

Lost PARADISE

Jagged volcanic mountains stand guard over pristine barrier reef at Lord Howe Island, where divers can blow bubbles on sites no human has ever seen before.

WORDS *Emma Ryan*





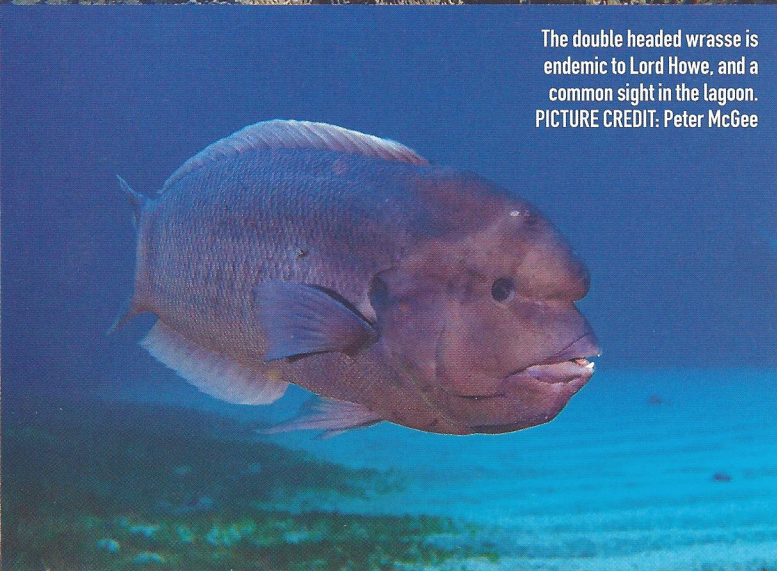
A lionfish struts its stuff
amid a sea of colour.
PICTURE CREDIT: Peter McGee.



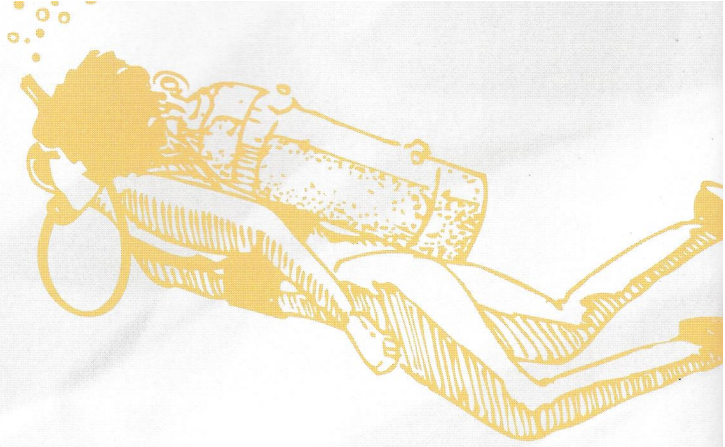
Crystal waters provide incredible visibility



Temperate, tropical and sub-tropical species are drawn to the isolated region
PICTURE CREDIT: Emma Ryan



The double headed wrasse is endemic to Lord Howe, and a common sight in the lagoon.
PICTURE CREDIT: Peter McGee



My heart thumped in my chest as I adjusted my mask and stared into the azure world below where the eerily majestic shape of Galapagos sharks circled in curiosity. My vision was unimpeded in the incredible 25m visibility. We had entered the water via a moving drop from the survey-spec rigid inflatable, and the adrenalin was pumping. I deflated my BCD and let the weight in my pockets pull me under, bidding temporary adieu to the staggering twin peaks that loom over every corner of this island like some omnipotent demigods.

I was pleasantly surprised by the warmth of the water; I had imagined, given Lord Howe Island's location off the Mid North Coast of NSW, around 600km east of Port Macquarie, the temperature would more resemble what I was used to in Sydney. But that was before I understood the convergence of currents that make this place a diver's paradise.

