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LORD HOWE ISLAND

New South Wales



The location may be laid-back but the itinerary is intense, as **Jo McKay** discovers on an ocean-swimming adventure that gives new meaning to “island time”. Photography by Luke Hanson.

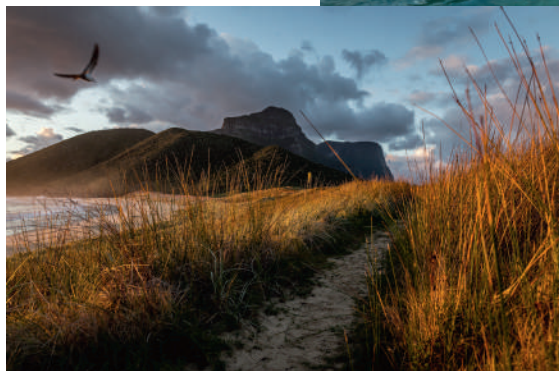
There's no mobile phone tower and wi-fi is sketchy on this island, 770 kilometres north-east of Sydney. Behind me is lush greenery, ahead is a large aquamarine lagoon; it's easy to see why so many people come here for timeout from their hectic, high-wire lives.

But I'm not one of them. In fact, during my week here, I hardly stop moving. I'm ocean swimming, Lord Howe Island-style, having signed up for a five-day experience run by adventure lodge Pinetrees (pinetrees.com.au). It's a week of fun freestyling, about two to three kilometres a day, through the marine world that surrounds this 14.6-square-kilometre crescent-shaped landmass, which, as part of the Lord Howe Island Group, was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1982.

I swim alongside him imagining myself Ironwoman-ish

The waters here are home to the world's southernmost coral reef, boasting more than 500 fish species. The island itself is strikingly beautiful, with two imposing peaks in the south, Mount Gower and Mount Lidgbird. It's a laid-back place and, uncommonly for Australia, also relatively benign: there are no snakes, no life-threatening spiders and no dangerous apex predators in the water. Galapagos sharks patrol the reefs but they pose no risk; instead, people yearn to swim with them.

During my week here, I get the chance. But first I must "reach and roll", a technique designed to help swimmers progress through a swell. It's one of many instructions my cohorts and I – a group of 15 – receive from our leader, former Ironman Trevor Hendy, during the beach briefings that kick off every day. Soon after, we're in the water, standing knee-deep in the shallows. Under the surface, fish flit and drift. The water is so clear we can almost count their scales. We're hard to miss, too, with our rainbow array of Speedos and rashies, red swimming caps, goggles, masks and the occasional set of flippers.



Navigating the balmy waters during Ocean Swim Week (above); the weather turns on Lord Howe Island

Anticipation ripples through the group as we wait for the signal to swim. It comes from Trevor, who's beside us in the water. "Let's go!" he cries. We all plunge in, powering over a sandy channel, beside coral outcrops and schools of tropical fish into deeper water where we cut across the swell and do circuits. When someone waves mid-swim, indicating that they've seen a "pointy dolphin", as Trevor calls the Galapagos shark, the group quickly gathers to hover above it, excited yet reverent, as it skims the ocean floor.



Twin peaks: Lidgbird and Gower (top); a morning masterclass with former Ironman Trevor Hendy

It's not only sharks that make us giddy; we get thrills seeing stingrays the size of a car bonnet and big green turtles drifting among the coral gardens. We slip by schools of catfish and wrasse, butterflyfish and eastern footballers. For Trevor, having a good time is the name of the game. "It's not about how well you've gone against everybody else," he says. "Let's take the competitiveness out of it and put the enjoyment in." He lives his own words; playful in the water, he sinks to the sandy seabed to try to lift a large

anchor chain. Showman-like, he free-dives into the depths of Comets Hole (seven metres) and blows bubble rings, swimming through them as he surfaces.

Antics aside, he dishes out valuable advice: how to stay on track by focusing on tall land-based markers (a mountaintop like Gower works pretty well) and how reaching further in each stroke creates a more powerful glide. I try it out and the difference is significant. I swim alongside him, imagining myself Ironwoman-ish.

Our swimming is never competitive but scoring a place at these Ocean Swim Weeks is. They run four times a year, in February and November, and each week books out several months in advance. A level of fitness is required (you must be able to swim 1.5 kilometres in 40 minutes) because every morning is spent in the water, even when the wind is whipping and the rain pelting, as I discover during one swim that happens as a cyclone passes some 300 kilometres to the east.

Though I find myself navigating chop and gulping salt water, at no point do I feel unsafe. We're overseen by a safety crew on surf skis and sometimes a support boat (if you fall behind,



Taking time out with views of
Lord Howe's southern tip

skipper Dean Hiscox will likely pluck you out of the water and drop you in again, ahead of the pack). Despite the tough conditions, I finish that day on a high, exhilarated to have gone beyond my comfort zone.

Many in the group have participated in Ocean Swim Week twice, thrice, even four times. Part of the attraction lies in the creature comforts of Pinetrees, the oldest guesthouse on the island. In 2015, several of the rooms underwent a chic, breezy makeover. Now it's all crisp white interiors and tropical and nautical prints, with a relaxed, beachy vibe that befits the location. There's also incredible food: a groaning breakfast selection (cooked and continental), lunchtime smorgasbords of salads, barbecued meats and fish, a decadent afternoon tea and four-course dinners.

It sounds like gluttony but we're constantly burning calories. When we're not in the ocean,

we're exploring the island: there's pre-breakfast qi gong (a form of tai chi) led by Trevor, plus cycling, golf and lots of walking (the island is stitched with trails). In the afternoons, I explore forests of pandanus and kentia palms. I climb the inappropriately named Intermediate Hill (a steep uphill slog) to Boat Harbour, a striking rocky beach. Invariably by 9.30pm, I'm sinking into a blissful coma that lasts a good eight hours.

On our final day in the ocean, as I reach and roll in the water, I let my mind drift. I'm gliding over coral and alongside fish. The sun is warm on my back. I glance up and see Mount Gower and the spectacular backdrop of Lord Howe Island. I course-correct, put my head back down and keep reaching. ●

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📍 gobareboating.com