



LORDLY PURSUITS

There are more paradises and heavens-on-earth touted around the world of travel than God ever intended, but all the exaggerated promises are justified on Australia's Lord Howe Island



Located 550km off the New South Wales coast, about two hours by air from Sydney or Brisbane, the 1,455ha island sits, gloriously adrift, like a forgotten punctuation mark. Such isolation has been its saviour: World Heritage-listed since 1982, and therefore of no interest to developers, Lord Howe provides an almost instant passage to a past era – and make that the 1950s of my youth, complete with few cars, no locked doors and the prospect of old-fashioned adventures.

There are about 350 residents on the island and tourism is limited to 400 visitors at one time, but exclusivity here doesn't mean luxe resorts and hideaways with private pools, rather membership of a kind of secret society – there's an almost-irresistible urge to wink at fellow tourists, to acknowledge that you are the clever ones who've 'discovered' such a hidden jewel.

Naturalist Sir David Attenborough called the island "extraordinary", extolling its pristine environment and diversity of plant and marine life. There are no snakes, stingers or sand flies: the only thing that startled me during a recent visit was a wooden that ran across a track in such a flurry, legs whirring like a cartoon character, that I almost fell over it.

Capella Lodge was a lovely little property in a prize location when James Baillie and his wife, Hayley, came along in late-2003 and saw the potential for an upgrade. Baillie was head of P&O Australian Resorts (now Voyages) and he masterminded the glam-up of the group's Queensland flagship resorts, Lizard and Bedarra. They unveiled the revamped Capella Lodge a year later and it is sensational – if a low-key, environmentally sensitive bolt-hole can be dubbed as such.

It has accommodation for 20 guests in a row of two-storey loft suites and single-level configurations with broad decks and cushioned day beds that invite serious lolling. Views of the ocean are filtered through a latticework of palms and flowering vines. The top-category Lidgbird Suite has an L-shaped deck shaded by pink frangipani trees and an outdoor spa tub; guests who book this accommodation also have the use of an electric golf cart, which more than holds its own on an island where traffic jams are unknown and the speed limit is a stately 25km/h.

The Capella look is contemporary beach-house: bleached timbers, accents of aqua, slate and navy blue, big windows that frame and open onto a marine view, natural cane, polished floors, groovy rattan light fittings and plenty of sink-in-to seating. Mambo designer Bruce Gould has come up with a series of patterns for Capella's soft furnishings: all soft blue-green swirls and nautical knots.

There is a small spa with an alfresco massage tent. For gourmet-lovers, there is a Sydney-trained chef with experience at the city's top Thai restaurants. Even the locals – some of whom were initially wary of the 'yuppie project' – now enjoy the restaurant and get to grips with chilli and coriander.

Long before Capella Lodge's reawakening however, Lord Howe was a magnet for eco-travellers and that's definitely still the case. Fit visitors can try an eight-hour guided ascent of 875m Mt. Gower, up to what's described as a 'hobbit rainforest' of ferns, mosses and orchids. It's a tough ascent, requiring ropes in parts, so less active types may prefer to watch the dot-like climbers from a perch at Capella Lodge – it has dress-circle views of towering Gower and its equally vertical neighbour, Mt. Lidgbird.

Much of a Lord Howe holiday is spent underwater and this is 'aqua therapy' at its finest: dipping in shallows so clear you can see your toenails, snorkelling in a lagoon rimmed by the world's southernmost coral reef or taking a boat to deep diving or fishing spots. There are also organised excursions out to Ball's Pyramid, 23km to the island's southeast, and said to be the world's highest rock, its grey basalt stained with white splashes of guano in a mad abstract. It's infinitely more comfortable to view Ball's Pyramid



from the air, however, and QantasLink pilots swoop low over the rock on their approach, so try for a window seat on the small Dash-8 aircraft.

A small museum contains memorabilia relating to Lord Howe's discovery by the First Fleet's HMS Supply in 1788 and the era of flying boat services from the late-1940s to 1974. There are also a few cafes and general stores in the one-street village, but you'd struggle to turn your visit into a shopping jaunt. The most popular souvenir is a potted baby palm from the Kentia Nursery; there are no quarantine restrictions on the mainland so taking in a palm is simple. Lord Howe is the world's biggest exporter of kentia and this certainly seems a suitably sedate 'industry' for a World Heritage Site.

At Neds Beach, fishing is prohibited and swarms of mullet and kingfish are well aware of this fact. They gather in thrashing swarms for feeds of bread from swimmers. At one end of the pretty scoop of beach is a tin-roofed shed with a room full of beach equipment for hire. This being old-style Lord Howe, you just pop your money in a white-painted honesty box and help yourself to a beach umbrella, kickboard, boogie board or wetsuit. There's an honesty box at the nine-hole golf club near the airport (not that the tiny 'terminal' and grassy landing strip really constitute the term). Opposite the airport is what the locals laughingly call 'the drag strip': the island's straightest road. Most visitors hire bikes though and meander along paths shaded by spiky kentia and colossal banyan trees. It's good territory for walking, too, with more than 20km of marked trails, some leading to scenic lookouts with vivid names such as Muttonbird Point. Bird-fanciers will also appreciate Lord Howe's shearwaters circle like small planes, returning to the island after feeding on the open water.

This is time-warp Australia, resistant to change and precious because of that. The baggage limit on the island's only airline, is a mere 12kg a person: an unnerving prospect for some travellers, but it offers a rare chance to strip back one's belongings and savour a serene and uncluttered travel experience. *Susan Karaszew*