As the world's southernmost barrier coral reef, the island benefits from the East Australian Current that brings warm water down the coast of Australia from the tropics and kicks out to the east at around Newcastle, enveloping Lord Howe Island and fostering the growth of coral and survival of tropical fish species. Cooler currents from the south bring with them southern species like the predatory kingfish. The marine ecosystem benefits also from Lord Howe's isolation; it's part of a cluster of lonesome structures that attract big ocean roamers. The result is an incredible abundance of marine life, with over 90 species of coral and 500 temperate, tropical and subtropical fish species, many of which are endemic to the area, like the double-headed wrasse. The island's southern location has meant the effects of coral bleaching have not yet reached it, and the coral here is some of the healthiest and most pristine I've ever encountered.

The island is comprised of the crumbling remains of a seven million year old volcano. The 14sq km, crescent-shaped landmass is defined by towering peaks and jagged cliffs thickly forested in subtropical rainforest, in which around half of the native plants are endemic. The island was presumably uninhabited until the British stumbled upon it en route to the penal settlement of Norfolk Island in 1788. Settled in the 1830s, some land was cleared on Lord Howe, but for the most part it's virgin forest. You're going to want to pack your hiking boots. It's a refuge for vast numbers of birds - in excess of 200 species, in fact - from the ethereal white turns to the charismatic red-tailed tropicbirds, which perform acrobatic courting rituals alongside the island's cliff faces, not unlike a pterodactyl might in a scene from Jurassic Park.

These volcanic beginnings have created an incredible underwater topography offering caverns, crevices, trenches and drop offs for divers to explore. All of this in world-class visibility, where 40m is not uncommon. Although for our group that went out the window after we caught the edge of the tropical cyclone system mid-week which, combined with heavy swell, stirred the water up considerably. But that would come later; on this dive and those that would immediately follow, the clarity of the water was incredible.

Rugged volcanic formations
above and below the surface.
PICTURE CREDIT: Luke Hanson



AARON AND LISA'S TOP 5 DIVE SITES

No one knows Lord Howe from beneath the surface like Aaron and Lisa Ralph, who run Pro Dive and live on the island with their two beautiful little daughters. Here's their pick of the best dive sites on offer.

1. Balls Pyramid

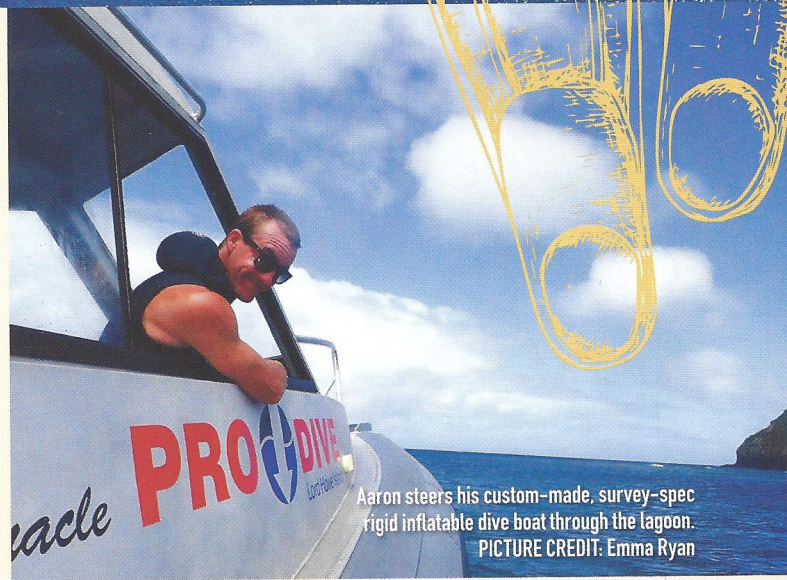
The crowning jewel of diving Lord Howe Island, this isolated sea stack boasts some of the best drift diving on offer. Forests of black coral hang from the walls, boulders and caves, often obscured from view by shoals of pelagic and reef fishes, many of which are endemic to the area.

