

Introduction

Why would anyone in their right mind *choose* to walk one thousand kilometres through blistering heat, freezing cold and torrential rain; along seemingly never-ending, isolated, sandy beaches; over hills and boulders, many of them masquerading as mountains; through dense bush and forests or across open, windswept plains? Why would anyone want to remove themselves from all the warm and cosy creature comforts we normally take so completely for granted?

For most people the answer is perfectly clear: any such person would have to be at least slightly mad. Yet, at the same time as the majority of people might be relegating such a proposition to some imaginary folder marked *Crazy*, there would certainly be a few who would be able to see past the thin veneer of supposed madness to the challenge behind it. These few people would immediately understand just what that challenge was offering: the promise of solitude and the escape from civilization.

The experience, not just of being alone but of being completely at one with the landscape, is very special, and, while some people might be happy to

rush through areas of singular beauty in well-equipped vehicles, constantly in search of the next photo opportunity or simply because they want to be able to tick off one more thing as completed, the landscape can only be properly understood when we are able to relate to it physically. It is necessary to be able to feel sand and rocks and prickly bushes against our skin, to smell leaves and grasses and to sense the numbing reality of cold creek water against our bare legs. We cannot properly understand the landscape until we are able to feel some kind of affinity with it, and when there is only us and the landscape this sense of closeness becomes not only self-evident but also very special.

Challenges are important. Back in the day, when we had to chase and subdue our dinner, survival itself was the major challenge, but a trip to the local supermarket in the twenty-first century is definitely not the same kind of experience, not even by a long stretch of the imagination. Many might attempt to call the supermarket excursion a challenge of sorts, but it is not quite the type of challenge I had in mind.

When dinners are minus legs, efficiently frozen and wrapped in plastic, and when, outside the gym, physical exertion is kept to a minimum we often need to find, or even create, our own challenges. If we do not challenge ourselves, mentally, physically and even emotionally, there is a danger of stag-

nation. By surpassing the limitations and the need for conformity imposed upon us both by society and our own innate fear of being different we are usually able to find ourselves. Accepting and then meeting a challenge is an amazing feeling: it is, I feel, the closest we will ever come to knowing who we really are.



The ten years that have passed since we walked the Bibbulmun Track have not changed the experience – that is not possible – and the story of our Walk is exactly the same now as it was when it actually happened. No matter how much we may sometimes want to, we cannot change the past.

It had always been my intention to write about the Walk, so, whenever I could during our six weeks on the Track, I took notes, filling the pages of a couple of exercise books that gradually became the more and more worn for wear as the Walk progressed. Then, when I finally had the time and space to start pulling everything together, I began to doubt that anyone would be interested, and I shelved both the notes and the idea.

Other things squeezed in until I had completely forgotten on what shelf I had placed everything, and

then, purely by chance, I read *Tracks* by Robyn Davidson (an account of her 3,000-kilometre journey from Alice Springs to the Atlantic Ocean). I really enjoyed the book and decided that perhaps there might actually be people out there who would be interested in reading about a 1,000-kilometre walk from Albany to Perth.

This is definitely not a *How to Walk the Bibbulmun Track* information book – there are already some excellent books for anyone wanting helpful, practical information about the Track¹ – it is simply an account of *our* Walk. Our experiences on the Track will not necessarily be exactly the same as other people's experiences on the Track, in the same way as other people's experiences will, with all likelihood, not even begin to parallel ours. It is quite possible that some people would have responded very differently to many of the situations and experiences we encountered along the Track, but then this is not their story; it is ours. What I have written may inadvertently give some tips and

1 The very best one I have seen is the two-volume, pocket-sized *A Guide to the Bibbulmun Track*, published by CALM. The edition I have is the 1st Edition from 1998; however, I believe that the two-volume edition was updated in 2014 and now comprises eight books. Unlike the original publication, these books do not contain any maps and must be used in conjunction with the Bibbulmun Track Maps. The Guides are now published by the Department of Parks and Wildlife.

information, but that was never the primary aim of the book.

Over the following pages, you will read about how the Walk came about and, more importantly, what it was like walking one thousand kilometres from Albany, in the Great Southern region of Western Australia, to the outskirts of Perth, the state capital, about four hundred kilometres to the northwest as the crow flies.

To simply *think* about walking one thousand kilometres is daunting; to do so is a challenge on many different levels. Even though there were times when I may have questioned our sanity, the indescribable sensation of being so very much at one with nature while being completely removed from the noise and stress of everyday living, together with the sense of achievement when we finally accomplished what we had set out to do, put everything into perspective. It was definitely one of the most difficult Walks I have ever done, but it was also the most rewarding and, in so many different ways, the most satisfying.



In February 2001, I flew to Tasmania with my husband, Andris, and did the Overland Track – a

five-day Walk through the extremely rugged and beautiful scenery in the north-west corner of that state. Unlike many of the other Walks we have undertaken, it is a very popular Walk, which means that the campsites are usually filled to capacity with tents, people and cooking smells.

I do not particularly like walking together with lots of other people, and I cannot see myself fitting into the traditionally accepted image of a bush-walking group. It is not that I do not like other people – quite the opposite – but walking as part of a group would in all probability negate what for me are the two most important aspects of long-distance walking: the isolation and the relative silence. Fortunately, when we did the Overland Track, the various groups of walkers that met up at the campsites in the evenings conveniently managed to disappear along the Track during the day, and, for most of the time, Andris and I were actually walking in our own, very isolated, space.

It was at the campsite on the first evening of the Walk that we met up with Heather and Chris from Western Australia, and we continued to catch up with them for a short chat on most of the ensuing evenings. While we talked about the Track and things related to the Track, it was inevitable that the conversation would eventually move on to other Walks – both those we had done and those we still hoped to do. Heather mentioned that she and Chris

had recently walked a small section of the Bibbulmun Track in Western Australia. Describing the long list of difficulties they had encountered while negotiating particularly daunting sand dunes, she shook her head and said that they had found it all far too demanding and that it was highly unlikely that they would do any more of the Track.

I had never before heard of the Bibbulmun Track, and I was trying to get my head around the strangeness of the word when Heather went on to say that the whole Walk measured just over one thousand kilometres. Immediately, my interest was sparked – a Walk measuring one thousand kilometres would *have* to be absolutely fantastic.

During the rest of 2001, the idea of doing the Bibbulmun Track remained very much in the background as there were too many other things demanding my attention. In May 2002, Andris and I did the Hume and Hovell Walk in south-west NSW – a 450-kilometre Walk stretching between Yass and Albury – and then, as 2002 moved closer towards 2003, I finally began to think more seriously about the Bibbulmun Track.

In early 2003, I contacted the Bibbulmun Track Foundation in Perth and spoke with a lovely lady called Gwen, who sent me a lot of information about the Walk. Having taken this first step, I was already looking forward to what was ahead of us, and I was

actually beginning to make a rough plan of the Walk in my head. Then, at the end of April, Andris suffered chest pains that necessitated a stay in hospital and a barrage of tests, and the idea of doing any kind of walk, least of all one that stretched over one thousand kilometres, suddenly became completely unimportant.

⊖⊖⊖⊖⊖⊖⊖