

# THE AUSTRALIAN

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## The Howe factor

Michael Gebicki explains why he's mad about a wildlife-filled isle with a calm and kindly charm off the NSW coast | *November 01, 2008*

**ALTHOUGH he is lying down on sand beneath a palm tree in a sunny place, Ian Hutton is not feeling relaxed and comfortable.**



Guide Ian Hutton leads the way on Mt Eliza for a classic view of the lagoon with Mt Lidgbird and Mt Gower in the distance. Picture: Michael Gebicki

He is trying to show us a providence petrel chick and this involves pain. One arm is inserted into the bird's deep burrow and he is feeling around inside. "The way to get the chick out is to let it bite your finger and then when it has a firm hold, drag it out," says Hutton.

A spasm crosses his face as the target locks on. "It's a biggish sort of bird, this one," he remarks. I am expecting something about the size of a budgie but what comes out of the nest is grey, quarrelsome and chicken-sized. Hutton is now explaining some of the finer points of the providence petrel's life cycle while trying to avoid its snapping beak, but we are too busy clicking cameras to notice. When the bird quietsens, we pass around this parcel of bones and fluff, cooing in appreciation.

By just about any measure, Lord Howe Island is an astonishing place. Anchored 750km northeast of Sydney, the crescent-shaped isle measures less than 10km end to end and barely 3km across at its widest point, yet it packs a mighty wallop. Home to just 300 residents, the island has surf beaches, the world's most southerly coral lagoon and several formidable peaks, one of which soars to 875m.

Lord Howe has 11 orchid species, 56 different ferns, more than 100 mosses, 183 spiders and 130 species of land snails. Its lowland forests are home to the remarkable banyan tree, which can span an area of 1ha, its octopus-like limbs supported on the ramrods of its aerial roots. The pandanus palms that stride along the margins of Soldiers Creek are possibly the world's tallest. It is also the evolutionary home of the kentia palm, the preferred palm of the Victorian era since it survived better indoors than any other.

Most incredible of all are its birds. One of the tiny islands that form a chain between the Solomons and New Zealand, Lord Howe is a perch for many species of sea birds in their migratory journeys. Close to 200 bird species have been recorded on the island and 18 land birds and 14 sea birds breed here, including 100,000 pairs of sooty terns. Although it ranges across 40 million sqkm of the Pacific Ocean, the providence petrel breeds only on Lord Howe Island. Without this ark, this and several other species would become extinct. So transparent are the island's natural wonders, in 1982 it became one of the first places in Australia to be included on the World Heritage list.

Although the scenery dazzles, the coral comes straight from the textbook, the beaches are lovely and you can wander around all day with a sigh never far from your lips, it is easy to miss most of what's around. Take the infant providence petrel. Its burrow lies right alongside the track on the island's southwest coast, but without Hutton, it's unlikely any of us would have noticed, or suspected what might lie inside. (Although one of us may have stepped in and sprained an ankle, one of the more common of the island's

souvenirs.)

If you want to see the best of the island you need an expert, and they don't come any more expert than Hutton. Originally stationed on the island as a meteorologist in 1980, he was smitten by the plant, bird and sea life. A decade or so later, when his bosses in the Met Bureau suggested his talents be deployed to another location, he resigned and relocated to Lord Howe permanently, where he writes books, takes photographs and conducts nature tours for a lucky few.

He's not often available, but every year in September Hayley and James Baillie, owners of Capella Lodge, operate Expedition Lord Howe, a 10-day program that packages accommodation, food and transport and harnesses Hutton to show you everything you could possibly want to know about Lord Howe Island.

There are 16 of us expeditioners, all Aussies except for a pair of intrepid Americans who have come all the way from Pennsylvania just for this. It's an action-packed program that covers all bases. There's an excursion to Balls Pyramid, a hike to the summit of Mt Gower, a trip to Red Point and the Herring Pools, snorkelling and glass-bottom boat trips over coral, daily walks and evening lectures from Hutton.

On our first full day we set out for the north of the island and climb Malabar, the 209m peak that dominates the island's north. It's a medium-tough scramble that takes us through a palm forest, up across a steep pasture and then through scrub where lawyer vines tug at our clothes. At the top there's a sheer drop to the sea and red-tailed tropicbirds wheeling around the cliffs, their crimson tails streaming like pennants.

