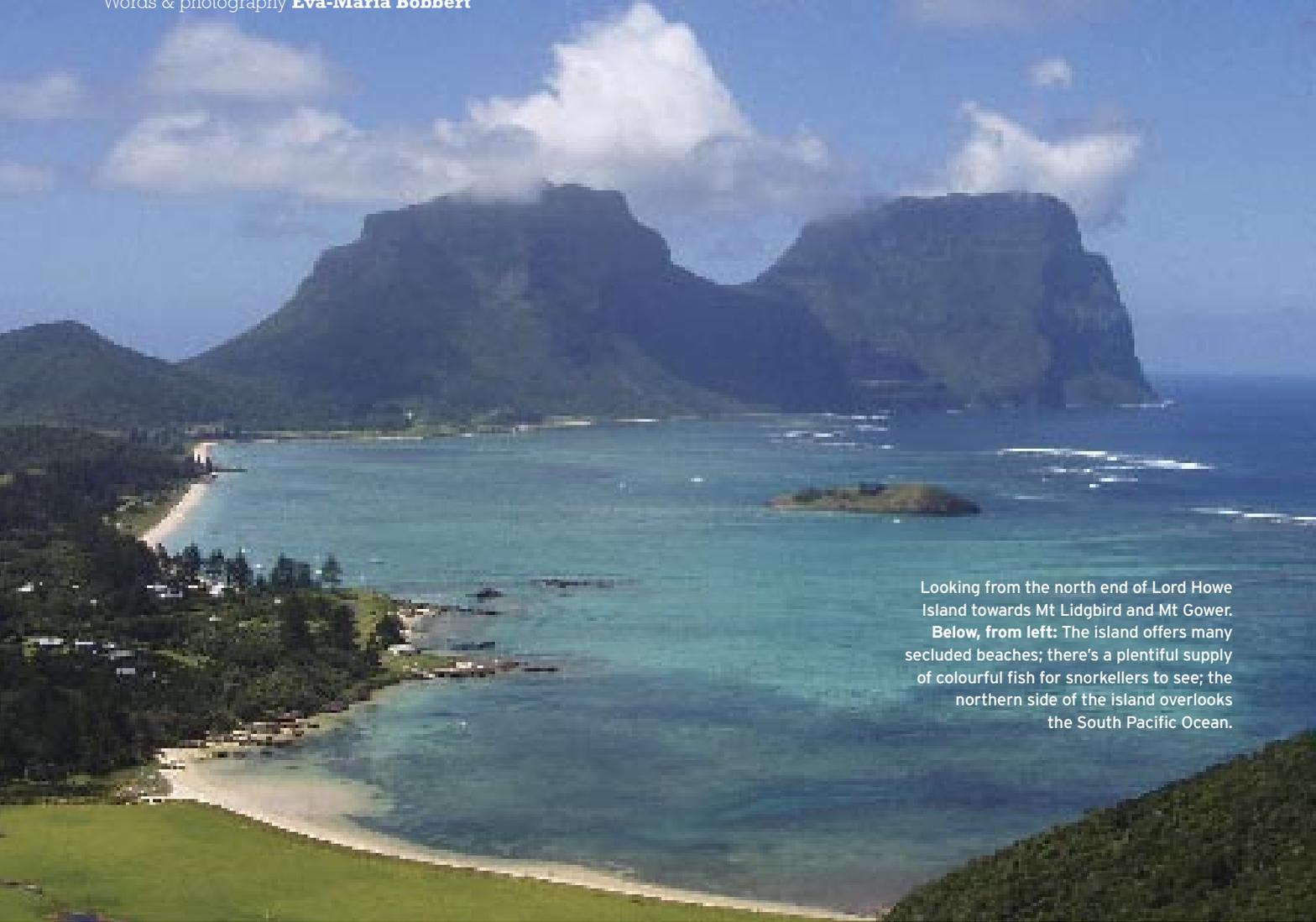


Howe sweet it is

Lord Howe is an island paradise that boasts pristine beaches and aqua-blue water, and although it's less than two hours from Sydney, you'll feel like you're a world away.

Words & photography **Eva-Maria Bobbert**



Looking from the north end of Lord Howe Island towards Mt Lidgbird and Mt Gower. **Below, from left:** The island offers many secluded beaches; there's a plentiful supply of colourful fish for snorkellers to see; the northern side of the island overlooks the South Pacific Ocean.



It's been less than an hour since I landed on Lord Howe Island and already I've broken two laws. Hurtling down the hilly main road on a borrowed bike, I'm doing well over the leisurely 25 kilometres per hour speed limit. I've also unwittingly broken the unwritten rule of bike riding – never (ever) wear a skirt.

