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TRAVEL

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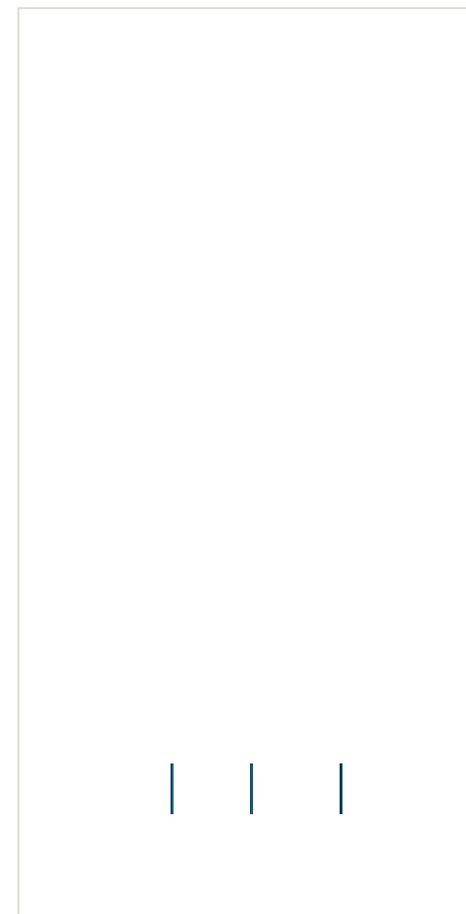
LOUISE EVANS The Australian November 24, 2012 12:00AM



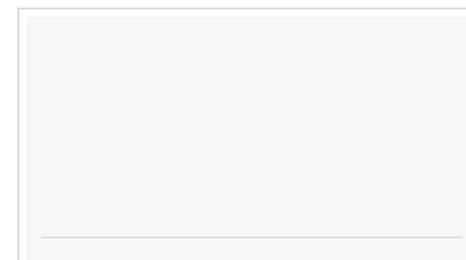
Snorkelling at Ned's Beach under the watchful eyes of local marine life. Picture: Tourism Lord Howe Source: Supplied

OUR snorkelling adventure is going swimmingly until the huge flat black rock beneath me suddenly comes to life. As I try desperately to escape from being on top of what is in fact a giant stingray, all I can think of is how Steve Irwin met his maker.

Luckily, neither my maker nor the stingray has the slightest interest in me and the ray glides off in the direction of the deserted beach where we've abandoned our picnic to snorkel along a volcanic rock face in search of turtles.



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We come to learn that the creatures inhabiting Lord Howe Island have a habit of startling trespassers. Wade in for a dip at the south end of Neds Beach and you'll be swamped by metre-long fish that gamely dart between your legs, demanding to be fed. And I have to confess that being tail-slapped by fish is laugh-out-loud hilarious (as well as ticklish).

Take a boat to investigate the colourful coral holes in the protected lagoon or the wider marine park and you'll come face to face with huge, immovable double-header wrasse fish, whose distinctive bumps make them look as if they've head-butted one too many snorkellers.

Pick one of the many scenic bluffs for sunset drinks and flightless woodhens, which look like little kiwis, may suddenly appear from the undergrowth to peck at your toes. Empty your backpack at one of the 11 white-sand beaches for a picnic lunch and an uninvited huntsman spider may well jump out and startle you.

Startling is actually a good word to describe everything about Lord Howe Island - its unspoiled beauty, fearless creatures, pristine azure waters, vibrant coral gardens and its proximity to the mainland (just a two-hour flight east from Brisbane or Sydney).

As you fly in, you'll see one of the isle's biggest jewels, the world's most southerly coral reef, which protects an incredibly clear and calm lagoon that is perfect for snorkelling and glass-bottomed boat tours. There are also 50 dive sites, littered with caves and volcanic drop-offs.

One of the reasons Lord Howe is so untouched and pure is because it was World Heritage-listed in 1982. The island is also part of NSW and its surrounding waters were declared a marine park in 1998. The human population is kept low; there are about 350 residents and visitor numbers are capped at 400 at any one time to limit the impact on flora and fauna. As a result, Lord Howe is like a huge open-air zoo where the animals, on land and sea, come to gawk at you, not the other way around.

A good way to get a feel for the stunning 11km-long land mass, which is just 2km across at its widest point, is to take a boat cruise around the island. More than 10 species of seabirds nest here and they make a frightening racket as they fight for space on the sheer cliffs.

There are good fishing spots, too, and the Lord Howe kingfish, with its soft, tasty fillets, features on the menu - along with local kingfish, tuna and squid - at the chic nine-suite Capella Lodge nestled below the twin peaks of Gower and Lidgbird.

If you prefer surfing, just follow the barefoot locals to Blinky Beach on the east side or past Salmon Beach on the west, depending on the winds.

Tourist operators boast about Lord Howe's crime-free environment and how no one locks their sheds or cars. Bicycles are the main mode of transport. In this laid-back, old-fashioned place, there is nowhere to take a stolen car or bicycle, so there's no point stealing. As a result, the island's sole policeman likes to have a chat when he stops tourists to remind them to wear their bike helmets.

Lord Howe has an intriguing human history, which can be further explored at its museum. The first white man to discover Lord Howe was Lieutenant Henry Lidgbird Ball, the commander of the First Fleet ship Supply. In 1788, while sailing between Sydney Cove and the Norfolk Island penal settlement, Ball spotted the uninhabited island and named it after Admiral Richard Howe. Ball's Pyramid, the sheer rocky spike to the south, he named after himself.

The first settlers were white men, who arrived with Pacific Islander wives. You are left to guess, as you study their glum faces in the museum photos, whether the women were kidnapped or came willingly.

Being about halfway between Sydney and Norfolk, Lord Howe became a trading post and provisioning stop for passing boats and whalers. When whaling became unprofitable the islanders, some of whom are descendants of the original settlers, turned the native kentia palm seedlings into a cash crop that they sold into European markets as parlour palms. But quite recently, and controversially, that nice little earner also went belly up, leaving tourists as the biggest cash crop.

Because of the limit on visitor numbers, accommodation is finite and it is expensive. The bottom rate at the top-of-the-range Capella Lodge is \$650 a person a night, which includes full breakfast, three-course dinner and all drinks and wine, although specials and packages are available. There is cheaper accommodation, but most of it involves some degree of self-catering and, because everything has to be shipped in, food, alcohol and restaurants are expensive - and there's a 14kg check-in baggage limit on the 32-seater Dash 8 planes that service the island.

QantasLink has a monopoly and it costs a hefty amount to fly from Sydney or Brisbane. Yet, despite the financial pain, our flight home is full of blissfully happy, rejuvenated tourists who have each paid many thousands of dollars for one week in paradise. Startling as that is, it's worth it.

- lordhoweisland.info
- baillielodges.com.au