

Lord Howe Island

by Scott Portelli

World Heritage listed Lord Howe Island is one of Australia's best kept secrets. Part of NSW, Lord Howe Island is approximately 600 kilometers from Sydney. With its towering twin mountains and coral lagoon setting the scene for one of the most picturesque destinations in Australia if not the world, this place offers so much for all walks of life.

Mt Gower is the highest peak on the Island, which stands at 875 meters. For the brave of heart you can make the 7-hour trek to conquer its peak. But it is well worth the effort, as nothing showcases the breadth of Lord Howe Island like the view from the top of its highest summit. There are so many spectacular walks on the island, and no matter where you go, the towering presence of Mt Gower makes a great backdrop as you explore the island. Towering cliffs and a spectacular coastline of pristine beaches and lush rainforest cover the island from end to end. And beneath the waves it is equally impressive.

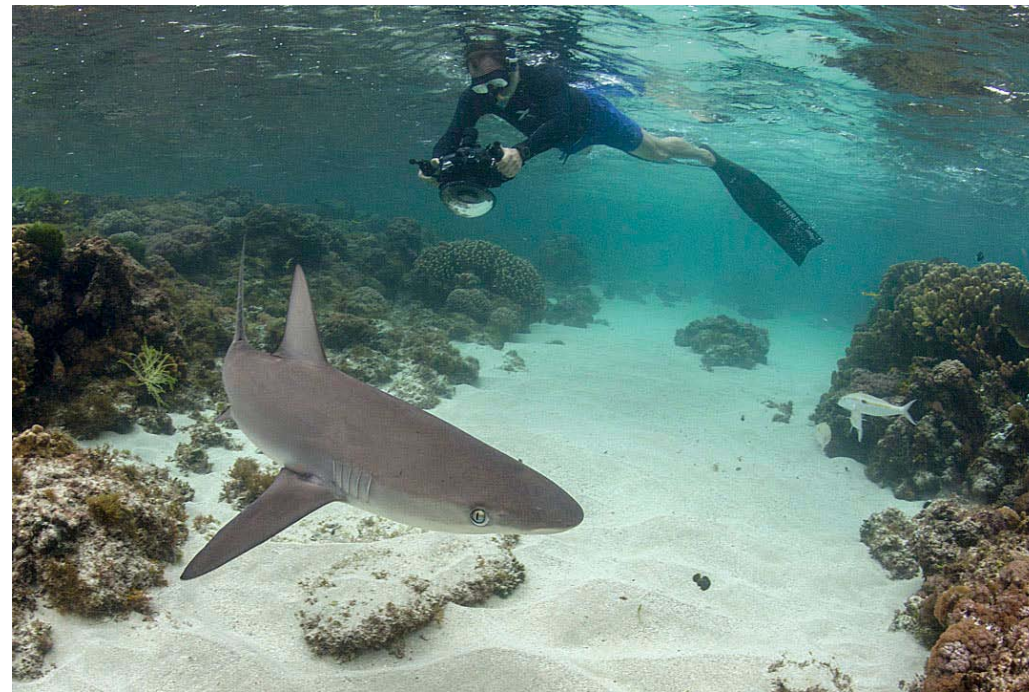
The island is teeming with marine life and even has some local hotspots that entice you to take the plunge more than once. Whether you are in knee deep water with turtles at Settlement beach or snorkeling the pristine Ned's beach with large Silver Drummer and King fish looking for a quick meal, there is always something for the avid diver and

photographer.

In the late afternoon, depending on the tides, visitors often take a stroll along Settlement beach. The main attraction being a number of green turtles grazing on the seagrass in less than 1 foot of water. You can literally walk up to these turtles and watch them eating the grass or resting in the warm shallow water. They are not in the least concerned about the human feet walking beside them and continue to munch away on the lush sea grass. So, with only fins, mask and snorkel you can get down to their level and cruise along the shallows eye to eye. They are so used to people that we don't appear as a threat. It's an ideal place to practice your split shots with the stunning rainforest and blue sky as your backdrop.

