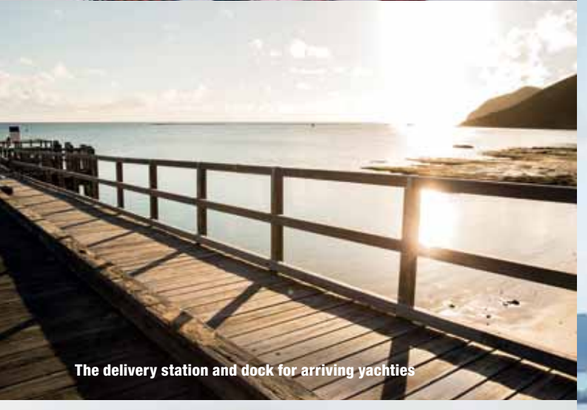
Island of dreams

Photographer **NIKKI TO** captures Lord Howe Island at its picture-perfect (everyday) best, and tells **GEORGIA RICKARD** what it's really like at New South Wales' furthest reach

The gorgeous sunset 'bar' at Pinetrees (a fridge stored inside the boatshed) works on an honesty system – just help yourself and write it down

Pretty Mount Gower, far right, is regularly climbed by ambitious souls – it takes eight hours, although at the recent 'Mount Gower Challenge', the winner did a round trip in just one hour and 40 minutes

Nautical debris decorates the interior of Pinetrees Lodge's sunset 'bar'


The delivery station and dock for arriving yachties

ABOVE AND BEYOND

"Idyllic. Unblemished. Faultless, flawless, perfect. There are many words I could reach for to describe Lord Howe Island, but I think these pictures do most of my talking. It's a place of simple pleasures and six-star natural wonders, and my time here [spent partaking in the 'Adventure Challenge Week' put on by local accommodation, Pinetrees Lodge] was filled with both. Take our first day, which we devoted to hiking up Mt. Lidgbird. People very rarely come up here – most experienced walkers head up the island's more famous summit, Mt. Gower, while those more inclined towards breathtaking views (rather than breathtaking hills) can take their pick from a number of other tracks. Even locals don't venture to this part of the island so the path was extremely overgrown, but the scenery at the top was worth it – just look at that view. Even when it's cloudy on Lord Howe Island, it's beautiful. I should also point out that even though it looks quite dangerous, it isn't – the heart was pumping for other reasons though, that's for sure."

ANOMALIES ON A PLATE

"Sir David Attenborough once described Lord Howe as 'so extraordinary it is almost unbelievable', and you do have to wonder if maybe he was talking about the food at Pinetrees! Maybe it was just the fresh air, the exercise and all the deep sleeping, but every meal I had was absolutely phenomenal. Lunch especially – there is always some kind of amazing spread of self-serve salads, fish, cold meats, and sandwich fillers, or a picnic hamper to take, or a barbecue being served on the beach. It's all the more impressive considering the island gets most of its food supplies shipped in once every two weeks."

NESTING WITH THE LOCALS

"The funny thing about Lord Howe is that you often feel that whatever you are experiencing is exclusive to you. That was certainly the case when I got up to watch an amazing sunrise at Blinky Beach one morning, in the company of a few hundred nesting sooty terns. Lord Howe is the only place in New South Wales where these birds nest, and they are everywhere. They're also very protective over their eggs; at one point I couldn't walk back to the carpark from the beach because a couple were blocking the walkway! It's incredible being so close to them – they have so much character. I never really appreciated that birds have personalities before." »

The island was uninhabited by humans until its eventual discovery in 1788. It's still easy to feel like you're the only one on the island – just 350 people live here today

CLEAR AS GLASS

"A family-run business here offers glass-bottomed boat tours around the lagoon to try the amazing snorkelling. There is spectacular sea life everywhere, including some stunning blue staghorn coral and Lord Howe's very own Nemo, which is black and white. Over on the other side of the island, at Ned's Beach, you can snorkel (or 'snorfel' if the surf is up – that's a cross between body surfing and snorkelling) with the many fish who wait here to be fed each day; this shot was taken at Ned's. Apparently a visiting photographer made friends with a turtle near here, and swam with him every day for three weeks – the turtle would come back to the same spot every day to swim with him! Note how incredibly clear the water is – that's par for the course on Lord Howe." »

Visitors to Ned's Beach feed the fish regularly – so much so, that locals have installed a fish food vending machine on the beach (next to the borrow-as-you-please snorkel sets)

BATTENING DOWN THE HATCHES

"Once day, I stumbled across some mutton birds (also known as shearwaters) snug in their burrow, preparing for an oncoming storm. This was a real highlight – they're just so sweet."

