

DESTINATION  
AUSTRALIA

# The Howe generation

Hiking, surfing, cycling, golfing – **Max Anderson** barely keeps up with his older fellow travellers on Lord Howe Island.

**L**ord Howe Island is old-fart heaven. The 25km/h speed limit, the glass-bottomed boats, the afternoon teas with full-cream milk straight from the cow – they're all grist to visitors whose teeth can no longer mill.

But Lord Howe Island is also proof that with age comes wisdom. Because when you're on a good thing, you keep it to yourself.

Lord Howe Island is a volcanic remnant poking out of the Pacific. It is 700 kilometres north-east of Sydney and definitely not Norfolk Island (which is 900 kilometres further). It's prettier than Hayman Island, more exotic than Kangaroo Island and more interesting than Rottne Island. In fact, if it were less friendly and more expensive it would qualify as a temperate piece of French Polynesia.

Alighting from a Dash 8 (and promptly lowering the median age by 40 years), I notice two things – both of them mountains.

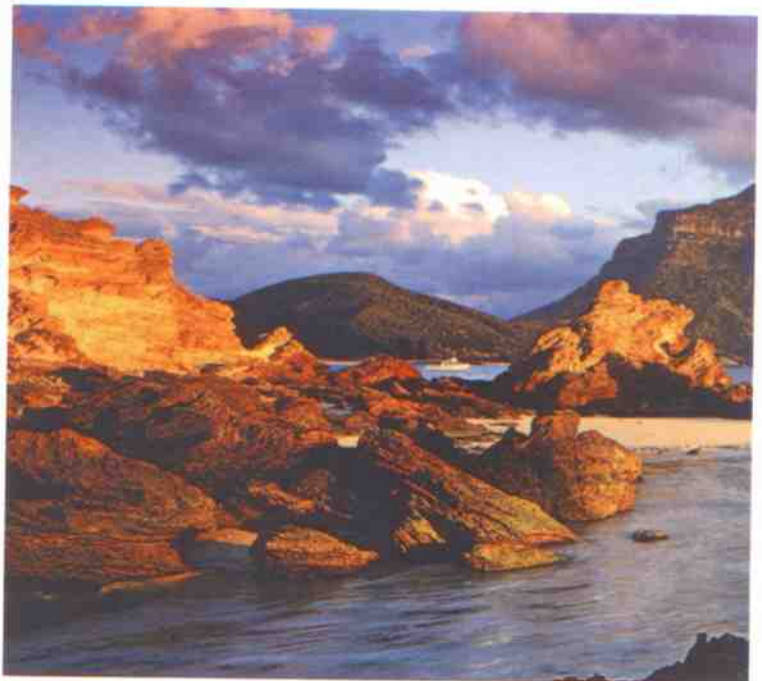
Mount Lidgibird and Mount Gower are loaves of basalt that loom some 800 metres out of the sea. They're an eye-ful of towers, 2½ times the height of Uluru and the most mountainous-looking peaks

I've seen in Australia. They're also part of the reason for my visit – to surmount a few challenges, to go hard or go home and see if this bizarre chunk of NSW can cut it as an action platform for gen X and gen Y, as well as a waiting room for the war gen and the booters.

As though being warmed up for the challenge, I'm constrained to travel by bicycle, the transport of choice for most of the 350 residents and 400 visitors allowed on the island at any one time. A sealed road runs a third of the 12-kilometre-long island, giving a fine overview of brilliant beaches, pastures, vales and uplands. It also affords a renewed respect for cycling into headwinds.

Within these lower Pacific latitudes, the island is susceptible to weather that is beautiful one day, biblical the next, especially outside of summer months. But respite is always at hand – when the westerlies turn feral, I simply pedal 10 minutes across the island to beaches on the east where the weather cools like a baby.

And besides, wind is my friend. "It's a rare day when there's no surf," says surf guru Tas Douglass. "On a good day, it matches Indonesia." We're



on dunes overlooking Blinky Beach, watching waves that peak, peel and spill in turquoise tubes. Douglass waits, concentrating on the rolling sets, but I feel confident enough to snatch up my board and paddle deep into the mild-temperature surf – where I meet the 11am express roaring in from New Zealand. This duly gives me a sharp spanking and sends me back to the dunes howling for mummy.

"That's why you watch," Douglass says. "Nice left-hander, though ..."

Serious windsurfers are also waking up to the island. This month, 16 wave jumpers arrive for two weeks of wave and wind excess. It's a Lord Howe first, organised by resident Tim Northam.

I meet Northam in Pandanus, the Italian restaurant he runs. "It doesn't get better than this," he says. "People on the mainland don't realise how good it is." He could be talking about his restaurant, which debunks the tyranny of distance by being astonishingly good and filled with diners. But he's talking about his other passion – when he swaps his roaring trade for roaring trade winds.

