

THE  TIMES

Australia's secret island hideaway



Lord Howe Island, described by Sir David Attenborough as "unbelievable" Rob Henderson/Getty Images

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It's only 11km long and has no phone reception, but Lord Howe Island is a favourite with the in-the-know crowd

I once met a woman with the weird and wonderful job of checking out far-flung locations for "vacational suitability" for a Hollywood clientele. So I shared a secret: Lord Howe Island. She hadn't heard of it, but then, it was one of the last islands on Earth to be discovered. It bears no trace of indigenous settlement and Europeans and Polynesians didn't show up until more than a century after the publication of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

Savvy Aussies-in-Hollywood certainly slip away to this tiny speck in the Pacific, governed from New South Wales. Judy Davis, the Emmy award-winning actress who appeared in *A Passage to India* and Woody Allen's *Husbands and Wives*, has visited its golden sands, as has Eric Bana of *Hulk* fame, who came with his kids, and George Miller, the director of *Happy Feet* and *Mad Max*.

But the islanders are too busy milking their cows or minding their honey bees to pay much attention and, as for visitors (numbers are capped at 394 at a time), why would you bother ogling stars when you can spend the time paddling with exotic fish in more colours than a Matthew Williamson kaftan? Anyway, the island — 11km long (6.8 miles), 2.8km wide and 770km across the Tasman Sea from Sydney — is out of mobile phone range, so you can't call and tell your friends which famous name you've just spotted.

It's not totally off the grid, though. You can buy the Australian edition of *Grazia* at the local store and an intermittent internet connection allows a couple of young mums to shop on Net-a-porter (then wait for purchases to arrive by barge because the daily 32-seat Dash 8 plane usually flies at capacity weight). As for fashionable visitors, Stephen Jones, the milliner, is among devotees of what he calls "an unspoilt hideaway", adding: "In a few short days, Lord Howe's magic transports me, even inspiring a collection of mine entitled 'Drifting & Dreaming'." A gentle respect pervades a place where the school uniform does not include shoes. If you need to move faster than you can walk barefoot, you hire a bicycle. (The speed limit for the few dozen cars is 25km an hour.) The chef at Pinetrees, the local hotel since about 1848, cycles to work with his surfboard under his arm. The relaxed mood extends to the hotel's "business centre" — an empty desk and a can of mozzie spray. No one uses it. The staff joke that they place bets on how few hours it takes for guests to go from "boardroom to BBQ".

"A few people do ask where the lap-pool is. I say 'over there, mate'," says Luke Hanson, one of the Pinetrees proprietors, gesturing to the lagoon that is home to 90 species of coral and more than 500 species of fish. Hanson has married into a matriarchal clan. His two young daughters, Elsie and Pixie, with wife Dani Rourke, an islander and former hot-shot Sydney lawyer, represent the seventh generation of women running Pinetrees (for, make no mistake, three-year-old Elsie definitely thinks she runs the place).

There's abundant nature and history here. Take the tale of Dani's great uncle Albert, who ran off as a teenager by lighting a beacon to attract a passing ship and said he'd been shipwrecked. Eventually, he settled in England, where, 30 years later, he wrote home to tell the folks of his new job — boatswain on the *Titanic*. Some 50 years after he perished at sea, a daughter travelled to Lord Howe Island, where she recalled her father as delusional; full of improbable stories of birds balancing eggs on branches

instead of building nests and flocks swooping from the sky at a human call. It's such true facts of fascinating fauna that made Sir David Attenborough breathless when he visited the island. He described it as "almost unbelievable".

Accommodation ranges from simple self-catering to the luxury of the new duplex Lidgbird Suite at Capella Lodge, which features a bathtub on a private deck under the frangipani trees and a plunge pool with views across the lagoon to Mount Gower. The latter is a tough climb of 875m (2,870ft), so a more sensible way to spend the day might be lazing on the day bed reading *The Freudian Slip* by Marion von Adlerstein, the must-read of the Australian summer, in part set on Lord Howe. Lovely Capella Lodge is child-free, so its owners, James and Hayley Baillie, who have four young boys, stay at Pinetrees.

Lord Howe isn't an island to jam into a tight schedule. There's the voyage to Ball's Pyramid, which rises 551m out of the sea like a Gothic spire. There are glass-bottom boat trips that are far less frenzied than on the Great Barrier Reef, and not-to-be-missed — even by those who think bird-watching is for twitchers — is a ramble with the ornithologist Ian Hutton.

Then there is doing nothing. When Kris Lewis, the general manager of Arajilla Retreat, returned after seven years working across Asia, he asked the fisherman who also refuels the planes what was new. "The windsock at the airport," came the reply.

Still, there's been much excitement lately. A new copper has reported for duty. Senior Constable McGrath's correct title is "Lock Up Keeper Lord Howe Island", though no one even locks their doors. The closest to that is the "privacy" sign hung on a banyan tree outside the yurt that houses the spa at Arajilla.

