



WORDS ELISABETH KING

## PACIFIC PARADISE

YOU won't see the remnants of prehistoric species such as iguanas or the world's only tropical penguin. Yet it's not too much of a stretch to describe Lord Howe Island as an Australian Galapagos. Sir David Attenborough certainly thinks so and visited the World Heritage-listed island in the late '90s to film the quirky behaviour of the island's providence petrel colony. "Over 90 per cent of our visitors are environmentally-minded," revealed the skipper of our glass-bottomed boat as we peered at the spangled emperors and double-header wrasse circling the coral reef at Erscott's Hole.

Named the most beautiful island in the Pacific by National Geographic magazine, World Heritage-listed Lord Howe lies about 700km north-east of Sydney. There's a

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palpable Jurassic Park, lost world air as the plane touches down and not only because of the sheer cliffs and mist-shrouded plateaus. A rocky outcrop measuring only 11km by 2.8km, the island was created by a huge volcanic eruption over seven million years ago. There's a practical reason for knowing this fact, too. Your mobile won't work.

More than 60 per cent of Lord Howe is covered by kentia palm forest, an endemic species once known as the world's most popular indoor plant. A single road links one end of Lord Howe to the other and the few cars you pass stick to the 25km/h speed limit. Discovered in 1788 by the crew of HMS Supply, en-route from Botany Bay to Norfolk Island with a cargo of convicts, Lord Howe was uninhabited and remained so until 1833 when it was settled by a trio of sailors from New Zealand and their Polynesian wives. More settlers arrived to lead a hard-scrabble life selling provisions to passing whaling vessels, mainly American adventurers and sailors jumping ship.

No more than 400 visitors are allowed on Lord Howe at any one time and the lack of crowds makes it easy to adapt to the island's glacial pace of life. Accommodation is varied and ranges from basic holiday apartment rentals through family-friendly resorts such as the fabled Pinetrees Lodge, which has been welcoming guests since the 1900s, and retreat-style boutique properties with beauty and wellness treatments. I stayed at Arajilla Retreat, which was packed with couples of all ages, as much for its proximity to Old Settlement Beach as for its 'secret garden' setting under a rainforest canopy of banyan trees and kentia palms.

Owned by Bill Shead, a former Sydney lawyer and sailor who visited Lord Howe for over 20 years before deciding the island's

laidback lifestyle suited him, the atmosphere is whisper-quiet except at 6.30am when the pied currawongs crank up their daily dawn chorus. Shead was waiting for me at the airport and managed to pack in a lot of information in the short drive to the retreat. "You won't run out of things to do," he warned, "but you can take it easy if you want to." I opted for a bit of both, anchored by Ayurvedic massages and yoga sessions conducted in the very chic spa housed in an environmentally-built yurt.

Greeting fellow guests became the rule as everyone succumbed to holiday mode - and never stopped eating. The conservatory-style lounge and restaurant features Buddhist statues and a riot of decorator colours. A relaxed backdrop to the buffet breakfasts of fresh fruit, pastries and fully-cooked extravaganzas for anyone who wants to "set themselves up for the day".

Lunches and dinners offer more than enough "to keep you going", too, from succulent vegetarian risottos to duck breast curries and

seafood linguine. Shead is a wine buff so the wine list is as top quality as the food. Make sure that you book for dinner even if you stay at Arajilla. There's only one cafe "in town" (a small settlement on a side road that also included a general store, post office and community hall). There's no pub, either, so visitors often eat out at a different lodge or resort every night.

Chef Dennis Tierney is a sushi expert and you can even bring back your catch of the day for him to prepare for dinner. Fancy a gourmet picnic on a secluded beach? No problem, either. All of the retreat's bread is made on the premises and goes very well with the locally-grown veggies and pasture fed meats.

When you are not in the mood to finish off a bottle, Pinetrees has a "cork it" policy, where unfinished bottles are returned to the bar and delivered back to your table for the next meal.

The Pinetrees restaurant is one of the oldest in Australia and the current chef is Alasdair Nicolson, ex- Sydney's Grand National. As at Arajilla, breakfast is the whole nine yards, gourmet picnic baskets are a major treat and you can bring freshly-caught fish back for the kitchen brigade to dish up for dinner. The kingfish is the highlight of the daily menus, served as sashimi or in expertly prepared mains like olive-crusting kingfish with soft polenta or herb-marinated with lemon preserve pilaf.

The view from the dining room at Capella Lodge, Lord Howe's ritziest bolthole, should have a separate World Heritage listing. The wine list is the most extensive of all the island's resorts and listings range from Henschke Sauvignon Blanc Semillon to Chain of Ponds Shiraz The Ledge with several available by the glass.

Capella Lodge is part of the Baillie Lodges collection which also includes Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island and Longitude 131 at Uluru. Chef Peter Smit has worked at other iconic lodges such as Wharekauhau Country Estate in New Zealand and El Questro in the Kimberley and works wonders with the fresh regional produce in dishes from duck confit,

truffled pommes puree and broad beans to island bass grouper, chickpea pottage and shaved prosciutto. Just the thing after a session at the Capella Spa or any other activity for that matter.

Fortunately, it's easy to work off the excess calories. Lord Howe's hiking trails, coastline and mountains offer great walks for all ages and fitness levels, culminating in the eight-hour trek to the 875m-high summit of Mount Gower. Be warned, though, the climb is not for the faint-hearted and National Park rules mandate escorted trips only.

Twitchers, or birders as the Americans more kindly call them, are much in evidence on Lord Howe. As Sir David discovered, the island is a bird watcher's heaven. More than 180 species have been sighted, including one of the world's rarest avians - the Lord Howe Wood Hen. With over 500,000 birds nesting on Lord Howe from masked boobies through mutton birds and fat-footed shearwaters, locals rightly boast that they live in one of the world's great sea bird habitats.

Ocean currents well up from a depth of 3000m to meet a land shelf about 8km off the island. The result? Lord Howe is also a world-famous game fishing area for marlin, yellowfin tuna, wahoo and kingfish.

To be honest, I could get seasick in a puddle, so contented myself with two voyages in the lagoon in glass-bottom boats and visiting Ned's Beach, where giant kingfish lurk in the shallow waters to be hand-fed by tourists. Other visitors played a round on the island's only nine-hole golf course, headed for one of the many snorkelling and scuba-diving hot spots or went surfing at Blinky's Beach. Yet the glass-bottomed boat trip out to Comet's Hole wasn't without drama when a brief, violent squall blew up. It departed as quickly as it came to return the view to postcard perfection. "People say that Lord Howe is the last real paradise on earth," said one of the crew members. "I dunno. But it's certainly got to be in the running." It most certainly is. 



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