

destination: Lord Howe Island



Admiralty Islets from Malabar Hill.

Pure magic? Or pure hell?

With conflicting stories about sailing passages to this heritage listed destination, there was only one thing for **Christine Danger** and her partner Wade Bishop to do: go and experience Lord Howe for themselves



ABOVE: Approaching Lord Howe at dawn.

RIGHT: *Take It Easy* moored at Comet's Hole with Mt Lidgbird and Mt Gower in the background.

Our goal was simple: to sail from the Gippsland Lakes in Victoria to Lord Howe Island and spend two weeks exploring and enjoying its wonders.

The crew consisted of Wade Bishop, skipper, Christine Danger, first mate, Sue Marlin an adventurous friend and Bengie the ship's cat. Our yacht is *Take it easy*, a 11.6 metre Easy catamaran of marine ply and epoxy construction, the first Easy 11.6 designed and built by Peter Snell.

We have clocked up 18 Bass Strait crossings, but this was our first "offshore" trip.

Regarded as one of the most beautiful islands in the Pacific, Lord Howe Island held significant appeal to us. First of all it is a world heritage treasure and iconic destination.

Secondly getting to Lord Howe involved making our first ocean voyage and our furthest trip to date, one that would give us a taste for longer passages.

Lord Howe lies approximately 425 nautical miles NE of Sydney, 475 SE of Brisbane and about 320nm due east of Port Macquarie.

Our home port being Paynesville in the Gippsland Lakes, it is another 360nm to Sydney, so a major undertaking.

Regardless of where on the east coast you set off from, several overnighters at sea are required to reach the island.

Passage planning

There is plenty of information about Lord Howe Island from a touristic point of view, but not a lot about sailing there, plus what is available is not particularly encouraging.

We consulted Alan Lucas' book 'Cruising the NSW coast'. We trawled the internet for information on weather, route planning, articles and stories. We found a few tales of yachts getting beaten up along the way and reports of uncomfortable, rolly conditions in the lagoon, so much so that we wondered whether this was a good idea. But you hear far more about the hell trips than the uneventful ones.

A one week break to Lord Howe via Qantas Link in August 2013 was not only a great winter escape for us, but more importantly an informative reconnaissance trip that allowed us to see the island for ourselves. To understand the lay of the land, the mooring procedures in the lagoon and to gather information from a few locals. We talked to Clive Wilson harbour master; Bill Shead whose family owns the

Arajilla Lodge and the catamaran *Cut Loose*; Jack Shick who runs a boat charter and guides the climb up Mt Gower. They all said a good number of yachts used to make the crossing, but this is no longer the case.

Apart from the annual yacht race from Gosford to LHI and the Lord Howe BBQ charity cruise and a few visiting yachts at Christmas, they say not many yachties make it here.

We had a fair bit to do before embarking on this ambitious voyage. As well as the typical annual maintenance, our preparation included getting a third reef in the main, new life lines and rerigging.

These were safety measures we hope would not be needed, but it is better to be safe than sorry.

Given that Lord Howe is 350nm from mainland Australia, it is also advisable to check your marine insurance for offshore coverage. Generally coastal cruising insurance covers only up to 250nm from the mainland. Ours did not, so after research we changed our policy to Top Sail. They covered 350nm around Australia at around the same price as our original insurer.

Unlike Norfolk Island, there is no custom clearance needed into Lord Howe if Australian.

The two charts we acquired are: Aus:4602, Int:602 – Tasman and Coral Seas, 1:3500000; Aus:610 – Approaches to Lord Howe Island, 1:150000.

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The first one clearly shows the sea mounts half way across in the Tasman Sea. These are underwater 'mountains' which are best avoided since the ocean depth changes from over 4000m down to 250m, creating very rough conditions. You need to plan your route to avoid these.

The second chart is handy to see the four separate entrances to the lagoon, the most frequently used being the North Passage and the surrounding isles.

An important aspect of route planning is the ability to get longer range forecasts at sea. We are wimps at heart and have no desire to get plastered along the way.

The Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) produces a range of very useful information, from wind roses showing prevailing wind conditions at different times of year, to maps of the currents seasonal direction and strength and of course the most useful interactive weather maps. Go to: www.bom.gov.au/marine.

