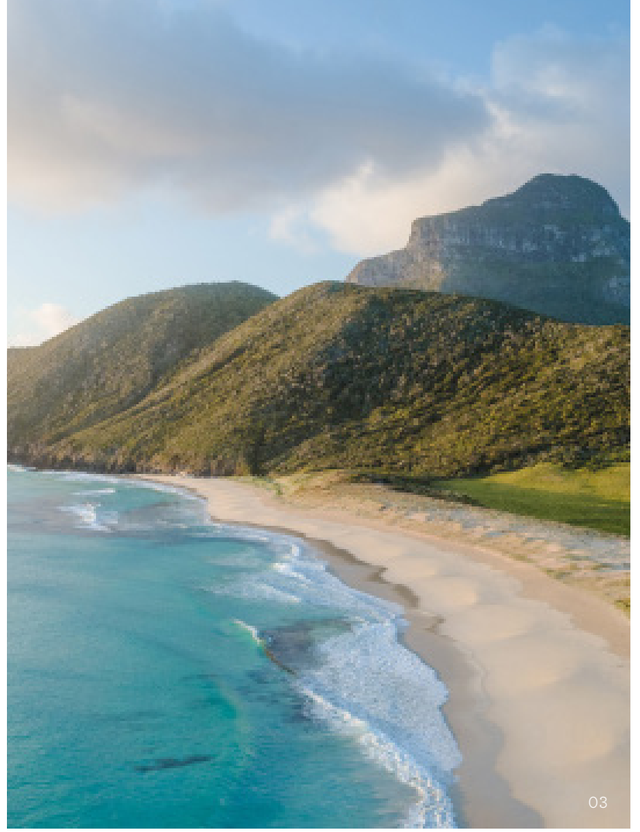

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01 View of Mount Lidgbird and Mount Gower © Susan Elliott 02 Turtles love Lord Howe Island Lord Howe /Zach Sanders 03 Blinky Beach © Visit Lord Howe 04 Wharf jumping. Images 02 & 04 © Visit Lord Howe

Howe to holiday

Obscure birds, 'tame' fish, brilliant coral reefs and jungles await on Lord Howe Island, writes **SUSAN ELLIOTT.**

It's dusk on Lord Howe Island and at Ned's Beach, it sounds not dissimilar to a primary school sports day. "Pick me! Pick me!"

But it's not the chant of children. It's the melancholic call of thousands of muttonbirds (flesh-footed shearwaters) returning from a day at sea. They crash through the forest canopy, skid along the roads and waddle to their burrows – it's hilarious to watch. It could be the movie set of *Jurassic Park* or a scene in a wildlife documentary.

Lord Howe Island is a bewildering combination of the real – and the unreal. Six hundred kilometres off the Australian East Coast – a two-hour flight from Sydney or Port Macquarie – the island is a precious bird sanctuary, marine park, and home to some of the rarest birds and insects on the planet. It's also surrounded by the most southern coral reef in the world. Then, there's the *really* cool stuff – rainwater for drinking, roadside honesty boxes, no crowds, no Wi-Fi or phone reception, and no need to ever lock anything.

Wet and wild

By day, Ned's Beach is a different scene. It's fishy. And you will *not* meet friendlier fish! They definitely know we've spent a dollar on fish pellets at the beach shack because as soon as our toes touch the water, they're circling for their aquatic picnic. Hundreds of mullet, wrasse and bluefish school at our ankles. Most grab 'n' go – others linger long enough for fantastic photos.

On the lagoon side of Lord Howe, there's a good chance of seeing green and hawksbill turtles, and it's here you'll also find all the land and water toys. Sheds along the foreshore rent bikes, kayaks, paddleboards, surfboards and snorkels, and you can book a dive, deep-sea fishing expedition or excursion to explore the reef in a glass-bottom boat.

A whippet puppy sitting in front of one shed makes our choice of operators easy. Missing our own pooch, we stop for a pat and next thing, we're on an ocean adventure! The whippet, Ely, is the 'sea-dog' buddy of Dave Gardiner from Reef N Beyond Eco Tours, who takes visitors to see the world's tallest sea stack, Ball's Pyramid, 20 kilometres offshore. Ely has his own seat at the helm, and seems as excited as us to be speeding across the ocean to the famous monolith. For a big rock in the ocean, it's jaw-droppingly beautiful. Bright-yellow drummer fish leap out of the water, a pod of dolphins rides the bow wave and above, the muttonbirds are hard at work, fishing the ocean. We can only circle the pyramid – humans are not allowed on land here anymore, following the discovery of the world's rarest insect: a phasmid thought to be extinct for decades.

Bike and hike it

Bikes are how you get around the island and, with cars limited to 25kph, it feels wonderfully safe. If you're not biking, you're hiking. There are dozens of tracks that range from tough (Mt Gower) to moderate hill climbs and easy shore walks.

And what is it about this lush jungle that inspires us to talk like Sir David Attenborough? Walking to Middle Head Beach under a canopy of centuries-old banyan trees and plentiful kentia palms with a symphony of seabirds as our soundtrack, we mimic the famous natural historian.

Sir David visited Lord Howe in 2007 and his sentiments about the island could not be more precise: "It is so extraordinary, it is almost unbelievable." ▲

Lord Howe Island Report Card

Info *lordhoweisland.info*
Getting there Regular direct flights are available from Sydney and Port Macquarie. *qantas.com*
easternairservices.com.au
Stay *milkyway.net.au*
Do *lordhoweislandtours.com*
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