Northam rips across the west-side Lagoon at up to 60km/h, weaving between moored fishing boats, playing to a faint roar of approval caused by surf booming on the outer reef. It's a spectacle but it's made majestic by the insouciant mountains to the south. I fare better on the sailboard than the surfboard, though three hours of trying to harness howling Howe westerlies leaves me with the constitution of one of those sticky latex toys you throw at window panes. It's soon time for something more sedate.

The island might be a secret guarded by canny seniors but the reputation of the Lord Howe golf course – for difficulty and beauty – is known abroad. Its nine holes are strung like a necklace around the base of Mount Lidgibird, all emerald fairways, sapphire sea and ruby swatches of bou-



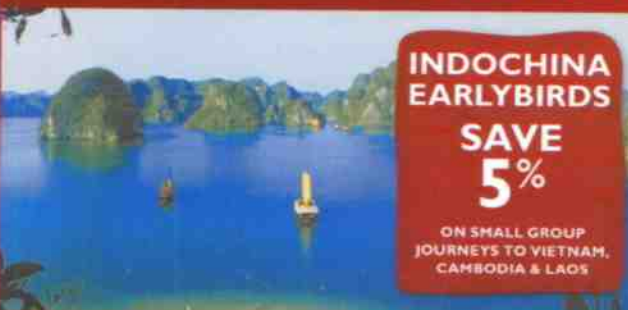
gainvillea. Locals chopped it out of a market garden in the 1970s but it could have been envisioned by Paul Gauguin.

"As an 18-holer, the course has never been parred," says club captain Neil Turk. "A few top players have come close in the Lord Howe Open but it has some unique challenges."

The difficulty is best appreciated on the eighth, a par-three honey ending at a splendid banyan tree. But it's narrower than Fred Nile's opinion of Mardi Gras and requires the most meagre slice to cause pain – and that's without reckoning on the wind. As many before me have done, I loft my ball over the sand tra, Cobbys Corner beach, into the waterhole that is the Pacific Ocean.

During drinks taken in the rudimentary clubhouse, enjoying sunset views sheikhs could not

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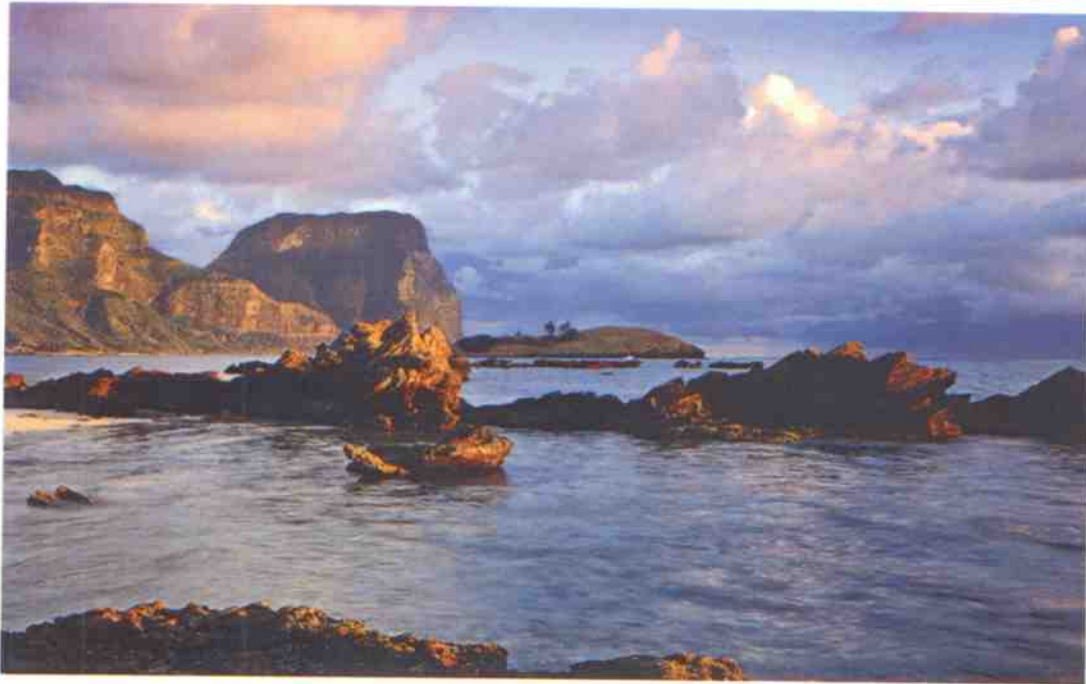
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**Action Isle ... (clockwise from far left) Lord Howe's legendary golf course; the view from North Bay; among the fish; the strenuous climb up Mount Gower.**



by, golfers tell how snorkellers enjoy collecting wayward Slatengers and Titleists – and how the chef at Pinetrees Resort once caused alarm when he emerged from the water with 16 golf balls squirreled away in his Speedos.