Good localised information is also available from Willy Weather: www.willyweather.com.au and from GRIB files. So you can get a good understanding of what is coming and how the weather is developing. We mainly use the BOM marine forecast.



For us, waiting anywhere between Sydney and Port Macquarie for a southerly change and following it was the plan. We were quite prepared to motor into light winds if needed.

About a month prior to departure, yachts must contact the LHI Board (www.lhb.nsw.gov.au or (02) 6563 2066) to obtain a permit to moor.

No anchoring is allowed in the lagoon, you must use one of the 20 moorings available.

You provide approximate dates for your stay, data about your boat, including weight, length,



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The lagoon and mountains from Mt Eliza.

“...the feeling of being alone in such an unusual and magnificent place was overwhelming.”

FORMALITIES AND SERVICES

Upon arrival outside the lagoon, VHF channel 12 is monitored by the local police and/or harbour master who directs you to your designated mooring.

The mooring fee is \$41 a night, or \$265 a week, with a minimum charge of two nights. There is also a booking fee of \$31 (non-refundable) and an environmental levy of \$39 per person. The fees are charged at the end of your stay.

Your mooring permit allows you to stay for two weeks. You are expected to take the next available weather window to leave after that, but there seems to be some flexibility.

No refuse or liquid waste of any type can be discharged in the lagoon. Without a holding tank, don't use the heads.

Water, toilets, showers and a washing machine are available at the jetty. There is a \$20 key deposit to be paid to the LHIB office.

Use jerry cans to top up water and get fuel brought to the jetty by arrangement.

Provisioning is possible but very expensive, so best to stock up on the mainland before you go.

There is no mobile coverage on LHI. Internet is available at the Museum, but is very slow, little better than dial up.

draft, which will dictate which mooring is allocated to you. Skippers should also contact the LHI Maritime as they leave the mainland.

Passage making

Our entire passage north required southerlies all the way, so we knew we would be making a few stops whilst bouts of NE blew.

We headed off from the Gippsland Lakes on 9/12/13, we entered Sydney Harbour on Sunday 16/12/13. What a shock to the system! Every man and their boat was out on this sunny day: ferries, speed boats, motor cruisers, yachts sailing, yachts motoring, club racing, jet boats and, with all that, some huge wakes!

It was nerve racking, but what a sight. There is nothing quite like seeing the opera house and the harbour bridge from your own yacht.

We followed the Parramatta River up to Hen and Chicken Bay, our rendezvous spot to pick up our friend Sue.

From then on, we found the weather very fickle and frustrating: long north-easterly spells interspersed with short periods of south easterlies switching back to the east and north-east too quickly for a three day crossing to Lord Howe Island. So a long wait ensued.

This is where sticking to your plan and not leaving unless the conditions are right ensures you don't put the crew and the boat at risk. We wanted an uneventful passage, not a scary one. Troublesome crossings happen when the diary dictates your decisions, rather than the weather.

We chose to initially spend our waiting time exploring Sydney Harbour. Bantry Bay at the far end of Middle Harbour was a surprisingly tranquil spot in the national park for a while.

We used one of the brief southerly intervals to sail north to Broken Bay and another to sail to



Red sky in the morning,
sailors' warning.

Broughton Island, just past Port Stephens. By then we had been waiting for 11 days.

We had given ourselves a deadline: if we had not left the east coast by the end of December, we would not attempt a crossing to Lord Howe as it would not give us enough time to get there, enjoy the island and get back to Victoria in time for a return to work on 3/2/14. So although we had time, we were very much aware the clock was ticking.

Thankfully on Thursday 26/12/13 our luck changed and it is with a mix of excitement, relief and nervousness that we headed out into the big briny.

We were fortunate to have the best run we could hope for: SW 25 to 30, then south at about the same strength, gradually switching to SE at 15 to 20. We sailed well all the way and completed the 355nm passage in 48 hours exactly, with no waiting at Lord Howe to get into the lagoon since we arrived at high tide.

It is worth noting that the true wind was never more than right angle to our run line. It blew up to 30 knots from the stern but never more than 17 knots forward of the beam.

We clipped on to one of the six moorings at Dawson's Point on arrival and later moved to our allocated mooring at Comet's Hole for the duration of our stay. We were one of only half a dozen visiting yachts in the lagoon.

Once at Lord Howe, there are nature conservation processes to follow since it is a world heritage site.

