The view of Lord Howe from the top of Mount Gower.
Island of delights

Great Walks discovers its inner boy scout during Wilderness Week on Lord Howe Island.
The week had all been leading to this. I took a tight grip of the rope, leaned back and slowly pulled myself up one of the steep faces of Mount Gower, SAS-style. My heart was pounding and I was reminded of my scouting days another life ago when I hiked, climbed and abseiled my weekends away. I looked over my shoulder and saw Lord Howe Island in all its glory. For me this was a day of pure joy.

Lord Howe Island is a mere dot in the Pacific. It’s 10km long and between 300m and 2km wide. However what it lacks in size it makes up for in natural beauty. Pinetrees Lodge, one of the oldest family businesses in Australia, has been operating on the island for 130 years and offers a range of experience packages including Wilderness Week, designed for guests who want a more active holiday, like me.

Boats, bommies and birds
The first day of Wilderness Week involved kayaking, snorkelling, and riding in a glass bottomed boat in the sheltered coral reef lagoon on the island’s west side. The multi-coloured coral bommies and huge range of marine life were as good as anything I’d seen on the Barrier Reef.

I’d learnt a lot that day about marine environments by our knowledgeable guide Dean Hiscox of Lord Howe Island Environmental Tours. For example of the 490 coastal reef fish recorded around the Island 15 are endemic and 70 percent are subtropical or tropical. The warmer waters flow down from the East Australian Current. Now that I had heard of it I couldn’t work out where – until it dawned on me. Finding Nemo!

In the afternoon we headed to the south of the island for our first walk. The short 1500m trail goes from the carpark to the base of the island’s second highest mountain, Lidgbird (777m). We were there to witness a rare event, one made famous by Sir David Attenborough who visited the island in the late 90’s for his TV show The life of birds.

The providence petrel only nests in two places on earth, Lord Howe Island and a monolithic rock right next to it called Balls Pyramid. We watched hundreds them soar above Lidgbird as the sun set. Then Dean showed us how to call the birds down by yelling out a series of “woops!” As soon as they heard our collective cries the petrels flew down and just dropped by our feet casual as ever. Dozens and dozens of them. It was a true David Attenborough moment. If I could only do his voice...

View to a thrill
The next day we headed to the island’s north to walk along a series of ridgelines and cliffs. Starting at Neds Beach, where you can feed hundreds of fish from the water’s edge, we walked up the step track towards Malabar Hill. The track took us in and out of the bush and as we got higher the views got better. This part of the island is a popular breeding area for mutton birds and their burrows are everywhere.
From the top of Malabar you get a real perspective of the island’s shape and geography. Lord Howe is the highly eroded remains of a seven-million-year-old shield volcano, the product of eruptions that lasted for about half a million years (give or take a day).

After Malabar we headed to Kims Lookout for even better views. Part of the trail runs along cliff edges that drops down to the rocks and ocean below. It isn’t dangerous, just worth knowing where you’re placing your feet.

Lunch was at the lovely North Beach, then it was a steep hike through another thick canopy of palm trees up to the rocky Mount Eliza. By then the wind had picked up and we all had to clutch our hats, else they’d be joining the petrels at the top of Lidgbird. The walk ended at Old Settlement Beach where the island’s first settlers lived in the early 1800s supplying passing whalers.

The first reported sighting of Lord Howe was on 17 February 1788 when Lieutenant Henry Lidgbird Ball, commander of the HMS Supply, was on his way from Botany Bay to found a penal settlement on Norfolk Island. On the return journey Ball sent a party ashore on Lord Howe to claim it as a British possession.
Ripping yarns
The following day we headed to the eastern part of the island for some bush bashing, beach combing and rock hoppin. It was the place that felt the most like what the first settlers must have seen – virgin rainforest, secluded beaches and rocky inlets with not a soul around.