Need to know

Where to stay

Pinetrees (pinetrees.com.au) costs from £730pp for five nights' full board. Capella (capellalodge.com.au) is from £1,300 for three nights' half board with wine. Arajilla (arajilla.com.au) is from £1,104pp for three nights' full board.

Getting there

Qantas (qantas.com) has flights to Sydney via Singapore from £1,136, for travel up to June 30.

A Qantas Walkabout Pass allows you to customise your trip and get good deals on fares to more than 50 destinations within Australia, including Lord Howe Island (fares start from £43 per flight, excluding taxes). You must book the pass at the same time as buying your international flight.

Further information

lordhoweisland.info; visitaustralia.com

Great island getaways

Three Hummock Island, Tasmania

This island off the island of Tasmania was unknown until recently — except to climate-change experts visiting the nearby baseline air pollution station, birdwatchers flocking after Cape Barren geese and the most ardent enthusiasts of the unifier of Italy, Giuseppe Garibaldi, who made a brief stop here in 1852.

Then in 2011 John and Beverley O'Brien, who make up the entire resident population, wondered if a snazzier bunch might also enjoy renting the heritage cottages and dining on abalone caught off the rocks and the famed beef and cheese from neighbouring King Island, accompanied by their home-grown organic vegetables. For a Londoner, it feels enchanting and distinctly strange to share 29 square miles with wombats and kangaroos. Try Marsupial meditation with glass of Tassie "Cab Sav" in hand — aka watching the roos as they watch you.

Details Charter flights can be arranged from Melbourne or local airstrips in northwest Tasmania — see threehummockisland.com.au. The cost per night, not including food and wine, starts at £62pp. Catering can be arranged to any budget in advance with Three Hummock Island.

Kangaroo Island, South Australia

You want more kangaroos? The answer, for me, is always yes. Especially when they come with (not as) canapés, served just as the sun goes down and mobs of roos start bounding across the horizon. Southern Ocean Lodge, with its 21 Jetsons-style suites, all with panoramic views, lays on the best spread. Kangaroo Island, pictured top, is a short plane hop from Adelaide. But the name of Australia's third-largest island is misleading. The explorer Matthew Flinders coined it for what his sailors threw in the pot; it is also home to koalas, wallabies, penguins, fur seals, sea lions and the echidna. The latter look like hedgehogs but are egg-laying monotremes, the oldest surviving mammals on the planet. The island is also renowned as the great white shark capital of Australia.

Details While Southern Ocean Lodge (southernoceanlodge.com.au) is the star. Rates start at a steep £673pp per night, twin share with all food, open bar with premium wines and spirits, "signature experiences" and island airport transfers. For more modest prices, see tourkangarooisland.com.au.

Haggerstone Island, Queensland

Queensland's islands have taken a battering in cyclones over recent years and some of the famous resorts remain shuttered. Those in the know opt for the remote, family-friendly Haggerstone Island in the tropical north, with only four rustic huts tucked away in the jungle. As for the guests, expect to find young Aussie business titans acting out *Swiss Family Robinson* adventures with their kids. Seafood comes fresh from the lagoon and mod cons include hot and cold running water in the showers. Come here for snorkelling among coral reefs or walking on sand so white that the silica shimmers like silver.

Details You can book Haggerstone as part of a bespoke safari for about £560pp per night; try Scott Dunn (scottdunn.com).

Wilson Island, Queensland

Ask the smart people in the Australian travel business for their own secret wow-factor pick and it is always Wilson, the über-exclusive tiny coral atoll in the Great Barrier Reef. This is the solar-powered eco adventure for those who dream of getting back to nature on a deserted island yet expect a state-of-the-art tent in which to recline after spotting a humpback whale. The water here is so vividly turquoise it looks retouched. Good news for the time-poor rich: Wilson is only 30 minutes by helicopter from the mainland.

Details The Kiwi Collection (020-3318 9541, kiwicollection.com) has rooms from £669 a night, including all meals and drinks.

Dirk Hartog Island, Western Australia

You heard it here first: Dirk Hartog, named for the Dutch sea captain who made landfall on the westernmost point of Australia in 1616 (Captain Cook wasn't born until 1728) is the upcoming remote island destination. It isn't the rare burrowing sand frog that is grabbing attention. In 1968 the Australian Government sold the island to Sir Thomas Wardle, who bred sheep here. His grandson, Kieran Wardle, has been working since 1993 to make this an eco-tourism destination. The noisy diesel generator has been replaced by peaceful solar power. Guests stay in sheep shearers' quarters and enjoy snorkelling, fishing, island walks and whale-watching.

Details Expect to pay about £200pp per night, plus transfers (dirkhartogisland.com).