The lagoon is very shallow, averaging only one metre at low tide, with a few holes close to the entrance channels where most of the moorings are.

You need a dinghy with a decent engine to go ashore as most moorings are quite a distance away from the beach, too far to row. Traffic in and out of the lagoon is done at high tide.

Anchoring outside of the lagoon, along the eastern side of Lord Howe is possible, in the right wind conditions. The island is surrounded by reefs and islets and some areas are inadequately surveyed, so great caution is required. The bays can also be swell affected.

We found it handy to hire bicycles during our stay. At \$40 a week, they make exploring the island easier.

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ABOVE:
Looking north
from the
summit of Mt
Gower.

RIGHT: Skipper
in jail in the
pandanus aerial
roots.



Enjoying the island and beyond

One of the pleasures of the island is the birdlife. It is a delight to observe sooty terns, white terns, masked boobies, noddies, red-tailed tropic birds to name a few. Their aerobatic displays are astounding. At this time of year many are rearing their chicks too.

Another treat is the snorkelling. We tried lots of different spots, but our favourites were Comet's Hole and Erscocks Reef close to our mooring. On the other side of the island Ned Beach was an easy walk-in spot.

Wherever you go the coral and variety of fishes in brilliant colours are a treat. There were a few small sharks too, just to keep things interesting.

We brought our own kayaks and paddled around on the few days when it was not too windy, but you can hire them on the beach if you have not got your own. Wade went diving with a few experienced free divers and we fished, so we feasted on crays, double headed wrasse and blue swimmer crabs a few times.

There are plenty of walks with sensational views of the shores, lagoon and surrounding islets. They cater for different levels of fitness.

We walked just about every track on the island. The big mean one, Mt Gower, requires a guide and is tough but what a view! Malabar Hill at the other end of the island is our pick for return on effort.

We did a sailing loop of Lord Howe which gave us a different perspective on the coastline and the impressive cliffs at either end of the island.

We indulged in a couple of wonderful meals at Earls Anchorage, a restaurant with a top chef.

And as if all this was not enough, we had the unique opportunity to sail *Take It Easy* to Elizabeth Reef, 100 miles north of Lord Howe. The atoll, with its protected lagoon and sand cay in the middle of the ocean was an unbelievable experience.

Fishing, sitting on the sand cay gazing at the curvature of the earth was an unplanned, but awesome adventure. The varying colours of the sea and sky were striking; the feeling of being alone in such an unusual and magnificent place was overwhelming.

Surprisingly, we sat at anchor in totally calm conditions, far more comfortably than at Lord Howe Island. We saw lots of turtles, but also too many sharks for our liking. So snorkelling or diving was off the agenda for us scaredy cats.

There is plenty more we could have done, such as a trip to Ball's Pyramid and the Admiralty Islets.

Return to the big island

The return passage was uneventful just as we like it.

We sailed west from Elizabeth Reef, enjoying an easy sail for the first 26 hours with the wind on our tail at 15 to 20 knots. We flew the spinnaker for a few hours, but the breeze died down during

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the second day and we had to motor overnight. The breeze picked up again and we sailed under main and jib for the rest of the passage.

We wanted to have a short crossing and were not too fussed about where we would make landfall on the mainland. We arrived at Port Macquarie after a 51 hour passage and as I am writing this, we are making our way down south.

The verdict

As with any cruising destination, the weather is in charge.

The conditions might be wonderful, or they might be downright horrible. So you need to sail there with your eyes open and tropical island fantasies firmly in check. But we had a ball.

Lord Howe Island is a hard place to reach in summer however, once there, it is a stunning setting with plenty to enjoy.

For the twelve days we were there, the lagoon was just fine. They were days on the mooring when the boat moved around but it was never uncomfortable for us. There were, however, few days when we would have enjoyed being on a monohull as they were doing what we would describe as acrobatics for all but two hours either side of low tide.

So the verdict: pure magic.

ch



cruisinghelmsman Christine Danger



Chris and her partner Wade have been sailing on catamarans of various sizes for the last 12 to 15 years. Their favourite cruising grounds are the Bass Strait Islands and Tasmanian waters. They have logged a total of 18 Bass Strait crossings to date. They live for the day when they can give up work and cruise full-time on Take It Easy.

ABOVE: The *Take It Easy* crew – from left to right: Chris, Wade, Sue.

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