



# The Weekend Australian Magazine

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## Beauty Rich and Rare

From islands to deserts, Australia's most spectacular destinations

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**F**ROM THE SUNDECK PLUNGE pool at Lord Howe Island's Capella Lodge the clouds hug the towering cliffs of Mt Gower, soaring from a cobalt-blue sea in a vision that is more Hawaii than Pacific island NSW.

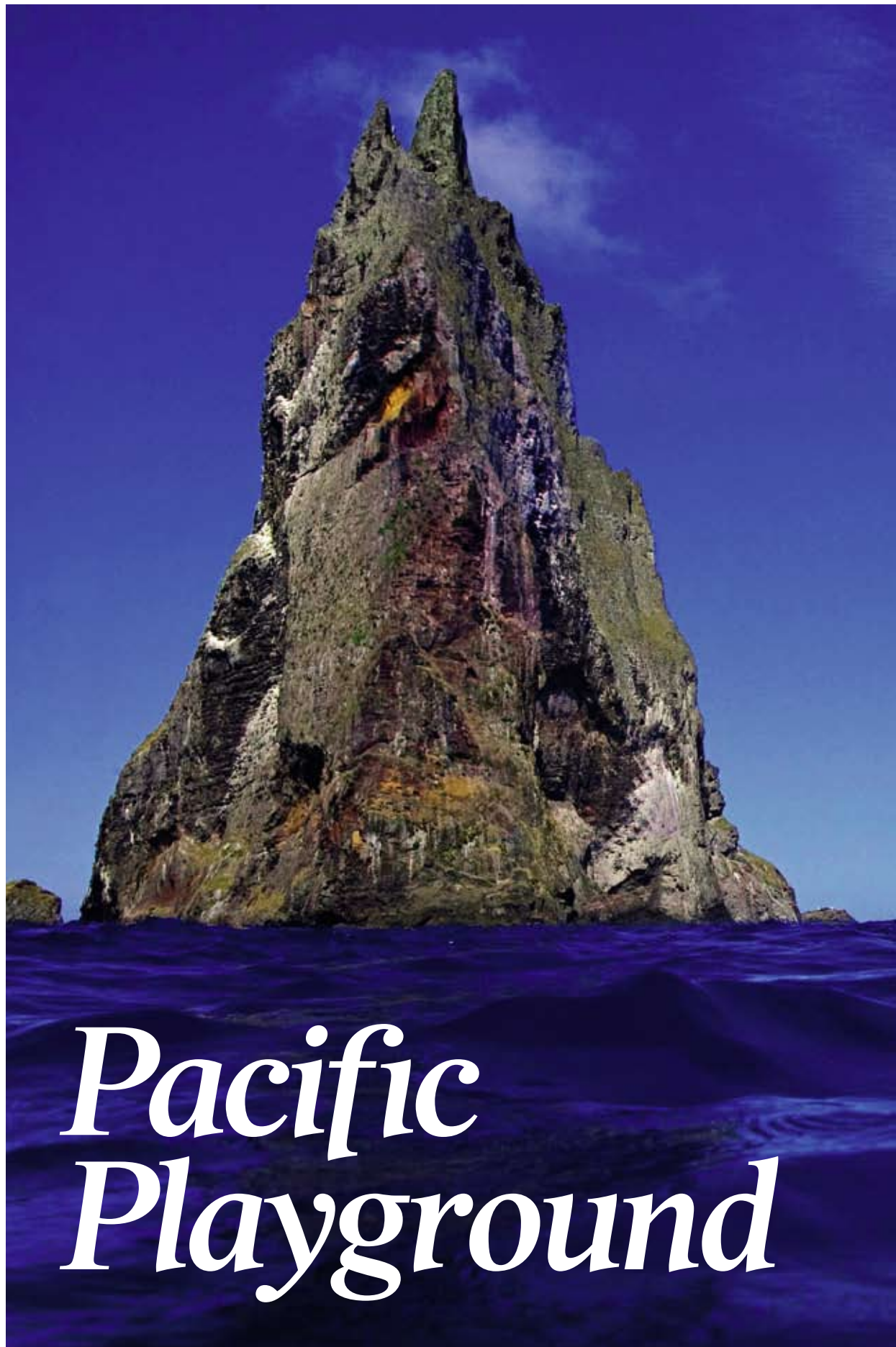
It is the ideal place to contemplate the fortunes of island guide Jack Shick and his great-great-grandfather Nathan Thompson, who was blessed with the sort of seafaring luck so impossibly good it is difficult to believe. En route to Lord Howe in 1853, Nathan's ship chanced upon a canoe containing five Micronesian beauties, one a princess, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Naturally, one became his wife.