DRINKING WATER

"Waterfalls often form on Lord Howe after heavy rain, but to see one in sunlight is incredibly rare. I can't even describe how unbelievable it was to be there both during, and after a storm. When the sunlight began streaming down around us we went out in search of waterfalls; it didn't take us long to find some. The size, the sound and the power were all pretty cool, but then we jumped under the water and began drinking it. The taste of fresh mountain water is something else."

PINING FOR PINETREES

"You really can't run a story on Lord Howe Island without mentioning Pinetrees Lodge. It's been in the same family for six generations, is run by the warmest, friendliest people and is an island institution. It's also recently undergone a renovation and feels beautifully modern, which is a surprise given its long history."

THE FERNS AND THE FIGS

"My host for the week, wilderness guide Dean Hiscox pointed out that the native flora appears to have a stronger affinity with New Zealand plant life than with Australia's – there's not a eucalypt to be found here. Once day we came across a particularly interesting specimen, the Boar Wood Plant, which literally smells like a boar (needless to say it's pollinated by flies, not birds!). There are also four types of endemic palm species to be found, including the popular kentia palm. In the early days of settlement, people used to climb the palms on Mount Lidgbird to harvest their seeds, then walk back down the mountain carrying up to 50 kilograms of their finds on their back. As for this particular piece of forest – isn't it beautiful? – I had to take this photo after being followed along this pathway, on foot, by a currawong! It's as if the wildlife here wants to be friends with you." »

This was the first island in the world to make the World Heritage List, back in 1982. Only four other island groups have made it on there since

VIEW FROM MALABAR HILL

"The climb through Malabar Ridge to Malabar Hill is nothing like Mount Lidgbird or Mount Gower, but it still commands a bit of stamina! The top provides fantastic views looking back at the island... and it was here that we discovered this red-tailed tropical bird. The story goes that an Indian couple from Malabar used to hunt these birds for their red feathers to trade with; the man ended up falling off the cliff mid-hunt, hence the hill's name." ■

THE DETAILS

GETTING THERE
Fly to Lord Howe Island with QantasLink: there are flights every day of the week from Sydney, and weekends from Brisbane. Flights are also available seasonally from Port Macquarie. Since the island is part of New South Wales, you can leave the passport at home.

STAYING THERE
We stayed at Pinetrees Lodge, the famous family-run waterfront accommodation (for six generations now) right on Lagoon Beach. All-inclusive five-night packages (with all meals, transfers and facilities) start from $1490 per person twin share, while Adventure Challenge Week, next running in October, adds to that some 'serious backcountry adventure', kayaking, night snorkelling, guided tours by scientists and rangers and more. From $1890 per person twin share. *pinetrees.com.au*

The sun sets on another perfect day, looking due west towards tiny Blackburn Island. Next stop, 600km further in that direction, is Port Macquarie on the mainland

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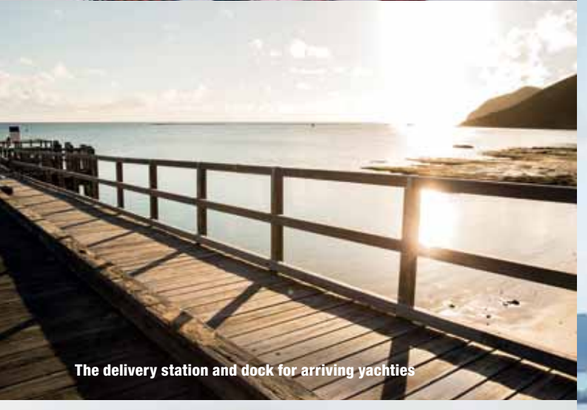
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