One morning we visit the kentia palm nursery. It's a big business for the island. The seed is collected from the wild, germinated in sterile conditions and grown until the palms are about 25cm tall, when they can be air-freighted to commercial nurseries that might be as far away as The Netherlands or the US. The nursery is owned by the island's governing board. All the profits are used to maintain the roads and pay for other public works. Thanks to this felicitous arrangement, plus a whopping tax on liquor, the residents pay no rates.

In the afternoon we head for Neds Beach on the eastern side of the island, a protected marine zone where giant kingfish swarm around our ankles. For many years they were fed each afternoon by Carter, a local who would gather leftovers from the island lodges and heave spaghetti and the morning's toast from a sack while the water boiled around him. Carter died a few years ago, but the fish are still there, and there aren't too many visitors to Neds Beach who don't take a bag of stale bread.

After dallying with the fish we go for a walk on the nearby reef. It doesn't look particularly promising, but then Hutton points out that the intertidal section we are standing on is one of the richest of any marine environments. He turns over a rock and, presto, there are fat black sea cucumbers, which he squirts to show us the sticky white filaments with which they deter anything that might eat them. There's also a decorator crab, which gets him very excited. The decorator crab picks up bits of algae and drapes them all over its body, where they grow to become camouflage.

Hutton says that he once had a decorator crab in an aquarium that had a Chux wipe inside and the crab sawed off bits and arranged them on its shell. He shows us some vivid green turtle weed and squeezes the bunched grass to flush out a pair of turtle weed crabs. "Always a Mr and a Mrs," he tells us.

"Now this is something you don't see every day," says Hutton in a hushed voice that comes close to that of David Attenborough. It's a starfish feeding on a sea urchin, a spectacle that stirs the usually placid Hutton to something close to voyeuristic delight. The starfish wraps itself around the top of the sea urchin, unbuckles and lowers its stomach so that the acids in its gut eat through the spines and into the flesh on the upper layer of the sea urchin. Miraculously, the sea urchin will recover from this rough treatment, although if the starfish can flip its spiny victim over, it's hasta la vista sea urchin.

I always thought of starfish as the harmless bimbos of the sea world, sea urchins as slightly repugnant characters, but it just goes to show how deceptive appearances can be.

Hutton has just turned over a crab to show us the art of crab sexing when a moray eel glides along the edge of the reef just below our feet. Despite his fondness for grappling with the natural world, Hutton is reluctant to grab on to this since the last couple of times he has done so he's been bitten. "The pain was incredible ... I had a party of schoolkids with me and they possibly learned a few new words that day."

Ballasting the natural wonders with a healthy dose of luxury is Capella Lodge. Perched on a hilltop in the island's south, with the giant green curtain of Mt Lidgbird as a backdrop, the nine-guestroom lodge is just about everything an adventurer could wish for in a castaway island paradise. Rooms come in one-

storey and loft versions, decorated from the same beachhouse-chic school of design as the main lodge. The table d'hote menu constructed for expeditioners could come straight from any smart urban bistro: kingfish sashimi, beef fillet with porcini risotto flavoured with Tasmanian black truffle and a chocolate torte served with quince paste and espresso panna cotta.

But Lord Howe also has its downside. Life in the fast lane it is not. The speed limit is 25km/h and there's no nightlife to speak of, although the local law will turn a blind eye to passengers riding in the rear of a ute. While you're welcome to drive a golf buggy on the island's roads, it's not allowed on the nine-hole golf course. You can leave your mobile phone at home because there's no coverage, and ditto for that ATM card.

As well as its birds, its fish, its walks, its quirky ways, Lord Howe Island is a drug, a potent personality-altering substance. It's the way the world should be: slower, kinder, calmer.

On Lord Howe, a blackberry is something you eat, and catching a big fish will earn you more kudos down at the bowling club than what kind of car you drive or how your share portfolio has gone today.

If this isn't paradise, I'm using the wrong dictionary.

*Michael Gebicki was a guest of Baillie Lodges.*

### **Checklist**

The next Capella Lodge Expedition Lord Howe is scheduled for September 2009. Baillie Lodges will also offer a similar expedition program at its recently opened Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island, South Australia. More: [www.baillielodges.com.au](http://www.baillielodges.com.au).

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