The question is, has Nathan's luck deserted Jack? The answer depends on the state of your legs and your head for heights, because twice a week Jack guides tours up Mt Gower – an 875-m rope-assisted hike, regarded as one of the world's best day treks. With legs trembling, heart pounding, gasping for breath, it is impossible not to think that Jack is being forced to repay the good fortune of his forebears. "Pain is weakness leaving the body," Jack says, quoting a military trainer who recently sprinted the climb.

"For 70 per cent who climb it, Mt Gower will be the most physically demanding experience of their lives," says Ian Hutton, an island ecologist who nowadays has the good sense to spend several days inspecting the unique cloud forests above 650m, rather than climb and descend in a single day.

For the inexperienced, Mt Gower is so tough it requires intense discipline just to take in the view rather than solely focus on the task at hand. In retrospect, when the pain has finally gone, it is worth the effort, from navigating the narrow cliff ledge passage at the outset that requires trekkers to wear a hard-hat, to the near-vertical rope-aided ascents that seem to go on forever.

The prize is a bonsai-esque cloud forest wonderland of ferns and stunted trees that are more than 500 years old. It is the world's



# Pacific Playground



**Larking about:** the *Carina* cruises past Balls Pyramid, 23km southeast of Lord Howe Island

## LORD HOWE ISLAND, NSW

primary nesting place for the human-friendly providence petrel that will climb all over passing walkers and nibble their ears to investigate a new sound. And when the clouds part at the summit, there is a breathtaking vista of the island lagoon to the north and the equally impressive Balls Pyramid to the south.

But below, from the six-star Capella beach house, it is easy to understand why it took 88 years – from Lord Howe’s discovery in 1788 to 1876 – for the first climb to be recorded. The sheer cliffs confirm Mt Gower as the centre of the volcano that formed Lord Howe Island seven million years ago; it has since then eroded to a fraction of its original size.

World Heritage-listed Lord Howe is one of a chain of about 20 volcanic peaks that have sprung up in an arc from the ocean floor as the Australian plate makes its way north at a steady rate of about six centimetres a year. The only other peak still visible above sea level is Balls Pyramid, jutting 550m into the sky, representing only one per cent of the original island.

Balls Pyramid is where kingfish, which crowd the island’s waters, commit suicide on any baited hook that meets the water. The only distractions are the Galapagos sharks that stalk the fishing lines, sometimes so persistent that they intercept every kingfish on its way to the ship’s ice bin.

“It’s reliable,” says Keith Gallo-way, who runs the *Carina* fishing charter to Balls Pyramid, where the physical demands of hauling kingfish is broken only by the even more physical challenge of reeling in hard-fighting wahoo or marlin.

Keith’s catch-cry, “Eat fresh fish”, fits neatly with the marine park regulations that stop the long-liners – who used to take the same amount of fish each outing as locals take each year – but allow recreational fishers and tour operators to supply local restaurants with fresh seafood.

After three days on Lord Howe my hands are broken from fighting monsters of the sea and rappelling unexpected mountains. To recover, Scott Allen is airbrushing my back with high-pressure



**A view to die for:**  
one of the bedrooms  
at Capella Lodge



**The clouds part:** main picture, view of Lord Howe Island from Mt Gower; left, a rope-assisted section of the ascent



**Lush:** cloud forest near the summit of Mt Gower

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spice-infused steam from what appears to be a stainless steel Kirby Vacuum cleaner. In fact, the Ayurvedic spa at the Arajilla retreat is a discovery that makes Lord Howe a worthy destination by itself. The experience was a world away from my introduction to Ayurvedic medicine a decade ago. That was at Fort Cochin in southern India, where a tag-team of burly practitioners had taken turns grinding me into the cement floor in what they assured me was an authentic demonstration of this 5000-year-old medicinal practice developed for royalty.

By contrast, Scott built a dough basket on my middle back and filled it with warm oil to melt away the tensions of modern life. The upmarket Capella and Arajilla retreats, complete with Ayurvedic steam wand, are a sign of the changing times at Lord Howe.

Island mainstay Pinetrees – a Christmas institution for an exclusive group of well-heeled Sydney residents – has also passed to a new generation. Sixth-generation islander Dani Rourke and husband Luke Hanson have returned from high-pressure jobs on the mainland to run the family business following the death of Dani's mother and island dynamo, Pixie Rourke, last year.

Dani and Luke have plans to build on the island's reputation for fresh food to boost the out-of-season business. But with a cap on visitor numbers of 400 beds, Lord Howe will always retain its deserted sub-tropical island appeal.

It's the sort of place locals just don't want to leave.

