

Howe now, black cow. There is a bovine welcome committee at Lord Howe airport as our plane lands but their interest in our arrival is minimal. A flick of tails and soulful stares are all we get as they gather behind a mesh fence. The temptation to use "Howe" references is just too tempting. Howe beautiful, Howe remarkable, and the list rolls on because this UNESCO-treasured island is all those things, a holiday destination 700km northeast of Sydney that feels decades removed from the 21st century.

There are more wood hens than residents, tourist numbers are capped at 400 at any one time, which is more or less the island population; the Qantaslink Dash-8 aircraft that ply the route between Sydney, Brisbane and Port Macquarie carry fewer than 50 passengers. Locking a door seems overcautious, there's no need to dress to impress or seek fashionable places to hang out, the speed limit is 25km/h but residents and visitors alike choose to ride bikes or walk along green corridors of colossal banyans and pandanus and everyone waves greetings.

Road signs warn of ground birds crossing; red-tailed tropicbirds of unearthly beauty swoop about. At Ned's Beach, a supply of pellets from the dispenser to feed fish in the shallows costs \$1. This crescent of an island is 11km long and barely 2km across at its widest point. It's a place of loamy red soil, lava flows and mutton bird rookeries, of tropical and temperate marine life, and scenery to stir and stimulate urban-dulled senses. Roll up at the Bowlo for a schnitzel or a barefoot game. There is no mobile phone reception and Wi-Fi is patchy. I reckon they still do perms at the Howe About Hair Salon. Are you in?

I am making a return after two visits, the last in 2011. I am reminded of what I've been missing during an entertaining talk and slide show at Capella Lodge by erudite naturalist and author Ian Hutton. An island resident and tour guide, Hutton knows the landscape here inside out and beyond, including the world's most southerly coral reefs and colourful fish and invertebrates of the marine park sanctuary, tabled in 1999. Two-thirds of the island is natural forest and there are 241 recorded species of indigenous plants, of which 47 per cent are found nowhere else. Birds? I give you 207 species, 32 of which breed on the island, and a further 15 are seasonal visitors. More than 1600 terrestrial insect species have been recorded, 50 types of snails and 57 ferns. Hutton's listing of endemic wonders, many rare and formerly at risk, is hardly dry and dusty but unfurls like a stocktake of Jurassic Park. I am so fascinated by his description of the phasmid stick insect (*Dryococelus australis*), once believed to be extinct, that I spend an inordinate amount of time next day on its case at the little volunteer-run Lord Howe Island Museum, fossicking and reading.

My base camp of Capella Lodge, in the southern reaches, is inarguably the top place to stay. A member of Baillie Lodges and Luxury Lodges of Australia, it has just nine suites cooled by ceiling fans and named for topographical features of the island. These chic chambers are set in a row amid sweet frangipanis and groves of endemic kentia palms with their distinctive hanging crowns.

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Solitude found on Lord Howe Island

SUSAN KUROSAWA

IN THE KNOW

Qantaslink provides daily return flights to Lord Howe Island from Sydney, weekend flights from Brisbane and seasonal flights from Port Macquarie. Capella Lodge rates start at \$750 a person a night and include breakfast, sunset drinks and canapes, dinner, open bar from 6pm daily, non-alcoholic beverages, selected in-suite mini-bar and island airport transfers. Children 10 years and over welcome. Following a new joint-venture agreement with KSL Capital Partners, Baillie Lodges will add Silky Oaks Lodge in the Queensland Daintree to its portfolio on April 1.

- capellalodge.com.au
- baillielodges.com.au
- visitnsw.com

Ned's Beach, main;
Capella Lodge, opposite,
above right and below;
freewheeling on
the island, below right



more open, with refreshed decor and cohesive palette of sea, stone and sand against pale beech timbers. The renovated Catalina Suite now sleeps four, thanks to a new loft bedroom, and the Makambo Loft, which also sleeps four, has gone all swish with multiple outdoor lounging areas, plunge pool and canopied day bed. It's good to see Bruce Gold's framed linocuts and scatter cushions, referencing island vegetation and birdlife, still in residence. There's now a small wellness spa that uses indigenous Li'tya products and the main pool deck, as ever, has the feel of an amphitheatre angled towards Mount Lidgbird and Gower across deep green farmland and a scoop of aquamarine bay. Guests sit

here at all hours in anticipation of moody morning lightshows, the slow lift of misty top-knots over those lofty peaks, dazzling sunsets and shapeshifting clouds across skies that change from bright blue to pale grey and back again. A hardy few will do the eight-hour round-trip climb of 875m-tall Gower with a licensed guide, entering a world of cloud forests and moss gardens, circled by petrels, seemingly lost in time.

