

## TRAVEL LORD HOWE ISLAND

# Take a walk where everything comes naturally

It's always a good time to visit this World Heritage site, writes Marguerite Winter.

On our first walk to Little Bay, at the southern and more dramatic end of the giant's claw that is Lord Howe Island, a pensive young man is coming up the rise towards us. He is deep in thought but nonetheless salutes us on this deserted road, the island's main thoroughfare. He is the only person we will encounter in that 90-minute stroll.

There are cattle in the tilted green fields that sit in the lee of two brooding granite peaks as we approach Little Bay. The stillness of the late afternoon, the preoccupied young man on the empty road – it's all very 19th century somehow.

This impression is reinforced the following morning when we take the glass-bottomed boat to the other end of the 11-kilometre island (it's a kilometre wide) to walk along the littoral with Ian Hutton, the island's internationally respected naturalist – a man with a very 19th century interest in specimens great and small.

Hutton came to the island – an equidistant 600 kilometres from Sydney or Brisbane – 30 years ago as a weather observer with the Bureau of Meteorology and stayed on to observe, photograph, research and record the island's natural history.

It's a story he has taken to the world. He has 10 books to his name and is on the international e-lecture circuit. He's leaving for New York the day after our walk and his latest book is sponsored by two American sisters who are noted natural history philanthropists.

To the raucous backdrop of hundreds of terns nesting in the grassy sandbank, our little band moves off along the beach to look first at some of the marine animals that have washed up on the shore. Hutton picks up the skeleton of a type of sea urchin, the heart urchin, and describes how these creatures live under the sand and use their bristly exterior to move through the sand "like a raised galleon", rowing their way as they ingest and break down organic matter from the sand, which they later expel.

The tiny bleached skeleton is, as Hutton says, a beautiful object and lots of visitors take them home as souvenirs. "This is allowed under the Lord Howe Island Act," he adds; and we are instantly reminded that the whole of this basalt island group is a sanctuary – one of only four to be inscribed on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's World Heritage list for the global significance of its natural beauty and heritage.

This significance was understood early; the island attracted much scientific interest from the time of its discovery in 1788, when the commander of the *Supply* came upon it en route to the penal colony of Norfolk Island. At various points in its short inhabited history, the island's tiny but doughty population (now 370)



has banished introduced species such as feral goats, pigs and cats, and a huge weed eradication effort is continuing.

The announcement of an ambitious and thorough program to eliminate rats (which came ashore from a vessel in 1918) received front-page news on the mainland in October. It is thought this last effort will return the island to the near-pristine state in which it dwelt for millions of years, sustaining a unique and utterly natural environment.

For a time in the 19th century, whalers used the island for food and fresh water. This happened both before and after the arrival of the first settlers – three couples from New Zealand – in 1834.

When whaling declined in the 1870s, the islanders (now more than 40 people) supplied seeds of the kentia palm (*Howea forsteriana* is endemic to Lord Howe) to the European market to feed the Victorian-era craze for parlour palms. Forests of these handsome specimens, interspersed with the remarkable banyan tree (*Ficus columnaris*), create a canopy for the island's many upland walks and are just one of the "exceptional range of ecosystems" that are part of the "outstanding universal value" for which Lord Howe gained its heritage listing.

The families looking after tourists today are descended from those who provided hospitality to those 19th century whalers and then, in turn, to the tourists who began arriving from the mainland at the beginning of the following century. Among the most prominent of these families are the proprietors of the legendary Pinetrees, sisters Pixie O'Rourke

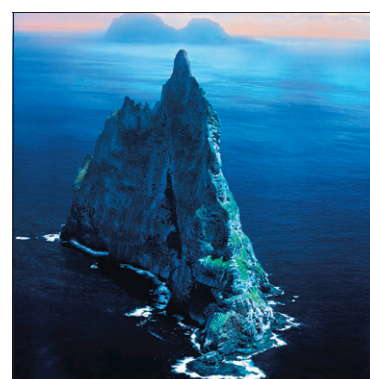


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and Kerry McFadyen and their mainland husbands Ed and Bruce.

Pinetrees is now 100 years old and has been receiving generations of the same families. These days, it has the feel of an old and treasured guesthouse with cabins scattered about the lush and exotic setting. It was a favoured place for many of the Sydney bar and their families over the second half of the 20th century, when flying boats replaced the old passenger ship from mainland Australia.

These have been superseded by QantasLink's daily flights to the island. Pinetrees' simple boatshed, sited along the edge of the sheltered aquamarine lagoon within the crescent of the island,



Clockwise from far left, Old Settlement Beach; a group climbing Mount Gower; Pinetrees; Ball's Pyramid; Capella Lodge. Bottom left, kentia palm saplings. Photos Tourism NSW, courtesy Pinetrees, Capella Lodge and Lord Howe Island Tourism Association

remains for many of its long-time visitors a hallowed place for a sundowner at close of day.

That Lord Howe is a place of returning prodigals is borne out by the story of the island's most recent developers of resort facilities, James and Hayley Baillie, whose now five-year-old, quietly glamorous and just overhauled Capella Lodge is attracting a new kind of sophisticate to the island, of the domestic and international variety.

Asked why they chose Lord Howe as the first of their developing list of upmarket lodges (which includes Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island), James Baillie has this to say:

"It was Hayley who introduced me to the spell of Lord Howe. In my days at P&O, she used to travel with me to the likes of Lizard, Bedarra and Heron islands, and she always used to say that I had to come with her to Lord Howe because it was a paradise. Hayley had spent her childhood holidays on the island with her parents, Dick and Pip Smith, who had honeymooned there.

"Well, one weekend we did go to Lord Howe and the rest is history. The island is unique; in many ways it's an anti-resort place – more quaint [village] amidst a world-class maritime wilderness. What it doesn't have is probably its biggest attraction. And unlike Queensland islands, there's no summer monsoon or stingers."

And no snakes or creepy crawlies, either. With a temperature that rarely goes below 10 degrees or above 28, Lord Howe Island is the perfect place for year-round walking (there are four levels of walking tracks), snorkelling and diving. There are

some spectacular walks on the eastern, "wild" side of the island, from which you might unwind in the casually salubrious spaces of Capella where, from the petite spa to a delectable table d'hôte, you are ministered to by an attentive and discreet staff.

At dinner we discover that our pensive-looking young man on the road was Capella chef Phil Woolaston, perhaps considering the possibilities for the kingfish served tonight.

Capella Lodge was established at the less populated end of the island, up against the impressive profiles of Mount Gower (875 metres) and Mount Lidgbird (777 metres) – all that remains of the 6.4 million-year-old lava flows that filled a large volcanic caldera.

Elsewhere, there is a range of accommodation for all tastes and budgets, including houses and stylish apartment developments. In addition to a good cafe and restaurant, a number of the island's resorts open their dining rooms to non-guests, including Arajilla, a luxury spa-in-a-forest at the Old Settlement end of the island with an excellent reputation for food. Arajilla uses the Ayurda beauty range and incorporates ayurvedic therapeutic treatments. Something you'd only consider, of course, should you really believe you need pampering in paradise.

#### Getting there

**More information:**  
www.lordhoweisland.info  
There is a daily QantasLink Bombardier Dash 8 flight:  
www.qantas.com

**The author travelled with the assistance of the NSW Government.**