How to FREE DIVING: EXPLORE OUR MARINE WORLD

Australian GEOGRAPHIC

Outdoor

explore adventure

20 Ultimate ESCAPES!

A SWISS SUMMER

Hike and bike beautiful Switzerland

MTB Utah and California, USA

Winter trekking the Yukon Territory

Top End tales

6 of the best Northern Territory adventures

The Great North Walk

All-season multiday trekking in New South Wales

PLUS:

Our experts' favourite gear!

+ the latest outdoor news and loads of gear tests!

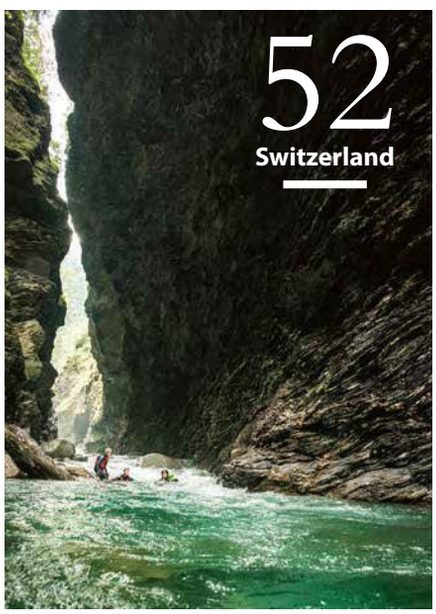
PRINT POST APPROVED 100008799

may/june 2017 $12.95 AU $13.90 NZ (inc GST)

THE NORTH FACE
MADNESS
PROGRESS
#QUESTION MADNESS

May–June 2017

Contents



adventures

24 Desert high
There's more than Moab for MTBers in Utah

30 6 Of The Best: Northern Territory
Best half-dozen NT escapes

40 Danger zone
An epic adventure in Iraqi Kurdistan

44 The long walk
The multiday Great North Walk, NSW

52 The green side of Switzerland
Top Swiss summer experiences

62 Channelling husky
Winter trek in Canada's Yukon Territory

70 Learning to breathe
The fine art of free diving

out there

80 Bike Lane
MTB California, Indian Pacific tragedy and more

94 Outdoor road trip
Amazing Philippines 4WD experience

skills & gear

88 Full flight
Visiting Arc'teryx HQ, Vancouver, Canada

100 Never left behind
The AG Outdoor team's favourite gear revealed

108 Gear Tests
LED Lenser MH10, The North Face Access, Yakima FullBack 3, Garmin Edge 820

regulars

6 Our view
The best time for getting out there!

8 Your view
What you think about all things outdoors

10 Read and react
All the latest in the adventure world

22 Planet Outdoor
One image, a world of inspiration

114 Last shot
Outdoor inspiration

EVERY BACKPACKER'S BEST FRIEND

THE NEW AETHER | ARIEL AG™

OSPREY®

ospreypacks.com

The Aether | Ariel AG™ Series features our innovative, ventilated and comfortable AntiGravity™ system to deliver the best in load carrying comfort and stability. For big trips and heavy loads, nothing compares. Join us on the #CommonPath.

T: 1300 784 266

Now is the time

I RECKON AUTUMN is my favourite season of the year in which to get outside and explore our great country. The heavy heat of summer has – usually – dissipated by end of March and being out all day doesn't mean you're going to get burnt to a crisp, so you can just focus on having an awesome time.

Usually for me this time of year means planning of more adventures through winter and spring, but this year I have decided to just sit back and take what comes in terms of adventure opportunities. Life is very structured these days, and has to be to an extent (especially with two kids under six!) when you think of family and work commitments, but it doesn't mean you cannot dream of that next escape into the wild, free outdoors.

It is the ideal of escape into the wild that pervades this issue of *AG Outdoor*. From tackling the Great North Walk in NSW, one of Australia's greatest – and most unsung – multiday walks, and learning how to free dive, through to exploring the adventure-rich country of Switzerland, trekking in a snow-covered Yukon Territory, and tackling six brilliant adventures in our own Northern Territory, there's something in this issue for everyone.

In this issue you will also find probably one of the most amazing stories we've ever published in *AG Outdoor*. Marcus Koehne's journey through Iraqi Kurdistan, starting on page 40. I will let you read about this incredible adventure yourself, but Marcus's experience in this part of the world proves once again that, even when there is great upheaval, a shared goal of adventure can bind people closer together than you would think.

Enjoy!

On the cover. Hikers exploring a trail near Tschentenalp, Switzerland.
// swiss-image.ch / Stephan Boegli

EDITORIAL
editorial director› justin walker
art director› mike rossi
senior contributors› pat kinsella, james mccormack, dean mellor, andrew bain, tim robson
senior photographer› mark watson
contributors› marcus koehne, ross taylor, dan slater, mike ellott, bruce newton
website producer› gemma chilton

ADVERTISING & MARKETING
national brand manager isabella severino
marketing manager› georgia mavrakakis

BEHIND THE SCENES
publisher – specialist division› cornelia schulze
publisher› jo runciman
general manager, marketing› natalie bettini
advertising production› dominic roy
distribution› gordon & gotch
printing› PMP Limited

ISSN 2200-1301

SUBSCRIPTIONS
to subscribe call› 1300 650 269 or see page 26

PRIVACY NOTICE: This issue of Australian Geographic Outdoor is published by Bauer Media Pty Ltd (Bauer). © 2014. All rights reserved. No part of the contents of this publication may be reproduced without the prior written consent of the editor.

Bauer may use and disclose your information in accordance with our Privacy Policy, including to provide you with your requested products or services and to keep you informed of other Bauer publications, products, services and events. Our Privacy Policy is located at www.bauer-media.com.au/privacy/ It also sets out how you can access or correct your personal information and lodge a complaint. Bauer may disclose your personal information offshore to its owners, joint venture partners, service providers and agents located throughout the world, including in New Zealand, USA, the Philippines and the European Union.

In addition, this issue may contain Reader Offers, being offers, competitions or surveys. Reader Offers may require you to provide personal information to enter or to take part. Personal information collected for Reader Offers may be disclosed by us to service providers assisting Bauer in the conduct of the Reader Offer and to other organisations providing special prizes or offers that are part of the Reader Offer. An opt-out choice is provided with a Reader Offer. Unless you exercise that opt-out choice, personal information collected for Reader Offers may also be disclosed by us to other organisations for use by them to inform you about other products, services or events or to give to other organisations that may use this information for this purpose,.

If you require further information, please contact Bauer's Privacy Officer either by email at privacyofficer@bauer-media.com.au or mail at Privacy Officer Bauer Media Pty Ltd, 54 Park Street, Sydney NSW 2000.

WARNING: Some of the activities in this magazine carry a significant risk of injury or death. Undertake them only with proper instruction, training or equipment. The publisher, and its servants and agents have taken all reasonable care to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this publication and the expertise of its writers. Any reader attempting any of the activities described in this publication does so at their own risk. Neither the publisher nor any of its servants or agents will be held liable for any loss or injury resulting from any attempt to perform any of the activities described in this publication.

BAUER
MEDIA GROUP

Teva
1984
OLD SOUL.
NEW SOLE.
ORIGINAL UNIVERSAL PREMIER
THE ORIGINAL SPORT SANDAL. MADE MODERN.
au.teva.com | online@au.teva.com | 1 800 838 200

Victoria's Wilsons Promontory is one of reader Ryan Shap's favourite outdoor destinations.

Letter of the issue

MY NAME IS JEMI HUGGETT. I am 15 years old and from the Southern Highlands in New South Wales.

I am inspired by the articles I read in Australian Geographic Outdoor magazine. I first started trekking whilst on a week long school camp. I came away passionate about the outdoors and connecting with nature. Since then, I have been on a 12-day hiking expedition and received a subscription to your magazine for my birthday. I love going with my family and friends to explore local tracks and bush walks use the trails to train for my longer hiking trips. I am currently planning my next big adventure…I will be turning 16 whilst on a 21 day course in New Zealand! It will be my first time trekking internationally and AG Outdoor magazine has provided me with so many helpful tips and product suggestions as I am preparing. I aim to become an outdoor educator when I finish school. I love to share my passion for the outdoors and encourage others around me to experience the beauty of the natural world and appreciate what is around them. Thanks for all the tips and tricks!

Jemi Huggett, NSW

Thanks for the letter and kind words Jemi. To help you pack for many more adventures, enjoy this The North Face duffel bag (RRP$180).

ALWAYS INSPIRING

Subscribing to your magazine has opened my eyes to all new sorts of outdoor recreation and adventure. Never before has a magazine explored the myriad outdoor activities for all people, especially within Australia! This magazine inspires me deeply, through its imagery and awe inspiring trekking options. There is truly an infinite amount of amazing places to visit and explore in this country. In light of this, I would love to see some more articles regarding environmental preservation and conservation, as ensuring that our landscape is cared for and protected, is just as important as exploring it. After all, there is no community more pro-active and passionate for nature than the outdoor-loving community! I can't wait to see more great content from this great magazine. (Attached are some photos taken on my recent trip to Wilson's Prom in Victoria.)

Ryan Shap, VIC

VARIETY IS LIFE

Hello from a long-term reader. The latest issue (Mar-Apr 17) proves once again why I keep on picking up this magazine; with the wide variety of destinations and activities throughout, whether it was the Editor's Antarctica trip, or the bucket list of treks, Outdoor continues to inspire me to keep on getting out there. Nice work by all involved and I look forward to many more fantastic stories!

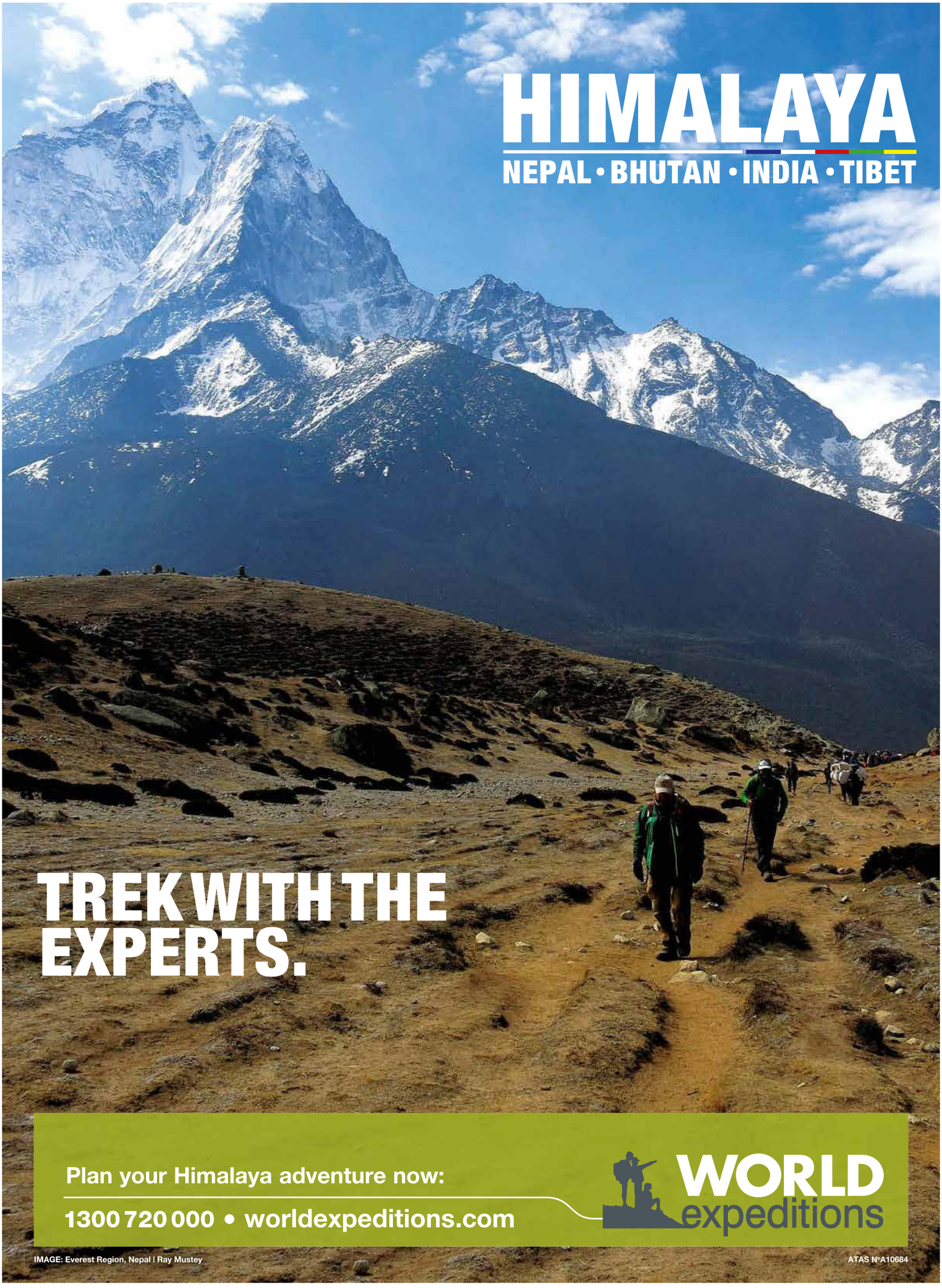
Kel Evans, QLD

TAKING ON ADVICE

I read Outdoor on and off – the main trigger for me laying down my money is the Outdoor Tech and Gear Test sections. You have some of the most experienced writers to explain the differences between different equipment, whether it is sleeping bags, tents or backpacks, and I look forward to you more gear-oriented issues every time. Well done and keep up the good work.

Stephanie Mallison, NSW

Write to us for your chance to win adventure gear for your shed! Drop us an email at ***outdoor@bauer-media.com.au***


HIMALAYA
NEPAL • BHUTAN • INDIA • TIBET
TREK WITH THE EXPERTS.
Plan your Himalaya adventure now:
1300 720 000 • worldexpeditions.com
WORLD expeditions
IMAGE: Everest Region, Nepal | Ray Mustey
ATAS N°A10684

Paul Pritchard Australian Tour Beyond 'Doing it Scared'

AUSTRALIAN CLIMBER Paul Pritchard, the subject of the award-winning doco, Doing It Scared, is about to tackle a big speaking tour road trip with World Expeditions to share his amazing life journey of recovering from a devastating climbing accident, and to return to where it happened and finish his climb.

It was 18 years earlier that Paul suffered very serious injuries while attempting to climb Tasmania's iconic Totem Pole. At the time, Paul was one of the country's leading climbers and, after winning the Boardman Tasker Award for his book Deep Play, he used that prizemoney to embark on a global climbing tour, which led him to the Totem Pole. It was while abseiling down this famous rockclimbing location that a boulder was dislodged by his rope, landed on his head, and set in motion a catastrophic accident that nearly cost Paul his life. After the accident, Paul spent the next 12 months recovering; learning to walk, feed and dress himself, Paul was also left with hemiplegia – he now has little movement or feeling on his body's right side.

The physical challenges were matched by the mental. "The accident taught me a lot about acceptance," Paul says. "Letting the future go without anticipation. With this acceptance comes the courage to navigate the necessary stumbling stones of life."

In 2016, Paul took his long recovery to its final steps: he attempted to climb the Totem Pole again, with that amazing challenge captured in Doing It Scared. His motivation was simple: to prove that 'disabled' people are not unable.

Paul's speaking tour kicks off in June 2017 and he is very keen to share his amazing story with audiences throughout Australia. Audiences will be both saddened but heartened by Paul's story as he recounts his recovery, and the many steps both physically and mentally taken to get him back to the Totem Pole to finish what he describes as "the longest expedition" he has ever been on. It is guaranteed to be an inspiring evening with an amazing Australian adventurer.

TOUR DATES

Sydney: Tues 20 June
Canberra: Wed 21 June
Hobart: Wed 28 June
Adelaide: Tues 4 July
Melbourne: Wed 5 July
Brisbane: Thurs 6 July

Time: Doors open 6:30pm. Presentation begins at 7pm.
Cost: $25 with all profits going to Paul's upcoming Lowest to Highest Expedition (see *www.lowest2highest.com.au*) a world-first expedition comprising of five people with significant disabilities riding human powered tricycles from Australia's lowest point, Kati Thanda (Lake Eyre) to the highest point at the summit of Mount Kosciuszko (2228m).
Booking: *www.worldexpeditions.com*

Paul's speaking tour is proudly supported by:

Outdoor Paddy Pallin SINCE 1930

REVISIT THE TOTEM POLE WITH PAUL

Paul has made the pilgrimage to the Totem Pole every year since his accident. This year, Paul is inviting you walk along Tasmania's wild coastline and rugged wilderness with him to reflect upon the spot where he started the longest expedition of his life.
4 DAYS | 9 Nov 2017.
Call 1300 720 000 for more information.

WORLD expeditions

Sea to Summit introduces

THICKER, LIGHTER SELF INFLATING MATS

with **Delta Core**™ technology

Comfort **plus S.I.**

SELF INFLATING

Thickness
8cm | 3⅛ in

R-value
4.1

ISPO AWARD WINNER
2017/2018

Multi-function high flow-rate valve

Fast inflation, one-way easy deflation and simple fine tuning for comfort

Delta Cores™

Diagonal supporting walls aid inflation and rollability

Thicker PU foam layer on top of Delta Cores™ provides more warmth

Triangular Delta Cores remove maximum foam bulk yet still provides structural support and strength

Horizontal Delta Cores across the width of the mat reduces bulk and weight without sacrificing comfort

Continuous top and bottom foam layer provides consistent insulation along the length of the mat

Fabric surface

Luxurious 30D stretch knit fabric on top for a soft next-to-skin feel

Complete Sea to Summit self inflating mat range

SEATOSUMMIT

This pic Clark Webb takes tourists on a SUP adventure while sharing the stories of his people. **Below** Wiradjuri man, Mark Saddler, runs Bundyi Cultural Tours out of Wagga Wagga.

Indigenous tourism booms in NSW

THE INDIGENOUS tourism industry in NSW is growing at an incredibly fast rate, with record numbers of toursts undertaking an Aboriginal tourism experience in the state, and now news that six more Indigenous tourism operations have started up.

In the year ending September 2016, more than 394,000 international and domestic visitors participated in an Aboriginal tourism experience in NSW – an incredible result and up 50 percent on the previous year. It is estimated that this injects $1.14 billion into the NSW economy. Besides this economic growth, the encouraging news is that the state's rich indigenous history and culture is now being more recognised by both visitors and state government bodies.

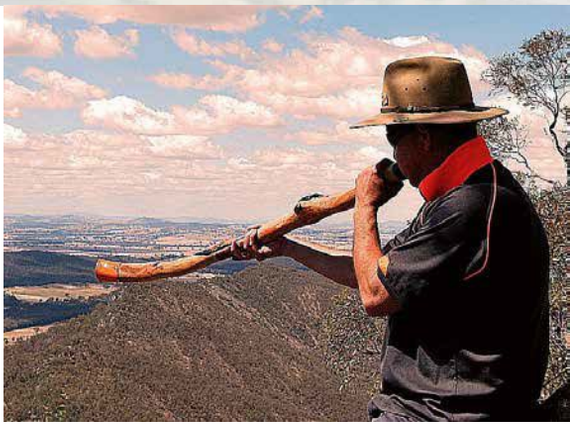
According to Destination NSW CEO Sandra Chipchase, "The growth in travellers yearning to learn more about NSW's diverse Aboriginal nations and their traditional and contemporary cultural experiences is fantastic news for the Indigenous tourism sector."

"NSW is a destination where Aboriginal culture is strong, vibrant and diverse. Across Sydney and Regional NSW, new tourism operators are taking tours to new locations and sharing the story of their people, language and cultural traditions as a way to educate visitors and locals. These tours provide a chance for mutual understanding and ensure that local language, cultural sites, ceremonies and stories are passed on."

One of the big advantages indigenous operators have is that they can mix in both the awesome culture and history of ther region as well as the actual outdoor/adventure experiences on offer. Clark Webb, who has recently started Wajaana Yaam Gumbaynggirr Adventure Tours, a social enterprise on the Coffs Coast, believes his tours share the stories and language of the Gumbaynggirr people, while also having fun stand-up paddling boarding and kayaking.

"Gumbaynggirr are saltwater people, so it makes sense to get people out on the water. On our tours people get the chance to paddle with the direct descendants of the world's first paddlers, feel a sense of adventure in unspoilt marine park waterways, and connect, feel and taste the soul of our country," Mr Webb said.

Indigenous operators can mix in both the awesome culture and history of the region as well as the adventures.



The success of Clark's tours has also had a positive effect on the local Aboriginal community. "Wajaana Yaam Gumbaynggirr Adventure Tours is a social enterprise, where we educate visitors about the Gumbaynggirr culture and educate the local Aboriginal community so they know the stories and language of their ancestors. In this way we encourage our community to be strong in both culture and education and create employment opportunities as tour guides."

Wajaana Yaam Gumbaynggirr Adventure Tours is one of six new NSW Aboriginal tourism operations.

Bundyi Cultural Tours, in Wagga Wagga, is run by Wiradjuri man Mark Saddler. Mark shares aspects of this culture, including the language, significant places and stories. There are options of a half- or full-day experience with Mark, where visitors learn about bushtucker, the making of cultural tours. For an even richer experience, Mark also offers overnight tours, where attendees will learn more about the Wiradjuri culture and its people through Dreaming stories, visiting cultural sites and learning about the Wiradjuri language and culture

Former Wallaby Tim Ella, of the Dharawal-Yuin people, and Grant Hyde have recently started Kadoo Tours at Watsons Bay and La Perouse, in Sydney. These two-hour tours begin with a traditional ochre ceremony and Welcome to Country, before showcasing bush tucker and also revealing Tim's close personal ties to the area.

Visit Sydney's Ku-Ring-Gai NP and sample barbecued kangaroo and emu as part of the four-hour Guringai Aboriginal Tours experience, led by Guringai descendant Laurie Bimson and Yuin descendant Les Mcleod. You also get the chance to check out sacred sites, rock carvings and hear the pair recount ancient stories.

Unkya Cultural Eco Tours offers authentic tours at Scotts Head and Gaagal Wanggan National Park on the Mid North Coast. Hear the creation story of the ocean and how the first wave was made, and learn about traditional fish traps and hunting on the Gurruuja Juun (Whale Tail) Tour which visits Little Beach and Scotts Head headland.

Experience the Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi/Gamilaraay country near Dubbo with traditional land owner Peter Peckham from First Lesson Cultural Tours. Hear the stories of this land and its people from a real bushman as you visit a scarred canoe tree, an axe-grinding site, and discover bush tucker and medicine plants. Peter also offers overnight camping tours, for a real taste of Outback NSW.

For info on indigenous tourism experiences in NSW, check out *www.destinationnsw.gov.au*

BACKCOUNTRY AVALANCHE COURSE

Learn the skills from the professionals.

alpine guides
Aoraki • Mount Cook

alpineguides.co.nz

Walls of Jerusalem comp winner

INGRID SCHNELL, of NSW, is the winner of our recent Walls of Jerusalem Circuit competition, presented by Osprey, Tasmanian Expeditions and AG Outdoor.

Ingrid's entry was the one drawn from a massive competition field of over 1100 entries, and she has won an awesome trip for two on the Walls of Jerusalem Circuit, a seven-day hiking adventure in spectacular southwest Tasmania.

The hike will see the competition winner kitted out with the choice of either an Osprey Aether AG or Ariel AG pack. The seven days in the wilds of Tassie will be an unforgettable experience and Ingrid will be joined by her chosen hiking partner, Osprey packs representatives, AG Outdoor and Tim Pallin from Paddy Pallin.

You can read all about this awesome multiday adventure in the July-Aug issue of AG Outdoor.

SAY HELLO TO THE PUMPED-UP NEW-LOOK ISUZU MU-X

GO YOUR OWN WAY IN THE 3-LITRE, MORE TORQUE, 6-SPEED ISUZU MU-X

With refined styling inside and out, the new-look, pumped-up Isuzu MU-X is a stand out performer on or off-road. With the legendary Isuzu 3-litre turbo diesel engine, a beefed up 430Nm of torque and an intuitive 6-speed transmission. Coupled with a Terrain Command 4WD system and 3.0 tonne braked towing capacity+, the 7-seat MU-X is all you need to pump up any adventure. GO YOUR OWN WAY!

Discover the Isuzu MU-X at your Isuzu UTE Dealer or isuzuute.com.au

SERVICE+PLUS
5 YEAR WARRANTY^ | 5 YEARS ROADSIDE ASSIST | 5 YEARS CAPPED PRICE SERVICE>

ANCAP Safety ★★★★★ TESTED 2013

ISUZU MU-X | ISUZU UTE

GO YOUR OWN WAY

+3.0 tonne braked towing capacity on all MU-X models when fitted with an optional genuine Isuzu UTE tow bar kit. ^5 years/130,000km whichever occurs first, for eligible customers. Excludes accessories. >The Capped Price Servicing Program ("CPS Program") applies to Eligible Vehicles with a Warranty Start Date on or after 1/1/15 at Participating Isuzu UTE Dealers only. The 5 years Capped Price Servicing covers the first 5 Scheduled Services for 16.5MY and later vehicle models for up to 5 years/50,000km (whichever occurs first). CPS Program is subject to change. For full terms & conditions and current pricing visit isuzuute.com.au/service-plus.

Snow season accommodation for all budgets

IT'S COMING: yep, we've borrowed one of the most-overused clichés to say that winter is nearly here so it is time to start planning for your big snow trip – and try and find suitable accommodation that doesn't break the bank, but is convenient.

Discovery Parks is a nationwide tourist park organisation that has a fantastic park located in Jindabyne, right in the heartland of the NSW snow fields. The park offers not only the convenience of being located in the town itself, allowing easy access to shopping and dining, but it is also only a 30-minute drive to ski fields such as Thredbo, Perisher and Smiggin Holes. The accommodation options range from budget through to luxury, making it quite appealing; there is a mix of cabins, villas, bunkrooms, and caravan and tent sites, so any budget is catered for. The park also offers chain hire and fitting, there's a drying room, as well as spa and sauna. Plus, if you're anything like some members of the AG Outdoor team and have the odd crash on the slopes, there's also a ski repair shop on site.

There are, of course, myriad options for visitors to the ski fields when it comes to accommodation but for families on a budget, or a group of friends, having this wide range of pricing options available makes the Discovery Park at Jindabyne hugely appealing.

For more info, see *www.discoveryholidayparks.com.au*

Discovery Parks Jindabyne offers accommodation for all budgets and gets you super-close to the NSW snow fields for that memorable family adventure.

FOLDING POLES
MICRO VARIO SYSTEM

LEKI

Pack size:
38 cm

Aergon Grip in shell cavity construction for extreme lightweight and ergonomics

Strap with security release function

A spring in the lower shaft guarantees maximum tension and automatic rope length compensation

Non-slip mid grip extension for maximum comfort

Smoothly change length by 20 cm with the Speed Lock 2 System, approved by the TÜV Süd

Special Aluminum sleeves protect the high modular carbon fibers and guarantee a perfect connection of the sections

Push Button Release Mechanism for fast and simple assembly and collapse

Flexible high performance tensioning rope reinforced with sturdy PE coating for lifelong protection of the fibers

Photo ©Christoph Schöch

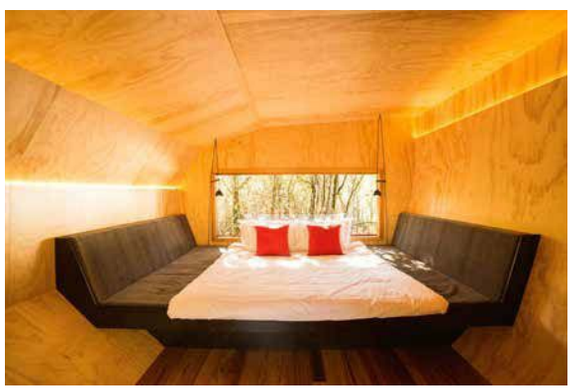
Velo-Vita Pty Ltd – Ph 02 9700-7977
www.velovita.net.au

More Tassie bike tourism

Ride the awesome Blue Derby trail network during the day, then relax in your own bush pod each evening.

FANCY RIDING Tassie's Blue Derby MTB trails all day, then sitting back with awesome food and drink that evening before dossing down in your own, unique bush accommodation? Then it's worth checking out the Blue Derby Pods Ride, a new premium guided mountain bike experience in northeast Tasmania's latest MTB hot-spot.

The first of its kind in Tasmania, the Blue Derby Pods Ride is a three-day mountain biking tour for small groups of eight people with two guides. It will use 100km of mountain bike trails in the Blue Derby Mountain Bike Trails network, which includes the Derby, Blue Tier and Weldborough (Blue Derby) areas of northeast Tasmania.



Mixing adventure with some well-earned comfort, riders will sleep in architecturally designed eco-sensitive pods for two, which feel as if they are levitating above the forest floor. Dining will be in a central hub building surrounded by quintessential Tasmanian bush with views down to the Cascade River Valley and beyond.

It's another boost to the MTB-based tourism push by the Tasmanian Government. According to a Tasmanian Visitor Survey (TVS), in the year to September 2016, there were 20,900 mountain bike visitors to Tasmania – an increase of 121% on the previous period

The Blue Derby Mountain Biking trails in northeast Tasmania are a key driver of this growth. Mountain biking is now being credited with the revival of the tiny riverside village of Derby – once a booming tin mining settlement - with room nights up 85% on the previous year.

The $2.9 million Blue Derby Mountain Biking Trail, right next to town, is a purpose-built track that weaves its way through temperate rainforest, large tracts of eucalypt and myrtle forest and woodlands, all with sensational views of this region's stunning landscapes.

Guests on the Blue Derby Pods Ride will be treated to some of Tasmania's finest produce with a menu specially created by local chef Daniel Alps and his team at Alps & Amici, in Launceston. Riders will be able to unwind after a day in the saddle with locally-crafted Tasmanian wines and beers, such as the Dam Busters Pale Ale from the Little Rivers Brewing Company, named after one of the Blue Derby mountain bike trails.

It's another boost to the MTB-based tourism push by the Tassie government.

The tour will incorporate three consecutive days of mountain biking without backtracking on a variety of world-class trails to suit the riders' abilities. With a bus transfer from Launceston, riders meet their guides at the Leaning Church Vineyard in Lalla. From there, the group drives to Blue Derby and hits the first 10km descent on the Atlas trail, followed by an al fresco lunch in the heart of the Cascade Valley. In the afternoon and following day riders can choose to explore more of the mountain bike trails through the Tasmanian forest – like Krushkas, Dam Busters, Flickety Sticks or Sawtooth.

The final day sees the group cycling to Derby where riders will be transported to the top of the Blue Tier, the highest point of the Blue Derby Mountain Biking Trail network. From here, they will descend through lush, dense rainforest to Weldborough.

The Blue Derby Pods Ride is the brainchild of Tara and Steve Howell. The couple moved from the corporate world to fulfil their passions of mountain biking and showcasing Tassie.

The three-day Blue Derby Pods Ride costs from $1,750 per person** and includes accommodation in elevated pods (twin-share), all meals and beverages, two qualified Experience Leaders, three days' mountain bike and gear hire - including bike, helmet, gloves and riding spray jacket - plus luggage storage.

Riders can bring their own bikes or hire one, free of charge. Blue Derby Pods Ride has a variety of bikes available including dual suspension, with a choice of 27.5, 29 and 6Fattie wheel sizes.

Departures run every three days on Saturdays, Mondays and Wednesdays, with return transfers between Launceston and Blue Derby included in the price.

For more information on the Blue Derby Pods Ride visit *www.bluederbypodsride.com.au*.

PLAY WITH MORE COMFORT

SENSE RIDE

COMFORT

Generously cushioned, Sense Ride makes the longest runs and the roughest surfaces a lot more comfortable.

RIDE

Built with a natural rocker profile, the sole and midsole of this shoe help you keep putting one foot in front of the other.

