

## NEW SOUTH WALES



# Find Howe to enjoy a natural high

The hike up Lord Howe Island's Mt Gower has been described as the best day walk in Australia. If it isn't, it's not far off it, writes **Mark Daffey**.

I'M HANDED a menu. It's no ordinary food menu though; this one lists the various spa treatments offered at Lord Howe Island's Capella Lodge.

I study the inventory of facials, massages and foot rubs offered, some with exotic titles that translate as "skin food" or "melody". There's one that goes by the name of Beyond the Big Blue. And another that makes me want to float on my back above a coral reef. It's called Ocean Dreaming.

Then I scan down to the last item. Mountain Man, it reads, describing it as "a revitalising therapy for men". It has my name written all over it. But, as the label suggests, I'll have to earn it first.

For two days now I've been swanning around the island in glass-bottomed boats or in the lodge's private mini-van, chauffeur-driven by manager Libby Grant or her partner Mark McKillop. At one stage, I borrowed Capella's golf buggy so I could nick down to the foreshore to snap a few pictures.

And all the while, I've savoured the inventive dishes served in the restaurant by head chef, Peter Smit.

For something different, Smit lugged his barbecue utensils down to the gently sloping lawns fringing Ned's Beach yesterday. There, he grilled Moreton Bay bugs, local kingfish and Yamba prawns while schools of mullet, silver drummer and spangled emperor loitered in the shallows, waiting to be hand fed.

So it's fair to say that my stay thus far has been self-indulgent. Now it's time to work up a sweat.

There's no better way of doing that than by hiking up a mountain, and I intend to tackle the biggest one on the island. Mt Gower stretches 875m straight up from the island's southern tip and the trail to the top is unmarked. For that reason, it's prohibited for lone hikers to attempt to reach the summit.

Fifth-generation islander Jack Shick is the more experienced of Lord Howe's two licensed hiking guides and it was



with Shick that I first climbed the mountain in 1996, three years after he inherited the permit from his father. The 53-year old looks as fit as he did back then, with wild, bushy hair—a little whiter than when I last met him—poking from beneath his cap. Little else has changed though.

I meet him just down the road from the lodge for a 7am start. A large group of hikers has gathered at the trailhead and we set off together, striding out beside the seafront until we run

out of level ground. Thereafter, the trail goes directly up a sharp incline where two supporting ropes have been bolted to the rock, one above the other. It's a taste of what's to come.

At the top of the slope, we rest beneath an overhang shaded by kentia palms. Shick tells us the endemic kentia is one of four species of palms found on the island and that its popularity as an indoor plant boomed during the 19th century. Using a hessian cord looped around his feet, he



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**ROUGH AND SMOOTH:** (clockwise from main) Hikers on the Lower Road from Mt Gower; Mt Lidgbird (left) and Mt Gower seen across Lord Howe's main lagoon; the summit of Mt Gower; view from Capella Lodge; cycling is the main way to get around Lord Howe; and sooty terns are among the many birds to be seen on the island. Pictures: Mark Daffey, Tourism Australia

draws on more than 120 years of ancestral practise to shimmy up the trunk to show how the seeds are collected for export.

The most dramatic section of the hike starts soon after. Called the "Lower Road", it navigates a ledge beneath vertical cliffs of

black volcanic rock. It's a drop of over 100m to the sea on our right, and straight up on the left. But it's also one of the simplest

legs – as long as you're not faint-hearted. Overripe blue plums sprinkle the trail thereafter, as we climb towards Erskine's Creek. Shick points out bush tomatoes and mountain apples, as well as endemic hot bark trees, whose protective outer layer tastes like chilli.

We stop at the creek for a break and the chance to refill our water bottles. The track then climbs steeply beneath curly palms, giant lily pillies and tree ferns to a saddle connecting the two mountains. We're almost halfway elevation-wise, but Shick tells us there's only about a kilometre of trail left to the summit. It suggests there might be plenty of scrambling ahead.

Sure enough, it's virtually straight up from this point. Twenty-three hikers have signed up today and at times the trail feels overcrowded. The queues are longest when we arrive at the foot of the "Get Up" – the steepest pitch to the summit, where ropes have again been fixed to the exposed rock to help haul us up.

Little and big mountain palms replace the curly palms closer to the summit, and moss carpets the ground. But from that juncture onwards, it's a simple traverse over boggy ground and knotted rocks to a narrow clearing at the top. Clouds often obscure the



views from the summit, but luckily for us the skies are clear. We look out across the lagoon towards North Bay and Mt Eliza. The razor-sharp spire of Balls Pyramid – the world's tallest rock – can be seen through a tangled web of branches to the south. And in front of us is Mt Lidgbird.

Endangered woodhens forage through the damp undergrowth and the ground is littered with the burrows of providence petrels that return here every year to nest. Pied currawongs perch shamelessly on the grass beside us in the expectation of being fed. Any closer and they would be able to pick meals out of our pockets.

It's taken five hours to get here, with another four-hour hike ahead, back to the lodge. By then, I think this mountain man will deserve a little convalescence.

The writer travelled to Lord Howe Island courtesy of Capella Lodge. Destination NSW and QantasLink.

**GO2 LORD HOWE**

**GETTING THERE**

QantasLink operates up to 11 return flights a week between Sydney and Lord Howe Island, as well as direct flights from Brisbane and Port Macquarie on certain days. For more information, flight times and fares visit [qantas.com](http://qantas.com)

**STAYING THERE**

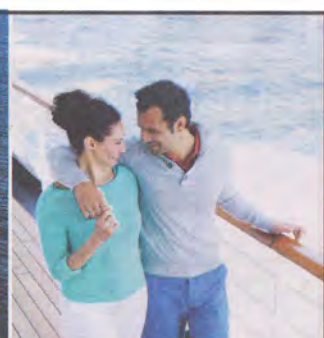
Rates at Capella Lodge start from \$750 a person, twin share (April 1, 2015 to December 18, 2015). For details, conditions and reservations, contact Baillie Lodges on (02) 9918 4355 or email [reserve@baillielodges.com.au](mailto:reserve@baillielodges.com.au). See also [capellalodge.com.au](http://capellalodge.com.au)

**MORE**

Sea to Summit Expeditions offers twice-weekly guided walks to the top of Mt Gower for \$60 a person.

Email Jack Shick on [seatosummit@gmail.com](mailto:seatosummit@gmail.com) or look up [lordhoweislandtours.net](http://lordhoweislandtours.net) for further information.

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