With my cotton frock flapping like loose sails around my ears, I pray that the island's single policeman, Dick, will be so distracted by my fashion faux pas that he might overlook my dangerous driving. In a bid to hold down my ballooning bottom half and retain what little modesty I have left, I am zigzagging down the main street like a blindfolded learner. But other than sending a wooden dashing for its life, the only damage is to my pride (Dick, I believe, was enjoying his day off). And despite, or perhaps because of, my less than graceful arrival, the locals simply wave or smile as I careen past.

It can take a while to adjust to the pace of life here, but there's really no need for speed as the island is a mere 11 kilometres long and two kilometres wide, so it doesn't take long to get anywhere. Life on Lord Howe seems leisurely in the extreme – most of the 350 permanent residents have cars, but they're restricted to the same 25 kilometres per hour speed limit as tourists who can either hire bikes or get around on foot.

Although it's less than a two-hour flight from Sydney, this island feels like a world away from the consumer-crazed city lifestyle. It may share a time zone with New South Wales, but somehow it feels like someone stopped the clock a few decades ago. Take the airport "terminal" for instance – it's actually more like a quaint 1950s country cottage, complete with white picket fence and manicured lawns. Mobile phones don't work here and electricity is limited (there are no streetlights at night, so you might want to take a torch if you venture out after dark). There are a handful of places to eat, one general store and only one drinking hole – the local bowling club. The service on Lord Howe is of the old-fashioned friendly kind, too. Seconds after you touchdown on the

tarmac, a jolly middle-aged local bounds on board to personally welcome you to this slice of subtropical paradise.

Perhaps there's something in the fresh island air because even the animals here are cordial – there are no pesky mainland nasties, such as snakes, stingers and sandflies, and some of the local water life seems more than happy to get up close and cuddly. Take a dip at Ned's Beach in the late afternoon and you'll be privy to swarms of friendly fish slapping their slimy tails on squealing tourists' bare ankles and occasionally tickling toes with their lips. I'm feeling a little out of my depth here (it's somewhat unnerving to see several metre-long kingfish fighting for food), but this fish feeding frenzy is a regular afternoon ritual.

Seconds after you touchdown on the tarmac, a jolly middle-aged local bounds on board to personally welcome you to this slice of subtropical paradise.

As well as the almost cliché island expectations of an aqua-blue sea and palm-fringed sand, Lord Howe boasts an impressive list of natural wonders: the world's southernmost coral reef, the highest single rock in the world (Ball's Pyramid), and kilometres of World-Heritage-listed rainforest. And you won't be fighting for space to enjoy it – there's a strict cap of 393 visitors at any one time.

Each end of the boomerang-shaped island is strikingly different. On the south side Mt Lidgbird (777 metres) and Mt Gower (875 metres) loom dramatically over the lush cow-dotted pastures below, while the north is what some locals amusingly refer to as the "busy" end because that's where the tourists generally stay. You'll need a reasonable fitness level and a guide to steer you through the steep trails of Mt Gower, but there are plenty of other bushwalking options on the northern half that offer spectacular views over the island and the South Pacific Ocean.

If you're more at home in the water you won't be disappointed as the snorkelling is superb. The bright blue waters of North Bay and the lagoon are teeming with colourful fish, including spangled emperor, bluefish and kingfish. We even spotted a few stingrays and a shy turtle paddling through the gentle swell.

Blinky Beach, the island's only surf beach, lies on the eastern side and there's a good chance you'll have it mainly to yourself. Most holiday-makers seem to hang out at Ned's Beach where



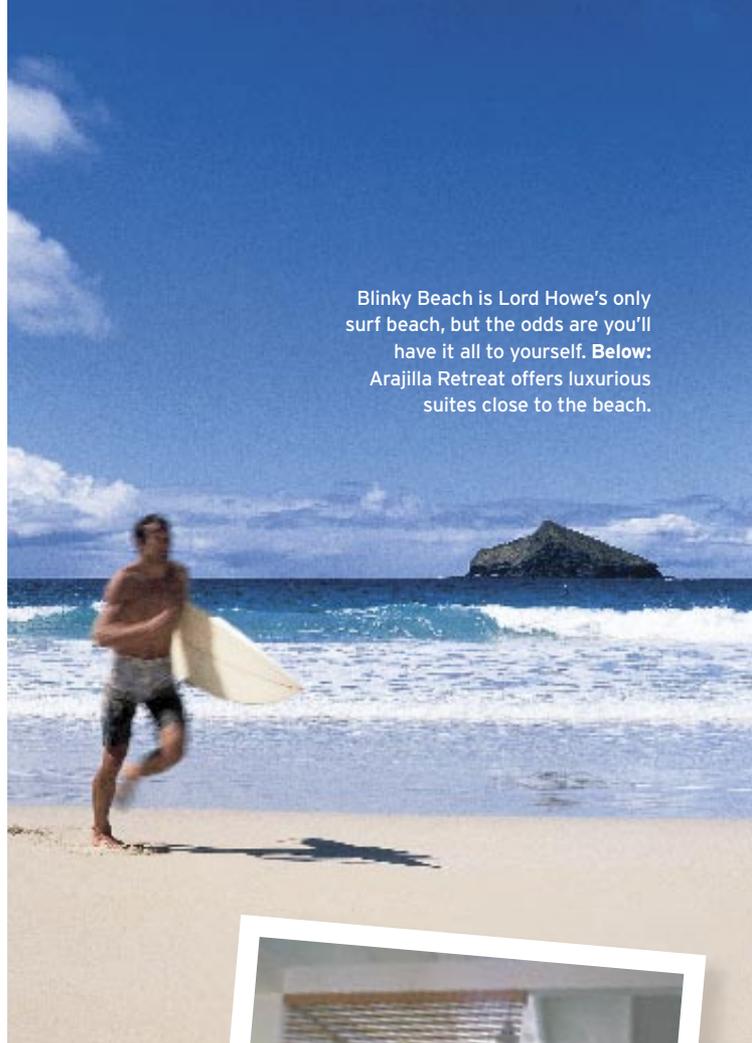
From left: Arajilla Retreat's candle-lit restaurant; the fish feeding frenzy at Ned's Beach; another breathtaking view of Mt Gower.