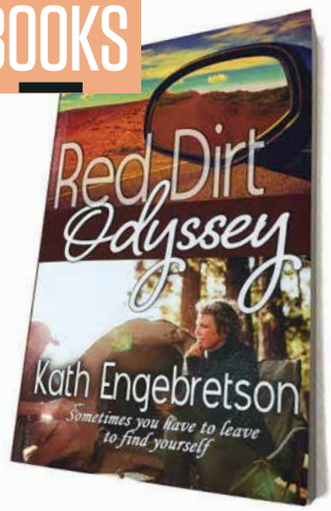
GRIP

Contagrip® sole offers great traction on soft or hard, wet or dry surfaces.

salomon

TIME TO PLAY

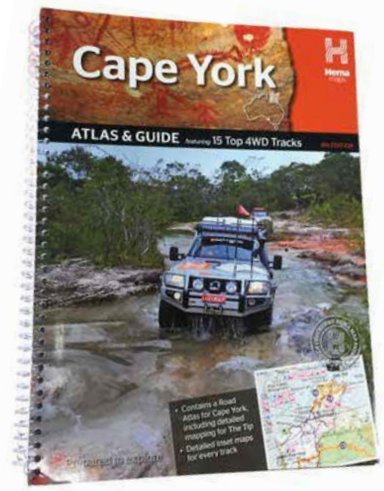
Outdoor BOOKS



RED DIRT ODYSSEY

A fictional adventure through Western Australia's magical Kimberley region. Author Kath Engebretson brings the region to life by recounting a woman's journey through the Kimberley and the various outback characters she meets along the way. Written while Engebretson was living in Kununurra, the novel is a great view into this iconic part of Australia.

RRP$27.50 www.atlasproductions.com.au



HEMA MAPS CAPE YORK ATLAS & GUIDE

Aussie mapping gurus, Hema Maps, has the ultimate guidebook for those adventurers thinking of tackling the 4WD trip to the top of Australia – Cape York, rated one of the world's greatest 4WD expeditions. Hema's comprehensive atlas and guide is packed with advice, info and detailed inset maps focused on 15 of the area's best 4WD tracks. A must for anyone keen on reaching "The Tip".

RRP$39.95 www.hemamaps.com.au

THE FLYING ADVENTURES OF JESSIE KEITH "CHUBBIE" MILLER

Author Chrystopher J. Spicer reveals the story of one of Australia's famous aviatrix – Jessie "Chubbie" Miller. Miller was the first woman to fly from the UK to Australia, the first woman to fly more than 800 miles, to cross the equator in the air and to traverse Australia from north to south.

RRP$49 www.mcfarlandpub.com

2016 tripadvisor TRAVELLERS' CHOICE AWARD TOP 25 HOTELS IN AUSTRALIA

5 out of 5 The Sydney Morning Herald Weekend Away Review – January 2015

seven peaks walk

The Seven Peaks Walk is Lord Howe Island's premier 5 day guided adventure that takes you from pristine beaches and exposed coral reefs to the delicate mist forests on Mt Gower. After a memorable day, you'll return to Pinetrees for a hot shower, cold beer, exceptional 4 course dinner, great wine and deluxe king bed. The walk is for experienced hikers who enjoy a challenge by day, and some luxury by night. Book our Seven Peaks Walk in 2017 and discover Australia's best adventure experience. Please call (02) 9262 6585 and quote 'Australian Geographic Outdoor'.

pinetrees
SINCE 1848 • LORD HOWE ISLAND

lord howe island • another world • close to home

Contact Pinetrees Travel on (02) 9262 6585 or visit pinetrees.com.au

LEATHERMAN®

See the complete range, including the Leatherman Signal at **leatherman.com.au**

planet outdoor

THE OLD MAN OF STORR, ISLE OF SKYE, SCOTLAND

Camera: SONY ALPHA 7R MK2
Lens: 24-70mm
Shutter: 1/250 sec
Aperture: f/3.2

Photographer: Chris Burkard

THE NORTH FACE
NEVER STOP EXPLORING™

– DESERT HIGH –

The St George area proves you don't have to go to Moab to enjoy spectacular MTBing in Utah.

Words Bruce Newtown

Photos Red Bull Content Pool, Tourism Utah & BN

The Red Bull Rampage is held at Virgin, Utah, right next door to the St George MTB trails.

Red Bull
RAMPAGE
2016

COMBINE MOUNTAIN BIKING and Utah in the same sentence and most people immediately think of Moab, the legendary home of slick rock riding in the east of the state.

But tucked down in the southwest corner of Utah is St George, a bustling small city of 80,000 people only a short drive from both the Arizona and Nevada borders. It is an emerging MTB destination of epic proportions.

The beauty of St George is you can stay in town and literally pedal to various local trailheads for some fabulous desert riding unlike anything we get in Australia.

If you have transport then you can head further afield, to diverse and extensive riding spots less than an hour's drive away. It's all mapped, signposted and accessible. What much of it is not, however, is beginner riding. Intermediate skills are often required here and even then, there are places where your confidence will be tested on black diamond sections and runs.

You see, the trail builders of St George and neighbouring Santa Clara and Hurricane are a fiendish lot. Out here in the desert you won't be slaloming through forests of pine trees or churning up gut-busting endless mountain climbs. What you will be doing is ranging far and wide over rocky terrain. You'll ride up and over boulders, down and over boulders, around boulders, between boulders and even under a boulder on the famous Zen Trail.

Oh yeah, you'll be doing it in thinner air too, as St George is roughly 900m above sea level – about the same as Jindabyne.

I'll put my hand up now and admit I am a rider of only intermediate skills, who usually rides at no more than a few hundred metres above sea level, encountering rocks so rarely in my local area I can name them individually.

Clockwise from left
The writer had his Specialized Stumpjumper set up perfectly by Red Rock Bicycle Co; the trails offer plenty of challenges; the trails are dotted with examples of rock art.

You'll ride up and over boulders, down and over boulders, around boulders and even under a boulder on the famous Zen Trail.

But here's the good news. After a couple of days riding the rocks of St George I really came to enjoy myself. The trails are so well thought out there is usually a natural progression going up or down or on the flat that made sense. If I wasn't sure I stopped and had a look, then sessioned the section to get it right or simply walked it. Yeah, I wussed it a couple of times, but one thing I know is rocks don't often bruise or break when flesh and bone lands on them... it tends to be the other way around.

The other thing you'll have to get used to in St George is riding close to the edge of some massive drops. Close enough to take your breath away at times. There's one trail named Precipice and it's an accurate description! And for more of an idea of the exposure you only have to check some of the Red Bull Rampage footage (that event is held near St George each year).

Now another important part of riding stuff like this is having the right bike with plenty of suspension travel, at both ends preferably, grippy tyres and a dropper seat post for those nasty descents.

Unless you bring your own bike with you then you are going to have to rent, and the

PETZL® Access the inaccessible

ALL NEW 2017 RANGE

HEADLAMP GUIDE

CLASSIC headlamps

Simply... hands-free lighting! Lightweight, compact and easy to use. CLASSIC headlamps provide proximity lighting for everyday family use: camping, recreation, travel...

e+LITE®
50 Lumens

TIKKINA®
150 Lumens

TIKKA®
200 Lumens

ACTIVE headlamps

Non-stop power! Compact and multi-beam, ACTIVE headlamps guarantee constant, comfortable lighting over time. They respond to the need for versatility that comes with outdoor activities such as hiking, backpacking, trekking, mountaineering...

ACTIK
300 Lumens

ACTIK CORE
350 Lumens

MYO®
370 Lumens

PERFORMANCE headlamps

Beyond Power... Intelligence! The ultra-powerful headlamps from the PERFORMANCE line adapt their lighting automatically and instantly to the ambient light. Ideal for dynamic, high-commitment activities such as trail running, technical mountaineering, ski touring...

REACTIK
220 Lumens

REACTIK+
300 Lumens

NAO®+
750 Lumens

Photo © www.andylloydcreative.com

Spelean Ph: 02 9966 9800 sales@spelean.com.au www.spelean.com.au www.petzl.com.au

Clockwise from left
A contrast of red desert sand and snow-capped mountains in the distance; the trails are very well constructed and offer sublime riding; the immense landscape dwarfs two riders negotiating a more technical trail section.

good news is there are a variety of options in St George.

I did my research and ended up with Red Rock Bicycle Co (*redrockbicycle.com*), who recommended the latest model Specialized Stumpjumper with all the bells and whistles, set the bike up in advance for me based on the weight and height figures I supplied, and even swapped the brake levers over to what they call 'moto-style'.

That means rear brake on the left and front on the right like we have them here. Over in the USA and in Europe they do it the other way around and I can tell you from past experience it puts a real dampener on your riding experience if the levers can't be swapped over.

The rental rate wasn't cheap at US$90 per day, but it proved the right choice. Plus the guys and gals at Red Rock were super cooperative and happy to give advice, both before I rented over email and when I was in-store.

Other stuff like accommodation, food and services are a no-brainer in St George because it is a sizeable place. There's everything from one to five stars, so it's really your budget that determines where you stay and how you eat.

Maybe the biggest challenge in logistical terms is getting here. St George does have an airport but there don't seem to be direct flights from places like Los Angeles. Instead the best way to get there from somewhere like LA is to fly to Las Vegas, which is about 170km south, and then just truck on up Interstate 15 in a renter.

And if you decide that you've had enough riding — as if! — then there are some wonderful natural attractions to visit nearby, including the spectacular Zion National Park and the even more spectacular Grand Canyon. In fact, just about everything you will see in this area is spectacular.

And the weather is pretty good too. I rode in late February and while it was cold — say 10°C — it was dry and clear. The locals claim more than 300 days of sunshine per year. The big issue here is riding in the summer heat because it gets darn hot from May to September.

Critical to maximising your good times is getting hold of the comprehensive trail map — Red Rock has them. It is a must if you want to understand the full gamut of what's available to you in the area. It costs US$12.99 and is worth every cent. Overlay that with internet resources such as the comprehensive utahmountainbiking.com (*www.utahmountainbiking.com/trails/idx-st-g.htm*), Red Rock's trail guide on its website and the excellent MTB Project smartphone app and you can assemble a pretty decent picture of where to go and what to do.

In one and a half days riding I did about 70km and stayed close to St George. Next time — and there will be a next time — I will head further afield to places like the Hurricane Rim Trail and the Gooseberry Mesa, which is a slick rock area like Moab.

My fave trail was the downhill run from the top of Sidewinder to the bottom of Precipice; a 40-minute grind to climb but 15 minutes of pure, rocky bliss coming back down. But the Barrel Trail loop, the Rim Reaper — ho ho — and the original local trail, Bearclaw Poppy, which finishes with a section called the RollerCoaster that's like mogul skiing — were laugh out-loud fun with gobsmackingly spectacular views.

So helmets off to the trail builders and riders of St George. Now there are more reasons than Moab to go MTBing in Utah.

LEDLENSER

FACE THE DARKNESS

The German-engineered range of flashlights and headlamps from Ledlenser utilise cutting edge technologies and high-performance features so you can challenge the outdoors - no matter how dark it gets.

ledlenser.com.au

UNCHARTED

· HIKE · PADDLE · CAMP · 4WD · MTB ·

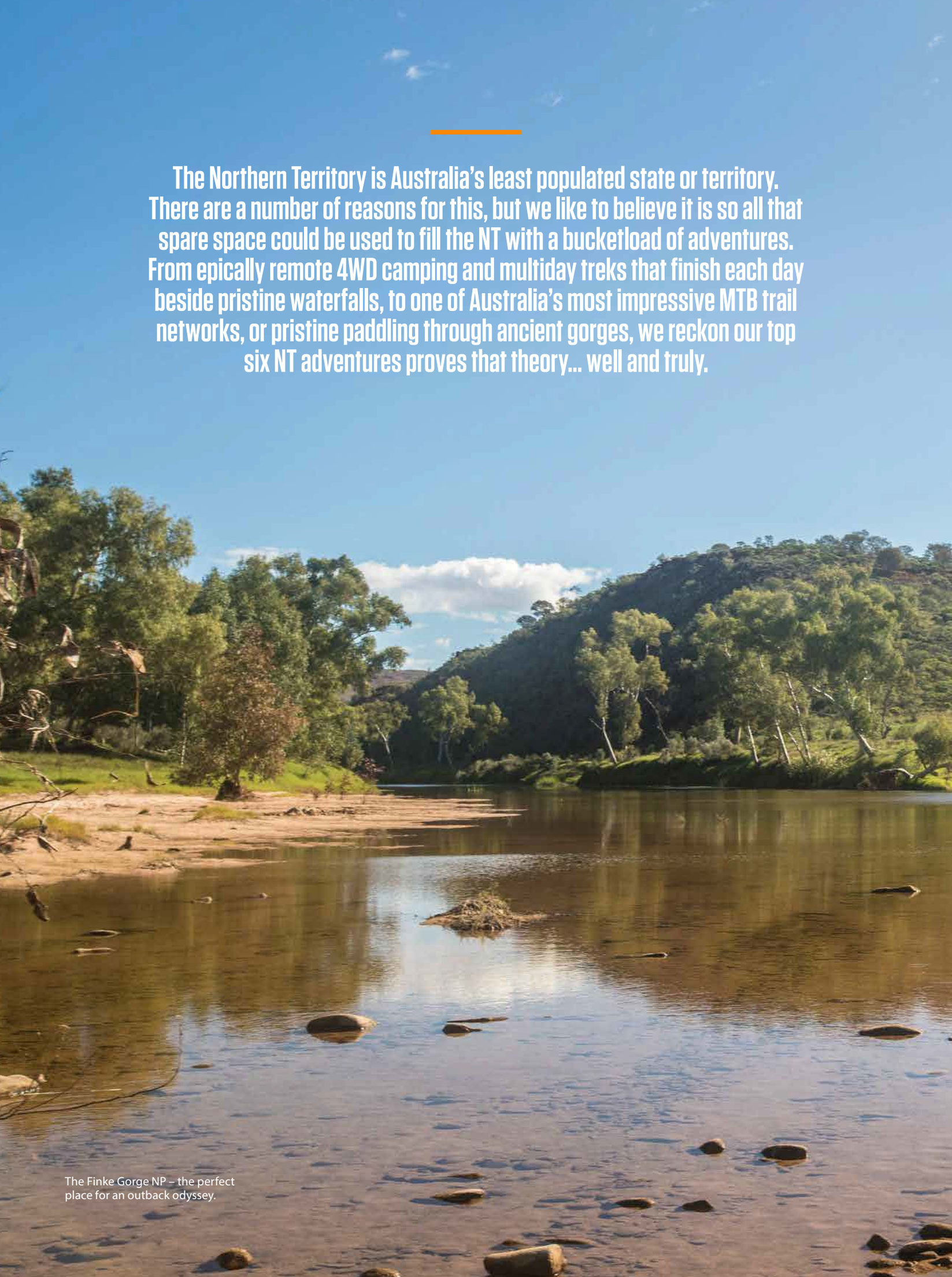
TERRITORY

From hiking and biking in the desert and camping under the outback stars, to exploring the mighty waterways and 4WD tracks of the tropical Top End, the NT offers adventurers the ultimate bang for bucks.

Words and Photos Justin Walker

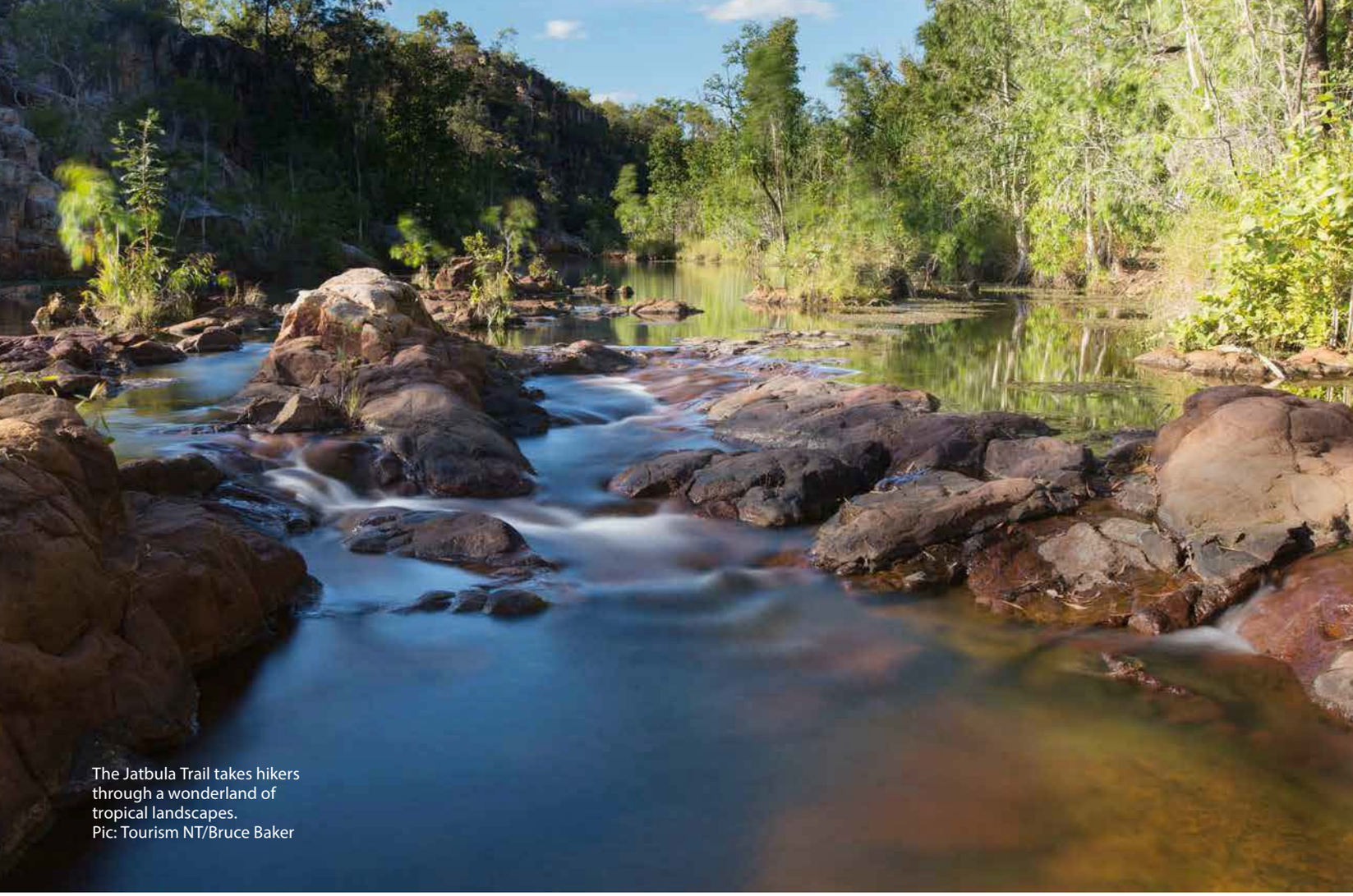
Outback sunrise in Finke Gorge NP. Campsites here are pristine and truly remote.

The Northern Territory is Australia's least populated state or territory. There are a number of reasons for this, but we like to believe it is so all that spare space could be used to fill the NT with a bucketload of adventures. From epically remote 4WD camping and multiday treks that finish each day beside pristine waterfalls, to one of Australia's most impressive MTB trail networks, or pristine paddling through ancient gorges, we reckon our top six NT adventures proves that theory... well and truly.



The Finke Gorge NP – the perfect place for an outback odyssey.

IPF
IPF
CC-05-FL



The Jatbula Trail takes hikers through a wonderland of tropical landscapes.
Pic: Tourism NT/Bruce Baker

· HIKING ·

Jatbula Trail

Info: *www.nt.gov.au/parks* **When to go:** June-September **Grade:** Moderate

THE JATBULA TRAIL is the perfect Top End accompaniment to the NT's other multiday walk, the Larapinta Trail. The six-day, 62km Jatbula takes you through some of the most vibrant and engaging terrain in this country. It can be walked independently (you need to book well ahead for park/camping passes, see the NT parks link above) or you can jump on board a guided adventure with tour operators such as World Expeditions.

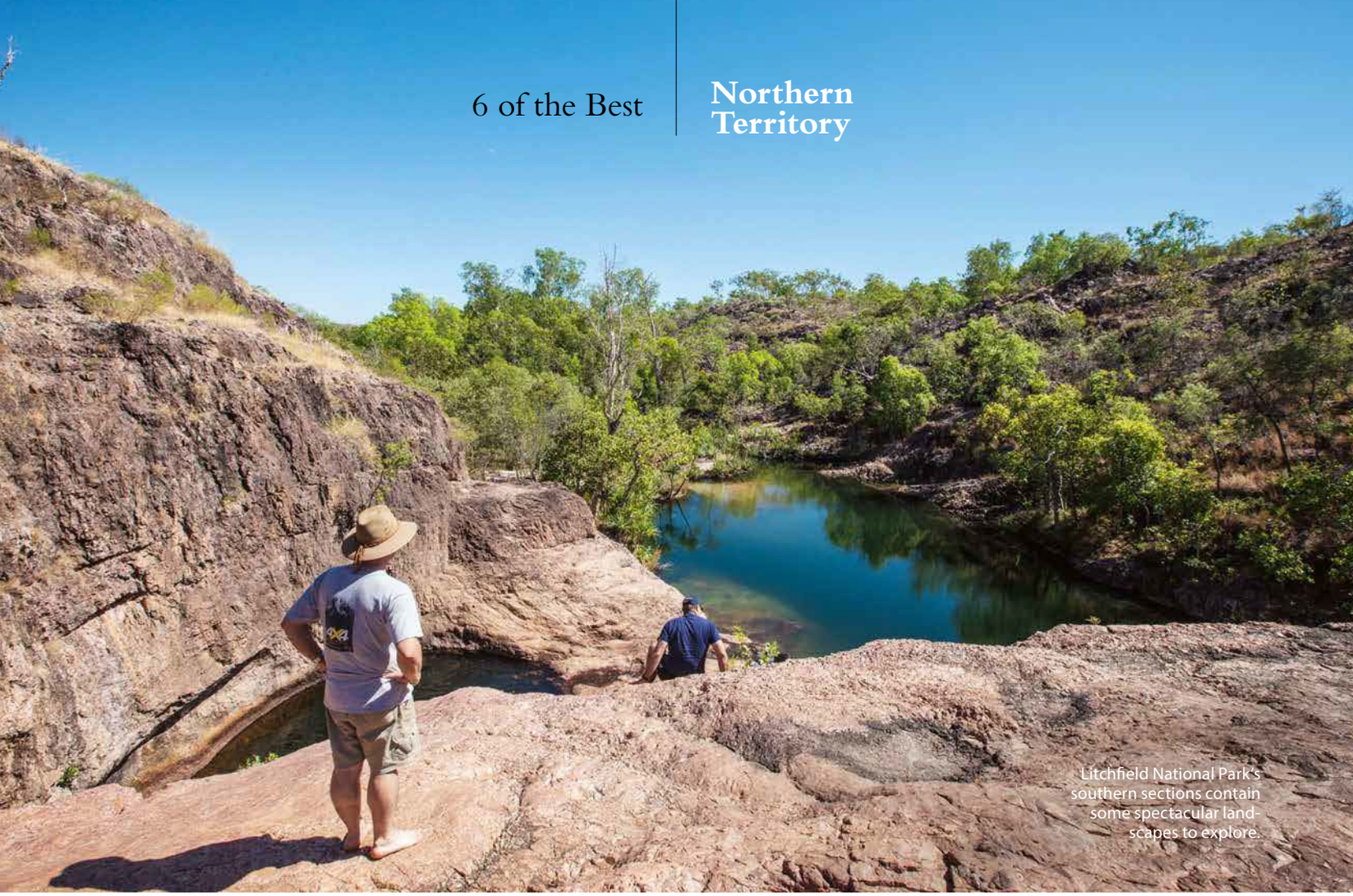
The Jatbula is located in Nitmiluk National Park and winds north (you can only walk it in this one direction) from Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) to Leliyn (Edith Falls). The route takes walkers on a tropical adventure along the western edges of the Arnhem Land Escarpment, passing through savannah grasslands, over quartzite cliffs, and through creeks and monsoonal rainforest. The terrain itself is amazing, but even more so are the campsites you sleep at every night: right beside waterfalls that drop into pristine and croc-free swimming holes below. This is the home of the Jawoyn people, and you'll have the daily chance to spot some beautiful rock art in a number of caves, rocky overhangs and outcrops. Each day of walking is around 10km, with the longest being 16km, on the section between 17 Mile Falls and Sandy Camp Pool.

The first few days see you traverse what is known as "stone country" before entering pockets of monsoonal rainforest. After a few days you'll follow a gentler track as you walk beside the Edith River on your way to Sandy Camp Pool, where you'll camp for the night, before continuing the next day through paperbark forests and past more waterholes to Sweetwater Pool.

The route takes walkers on an adventure along the western Arnhem Land Escarpment

The Jatbula Trail can be done at an easy pace. We'd recommend starting early, however, to miss the heat of the afternoon, and also take advantage of each campsite's location where you can cool off in the camp-side waterholes. As well as warm days and coolish nights, you should see plenty of stars in the clear NT skies.

The Jatbula's start/end points are ideal for other day walks, or canoeing the gorge (see page 39) . The alternative is to keep living that waterfall dream and spend a few more days lolling about at Leliyn at the end of your trek. Yep, the NT can be tough sometimes...



Litchfield National Park's southern sections contain some spectacular landscapes to explore.

· FAMILY CAMPING ·

Litchfield NP

Info: *www.nt.gov.au/parks* **When to go:** April-October **Grade:** Moderate

THEY CALL IT a mini-Kakadu, but to describe the NT's most visited national park – Litchfield – that way is to do this wilderness haven a disservice. The 1500km² park is jam-packed with waterfalls, magnetic termite mounds, some brilliant swimming holes (check all signs for croc warning/no swimming) and awesome camping. Best of all, the national park is just 120km southwest of Darwin. Even though this may sound warning bells for potential campers, the fact is the park is sizeable enough, with a decent spread of campsites throughout, for you to still find your own personal piece of Top End paradise for a weekend or longer of camping.

Most of the park's roads are sealed, which results in a large number of day tourers, but if you are prepared to drive (4WD only) into – and explore – the park's more southerly sections, you will find fewer people with plenty of sublime campsites available. We'd recommend a loop through the park to and from Darwin for a long weekend of camping. And we'd also opt to do it clockwise, driving south along the Stuart Highway from Darwin, and then turning right on to Daly River Road and accessing the park via its southern entrance. It's a much longer first day, but well worth it…

This southern part of Litchfield National Park is less crowded and a little 'wilder' in terms of its landscape, big creeks and rivers, and campsites than the northern section. Most waterways in this section will have dropped down enough for an easy crossing in your vehicle by the end of the Wet Season (usually June, but check beforehand with National Parks) and you will kick off your Litchfield NP camp adventure with a night at one of the prettiest campsites in the park: Surprise Creek Falls. The bonus of this campsite is twofold; it is remote and rarely overcrowded, plus you can safely swim in the waterhole at the bottom of the falls.

For the next night, we'd highly recommend tracking north along the park's main track, negotiating the park's widest water crossing – the Reynolds River – and then setting up camp not much further north of there, at beautiful Tjaynera Falls (Sandy Creek). Again, this site is a bit harder to access so there should be space, plus you can enjoy another swim there, safely.

The final day could be spent sampling some of the swimming at the numerous waterfalls in the northern section of the park, such as Wangi and Florence Falls, Buley Rockhole and Cascades. Even though it is popular, we'd still definitely recommend a night's camping at the quirky Wangi Falls campground, with the waterhole just a short walk from camp for a nice dip at the end of the day. It's close to the best three days of camping you will find in Oz.

The mountain bike trail network surrounding Alice Springs is world-class and accessible right from the town centre.

· MTB ·

Alice Springs

Info: *centralaustralianroughriders.asn.au* **When to go:** April-October **Grade:** Easy-moderate

THE RED CENTRE capital has, in the past decade, transformed itself into one of the country's mountain biking meccas. With a supportive council and territorial government, and a hugely passionate riding community, the mountain bike trail network in Alice Springs has grown to be now considered world class, with a mix of trails running from beginner through intermediate (the majority). The total legal MTB trail network is around 34km and always growing; the Central Australian Rough Riders' website has an excellent trail network map that shows the different trails, their distance and their grading.

The best thing of all is that the main MTB network starts from the historic Alice Springs Telegraph Station, not more than a 10-minute bike ride from the centre of town along the Riverside Walk (a multi-use path), so you are soon surrounded by quintessential Red Centre terrain — red rock, lustrous blue skies and the occasional pale ghost gum. This sealed track follows the (usually dry) Todd River's sandy bed, bordered by river red gums and ghost gums and, as well as providing access to the extended MTB trails, makes for a great family cycle adventure in itself for those with young'uns on board.

The easier trails are short, well constructed, feature a wide, flat base, are well signposted and contain only slight undulations along their length. Move into the longer trails north of the Telegraph Station and riders will encounter slightly steeper sections and looser terrain, with a mix of sand, rocks and gravel as their base. The intermediate trails are well within the skill level of most riders and the efforts are worth it: these trails offer fantastic views from a number of high points, looking back across Alice Springs itself, and further afield to the peaks of the West MacDonnell Ranges, which themselves hide one of the Red Centre's best-kept cycling secrets: the fully sealed, 17km Simpson Gap Bicycle Path — the perfect family riding adventure.

This slightly undulating path starts (or finishes; you can ride in either direction) at Flynn's Grave, 7km west from the town centre, and finishes at beautiful Simpsons Gap, where you will find toilets, a water supply (remember to bring your own water on the ride itself) and barbecue facilities.

The sealed surface makes for very easy going (a rough estimate of time would be two hours one way — more if you're conducting a family trip), and there are four rest areas along the path, with seating and bike racks. This ride passes through terrain ranging from dry river flats to woodlands and rock-covered high outcrops, with rugged hills including Rungutjirba Ridge and Mt Gillen surrounding the path. Ride this path either in the morning or afternoon for the best light, or you might even follow a Parks NT suggestion: ride the path during a full moon.

Pausing for breath after the climb up to the Ormiston Pound Walk's high point, looking over the wide expanse of the pound below.

· HIKING ·

Ormiston Pound Circuit

Info: *www.nt.gov.au/parks* **When to go:** May-September **Grade:** Moderate

ONE OF THE *AG Outdoor* team's all-time favourite Aussie day hikes, the three-four hour Ormiston Pound Circuit is a microcosm of its nearby (and much longer) sibling, the famous Larapinta Trail. Ormiston Pound is 135km west of Alice Springs, in the West MacDonnell Ranges, reached via a sealed road. There is also a campground (including toilets) here, and the information boards and track signage are top notch.

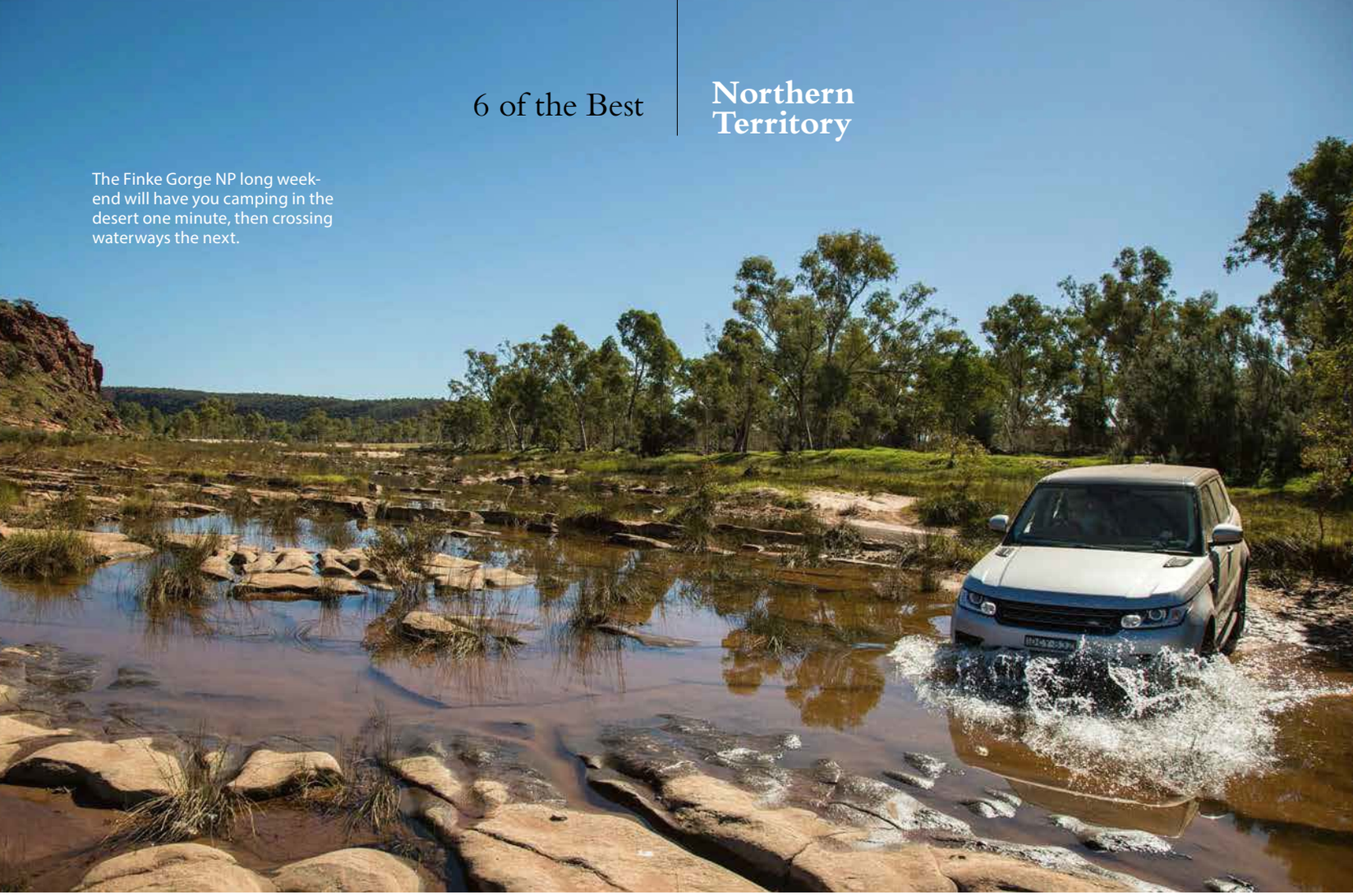
This day walk really has everything, from cool, shaded gorges with towering red rock cliffs looming on either side, through to the incredible pound itself, with its lunar-esque landscape. Combine these with rocky sections of the track that house a surprising amount of native fauna, and some fantastic high viewpoints, and you have a knockout one-day hike that is ideal for most age groups (kids from around nine years of age up could complete this walk easily).

