

GREAT
LONG
DISTANCE WALKS

BIBBULMUN
TRACK, WA
(PART 1)

OUTDOOR ODYSSEY

Great Walks clocks up the kays in the first part of our two-part Bibbulmun Track special.

WORDS AND PHOTOS [LAURA WATERS \(SOULTREKKERS.COM.AU\)](http://SOULTREKKERS.COM.AU)



Loving the views on
the Bibbulmun.



“THIS IS A JOURNEY THROUGH AN ANCIENT LAND LEFT LARGELY UNTOUCHED OVER THE MILLENNIA BY VOLCANIC OR GLACIAL DISRUPTION.”



THERE are usually some benefits to hiking a particular trail at any given time of the year – perhaps watching the landscape transform with the seasons, fewer visitors or a changing light. But there can be few places better to be, and few times better to be there, than Western Australia’s Bibbulmun Track in spring.

Arguably Australia’s best long-distance trail, the ‘Bibb’ winds 1003km from Kalamunda in the Perth Hills to Albany on the south coast, and in spring the region explodes with wildflowers in a riot of colour and fragrance.

This is a journey through an ancient land left largely untouched over the millennia by volcanic or glacial disruption. Isolated by ocean and desert, plants have been left to their own devices, evolving under a highly variable climate that challenged them to adapt. It’s why the region is one of the world’s most bio-diverse with almost 80% of the plant species here not found elsewhere.

There are more than 12,000 different types of wildflowers listed for the state and more being discovered each year.

The first step

I begin in early September, embarking solo on a journey I expect to take around 55 days. The route is largely wilderness, occasionally passing through small towns for a food resupply, and the first leg between Perth and Dwellingup is the longest. Carrying nine days of food to last me the 211km I head out into the Darling Ranges, a low escarpment running parallel with the coastline, and almost immediately the flowers begin. All around me appears landscaped, as though I’m walking through a native plant nursery – a perfectly balanced arrangement of granite boulders, grasstrees, red scoria paths, and grey leaf litter spread like mulch between clumps of wildflowers. I snap

away on my camera, more amazed as each day passes, dazzled by pockets of yellow, white, blue, pink and purple blooms.

Every day I am shadowed by the mournful call of flocks of black cockatoos with tails of red, yellow and white, moving from treetop to treetop to feed on seeds. Scarlet robins are plentiful, contrasting against yellow wattle. Kangaroos and the occasional emu flit through trees, and overhead wedgetail eagles soar with wingtips splayed.

One campsite is called “Waaalegh” (pronounced Wallich), translating in local language to place of the wedge-tailed eagle. The trail has a strong indigenous connection and is named after the Bibbulmun people, a sub-group of the Noongar, who first inhabited this southwest corner of the state. Records show that the Bibbulmun people walked long distances for ceremonial gatherings and so it seemed fitting to name a modern pilgrimage

ADAPT TO YOUR ENVIRONMENT

AIRZONE



after them, hopefully giving hikers an opportunity to develop a spiritual connection with the land also. For this journey walkers follow the Waugal, a symbol of the Rainbow Serpent, seen as the creator of the universe – black snake on a yellow triangle.

Rising up

The Darling Ranges form the hilliest part of the entire trail, punctuated by a series of stunning granite domed peaks. Though not overly high, the views from these mounts are unhindered in all directions, unveiling spectacular aspects of the vast treed plains below. These enormous knobs of granite become a favourite place of mine to rest and ponder, to listen to the distant shriek of birds or to spy the quick dash of an ornate crevice dragon. Even on solid rock the wildflowers manage to gain a foothold amongst cracks and beds of moss.

Above left:
Expansive views from
Boonerring Hill.

Above: A valley on
fire with wattle.



Lowe
alpine

www.lowealpine.com.au



On Mt Cuthbert I lay on my back gazing at the clouds overhead, watching them explode and collapse, swirling in the wind. I reach the highest point of the White Horse Hills not long after sunrise on a chill, still morning. Pools of water in the granite reflect the deep blue of the cloudless sky above and I linger as long as the cold temperatures will allow me.

Mt Cooke is the highest point of the trail at 582m. I climb through morning fog to the main ridge that runs for about three kilometres, undulating between large grey boulders stacked on top of each other, and when the mist clears I see that half the mountain has been consumed by swathes of wattle.

With tired feet but an uplifted soul, I walk into Dwellingup to rest and recuperate. A day off gives me a chance to put my feet up in the shade, to fill up on hearty meals offered in cafes and the corner pub, and to collect my food box for the section ahead.

Flower power

South of Dwellingup the trail follows the Murray River for a while. Trailing coral vine covers the forest like some vast pink and orange camo net. On other days it's the white clematis or purple native wisteria that dominate. I start seeing orchids, lots of them. They have weird and wonderful shapes with names to match, like bunny, donkey, snail and spider. I'm not especially botanically minded but it's impossible not to be excited at discovering yet another one of nature's amazing creations. I become a like treasure hunter, seeking out new species, comparing photos and guidebooks with fellow hikers at days end to identify them all. With around 350 orchid species in this southwest corner of the state, there are plenty to find.