The wind nips only one of my six action challenges – deep-sea fishing. This is frustrating because I miss the chance to get close to Balls Pyramid, the world's highest sea stack, rising 562 metres from the ocean. Lurking beneath are monster kingfish, the fabled fighters that provide top sport and big feeds. With fishing literally blown out of the water, I join a tour of the Lord Howe Nursery, where two million kentia palms are cultivated and exported to parlours and offices all over the world. The kentia is one of more than 900 plants, animals and fish found

only on Lord Howe and, while it's not up to yanking on a kingfish, I'm happy to see it up close. But the tour guide has another surprise.

"This," says Bruce, pulling a large plastic container from under a desk, "is the phasmid Hilton." Inside are six black insects about the size of cigars. "They look a bit like yabbies, which is probably why they're also called 'land lobsters'."

The phasmid is the world's rarest insect, restricted to several hundred individuals, here and in a breeding program at Melbourne Zoo. It was believed extinct for 80 years until 2001, when a few were found alive on Balls Pyramid.

A minor miracle, says Bruce, but not one that everyone was happy about. One aged islander's reaction was, "Whadda they have to bring those things back for?" Apparently he was still haunted

by memories of phasמידs clinging to his bedroom ceiling and dropping on to his pillow.

Dive master Brian Busted lists other creatures. "We've dived with whale sharks and humpbacks," he says in his boatshed adjoining the Lagoon, "but people travel from all over the world to see the smaller fish, like McCulloch's anemonefish. You can't see them anywhere else."

When we dive at sheltered Neds Beach, we don't see them here either. But I don't care. Rarely have I seen such lush underwater scenery, the sands carpeted in soft sea lettuces and ferns, studded with coloured coral. The parrotfish are big and fearless, a thuggish spangled emperor glowers, a splendid scorpionfish bristles. Most impressive are the 1.5 metre kingfish – a score of 20 of them – a great swirling morass of angry protein close to the shoreline. They're taking scraps thrown by people on the rocks. I sneak up to the edge of their pack and it's a strange, slightly unnerving experience. Casting for kingfish is one thing, getting close enough to tickle them is quite another.

On my last day, the only way is up. From roaring sea to soaring summit, the Mount Gower climb is defined as "strenuous". The return journey takes eight hours, climbs 875 metres and covers 14 kilometres; it includes cauldron walks along narrow ledges, steep boulder staircases and a few man-hauling rope sections.

"The oldest climber I've taken to the top was 82," says licensed guide Jack Schick. "A lot of the older visitors want to do it and, within limits, I'll do my best to get them there."

The trail is a steep, narrow artery through thick stands of palms, vines and behemoth scaly oaks about 600 years old. The air smells cabbagey and all around are the sounds of 30,000 providence petrels wheeling and diving. From March to November they breed on the mountain peaks and nowhere else on Earth.

**FAST FACTS**

**Getting there** QantasLink flies from Sydney for about \$768 (low-season return, including tax). Melbourne passengers fly via Sydney to connect for about \$984. There's a bed limit on the island so accommodation should be booked before flights.

**Staying there** Pinetrees is a terrific old-fashioned resort hosted by Pixie Rourke, a fifth-generation islander. Meals are superb. From \$260 a person a night, including accommodation, transfers and all meals; see [pinetrees.com.au](http://pinetrees.com.au).

Somerset Apartments has 25 self-catering apartments from \$130 a night; see [lordhoweisland.com.au](http://lordhoweisland.com.au).

**Activities** Introductory dives with Brian Busted cost \$130; see [howeadivers.com.au](http://howeadivers.com.au). For details of Tim Northam's 2010 windsurfing trips, email him on [pandanushih@clearmail.com.au](mailto:pandanushih@clearmail.com.au). Jack Shick will guide you on the eight-hour Mt Gower climb for a remarkable \$40; see [lordhoweisland.info/services/sea.htm](http://lordhoweisland.info/services/sea.htm). Basic surf boards can be hired for \$30 a day via an honesty box on Neds Beach. Bike hire costs about \$7 a day. For more information, see [lordhoweisland.info](http://lordhoweisland.info) or phone 1800 240 937.

At 700 metres, the air cools and the strange mist forest closes in, a gloomy dell of cork-screwed boughs covered in fine mosses and delicate white orchids. Schick stops under a thick canopy. "Watch this," he says. He cups his hands and makes a bird call and, suddenly, providence petrels come crashing through the boughs and fronds – all gawky wings and big stupid feet – to land quite literally at our feet.

"If you're careful, you can pick them up," he adds. The birds are silky and warm. It's one of the strangest natural encounters I've experienced. "I took David Attenborough on this climb. He was 72 at the time, filming *The Life of Birds*. I remember he was astonished. To see a man of his experience being so excited, it was just great."

I sit at the summit, looking down on foamy turquoise, frondy canopies and the tombstone-like form of the neighbouring peak, Ladgird. It's dizzying and dazzling.

Several older climbers have made it to the top, one of them close to 70. They look in remarkable shape, their complexions invigorated with blood and fresh air.

We sit together, joking and exclaiming. And when cloud begins to swirl in over the peak, it really is heaven – for old farts and young farts alike.

Max Anderson travelled courtesy of the Lord Howe Island Tourism Association and QantasLink.

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