The Circuit can be walked in either direction, but we'd highly recommend walking it anti-clockwise, starting from the carpark. Tackling the walk this way means the landscape and scenery build up to the awesome finish of walking (or wading/swimming) through Ormiston Gorge itself.

The land is the big attraction here; as you make your way around the circuit you move through different geological zones (limestone, quartzite, granite) and the resultant vegetation (or lack of) is unique to each section. The views at the high ridge just before you drop into the pound give you some sense of scale to the area. Walking across the floor of the pound itself is like walking across the surface of Mars, with the odd gnarled gum tree, (usually) dry creek beds, the occasional wedge-tailed eagle, and that sense of vast open space that only the outback can offer.

This walk has everything, from cool, shaded gorges with towering red rock cliffs, to the pound's lunar-esque landscape.

This vastness makes the actual entrance into Ormiston Gorge itself even more of a contrast; it is like stepping foot into a different, but equally ancient, world. Here, shaded by the immense cliffs where ghost gums cling precariously to the walls, the waterholes are like mirrors. If you're lucky, you may even spot a dingo or wallaby (or one of the NT's myriad bird species) drinking from these waterholes as you move deeper into the gorge. If it is warm enough, make sure you pack some swimmers as you can even go for a celebratory dip in the main waterhole back near the campground — a great way to finish the day's walking.



The Finke Gorge NP long weekend will have you camping in the desert one minute, then crossing waterways the next.

· 4WD TOURING ·

Finke Gorge NP

Info: *www.nt.gov.au/parks* **When to go:** April-October **Grade:** Moderate-challenging

FOR A FANTASTIC outback touring adventure that offers the convenience of not being too far from a major population centre, but also that lusted-after remote camping experience, a long weekend driving, camping in and exploring this national park is hard to beat. Finke Gorge NP is named after the eons-old river that flows (sometimes) through it, and its 460km² contains a mix of terrain and vegetation, including the red cabbage palm tree, found in the park's aptly named Palm Valley. For this long weekend escape, this famous destination doubles as the first night's camp, with the excellent campground having toilets, water, fireplaces and an information booth. It is also the start-point for some walks: the Mpulungkinya (5km) and Arankaia (2km) walks, as well as the 45-min track up Kalarranga Lookout.

From here, the remote desert adventure really begins; continuing south along the Finke River 4WD Route (be advised this is a very remote route, so be well prepared and have a satphone or EPIRB) will see you traverse everything from kilometres of dry sandy riverbed to waterholes and water crossings, while passing old homesteads and police station ruins. This park is incredibly scenic; as you drive along the sandy floor of the gorge the ancient waterway has cut into the landscape, the towering river red gums and sheer red-rock cliffs loom high above. Boggy Hole is a popular campsite for your second night and it is another contrast; rich lush green reeds surround this immense waterhole, with contrasting red cliff faces on the opposite banks to the campsite. The best part of this adventure is that you can camp where you like — bush camping is allowed.

There are plenty of opportunities for young adventurers; this writer's daughter spent hours exploring the surrounds of our camp each evening, plus helped gather firewood or chased frogs in small waterholes. The last day of the journey sees rich-red sand dunes traversed as you continue toward the park's southern boundary. A side trip here is Illamurta Springs Conservation Reserve. It has a permanent spring and old police station ruins. From here, you rejoin the Finke River 4WD Route and continue south to Ernest Giles Road for the return to Alice. Not a bad long weekend escape.

As you drive along the sandy floor of the gorge the ancient waterway has cut into the land... sheer red-rock cliffs loom high above

Hiring a canoe (or bringing your own) means you get to really experience the magic of Nitmiluk.

· PADDLING ·

Nitmiluk NP

Info: *www.nt.gov.au/parks* **When to go:** June-September **Grade:** Moderate-challenging (distance dependent)

A FANTASTIC MULTIDAY (between three and five) Top End canoeing experience, paddling through eight of the nine gorges that comprise Katherine Gorge, in Nitmiluk National Park, should be on every paddler's Aussie bucket list. This water-borne journey has many highlights throughout, including the obvious escape from 'civilisation' (in the form of tourist boats and crowds), the steep, red cliffs of the gorge walls, plus the chance to spot some of the area's famous native wildlife, including turtles, water monitors and freshwater crocodiles.

The paddling itself is not too strenuous — it will be the portages between gorges that require the most effort — and if you do get too hot, tired or otherwise, you can simply pull in at one of the many sandy beaches along the gorge(s) and take a dip in the refreshing water. The NT Parks recommends the fifth gorge as the limit if you're just up for a day-paddle, but we'd highly recommend packing your camping gear and pushing further into the more remote parts of the system — all the way to gorge nine if you can, but at least to the sixth gorge (Gorges 6 and 7 have numerous rock bars to portage).

You will need to be self-sufficient if you opt for an overnight or longer journey (and source the appropriate canoe camping permits). The rewards for the extra effort (packing additional gear and having to negotiate the sometimes challenging portages over rock bars and rapids) are, most often, having these more remote sections entirely to yourself. Highlights along the way include Butterfly Gorge in Gorge 2, with its short walk, and the hanging gardens the result of water seeping from the escarpment down the cliff face, resulting in plants growing out of the bare rock walls not much further on. Gorge 3 includes pretty Lily Ponds, a short walk to a swimming hole below a waterfall (still usually running in June) and a sublime beachside campsite — one of many throughout the gorge system. The fourth gorge campsite even has a loo (as does the campsite at Gorge 6), but is also at the end of some tough portaging. Still, if you've allowed yourself around three to four days, there's no rush to get to the end, plus you can always turn back and take even longer on the return journey, stopping off at every beach you see along the way for a cooling swim.

Things to remember? Take plenty of water, food and loads of sun protection; during the day you will be mostly paddling under clear blue skies as it will be the Dry Season. If you're a keen angler, pack a fishing rod (lures only in the gorges; bag limit is five fish) but please practice catch-and-release unless you plan to cook your catch that night at camp.

DANGER ZONE

Any climbing expedition can be fraught with danger, but this is amplified exponentially when travelling into a warzone. Nevertheless, the drive to climb and experience somewhere new usually outweighs the potential for risk.

Words and Photos Marcus Koehne

Approaching the summit of Mount Halgurd, at 3607m, the highest peak wholly in Iraq. Just beyond is the Iranian border.

IRAQI KURDISTAN borders what is surely the most significant and tragic conflict zone of the 21st century. It is not your usual mountain trekking location and certainly not your typical tourist destination. Situated in northern Iraq, it is the country's sole autonomous region. Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi forces, in conjunction with Coalition airstrikes, have reclaimed territory from Islamic State (IS) in recent months. Yet the extremists are still in control of large expanses of Iraq, and there is considerable tension between the Kurdish local government and the central Iraqi bureaucracy. Nevertheless, Iraqi Kurdistan contains some of the Middle East's most appealing landscapes, and Kurdish hospitality is truly sincere.

Our objective was the 3607m Mount Halgurd, the highest mountain wholly in Iraq. Situated in the rugged Zagros Mountains, it lies only 2km from the Iranian border. A trip like this is typically planned many months ahead of time; its multi-faceted complexities far from our comfort zones of 'Western Civilisation' and 'Great Walk' hiking. This isn't the Routeburn or Overland Track. With all this in mind, a group of strangers with a keen sense of adventure enlisted the support of a commercial expedition company.

However, as the commencement date approached, concerns were raised over Turkish airstrikes being directed against the Kurdistan People's Party, or PKK, which is waging an armed struggle against the Turkish state for the self-determination of the Kurds. These strikes were reported to have recently encroached to within just 15km of Mount Halgurd. Further, new information on the targeting capabilities of the Turks had been provided. They seemed to be less capable than previously thought, with few PKK members actually being hit. As a result, the possible risks of 'collateral damage' had greatly increased. There was heightened concern about the potential for Turkish jets to either mistake the party on the mountain for a military target, or for an accidental strike in the proximity of the team. These new fears led the commercial expedition to be cancelled abruptly — only days before our departure.

INTO A WARZONE

Independently, we made inquiries and we determined that, as a non-commercial entity, the risk was acceptable. An undaunted five members of the original team of 12 continued towards the looming goal of Halgurd. Hurriedly, we established contacts with local drivers and located a mountain guide. We were greatly facilitated by the helpful members of the Kurdistan Mountaineering Federation. Everyone assured us that we would be safe from airstrikes and extremist infiltrators. We weren't fully convinced, but we put these fears to the back of our minds. We obtained topographical maps from international mountaineering sources. These contained crucial data, indicating the location of minefields in the Iran-Iraq border region; a longstanding consequence of the armed conflict between Iran and Ba'athist Iraq from 1980-88.

Our abridged team re-energised over frantic emails; two Aussies, two Americans and a Brit, with a diverse mix of travel and outdoor backgrounds. Myself in the previous months had trekked in Northern Afghanistan, Far East Russia and Ethiopia; and had toured Mogadishu, Somalia. So this was a natural extension of my explorations and expeditions, intertwined with complicated cultural, political and security environments. Yet I was not complacent, as by the nature of the location and the surrounding political turmoil, this was no doubt going to be a problematic undertaking.

Our arrival at the airport in Erbil was daunting. At the time the front line against IS had been pushed back but still was only 50km away. Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan, seemed peaceful, welcoming and was historically fascinating. There was no indication of the brutal war occurring over the horizon, except for the occasional thunderclap of explosions and the accompanying mushroom clouds. With our team hastily meeting, we greeted our drivers, who were to become crucial to our success. Haval was a friendly and resourceful (unpaid) government agricultural administrator. Wahed was a respected elder, conservative in his religion and manners. He had never collaborated with Westerners, and appeared to be distant and somewhat uneasy, especially when accompanying the women in our group.

We headed off on a captivating two-day tour, which took us even closer to the frontline.

Having made our rushed arrangements for climbing Halgurd, we headed off on a hectic but captivating two-day tour, which took us even closer to the frontline. Beginning in Lalish we met the Yazidi; ethnically Kurdish, yet belonging to an independent religious community with their

Kurdish Peshmerga artwork on the wall of one of Saddam Hussein's former extravagant palaces.

own unique culture. Since August 2014 they have suffered from genocide inflicted by IS. Yet during our April 2016 visit they were welcoming and generous as we participated in their New Year Feast. From here we visited the Saint Hormizd Monastery, carved into the mountainside in 640 AD. Here the peaceful atmosphere was shattered by the sound of a jet and the detonation of twin 2000-pound bombs, as we observed a Coalition airstrike against Islamic State positions in the direction of Mosul. In contrast to the incredible hospitality we had received, this was a stark reminder of the geopolitical realities of our mountain objective.

Passing one of Saddam Hussein's vast, crumbling palace complexes we continued towards the Zagros Mountains. En route we made a side trip to Amedi, a beautiful citadel built on a mountain plateau over a millennium ago. Here we encountered Syrian refugees, who had fled the horrors of IS, and were now occupying a once lavish guesthouse of Saddam's. By the evening we were nearing Choman, the closest town to Mount Halgurd. Here we encountered a final hurdle as the checkpoint guards questioned our intentions. With a recent visa stamp from Afghanistan in my passport there seemed to be some consternation. However, our dependable drivers, Haval and Wahed, ensured we passed scrutiny. After sharing some sweets with the soldiers and confirming there was no Afghan contraband concealed in my luggage we reached our staging base for climbing Halgurd, an abandoned house on the banks of the Choman River. That night we commissioned a local guide. His mountaineering competence was minimal, as was his English, but we had to overlook this as we needed a local guide through the minefields. We planned our mountain ascent to last two days — one night at high camp, an early summit over frozen snow, and then the long descent back to the road head.

Caution is required; mines and unexploded ordnance are scattered throughout Kurdistan.

CLIMBING HIGH

On the morning of our summit trek we were met by a driver and his Toyota 4WD. We readied our mountain gear, but were delayed when we realised the bald tyres of this particular vehicle would not be sufficient to ascend the winding approach road. While another vehicle was arranged we finalised the formalities of seeking permission for our journey so close to the Iranian border. We met with the local security commander, and while tense at first, our meeting settled into copious tea drinking and photo taking. He offered us a military escort, which we declined, and provided his personal mobile number, in the event of an incident. After the pleasantries, and some gun-toting photos, we piled into the slightly better treaded replacement vehicle, and began the final road push. There was the driver, the guide, the five team members, and Haval and Wahed. They had insisted on coming along to make sure we got the full value out of our local support. Of course it was nothing to do with that — they had never stood on the slopes of such a prominent, snowy peak. So with the nine of us in our five-seat vehicle we at last began to close in on our goal. Passing several minefield warning signs increased our trepidation but our team was excited that despite the cancellation of the first expedition we might be summiting our objective after all — a feat rarely achieved by foreigners.

After a 40-minute drive we hit the snowline, said farewell for now to Haval and Wahed, shouldered our packs and commenced our ascent. The route was scattered with spent ammunition cartridges, ration tins, the odd army boot, and remains of exploded ordnance. Minefield markers became a constant accompaniment. The approach to our high camp was challenging due to the unseasonably deep snow. Then on reaching the intended vicinity of our camp we were battered by intense winds. With difficulty and an irrational fear of hitting landmines we cut our tent platforms into the frozen snow and erected flimsy tents. These were provided by our local guide and were the equivalent of department store beach tents that offered negligible protection against the elements. Our expensive mountaineering tents remained

behind as we had been assured we did not need them. Anyway, by then our group was familiar and we adopted cosy sleeping positions. Fortunately the wind eased overnight and we slept well in our distorted tents.

The next day we awoke at sunrise and assessed the mountain conditions, geared up and began the final ascent. While predominantly firm snow, there were some tricker rock sections to overcome. Two hours of moderate yet scenic climbing saw us reach the lower summit. Here the winds were powerful yet the view was overwhelming. We could observe rugged peaks in all directions and sighted the mountain range that continued deep into Iranian territory. We pushed on, gaining the final heights to stand on the true summit. It was indeed a lofty peak and fulfilment showed on our faces. After celebratory handshakes and the obligatory photos we were ready to descend. Facing down the long slope this was noticeably trickier than coming up. With a few stumbles, and application of our self-arrest skills, we managed to reach easier ground and arrived back at camp for a short but satisfying rest. Breaking camp we made a long push to rendezvous with our transport. Our success despite all of the many hurdles made the trudge through the deep, soft snow entirely bearable.

The route was scattered with spent cartridges, ration tins, the odd army boot, and remains of exploded ordnance.

HORRIBLE HISTORY

Having summited Halgurd over two days, we spent the rest of the trip touring and immersing ourselves in Kurdish culture and history. We headed east and arrived in As Sulaymaniyah, the most liberal and Western-styled city of Kurdistan. While appreciating the extravagance of a developed city it was here that we were confronted with the horrific modern history of Iraq. We visited Amna Suraka, or the Red Prison, which had functioned as the headquarters of the northern division of the Mukhabarat, Iraq's former secret intelligence agency. It was now one of the world's most disturbing museums memorialising the horrors inflicted under the Ba'athist regime. Between 1986 and 1989, the Iraqi state conducted the genocidal al-Anfal Campaign against the Iraqi Kurds. Led by Ali Hassan al-Majid under the direction of Saddam Hussein, al-Anfal utilised bombing, death squads, forced relocation, scorched earth tactics, torture and imprisonment, and chemical warfare in an attempt to destroy the Kurdish population.

The chemical gas attacks, part of al-Anfal, earned al-Majid the nickname of 'Chemical Ali'. A Human Rights Watch report documented the "systematic and deliberate murder of at least 50,000 and possibly as many as 100,000 Kurds" as a result of al-Anfal. During the first Gulf War of 1991, the Kurdish Peshmerga conducted an uprising in northern Iraq with the resolve of liberating the country from Hussein's control. Though ultimately unsuccessful, the rebellion saw the takeover of Amna Suraka by the Kurds.

Departing As Sulaymaniyah, we hastily drove through Kirkuk, only recently on the frontline, and an ongoing location of suicide bombings, arriving back at Erbil where we had begun several adventurous days ago. We were most grateful for the calm and reassuring nature of our newfound friends Haval and Wahed. We celebrated in their homes with amazing Kurdish hospitality in a binge of eating that continued for most of the day. Though being a former soldier of Saddam Hussein's army, Wahed had become our best ally through military checkpoints and car breakdowns. He had forgone the stereotypes of Westerners and their excesses, with a relaxed, joyful nature replacing his initial apprehension. By sharing his and his family's stories he had shown a human side to a war-hardened generation of Kurds.

We finished with some German beer behind the stalwart walls of the well-concealed Deutscher Hof Erbil, a popular drinking hole for expats, the location of which now seems somewhat hazy. The following day we concluded our Kurdish journey exploring Erbil. The Citadel is said to be the oldest continually inhabited place in the world. The nearby Grand Bazaar was colourful and fascinating, welcoming and cheerful. I sensed the people here were not in denial of the horrors inflicted by past and present, but their human spirit superseded the extremism of religions and regimes.

On my flight to Jordan, I reflected on an incredible experience. I was in awe of the friendly Kurds who welcomed, fed and guided us. Without them and the determination of our team we could not have achieved a goal from the upper echelons of global adventure. For many adventurers we go to the mountains to escape the modern world. Yet on this trip, natural exploration and world politics were intertwined. This is the reality of today's explorer.

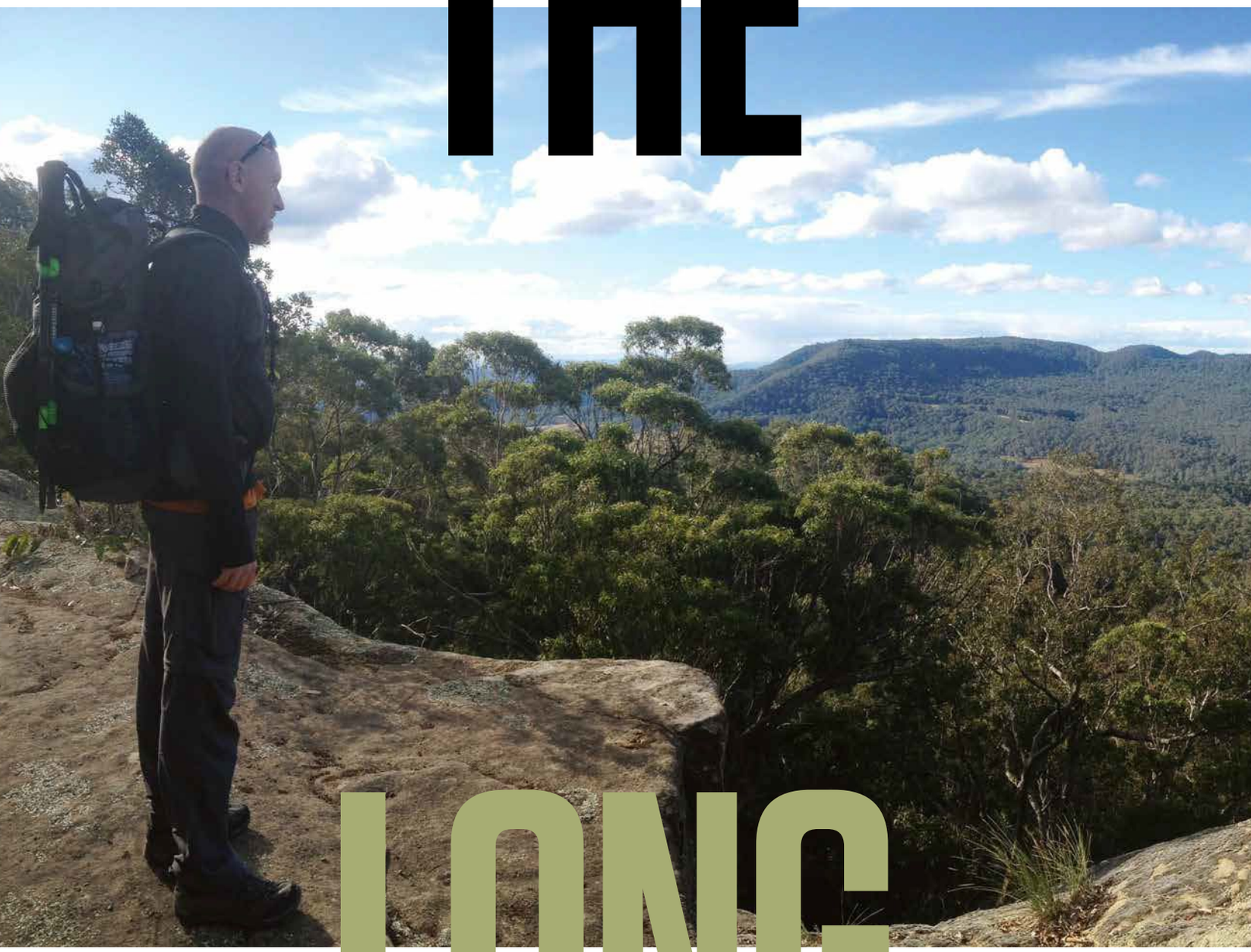
Celebrating the Yazidi New Year in Lalish.

THE ESSENTIALS

Kurdistan in Northern Iraq is a challenging but rewarding destination full of history and welcoming Kurdish locals. For a historical and cultural tour check out Karwan Wahed Kurdistan Tours, *www.kurdistantours.net*.

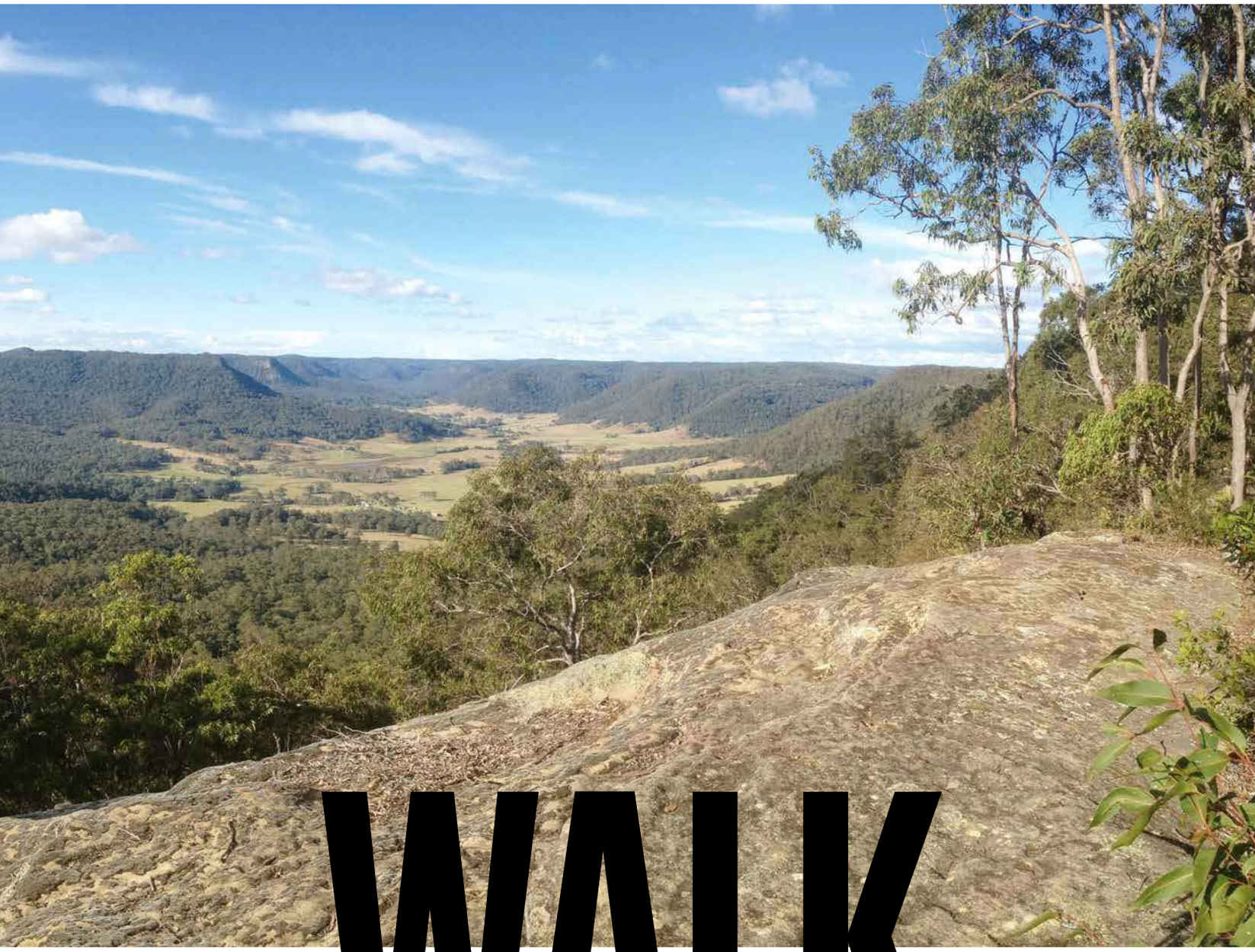
Or for something more intrepid Secret Compass can take you on a mountaineering expedition to Mount Halgurd, the highest peak wholly in Iraq, near the Iranian Border. Secret Compass is an exceptional leader in taking you on adventures off the beaten path. See *www.secretcompass.com*.

THE LONG



What started as a walk on a whim morphed into a three and a half year adventure along the GNW.

The incredible view
from Flat Rock Lookout.



WALK

Words and Photos
Dan Slater

Clockwise from left Day one, blissfully unaware of just how long this walk is going to take; picturesque boardwalk near Berowra; just one of the many, many trail markers we passed.

FIRST, A WORD OF WARNING: before undertaking any 250km walk it is essential to make a thorough plan. The route, equipment, meals, transport and weather conditions must be scrutinised and checked down to the last detail. On no account should you cobble together a plan in the pub the night before over a schooner of ale and a smartphone. Yet somehow that is what happened.

Paul and I were only looking for a day walk but because the Blue Mountains, our regular haunt, was a swirling cauldron of fire, so we were forced to look further afield. Or nearer, as it turned out. I'd known about the Great North Walk (GNW) for years but had dismissed it on account of its length — if I had the time to walk 250km I'd probably go somewhere more exotic, like Africa or Nepal. I'd never contemplated doing a walk in sections either; it just wasn't my thing. Nevertheless, a co-worker had recently mentioned the walk and hence it popped into my head the night we were brainstorming for a location.

The GNW markets itself as Australia's most accessible walking track, and that may be true given the percentage of our population that lives nearby. Certainly a good deal of it is near to public transport, which we intended using as much as possible. The idea for a 'Sydney to Hunter' track was originally researched by local bushwalkers Gary McDougall and Leigh Shearer-Heriot in the early 1980s, then, in 1986, their idea was picked up as a bicentennial project and rushed to completion for 1988. The track is now administered by the Department of Primary Industries (Lands).

At first we decided to hike the section through Lane Cove National Park, which was close enough to access by train but avoided the 5km of paved roads that threaded through the riverside suburbs. However, we quickly realised that should we decide one day to do more sections of the GNW we would regret not beginning at its official start point. Thus we met up at 9am on a clear spring day, slightly baffled and sore of head, at the obelisk in Macquarie Place.

OCT 2013: SYDNEY TO THORNLEIGH, 35.0KM

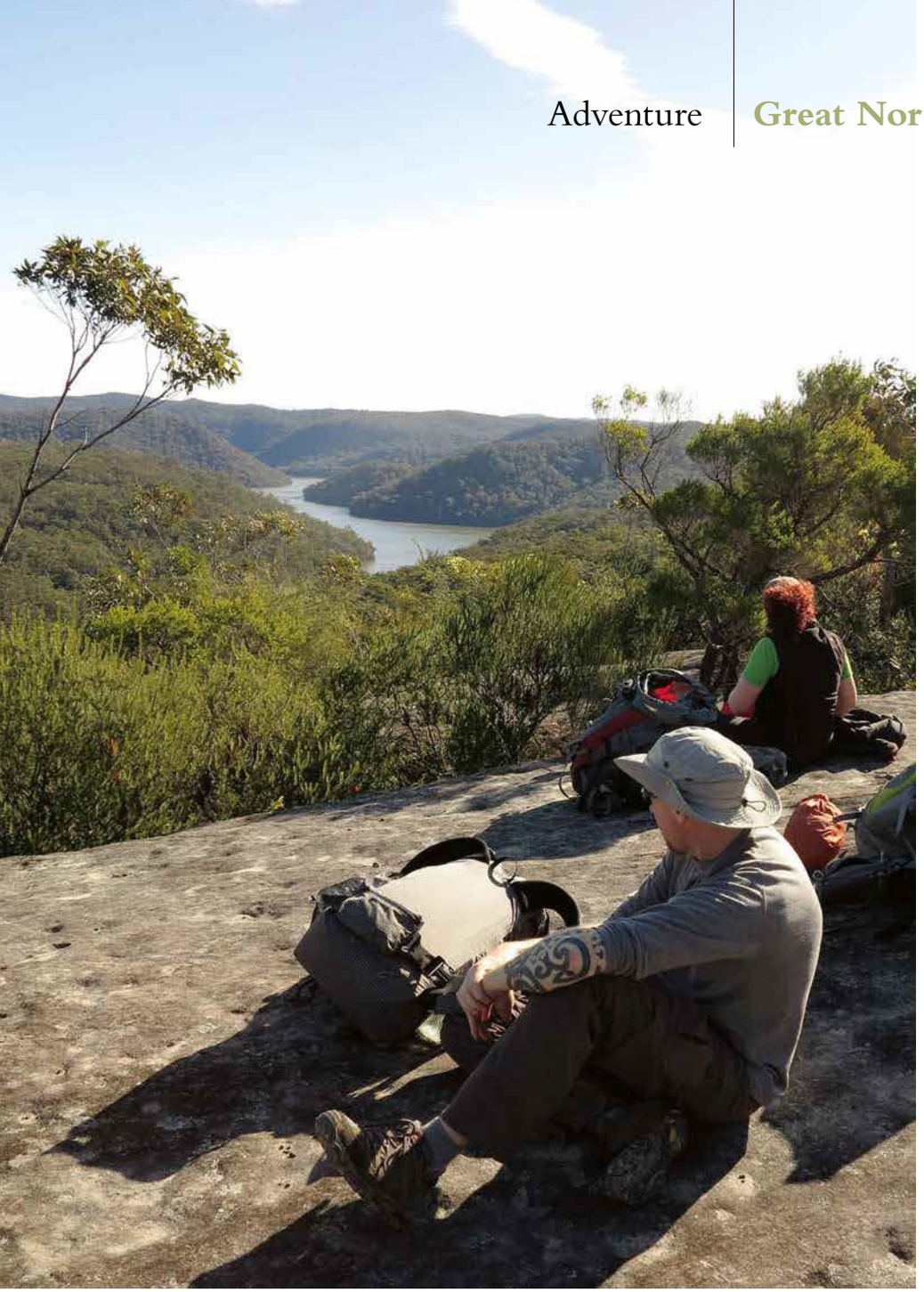
A brisk stroll from the obelisk, the original Mile Stone for all roads leading out of Sydney, brought us to our first river crossing — the ferry from Circular Quay to Woolwich Wharf. Soon afterwards we were among the mangroves of Buffalo Creek, out of sight of concrete and glass, and it took little imagination to picture ourselves deep in some coastal wilderness, weeks from civilisation. This coastal wetland sanctuary is just the first of several diverse habitats through which the GNW passes, including sandstone plateaus, national forest, coastline and quiet river valleys. To a city dweller the ibis looked incongruous among the mangroves; I was used to seeing them in their natural habitat, perched on inner city dumpsters with beaks clearly evolved for ripping open bin bags and scavenging within.

