





Howe Do You Do

From the rocky peaks of Mount Gower to the magnificent birds and marine life, Lord Howe Island sets the bar sky high – and wonderfully low.

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Clockwise from opposite page, top left: Mount Lidgbird (left) and Mount Gower; Solitude at Lord Howe Island Wharf; 'Happiest fish in the world' at Ned's Beach; Green turtles love the main lagoon on Lord Howe Island; Beauty above and below at the main lagoon.

I fell for Ely on my first trip to Lord Howe Island. It was his first shaky day on the job for Reef N Beyond Eco Tours and with his life jacket strapped tight, snuggled in his hammock, Ely was co-captain on the 27km sea voyage from Lord Howe Island to Ball's Pyramid, the world's tallest 'sea stack' (a stack of rocks at sea).

Ely was a wisp of a whippet with a broken leg. But he had sea dog genes and photographing his puppy face, I didn't even notice the swell.

Okay, it's not the Drake Passage. And the four-hour ocean adventure has a human at the helm – Dave Gardiner, whose child-like enthusiasm has everyone believing it's his first trip to sea. But the commentary gives him away. Every landmark, bird, beach, marine animal and ocean outcrop is described as only a Lord Howe skipper of 40 years can do.

I'm 600km off Australia's east coast but it feels like we're oceans from anywhere. Lord Howe Island, a drop of rock just 11km long, is nicknamed the 'Galápagos of Australia', and has so many wonders that, after visiting in 1997, Sir David Attenborough described the island as "so extraordinary it is almost unbelievable". Sir David, at the age of 71, summitted Mount Gower, the island's crowning glory, 875m high. It's a gutsy eight-hour, 14km round trip over rugged terrain with dizzying drops and rope climbs, but the reward is a seabird's view of the island and the company of some of Earth's rarest ferns, trees, mosses and orchids.

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BIRD LOVER'S PARADISE

And birds fall from the sky. Literally. Providence petrels, which breed on Lord Howe Island, are attracted by strange noises and when you call out, they come crashing down through the forest canopy to investigate. It's hilarious, and their fearlessness is a delight. Birds are everywhere. This is Australia's premier seabird island.

Ned's Beach at dusk is a riot as thousands of flesh-footed shearwaters return from their days fishing and stumble like drunks to their sandy burrows (thanks, webbed feet!). I'm laughing, in tears, hearing their plaintive "Pick me! Pick me!" call. It's so human-like, and it takes all of my willpower to not run through the palm forest and choose one.

On every beach, terns ride the breeze and hover in your face for that perfect Instagram reel. Watch your likes soar.

What you won't see much of, are people. Only 400 visitors are allowed on the island at any time, a decision made in 1980 to protect this UNESCO World Heritage-listed site. You won't see many cars either. Bikes are the way to go and if you're good on the pedals, there's a chance you will overtake the cars you do see, limited to 25km per hour.

If you're not biking, you're hiking – Lord Howe has some of the best walks in Australia. I wake early for a sunrise trek up Malabar Hill, the track a mix of paddock paths, forest trails and steep steps – with hundreds of sooty terns as escorts. Locals call the terns 'wide-awakes' ... and after an hour of their relentless screeching, you will be!

Mount Eliza is a steep, rocky walk to 147m and the Old Gulch is a stunning rocky cove that could have been purpose-built for photographers.

Nature experiences like this are what Lord Howe Island is all about. At Ned's Beach I'm knee-deep in the shore break feeding the 'happiest fish in the world'.

Their tiny mouths punch the surface, hungry for the fish pellets that I toss to the sea. Little Galapagos sharks dart around our watery picnic seeking their own tasty takeaways.

The island's main lagoon has the world's most southern coral reef. Dean Hiscox from Lord Howe Island Environmental Tours will take your out to see it in his glass-bottom boat.

"Probably, we shouldn't have a reef here at all," Dean tells us. "It's only because the East Australian Current flows all the way here from the Coral Sea, transporting a lot of coral species which have colonised this isolated reef."

Dean's daughter, Kayla, jumps overboard, dives for sea urchins and cuts them open to feed double-headed wrasse beneath the window. Stingrays and turtles drift past, and on the sea floor, tropical rock lobsters wrestle like it's a title fight. It's so intriguing that passengers 'jump ship' with masks and snorkels for a closer look.

Back at sea, Dave dances our boat in the sloshy surge around the base of Ball's Pyramid, albatrosses perform an aerial ballet, dolphins play in the wake, and Captain Ely snuggles his muzzle in a blanket.

Sea dog duties done.

GETTING THERE

Qantas flies to Lord Howe Island from Sydney; and Eastern Air Services flies from Port Macquarie, Newcastle and the Gold Coast.
qantas.com
easternairservices.com.au

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