

BY KATRINA LOBLEY

PINETREES LODGE,  
LORD HOWE ISLAND, NSW

### Twin peaks

FOOD, MUSIC... ISLAND BLISS

People leave us fatter but fitter," says Pinetrees Lodge's Dani Rourke. I'm hoping to be an exception to this rule while taste-testing the Lord Howe Island property's inaugural summer festival.

Slim chance. Not when Pinetrees' waist-expanding pleasures include afternoon tea, haute brekkies and dinners from the five-chef kitchen, and lunch options including a packed cooler dispatched to a beach barbecue. It's quite a change from my last island visit, during which I self-catered elsewhere, wincing at the price of groceries that arrive on a barge from Port Macquarie, usually every two weeks but sometimes stretching to four.

These logistics challenge Pinetrees' culinary team as well: "On days when the ship is delayed by stormy weather, the islanders rally," says lodge chef Dennis Tierney. "I ring growers and other restaurants begging, borrowing and buying anything they have to spare. I turn to produce like green pawpaws, which grow most of the year on the island. If pickings are

still really low, I'll forage the sand dunes for samphire, wood-ear mushrooms, smilax, warrigal greens and pigface – some of my favourite dishes have come about this way."

This ingenuity permeates the 37-suite lodge, shaded by namesake towering pines. Rourke (a sixth-generation islander) and her husband Luke Hanson dreamed up their summer festival after noting a lack of bookings for the week between the end of school holidays and the start of one of their popular ocean swimming weeks with former Ironman Trevor Hendy. Yet this is when the World Heritage-listed NSW island, 600km east of Port Macquarie, is at its prime. The weather is balmy, snorkelling over corals in the lagoon is sublime and the island is mostly teenager-free. There's enough island – about 14.5 square kilometres – to roam for hours without meeting anyone or anything bar the odd woodhen.

The couple have packed their first summer festival with all the good things: food, music and yoga. They've worked with celebrity chef Tom Kime and yoga instructor Charlotte Dodson for years so they were shoo-ins, but who would provide the missing piece of the puzzle?

They decided to shoot for the stars, asking Melbourne singer-songwriter Jeff Lang if he'd do the honours. The couple fondly remembered seeing him perform when they first started dating. After negotiations with QantasLink, Lang was allowed to bust the checked baggage limit for the Dash 8 turboprop planes (one named after Rourke's late mother, Pixie) that service the island, bringing 45kg of gear including an acoustic guitar and acoustic lap steel, a stomp box, cables, preamps and vocal mic, along with a snazzy blue suit,



THE WATER SKIMMED AS A LIST OF THE OPENING PHOTOGRAPH BY LUKE HANSON. LUCAS/ETHAN/UNIT



Get the drift: lagoon; Palm Room; Lang plays the boatshed; lunch; Lord Howe

tan shoes and flat cap. The lodge, which hosted winter jazz festivals when Rourke's parents ran the place, updated its own sound equipment, too.

Lang plays four mesmerising sets over four days: two on the lodge's deck and two across the road at the door of the boatshed, where guests and invited locals sprawl under the pines and the island's twin peaks of Lidgbird and Gower provide a dramatic backdrop. While the audience snacks on barbecued canapes served by Kime and lodge staff, Lang's musical tales spill forth. By the final gig, word has spread: a few people paddle over and bob offshore to catch the rare sound of live music drifting over the sunset-gilded lagoon.

It's a scene that's as blissful as the rhythm of lodge life itself. My Palm Room features neutral tones, splashes of green, floor-to-ceiling windows and a veranda with a daybed but I don't spend much time there – not when Dodson is



holding pre-breakfast yoga classes by the lagoon, Kime is giving masterclasses that include how to fillet a flame snapper, and the island's extraordinary marine and birdlife beckons.

If you're desperate for conveniences such as TV, pop into the nearby bowl; if you need to connect to the outside world, buy fast wi-fi from Thornleigh Farm further along Lagoon Road. I take to sitting by the road on a chair propped outside a resident's house, laptop open on my ever-expanding belly (Pinetrees' chefs, I curse you all). You'd think the laconic islanders wouldn't blink but many are curious: am I counting something? Certainly not calories but I'm watching, with dismay, as my days in paradise dwindle away.

Perfect for: Foodies, music lovers and seekers of an exotic island escape within Australia.

Must do: Explore the lagoon's marine life on a two-hour snorkel cruise with Lord Howe Environmental Tours.

Dining: Breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner are included in the lodge's rate. The compact wine list features mainly James Halliday-rated Australian drops.

Getting there: QantasLink flies to Lord Howe Island from Sydney and Brisbane.

Bottom line: Packages at Pinetrees start at \$1800 per person for five nights. The 2020 summer festival featuring Jeff Lang will run from Jan 26-31; packages start at \$2709 per person twin share. Packages exclude airfares.

pinetrees.com.au