Most of the day was spent in Lane Cove NP. This 372ha protected area is only 10km from Sydney CBD and follows the Lane Cove River virtually to its source, a beautifully serene stroll disturbed only by the distant hum of articulated trucks. The delights of the track began to wear off as we crested late afternoon, the jumble of loose rocks underfoot not my preferred walking surface at this stage of the day. "Hopefully around the corner it turns into a deep pile Axminster carpet?" I fantasised aloud. "Possibly a lightly sprung conveyor belt," agreed Paul. It seems that 35km might have been just a tad too far for a spur-of-the-moment stroll.

We reached Thornleigh Oval at 5:30pm, where it struck us that we'd walked from the centre of the country's largest city to a quaint country village in eight hours, or a regular day of work. It had been hard but somewhere along the line my perspective had changed. Maybe undertaking a long hike in sections wouldn't be so bad? It might be fun to have a goal to aim for, and whenever we felt like a bush walk we wouldn't have to think about where to go; it'd be right there in front of us. We'd unintentionally started something, and both of us knew we wouldn't be able to stop until we'd reached Newcastle.

MAR 2014: THORNLEIGH TO COWAN, 34.1KM

Somehow, a whole summer had passed since



Clockwise from left Relaxing above Brisbane Water National Park; we both used a number of different packs throughout the walk, including this one from Aarn.

our first tentative steps along the Great North Walk. It's not that Paul and I weren't keen to get back out there but summer is busy with other activities and we had agreed from the start that the GNW was something we would fall back on when all other options had been exhausted. So, after a summer that included climbing in Mt Cook National Park, hiking the Tongariro Circuit and canyoning in the Blue Mountains, we finally found ourselves back at Thornleigh train station on a warm autumn morning, packed for an overnighter.

Despite the forecast rain the sky was cloudless but very humid, and it felt as if a storm could break at any time. We followed Berowra Creek from its headwaters all the way to the suburb of Berowra Waters, crossing Calna Creek on the way. At that time Calna Creek was spanned by a 1980s army-built log bridge, but being good little hikers we had done our research and discovered that the bridge had collapsed the previous year. Signs either end warned that only two persons at a time should use the bridge and internet rumour suggested these had been ignored. The two pieces of the structure still lay across the water but with an impossibly wide gap between them, and we would have been facing an early evening swim except for one bushwalking forum that advised the creek was wadeable 500m upstream. Fortunately we got away with only wet knees before pitching camp. [NB. A new bridge was opened in August 2015 and the creek is now crossable with dry feet.]

Soon afterwards we were among the mangroves of Buffalo Creek, out of sight of concrete and glass.

The next day's section from Berowra to Cowan was labelled 'Moderate, with hard bits' but I contend that the 'hard bits' made up 90 per cent of the route. The track took us steeply up to the tops of Berowra Reserve, through eucalypts, black boys, cut steps, iron rungs set in the boulders, and the familiar sandstone overhangs. After two and a half hours of up and down we huffed into Cowan, very ready for a lunch break, which we took under the eaves of the local shop. And thank goodness we did; we hadn't even finished our cheese and crackers when the sky collapsed in a sheet of solid water. Brooklyn, our goal for the day, was still 12km away but to walk in this would be like trying to hike through the gorge beneath Victoria Falls — we would likely drown. There was nothing for it but to pull the plug.

MAY 2015: COWAN TO WOY WOY, 28.4KM

Somehow we'd kept ourselves busy for over a year before feeling the pull of the GNW again, during which time I'd trained for and run (and won) an ultra marathon, and together we'd

Clockwise from left Sunset on the rocks near Little Wobby; Oasis at Kariong Brook Falls.

done a month-long cycle tour of New Zealand's South Island (see *AGO* Jan-Feb 2016). We were fit and ready to recommence our mission.

This section marked our only real divergence from the official GNW. After a pleasant enough walk to Brooklyn, the Hawkesbury River (slightly too deep to wade) could only be crossed to Patonga Wharf by water taxi. This was going to work out rather expensive between the two of us so we hatched an alternative plan: the scheduled ferry service to the isolated community of Little Wobby. This charming row of houses sits between the lapping waves of the Hawkesbury and the looming cliffs of the peninsula with not so much as a footpath to spare. Once we'd disembarked the final boat of the day we picked our way through front yards and over rickety wooden platforms to the village's southernmost house, and from there to an empty beach where we made camp in the warm glow of sunset.

The next day we tackled the Highway Ridge track up through Brisbane Water National Park. Not being part of the formal GNW the route wasn't signposted and the initial ascent was an exercise in bush bashing, followed by an indistinct trail marked only by the occasional bit of pink tape tied to a log. Once on the ridge we somehow got completely turned around and heading firmly south, and only numerous consultations with map, compass and GPS persuaded us of our error. Many scrambles, scratches and fallen branches later we finally rejoined the GNW just south of Mt Wondabyne, before heading east to Woy Woy and a train home. Despite being the most difficult section so far, and not recommended for the leisurely GNW section hiker, the day had been thoroughly enjoyable.

Rounding a corner beneath a sandstone overhang north of Mt Wondabyne we came across a delightful waterfall and pool: Kariong Brook Falls

JUL 2015: WOY WOY TO SOMERSBY, 33.6KM

A mere two months later we were back, and with a special guest no less. Gerda's introduction to the GNW, albeit under perfect blue winter skies, was anything but gentle as we chose the most direct route from Woy Woy station back to the track. From an old junkyard we bush bashed up a creek beside the train line; deadfall, mossy boulders, tangled bushes — this was tick heaven.

I almost felt like apologising on behalf of the GNW but we eventually found a fire trail and Gerda was rewarded soon enough with possibly the loveliest spot on the entire walk. Rounding a corner beneath a sandstone overhang north of Mt Wondabyne we came across a delightful little waterfall and pool: Kariong Brook Falls. The dappled glade was a perfect lunch spot and source of cool water and fully revived us for the afternoon stint — enjoyable singletrack alongside Piles Creek and, after crossing the Pacific Highway, a long section following Mooney Mooney Creek.

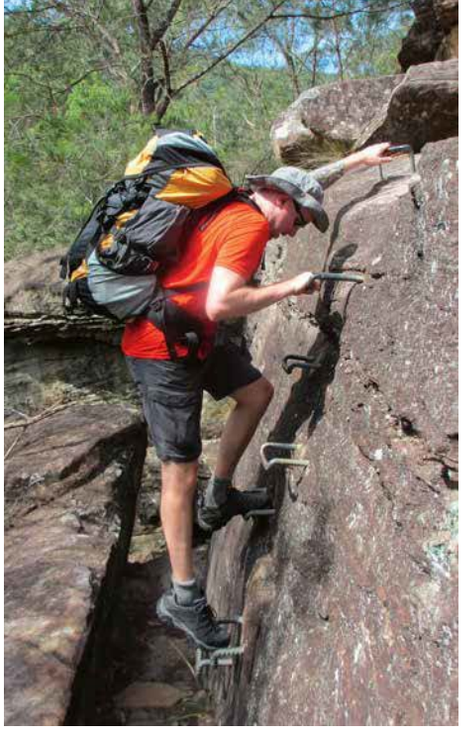
After a night at one of several nice camp spots along the creek, the next day saw us on the approach to Somersby, a small rural hamlet based around a primary school and a single store. The map's scale seemed to have grown overnight as we fairly bounded along, eating up the distance. Unfortunately the proximity of 'civilisation' meant more firetrail than usual and even a few kilometres of unwelcome tarmac. With the absence of a rail line we fell back on hitching a ride on the school bus into Gosford and the train station there.

OCT 2015: SOMERSBY TO BASIN CAMPSITE, 42.0KM

The disappearance of public transport altogether from this point on forced us to engage in a combination of bribery and cajoling to ensure a pick-up by Gerda at our finish point,

FIND
MORE
FREE
MAGAZINES

FREEMAGS.CC



Clockwise from left Descending from the tops to Galston Gorge; the sea signals the beginning of the end of our epic mission; a red-bellied black snake slithers quietly away.

somewhere in the middle of Olney State Forest, three days later. A greasy breakfast at Somersby Store set us up for the weekend, one that began grey and drizzly but soon transformed into a sweltering heat wave.

Moving north of Somersby marked a definite change in the mood of the GNW. Gone were the meandering creek valleys, sparkling bays and sandstone plateaux. Instead we encountered more and more forest fire trails along low mountain ridges. Scribbly gums and stringybark trees shaded us from the burning sun and the wildlife, mostly nocturnal, became more abundant, as did the dirtbikers. A red-bellied black snake sunning itself in the path was infinitely preferable to a succession of noisy petrol-heads.

At some point on the first day I calculated that we had reached roughly the halfway point. Halfway, and it'd only taken us two years! Where does the time go? Disappointingly there was no congratulatory signpost to be seen but we celebrated anyway with a photo and some brief reminiscence about our first steps in Lane Cove NP. Ah, those were the days!

The next day was characterised by flies as we each walked along in our own personal buzzing cloud, but our spirits were lifted by the contour path around a beautiful natural amphitheatre leading to the village of Yarramalong. Two ice creams later saw us begin 11km of road, the longest stretch on the whole GNW, and while there were worse places than the peaceful Yarramalong Valley to be pounding tarmac, it was still nice to get back in amongst the trees for our second night.

We arrived at our Basin Campsite rendezvous several hours early, having underestimated our speed to make sure Gerda was not kept waiting. Our thoughtfulness was rewarded with hot Chinese food and cold beer. Best pick-up ever!

MAY 2016: BASIN CAMPSITE TO WATAGAN HQ, 47.0KM

It was only after another hectic summer that we found time to drive to Basin Campsite one Friday evening. I was feeling strong from recent multiday hikes around Patagonia's Torres del Paine and on Tasmania's Overland Track, useful since we were about to tackle the highest section of the GNW — the Watagan Mountains.

The forest roads continued much the same as before but now water started to become a serious issue. Descending Mt Warrawalong, the high point of the entire walk, we expected to be able to fill our bottles in Watagan Creek but found it polluted by farm runoff. After another steep and thirsty ascent we managed to coax some dodgy-looking yellow liquid from the rainwater tank at Flat Rock Lookout, but it was barely enough to last the night. We ran out completely at breakfast but made it to the Congewai Valley alive, only to discover the water there also undrinkable. It would have been folly to begin the steep ascent of the Watagans without water so we were forced to ask for help at a farmhouse, where fortunately they revealed the presence of a dedicated GNW water tank just up the track. We were saved!

The remaining fire trails along the spine of the Myall Range were long and somewhat tedious and we were relieved to arrive at Watagan HQ to meet our wonderful collaborator, who drove us back to Basin Campsite to collect the other car.

OCT 2016: WATAGAN HQ TO TERALBA, 27.0KM

Gerda's final favour was to return us to Watagan HQ for the penultimate leg, and with

Clockwise from left An impromptu halfway mark celebration; a beautiful camping glade near the Congewai Valley; so close we can almost smell the beer.

a long day walk ahead the three of us drove up the night before to camp. Sadly our evening's relaxation was spoiled by a group of rednecks blasting rock music from their ute and competing to throw their empty beer bottles the deepest into the forest. When they roared off at 3am I couldn't help hoping they'd wrap themselves and their throbbing woofers around a tree.

The day began with several glorious panoramas including a view of our final destination, still almost 50km away, from Heaton's Lookout. The other highlight of the morning was a burnt-out van at the edge of the escarpment that looked suspiciously like a torched getaway vehicle. After that excitement the afternoon was less interesting: virtually the entire Sugarloaf range was monotonous fire trail and began to feel like a chore, with the last 6km to Teralba station all on tarmac. At least we could finally catch a train home again.

MAR 2017: TERALBA TO NEWCASTLE, 27.0KM

It was a weekend in late summer, almost three and a half years after starting, that we decided to finally finish the GNW. At an average speed of around 200m per day we were understandably keen to see off this project come hell or high water, and the latter is exactly what we would be getting with the forecast for classic Sydney thunderstorms.

By this time it took two and a half hours to get to the start, water streaming down the train windows as we sped past towns through which we walked so long ago I could hardly picture them. The rain paused as we strolled along the esplanade to Warner's Bay but as we turned inland it settled in for the day — constant drizzle with occasional heavy showers. A mixture of pavement and sparse bushland brought us to the coast, only 8km from Newcastle. The beach was a heart-warming sight but our relief was short-lived as the rain began in earnest and we rushed to erect shelter.

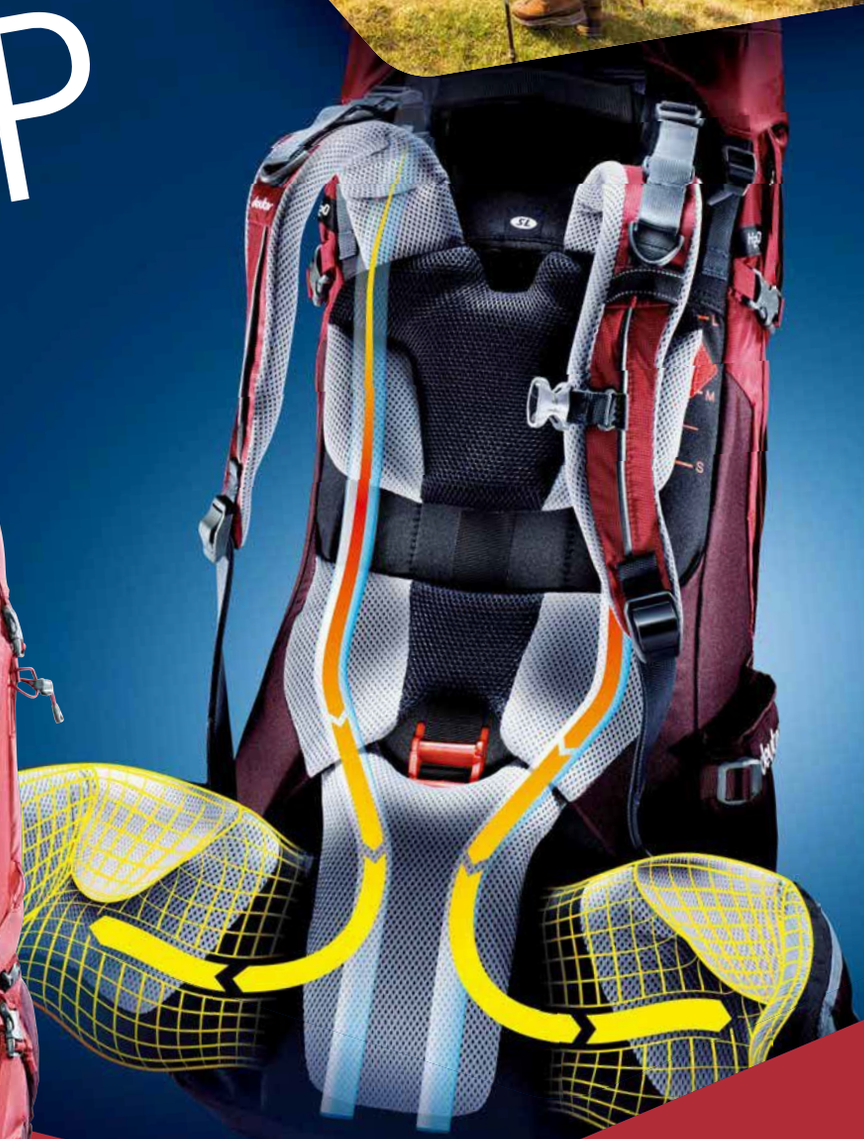
We were up and at it early on the final day and took only one and a half hours to walk into Newcastle. The last victorious strides turned into a farce as we scurried hither and thither trying to find the official end point. The signage sort of petered out and the map was inconclusive so we were reduced to Googling the GNW to see where it finished — Queen's Wharf Tower, apparently. I'm not sure what I was hoping for — back-slapping, cake, dancing girls maybe, but there was no sign, no plaque, nothing. It was a bit of an anticlimax. Worse, the pubs weren't even open. How on earth were we supposed to plan our next adventure?

Photo: Lars Schneider

LIGHTEN UP

THE NEW AIRCONTACT PRO

HIGH-PERFORMANCE LOAD TRANSFER



*Womens SL model shown

deuter

www.deuter.com

Distributed by Velo-Vita Pty Ltd, service@velovita.com.au, Ph 02 9700-7977

THE GREEN SIDE OF SWITZERLAND

As the sun starts to distance itself from the southern states of Australia and dark evenings edge ever closer, the Swiss Alps are throwing back their winter doona and emerging with a great green grin, welcoming active travellers to a world of verdant adventures.

Words Pat Kinsella
Photos Switzerland Tourism

On the Eiger Ultra Trail between Grindelwald and Lauterbrunnen.
Pic: Switzerland Tourism/Stefan Schlumpf

Autumn evening mood on the Susten Pass. *Pic: Switzerland Tourism/Alessandra Meniconzi*

It seems such a waste, in so many ways, that many outdoor-orientated explorers only venture into the embrace of Switzerland's mountains when they're all tucked up under a blanket of snow.

The country has some of the planet's premier skiing, no doubt about it, but some of the best fun comes when the sun melts the white stuff and the frozen crystals turn to cold cascades, crashing down canyons and beautifying already stunning cycling and trekking trails with waterfalls such as Staubbachfall and the rumbling, tumbling Trümmelbach.

Each spring Switzerland reveals its not-so-secret bank account of green-season adventures — a tidy fortune spread across some 60,000km of backcountry trails. There are myriad ways to enjoy this newly hatched wonderland — in the saddle or with a paddle, helmeted and hanging from a rope in the fold of a canyon or flying high upon the alpine thermals beneath a bluebird sky — but all you really need is a pair of boots, maybe a map, and a willingness to go wandering about.

Following are some seeds of inspiration to be sown into your diary, for intended flowering in the lazy, hazy days of the early summer up in the Northern Hemisphere: plant them in the reach of full sun and sprinkle with a little gla-

The small church on the shores of Lake Melch at Melchsee-Frutt, a holiday resort above the Melch Valley, Obwalden. *Pic: Switzerland Tourism/Lucia Degonda*

BEST FOOT FORWARD

SWITZERLAND IS Europe's most mountainous country, but you don't have to climb to the very pointy part of those peaks to enjoy them — hiking through the valleys and around the flanks of the voluptuous hills is just as enjoyable an experience, coming complete with all the Toblerone-style vistas and often possible in shorts and T-shirt, but minus much of the huffing, puffing and panting.

DAYDREAM ROUTES

The 17.6km Four-Lake Hike is a five-hour perambulation in the central Jochpass region, which is one of Switzerland's best single-day adventures. The four-puddle route leads interlopers along a trail that wends around the wonderfully hued H2O of the magical Melch, blue-eyed Engstlen, turquoise Tannen and finally the translucent Trüebsee, where the shimmering face of an aquatic alpine mirror turns surrounding mountains — including towering Mt Titlis — upside down.

Start from the station of Melchsee-Frutt, pass the little chapel, mooch by Lake Melch and Tannen Lake, and then trek towards Tannalp. After you've dropped down to appreciate the azure allure of Engstlen Lake — a picturesque place for a picnic — the ascent to Jochpass beckons, taking you up and over the toes of the Titlis Massive. Your sweat and sweating are amply rewarded when you reach the sensational saddle, which straddles the divide between the Bernese Oberland and Central Switzerland, with eye-popping views over Trüebsee, the finishing point shimmering and winking at you to come hither.

You don't have to climb to the very pointy part of those peaks to enjoy them – hiking the valleys and flanks of the voluptuous hills is just as enjoyable...

EXPLORE MORE

For more one-day dalliances with Europe's most coquettish countryside, check out the low-traffic trail from Pfingstegg to the hut at Bäregg, above the lower Grindelwald glacier, or luxuriate in the landscape on display during the meander from Mürren to the Lauterbrunnen valley floor. Alternatively, test your knees and lungs during the one-way hilly hike from sensational Schynige Platte to the summit station of the Grindelwald-First cableway (take the easy way down), or wander the national Swiss William Tell Path from Rütli to Bauen. Still got energy to burn? Go and gallop the Glacier Trail between Bettmerhorn and Fiescheralp, via Grosses Gufer and Märjelen lakes, or dare to leg wrestle the ogre on the iconic Eiger Trail from Grindelwald to Alpiglen station, contemplating the dark mountain's infamous Mordwand (Murder Wall) as its notorious North Face frowns down from above.

High altitude hiking is one of the most popular outdoor activities in Switzerland and it is easy to see why. *Pic: Switzerland Tourism/Lorenz Andreas Fischer*

MULTIDAY MEANDERS

For a longer escapade, consider the Hinteregasse, an eight-day mission through the Bernese Oberland. This alpine epic is for those who love to properly immerse themselves in mountain scenery, overnighting in huts operated by the Swiss Alpine Club, high-elevation eyries offering stunning views across the valleys and peaks.

The route's moniker won't appeal to those with a babble-fish implant, translating from German to English as 'rear alley', but don't worry, we're not giving you a bum steer and this is far from an arse-end amble. The name, which can also be interpreted as 'backstreet', refers to the fact that this trail is an umbilicus between Switzerland's pre-alpine environment and the country's cracking high-alpine peaks, which also gives you a clue to the elevation gain involved. But you're here to get high, right? Well, there's no better way to score that alpine buzz than by sucking hard on some increasingly oxygen-light alpine air.

You can splice together some awesome overnight foot-powered adventures by staying at inns, pensions and huts all through the Oberland

An iteration of the route is also known to the Swiss as the Bärentrek (Bear Trek), although sadly (or gladly, depending on how you look at it) the real bears have long disappeared from this lofty part of Europe.

Starting from Meiringen, the route rambles up to Kleine Scheidegg (2061m), a dramatic and drop-dead gorgeous pass between the imposing Eiger and lovely Lauberhorn peaks. From there you stroll to Sefinenfurgge (2612m), crossing the col between the Hundshore and Bütlasse Hohtürli. Then head through Hahnenmoospass (1950m), which splits the peaks of Regenboldshorn and Albristhorn, to Trütlisberg Pass (2072m) and to finally aim for Chrine.

EXPLORE MORE

Unfortunately, wild camping doesn't fly in highly regulated Switzerland — and there's scarcely any level land to pitch your tent and lay your head anyway. However, you can splice together some awesome overnight foot-powered adventures by staying at inns, pensions and huts all through the Oberland and many other areas, such as the Engadin in the south east, where an Alpine valley traces the River Inn right across the country, from just west of glitzy St Moritz to Austria.

Multiday hikers can also consider taking on the sensational Haute Route, an absolute alpine classic that connects Mont Blanc in Chamonix, France, with the marvellous Matterhorn above Zermatt, in Switzerland. The route is non-technical and stays comfortably below 3000m, but it is a 12-day commitment (and well worth every minute).

The Saas Valley in canton Valais boasts a 350km long network of hiking trails for everyone: easy strolls, high level routes lasting several days, special themed trails for children and all surrounded by 4000m peaks. In the background the Allalin (4027m).
Pic: Switzerland Tourism/Christian Perret

EXPERIENCE COUNTS

Note: The Hinteregasse, Bärentrek and Haute Route are not trails to be undertaken independently by inexperienced hikers, and detailed additional route information will need to be sourced before setting out. The alpine climate is incredibly unpredictable, and conditions can change in instant. Hiking in Switzerland's mountains is usually only possible between June and September, but even within that window of opportunity it's absolutely essential to check current weather forecasts and the state of your chosen track before setting boot on the route – snow cover can quickly make the alpine passes described here completely impassable. Prepare for all eventualities: always carry extra layers – including waterproofs – in your backpack, along with sunscreen, sunglasses and some high-energy snacks. On-the ground operators such as Eurotrek (*www.eurotrek.ch)* offer guided treks on the Bärentrek, and you can source self-guided packages for the Haute from Alpine Hikers (*www.alpinehikers.com*).

Main and bottom right Cyclists of all ages can enjoy the route along the Aare River.
Pic: Switzerland Tourism/S. Boegli

Mountain bikers at Lake Stellisee in Zermatt. In the background is the mighty Matterhorn (4478m). *Pic: Switzerland Tourism/Christian Perret*

EXPLORE MORE

For those who would prefer to stay away from sealed surfaces altogether, Switzerland offers endless mountain-bike trails to mooch around and bomb down, from the singletrack-stacked resorts of Zermatt and Verbier, to the pedal powered playground that is Crans-Montana in Valais, and the less-ridden trails around Saint-Luc. If you fancy cycling on the shoulders of the Ogre, Grindelwald's annual Eiger Bike Challenge (*www.eigerbike.ch*) sees 1500 rough riders taking on an 88km circuit with 3900m of altitude gain every August.

ON A ROLL

CYCLING THE AARE

FOLLOWING the flow of Switzerland's longest River, the full Aare cycling route rolls for 305km, from the glacier-fed lake on the Grimsepass to the river's confluence with the regal Rhine at Koblenz, via Switzerland's outdoor adventure capital Interlaken and the country's actual capital, Bern. Alternatively, you can join it in Interlaken, by Lake Thun, or simply bite it off bit by bit, cycling a section or two at a time.

The big bike ride is best done in seven stages. It's a waymarked mixed terrain adventure through rural and urban environments, with 64km of the route venturing off road onto unsealed terrain, so a sturdy touring steed with reasonably knobbly tyres or a decent hardtail mountain bike with reliable lockout on the front forks and tyres that aren't too aggressive are both good choices. Myriad accommodation options are available en route, including campsites, so pack those panniers wisely.

After hurtling down from Grimsepass (2164m), the trail skirts the Aareschlucht gorge and shadows the shores of Brienzersee and Thunersee, with Interlaken splitting the two lovely lakes. Going beyond Bern and Bielersee, towards the Seeland, the route takes a meandering riparian course through Mittelland forests, going via mediaeval Solothurn and Jura's Baroque towns to the trail's conclusion at Koblenz on the Rhine, not far from the famous falls.

After hurtling down from Grimsepass, the trail skirts the Aareschlucht gorge and shadows the shores of Brienzersee and Thunersee...

A canyoning group exploring the Viamala gorge.
Pic: Switzerland Tourism/Ivo Scholz

WET AND WILD

SWITZERLAND'S shudderingly cold high alpine lakes are, by and large, placid puddles, perfect for playing around on if you're into sailing, stand-up paddleboarding and flatwater canoeing. Those looking for more of a boating buzz can explore the numerous whiter waterways that plunge down the side of the Alps as the snow and ice melts each spring.

Kayaking and rafting are both possible on the class III-IV rapids of the River Sarine, which charges dramatically into the Pays-d'Enhaut just outside Interlaken, thundering through spectacular Vanel and Gérignoz gorges. The sport of riverboarding is popular here too — which sees rapid runners replace their boats with bodyboards, to get a lot more close and personal with the churning water. The Ruinaulta, occasionally referred to as the Swiss Grand Canyon, is a super scenic gorge on the Swiss section of the Rhine, a waterway that boasts III-IV rapids and some impressive falls, and shouldn't be missed by paddlers. Both the Aare and the Arve are far calmer, but well worth exploring by canoe or kayak.

CANYONING

A tragic accident in 1999, when 21 young people including several Antipodeans were killed by a freak deluge of water while canyoning in Saxet Brook near Interlaken, proved that this niche sport isn't without its dangers. This is still the first thing many people read about when they look into canyoning in Switzerland, however the awful incident forced a complete rethink of the outdoor industry in the country — and well beyond, as shockwaves were sent around Europe — and now, almost two decades later, such guided adventure activities are super-organised, and populated by regulated and highly qualified professionals.

Canyoning involves a mixture of scrambling, clambering, abseiling, jumping, sliding and swimming. It is not uncommon to find yourself reverse climbing through waterfalls, and the sport is sometimes described as whitewater paddling without a boat. The pursuit arguably reaches its absolute apex within the otherworldly emerald gorges of Switzerland, especially the Ticino region, where ghostly white-walled caves and long slippery chutes cause it to be considered the country's canyoning capital. Standout gorges include Chli Schliere, Lodrino, Pontirone, and Iragna.

As history has shown, expert guidance and proper equipment is essential when canyoning, and it's not something you should undertake independently, unless you are experienced and have excellent local knowledge.

THE ESSENTIALS

Resources: *www.wanderland.ch/en* is a great resource for hikers travelling to Switzerland. Cyclists should check *www.veloland.ch/en*. For more information about a range of other outdoor pursuits, explore *www.outdoor-interlaken.ch/en*.
Getting there: The areas here are all best accessed via Zurich Airport.
Accommodation: The Swiss Alpine Club operates huts throughout the mountains. See *www.sac-cas.ch/en/huts.html*.
More info: *www.MySwitzerland.com*
www.MySwitzerland.com/rail – Swiss Travel Pass

EXCLUSIVE

Australian Geographic

AG READER EVENT

Hosted by Chrissie Goldrick
Editor-in-chief
AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC

BE INSPIRED!

Come and join us for an evening of courage and inspiration with three of Australia's most outstanding women adventurers.

CAROLINE PEMBERTON, presenter of the *AG Adventures* TV series and the *AG Explores* documentary series, celebrates the spirit of adventure with special guests Jade Hameister and Sandy Robson. Hear their inspiring stories of dedication and tenacity in the face of huge odds.

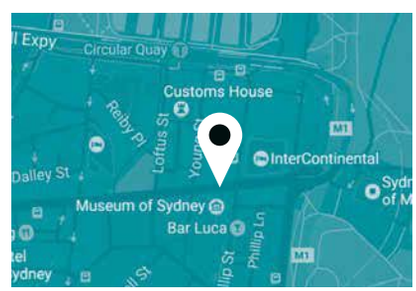
JADE HAMEISTER

HEAR HOW MELBOURNE schoolgirl Jade Hameister walked into the history books in 2016 when she became the youngest person to trek one of the more difficult routes to the North Pole at the age of 14. She faced dangerous conditions, freezing temperatures and the threat of polar bears. In May she will ski 540km from coast to coast across Greenland – the world's second biggest ice cap. Jade is living proof that age is no barrier to achieving your dreams, no matter how big those dreams may be.

SANDY ROBSON

MEET SEA KAYAKER Sandy Robson and hear about her five-year, 22,000km solo kayak journey from Germany to Australia through 20 countries, completed in November 2016. She was inspired by German canoeist Oskar Speck who, between 1932 and 1939, paddled a folding kayak along the same route. Sandy retraced his steps in the hope that her journey would inspire women adventurers and to highlight the importance of taking care of our oceans. Come along and hear the story of her epic journey.

- **Thursday 31 August 2017 at 6.30pm for a 7pm sit-down in the theatre.**



- **Museum of Sydney, corner of Phillip and Bridge streets, Sydney.**
- **Tickets $35, or $30 for AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC subscribers.**
- **Complimentary wine and canapés.**

Book now via our website. Places are limited so don't delay.
www.australiangeographic.com.au/society/events
Enquiries to society@ausgeo.com or phone 02 9263 9825

In association with

APT

Left to right Crossing Mandanna Lake; morning breaks on the trail.

Adventure **Yukon Territory, Canada**

CHANNELLING HUSKY

There's a certain irony in the incredible amount of forward preparation required to tackle a crossing of the Yukon from a canine's perspective… all to live in the here and now.

Words and Photos
Elspeth Callender

IN THE DEAD of every subarctic winter, teams of bootie-shoed husky dogs and fur-clad mushers race a 1600km wilderness course between Whitehorse, Yukon and Fairbanks, Alaska. The trail is a collection of historic northern winter transport and travel routes across a frozen landscape of immobilised rivers and snow-filled forests and exposed mountaintops. Depending on conditions, surfaces can be anything from fresh powder to bare ice. Checkpoints and hospitality stops are few.

The Yukon Quest is now over 30 years old and, these days, any visitor to the Yukon can mush a team of huskies on accessible sections of the trail with a local kennel, post-race. I first mushed when I was new to the Yukon with the unexpected result of spontaneous blubbing from an eyes-meet-eyes moment with my lead dogs as we crossed a powdery white lake on a bluebird day. A multiday mushing and camping tour on the Quest trail with Muktuk Adventures the following winter also produced an unforseen outcome: veteran champ Frank Turner's broken-record mantra "it's all about the dogs" forced me to contemplate the canine perspective.