2. North Rock

North rock impresses even the most seasoned dive veteran. Situated to the north of Lord Howe Island in the Admiralty Island group, it welcomes divers with an array of soft strawberry corals and sponges as well as large black cod and yellowtail kingfish. Following a number of deep crevices, divers are able to make their way up a 22 shelf and across to the rock itself for the safety stop.

3. Sugarloaf

Dive Sugarloaf on a dropping tide and you literally bounce off the fish as you enter the water. Also located in the Admiralty Island group, the current splits around Sugarloaf on both incoming and dropping tides. This water movement attracts lots of fish, however it is the filter feeders that are my personal highlight; corals host feather stars and basket stars, which exist in a symbiotic dance with the tide.



Aaron steers his custom-made, survey-spec rigid inflatable dive boat through the lagoon.
PICTURE CREDIT: Emma Ryan

4. Malabar

A real crowd pleaser, Malabar's four kaleidoscopically-coloured fingers of reef are surrounded by pristine white sand, which create a wonderful contrast. Home to green and hawksbill sea turtles, Malabar also boasts a series of caverns and swim-throughs.

5. Horgan's Hook

This is a dive that Pro Dive is particularly proud of as it was only recently discovered on an exploratory dive. Situated at the inside of the most northern passage of the Relict Reef, the hook hangs out into the current at 25m and houses huge black coral, Faulkner's coral and an array of fish and invertebrates, including schooling Galapagos whaler sharks.

DESCENDING ONTO AN ANCIENT REEF

We sank 30m into the blue until we reached the floor of the ancient 'relict reef' that encircles Lord Howe Island, far older, deeper and more extensive than the active coral barrier reef along the western side of the island. The full extent of this ancient geological behemoth was only recently discovered by researchers from the University of Wollongong and Geoscience Australia following the 2010 geomorphology scan of the seafloor surrounding the island. The study revealed the existence of a fossil reef, some 9000 years old, which completely encircles the island and is 20 times larger than the current reef. It is thought the relict reef drowned 7000 years ago after rapid sea level rise meant coral – which thrives in shallow water – could not survive.

And while the study has revealed key insights into the ability of coral reefs to flourish further from the equator than previously expected, for recreational diving it has meant the identification of 300-plus potential new dive sites, most of which

have never been dived before. Aaron Ralph, owner and operator of Pro Dive Lord Howe Island, regaled me of these findings over a sunset beer at his waterfront dive shop one evening, eyes wide with excitement like a mad pirate on a treasure hunt as his finger traced a map dotted with waypoints next to question marks.

We were the first humans to drop onto this particular waypoint, a few kilometres southwest of the island. The structure the geomorphology scan had detected was a set of bommies where we encountered an abundance of predatory species including the aforementioned Galapagos sharks, a silky shark and schools of big kingfish, which are wonderful to dive with thanks to their curiosity. And while we would have more spectacular dives that week with a greater variety of fish and incredibly healthy coral, this adventurous deep dive in breathtakingly clear water with Lord Howe's fiercest critters will long stay with me.

"Volcanic beginnings have created an incredible underwater topography offering caverns, crevices, trenches and drop offs for divers to explore"

