

HOWE DELIGHTFUL

Great Walks gets back to nature at the inaugural Seven Peaks Walk on Lord Howe Island.

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GREAT ISLAND
WALKS
LORD HOWE
ISLAND, NSW

A great view of Lord Howe, with mounts Liddbird (left) and Gower in the background.



Left: Providence petrels hover around resting hikers.

LORD Howe once flew under the travel radar. But the secret is now out, with the go-to travel site Trip Advisor rating Pinetrees Lodge Australia's No.1 Hotel. Pinetrees have packaged the ultimate guided island experience with the Seven Peaks Walk, which was recently added alongside the 10 signature Australian Tourism Great Walks of Australia (see pg22) and the first NSW entrant.

It's a guided adventure for everyone, even catering for the non-walkers in your life with only a reasonable level of experience and fitness required for the wide array of activities. The Mount Gower climb at the end of the week is purely optional.

Pinetrees make your stay unforgettable, excelling in personalising their service, accommodation, food and wine, and they must be doing it right, they've been in business for over 125 years. Explore and be challenged by day, shower, grab a beer or wine and then relax at the iconic boat shed, overlooking the spectacular lagoon, watching the sunset over water. It's a somewhat unique experience on the east coast of Australia.

Day 1 – Easing into it

After marvelling at the reef in a glass-bottom boat across the lagoon, the group disembarks in North Bay with Dean Hiscox, our chief guide for the week, who was the island's ranger for 16 years and has a vast knowledge of Lord Howe. Garden shears in hand to do a little pruning as he goes, Hiscock leads the group through the Kentia palm forest before heading up the bare resemblance of a single track to the top of North Head to claim our first peak of the week. At an elevation of just 100m, it's a short climb and eases our muscles into the week.

At the very north of Lord Howe, the view back to the island's two main peaks, mounts Lydgbird and Gower, is jaw-dropping, as are the sheer drop-offs. We are also lucky to witness a few remaining red-tailed tropicbirds, who call the island home in summer. With two long red streamers, they breed on the northern cliffs, and their acrobatic displays are captivating.

Upon our descent it was a short walk to the rocky beach named the Old Gulch for lunch. After a bit of a scramble we were able to make our way around to the Herring Pools – eroded basalt

rock pools only exposed at low tide and low swell. Deep and with crystal clear water, the temptation to jump off rocks into them was just too much.

Upon drying off the group headed up to the top of Mt Eliza. Another short, sharp climb, at an elevation of 150m, it certainly helped burn off lunch. After the descent we walked past Old Settlement Beach and back to Pinetrees. So after the first day we have already claimed two peaks and walked just over 10km. Dinner was eagerly anticipated: Pinetrees' famous fish fry, which they've been serving for generations. And to match our week adventure, a buffet of seven spectacular desserts.

Day 2 – Why walk when you can swim

Lord Howe possesses the southernmost coral reef in the world. Taking advantage of the spectacular weather and tides, our morning is spent snorkelling in the lagoon. Thanks to Lord Howe's small population (350 residents), their passion for conservation (no commercial fishing) and very little human intervention, the

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WALK NOTES | LORD HOWE ISLAND



Day one: North Bay – starting the day with a boat cruise, then a climb of North Head and Mt Eliza.

Day two: Malabar – climb to Kims lookout and traverse the ridge between Kims and Malabar (two peaks). Descend Malabar to Neds Beach then climb Transit Hill.

Day three: East Coast – walkers head to Mutton Bird Point and Rocky Run, and then climb to Goathouse on Mt Lidgbird and climb Intermediate Hill.

Day four: Rest day

Day five: Mt Gower – this is the optional. Stunning views await and a chance to experience the unique mist forest and bird rookery.

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Top: The climb up to Goat House Cave requires a bit of rope work.

Above: Clear rock pools beckon hot walkers.

coral gardens at Lord Howe are pristine and teeming with marine life.

We explored Comets and Erscotts holes, which are just inside the main western reef which hosts a diverse mix of over 500 marine and 90 coral species.

After an indulgent seafood bbq lunch on the edge of the lagoon, the walking for the day began and it was time to head north again to add the third and fourth peaks to our collection. After skirting Old Settlement Beach, we make the 45-minute, 600+ stair climb through sub-tropical forest to reach a peak named Kim's lookout. At 200m, it is the highest point so far and upon reaching the peak you marvel in the realisation that you are atop a sheer cliff. Looking north you become mesmerised by the subtle variations of blue of the ocean, while at the same time entertained by the dolphins frolicking at the base of the cliff.