Back in Australia again, the desire to wear lightweight footwear and a harness and drag a sled for days along that snowy trail intensified and took shape as an expedition idea. I knew I'd hit on something special when Yukon locals emailed with "Off your meds again, Callender?" and "Love it... you crazy thing" and the tourism people flatly refused to support the trip due to safety and outfitting concerns.

Plans were made to return to the Yukon the following winter to channel husky.

Its silence, space and limited distractions are a common catalyst for personal epiphanies.

FINDING A MATE

Canada's most north-western territory is just under 500,000km² with a population of just over 35,000. Its silence, space and limited distractions are a common catalyst for personal epiphanies. Its magnetic pull, spoken of in whispers and song, can be easily dismissed as nonsense until you find yourself flying back there every six months.

Extreme places attract extreme personalities and I already knew a suitable northerner who'd be up for this trip.

I first met Fluffy — his name has been changed to protect his identity — at a New Year's Eve party in a huge fire-warmed shed on the capital's outskirts when the outside temperature was 30 below. This was my virgin visit to the Yukon and I'd returned that day from Kluane National Park where the nightly comedown of motel accommodation between snowshoeing daytrips had fuelled what I thought was an impossible fantasy of camping out in the wintery landscape.

It was an immediate connection with Fluffy when I said "I don't give a rat's trap about the Yukon Quest" (back when I didn't) and he said "me neither, I was the ex-

Left Firewood duty.
Above An easy uphill haul.

ecutive director for seven years". The following summer we canoed a wild Yukon river and established we could get on for a week as long as he didn't hum.

Originally from Ontario, Fluffy was a wilderness white-water canoe and dogsledding guide before going exec for the Quest. A fit mid-50s, he has puppy-like energy to burn, the enthusiasm for outdoor adventure of a *Boy's Own* magazine cover kid and a body shape his acupuncturist once described as "good for pushing cars out of ditches".

There's a point to all this detail: it's not a decision I made lightly. The grizzlies may be snoozing when the snow lies thick on the Yukon ground and I might well have scoffed at every conservative opinion on my travel plans, but the wrong companion in a subarctic winter wilderness expedition can quite easily mean the end of your life.

In turn, Fluffy double-checks he understands my intentions: to haul sleds along the Quest trail between two Yukon checkpoints right after the race has gone though so the way is clear, the snow is packed and the surface ice on lakes and rivers well tested. When he's confirmed there'll be no obligation to wear connecting neck ropes, sleep outside on straw, eat frozen fish offal or piddle on the go he agrees to do it.

PREPARING FOR PAW CONDITIONS

Yukon winters are typically so cold and dry that freshly fallen snow can be shaken off like confetti. Yet, like dry heat, dry cold is far more manageable than the damp alternative, which is why 'crisp' is such a positive word and 'soggy' is not.

Although we could be facing temperatures as low as -52°C, the range is more likely to be around the minus 20s and 30s. That's what we're hoping for. Not cold enough can be as much a danger as too cold on northern winter routes.

Yukon Quest Champion, Bruce Johnson, fell through the ice while training on Little Atlin Lake in the mid-1990s and the entire team – human and animals – perished. With this in mind we fashion a looped strap-and-rope system for pulling our sleds so we don't stay physically attached to them in the unlikely event we break through thin ice.

The Quest always starts in February, the best month for winter travel at this latitude. Well past the darkness of solstice – way back on 21 December – there are over nine daylight hours by mid-February.

As part of my pre-expedition research, I read Jack London's *To Build a Fire*. This sobering fictional short story, published in 1902 and set in the Yukon wilderness, skates around and then smashes into the reality of the human body's utter fragility in a severely cold climate.

Like serious frostbite, its chilling message becomes a permanent part of me.

GROWING A WINTER COAT

Over the next few months emails fly back and forth on subjects like the best sunglass lenses against snow blindness, number of sleeping mats needed between a body in a bag and bare snow, schools of thought on multiple sock and glove layering, early signs of frostbite, why wolverine is the superior parka ruff fur...

My tent, stove, sled, threads and food research keeps leading me to a particular North American traditional winter trekker and camper's site where my steepest learning curve is in the haberdashery department.

Our clothing must protect us from cold, catch and trap body heat and release moisture; nothing new, just the same old requirements in extreme conditions. Most modern hiking gear is weightless, warm and wind resistant but not adequately breathable for intensive activity or resistant to sparks. Because our weight restrictions are relatively loose, the solution is layers of good old-fashioned woollen garments over our thermals and, the biggest surprise, an outer shell of cotton.

During the year, I find heavy wool shirts and trousers and a cotton anorak in an army surplus store in Prague, borrow a Norwegian woollen jumper from a friend and order felt-lined hide and canvas boots from Wisconsin.

We organise ourselves a fancy First Nations-style high-

Clockwise from left Drying the many layers of mukluks; relaxing over morning coffee; traditional snowshoes still work brilliantly.

The Yukon Quest is now over 30 years old and, these days, any visitor to the Yukon can mush a team of huskies on accessible sections of the trail with a local kennel, post-race.

density polyethylene toboggan and, for a second one, revamp a borrowed plastic sled usually used for dragging firewood around a suburban Yukon yard. Fluffy lashes out and buys himself the handmade treated canvas winter trekking tent and compatible wood-fire stove he's always wanted.

Because this winter camping trip was only ever going to happen with a heated tent in tow.

I've done 'cold camping' in the Yukon and, without being preceded by an f-word adjective, the phrase is an absurd understatement. My experience was a dogsledding tour advertised as a multiday heated-tent camping expedition, but in-tent warmth consisted of just a few minutes of blasted radiance at each end of the day to ease the agony of transition between massive parka and double sleeping bag. On the second morning of that trip, someone sharing my tent kept the heat on for half an hour, claiming to be looking for a sock, while the rest of us were outside eating breakfast with frost forming around our faces. So that was the end of the propane.

Without nightly respite from that degree of cold, the unrelenting frigidity spreads out around you like an ocean and incites obsessive preoccupation with an imaginary warm island whose possible existence taunts mercilessly from far beyond the cruel horizon.

At -33°C in a damp sleeping bag under a ceiling of crystal stalactites, I lay awake for hours one night in genuine fear for my life and even sat up at some stage to start removing clothes. But then I got it together and calmed my breathing and lay back down.

This time we'll be curling up fireside every evening like retired lead dogs in a musher's cosy cabin.

SNIFFING OUT THE TRAIL

After the last Quest team crosses the Whitehorse finish line it snows for a couple of days while we're making final arrangements for transport. We've chosen the stretch between Braeburn and Carmacks because it's forested and we need firewood, undulations are minor so we can cover a reasonable distance each day, and both checkpoints — one a roadhouse and the other a town — are within 200 highway kilometres of Whitehorse.

Instead of leaving from Carmacks and closely paralleling the highway for at least a day, we choose to be delivered 30km east of town — just past the Columbian Disaster lookout on Robert Campbell Highway — with a plan to locate the Quest trail on the other side of the Yukon River.

We're under an arctic high so it's a blue windless day in the low minus 20s. A hundred kilometres lie between us and Braeburn.

The sides of the Territory's longest river are lined with jumble ice where the surging current and fluctuating temperature in early winter confused the freeze, but locals' snowmobile tracks show the way through. The toboggans slide well on the packed trail. We walk single file up river, slowly stripping down to maintain what winter trekkers call 'the edge of cold'.

The sun on our faces tricks our skin into thinking it's being warmed. My mukluks are sock-light and silent on the snow. The discomfort of leaving a warm car to pack gear in the freezing air has been replaced by a chest-expanding urge to journey into this landscape I have the ever-increasing sense I've always known.

Yukon terrain is essentially river valleys, plateaus

Clockwise from left The sun sets on a burn; frosty morning means staying well rugged up; woollen trousers and mukluks keep things toasty; a feathery meal; a forest slowly regenerating.

The sides of the Territory's longest river are lined with jumble ice where the surging current and fluctuating temperature in early winter confused the freeze, but locals' snowmobile tracks show the way through.

and mountain ranges. Vegetation is mainly evergreen-dominated boreal forest of small spruce, pine and aspen or colourful tundra at higher altitudes and in the arctic north.

On the far side of the river we have a steep uphill haul through spruce forest ravaged a decade earlier; the countless black poles stand in the snow like spent sparklers still on a cake. The temperature drops with the sinking sun.

At the top of the slope we intersect with the Quest trail.

BEDDING DOWN

Making camp takes hours and the cold drains our energy reserves like birch trees harvested of sap.

In hardwood snowshoes with rawhide lacing we march like toy soldiers, back and forth, to pack down a solid base. After jointly erecting the tent, chores are split for time efficiency – one starts the fire and cooks dinner while the other chops, saws, carries and stacks wood.

We always overdo the firewood to avoid this imagined scenario: we wake in the early hours to a tent drained of heat and no cut wood; half asleep with limited light and in the wrong shoes one of us goes outside to use an axe or saw; we slip and fall or cut a hand and need attention; one down, both getting colder and still no wood.

When outside work is done, mukluks are hung to dry from the ceiling of our little canvas kennel in the woods and replaced with cushy down booties. I inevitably fall into a dribbling power nap while Fluffy does the finishing touches on the evening chores, such as melting snow for the next day's water supply. Though, when I'm the nightly fire keeper, I wake every couple of hours and methodically restack the glowing belly as if I've done it all my life.

When outside work is done, mukluks are hung to dry from the ceiling of our little canvas kennel in the woods and replaced with cushy down booties.

One night, Fahrenheit and Celsius rendezvous outside at minus 40° but we don't notice. There are no stalactites here.

FOLLOWING OUR NOSES

Apart from fiddling with fabrics and nightly chores – necessary for creatures with limited natural resistance to cold – I've never felt so doggish in my life during our week of eat, pee, poo, walk, sleep.

Each day begins with voracious consumption of fatty, sugary foods. When full, a compulsion to get moving kicks in. The arctic high holds all week and such great weather,

Left to right Across the frozen Yukon River; a starry night at thirtysomething below.

gear and planning culminate in an idyllically uneventful trip; the height of problem solving is sighting the next orange and black track marker.

The silent white trail, carrying the scent and memory of so many dogs before us, cancels out pretty much everything but here and now.

We trot across vast white lakes, lope down snowy slopes and pad through copper-coloured forests of unburnt spruce — shabby with age and stunted from cold — to find stories in the snow: blood and feathers that tell of a struggle and a meal; yellow and brown smudges around trees colourfully illustrate team pit stops. Across our path, on and under layers of snow, are the footprints and hoofprints and claw prints of squirrel, chipmunk, lynx, wolf, moose, coyote, fox, hare, wolverine, river otter, marten, fisher, raven, magpie, chickadee and whiskey-jack.

There's such hypnotic steadiness to the whole trip — a purity of focus that comes from building a routine in survival mode — that when it's all over and we drop our loops in Braeburn, the relief at coming to the end of a week of constant exertion wrestles with an instinctiveness to take up the slack and keep going.

"How was Aurora?" friends ask, because it was apparently awesome and spectacular that week, but the question makes me quadrupedally inarticulate. Head cocked to one side and eyebrows in a twitch, I wonder how I can explain that all I had the energy and inclination to do each night was scoff elk and bison smokies then stretch out in front of the fire and chase rabbits in my sleep.

THE ESSENTIALS

Getting there and around: Qantas flies to Vancouver from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. From there, Air North flies daily from Vancouver to Whitehorse and operates down to -50°C. The flight takes just over two hours. For bookings go to *www.flyairnorth.com*.
When to go: The Yukon Quest is held every February. For dates and race information see *www.yukonquest.com*.
Where to stay: There's plenty of Whitehorse accommodation, such as Gold Rush Inn on Main Street (*www.goldrushinn.com*) and Westmark Whitehorse Hotel on Wood Street (*www.westmarkhotels.com*).
What to bring: Main equipment includes canvas winter trekking tent and wood stove, toboggan, boots (*www.mukluks.com*), parka suitable down to minus 45°C and sleeping bag for temperatures down to minus 40°C. Satphones can be hired locally from Total North Communications (*www.totalnorth.ca*). Up North sells select winter gear and offers transport (*www.upnorthadventures.com*). Maps can be purchased from Mac's Fireweed Books (*www.macsbooks.ca*). Main maps (1:25,000): Frenchman Lake 105 L/4; Mandanna Lake 105 E/13 West; Mandanna Lake 105 E/13 East; Frank Creek 105 E/11 West. Mark Stenzig of Up North can help you plot the Quest trail.
Thanks to: Snowtrekker Canvas Tents (*www.snowtrekkertents.com*) and Black River Sleds (*www.blackriversleds.com*) for their generous support and fabulous equipment.
More information: *www.wintertrekking.com*

LEARNING TO BREATHE

Adrenaline junkies needn't apply; learn the art of freediving and you can expect to find a peaceful, almost meditative state far below the surface of the water.

Words and Photos
James McCormack

It's easy to laugh when you can dive 100m deep on a single breath. Freedive Gili co-founder Mike Board.

FREEDIVING HAS ALWAYS seemed to me one of those sports that belong in the same category as wingsuiting; death or injury appears a matter of when, not if. Scuba diving to a hundred metres is loco enough, but doing it sans tank, with only a lungful of air, well that, my friends, seems certifiably insane.

Which is why I felt so weird that on my first freediving session. There I was, far below the surface, deeper than I'd ever dived, and I was feeling not pumped with adrenaline but instead so comfortable I felt I was in a womb. A baby-blue womb of sloshy amniotic fluid, all soft and protective where I could just float and relax. I'd stopped descending at this stage. Hitting the end of the 12m rope that had been set up, I was in no hurry to ascend, so I'd decided to sit and wait until I began running out of breath. The curious thing was that this didn't happen; the urge to breathe, it seemed, had simply disappeared. I sat there looking up at the soft light beaming down from above, examining the spidery shapes of my fellow freedivers, way, way up there on the surface. And I meditated.

Not consciously chanting mantras or deliberately trying to clear my mind, but there's no better way to describe the peace and stillness I felt other than to say it was meditative.

That first day of freediving took place in the tropical blue waters on a small island off the coast of Indonesia's Lombok called Gili Trawangan, and I was there with instructor Mike Board, along with three other pupils learning the basics of the sport. Just a couple of days earlier I'd been snorkelling around the spectacular coral of nearby Gili Air, and swimming with sea turtles and schools of tropical fish that sparkled like glittering confetti. Most of my outings were towards the island's northern end, away from other snorkelers. But two days earlier I shared the waters with a spear fisherman, and I watched him working the coral wall. Damned if he couldn't stay down there. And damned if I didn't want to, too. It is, of course, the very reason so many snorkelers progress to scuba diving.

But there's something about scuba diving that's never quite captured my interest. Tanks, nitrox, regulators, gauges — it just seems so equipment heavy. Instead, I like the simple purity of just filling your lungs and going for it. So I've always stuck with snorkelling. Freediving seemed just as pure, only it took it to another level. That I liked, too. It took skill. Physical skill. It even had, unlike scuba, a competitive element. Go longer. Deeper. Harder. Oooh baby.

And yes, I admit it, there's another factor; I am a tightarse.

Having never liked the idea of continually hiring scuba equipment, the *free* in freediving held double appeal: minimal equipment, and—once I'd purchased my snorkel, fins and mask—diving without the further outlay of even one brass razoo. But it had never occurred to me there might be an actual school out there teaching you how to do it, let alone instructing you how to not die in the process. But watching the deep-lunged spear fisherman jogged my memory of a freediving school on the island next door run by Board—a Britisher who holds four national freediving records as well as an unofficial descent to 103 metres. That evening, I sought him out.

HOW NOT TO DIE

I won't bore you with all the details regarding each dive I did, nor prattle on about the kaleidoscopic experience of seeing brightly coloured fish and extravagant coral in the warm tropical waters, but I will impart what I learnt from attending Board's freediving course.

As well as learning how not to die, I also learnt more about science and human physiology in two days here than in a year of high school science. The Respiratory System! Capillarisation! Cerebral vasoconstriction! Eustachian Tubes! Boyle's Law! The Law of Partial Pressures! All that useless stuff that back then bored me to tears—you know, facts—now seemed riveting.

I was fascinated to learn, for example, that it's not actually lack of oxygen that makes you want to breathe; it's CO_2 buildup. To learn that

Unlike scuba, there are no issues with nitrogen and decompression sickness. And in organised freediving competitions there has never been a fatality.

humans, like dolphins and seals, can use the mammalian dive reflex to stay underwater longer. To learn that hyperventilating is not only dangerous, it makes your ability to stay down far shorter. But these I'll get to later.

Importantly, I also learnt that freediving is, or at least can be if the correct procedures are followed, surprisingly safe. True, Board's demeanour – calm, considered, confident – could convince you anything is safe. The crisply accented Englishman oozed such confidence that within minutes of meeting him I'd decided he was a man I could trust with my life. Only later did I discover that Board's life path to becoming a freedive instructor included six years in the Royal Marines, followed by years as a diplomatic security consultant in Israel, Palestine, Baghdad and on the Georgian-Chechen border.

Unlike scuba, there are no issues with nitrogen and decompression sickness. And in organised freediving competitions there has been just one fatality. That's not to say others don't die. By some reckonings, freediving ranks only after base-jumping in terms of deaths, although those figures include spearfishing. Blackouts are the most common cause.

But Board insists blackouts themselves are not dangerous. "They're no more harmful to you than fainting. Essentially you pass out; you continue breathing and when enough oxygen returns into your system, you wake up. There is no damage at all. You still have minutes until the flow of oxygen stops. And then you have several minutes again until any brain damage occurs."

At least, this is the case on dry land. In the water, though, it is different. When you pass out, your brain recognises there is water by the airways, so you continue to not breathe. Without oxygen, the brain begins to suffocate, to the point it can no longer send the signal to not breathe. Your airways open up. Now you begin taking in water.

You are fucked.

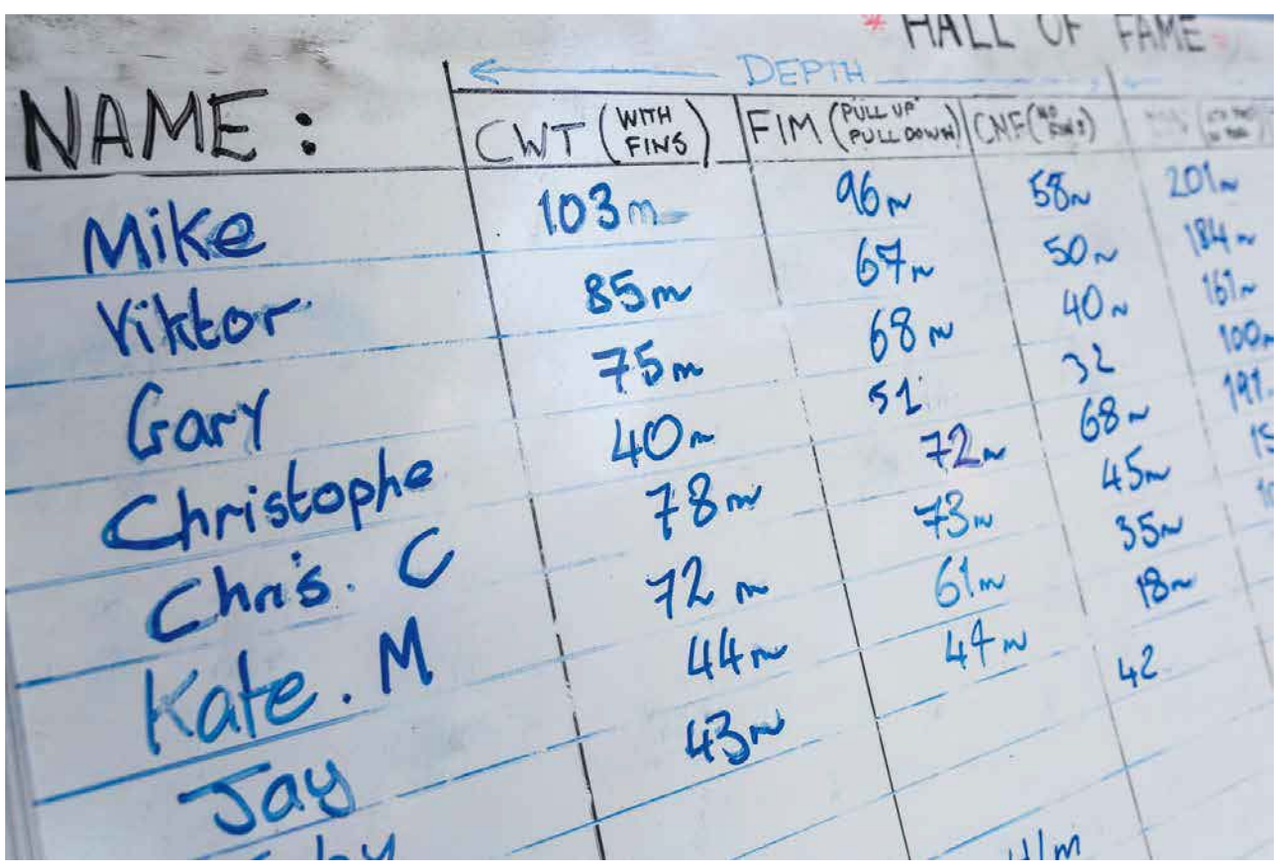
Unless you are with someone.

Which you are, right? Because this is the golden law of freediving. Without someone to rescue you, a blackout will kill you. Guaranteed. With someone, you will be safe. *Virtually* guaranteed. The reason is that nearly all blackouts are at or near the surface, where your partner can easily rescue you.

Pressure is the villain and saviour here, a two-edged sword that makes freediving both dangerous and safe. Well, at least safer. The dangerous bit is easy to understand; every 10m of underwater descent increases the pressure by one atmosphere. Your ears, at least, can be equalised to deal with the increasing pressure. The key is to equalise often and, crucially, early. "Don't be stingy with it," says Board. "Don't wait until you feel the pressure build; begin equalising even in the first few metres underwater."

First things first: before we even jumped in the water, Board ran us through a sequence of yoga-inspired breathing and relaxation techniques.

Above Who would ever have guessed that learning about the Eustacian tubes might actually be fun?
Below It's just beyond comprehension.



Relaxing on the outrigger to the dive site.

What you cannot equalise, however, are your lungs. And what Boyle's Law — which to refresh your memory is simply that gas volume decreases proportionally with increasing pressure — means for your lungs is this: at 10m, they are already half their usual size. At 30, a quarter. A hundred metres below the surface — and the very best freedivers can get deeper still — and the average male's six-litre lungs have shrunk to the size of a pair of oranges. Lung squeeze is a very real danger for freedivers.

But shrunken lungs allow you to, for want of a better way of putting it, squeeze the oxygen out of them. It's as they expand that it becomes harder. And the greatest expansion, and hence most blackouts, occurs not at depth but where the greatest pressure differential lies — the upper 10m, and in particular, at the surface. Precisely where you can be rescued.

"I've only ever seen blackouts below the surface in competitions," Board assures us. "And even in competitions, the deepest safety divers only go to 50m."

"But what happens if you get narcosis at 80m, and you're off with the fairies?" asks one of the other students, Paul, a pilot now based in Hong Kong.

"Well," replies Board, without a trace of emotion, "*that* can be a problem."

THE SCIENCE OF BREATHING

Perhaps it is strange that competitive breathing has never taken off as a sport. Breathing is, after all, our most fundamental activity. Not running. Or eating. Or even procreating. Without breath, we each have just minutes to live. But while we have all manner of sports testing physical skills with varying levels of contrivance, very few sports actually test our ability to take in a lungful of air.

Breathing, Board explains to us—as we listen in our open air classroom to the wail of the muezzin, the jingle of passing horse carts, the crack of thunder and the pattering of rain—works like this: we inhale oxygen, which moves down our bronchial tubes, into the alveoli in the lungs.

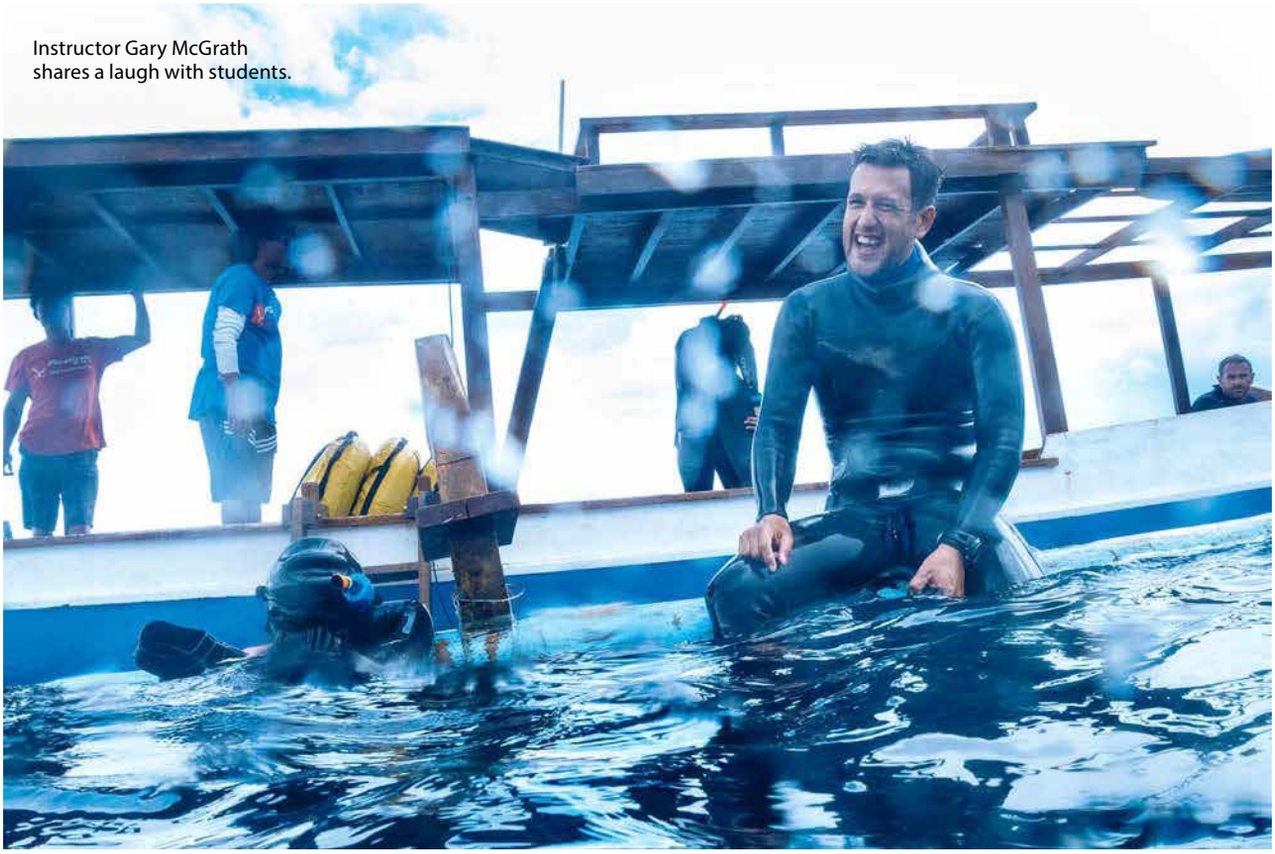
The membrane in the alveoli is extremely thin, just a few cells thick. The oxygen moves from high pressure to low pressure, through the capillaries and in the process it bonds to the haemoglobin in the blood. This then travels throughout the body. The vein network then returns the blood, now with CO_2, back to the heart and then the lungs.

It's this CO_2 — which is a metabolic toxin — that triggers the urge to breathe. "Your body doesn't mind being low on oxygen, funnily enough," says Board. "It's the CO_2 it wants to get rid of." The medulla—where the brainstem connects with the spinal cord, and which controls respiratory and cardiac functions, along with sneezing, vomiting and other fun involuntary bodily functions—detects changes in the pH. It sends a message for you to exhale, to release the increased amounts of CO_2.

Given the importance of the awareness of breath, it's perhaps unsurprising that our breathing lessons commence not in the classroom or in the water, but instead in the yoga hall. I had never considered a connection between the two but, of course, both are heavily focussed on breathing, and the relationship is symbiotic enough that the school is actually 50:50 freedive and yoga.

For us though, Board has adapted a series of yoga manoeuvres focussed on stretching the thoracic area. He starts with Sufi grinding. Done by Board, it's a kind of graceful swirling movement of the torso while seated; done by me it evolves into a motion not unlike a madman rocking backwards and forwards in an asylum. From there we move to spinal flexes, rotations, side bends and neck rolls. In sum, these are designed to warm up the spine and the muscles used for breathing.

The breathing exercises themselves follow. Again they are essentially yogic techniques. We commence with diaphragmatic breathing, which is breathing without moving your chest but instead letting your abdomen move in and out. Freedivers or yoga practitioners aren't the



Instructor Gary McGrath shares a laugh with students.

Relaxation is key to staying underwater longer. Your brain is a big consumer of oxygen; if you're panicking, it uses more.

only ones to benefit from diaphragmatic breathing practice, however. We all can. With our sedentary, largely seated lifestyles, many of us breathe shallowly, through the chest. But studies have shown diaphragmatic breathing, at the very least, reduces stress. Others believe it can help with specific disorders, such as high blood pressure, insomnia and asthma.

Then we reach the heart of the matter; the art of filling your lungs. It's not the breathing technique usually assumed; hyperventilation is not only dangerous, Board explains, it doesn't work anyway. To demonstrate, he gets us to hyperventilate. We take 10 quick, heavy deep breaths. "How do you feel?" he asks. "Dizzy? Tingling?" We all nod. "Exactly!" Hyperventilating lowers your CO_2 levels, which increases cerebral vasoconstriction and in turn decreases the blood flow to the brain. And it stops the mammalian dive reflex, which I'll get to shortly, from kicking in.

No, the art of lung filling is not hyperventilation but two-section breathing.

You first fill slowly with the diaphragm, and only once it's full do you then expand your chest, again slowly, to inhale as much air as possible. Learning the art of two-section breathing is important for freediving as they are the last breaths you take before diving. You take no more than four of these — it's dangerous otherwise — and on the final one you fill your lungs and go for it.

"Your final breath should feel like you want to explode," Board instructs us. "And don't worry about getting too full; once you're underwater, the pressure will stop you from feeling too stretched out."

This technique of two-section breathing, and indeed yogic breathing in general, does more than simply fill the lungs; it triggers a deep state of relaxation. And relaxation is key to staying underwater longer. Your brain is a big consumer of oxygen; if you're panicking, it uses more.

But to induce relaxation, breathing is just one of two key techniques; for the other, we need to board Board's outrigger, sail past a gaudy flotilla of local fishing boats moored off the beach, and get in the water. The mammalian dive reflex is what allows aquatic mammals like seals, dolphins, otters and whales to stay underwater for long periods of time. But humans possess the mechanism too, albeit in a weaker form. The effect works best in cold water, and also the younger the person, which is why you sometimes hear stories of toddlers spending an inordinate time under freezing water and still surviving.

When your face is submerged and you stop breathing—which is why the effect works for freedivers but not scuba divers—water sensitive receptors around the nasal cavity and other parts of the face relay this information to the brain, and a number of physiological reactions take place. Your heart slows, thanks to process known as bradycardia, thus using less oxygen. Top freedivers, says Board, can slow their hearts

Above The class does its best suspended animation impersonation.
Below The Gilis abound with sea turtles. Nearby Gili Meno actually has a sanctuary and hatchery.

The soft blue peace of freediving.

down 17 to 20 beats a minute. Your spleen contracts as well, releasing more red blood cells into the body.

Meanwhile, in a process known as vasoconstriction, the capillaries in your extremities — hands and feet, then arms and legs — get smaller. This leaves more blood for other essential organs, such as your heart, brain and lungs. And speaking of lungs, there is one last key element of the mammalian dive reflex, one that saves them from being crushed by deep dives. As your lungs reduce in volume because of increasing pressure, blood shifts to them and swells their blood vessels. This inhibits excessive compression, aka lung squeeze, and prevents barotrauma injuries that might otherwise occur at depth.