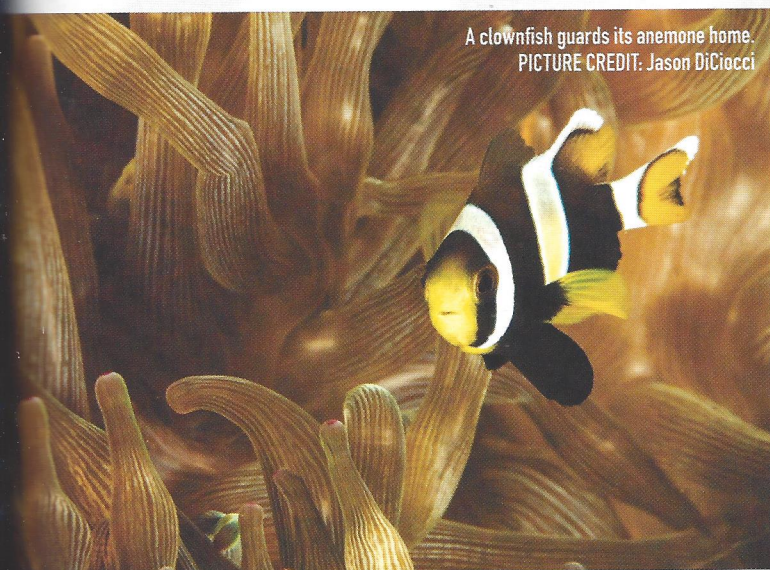


Emma swims through a coral-adorned crevice.
PICTURE CREDIT: Kate Tinson

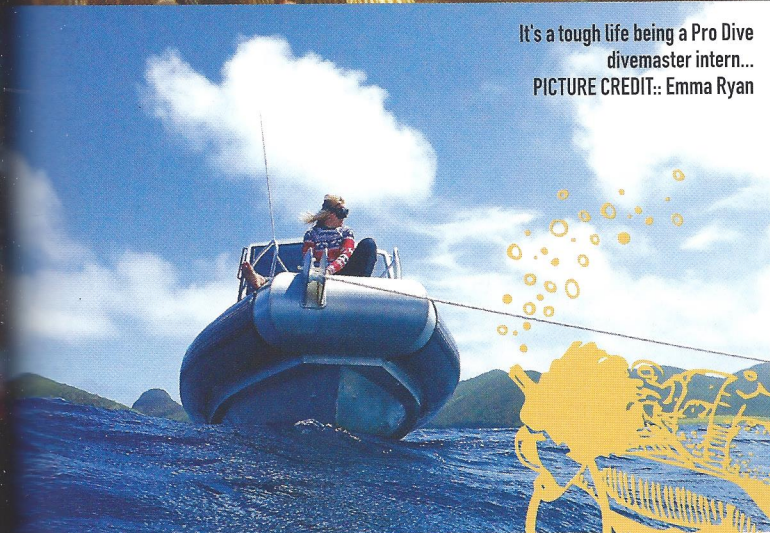
Hawksbill and green sea turtles are commonly encountered.



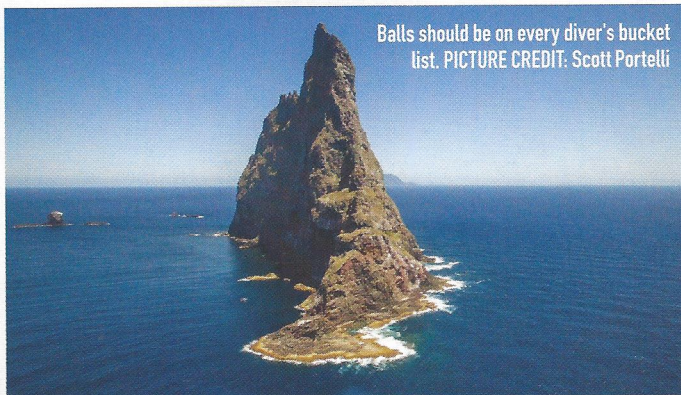
A clownfish guards its anemone home.
PICTURE CREDIT: Jason DiCiocci



It's a tough life being a Pro Dive
divemaster intern...
PICTURE CREDIT: Emma Ryan