The group then heads south for more iconic views of the entire island to the south as we traverse the ridge between Kim's lookout to Malabar. Malabar represents our fourth peak and at 210m just eclipses Kim's as the highest peak to date. To the NE are the Admiralty Islands; Roach Island is the most obvious with its tunnel cut by waves from one side to the other. Again red-tailed tropicbirds perform their death-defying manoeuvres, keeping a close eye on the human intruders.

As we work our way back down the ridge with views of the famous Neds Beach, we reach a plaque on a rock along the trail. It's a memorial to the seven of the nine airmen killed in September 1948, when an RAAF Catalina clipped the top of the hill and crashed.

Day 3 – Time to head south

A full day with our fifth and sixth peaks. Heading to the south side of the island for the first time, we were up for the challenge of Intermediate and Transit Hills. Intermediate Hill was probably our toughest walk to that point: although the distance to the peak is not that long, well under 2km, the climb itself to an elevation of 250m was certainly not without effort.

At the summit there is a man-made platform offering 360° views including the famous Balls Pyramid. At 561m it's the world's tallest sea-stack and situated about 20km south-east of the island.

Probably the highlight of the day was enjoying our gourmet packed lunch at Rocky Run: camped on the black basalt rocks, we watched the waves pound the base of Mt Lidgbird. From there it was a much gentler climb over Transit Hill (120m) before returning to Pinetrees. We covered about 8.5km, which didn't seem far, but the climbs are getting tougher.

Sunset drinks were followed by another spectacular four-course dinner, the highlight being the freshly caught kingfish, with tomato, avocado, cucumber, capsicum and shallots.

Day 4 – Peak fitness

You can't summit the island's second highest peak, Mt Lidgbird; however you can scramble just over halfway up, about 465m, to Goat House Cave, and it's a perfect gauge to see if you are capable of tackling Gower.

Like Gower, it does require some rope climbs and you need to be comfortable with heights. Starting at the southern end of the island's runway you enter the forest and are greeted with a steady, steep climb. About halfway up, we are

Right: Hard hats on for the Mount Gower climb.

Below: Taking a dip at the Herring Pools.



getting one of our regular chats from Hiscox when objects start crashing through the forest canopy, scaring the daylight out of the group.

It's also our first exposure to the providence petrels. These sea birds migrate from Siberia to Australia every March to commence courtship and breeding. They fly and collect food during the day, before nesting in the burrows on Lidgbird and Gower by night.

Lord Howe is a birdwatching Mecca with over 170 species and the petrels are the most popular, almost Mr Bean-like. They may be masters of the sky, but on land they are uncoordinated, gangly, yet without a trace of fear of humans. With a high-pitch squeal, you can attract flocks of them to come plummeting from the sky as they search out the source of the noise near their burrows. Upon reaching Goat House Cave, the views north of the entire island make the two hour climb worthwhile.

Day 5 – Australia's toughest day walk

We had lived in the shadow of Gower all week. It was time. Our group has thinned a little as members made honest evaluations of their climbing ability. Tackling Gower is not for

everyone: it's more than just a hike, it's a nine-hour round trip, with numerous rope assisted climbs and negotiating wet and slippery trails. You skirt around the base of Lidgbird, wearing hard hats in case of rock falls, cliff face to your left, 100m drop to the ocean on your right and a 500m narrow ledge to navigate.

Upon removing the hard hats it's then an undulating climb to Erskine Creek, where it's the last chance to rest and top up water bottles before the climb starts. Over the next 1km, the track starts to climb steeply, about 200m, and you're then on the saddle that separates Lidgbird and Gower. The good news is you're nearly halfway there; however, the final 450m climb is done in a distance of just over 800m with 17 rope assisted climbs.

At 720m you reach the famed mist forest. This is the level where clouds generally begin to engulf the the peak. The vegetation reduces in height, turning to rainforest covered in moss. When you reach the top you expect a ridged peak, but Gower's actually a tabletop, with 26 hectares of dense vegetation and home to some of the island's rarest plants and bird life.

Besides the thousands of petrels, it's also home to the Lord Howe Island woodhen, which was nearing extinction at the turn of



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the century, but is now thriving after islanders removed the majority of their predators, like feral pigs.

Once you hit that top, it's fingers crossed that the lingering clouds retreat and luckily for us they did, revealing the island below from its highest peak. Time for photos and a much deserved break because reaching the summit is one thing, but coming down is another: the descent is much tougher, very much a quad and knee killer.

We all got back to the start in one piece, but a four-hour climb was trumped by a five-hour descent and we were spent. Overall the round trip covered 11km and the only relief to aching muscles was to grab a beer and wade out into the lagoon to watch the sunset.

What a fitting way to finish the week. ⚙️

Great Walks was a guest of Pinetrees Lodge

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