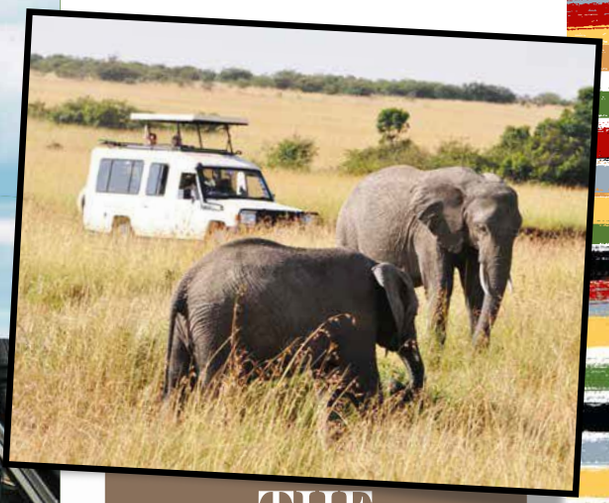
There is a side effect of all this: you feel really, really comfortable underwater. Blissful even. "It might take a few dives to induce this," says Board. "It might even take 30 or 40 minutes. But after a while you'll notice you're feeling incredibly relaxed; that's the mammalian dive reflex kicking in."

TOTAL RELAXATION

Which brings me back the most surprising element of all of this. Relaxing under the water. Sitting still. Not moving. Watching the dancing sunlight play down in columns. Contemplating the seamless gradation from baby blue to darkening depths. Embracing the thick warmth of the water. But, most unexpectedly, letting the mammalian dive reflex embrace me. Down here, deeper than I've ever dived, I expected to find adrenaline; instead I discovered one of the most complete states of relaxation I've ever found.

A minute later I would be on the surface, having returned not because of a lack of air but because I'd been down so long it would seem prudent to do so. I would reach the surface so relaxed the need to draw breath would seem barely apparent. My lungs would not be heaving; one small inhalation and I would begin talking immediately.

But all this would be later. For now I sat. Sat far below. Meditating. And astounded that here of all places, I had found a soft blue peace.



ESCAPE ON THE ULTIMATE WILDLIFE SAFARI ADVENTURE

WILDLIFE SAFARI, the luxury travel company, presents the ultimate wildlife safari – the most exciting, value-for-money safari available today.

It's a nine day luxury Kenya safari visiting three unique and diverse wildlife sanctuaries.

After arriving in Nairobi, you will stay overnight at the Nairobi Serena Hotel before setting off to Ol Pejeta Conservancy, home to the only chimpanzee sanctuary in Kenya. Enjoy two exciting days of game viewing and continue into the Great Rift Valley for exceptional bird and game viewing in the Lake Nakuru National Park, home to a black and white rhino breeding sanctuary. Finally, spend three days of unsurpassed game viewing in the great Masai Mara, the finest wildlife sanctuary in Africa, with

its majestic herds and great prides of lion. It's then a short domestic flight from the Masai Mara to Nairobi, with transfer to the international airport, for your flight home. Wildlife Safari offers the option of combining this safari with special QATAR AIRWAYS airfares from Australia to Nairobi, Kenya.

THE ULTIMATE WILDLIFE SAFARI

THE NINE-DAY KENYA luxury safari visits three unique and diverse wildlife sanctuaries and is the perfect safari for couples, friends and families.

Visit the only chimpanzee sanctuary in Kenya, search for black and white rhino, observe bird life on Lake Elmenteita and enjoy unsurpassed game viewing in the famous and beautiful Masai Mara.

Includes:

- 8 nights accommodation, twin share
- **Breakfast, lunch and dinner on safari**
- All ground transport by custom-built Wildlife Safari 4WD vehicle
- **Domestic flight from Masai Mara to Nairobi**
- Services of the finest guides, all park and wildlife sanctuary fees, government taxes and statutory charges

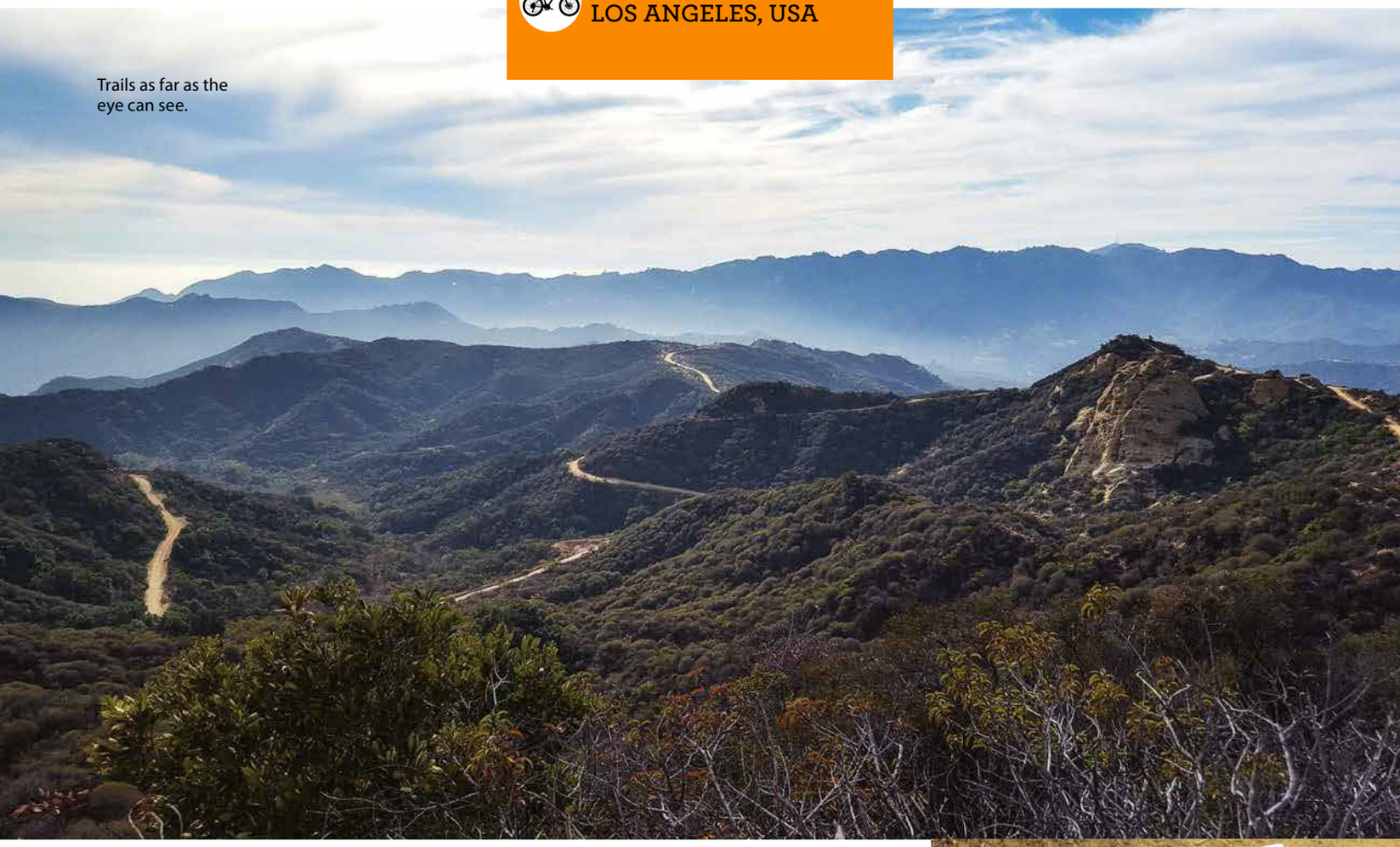
Cost: from **$5650** pp twin share
Conditions apply
For more details and to book, contact Wildlife Safari at **1800 998 558**, or **info@wildlifesafari.com.au**.
For more information, visit: *www.wildlifesafari.com.au*

LA CONFIDENTIAL

Tim Robson finds a treasure trove of mountain bike trails just 20 minutes – and a lifetime – away from downtown LA.

Words & Photos
TIM ROBSON

Just outside one of the world's busiest cities, you will find MTB bliss.



Trails as far as the eye can see.

WE ALL deal with the stress and pressure of time. We've all got the same amount in a day, but there's an ever-increasing demand on it in our fast-paced world.

And despite the advent of tools like email and video conferencing, work travel levels continue to climb – more than eight million Aussies, for example, travelled overseas in 2015 for work, as opposed to just over four million in 2005.

Of course, work life isn't the be all and end all of our existence, but it's often a necessary evil that cuts into other aspects of our lives, like looking after family and looking after ourselves.

As a frequent business traveller, a life of airport lounges and hotel buffet breakfasts is doing the necessary things for our familial income, but does nothing for my waistline or my metal state. And my love of mountain bikes has also suffered – in the struggle between work and family, riding loses every time.

I figured there has to be a better way; I fly to these great places all the time, so why can't I take advantage of it?

Well, often the trips are too short; a recent trip to Tokyo consisted of arriving at 9pm Sunday night and departing at 10pm Monday; 18 hours of flying and eight hours of coach travel, interspersed with six hours of sleep, in a 36-hour period. Exercise? Grabbing more ramen noodles from the airport lounge buffet, or walking to the other end of the terminal.

But recently I managed to wrangle an extra day out of a trip to the US, and I decided to use it wisely.

California is widely regarded as the birthplace of mountain biking, with tales of motorbike riders converting old Schwinn beach cruisers into off-road machines in the 1970s and tackling the long fire road descents scattered around the hills of the state.

...with over 500m of climbing in 22km, the Outpost Trail starts going vertical, and just keeps going.

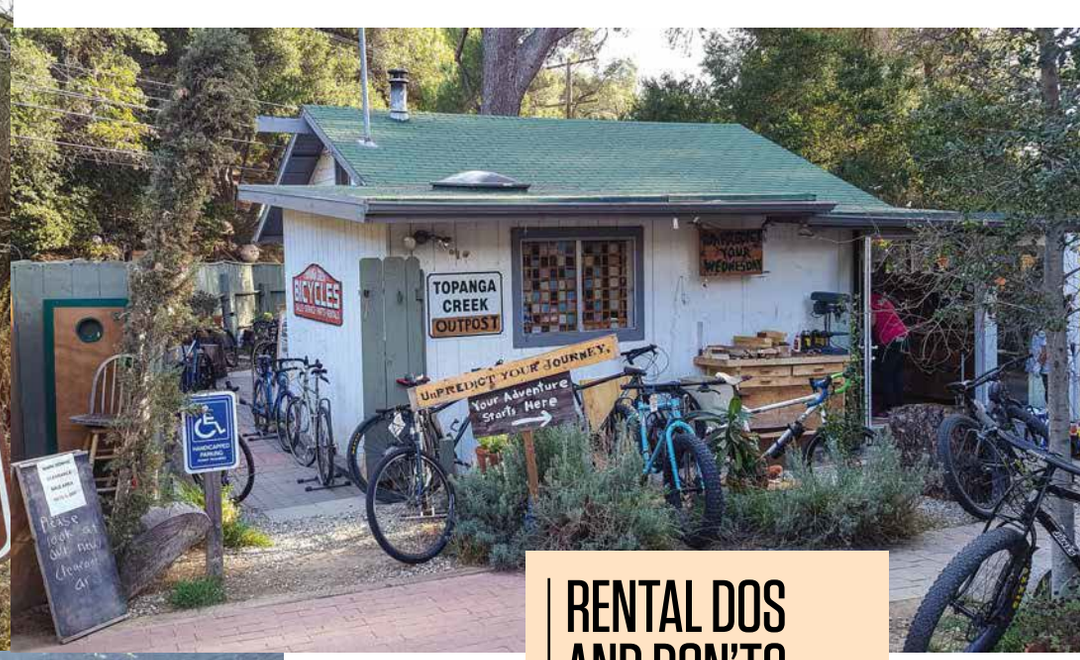
One of the names I've read about was a place called Topanga, which lies only 30 minutes outside of the bustling hub of downtown Los Angeles. A quick web search revealed there was a network of state parks in the region – including Topanga State Park, billed as the largest park within a city limits anywhere in the US – along with a shop called the Topanga Creek Outpost that rented bikes out.

Now usually I'd always opt for my own bike over a rental… but in all honestly, the butt-ache of packing and lugging a bike across the other side of the world for a single jaunt, then having to look after it for another week while I did my day job, just wasn't going to work this time.

I exchanged emails with Outpost owner Chris Kelly about renting a decent rig and exploring the surrounds, and he bounced me back a couple of options, including the chance to grab a new dual suspension carbon Salsa Redpoint from his fleet. All I needed was my kit and some pedals, and I was there.

Los Angeles is as busy and gritty as you can imagine a large city to be – but Topanga, just 20 minutes from the downtown area, couldn't be more different. Nestled in the shallow hills around the town, houses are built right into the mountainsides, and almost unbelievably for the US, there is virtually no signs of commercialism. If you're looking for a Dunkin Donuts next to a Walmart, you're in the wrong place.

It's hard to equate it to a place in Australia, but if



Clockwise from above The Topanga Outpost looks almost nothing like a bike shop; the carbon Salsa dually is a great rental; photos of nav points were amazingly helpful; trails as far as the eye can see.

RENTAL DOS AND DON'TS

- NOT ALL RENTALS are created equal, and it pays to do your research via the web. My Salsa Redpoint was perfectly maintained and a pleasure to ride. Make sure the rental outlet gives you a bike that works – take a test ride around the block before setting out, and make sure they tune the suspension to your body weight.
- IF YOU'RE RENTING while in the US, check which side the front brake is on (it's usually on the left, while Aussie bikes are usually set up motorcycle style with the front on the right). SRAM brakes can be swapped in a couple of minutes, but Shimano brakes are more of a pain.
- CHECK IF PEDALS ARE PROVIDED, or bring your own pedal and shoe combo from home.
- BRING YOUR USUAL RIDING GEAR, including a Camelbak, helmet and your trail tools (just don't leave them in your cabin baggage!). And do a quick weather check to see what you might be heading into. Lightweight body armour doubles as skin insurance and extra warmth.
- TAKE OUT TRAVEL INSURANCE before you leave Australia. If you're injured in the US without insurance, the resultant bills could literally cost you your house.

you think Sunshine Coast or Coffs Harbour, you're close. Little hippie shops line the winding Topanga Canyon Boulevard that turns off the famous Pacific Coast Highway before you hit Topanga Creek Outpost.

And the store itself also defies all notions of your typical bike shop. Mechanic Jay Barre has a stand set up in what's essentially a front yard, while bikes of all vintages and types are scattered around. The retail store itself is based in a small cottage, with several rooms rammed full of an eclectic mix of bike bits and in-house leather works. Eccentric and eclectic, it's also instantly relaxing and inviting. It's fantastic.

Chris greets me with a smile and an offer of coffee. "I'll have some banana bread done by the time you get back," he smiles, gesturing to a beat-up lounge so I can fill in the paperwork to rent the Salsa. He also has a set of photocopied instructions that directs me to the Outpost Loop, a 22km sample of what the area has to offer. One side has written directions, with photo markers on the other. It's a simple, clever idea. Chris sends me on my way with a friendly warning; "there's a bit of climbing!"

He's not wrong… with over 500m of climbing in 22km, the Outpost Trail starts going vertical, and just keeps going up. And up. And up some more. The temperate LA autumn weather means it's not overly hot, but a complete lack of shade up here means it would be baking in the summer.

It's predominantly a fire trail loop, but there are verges most of the way where riders have cut in singletrack alternatives to follow. Besides, fast, sweeping fire road descents are part and parcel of the Californian mountain bike experience.

The views, too, across Summit Valley and Westridge Canyon are immense, and a great place to actually stop and smell the roses. I'd managed to carve out a morning to myself to ride in a new place, and it feels absolutely liberating.

After a few selfies, I'm back on the Salsa – an excellent rig with predictable manners and plenty of speed – for the run home. From the top of the loop, it's possible to follow singletrack all the way down to the Pacific Ocean, but unfortunately the long climb back to the store falls outside my available time, so I opt for the steep, rutted Yedvarts trail, 2km of black diamond downhill that more than makes up for the fireroad climb. By the time I get to the bottom, my eyes – and my forearms – are bulging from pinging off huge boulders and surfing through giant ruts. It's awesome fun.

From here, it's a road roll back to the store, more coffee and the fresh banana bread. Jay's in the shop's kitchen making a fantastic looking curry for lunch and asks if I'd like to hang around, but the real world is calling me back. Handshakes all round, and I'm soon back on the fiendishly busy Pacific Coast Highway for the run back into LA. My colleagues cast curious – and slightly envious – glances as I pile back into the hotel foyer with a thin film of dirt on my legs and a massive grin on my mug, and the rest of the work trip seems to go a lot easier.

We all have to work for a living, but there is always a way to get out there amongst it. With a bit of research and a 'take it as it comes' attitude, you too can find that way.

BIKE LANE NEWS //

TRAGEDY ON THE INDIAN PACIFIC WHEEL RACE

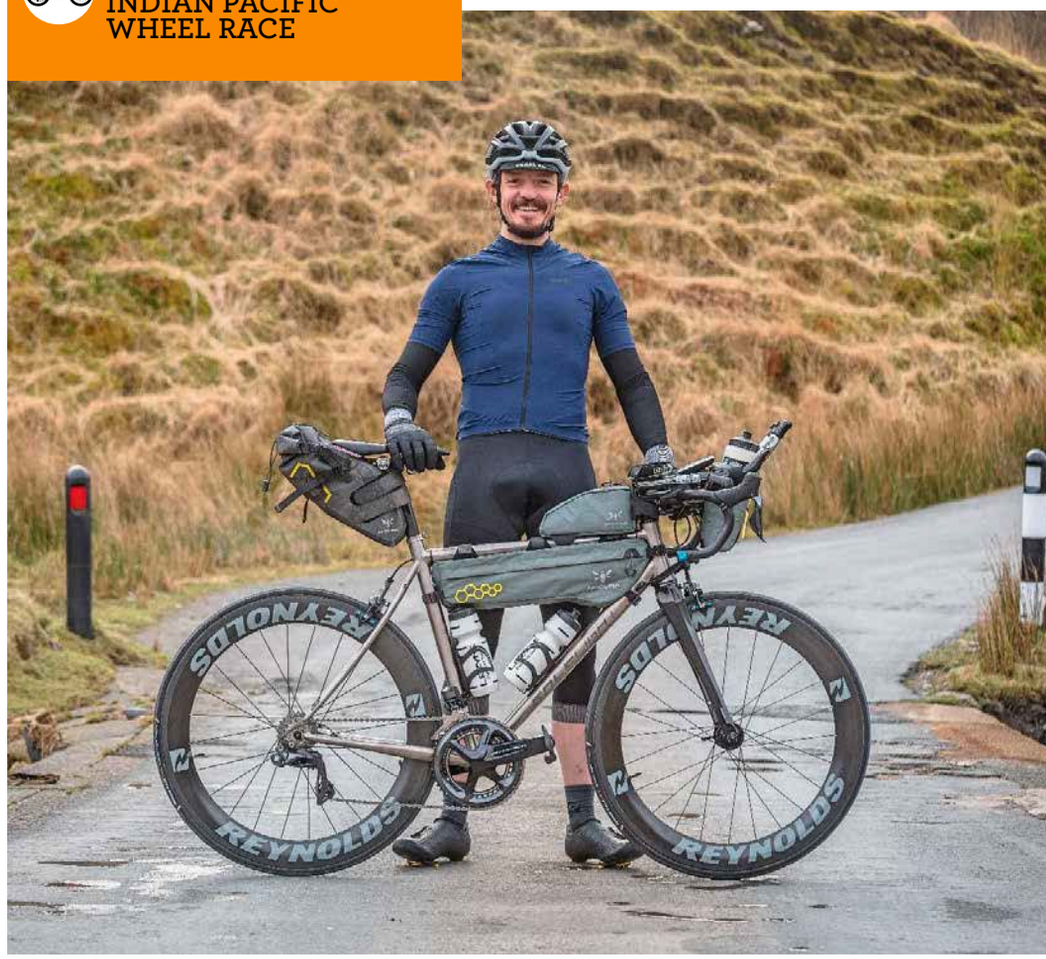
The newest – and arguably toughest – long distance bike race in the world came to a tragic end in April, with renowned British rider Mike Hall losing his life 400km from the end. Will the Indian Pacific Wheel Race be back?

AS I covered the last few kilometres in my car to the site of the crash that claimed the life of Indian Pacific Wheel Racer competitor Mike Hall, a feeling of melancholy descended. What was this legend of endurance cycling thinking as he rolled across the wide plains and rolling hills on the southern edge of the ACT in the pre-dawn chill? Maybe about the finish, barely 400km away after more than 5000km solo on the road from Perth? Perhaps about what he'd grab for breakfast? Or maybe of deeper things… where he'd been, where he was going?

He had started the Indian Pacific Wheel Race 13 days earlier at South Mole Lighthouse in Fremantle, dipping his rear wheel in the Indian Ocean before setting off with 70 other riders on an unsupported journey across the Nullabor, over the Australian Alps and through some of our biggest cities.

And 'unsupported' means just that; no following vehicles, no service stops, no pre-booking accommodation. Riders can accept food from fans, but not a night's lodging, and most nights will be spent in a swag under the stars – or stormclouds.

Ultra endurance racing has a place in Australian folklore, with riders tackling the coast to coast challenge through the 1950s, often returning to streets packed with tens of thousands of people cheering them home.



Above Mike Hall's ultra endurance career was unmatched in the modern era. **Below** the site of the crash, on the Monaro Highway near Canberra

Ultra endurance racing has a place in Oz folklore, with riders tackling the coast to coast through the 1950s

Mike had covered a truly staggering number of kilometres in his too-short life. The affable 37-year-old won the World Cycle Race in 91 days in 2013, and established the cross-Europe Transcontinental Race soon after. His last major victory came in the Tour Divide from Canada to Mexico last year, riding more than 2700km in 14 days.

A regular on social media and an icon of the sport of ultra endurance riding, Mike's death was witnessed by thousands of fans watching the Indian Pacific race via live telemetry markers, or dots, on the race's website. Police say Mike passed away at the scene, but his identity wasn't formally confirmed for some five hours after the pre-dawn crash. His dot, though, started moving again before his death was announced, but at 90km/h and in the wrong direction, underlining the worst for a legion of fans watching from around the world.

The stretch of Monaro Highway where Mike and a car driven by a local resident collided is wide and well maintained; police are still investigating the nature of the crash. Wreathes of wildflowers are taped to the road marker near the accident site, but there are no other signs that anything untoward has happened.

The race – the brainchild of Melbourne ultra endurance rider Jesse Caarlson – was cancelled after Mike's death was confirmed. Many riders, including the man Mike was chasing for the lead, Belgium's Kristof Allegaert, decided to complete their journeys to honour Mike, riding to Bondi Beach to dip their front wheels in the Pacific Ocean.

It's too early to know if the Indian Pacific Wheel Race will continue in 2018, but given the outpouring of grief from around the world and support for the competitors – not to mention Mike's legacy as a doer, not a quitter – it's fair to surmise that one of the world's most epic cycling events will carry on into the second year of its rebirth.

"It takes a special sort of courage to start, and a rare motivation to finish, the things that Mike did in his short life," said Jesse in a statement. "Mike excelled in the longest and most difficult cycling events in existence – it was not about prize money or material winnings. He did them to see if he could. He relished the challenge of testing his mental and physical limits. He loved the thrill of the race.

"His super-human abilities made him a hero, but Mike's humility and care for fellow competitors made him a true champion."

LONG TERM TEST //

CANYON ULTIMATE CF SLX

Mail ordering a $5k bike – smart shopping or fool's folly? Tim Robson takes the plunge with German brand Canyon.

WORDS & PHOTOS Tim Robson

LAST ISSUE we introduced the latest addition to the Outdoor fleet; a Canyon Ultimate CF SLX road bike. It's so much more than a roadie, though…

After another couple of months, the Canyon has been getting some real miles under the wheels… and new wheels at that. You might recall last time that I thought the stock wheels – a set of gorgeous Mavic Kysrium Pro Exalith SLs – might have been underplaying it for a larger rider, given their featherweight properties, so I decided to do something about it.

Now, most people are rushing out and buying carbon fibre wheelsets with price tags that rival those of a decent second hand car, and I wasn't about to/couldn't afford to do the same. And because our Canyon uses rim brakes rather than discs, I wasn't especially keen to compromise the braking performance. Most carbon rims need special brake pads, and the combination often struggles in wet weather – and that's not something I want to think about on a big day out.

While it's relatively easy to buy a ready-made set of wheels from various brands, I decided to go for the handbuilt option through Sydney-based wheel specialist TWE. Proprietor Greg Ryan has been building wheels for world champions and Olympian on- and off-road racers for a couple of decades now, but he also offers regular wheelsets for regular riders. After a couple of emails, we teed up a final build over the phone, consisting of his 30mm deep alloy rims, with 28 holes up front and 32 holes in the rear, sealed bearing hubs and bladed spokes. Greg also added a little bit of gold coloured bling in the form of a pair of spoke nipples around the valve hole. There's nothing fancy in the build, either; I can buy spokes anywhere, and the three-cross lacing pattern is simple and stable.

Weight wise, they came in at 1600g front and rear – some 250g heavier than the stockers, but when the bike weighs so little – 7.2kg stock – a little more strength in the wheels won't hurt.

The first big test was the Tour Down Under Community Stage, a 167km epic that follows the fourth stage of the Tour ahead of the pros. Straight off the bat, I could feel the TWE wheels were vastly stiffer side to side, and complement the softer rear end of the bike perfectly. Braking is vastly improved, too, though that lovely black finish will soon wear off. And after the ride, and 400km or so after that, they are still running smooth and true. Best of all? Changeover cost from the fancy Mavics to the functional TWEs was minus $200!

Could I feel the extra weight? Not really. They might be a fraction slower to come up to speed, but that certainly doesn't affect a hack like me.

I also added a Wahoo Elemnt computer to the bike, which I review over the page. Suffice to say it's a big screen GPS with more info readouts than a fighter jet cockpit.

Next issue: wider bars.

Above The Ultimate is performing like an absolute champ with a few miles under its belt

Left: Custom wheels don't need to be expensive, as TWE proves. Note the orange nipples either side of the valve hole.

GREG RYAN HAS BEEN BUILDING WHEELS FOR WORLD CHAMPIONS AND OLYMPIAN ON- AND OFF-ROAD RACERS FOR A COUPLE OF DECADES NOW

SPECS

Bike: Canyon Ultimate CF SLX 8.0
Price: $4700
Spec: Shimano Ultegra 11sp, TWE SLR30 custom wheels
Odo: 1140km
Upgrades: TWE wheels ($700), Wahoo Elemnt computer ($600)
Likes: comfy and fast
Dislikes: Hard to keep clean!

GEAR TEST //

QUARQ SHOCKWIZ SUSPENSION CALIBRATOR

Having trouble with your suspension settings? This incredibly clever tool could help you – for a price.

RRP $529 (sample online price, Australian retailer)
WEIGHT 45g (head unit only) **INFO** *quarq.com*
TESTED BY Tim Robson

DATA acquisition is an engineer's best friend, especially when it comes to setting up a suspension system. Getting that data from, say, a car is pretty easy, but for a bike, it's a tougher proposition.

And it's worth considering that when a bike costs the better part of five or six grand, it makes sense to try and get the best performance possible from it.

A young Aussie engineer has come up with world-beating technology that can help to quickly and efficiently set your single or dual suspension bike up with optimum settings in a fraction of the time it used to take.

Nigel Wade is a young mechanical engineer from Western Australia, whose idea for a data reader has gone from a successful Kickstarter campaign to being picked up by American company Quarq, which in turn is part of the SRAM empire. He's now a full time employee of SRAM, and he still lives in Perth (look up Dusty Dynamics on Facebook to see more).

His ShockWiz device is a suspension measuring tool that measures suspension behaviour of air-sprung forks and shocks, sending that data via Bluetooth to a phone app that can suggest ways of tweaking settings to make the suspension work more efficiently for a given application.

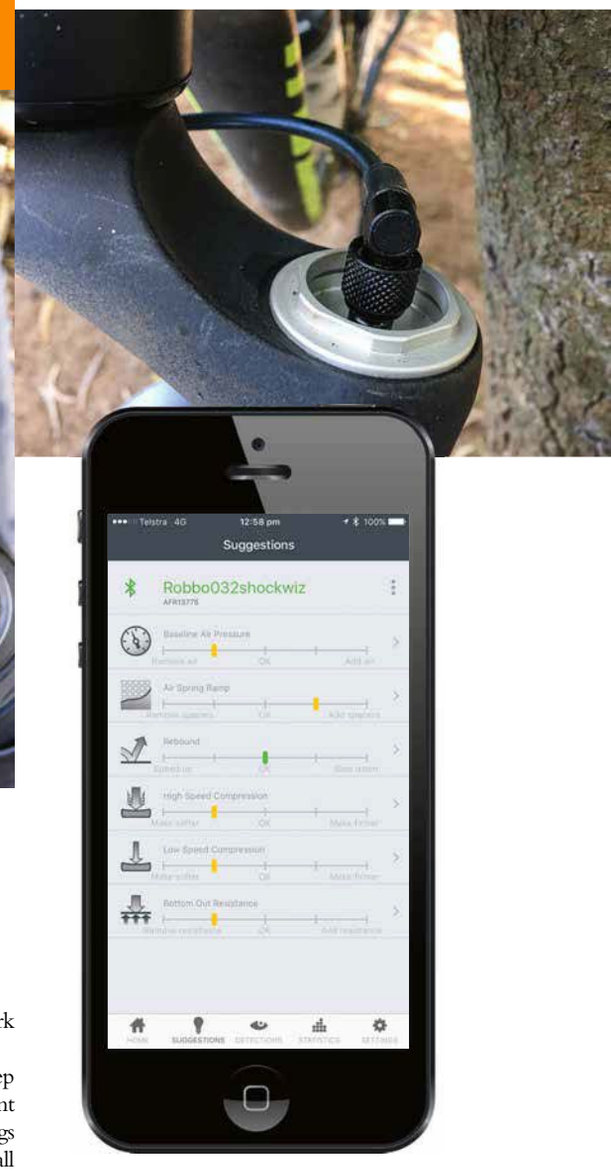
For example, the app can be configured to offer advice for a soft, a balanced, or an aggressive tune, with suggestions for air pressure, rebound speed and even the internal spring curve of the suspension part.

The ShockWiz is zip tied to the bike and the unit attaches via an air hose. The more data it gets, the better its advice is, and we found that at least of 30min of solid riding gave the best result. An easy to decipher app then offers advice on which way to tune the fork or shock.

We tested the ShockWiz on a X-Fusion Sweep fork under our 15-year-old speedster Max at a recent event at Thredbo. Starting with the factory settings of 60PSI of air pressure and mid-way settings on all other settings like rebound and compression, it took two runs down the same trail to provide a full read of data.

Suggestions were actually minimal, which tells us a lot of suspension ills can be cured straight off the bat via correct spring sag settings (generally, suspension should 'sag' when the rider is on the bike, and no more than 15 to 20 per cent of total travel should be used up as sag. Adding or subtracting air pressure from the air spring controls this). We sped up the rebound rate (the speed at which the fork extends back from being compressed) and slowed down compression a tiny bit, and Max declared himself happy with the result.

THE MORE DATA IT GETS, THE BETTER ITS ADVICE IS, AND WE FOUND THAT AT LEAST 30 MIN OF SOLID RIDING GAVE THE BEST RESULT.



The Shockwiz monitors the fork's air pressure via a direct connection (top) and sends data via Bluetooth to an app on the iPhone (above).

It also worked well with a burlier version of the X Fusion fork called the Metric, although we lacked the parts to fully tune the fork as the ShockWiz suggested.

Downsides? The ShockWiz does need to be calibrated every time it's attached to a new device. It's not at all hard, but is a bit time consuming. As well, you'll need to make sure that your fork or shock is compatible with the ShockWiz. It won't work on coil spring units, for example, or a handful of air-sprung forks that use a dual-air spring (there aren't too many of those, though). We also had a bear of a time making the Android version of the app work with the ShockWiz, though the iPhone version hooked straight in.

Granted, this is high-end stuff for most average users, and the physical cost of the unit will restrict its use to bike shops and the like. However, if you have, say five suspension units in your garage (two duallies and a hardtail), or a circle of mates who are also keen to improve the performance of their big dollar rigs, then the ShockWiz is a great addition to your tool box.

GEAR TEST //

WAHOO ELEMNT COMPUTER

Garmin isn't the only one with skin in the bike GPS game. Tim Robson tests the Wahoo Elemnt, a full function computer with a lot of ability.

RRP $600 (sample online price, Australian retailer)
WEIGHT 105g (head unit only))
INFO *http://au.wahoofitness.com/gps-bike-computer-elemnt*
TESTED BY Tim Robson

THERE IS a bewildering array of products out there if you're looking to record your cycling performance, be it as a happy amateur looking for simplicity of use, or as a more serious user trying to maximise performance via data.