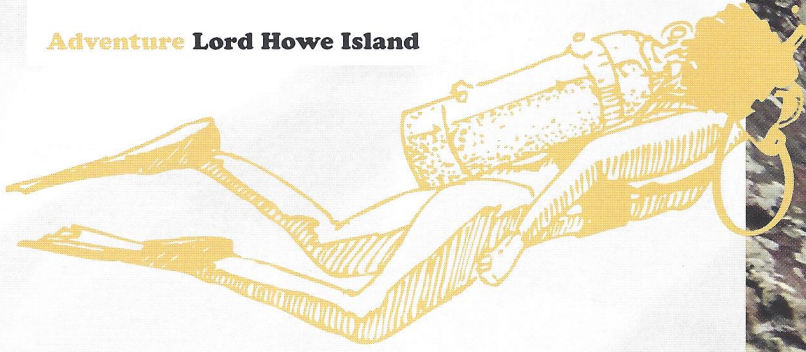
Balls should be on every diver's bucket
list. PICTURE CREDIT: Scott Portelli



BALLS PYRAMID

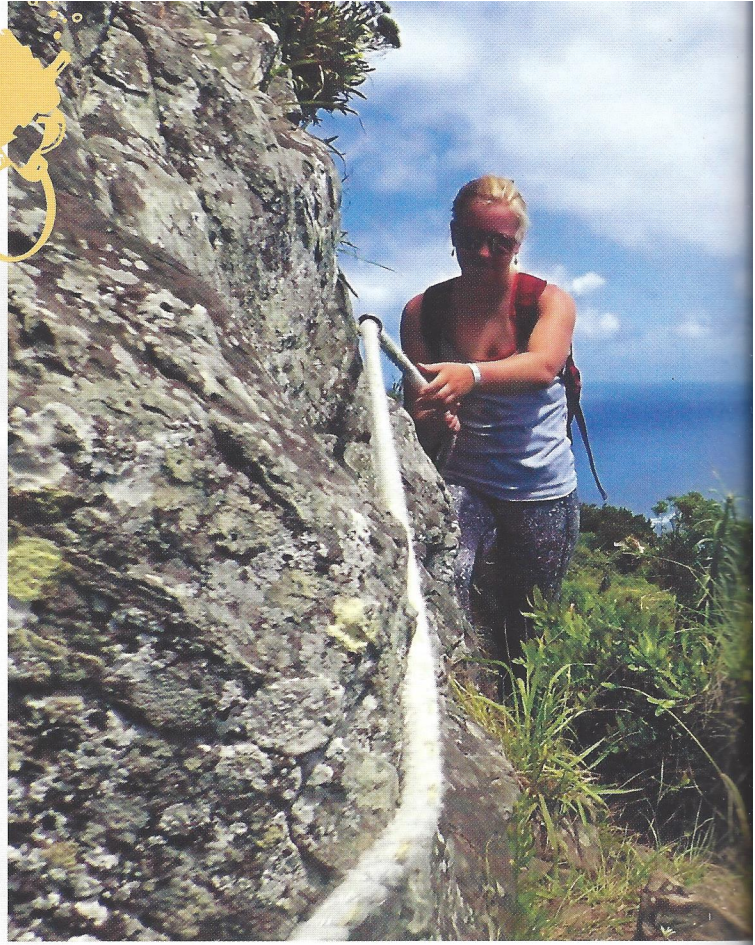
Located 20km southeast of Lord Howe Island is the world's tallest volcanic stack: Balls Pyramid. Stretching 562m skyward, Balls Pyramid is a playground for divers, fishermen and rock climbers, although the latter is these days only authorised under strict conditions. Balls is home to the last known wild population of the endangered Lord Howe Island stick insect.

Balls Pyramid is considered Lord Howe Island's premier dive site, however conditions must be perfect for the boat to run, which they were not for our visit, sadly. It's the only place in the world divers can see the Ballina angelfish, a deep-water species generally only found in depths of 100m or more. In addition, divers may see large schools of violet sweep, amberjack, kingfish, silver drummer, rainbow runners, trevally and occasionally martin, dolphins and wahoo. One for the bucket list.

