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I do, I do, all over again

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March 9, 2013

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Soak it up: Capella Lodge's hot tub

Few guests, fewer cars and a general state of perfection: little has changed at this Pacific idyll, writes Susan Wyndham.

The sculptured volcanic rocks at the south end of Old Settlement Beach provide a view of the tranquil turquoise lagoon and the cow-dotted slopes leading up to Kim's lookout, as well as shelter from any island winds and a natural table for a bottle of bubbly.

"Is this where we said, 'I do'?" my husband asks as we stand barefoot in the fine sand by the rocks.

"It is," I reply. "And I still do."

The last time we stood together on this spot was in September 1999, when the administrator of Lord Howe Island interrupted his morning's work shooting feral goats on Mount Gower to marry us. He picked us up in his van, brought two staff members as witnesses, and after a short ceremony pulled a bottle from his backpack

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and filled five plastic glasses for a toast. Then he dropped us back at Pinetrees Lodge, where we had a blissful week's holiday. For us, it was the perfect wedding.

We returned in September 2009 to celebrate our 10th anniversary and were happy to find the island almost unchanged. This year we were pleased to be invited back and do things a little differently as guests of the two most exclusive boutique hotels, Arajilla Retreat and Capella Lodge.

The other big difference was that this time we went in February, when the water temperature is 23-24 degrees, much more appealing than the 18-19 degrees of spring when even a wetsuit doesn't keep out the chill. Autumn-winter-spring are ideal for taking the island's many walks, easy or strenuous, and cycling, fishing, birdwatching, golfing, or relaxing with a book and a spouse. Summer is the time to immerse yourself in the idyllic waters around the reef and enjoy the breeze-cooled temperate weather.

The pleasure begins with the easy flight, an hour and 45 minutes from mainland NSW. Landing over the long, narrow island with its lush forests of palms, pines and banyan trees, volcanic peaks, sandy coves and crystal lagoon, you might wonder why anyone needs to travel further for a special beach holiday. Apart from a taste for the exotic, the only reason you might bypass this perfection is the cost: with just 400 visitors allowed on the island at once, airfares and accommodation can be expensive. That's the price of World Heritage List beauty.

We are picked up by Dan, one of the relaxed but attentive staff from Arajilla, and within 20 minutes we've signed in over banana-mango smoothies, dropped our bags in our Kentia Suite and are seated in the open-sided, Balinese-style lounge consuming herbal teas and cakes made by the pastry-chef daughter of owners Bill and Janne Shead.

Arajilla's timber pavilions have a lovely and convenient setting, close to "town" at the north end but nestled among native kentia palms and banyan trees and a few steps from Old Settlement Beach. So between afternoon tea and cocktails we rediscover our wedding site and plunge into the transparent water. The panoramic view



Cycling along the shady paths around Arajilla Retreat.



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takes in grassed slopes, rainforest, the cloud-wrapped Mount Gower and Mount Lidgbird, and a clear blue horizon.

Luckily we also look down in time to see a small leathery head pop out of the water beside us. Our companion is one of the lagoon's many summer-resident turtles, who savour the seagrass of this bay.

Drinks in the lounge lead into an excellent dinner in the adjoining restaurant: barbecue king prawns with Thai salad, grilled mushrooms with melted brie and parmesan mousse-filled cone, pan-seared kingfish (a Lord Howe specialty) with miso butter sauce and tempura enoki mushrooms, vegetable pakoras with tamarind dressing, sweet egg with saffron poached pears, and peach-filled cinnamon doughnut with white chocolate parfait and berries. And yes, that is just the first of our included three meals a day.



Facial mask at Arajilla retreat.

Swishing palms and sea lull us to sleep. After breakfast my husband heads out on our favourite walk, up the slopes of Malabar Hill to the cliffs where tropic birds swoop over the ocean, trailing vivid red tail feathers. As a birdwatcher he's in heaven here, with more than 130 species at various times - terns, noddies, shearwaters and the unique flightless woodhen, which has grown in numbers (while the goats have been eradicated).

I'm seeking lazier relaxation in Arajilla's wellness spa. Guests can have a consultation, treatments and cooking lessons with Scott Allan, a specialist in the ancient Indian science of Ayurveda, which aims to find an individual's healthy balance through diet, lifestyle and herbal treatments.