The leader in the field of GPS cycling computers to this point has been Garmin, which offers a solid range of computers across a wide price spectrum. Wahoo is a late starter to the game, but has made a name for itself via a range of so-called 'smart' trainers that can be linked to online programs to improve the stationary cycling experience. It's also branched out into the GPS head unit space with this, the Elemnt.

I've used a few devices over the years, and I've recently wound back to a tiny Garmin device that basically told me how far and how fast I was going – but it wasn't quite enough info. I was still keen on something that was easy to read and easy to customise, with the ability to pre-load mapped routes.

The Elemnt can be had for around $500-600 depending on where you shop, and it comes complete with three different mounts and a USB charging cable. It's a fair size both in screen size and thickness, and uses three easy to use buttons along the bottom, a zoom button on the side and a bank of LED lights up the left side to help you monitor things like average speed or heart rate zones.

The lights are actually pretty useful – I've set them to tell me what heart rate zone I'm in. Blue is good, green is great and orange is pushing it, and straying into the red tells you its time to wind it back a bit.

It's designed to pair up with your smart phone via a Wahoo app in order to set it up and maintain it, which was an easy, painless process using an iPhone 6 S Plus. We've also tried the Elemnt on a Samsung S6 with similarly good results.

It also works seamlessly with apps like RideWithGPS and Strava, allowing you to download your results and upload routes with ease via the phone.

The Elemnt is rated to last 15 hours on a single charge, though it fell to less than 10 per cent charge after 10 hours. There is an out-front bracket included in the box, but it is a bit too flexible when pressing buttons.

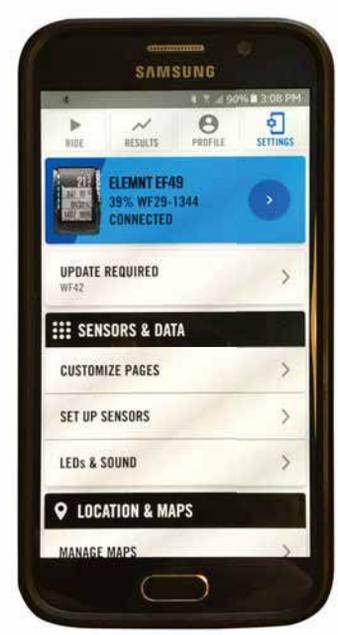
IT WORKS SEAMLESSLY WITH APPS LIKE RIDEWITHGPS AND STRAVA, ALLOWING YOU TO DOWNLOAD YOUR RESULTS.

In use, the black and white Elemnt is easy to view even on bright days with simple graphics and good contrast, and it teamed up with a Garmin-branded heart rate monitor with zero fuss.

The main screen can be configured to show as little or as much information as you need, including the basics like elapsed time, speed and distance as well as more advanced features like upcoming topography (or, as I called it on a long ride, the suffer meter). It also offers a turn-by-turn navigation function, with inbuilt maps for both Australia and NZ included.

It can be used for a heck of a lot more than that, too, including recording and displaying data from power meters and wireless electronic shifters from SRAM, but it's equally at home relaying more basic information in a simple-to-use and simple-to-view format. It will even send message and call notifications to the screen if your phone is connected via Bluetooth.

The Wahoo Elemnt has frankly amazing abilities that I may well never tap into, but it doesn't detract from its job of being a useful, functional bike computer. With an incredibly easy yet robust interface, the Elemnt will also appeal to people looking for a simpler life.



The in-house metal fabrication room at Arc'teryx HQ allows the company to create exactly what they need to manufacture and test its equipment.

FULL FLIGHT

A tour of Arc'teryx HQ in Vancouver, Canada, shows a company at the top of its game.

Words DAN SLATER
Photos ARC'TERYX

FOR THE committed outdoor gear freak there are only a handful of brands that stand head and shoulders above an overabundance of mediocre to good product, and Vancouver's Arc'teryx Equipment Inc. is considered among many to be the very best at what it does.

Committed to its core principles of design, craftsmanship and performance, Arc'teryx has been operating out of its North Vancouver base since 1989. The company was originally called Rock Solid, but was rebranded Arc'teryx two years after its inception; it's an abbreviation of *Archaeopteryx Lithographica*, which is the scientific name of the earliest known reptile to develop feathers and take flight, around 150 million years ago. The Arc'teryx logo is a stylised reproduction of the fossil of this first bird, now housed in the Natural History Museum in Berlin, and the brand has become synonymous with evolution, specifically the evolution of design.

All this information is freely available but when you are relying on your equipment to keep you safe from the elements, either on a daily basis or a gruelling expedition, you form a special bond with it. You come to admire and respect the clothing in a unique way, and this is how most Arc'teryx users would describe their relationship with the brand. When this is the case, the equivalent of a holy pilgrimage is to visit the Arc'teryx headquarters and design centre, which I was lucky enough to do.

COMPANY PHILOSOPHY

After an hour-long bus journey from central Vancouver through the wet suburban snow of a winter's morning, I strolled into the airy atrium of the two-story Arc HQ to be met by Jo Salamon, the Media & Communications Manager, and her dog, Pepper. Among other things, all Arc buildings are dog friendly. Between the desks are strewn numerous doggie beds for the relaxation of the employees' canine pals, and allowance is made for daily exercise. Of course, human down-time is also catered for in the form of a gym, an indoor bouldering room and large bicycle storage area for commuters.

First things first – Jo gives me a rundown of the company's history, as represented in the reception area by a timeline of key points, including the introduction of watertight zippers in 1997 (actually a 20-year design process) which have since become the industry standard, the company's purchase by the Salomon Group in 2003, and subsequently by Amer Sports in 2006. Also displayed in this area is an iconic Alpha SV mountaineering shell, enclosed in a glass cabinet and surrounded by lasers, no doubt.

My tour continues upstairs to the second floor and a more traditional open-plan office environment ("Pen-pushers and emailers," jokes Jo) overseen by large-format images of forbidding alpine peaks. A series of meeting rooms is named for some of the company's key lines, such as 'Theta' and 'Sidewinder', with even the lettering on the door mirroring the brand's elegant look. 'Push' never looked better.

"Jeremy's whole aesthetic has stayed with this company right from the get-go," says Jo, referring to Jeremy Guard, co-founder and president until 2001. "He's got a very clearly defined style and always wanted to make sure that whatever we were doing was simply designed, functioned the way it needed to function and looked really good. You had to want to wear it, and use it, and that's part of the initial DNA of the company that is still present. As they're working, our designers constantly go back to Jeremy's key fundamental points."

I'm shown around the warranty department, to which every piece of clothing in the world that needs repairing is returned. Consequently, there's a need to keep a bewildering array of old colours, materials and zippers to use in repairs. It's comforting to the consumer but worrying for the environmentalist that even such minor repairs as a frayed hem are done in Vancouver; Arc just doesn't trust anyone else to do a good enough job.

Speaking of environmental concerns, the building itself is a model for a low carbon footprint, including the use of natural light, recycled floor and furnishings, MesoOptics lighting fixtures, the bike room, electric car charging stations and waste water heat exchangers. One day the company aims to run all its facilities with a zero footprint.

Elsewhere on the top floor is a corner dedicated to Corporate Social Responsibility and the projects that Arc funds in the community. Foremost among them is the Bird's Nest Project, in which discontinued fabrics are used to create sturdy rain capes for the city's homeless. Amongst others, the Trail Builder Academy is an educational programme that teaches mountain bike trail building techniques, and the company donates used Gore-Tex jackets to anti-poaching squads in Tanzania.

Jo explains one of the company's four guiding principles – to extend the lifespan of products: "Our key environmental stance is that we're creating a product that will keep out of landfill as long as possible. It's about creating a product that performs and lasts. We work on all sorts of fabrics, testing performance against durability and weight and look for that magic spot between all three." Rather than erring on the side of lighter weight, Arc makes sure its clothing is built to last.

"We work on all sorts of fabrics, testing performance against durability and weight and look for the magic spot between all three."

Clockwise from top Arc'teryx keeps a huge backlog of fabrics for repair/warranty work; the 'Men of Arc' are charged with fabricating the tools and equipment needed for the company to test and manufacture equipment; the craftsmanship involved in manufacturing is incredibly high; having the ability to tweak designs in-house, then test them in the mountains outside Vancouver, is a huge advantage; threads galore.

DEIRA

FACTORY TOUR

Five minutes' walk down the road is the second building, dedicated to design and sample production. There I'm introduced to Greg Grenzke, Design Manager for Ascent & Footwear, whose most recent major project to come to fruition after several years' work is the Procline ski boot. Greg shows me possibly the most exciting part of the operation – where the design teams have begun working on the Spring 2019 range.

"Having a manufacturing facility right here means we get to make incremental changes that other companies wouldn't be able to," he explains, "because we're not shipping something back and forth to Asia every time we want to get a sample made. We can prototype, we can make full finished samples, we can test them on mountains, come back in, tweak them, go back out etc. until we can perfect the performance. This sets us apart because not everyone has the ability to do that." Unfortunately, no matter how I pry and wheedle, Greg remains tight-lipped about what exciting products may be in the pipeline for the future, and I am barred from photographing the special presses and laminating machines in the interest of intellectual property protection.

I'm led through a labyrinth of metal workshops, testing labs and fabric storage areas to a department that is less secretive – the colour lab, where I'm treated to previews of next season's colourways such as Lunar Mist, Electrolyte and Himalayan Sugar. I'll leave you to guess what hues those names represent.

The third building, which I don't get to visit, is Arc One – the company's flagship factory situated an hour down the road in New Westminster. This is where all of the safety equipment (harnesses and avalanche packs) is made, as well as the Veilance line, much of the LEAF gear (Law Enforcement & Armed Forces), and some of the more iconic products such as the Alpha SV. This proximity allows Arc to make big changes in manufacturing processes with little fuss, plus the company can make small runs of pretty much anything (except footwear) on short notice for anyone from REI to Search and Rescue teams across the continent.

Clockwise from above Arc'teryx has recently moved into footwear; apparel is rigorously checked and tested; prototype down jackets await testers – unfortunately we couldn't bring them back to the *AG Outdoor* office!

PEOPLE AND PARTNERS

Arc'teryx currently has about 800 employees and is looking to take on an additional 50 per year, going forward. It uses a Lean Manufacturing model – a system developed in Japan for the elimination of waste in the production process. "Before this everyone worked on piecework," explains Jo, "so you might be great at hoods or sleeves but you never really saw a finished product, and if one person was held up that would hold up everything. With Lean Manufacturing teams of 12 to 15 people work on the whole product and are paid as a team. Each person is cross-trained so they can do sleeves, hoods, laminating, whatever. This process has changed the lead time in the factory from 30 days to 10!"

Most products are no longer made in Canada, however. "We consider our 20 or so partner factories across the globe as extensions of our own facility, so they have to adhere to the same standards and quality control that we do," continues Jo. "Our product is very technical so any partner we work with has to have skilled labourers who are paid way above minimum wage in their regions. We see these facilities as partnerships, some of which we've had for over 15 years. It's not just somebody making jackets for us. Our partners invest in their employees, because it might take six months to train each one, and we invest in our partners – it's kind of like a circle."

My tour ends at the factory shop, where old season product and seconds are sold on the cheap to Arc-hungry consumers who buy armloads at a time. I come away more impressed than ever at the operation and feel privileged to have been allowed a glimpse inside the workings of the 'Dead Bird Society'. Arc'teryx is at the pinnacle of the global outdoor industry and is still pushing its game. Long live the Evolution!

"We can test them on mountains, come back in, tweak them, go back out, etc."

How can I save on travel insurance?

Answers at

moneymag.com.au

IN 0142

ROAD TRIP
MT PINATUBO, PHILIPPINES

LAVA RUN

The second biggest volcanic eruption of the 20th century spelt disaster for the Philippines back in 1991. Today, the locals have learnt to live with the way this massive geological event changed their landscape forever.

Words DEAN MELLOR
Photos DM AND FORD

WHEN MOUNT PINATUBO erupted on 15 June 1991, no one could have predicted the devastation it would cause. This was the second biggest eruption of the 20th Century, and Mt Pinatubo spewed out a billion tonnes of magma, 20 million tonnes of sulphur dioxide and more volcanic ash than any eruption since Krakatoa in 1883.

Three months prior to the eruption, a series of earthquakes provided some indication of what was to come, and as volcanic activity around Mt Pinatubo increased, local inhabitants were advised to evacuate the area, including 20,000 indigenous Aeta people who lived on the slopes of the volcano, and up to 200,000 who lived in the lowlands around it.

In a cruel twist of fate, on the day of the eruption Typhoon Yunya also struck Luzon; as a result, heavy rains combined with the ash ejected from the volcano to create massive lahar flows that buried numerous towns and villages, and destroyed most of the agriculture and infrastructure in the surrounding area. In total, around 840 deaths were reported, mostly from roof collapses caused by the weight of the wet and heavy ash that had settled on houses, but many thousands of lives were saved by the early evacuations.

In October 1995, more heavy rains saw the lahar overflow from the Pasig-Potrero River, which buried Bacolor town. As a result, the Filipinos built a 56km-long U-shape 'megadike' as a last defence to protect Pampanga province; it was completed in 1997 and is called the FVR Megadike, and it's so big that it has a highway built atop it.

Quarter of a century after the Mt Pinatubo eruption, the lahar beds are still the dominant geographical feature of the landscape around Mount Pinatubo. Although thick, tropical vegetation has made a remarkable comeback along the sides of the riverbeds, the grey lahar, made up of ash and rocks, looks as though it could have been deposited just a few days prior. And when it rains the lahar continues its movement downstream…

Of course, the resourceful Filipinos have found ways of making use of the lahar, which is now often referred to by locals as 'white gold'. In fact, as we make our way to the Sacobia River just a short drive from our hotel, we can see earthmoving equipment quarrying the lahar for use in construction projects and road building. Ironically, it was used extensively in the creation of the FVR Megadike itself.

I'm behind the wheel of a Ford Everest, and the sense of relief I feel as I turn off one of Pampanga's main roads with its Filipino traffic chaos is shortlived. I now have to pilot the sizeable (left-hand drive) 4WD wagon along a narrow laneway lined each side with jittery toddlers and mangy-looking dogs. Despite their formative years, the toddlers and their slightly older siblings exhibit remarkable road sense;as our convoy proceeds slowly through the village of Haduan, I'm more than happy there are no 'incidents' to report.

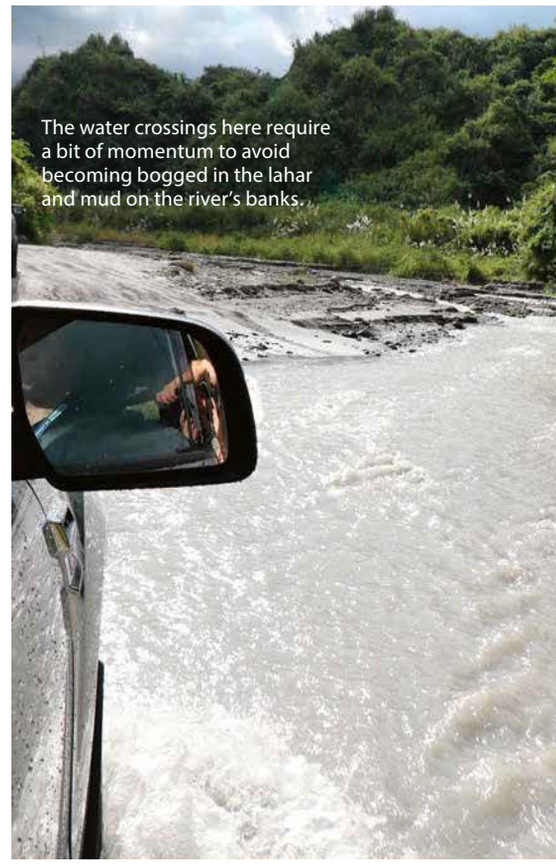
As we break free of the village we find ourselves surrounded by a moonlike landscape, albeit one with lush green vegetation on the horizons and a decent-size river running through the middle of it.

Driving on the dry lahar is easier than expected. In parts the surface is as hard as concrete, and where it's softer the driving could hardly be described as challenging; we don't even bother to lower tyre pressures to aid traction. We do, however, change the setting on the Everest's full-time 4WD Terrain Management System (TMS), which is achieved by turning a clearly marked dial on the centre console. Moving from the 'Normal' setting to 'Sand' mode makes the throttle more sensitive and instructs the transmission to downshift more readily, so we'll have plenty of power on tap if we need it.

It's only when we pull up just before the track meets the Sacobia River that we're instructed to select low-range and lock the rear diff, for where the lahar meets the dark water, we're advised that a vehicle can easily become bogged… and not easily extracted.

Before we tackle the water crossing, we watch as local farmers ride their motorcycles across the river. Even the water buffalos that they're tending seem unfazed by the potentially boggy lahar beneath the surface. As I dip the Everest's wheels into the drink I feed on the power and splash across to the other side without a problem.

As we continue upstream we're confronted by the discrepancy between living standards of the rich and poor in the Philippines. On one side of the river are shacks made from old scraps of timber, rusty bits of corrugated iron and anything else that could be cobbled together, in which entire families live, trying to eke out an existence anyway they can using the river as their only resource, while on the other side we spot tourists relaxing in the pools of a resort called Puning Hot Spring and Sand Spa. The latter also offers 4WD safaris along the lahar beds of the Sacobia River.


The water crossings here require a bit of momentum to avoid becoming bogged in the lahar and mud on the river's banks.

…the reward at the top is a lake with stunning turquoise waters surrounded by steep crater walls.

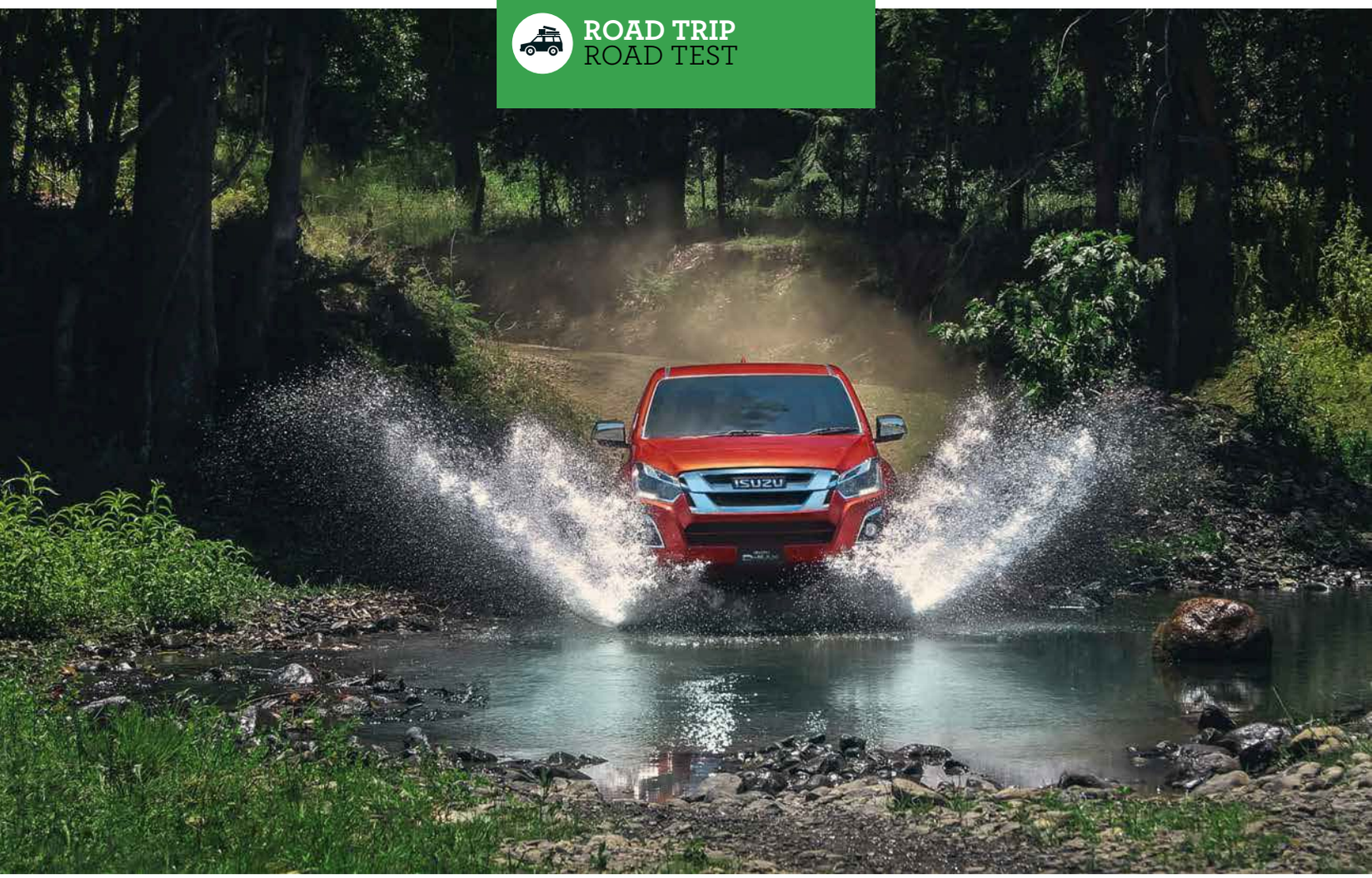
We push on and rinse the dust off the vehicles under a waterfall before we reach the end of the track where the high walls of volcanic ash seem to close in around us. Our guide tells us that off-roaders used to be able to drive almost to the top of Pinatubo, where there's now a crater lake, but these days you have to get out and walk to the top. The hike is 5.5km and ascends some 300m from where you're dropped off in a 4WD, and the reward at the top is a lake with stunning turquoise waters surrounded by steep crater walls. Unfortunately our tight schedule sees us point the vehicles downstream and make our way back to the comfort of our hotel.

While a four-wheel drive trip along Mount Pinatubo's lahar beds was never on my travel radar, I'd certainly like to make a return trip with a little more time up my sleeve to explore the area more, and to cover that last 5km to the top of the volcano.

THE ESSENTIALS

Getting there: Qantas flies daily to Manila (*www.qantas.com*). From there it's less than 100km to Pampanga, but is a long drive. It took three hours on a charter bus to reach our hotel. An alternative is to fly into Clark International Airport, via Hong Kong or Seoul.
Where to stay: Travelling as a guest of Ford Australia, we stayed at a new hotel called Midori Clark Hotel and Casino, near the old US Air Force base at Clark. See *www.midorihotel.com* for bookings. There are plenty of other alternatives in and around the city of Angeles. Check out *www.visitclark.com*.
Tours: Several companies operate tours to Mount Pinatubo, including Trekking Mt Pinatubo, which runs 4WD tours and hiking up to Lake Pinatubo. For more info, see *www.trekkingpinatubo.com*

Clockwise from this pic The team celebrates an amazing day exploring; family transport differs to Oz; driving into a spectacular sunset; bullocks are still used widely here.



ADVENTURE VEHICLE ROAD TEST //

ISUZU D-MAX

Words JUSTIN WALKER

THE ISUZU D-MAX has been a runaway sales success for the 100-year-old Japanese company since its 2008 launch in Australia, and has steadily climbed up the local 4X4 ute sales ladder to an impressive sixth position in 2016, finishing comfortably ahead of Mazda's BT-50 and Volkswagen's Amarok.

With this type of result, combined with the impressive sales performance of the MU-X 4X4 wagon since its late 2013 debut, you'd think Isuzu UTE Australia (IUA) would be happy to rest on its laurels. Nothing could be further from the truth, of course, and the company's determination to grow sales further was more than evident at the recent launch of the 2017 Isuzu UTE and MU-X (officially called the "MY16.5" variant as it doesn't cop a lot of the exterior styling/design tweaks that the MY17 D-MAX does but does receive the new engine), with the big news being its all-new, world-first Euro5-compliant 3.0-litre, common-rail, turbo-diesel powerplant, developed exclusively for Isuzu's Australian market. The engine carries over the 130kW power output from the previous-gen while upping the torque; the newbie's 430Nm (at 2000-2200rpm) is not only 50Nm higher than previous, but is now available across a far wider rev-range, with 380Nm of torque on tap from 1700-3500rpm – a big improvement on the previous-gen's 1800-2800rpm. Backing this increased grunt is a new six-speed manual (Isuzu's own; the MVL-6N) and smooth Aisin six-speed automatic gearbox, along with a toughened rear diff to cope with the extra punch.

UNDER THE BONNET

The new 3.0TD engine, on paper, is impressive: it features a new variable geometry turbocharger and intercooler, new pistons (graphite coated), injectors, fuel pump, robust steel timing chain, larger EGR (Exhaust Gas Recirculation) cooler, tough cast roller rocker arms and more – all aimed at confirming the Isuzu reputation for bombproof powerplants. One of the most impressive pieces of tech in this new engine, though, is the Diesel Particulate Diffuser (DPD), which was the final piece of the Euro5 compliance puzzle. This technology, put simply, results in collected particulate matter (held in a filter) being burnt off once the filter is full, or at a given distance. The process is dubbed "Automatic regeneration" by Isuzu and you can even watch its progress via the on-dash display, which shows both the level of particulate matter as it builds up, and then the regeneration process.

A NEW FACE

For 2017 the D-MAX styling has been refined (the MU-X keeps its current styling at this point) with a sleeker appearance. The bonnet and the grille have been redesigned, with the stylists managing to improve the coefficient of drag (by a claimed 0.4%) while still retaining the 'tough' appearance that is part of the D-MAX DNA. Other tweaks include revised headlights, with the LS spec D-MAX copping LED daylight running lights (DRL) and lower spec EX and SX receiving new halogen headlights. The 18-inch alloy wheels on the LS-T have also been redesigned.

To celebrate Isuzu's 100th anniversary, IUA has released a limited-edition X-Runner model, available in either Silky White Pearl or Cosmic Black. This auto-only model is aimed squarely at the active adventurer market. Black and red dominates the colour scheme of both variants – with black sports bar and dark grey alloys exterior highlights – and inside, the seats are a sporty mix of black and red.

ON- AND OFF-ROAD

The test route for the Isuzu D-MAX and MU-X launch was designed to showcase the vehicles' all-rounder capability, with a return loop starting from Queensland's Gold Coast and heading south along major freeways and B-roads to the beach at Evans Head, NSW, and then into a deserted quarry for more off-road driving, before returning north to the GC.

IUA makes no qualms about the D-MAX, in particular, being primarily a workhorse but one that is also more than comfortable doing family weekday duties while serving as an adventure vehicle for weekends. To this end, the vehicle's suspension is slightly biased toward its load-lugging capability,

but surprisingly, the expected overly hard ride did not eventuate. Our first test rig was an unladen X-Runner and it impressed both with its surprisingly compliant ride (for a 4X4 ute), and also with its on-road dynamics; there was little in the way of pronounced body-roll, even on tight corners approached at a decent clip, the D-MAX remained composed and didn't lean over dramatically. The ability to switch the Aisin six-speed auto into "manual mode" for windy downhill sections was also appreciated. The auto kept the revs well within the optimum working range ensuring minimal hesitation if you stomped your right foot. The NVH levels have definitely improved, with engine noise well muted and only really noticeable if you dropped down a couple of cogs.

The driver's position (always a personal thing) in the X-Runner is relatively comfortable – the only negative from this 183cm-tall person's perspective is the bottom cushion on the seats is a bit short, and the seat base is set quite high (not an issue if you're a shorty of course). The only other minor bugbear is the steering wheel has no reach adjustment. Jumping in a high-spec MU-X midway through the on-road section, however, it was great to have the six-way powered leather seats (standard on the LS-T D-MAX as well). The base of these seemed longer, and the additional adjustability was most welcome, allowing for a very comfortable driving position.

Off-road performance of the D-MAX and MU-X reflects the brand itself: the vehicles just get the job done, with no frills. The updated models still rely solely on electronic traction control (there's no LSD or rear locking diff option), but IUA has added Hill Descent Control (HDC) as well and during testing this worked a treat; one steep descent was reduced to a doddle thanks to the effective HDC which is easily controlled via brakes and throttle. Wheel articulation on the D-MAX is also quite good for this market; there were only a few instances that a rear wheel lost contact with the ground, on noticeably deep ruts, but the ETC kicked in quickly and, after a bit of excessive wheelspin, got the vehicle through. Isuzu has a lot of confidence in its ETC for these vehicles but it would still be nice to be able to add a rear locker, especially when most of the D-MAX competitors have them as either standard fitment or a factory option. The underbody has also been beefed up; steel sump and transfer case guards, a steel front skid plate and protection for the fuel tank are all standard.

The Isuzu D-MAX and MU-X have been the quiet achievers in the Oz 4X4 market – but very successful ones for the Japanese company, thanks to their combo of a tough, reliable vehicle range that offers great bang for your bucks, 12-month service intervals, five years capped price servicing and excellent dealer service (Isuzu looks likely to be ranked second in the 2016 Roy Morgan Customer Satisfaction Awards). These latest upgrades and refinements will see IUA confident of continued success.

Off-road performance of the D-MAX and MU-X reflects the brand itself: the vehicles just get the job done, with no frills.

WHAT YOU GET

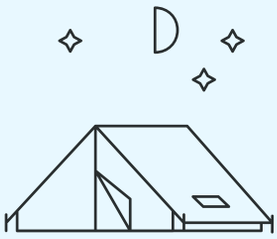
D-MAX 4X4 CREW

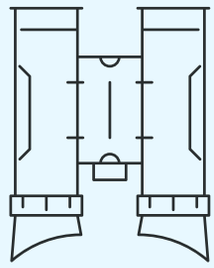
SX	C/C Hi-Ride	man	$43,200	$39,273
SX	C/C Hi-Ride	auto	$45,300	$41,182
SX	Ute Hi-Ride	man	$43,900	$39,909
SX	Ute Hi-Ride	auto	$46,000	$41,818
LS-M	Ute Hi-Ride	man	$46,400	$42,182
LS-M	Ute Hi-Ride	auto	$48,500	$44,091
LS-U	Ute Hi-Ride	man	$48,300	$43,909
LS-U	Ute Hi-Ride	auto	$50,400	$45,818
LS-T	Ute Hi-Ride	auto	$54,200	$49,273

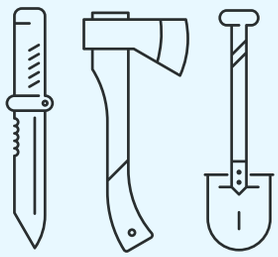
MU-X 4X4

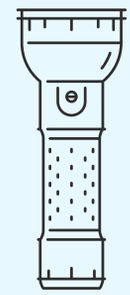
LS-M	7-seat SUV	man	$47,000	$42,727
LS-M	7-seat SUV	auto	$49,100	$44,636
LS-U	7-seat SUV	man	$49,000	$44,545
LS-U	7-seat SUV	auto	$51,100	$46,455
LS-T	7-seat SUV	auto	$54,800	$49,818

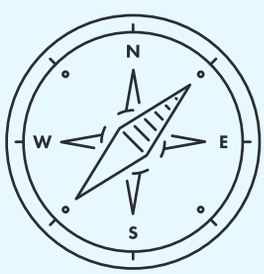
For more info on the D-MAX and MU-X, see *www.isuzuute.com.au*

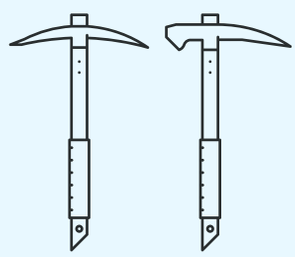


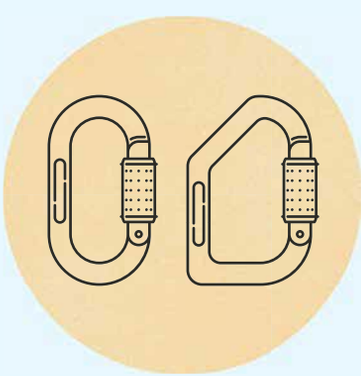


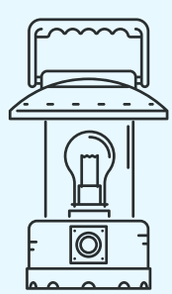


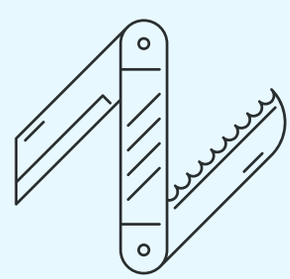



N
W
E
S









NEVER

FAVE GEAR

LEFT

Everyone has one: that must-pack piece of gear that has never let you down, on any adventure. We reveal some *AG Outdoor* team favourites.