That sounds like paradise. Although for some people who grew up on Lord Howe it was anything but, such as Albert ‘Big Neck’ Nichols, who dreamed of escaping his over-domineering mother Mary Nichols, who ran Pinetrees in the 1890s. He kept a bonfire at the ready on one of the beaches just in case he sighted a passing ship. Sometime when he was 18 he spotted one and lit the beacon. Albert told the long boat crew who came in that he had been shipwrecked. They took him back to their ship and he never set foot on the island again.

But Albert’s story doesn’t finish here. He eventually made it to England, and over the years married and became a boatswain – an officer in charge of a ship’s deck crew, rigging and anchors. In 1912 he was boatswain on a ship you may have heard of – Titanic. On the night of the disaster, Alfred (42) was last seen leading a team to open a few of the lower gangway doors so that people could be loaded onto lifeboats. He was never seen again.

The big push
The last day of Wilderness Week was the hike up Mount Gower (875m), a tough eight hour return trek, complete with rope-assisted climbs and dizzying drops. It’s not for everyone but if you’re reasonably fit and are prepared to get out of your comfort zone it’ll be a day you’ll never forget.

The walk began at a rocky beach and from there it was a scramble up a trail that disappeared vertically into a rainforest on the lower slopes of Mt Lidgbird. The next task was to skirt the exposed southwest scarp of the mountain by climbing along a narrow ledge, face to the cliff and clinging to a rope with a sheer drop at our back.

Along this part of the trail we had to wear helmets in case of falling rocks but we ditched them at the end of this roped section. From here we disappeared into cool tropic rainforest, crossing Erskine Creek. And then the real work began.

The track climbed steeply here – about 200m up in less than a klm – bringing us out at the top of the valley, on the saddle between Gower and Lidgbird. We were awarded with the first of many spectacular views of the island. However there was still another 450m to go up, and only about a kilometre of walking left.

wilderness weeks
Wilderness Weeks at Pinetrees Lodge on Lord Howe Island combine the experience of local rangers and scientists to guide you to, and explain, some of the world’s most amazing places. After a memorable day, you’ll return to Pinetrees for a hot shower, cold beer, exceptional 4 course dinner, great wine, open fire and comfortable bed.

Our Wilderness Weeks include:
- Guided walks and swims through rarely visited World Heritage wilderness with park rangers and scientists
- Guided boat, snorkelling and kayak trips through the world’s southernmost coral reef system
- ‘Hands-on’ explanation of conservation practices
- 5 nights’ accommodation
- Full breakfasts, lunches, afternoon teas and 4 course dinners

Wilderness Weeks are available in June, July, August and October 2014. Group size is limited to 15 people with a guest to guide ratio of 8:1. Package rates start from $1465 per person (twin share), excluding airfares and applicable taxes.

Contact Pinetrees Travel on (02) 9262 6585 or visit pinetrees.com.au
You need to use ropes up most of this section so you have to trust your grip and if you don’t have a head for heights (and were still crazy enough to do the walk) don’t look down. As for me, I was loving every rope-climbing, rock-scrambling, heart-pounding minute!

Little pockets of moss-covered rainforest kept the sun off our backs for some of the way until we popped out the top of Mount Gower and were rewarded with the best views in the house. This was truly a great walk.

Just for your information the oldest man to have summited Gower was an 85-year-old, a 77-year-old holds the female record. The youngest was a little boy of 4½!

Great Walks was a guest of Pinetrees Lodge (www.pinetrees.com.au).

Walk notes

**MOUNT GOWER, LORD HOWE**

Time/distance: 1 day/14km | Grade: challenging

Walknotes

The Mount Gower hike is a challenging 8hr return trek, complete with rope-assisted climbs and dizzying drops. Walkers traverse around 14km across the mountain’s rugged terrain, encountering some of the islands rarest plants and wildlife along the way.

**NEED TO KNOW**

Lord Howe island is two hour flight from Sydney on Qantas Link.

Best time to go

Anytime. It’s temperate climate means it’s never too cold or too hot. In fact the hottest temperature ever recorded was only 31.5°C!