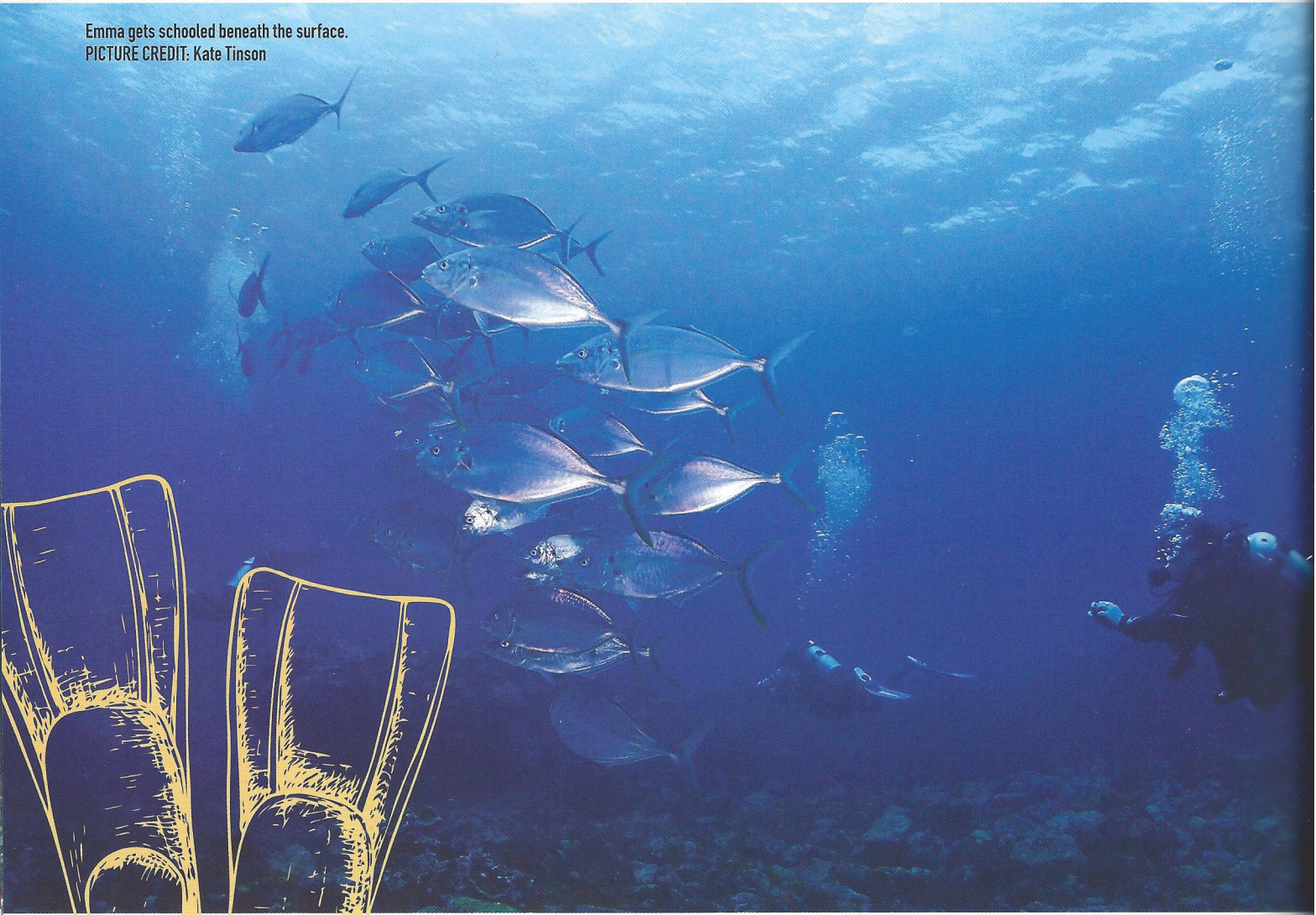


COMMON GROUND

The concept of an 'exploratory dive' certainly whet the appetite of our group, who had descended on Lord Howe for Dive Week, an event hosted by the island's longest running resort, Pinetrees Lodge, in partnership with Pro Dive. We were a fun-loving ensemble of characters from all walks of life and with all levels of dive experience: a retired high school teacher with thousands of dives under her belt (MVP in our post-dive game of 'what was that'); a pair of British expats more accustomed to spotting leafy sea dragons in the icy waters of South Australia; a well-heeled finance executive enjoying a week in paradise with his father; a pair of empty nester yachties from Scotland Island in Sydney's Pittwater; and me, a 30-year-old adventure journalist