BEHIND

THE NORTH FACE BASE CAMP DUFFLE

BAG IT UP

WORDS AND PHOTOS JUSTIN WALKER

YEP, IT COULD BE viewed as 'just' a bag; which it is, of course. But The North Face duffle is also much more than that. This robust, well-worn, always reliable TNF duffle has been my constant adventure companion now for more than 10 years. And that's not a decade of the occasional trip here and there; this 95L (Large) Base Camp duffle has been dragged and/or carried from one end of the planet to the other, on everything from high-altitude treks in Africa and South America, to canoe journeys in Canada, through to remote outback 4WD expeditions. In that time, it has been lugged by ponies, thrown in the back of 4WDs, and carried by porters (and myself) - and has always kept my clothing and gear safe and undamaged.

The duffle is tough: the outer laminated nylon material is thick and strong and the double stitching and extra bar tacks ensure it won't burst when over-loaded. Helping this are compression straps, allowing you to easily cinch a full load down to a more manageable size. Conveniently, it has shoulder straps as well, so you don't have to drag it around the ground unnecessarily. Even though you wouldn't want to carry the duffel this way for a full day, for shorter lengths of time the straps have enough padding to be relatively comfortable. The handles at each end are also handy for when you need to lift it in and out of vehicles. The zips are lockable, there's an ID pocket for your business card or details, and the mesh pocket inside the lid can be used to stow any number of items, such as keys, mobile phones, wallets, etc.

This Base Camp duffle has been dragged and/or carried from one end of the planet to the other, on everything from high-altitude treks to canoe journeys...

The only slight negative for me is, when packing (or searching for something) it would be great to have a wider opening. Other than this one small complaint I have never been disappointed in the Base Camp. This 95L Large model is probably the optimum size, too; I have managed to fit enough gear in to cover multidisciplinary trips, such as a combo mountain biking/hiking expedition. Bulky items such as my MTB helmet and shoes, as well as hiking boots, etc., have all been jammed in there successfully. I have also been able to cinch it down when lugging less gear, too.

The North Face Base Camp duffle is available in a number of sizes (I also have a 70L medium and 130L XL) all of which share the same bombproof DNA. The Base Camp has been in production for 31 years now, and I am never surprised to see old, seriously beat-up ones doing duty in remote corners of the world — they really are that dependable. I look forward to many more years of service from mine.

MTB DROPPER POST

For me, life is divided into pre- and post-dropper. Descents became far easier, far faster and far safer. So, too, rock gardens. And drop-offs. And jumps. And airs.

THE GAME CHANGER

WORDS JAMES McCORMACK
PHOTOS JUSTIN WALKER

I'M GONNA MAKE a big call. Of all the advances in mountain biking tech over the last decade, and there have been many—single chainrings, 29 and 27.5-inch wheels, wider bars, wider hubs, plus-size tyres, electronic shifting (if you've got the bucks)—the biggest, bar none, is this: the dropper post.

Sure, I know there'll be quibblers. Hell, there are some who don't even use dropper posts. Most holdouts (but not all; you know who you are, Roger) dwell at the distant fringes of the MTB spectrum: lycra-clad weight weenies at one end, DH-huckers at the other. And for a few specific courses and areas, they might be right. For anyone else, though, the dropper post should rank up there in importance with rear suspension. In some trail areas, even more.

For me, life is divided into pre- and post-dropper. Descents, of course, instantly became far easier, far faster and far safer. So, too, rock gardens. And drop-offs. And jumps. And airs. The biggest difference, naturally, were those super steep, bum-over-the-back, barely controlled freefalls; they transformed from exercises in white-knuckled terror to grin-inducing lines. And endos, once a seemingly regular staple on those aforesaid freefalls, seemingly vanished overnight.

This isn't surprising. Duh, you're saying, droppers make descending easier. You're shaaarp. And you're right, even a short-sighted idiot like myself could have guessed that. Cornering, however, was a revelation. It shouldn't have been; a lower centre of gravity has obvious cornering advantages. But even today, having used a dropper post for near a decade, I am consistently struck by the magic of it all, a magic that for some reason I fail to consider when it comes to gear shifting or suspension. Perhaps the reason is its immediacy. One moment I'm charging into a corner at a speed that, with my seat high, I have precisely zero chance of negotiating. A hit of my thumb and literally a split second later, I'm low and comfortable and ready to rail. All those XC-weenies who think a droppers' weight penalty is unjustified haven't considered the fact that most corners, steep or not, will be taken far quicker with a dropper.

And then there are the ups. You heard me, the ups, because droppers improve ascending. It's not merely that on super techy climbs a lower saddle can help you negotiate large obstacles. More importantly, fixed height seatposts usually—but not always, especially on tame trail—involve a compromise in height; if the trail points down with any regularity, you'll knock a centimetre off your ideal climbing height. But droppers negate that necessity. You go low for the descents. And then on the climbs have it rise to the ideal height, right to the centimetre, letting you squeeze every last bit of juice from each pedal stroke. God knows, if you're a slug like me, you need it.

Over the years, I've only had two dropper posts. They've both been awesome. And that's despite one of them being crap. While my Rockshox Reverb has been solid and dependable, on my old bike—thanks to an obtuse 28.6mm seat post diameter—I had no choice but to run X-Fusion's HiLo. The thumb switch is imperfect; it allows loads of saddle-wobble. But there's no way I'd trade in this cheap, wobbly dropper post for a fixed one. Droppers are like the pizza of mountain biking; even when bad, they are still very, very good.

2013 TURNER BURNER ALLOY FRAME

MASTER OF ALL TRADES

WORDS AND PHOTOS TIM ROBSON

LET'S FACE it... a lot of our new gear purchases are the result of wanting something... well, a little newer. We can justify it to ourselves — and our partners — with facts and figures, but how often have you replaced something that still had a lot of life left to give?

Well, that's not going to be the case with my favourite bit of gear, my 2013 Turner Burner dual suspension mountain bike frame.

The brand itself is about 25 years old, and the lifelong obsession of Californian Dave Turner, a friendly yet intense bloke who prides himself on doing things his way, whether it's in sync with the winds of mountain biking fashion or not.

In fact, he was one of the last MTB builders in the United States to still build aluminium frames in his small (Palo Alto) facility, before those winds blew him towards sourcing carbon fibre frames from Asia early in 2014.

"I had no choice," he told me frankly a couple of years back. "You have to follow the market at some point or die."

My Burner, then, is the last of a breed; a handmade aluminium dual suspension frame that was literally lifted from the welding table, complete with blemishes and pen marks, and placed in a box to make its way to Australia.

I picked the Burner because it's a jack-of-all-trades frame, and in our four years together, my Burner has stretched the envelope of what a single bike should be able to do. It's raced 24-hour events and short-course cross-country races. With a change to the suspension and fatter tyres, I can use it on pump tracks and flow trails, and with the addition of more robust forks and wheels, I can take it to gravity-fed ski resort runs and simply hang on.

We've travelled up and down the Australian east coast, as well as to New Zealand a couple of times, and it's had almost a completely new drivetrain, new forks, handlebars and more in that time.

But the heart of my bike, that tarnished, raw, gorgeous alloy frame that's polished to a high sheen where my legs rub the tubing, is still railing trails as if it were a day old. It's not made of the latest material, nor does it wear the freshest colours or sport the latest must-have geometry. A couple of new machines have made their way into the shed, but the Turner remains the first bike I grab most days, and I'm confident that I'll never sell it.

...the heart of my bike, that tarnished, raw, gorgeous alloy frame that's polished to a high sheen where my legs rub the tubing, is still railing trails as if it were a day old.

COOL STUFF

WORDS AND PHOTOS DEAN MELLOR

ONE OBVIOUS ADVANTAGE of four-wheel driving as an outdoor pursuit is that, compared to hiking, MTBing or even canoeing, you can carry a lot of gear with you, and one piece of equipment that I never leave home without is my trusty old Engel fridge/freezer.

I've had this 39L Engel for more than 20 years and while there are a lot of newer and fancier portable fridge/freezers on the market that are more efficient, have electronic thermostat control, are quieter and sport better designed and larger interior cabinets, the thing I really like about my noisy, rattly old Engel is that it has never let me down. Sure, I have had to replace the 12V socket and fuse holder on the power lead a couple of times, but the popularity of this fridge over the years means that (consumable) spare parts like this are available at most good camping stores, so unless you have a problem when you're really out in the sticks you'll never be left with warm beer and spoiled food.

Sure, the Engel has its faults: it's noisy and rattly (as mentioned); the carry handles are flimsy; the thermostat control can be a bit hit and miss; and there's no drain plug to aid cleaning at the end of a trip. But this truly is one product that does what it says on the box: it keeps stuff cold.

The Engel is built tough, with a steel outer case and a surprisingly robust plastic interior. A low current draw and an efficient design (with a cooling plate that runs all the way around the interior cabinet and plenty of insulation) means I can run the Engel off a 12V power source for long periods without battery recharging.

Although not designed for outdoor use, when fitted with an insulated transit bag (initially an Engel one, and later an MSA 4x4 branded one) I've run the Engel in the back of an open ute without a problem, and it's continued to rattle away outside my tent when it's bucketing down outside. In fact, this Engel has done thousands of kilometres around Australia, many on corrugations that would make your fillings fall out. And thanks to its dual 12V DC/240V AC inputs, it has performed beer-cooling duties at countless home barbecues over the years, as well as back-up food-cooling duties on the couple of occasions our primary home fridge has failed. I've even lent it to mates for their camping trips, and it always comes back (eventually) in perfect working order.

The modern incarnation of my old Engel is the MT45FP 40L model, which is almost identical in design although with a few extra features such as a user friendly digital control with LED display and a built in battery monitor. While RRP is a quite hefty $1580 for this model, I have seen them advertised for as little as $1280. Considering the lifespan of an Engel fridge (forever!), I reckon this is money well spent.

ENGEL FRIDGE/FREEZER

Sure, the Engel has its faults... But this truly is one product that does what it says on the box: it keeps stuff cold.

NO 3 RP

VERTICAL ASSURANCE

WORDS AND PHOTOS ROSS TAYLOR

PICKING YOUR FAVOURITE bit of climbing gear is a bit like picking your favourite child, but whether I've been climbing amidst the patchwork of paddocks at Mt Arapiles or stealing my way up the ragged quartzite of Tassie's Federation Peak, my No 3 RP is always with me.

RPs — the acronym is taken from the initials of their maker, Roland Pauligk [pictured right] — are small metal wedges with brass heads and steel cables that climbers use to wedge into tiny cracks in the rock. If the climber falls, they rely upon these tiny wedges to stop them from plummeting to their death.

Easily the most famous Australian-made climbing gear, RPs are iconic: from the gritstone edges of the Peak District in England to the epic granite walls of Yosemite Valley in the US, RPs made the impossible possible.

Roland started making them in the late '60s. Early models were smelted down from aluminium drink cans in a cave in the Grampians, but the brass models that went into commercial production were made in his small garden shed in suburban Mordialloc, Melbourne.

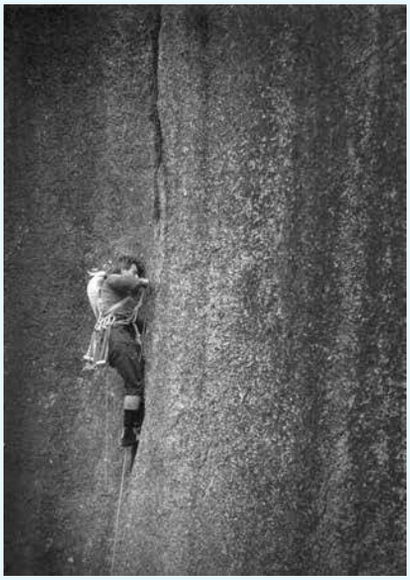
These small brass RPs revolutionised climbing. There was nothing else available that could protect small cracks so well, and they opened up previously unprotectable territory for climbers. The trick to RPs was that Roland, a boilermaker by trade, skillfully silver-soldered the steel wire into the brass head, a method that proved to be super strong.

RPs come in six sizes, from zero to five. The No 0 and No 1 RPs — with heads just a millimetre or two deep — are generally only considered body-weight pieces (not strong enough to hold a fall). But from No 2 up, you can start to take small falls to very big falls.

But of all the sizes, the No 3 is my favourite. Why, you ask? For four years in my teens I lived in Natimuk, the small town that sits 8km east of Mt Arapiles, one of the world's great trad-climbing crags. Every weekend would find me out Arapiles climbing. And the more I climbed, the more I learned that whenever I reached for my set of RPs, it was the No 3 that was the lifesaver.

Roland, who immigrated to Australia after escaping communist East Germany in the '60s, was also a family friend, someone who climbed with my father; he gave me my first set of RPs when I started climbing at 13.

Commercial production of RPs ceased this year, as Roland passed away in January after a long battle with cancer — so my No 3 RP is now more precious than ever.



The trick to RPs was that Roland, a boilermaker by trade, skillfully silver-soldered the steel wire into the brass head, a method that proved to be super-strong.

Australian GEOGRAPHIC

Get the best of both worlds when you subscribe

Print & Digital Package

Keep them both or give one to a friend

3 print issues
+
3 digital issues

ONLY $34.99

SAVE 53%

Digital Subscription

6 digital issues

ONLY $19.99

SAVE 66%

Visit **magshop.com.au/agdigital**
or call 136 116 and quote X7138AGD

Terms and Conditions: Savings based on single issue digital edition price of $9.99 and single issue print edition price of $14.95. Offer available from 04/05/2017 until 28/06/2017 If you do not want your information provided to any organisation not associated with this promotion, please indicate this clearly when you subscribe. For terms and conditions, visit magshop. com.au and for Bauer Media Ltd's Privacy Policy, visit bauermedia.com.au. Apple, the Apple logo and iPad are trademarks of Apple Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. Subscription automatically renews unless cancelled.

GEAR TESTS

Enter *AG Outdoor's* Gear Test section. Here you will find our expert opinions on all the latest outdoor equipment:

LED Lenser MH10 ..... **P109**
The North Face Access **P110**
Deuter Transit 65 ..... **P111**
Yakima FullBack 3 ..... **P112**
Garmin Edge 820 ..... **P113**

← **LED Lenser MH10** offers powerful lighting and tough build quality in a lightweight package.

GEAR TEST // LED LENSER MH10

RRP$174.95 *www.ledlenser.com.au*
TESTED BY Justin Walker

I AM ALWAYS SAYING that there's nothing simple about a headtorch. I know, that statement sounds odd (and I cop some odd looks from friends), but when I started testing a new headtorch from highly respected lighting manufacturer, LED Lenser, its performance proved that statement once again.

The company's new MH10 is its top-tier headtorch, and it is jammed full of lighting technology. The unit's features list reads impressively: the maximum claimed light output is a high 600 lumens; and its beam range an equally impressive 150 metres (at high power; 100m at mid power; 20m at low power). This lightweight powerhouse (it weighs a paltry 158g) also includes LED Lenser's Advanced Focus System (which allows you to modify the beam from a wide spread to a bright and sharply focused high beam via a simple twist of the ring around the lens), and Smart Light Technology (basically a three-level light output adjustment) as well as a red safety light at the rear of the head strap, plus a colour lens filter.

As well as all that lighting tech, the MH10 is IPX4-rated for water-resistance, meaning it can be used without qualms in rain, plus the headband itself is machine-washable – something people often dismiss but after a few weeks of use, any material in direct contact with your sweaty hand is going to get whiffy, so this is definitely a bonus.

Power for the MH10 is via a rechargable 3400mAh Lithium-ion battery, with claimed run times from 10 hours at maximum output, through to an impressive 120 hours at low output. To be honest, most of my light output usage during testing has been when using the low power setting. I have occasionally blasted an unsuspecting possum or spider with the high output when our children have wanted to spot them in trees near our campsites, but for most of my around camp and cooking duties the low output setting has been sufficient.

The Advanced Focus System has been great; again, most of my light needs have been catered for by the low output spread beam setting, but when I have wanted to adjust a tent guy-line at night, or do something that requires a finer light focus, twisting the AFS ring on the MH10 has sorted that. The ability to adjust the angle of the light beam is also handy and, again, is a simple process. One thing I have noted is that, even after a lot of testing of this tilting feature and the AFS focus ring, both the hinges in the tilt mechanism and the focus ring have stayed tight in operation – there's been no loosening of 'play' in them, which points to a well constructed unit.

I will put my hand up and say, in the past, I have never been a massive fan of rechargeable batteries in the outdoors, mainly due to my old-school thinking of running out of battery, and thus light, but with the portable solar power units available these days, this has become a non-issue for me. Plus, the fact I am not throwing away numerous spent batteries is a good thing, too. The only other feature I thought may be an issue with the MH10 was its lack of 'over-head' strap, to help support what looks to be a bulky unit on your noggin. This, too, has not been an issue, due to the MH10's light weight.

For anyone looking for a fully featured, versatile headtorch, the LED Lenser MH10 is most definitely worth checking out. For the asking price you get plenty of lighting tech bang for your bucks – plus the unit is built damn tough, ensuring many years (there's a 7-year warranty) of lighting service.

The North Face Access has a unique protective shell for your gear and everything inside is very easy to access.

GEAR TEST // THE NORTH FACE ACCESS

RRP$350 *www.thenorthface.com.au*
TESTED BY Justin Walker

BIKE COMMUTING is one of the ways I get to work. As any commuter – riding or walking – knows, finding a pack that offers the correct type of storage – not to mention protection – of your fragile electronic gear (laptop, tablet, phone, hard drives) and other work and transport-associated paraphernalia (notebooks, pens, wallet, office pass, keys, blah, blah) is not that easy.

For years, I have pressed one of my daypacks into commuter service and just put up with the fact it wasn't ideally suited to the task. So when The North Face announced its all-new Access pack and one landed in our office, I knew to whom I would be allocating it for testing. Yep, that'd be me…

The Access offers all the things you want in a commuting-focused pack, with a couple of new and exciting stand-out features. The most obvious is its construction: the Access features a robust aluminium frame for enhanced rigidity, covered with 500D nylon/polyester fabric. And on top of that is the spring-steel main compartment that flips open via a sprint-loaded clip at the top of the pack. This does away with zips (the only zips are waterproof jobbies in the separate laptop compartment) and works a treat; the large opening reveals a cavernous main compartment. (Total volume is 22 litres.)

The Access's main compartment offers, ahem, access to a number of other ones, each of different dimensions, and each designed to store different work items, such as the tablet, mobile phone, notebooks, etc. The laptop compartment is separate from the main compartment and fits a laptop up to 15-inch in size. This compartment features those water-resistant zips and sits closest to the harness/your back. A nice feature of some of the Access's compartments is the toggle bands. These are elasticised, allowing you to pull up on a tab to bring the particular item into easy reach without having to rifle through stuff. Interestingly, The North Face promo video for the Access promotes this ease of use with a lot of one-handed grabbing of equipment out of pack. And it actually is that easy; the elastic tabs work brilliantly – just pull up on the tab(s) and your electrical gadget pops up to grab. It will be a few more months of extensive testing before I can say how robust the tabs are, but so far they have worked a treat.

I often say to any one who will listen that I like structure and order (yeah, I know: boring!) and this mindset has been well satisfied with how you have to pack the Access. Unlike my old soft daypack, the Access's rigid structure means you cannot squish it down if it is not full, so, well, I fill it – and in a certain order that corresponds with what item fits in what compartment. Yes, I know, I probably need to see someone but it is a near-joyful experience placing my mobile phone in its own particular compartment inside the Access…

If I could find any negative to the Accent it would be that, at 1.95kg, it is noticeably heavier than my old daypack – an obvious result of its internal frame and tough construction. However, for me, this extra weight is well worth it for the significant increase in assurance that my work equipment is very, very well protected. Besides the excellent protection and security of all your stored goodies, the harness system also offsets the additional weight. From a bike commute perspective, even though it is lacking a waist harness, the compression-moulded shoulder straps, chest strap, and TNF's 'Flex Vent' back panel are both supportive and comfortable. Impressively, if you do stand up and really push it on the pedals, reliving that imaginary Tour de France sprint finish, there is only slight sway from the pack.

The Access ain't cheap, but you are paying for a pack that offers far more equipment protection than others – plus it's built to the usual TNF standards, so should provide many years of reliable use.

GEAR TEST // DEUTER TRANSIT 65

RRP$360 *www.deuter.com*
TESTED BY Justin Walker

THINK OF TRAVEL PACKS and some of us would think of a compromise not worth taking. After all, why not just go for either a dedicated travel bag or duffel, or just use a backpack when you're travelling? Deuter has an answer for those doubters: the Transit 65. And when you consider how long this German pack-making powerhouse has been producing high quality products – 109 years if you really want to know – it make sense they'd release a product that aims to be the definitive travel pack.

The Deuter Transit 65 (the number denoting the capacity in litres) has been designed to offer the best of all worlds in regards to someone who is looking to head off on that 'big trip' and wants to combine a number of outdoor activities during their journey. To this end, Deuter has ensured the Transit 65 includes some of the brand's iconic features, such as the Aircontact harness system (which zips away when not needed) and Deuter Super Polytex outer fabric (600-denier weight and PU coated).

For its size, the Transit 65 is light, coming in at just over 2.4kg in weight. This has been achieved via a combo of the Super Polytex fabric being used in high-wear areas, and Macro Lite 210 (a lighter nylon) in the areas of the pack less likely to cop scrapes and bangs. The main zip on the pack is U-shaped, allowing for excellent access to the main luggage section of the pack. The bottom zipped section is ideal for stowage of items such as sleeping bags or outer shells and is, like the main compartment, very easy to access. (All zips can be locked.)

The pack is very easy to lug around even when you're not taking advantage of the harness system; there are two grab handles and a carry-strap (detachable) that mean you can lug it around however best suits the location/circumstances you find yourself in on your trip. For me though, I wouldn't hesitate to always use the excellent Aircontact harness system. This is one of the best harness setup going around in my opinion, with its combo of effective ventilation, easily adjusted VariQuick system to ensure it fits your back length and comfy hip fins and what Deuter dubs "ActiveFit" shoulder straps. Add this harness system to the fact you can secure your pack's luggage via stabilising straps inside, and walking even short distances would see me going for the back harness every time. This doesn't mean I am dismissing the other options – the grab handles in particular seem super-strong and could most likely withstand being dragged around or used as leverage for luggage handlers at the airport and not fail.

The daypack zipped to the Transit 65 is a pretty basic jobbie but built to the usual high standards of Deuter's gear. Plus it is, again, very easy to unzip and use straight away with no faffing around. For those days touring around towns, etc., it is also sizeable enough to fit in an outer shell, lunch, and water with room to spare for a small camera and other personal belongings.

Whenever we have tested Deuter products at AG Outdoor, they've always just worked and, as this writer can attest, they just keep on working; one of my high-use daypacks is a Deuter model that has been treated with a little less care than it should have been, but it just keeps doing the job. The Transit 65 seems to be of the same ilk: a well-designed, well thought-out, highly versatile travel pack that could easily do duty as your 'one pack' and be just as effective on a multiday trek as it would be on a road trip – or a combo of both.

↑ The **Deuter Transit 65** is the perfect combo of travel bag and backpack, with the company's excellent Aircontact harness a standout.

The **Yakima Fullback 3** is easy to fit to either a sedan or hatchback, and holds three bikes securely.

GEAR TEST // YAKIMA FULLBACK 3

RRP$449 *www.yakima.com.au*
TESTED BY Justin Walker

THE ALL-NEW Yakima FullBack 3 is what is termed a strap rack, in that you use a number of straps (four) to secure the carrier to your vehicle. The FullBack 3 (the number obviously indicating the number of bikes carried) works with both sedans and hatchbacks, thanks to that simple but clever ratchet strap system. The FullBack 3 is – as with all Yakima gear – built tough. The steel frame features CNC-bent tubing that eliminates the need for welds, thus upping the strength factor. Steel does mean extra weight (the unit weighs in at 10.4kg; folded dimensions 63.5cm high and 76.2cm wide) but we'd take the additional strength and enhanced fatigue levels over aluminium any day for something like this.

Other features are new Zip Strips that include a padded section at the frame contact point. These are simple to fit as well; push them through from above to the clips underneath until it ratchets tight enough to hold your frame and you're done. Super-Cush anti-sway cradles do just that – minimise the swaying of loaded bikes in the carrier when you're on the road. The two rollers on the top section of the rack – and corresponding padding at its base (both top and bottom are marked clearly) ensure your vehicle's paintwork won't be marked – as do the rubber coated hooks for the four straps.

Fitting the FullBack 3 to your vehicle is dead-easy; an interlocking hub setup ensures you can open up the rack to a suitable angle for the rear of your vehicle, whether it's a sedan or hatchback. The dial hub for this adjustment is in the centre of the pivot section of the carrier and just needs you to push up with your thumb to unlock it, then you simply open it to the desired angle and then let the dial move back to its original position to lock the frame in place. Then you feed the top and bottom strap hooks through the hatch/boot lid, tighten them (and use the supplied bands to secure any excess strap length) and it's on. The two carrier arms also feature the unique interlocking hub setup and operate the same way when it comes to positioning them at the correct angle (slightly upward). Once you've got the arms out in position, it's just a matter of placing your bikes on the padded cradles, securing the Zip Strips and anti-sway cradles and you're all good to go. The anti-sway cradles are more than a gimmick; during testing we compared the bike movement with and without these cradles secured and they do make a marked difference when it comes to minimising sway. (One last impressive feature is the locking setup, with a cable leading back through your hatch/boot lid, ensuring the rack cannot just be lifted off the vehicle.)

In the past, I have always been slightly dubious as to how secure and functional strap racks are; my preferred method of bike transport has always been either a hitch-based solution for multiple bikes, or a roof-based one for a single rig. However, this FullBack 3 has more than convinced me of its viability as an option for bike transport. The fact that it is very quick to set up and take off your vehicle, is versatile to fit either a sedan or hatch, doesn't need roof-racks or a hitch for use, is built tough, and it packs down compact for storage in your garage, sees the Yakima FullBack 3 present a positive case for purchase.

GEAR TEST // GARMIN EDGE 820

RRP$549 *www.garmin.com.au*
TESTED BY Mike Ellott

AFTER FIVE MONTHS of testing, the 820 is exactly the GPS I've been looking for. It perfectly fits my needs, whether I am commuting to work, in a club race or just keeping the k's ticking over every week.

The size of the device is finally as it should be. It sits nicely on my bike stem and not too small to navigate the multiple touch screens on offer. If you are familiar with the Garmin inter-face there is not much change here, swipe right to find familiar training, maps and screens to fit your purpose.

Now, this might all be sounding a little familiar and not really enough reason to upgrade, but thankfully there are some worthy additions to mention.

The computer easily links to your smart phone, as a result you are alerted to incoming calls and can easily read incoming texts on the move from the GPS.

In addition to this, thanks to the bluetooth connectivity, you can now upload and view your finished ride to your Strava feed, all within two taps of the touch screen. This basically means you can view your on road achievements at the coffee shop at the end of your ride.

The GroupTrack feature has the ability to link a number of 820 computers together, so when viewing the map screen you can see where your mates are on the road. Sorry to say I never got to see this in action, mainly because my mates have a varied and dated way to record their rides. But, I can see it being useful if you are a member of a passionate racing/club culture.

It really is a little computer with a lot to offer and even boasts the ability to become more personalised with it's IQ function - this is effectively a Garmin app store. Here you will find data fields to download from the connect store. Some of the apps are better than others, 'Battery life estimate' which shows you how much power you have left in actual time is a favorite of mine.

The compatibility of Garmins sister products 'Vector 2' pedals and 'Varia Rearview Radar' with the 820 Edge makes this a GPS well worth investing in. I know I will be using it for a very long time.

The **Garmin Edge 820** is packed with the latest tech and links to your smartphone or computer easily.

lastshot

WHO: Unknown Paddle Boarder
WHERE: Yeppoon, Southern Great Barrier Reef, Central Queensland
PHOTOGRAPHER: Lincoln Bertoli

WHY: Yeppoon skirts the famous Southern Great Barrier Reef and is home to arguably the most northern surf breaks in Australia. However Central Queensland's mercurial wet season has started much later than usual this year, and the heavy rain generally makes for perfect paddling conditions the morning after.

"After a heavy storm, I'm usually lucky enough to get on the water before sunrise, if the tides are right, and sneak in a 3 or 4km paddle around the headland before starting work," photographer Lincoln Bertoli says.

"The sky was still rumbling on this particular morning in and clouds were closing in from the south as a I turned back for the mouth of Ross Creek where my car - and perhaps more importantly coffee and camera - were waiting for me.

The brooding cloud cover, coupled with the greying black rock wall and striping band of clear sky, framed another lone paddler snaking his way back to dry land, and I happily squeezed a few frames just before the rain set in once again."

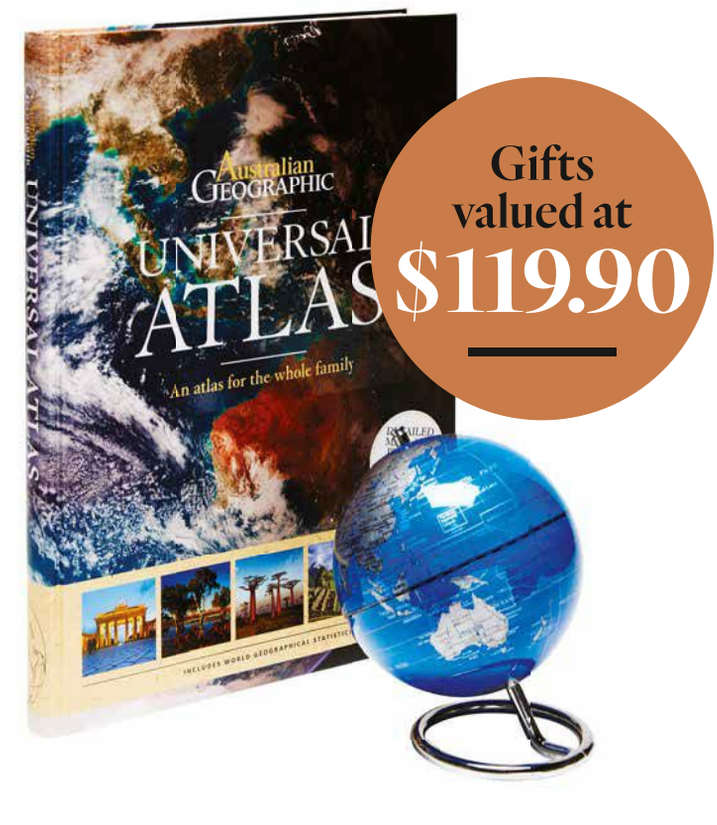
Australian Geographic Outdoor

Got a great adventure shot and story?
Send it to us with "Last Shot" in the subject line to *outdoor@bauer-media.com.au*

NEXT ISSUE JULY-AUG
ON SALE JULY 13, 2017

Australian Geographic

Subscribe and receive TWO FREE GIFTS



Gifts valued at $119.90

Universal Atlas

Continents and oceans, mountains and lakes, rivers and cities: with the *Australian Geographic Universal Atlas* and globe, you can explore the whole world. Featuring world map overviews, detailed country maps, and statistical profiles on each country, there'll be no end to your exploring. Whether you're studying, planning adventures or just curious, the *Universal Atlas* is the ideal reference for the whole family.

SUBSCRIBE OR RENEW your subscription to AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC via pay as you go and you will pay only $12 per issue – a saving of 19 per cent off the retail price. Plus, receive a copy of our new book, Universal Atlas, and a globe, valued at $119.90.

YOUR SUBSCRIPTION INCLUDES

- **$12 PER ISSUE** of AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC – via pay as you go
- **AVOID** big upfront payments
- **NEVER** miss an issue
- **FREE DELIVERY** to your home each issue

+TWO FREE gifts valued at $119.90

ALREADY A SUBSCRIBER?
Extend your subscription now to receive these **exclusive gifts**!

magshop.com.au/agg705 or call 1300 555 176 and quote M1705AGG

For Terms and Conditions, visit magshop.com.au/agg705. Please see contents page for the location of Bauer Media's Privacy Notice. If you do not want your information provided to any organisation not associated with this promotion, please indicate this clearly at the time of subscription. The offer is valid from 11/05/17 until 28/06/17 to Australian Residents only. The offer includes an Australian Geographic book, Universal Atlas, and a world globe, valued at $119.90, with every paid one-, six- or 12-issue subscription. Please allow four weeks for delivery for gifts. Free gifts are sent to purchaser of the subscription. Subscription copies do not receive free gifts offered at retail. Automatic renewal: After the first payment of $12 for one issue the

To find inspiration, call 00800 100 200 30 or visit **MySwitzerland.com**