

Travel special

Unspoilt islands, marine splendour and jungle entanglements: the Asia-Pacific is packed with nature-based short breaks in all directions.

PRODUCED BY VANESSA WALKER

5 fab
short breaks
CLOSE TO HOME



Guests relax in the late afternoon at Pinetrees boatshed on Lord Howe Island.

IT'S ONLY NATURAL

With its spectacular nature reserve and warmly welcoming community, Lord Howe Island is *the* place to recharge your batteries, writes Flip Byrnes.



Flooring a golf buggy down Lord Howe Island's 9km road, a police car signals behind me. Despite my best efforts, I've been unable to break the island-wide 25km/h speed limit, so what could it be? Pulling alongside, the policeman winds down the window and says, "Hey, want to go snorkelling?" On Lord Howe Island, the only way to break the law is by not having fun.

Lord Howe Island, the seven-million-year-old remnant of a volcano, is utterly unique, only two hours from Sydney or Brisbane but a world away. Guests leave cares behind, along with mobiles (there's no reception), computers (minimal internet) and shoes (there's an unofficial barefoot policy). Add to that list no traffic lights or fast food and you have a place unlike any other.

With no Facebook or shrill ringtones, life has remained simple. Cars idle on

the road while drivers' chat, surfers check the airport windsock to gauge conditions at nearby Blinky Beach, and everyone knows each other, which is not surprising given there are about 350 residents. Add a cap of 400 visitors at any one time and Lord Howe Island is not unlike the bar from *Cheers* – where everybody knows your name.

Dani Rourke from Pinetrees Lodge gives me a quick car orientation of the island. And it is quick; this World Heritage Listed paradise is only 11km long and 2.8km wide, yet packed with more of nature's bounty than many large countries. There are more than 200 bird and 500 fish varieties and the volcanic soil supports 241 plant species.

The roads are lined with kentia palms, Lord Howe's major export, and the island boasts both rolling surf and a lagoon with the world's southern-most

coral reef. There aren't any poisonous snakes and spiders either.

While the natural splendour is all encompassing, it's the social fabric and island lifestyle that are mesmerising; and staying at Pinetrees means I've hit the cultural jackpot. Dani manages Pinetrees along with husband Luke Hanson and is a sixth-generation islander. The Pinetrees founder, Grandma Nichols, was a force to be reckoned with. Married to an often-absent whaler, she took in guests, exported kentia palms, was a midwife, and would fire a shotgun over the heads of slacking workers. "She must have been terrifying," says Dani.

Over 130 years, the hospitality procedures at Pinetrees have changed (staff aren't shot at any more), as has the clientele. In peak summer you'll find affluent urbanites >

◀ techno-detoxing; in winter diehard ornithologists and hikers are drawn by Pinetrees' off-season calendar loaded with wellness weeks, guided walks and photography workshops.

In addition to the comfortable accommodation and buzzing restaurant at Pinetrees, there's the boatshed across the road. Perched on the edge of the *Avatar*-blue lagoon, a sundowner with feet in the sand is the quintessential Australian beach experience.

Dani and Luke go the extra yard for guests (Dani even lends me a wetsuit for my entire stay) and the welcome is so warm that I almost have to be dragged to Capella Lodge. The baby of hoteliers James and Hayley Baillie, it has a big reputation for serious luxe and is situated on the quiet southern end of the island, nestled near the flanks of the iconic 875m-high Mt Gower.

Capella Lodge is a perfect place for rejuvenation and tranquillity. Here, birds are my alarm clock and evening stars my night-light. My only concern is that out my windows, Mt Gower looks, well, high. And I'm about to scale it.

Climbing Mt Gower is hands down one of the most spectacular day walks in the world. But let's not mince words; it's a tricky, relentlessly uphill hike studded with a series of ropes to haul you bodily uphill. The reward? A sense

of accomplishment, a panoramic island view and extra appetite to squeeze in one more canapé.

Mt Gower is not the only hike, and hiking is not the only activity on Lord Howe Island. There is scuba diving, fishing, snorkelling, being nibbled by metre-long kingfish while feeding the marine life at Ned's Beach (\$1 servings of fish food available from a nearby dispenser), surfing, nature tours and walks to secluded beaches such as North Bay.

But on a hike along Malabar Ridge, where I run into my previous night's waitress, my Mt Gower guide and the policeman (again!), I come to the RAAF crash site.

A Catalina plane crashed here in 1948, killing seven of the nine airmen aboard. The airmen are not buried here but the breeze blowing the grass in silky waves is like a whisper from souls since departed. Debris as small as shards and as large as an engine litters a paddock. Anywhere else the wreckage would be in a museum, but here it lies open, an undisturbed memorial.

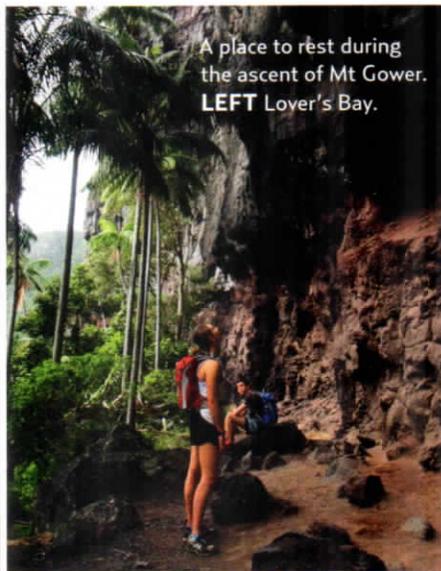
This sums up Lord Howe Island. It's more than a pocket-size patch of beauty; it's a place of history, of emotion and community where visitors are welcomed with open arms. It's the best place in the world to unplug. ➤

HOW TO GET THERE

- ❖ Return QantasLink flights start at about \$1000 during the high season (Christmas and New Year) and \$700 in winter. www.qantas.com.au.
- ❖ Pinetrees Lodge has five-night packages from \$1115 per person including meals, airport transfers and facilities. www.pinetrees.com.au. Capella Lodge has suites starting from \$650 per night, from April to October. www.capellalodge.com.au.

MORE QUIET ISLAND SHORT BREAKS

- ❖ Wilderness Island in the Exmouth Gulf in north western Australia is a virtually unknown fishing and ecological paradise that small groups can share with a handful of full-time residents. It's tricky to get to (by boat or plane from Exmouth) but worth the unspoilt surroundings. www.wildernessisland.com.au.
- ❖ Soaring cliffs, dense forest, huge sand dunes, wetlands and kilometres of white beaches, Kangaroo Island is home to 4600 people, many descended from islanders who have farmed the land and fished the seas for generations. A short flight from Adelaide or a ferry from Cape Jervis. www.tourkangarooisland.com.au.
- ❖ Flinders Island is located between Wilsons Promontory, Victoria, and Cape Portland, Tasmania. At 75km long and 40km wide, the landscape ranges from beautiful beaches to rugged ranges, with abundant wildlife and flora. www.visitflindersisland.com.au.



A place to rest during the ascent of Mt Gower.
LEFT Lover's Bay.