The other hotspot that is easily accessible is Ned's beach. Here you have a seascape of rich green sea grass and hard corals that stretch across the entire beach. In the shallow water a resident group of Silver Drummer and King fish congregate waiting for a quick meal. The fish are in 6 inches of water and will almost beach themselves to get a free feed. Years ago, a few of the restaurant owners would throw some of the food scraps into the water and the local fish started to realise if they kept coming back, there was an endless supply of food. Over the years, visitors started feeding the fish bread scraps, but more recently





the local authority placed a healthier food source for visitors to feed the fish.

This is another great spot to get in and photograph the fish, the water is clear and the fish will come face to face with you in the water. I have spent countless hours here taking split shots with the fish as they are very accommodating and somewhat predictable, especially when there is food involved.

But Ned's beach has so much more to offer. Galapagos whaler sharks will come into the shallows, most probably attuned to the splashing and activity caused by the nearby fish frenzy being fed pellets by visitors. The Galapagos Whaler are quite a curious shark and about 1 ½ meters in length. They are common in all areas around Lord Howe Island and you will see them on most

dives. Another visitor that can be found around Ned's beach are turtles of varying species, including hawksbill, loggerheads and green turtles. They too stay in the shallows and graze on the abundant sea grass.

Hard corals, sandy bottoms, intricate structures, caves and an eclectic range of unique marine life is what Lord Howe Island offers for the experienced diver. You can tell by the healthy array of life below the water that there has been minimal impact on the marine environment.

The Admiralty Islands sit at the northern end of Lord Howe Island and are the jewel in the Island group, offering some of the best and most accessible diving from the main Island. Almost a third of all Nudibranchs identified by the



late Neville Coleman were discovered in LHI and specifically around the Admiralty Islands. It is the ideal spot for wide angle and macro photographers and never disappoints the avid diver that is seeking an eclectic range of species.

There are over 25 dive sites around the Admiralty Islands, with the most popular ones being Noddy Island, Rupert's Reef, Sugarloaf Island and Tenth of June Bombora. Diving depths are between 15-40 meters and the dive sites consist of large pinnacles and coral reefs with large numbers of pelagic fish schooling in the deeper water.

For many divers the LHI region contains something even more elusive, the pinnacle of all pinnacles, Balls Pyramid. Located 23 kilometers south east of Lord Howe Island. 1 kilometer

in length, standing 521 meters above sea level it is the tallest ocean pinnacle in the southern hemisphere. Often on the top 50 dive sites list of places to dive in the world, it is easy to see why it attracts so much attention. Crystal clear waters and an abundance of marine life including the only location on the planet where you can see the rare Ballina Angel fish, Balls Pyramid is a must do dive.

On the boat trip out we are frequented by a resident pod of pacific bottlenose dolphins looking to surf the bow of the boat. If you are quick enough, you can jump in the water and swim with this group and if you are entertaining enough they may just stick around.

Balls Pyramid also contains the rarest stick insect in the world which lives exclusively on this 1km long volcanic





stack. It is 12 centimeters long and the heaviest flightless stick insect in the world. Thought to be extinct from the main Island these insects managed to survive exclusively on Balls Pyramid.

Diving in the area there are a number of species you see on a regular basis including Galapagos sharks, green turtles, giant stingrays, painted morays, lion fish, blue crayfish and schools of trevally. Finding the rare Ballina angelfish is also a bonus. But no matter what you are looking for the diving is spectacular and in one of the most unique places in the world.

Even if the weather is bad, you still have the lagoon which is thriving with marine life, and due to the shallow nature of the lagoon, you can spend a lot more time under water. One of the dive sites, Comets Hole is a natural upwelling of fresh water which has created a hole in

a sandy part of the lagoon, surrounded by coral. This fresh water layer meets the salt water creating a nutrient rich environment where the marine life gathers. Even a snorkel in the lagoon is quite rewarding, you are bound to bump into giant stingrays, Galapagos sharks and turtles.

The simple fact is that this is probably one of the most undiscovered places to dive in Australia. The island limits the number of guest to 400 at any one time which means you can often walk along a beach and not run into another soul. For divers, this means you are not competing with multiple divers at any dive site. All the dive sites are fairly unique but it might take a few years to explore them all. It is well worth the effort nonetheless.

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