who had to look them all in the eye and tell them that for me, this was 'work'. We were a motley crew whose only commonality was a penchant for breathing underwater, but that - and a dash of wicked humour - was enough to ensure we were all genuinely sad to be saying goodbye as we traded email addresses a week later.



Emma gets schooled beneath the surface.
PICTURE CREDIT: Kate Tinson



GET INVOLVED

Pinetrees hosts dive week twice a year, in addition to other themed activity weeks centering around ocean swimming, hiking and wellness. For more information, visit www.pinetrees.com.au.



Push bike is the main form of transport on the island.
PICTURE CREDIT: Emma Ryan



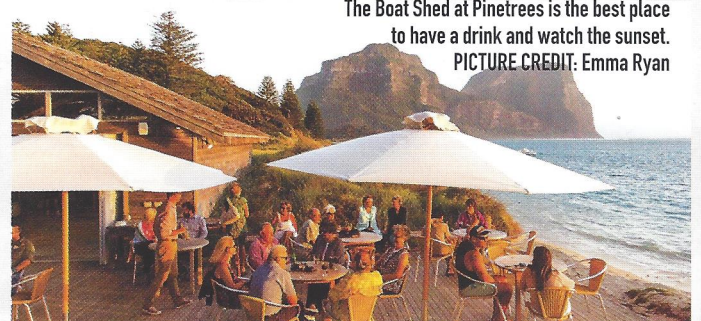
A fledgling sooty tern awaits its seafaring parents at North Bay.
PICTURE CREDIT: Emma Ryan



