

IN THE OLD DAYS you had to take the seaplane from mainland Australia to Lord Howe Island and land in hopefully calm waters inside the island's coral reef. In 1974 they built a runway, and today you can take a Dash-8 from Sydney or Brisbane and land on terra firma. Best leave most of your luggage behind – there's a 15kg limit and they take it seriously, weighing hand luggage as well as checked items.

LHI is less than two hours by air from Sydney, but it seems to have a weather system all of its own. If rainstorms whip up and you can't land on the island, you have to have enough fuel to return to the mainland Australia – otherwise you'll end up as flotsam in the Tasman Sea.

The sun shone as our plane approached the island, so I had a clear view of the amazing Ball's Pyramid, the world's tallest ocean stack, jutting up a sheer 500 metres above the surface of the ocean. Moments later, we landed on the airstrip, in the shadow of the island's twin peaks: Mount Gower and Mount Lidgbird.

REMOTE CONTROL

Lord Howe Island had long been on my bucket list. It's extraordinary in so many ways. One of Australia's first World Heritage sites, it's protected under its own special legislation. Its resident population is 350, and the Australian parliament's LHI Amendment Act of 1981 imposed a maximum of 400 tourists at any one time. With just a handful of cars on the island, you have to walk or cycle if you want to get around.

That was totally fine by me. If there was one single feature that I found absolutely fascinating about Lord Howe Island, it was the acceptance on all sides that 'growth' was for the birds. Yes, even that nebulous concept of 'sustainable growth', much beloved of politicians, economists and 'development experts'.

Ian Hutton, long-time LHI resident and the island's chef naturalist, whom I met on my first afternoon on LHI, was quite explicit. 'We recognise the need for a sustainable no-growth economy.'

A 'sustainable no-growth economy'! How I wish a few more politicians



HOWE'S THAT!

With rare species thriving again, Lord Howe Island off Australia's east coast is a biological success story

by Stanley Johnson – a writer, environmentalist and former MEP



around the world would adopt that concept as a campaign slogan!

That doesn't mean all environmental issues suddenly disappear on Lord Howe Island. People like Ian accept that even with a population stable at 350 and a 400-person limit on visitors, there will be an impact on the island's astonishing wildlife and biodiversity, but he says every effort is being made to keep that impact to a minimum.

Towards evening I walked with Ian through the thick palm trees on a shady track which runs alongside a

rocky bay at the foot of Mount Gower. Looking up through the trees to the rugged face of the mountain, I could see a mass of birds whirling, soaring and diving overhead.

'That's the providence petrel,' Ian said. 'There are around 32,000 pairs. The mountains of Lord Howe Island are the world's main breeding location in the world.' Thirty-two thousand pairs! I must have seen quite a high proportion of that population that day.

'The breeding burrows are in the deep basalt soils covering the mountain summits,' he added.

'They're not breeding at the moment. What we are witnessing is a massive display of pre-nuptial courtship.'

He cupped his hands over his mouth to produce a strange ululation. Moments later, first one, then half a dozen large dark birds crashed through the trees on to the path.

'They come when you call them,' Ian explained. 'Nobody really knows why.'

The providence petrels seem to have no fear of humans. The birds flapped around our feet for a while, then disappeared among the trees.

AVIAN WATERS

It's not just the providence petrels which make this place unique. LHI hosts one of the major seabird colonies in Australia and the South Pacific. Fourteen species of seabird breed here, including 17,000 pairs of flesh-footed shearwaters.

As for non-marine birds, LHI has been the site of one of the world's greatest conservation success stories.



In the shadow of Mount Gower and Mount Lidgbird lie a range of natural delights on both land and sea (NB: sighting of Stanley Johnson not guaranteed when you visit)



When it was discovered in 1788, the island (then uninhabited) had 16 species of land bird, of which 13 were not to be found anywhere else on earth. Nine of the 16 are now extinct, devoured by humans or by rats, cats and other introduced animals.

But the woodhen miraculously survived, its last stronghold being the cloud forests which clothe the summits of Mount Gower and Mount Lidgbird and offered a refuge from feral pigs and other predators.

A woodhen recovery programme, launched in the 1980s and linked with a programme to eliminate those unwanted predators, has succeeded in bringing them back from the brink. I saw half a dozen of them while I was there. Now that it's safe for them to come down from the mountains, you can meet them on the island's roads and beaches, poking around quite casually and undisturbed.

MIST OPPORTUNITY

The extraordinary thing about Lord Howe Island today is how intact that original environment still is. As much as 85 per cent of the original forest survives. If you have time, put on your boots and head for the hills – but check the weather first. The steep gradients and sometimes thick mists which shroud the twin peaks can be daunting even for the experienced hiker.

If you do make it to the top, the rewards can be immense. The cloud forest is home to many so-called 'relict' species – liverworts, mosses and ferns, which evolved millions of years ago when the earth was wetter and dinosaurs roamed the planet.

If you don't have time or the inclination for the mountain trek, try viewing the world's most southerly coral reefs from a glass-bottomed boat instead. At a time when the world's coral reefs, including the Great Barrier Reef, are under intense pressure, Lord Howe Island has more than 500 species of fish and 90 different species of coral.

That afternoon I saw half a dozen sea turtles too. One of them – a green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) – swam directly under the boat. Bliss! 🐢

HOW TO DO HOWE

Renowned for its warm and friendly service and laid-back ambience, **Arajilla Retreat** encapsulates the essence of Lord Howe Island, offering guests a haven of tranquillity.

Meandering pathways lead through native gardens, to the beach, to the serene day spa, to Arajilla's luxurious suites and renowned restaurant. Kentia suites are \$1,500/night (approx £825), or stay for five nights and pay for four.

Web arajilla.com.au

Commanding stunning ocean and mountain views, **Capella Lodge** offers a civilised, stylish and sophisticated escape. Capella's contemporary cuisine, relaxed sophistication and intimate surrounds combine to deliver a unique and exclusive Lord Howe Island experience. Off Peak: \$1,500/night for a twin suite (approx £825). Peak: \$2,200 (approx £1,200).

Web lordhowe.com

Return **flights from London to Sydney** with Etihad Airways start from £707 in economy. Etihad, the national carrier of the UAE, also offers three daily flights between Heathrow and Abu Dhabi.

Web etihad.com
Tel 0345 608 1225

QantasLink operates **flights to Lord Howe Island** that are less than two hours from Sydney or Brisbane. With guest numbers for Lord Howe Island limited, you may need to think ahead to secure your spot.

OTHER USEFUL LINKS

islandercruises.com.au
lordhoweisland.info
uk.sydney.com