tourists share towel space with local ducks who waddle from the grassy knoll to dip their feet into the salty water.

As Lord Howe is fairly small, most accommodation options are no more than a short stroll or bike ride from the beach. Camping is not permitted but there are plenty of choices to suit all budgets, ranging from basic apartments to five-star guest retreats. If you like a little luxury, opt for Capella Lodge on the southern end of the island or Arajilla Retreat in the north. In contrast to the high-rise developments that have popped up along many popular mainland beaches in Australia, both Capella Lodge and Arajilla Retreat have been designed to blend in with the environment. We stayed at Arajilla, which has recently been upgraded. Tucked away behind banyan trees and native kentia palms (the island's only export crop), the one and two-level suites with private decks and kitchenettes are separated by densely planted pathways that lead either to the beach, the wooden yoga yurt or the restaurant/bar.

While the resort's candle-lit restaurant is first rate, you can also request a gourmet barbecue on the nearby beachside reserve. This is no ordinary steaks and snags affair – the restaurant's chef is on hand to whip up a feast of spicy sizzling prawns and fresh fish (not caught at Ned's Beach, where our scaly friends come to feed, as fishing is prohibited in this area).

After a night of drinking and dining under the stars it's just a short stumble back to your stylish suite. And when you wake the next day and the biggest decision you face is what to choose from the breakfast buffet, you'll wonder why we don't all adjust to island time – Lord knows, life at this pace is pure bliss. **AGT**



Blinky Beach is Lord Howe's only surf beach, but the odds are you'll have it all to yourself. **Below:** Arajilla Retreat offers luxurious suites close to the beach.

Howe's that!

Getting there: Lord Howe Island is 550 kilometres east of Port Macquarie and 770 kilometres north-east of Sydney. Qantas flies to Lord Howe five to 10 times a week, depending on the season, and a return ticket is priced from \$700 (visit www.qantas.com.au or tel 13 13 13). It's one of the only destinations in Australia that still relies on paper rather than e-tickets, so don't forget your documents for the return trip. Oh, and be warned that you'll also be weighed before you board your flight back to Sydney (so you'll know right then and there if you've overindulged on your stay!).

Getting around: Although the 350 residents are allowed cars, visitors to the island mostly get around on bicycles (Arajilla hires them out to guests for \$8.50 per day) or on foot. Airport transfers are usually included in the price of your accommodation.

Where to stay: Arajilla Retreat is close to quiet Old Settlement Beach and a short walk north of the main strip. Prices start from \$289 per person per night, but package deals are also available (visit www.arajilla.com.au or tel 1800 063 928).

Best time to visit: September to May is the best time of year, particularly for bird lovers as seabirds nest on the island over these months. The maximum temperature is about 25°C in summer and 16°C in winter. Arajilla offers some excellent winter deals, including week-long yoga retreats.

What to bring: Regular island gear (togs, sunnies, beach towel, thongs ... and shorts if you plan to use the bikes!). Pack light though – there's a 14 kilogram luggage limit per person on the flight. Credit cards are accepted at most places, but there are no ATMs on the island so you might want to bring some extra cash.

What to do: Hire an expert guide like Peter Busteed, who offers



snorkelling trips to North Bay from \$25 per person, which includes morning tea and equipment (tel (02) 6563 2298). If you want a glimpse of the underwater world without getting wet, you can always jump on a glass-bottom boat. Guided tours are also available if you're keen to attempt the eight-hour Mt Gower climb. For a gentler workout, play a round on the picturesque golf course or try one of Arajilla's yoga classes in the purpose-built yurt. Then again, if you'd rather indulge in being idle, there are plenty of blissfully quiet spots to sit back with a good book.