The top accommodation option is the two-person Lidgbird Pavilion, with its own electric golf cart for tooling about, a huge deck through which gnarled pencil-stick euphorbia stand at curious angles, plunge pool, daybed and alfresco bath-tub. Downstairs is a sitting area and basalt-walled bathroom while upstairs the ensuite bedroom all but merges with the view via wraparound window walls. It feels like a sailing ship crow's-nest merged with a cruise liner penthouse and would qualify for all known listings of world's best hotel panoramas. And this being a Baillie Lodges property, all the details have been meticulously attended to, from well-stocked minibar, bespoke botanical soaps and toiletries and other thoughtful guestroom extras to two substantial meals a day, starting with a brilliant breakfast buffet and next-level fruit smoothies and ending with a four-course dinner and matched wines.

A sit-down lunch or picnic basket or barbecue hamper are available at a reasonable cost so I avail myself of the to-go option and sit on a bench at Lovers Bay with a chunky garden salad, coconut water and fruit. When three walkers appear and murmur hello, it feels ridiculous intrusive.

As I take an afternoon stroll, holiday-makers are sizzling sausages on immaculately kept public grills, with chopped wood provided and wood hens scurrying about. Everyone, including me, has broken out the dag hats and thongs. If it weren't for the cappuccinos and focaccias served at the museum's





Coral Cafe, it could be the 1950s. Time stands still on Lord Howe Island? You bet.

Meantime, back at Capella Lodge, it's the cocktail and canapes hour and I have combed my hair and put on proper shoes to meet executive chef Cooper Dickson, a veteran of Baillie Lodges sister property Southern Ocean Lodge on South Australia's Kangaroo Island. He says he's excited that more cultivation is taking place on Lord Howe Island so his produce supply chain is becoming easier

for his daily-changing menus, and locally sourced means no packaging to be returned as landfill waste to the mainland by barge.

Dickson's vegetable and herb patch is flourishing, the free-range chooks are laying, and local leaves and flowers in his dishes include nasturtiums, watercress and sea herbs. By coincidence, I see a *Gardening Australia* segment shortly after my return to Sydney on Thornleigh Farm, a heritage organic estate on Lord Howe Island producing herbs, fruit and vegetables, including firestick radishes, finger carrots, kale and leeks. If you're at self-catering digs, this farm store is the place to stock up. And there on the telly is Luna, the farm's "pet" black angus cow, trotting along a white-sand beach with one of the farm workers, almost high-stepping with happiness. Howe very Lord Howe.

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of Baillie Lodges.

MORE TO THE STORY

■ At the little airport or from most island shops and lodgings, pick up a free copy of *Exploring Lord Howe*, which contains a pretty good map with symbols showing the sites of barbecues, picnic tables, the nine-hole golf course, lookouts and facilities such as toilets and public showers. Importantly, its series of walks are graded one to five, from easy rambles to tracks requiring stamina and bushcraft. Hikers are asked to be aware of locations of boot scrub bays to ensure footwear is cleaned to stop the spread of fungus and weeds.

■ This is not a shopping destination but there's a small range of island-made wares at the museum and a couple of boutiques selling beachy clothing and jewellery. Abemaha has locally designed T-shirts and specialises in "earth-friendly" fabrics such as bamboo, hemp and organic cotton. On the last Sunday morning of each month, the Lord Howe Community Markets are held beside Lagoon Beach with stalls selling the likes of homemade cakes and muffins, carvings and sarongs. I scoop up soy wax candles in chopped-off recycled wine bottles from Unwined Collection. The scent of fresh sage and driftwood, in particular, instantly summons Lord Howe Island.

■ *The Lord Howe Island Red Map*, available just about anywhere, covers a directory of local businesses, including operators who take glass-bottom boat tours in search of turtles, daily dives and sunset cruises plus companies that rent out kayaks, stand-up paddleboards, snorkelling gear and wet-suits. Its map of the town precinct has shops and services clearly marked.

■ Safe beaches and bays are set between



guardian headlands and do not miss Ned's Beach, closely protected by a reef, in the island's northeast. Grab that \$1 supply of pellets and hand-feed the fish, including mullets by the mile, that gather in the glass-clear shallows. There's a shed where masks, wetsuits, fins and snorkels can be hired for next to nothing; beach umbrellas are \$12 a day, kids' kickboards, \$10.

■ Ball's Pyramid (pictured), 23km southeast of Lord Howe, is the world's tallest sea stack. It's nirvana for experienced divers and, as its location is outside the marine park sanctuary, fishing operators can take charter trips. Divers report the occasional appearance of species with names such as Spanish Dancers and Galapagos Whalers, which makes this sound like the most festive of outings.

■ The volunteer-run Lord Howe Island Museum is a terrific little facility, with displays about the era of flying boats (lady passengers in hats and heels), handwritten minutes for a residents' meeting in 1870 ("rules and regulations for living together on the island"), early tomes on birds and botany and nautical memorabilia.

■ lordhoweisland.info

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