely memorable. If you only have a week on Lord Howe, and if you're fit and adventurous, then you should do as many of the following activities as conditions allow.

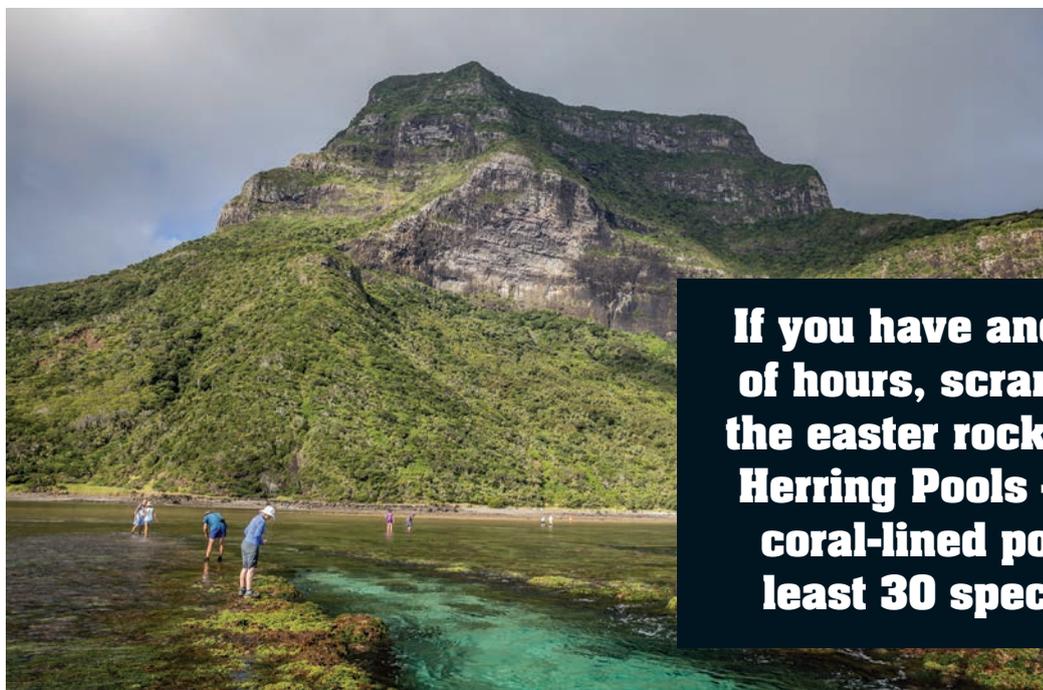
What to do

KAYAK to the Admiralty Islands (when the wind and seas are calm). You'll need to book Lord Howe's best guide, Dean Hiscox, who was the park ranger for 16 years and knows Lord Howe better than anyone. The paddle from Neds Beach to the Admiralty Islands is a few intense kilometres across the fast-flowing East Australian Current, complete with waves, coral bobbies, sharks and thousands of flesh-footed shearwaters. When you arrive safely to the shelter of the Admiralties, you can snorkel through the Eye of Roach – an enormous cave

under Roach Island – and you'll feel eerily aware of the bottomless cobalt blue ocean all around you. It's like vertigo and *Jaws* combined.

CLIMB Mt Gower (when conditions are dry and cool). You'll need Dean Hiscox again to help you 'enjoy' one of the hardest days of your life. I'm not joking. Even if you're fit and experienced in rugged mountain terrain, you'll still have a tough day. Savvy mountain guides call it 'type two fun', which means challenging at the time, but fun in hindsight. The climb from sea level to the summit is 875 vertical metres, but most of the climbing is rope supported on slopes between 40 and 65 degrees. The traverse across the Lower Road is arguably the most spectacular 400m of hiking in Australia, but don't look under your toes – there's lots of air between you and ocean far below. If you reach the summit (most likely in cloud), you'll experience the Mt Gower cloud forest – an endemic forest community that's more like temperate rainforest in Tasmania. It's an amazingly delicate and beautiful ecosystem for such an unforgiving location. In autumn and winter, you'll have thousands of providence petrels around you, literally, defending their burrows and looking for mates. It's hectic, loud, funny and absolutely relentless. Some of the birds will chase you down the ropes and nibble on your ankles. If you suffer from ornithophobia, go to the beach instead.