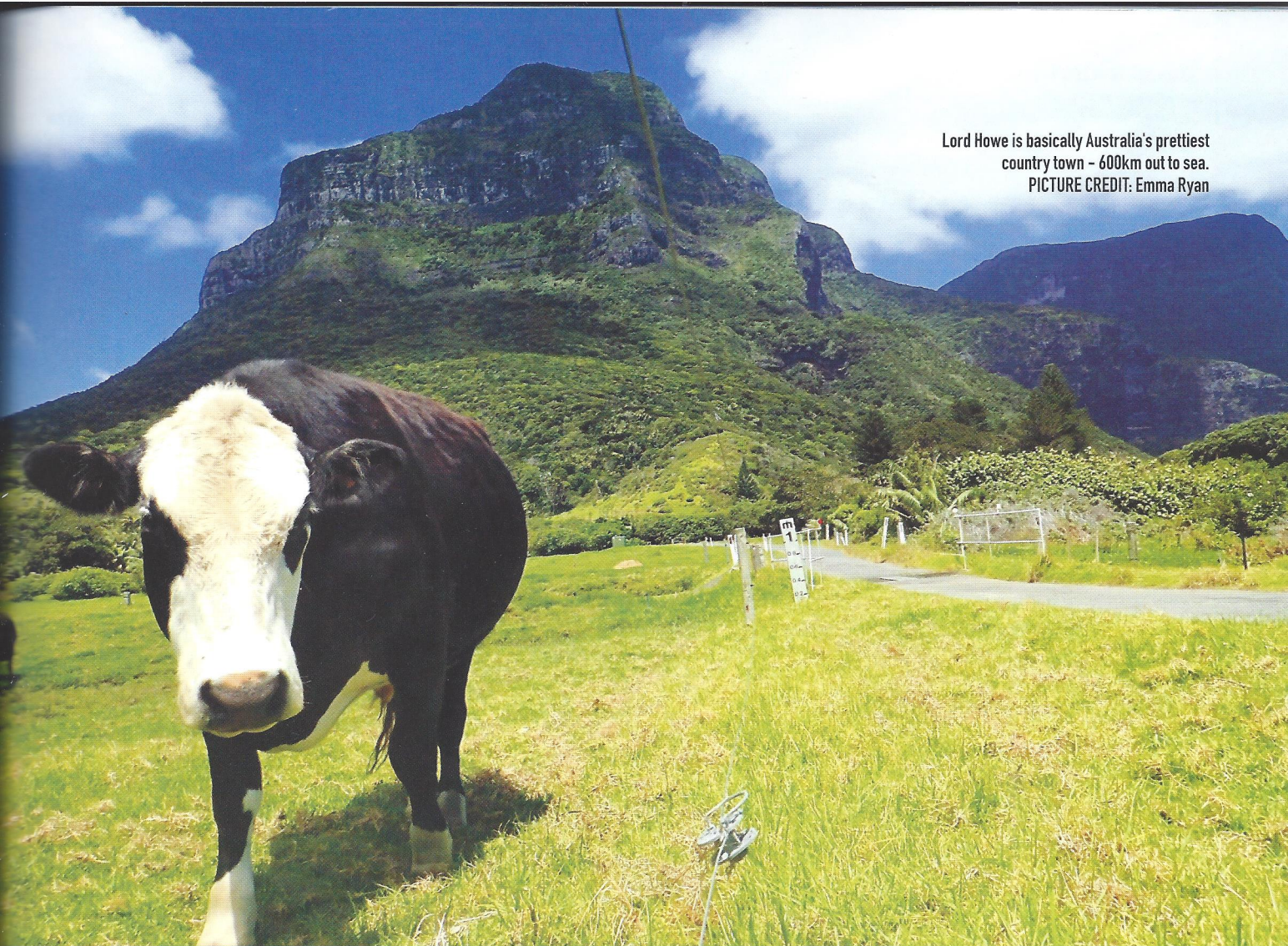
Pinetrees puts on a seafood barbecue for the Dive Week crew.
PICTURE CREDIT: Emma Ryan

DIVE WEEK: ADVENTURE AND LUXURY

Of course, when you're enjoying incredible, all-inclusive hospitality and scuba diving all day in paradise, bonding is easy. Pinetrees manages to marry luxury and comfort with unpretentiousness, and guests' enjoyment of the great outdoors is always the number one priority. From hiking the mountains to ocean swimming, kayaking, snorkelling and, of course, diving, whatever help you need to plan your day of adventure, you've got it. There is no WiFi (they prefer guests to mingle and explore), no locks on the doors (Lord Howe is one of the safest places in Australia), and the predominant form of transport is pushbike (yes, your buns will burn). The team at Pinetrees would prefer to send you off with a packed lunch each morning and know that, whatever you got up to, you'll come back that afternoon tired and smiling, ready for the Lord Howe Afternoon Nanna Nap (definitely a thing). When you're diving two, three and even four times a day, knowing where your next meal is coming from (and that it's going to be amazing – the food here is seriously off the charts) is a welcome treat indeed. Even diving on nitrox, which our entire group did, mostly under tuition from Pro Dive, that wonderful, salty sleepiness still manages to creep in. Not that I'm complaining, I love that feeling, but it does make an all-inclusive package like Dive Week so appealing; all you have to do is eat, dive, eat, dive, eat, sleep and repeat – sometimes with an extra dive chucked in for good measure. If you find a recipe for a happier existence than that, do let me know. **📌**



The Boat Shed at Pinetrees is the best place to have a drink and watch the sunset.
PICTURE CREDIT: Emma Ryan



Lord Howe is basically Australia's prettiest country town - 600km out to sea.
PICTURE CREDIT: Emma Ryan



Mount Gower is an 875m behemoth that takes eight hours to climb.
PICTURE CREDIT: Luke Hanson