I have a soothing massage from Elle, who uses warm oils and silence to deepen the sense of peace.

There's just time to grab a sandwich from the dining room before we hurry to the nearby boatsheds and join Peter Busted of Islander Cruises for a two-hour snorkelling trip, which he generously extends to three hours in perfect conditions.

Peter lets the group off at four sites in the lagoon, each a brilliant fashion show of corals, fish (more than 500 varieties swim here) and other marine life. It's easy, safe, high-quality snorkelling on the world's most southern reef. For other fishy encounters, there's scuba diving and kingfish feeding from the shore at Neds Beach.

Next day we make a leisurely lunchtime move from the shaded serenity of Arajilla to the laid-back glamour of Capella Lodge at the more remote south end of the island. Capella's light timber and glass buildings are set into the hill and have strategic decks so everyone faces the knockout view of Mount Gower and the lagoon.

Owned by Dick Smith's daughter, Hayley, and her husband, James Baillie, Capella is part of a five-star portfolio that includes Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island and attracts international travellers.

The view is too tempting for my husband, who doesn't have time for the eight-hour Mount Gower climb but takes the stiff hike, with ropes and cliff-edge paths, up Mount Lidgbird to the Goat House Cave and a rare view of Balls Pyramid, a towering rock out to sea. I spend the same two hours in Capella's spa under the strong hands of Tennille, who exfoliates, massages and moisturises me from head to toe using native botanical products.

It's dinner and a show as we watch the sun sink into the ocean while eating kingfish

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carpaccio, tempura soft-shell crab in miso broth, beef cheek pie, pan-fried kingfish with Vietnamese salad, chai ice-cream with mango, and creme brulee made with local honey from Jack Shick's hives.

Rather than just being a tourist resort, Lord Howe is anchored by a real community and it's satisfying to eat fish or fruit provided by weathered locals and watch children going barefoot to school; no one locks their doors, and it's like a more sophisticated version of our childhood beach holidays.

We sleep upstairs in our Lagoon Loft and wake high above the ocean. After another sumptuous breakfast we stroll down to the tiny beach at Lovers Bay, an obvious favourite with honeymooners.

The island is beautifully maintained, from roadside gardens to mown picnic areas; barbecues are stocked with firewood where you can cook a lunch supplied by your hosts. Capella is ideally placed for golfers, just a few strokes from the manicured nine-hole course.

Tourists cannot drive on the island but the 25km/h speed limit for the 350 permanent residents makes it safe to walk and cycle, and hosts offer a lift if you have far to go.

Four days is not enough to do all the island offers. There's the museum displaying its history beginning with a sighting by the First Fleet ship, Supply, and settlement in 1834 by three New Zealand couples; the shops, cafes and galleries of the village; many more excursions on land and sea; and just soaking up the comfort and thoughtful care offered by both of the places we stay.

Libby drives us to the airport and sees us off like friends before picking up her new guests. After three holidays in 13 years we can almost call ourselves Lord Howe veterans, though it will take a lot longer to become regulars.

We intend to work on it.

Susan Wyndham travelled courtesy of Lord Howe Island Tourism Association and QantasLink.

FAST FACTS

Getting there QantasLink has daily flights from Sydney to Lord Howe Island with fares ranging from about \$750 return to about \$1500 in peak summer periods. Winter specials go on sale in May.

Staying there Arajilla Retreat and Spa has 12 one- and two-bedroom suites from \$615 to \$865 an adult, twin share. Rates include pre-dinner drinks, meals and afternoon tea. See arajilla.com.au, email reservations@arajilla.com.au or phone 1800 063 928.

Capella Lodge has nine one- and two-bedroom suites from \$650 to \$1200 an adult, twin share, to the Lidgbird Pavilion at \$1200-\$1550 a person. Rates include sunset drinks and canapes, gourmet breakfast and three-course dinner with wines. Closed in July. See lordhowe.com or phone 9918 4355.

Rates at both places include snorkelling gear, mountain bikes, island airport transfers and many special touches. Both take children aged six and over at a lower rate.

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