Just ask Jack.

The author travelled to Lord Howe courtesy of the Lord Howe Tourism Association  
[www.lordhoweisland.info](http://www.lordhoweisland.info)

Qantaslink flies daily to Lord Howe from Sydney, weekly from Brisbane and Port Macquarie

Accommodation  
Capella Lodge: [www.capellalodge.com.au](http://www.capellalodge.com.au)  
Phone: (02) 9918 4355  
Arajilla Retreat: [www.arajilla.com.au](http://www.arajilla.com.au)  
Free call within Australia: 1800 063 928  
Pinetrees Lodge: [www.pinetrees.com.au](http://www.pinetrees.com.au)  
Phone: (02) 9262 6585

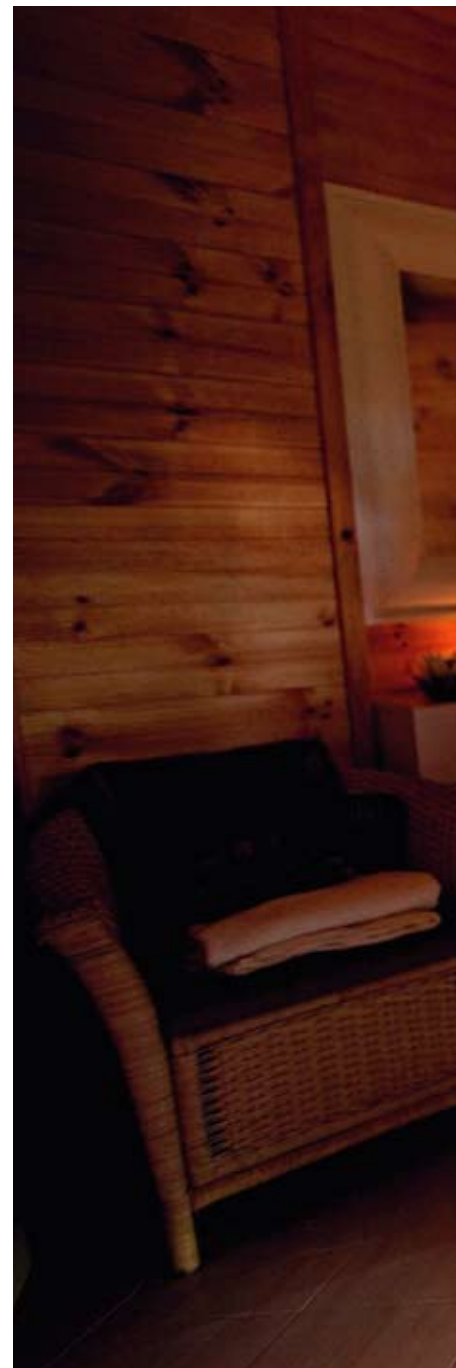
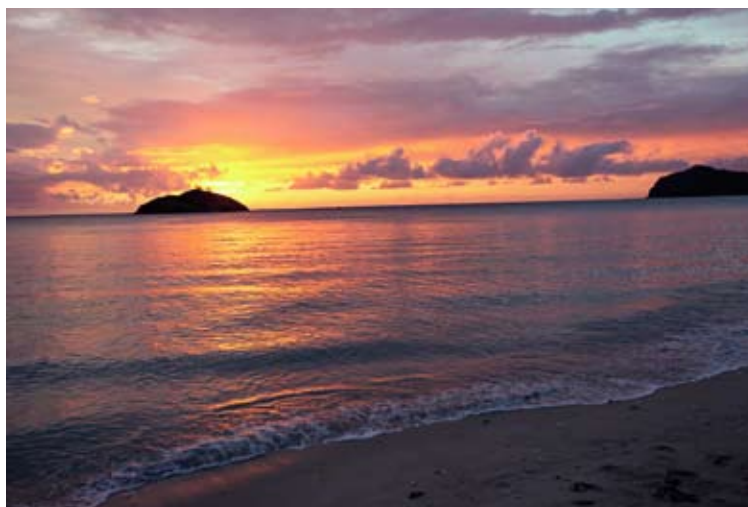
Mt Gower Climb  
Jack Shick – Sea to Summit Expeditions  
[Seatosummit@clearmail.com.au](mailto:Seatosummit@clearmail.com.au)

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Phone: (02) 6563 2239



**Cool:** Arajilla's guest lounge

**That's supper:** kingfish are prolific in the waters around Balls Pyramid; below, sunset from Pinetrees Resort





**Soothing:** main picture, Ayurvedic therapist Scott performs a treatment at Arajilla's day spa; far right, the dough basket that's filled with warm oil

