#LORDHOWEISLAND #HAPPYPLACE

Natural selection

At a time when space and a connection with nature are the travel world's greatest luxuries, Lord Howe Island may well take the trophy as Australia's most exclusive destination. ***By Susan Elliott***

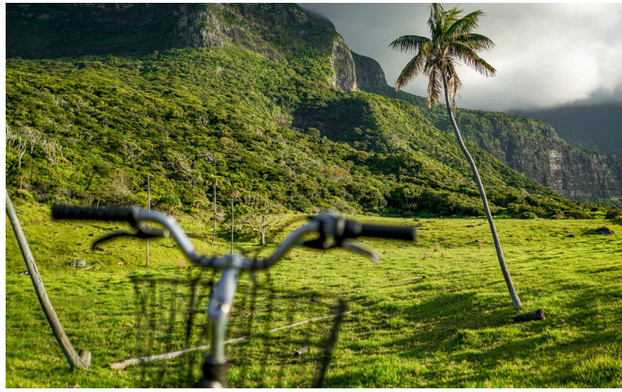












OPENING SPREAD: Lord Howe's natural bounty glimpsed from the top of Mt Eliza © Ken Lees. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Lagoon views © Susan Elliott; the island is a breeding ground for sooty terns; snorkelling the dreamy lagoon © Jewels Lynch. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Blinky Beach © Jewels Lynch; cycling is the best way to explore the island; Ian Hutton with a sooty tern © Ian Hutton. Icon CI Furlan/Noun Project

IF A DESTINATION COULD BE on *Australia's Most Wanted*, it would be Lord Howe Island – for harbouring exotic fishes, supplying unspoiled beaches, touting delicious food, trafficking passengers to untouched coral reefs and being outrageously beautiful. Lord Howe – guilty as charged.

At Ned's Beach, Lord Howe's dreamy northern cove, I tiptoe through the shore break, triggering hundreds of mullet, wrasse and garfish into a frenzy. Tiny, gaping mouths punch the surface and swirl around my feet. It's a scaly mosh pit, the party disrupted, momentarily, by a juvenile Galapagos shark who snaps an unlucky mullet and shoots off. The 'happiest fish in the world' resume their watery dance. Nature experiences like this are what Lord Howe is all about. And for this tiny drop of land, just 600 kilometres off the east coast of Australia, there are many.

ADVENTURE AWAITS

Bikes are the best way to get around Lord Howe, and the only way you will travel faster than the 25km/h speed limit set for the few cars on the island. Lagoon Road tracks the foreshore and is as flat as the Tasman Sea alongside. But you have to suck in lots of air for the heart-pumping peddle up Middle Beach Road. At the top, a 10-minute walk past centuries-old banyan trees leads to an ocean view that draws what's left of your breath away.

If it's not two wheels, it's two feet – hikers say Lord Howe has some of Australia's most epic trails. Tens of thousands of sooty terns are my escort for a sunrise hike up Malabar Hill. Locals call these birds 'wide-awakes', as after a few seconds of their incessant screeching, you are just that. The track I'm on is a mix of paddock paths, forest trails and steep steps with views spanning the entire 11-kilometre length of the island.

Other popular walks include Mount Eliza, the Old Gulch and Transit Hill. But Mount Gower, towering 875 metres above the lagoon, is Lord Howe's crowning glory. It's a gutsy eight-hour, 14-kilometre round-trip across rugged terrain, with dizzying drops and rope climbs. The mountain-top reward is a seabird's view of the island and a walk among some of Earth's rarest ferns, trees, mosses and orchids. In winter you'll have the company of providence petrels, a seabird so trusting it literally drops out of the sky when called in by your guide.

What you probably won't see are people. With only 400 visitors allowed on Lord Howe at any one time – and with notorious winds redirecting many a flight – it's rare to pass a soul.

WILD AND WONDERFUL

"Pick me! Pick me!" The call of the muttonbird, or flesh-footed shearwater, is hilariously human-like. It's dusk at Ned's Beach and the 'fighter pilots of the sky' are crash-landing through the forest canopy and, with webbed feet, stumbling like drunks to their sandy burrows for the night. It's a fantastic sight. I gently relocate several birds who've paused to warm themselves on the road and *my* heart is warmed by their absolute trust of humans.

"This is the Galápagos of Australia," says Ian Hutton, Lord Howe's 30-year resident naturalist, biologist, conservationist, bird expert, museum curator, author of 11 books on Lord Howe and guide. Track him down if you can – he's a treasure as rare as the hundreds of endemic birds, plants and sea-life on this UNESCO World Heritage-listed island and marine park.

I feel spoiled simply swimming. The Tasman Sea to the west and South Pacific Ocean on the east are eye-popping shades of blue. Beneath is the extraordinary palette of the world's most southern barrier reef. Dean Hiscox, from Lord Howe Island Environmental Tours, shows it to me from his glass-bottom boat.

"We probably shouldn't have a reef here at all," Dean says. "It's only because the East Australian Current flows here from the Coral Sea, transporting coral species that have colonised this isolated reef."

Double-headed wrasse crowd the glass window, massive stingrays play hide and seek in the sand, a turtle glides past, and tropical rock lobsters stage a thrilling world-class fight below us.

After a week of unbridled nature experiences, it's a whippet called Eli that makes my trip. He's the 'sea-dog' buddy of Dave Gardiner from Reef N Beyond Eco Tours on our offshore trip to the world's tallest sea stack, Ball's Pyramid. At 562 metres, the rocky monolith is all that's left of a volcanic island that rose from the ocean about seven million years ago. I didn't imagine a big rock in the ocean could be so moving – it's simply jaw-dropping.

It could be the thousands of seabirds swirling above, the bright yellow drummer leaping out of the waves, the dolphins riding our bow or Eli, Lord Howe's cutest canine skipper. But it's clear Lord Howe is a repeat pleasure offender – and certainly high on the list of Australia's most wanted travel destinations.

SLEEP LIKE A CELEBRITY

Want to sleep in a bed that has also hosted Chris Hemsworth? Check in to celebrity favourite, Island House. This design-driven bolthole is hidden amid a forest of kentia palms and ancient banyan trees. Two pavilion homes sleep eight guests (you can have one, or both). On request, there's a private chef, and Lord Howe's new brewery is also on site. **islandhouse.com.au**

TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE

Qantaslink flies to Lord Howe Island from Sydney and Brisbane.
qantas.com.au

DINING THERE

Anchorage Restaurant
earlsanchorage.com

EXPERIENCES

lordhoweislandtours.com
visitlordhowe.com.au

INFORMATION

lordhoweisland.info