HIKE to Mt Eliza and the Herring Pools (when the tide is low and the winds are from the south). The track from Old Settlement Beach to Mt Eliza requires a climb of about 200 vertical metres, but the view from the summit is stunning. ►



Reef walking to the Pot Holes on a zero tide.

If you have another couple of hours, scramble around the easter rock ledge to the Herring Pools – a series of coral-lined pools with at least 30 species of fish.

It's worth taking some time to sit, observe and reflect as you gaze north over the Pacific Ocean. Your descent to Old Gulch will be quick and painless, and if you're short of time, then swim through the deep azure water of Old Gulch from the boulder beach. If you have another couple of hours, then scramble around the eastern rock ledge to the Herring Pools – a series of coral-lined rock pools complete with at least 30 species of fish (you'll need a mask). Once you swim in each pool, and hopefully convince someone to carry your gear back to Old Gulch, jump off the ledge and swim 300m back to the boulder beach. Warning – once you're in, you're in – and it's deep. Free divers have been known to find large crayfish in these parts.

WALK to the Pot Holes (when the tide is lower than 0.1m and the seas are calm). You'll need normal shoes, reef shoes and a serious sense of adventure. Start at the Little Island gate and walk for about 700m towards Mt Gower. When you're in line with the pink Marine Park buoy (which should be high and dry from the low tide) then walk on the lagoon bed and coral rubble to the outer reef. If you take the correct line, for about 400m, you'll see the Pot Holes – a series of sand-bottomed fissures surrounded by coral walls. They're the jewel in our crown. You can swim in them, so long as you take a few towels (or a yoga mat), to help you get out without damaging the coral or yourself. If you do get a little cut, then apply lime juice – it's guaranteed to really sting, but should help prevent an infection.

BOOK our Seven Peaks Walk over five amazing days, if you'd prefer to join a fully guided trip to most of the places in this list, that is. As one of the Great Walks of Australia, we're obliged to pamper you by night and push your limits by day. Our highlight of the week is always our exploration day when we take you 'off-track' to parts of the island that are rarely visited. We'll get you to places such as the Grey Face on Mt Lidgbird, Scab Point, Red Point or North Head and, if conditions allow, we'll jump off a ledge and be picked up by a passing boat for a remote snorkel under the 800m vertical cliffs of Mt Gower. Just think about how high that is.

Endless adventures

Despite its small size, Lord Howe Island has an endless selection of adventures. Its rugged terrain, and vast area of surrounding reef, always offer opportunities for something new. In the last few months, I've swum over Erscotts Passage (think of Nemo at the "drop-off"), scrambled to the ochre-coloured cliffs at Hells Gate, climbed 'above the cross' on Mt Lidgbird, and stood at Little Island and counted 27 waterfalls after three inches of rain.

I still can't comprehend that, for decades, Lord Howe was the domain of honeymooners and beach-sitting retirees. Not that they weren't completely happy with their holiday – many still come back every year – but because they didn't scratch the surface of what Lord Howe had to offer in terms of outright adventure. Only in the last few years have people dressed in Icebreaker, North Face, Macpac and Patagonia appeared in larger numbers, and only now are people discovering our adventure playground.

Don't worry about crowds, though, because our World Heritage listing caps the number of guests to 400 at any one time, and they scatter through two cafes, eight volcanic peaks, 10 square kilometres of lagoon, 18 surf spots, 20 beaches, 24km of coastline, and 45km of hiking track. In reality, you'll feel like you have the place to yourself. **A**

Dedication Ken Hisco guided tens of thousands of guests through Lord Howe's lagoon over 20 years on his glass bottom boat *MV Coral Princess*. Before becoming a commercial boat skipper, Ken worked as a Seventh Day Adventist pastor in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, the Torres Strait Islands and more, and then settled on Lord Howe with his family. He had more adventures and did more good in the world than most of us could dream of. Ken was funny, wise, relaxed, diplomatic and generous, and was the kind of inspirational man who made you strive to be better. Ken was 80 and worked on his boat until the day he died, on 22 February 2019. Lord Howe Island is a lesser place without him.