“TRAILING CORAL VINE COVERS THE FOREST LIKE SOME VAST PINK AND ORANGE CAMO NET.”

Two weeks in, I hit ‘peak flower’. One valley is so packed with brilliant yellow wattle it looks like it’s on fire. Beyond it, I push my way through jarrah woodland stuffed with orange, yellow and white blooms, the air heavy with fragrance, thankful that I don’t suffer from hayfever. It’s unexpectedly overwhelming. I feel like I’m drowning in flowers.

It’s not all about flowers though. There are a huge variety of other species as the trail heads south through a changing climate and terrain. Zamia palms spout from the ground, often cradling two or three enormous seed cones shaped like pineapples. One minute I’m hiking over soft white sand through thickets of grasstrees, banksia and palms, the next its dry wandoo woodland. One morning I hike a short section of swampland dotted with dozens of dew-covered spider webs hanging in the trees like dream catchers.

Into the forest

Just 350km south of Perth, the forests close in and the temperatures are noticeably cooler. Over a couple of days so much rain is dumped it feels like buckets of water being thrown on me, but at least there is always a dry shelter waiting at day’s end. It’s one of the things that make the Bibbulmun so

Above: Watching the sunrise from the White Horse Hills.

Left: The Bibbulmun offers many hours of contemplative walking.

ADAPT TO YOUR ENVIRONMENT

AIRZONE



FEATURING
**EXPERT VENTILATION
TECHNOLOGY**

With its sophisticated ventilation technology AirZone helps you keep your cool. The suspended mesh system maximises breathability and adapts to you, supporting your load.

Whichever path you tread, adapt to your environment with AirZone.

02 9417 5755



WALK NOTES | BIBBULMUN TRACK, WA

Time: 6-8 weeks | **Distance:** 1003km | **Grade:** Challenging



Above:
Bridge over the
Murray River.

good, particularly for those wanting to keep logistical challenges to a minimum. Three-sided shelters are spaced roughly a day apart, offering sleeping platforms for 8-15 people, water tanks and drop toilets. These comforts, combined with the availability of a series of maps and comprehensive step-by-step trail guidebooks, make it a very straightforward hike for those heading out on their first long-distance walk.

Rolling out a mattress al fresco on the sleeping platforms has its benefits – within minutes of arrival you can be reclining in bed, gazing at parrots flitting through the treetops or watching kangaroos and emus wander through camp – but for those who prefer a little privacy there are tent sites too. As the nights start to chill I opt to use both tent and shelter. With overnight temperatures at freezing or even below I need all the protection I can get. Laying in bed, I find myself avoiding breathing too deeply at the cold air that chills me from the inside like an icy drink, and for the first time ever my emergency space blanket is dragged out of its little plastic pouch to provide a little extra boost of warmth.

It's a gamble to know quite when to start this hike. Too early in spring and you'll cop some chilly nights but too late and you'll be finishing in the harsh heat of summer. Evidence is everywhere of the many bushfires that have roared through this part of the state – in the blackened tree trunks and re-built huts – and you certainly wouldn't want to be anywhere nearby when one hits.



Above: Waalegh camp.

“JARRAH ARE THE WEATHERED OLD MEN OF THE FOREST, BEAUTIFULLY GNARLED AND TWISTED.”

NEED TO KNOW

There is no fee to hike this trail and campsites need no pre-booking. Tackle it in sections or do it in one 6-8 week push for the full through-hike experience. The trail can be walked in either direction.

All trail towns have a store of some description but some smaller ones have limited stock and can be expensive to resupply, and in these cases you're better off sending a food parcel to your accommodation provider.

Best time to hike is spring and autumn. The trail can be very hot over summer and fire danger is a real risk. Winter is also recommended if you're hardy enough and well equipped for cold and sometimes wet conditions.

Getting there

A local bus will take you 30 minutes from Perth to the northern trail terminus in Kalamunda. From the southern terminus in Albany catch a Trans WA bus for a 6 ½ hour journey back to Perth, \$65. transwa.wa.gov.au

Maps, guidebooks and all other info

Visit bibbulmuntrack.org.au for comprehensive information and planning advice. Maps and guidebooks can be ordered from the Shop page.

Tall timbers

A friend meets me in Balingup to hike the next 160km leg through to Pemberton, a section characterised by damp moss covered forest, rivers rushing over granite slabs and enormous trees reaching high into the sky. There is the marri, tall and slender, seeping streaky red gum from its trunks and dropping sizeable honkey nuts that lurk dangerously under leaf litter like golf balls. Jarrah are the weathered old men of the forest, beautifully gnarled and twisted, and then there's the yarri too. But it's the karri that gets much of the glory in these parts, tall and arrow straight with pale trunks that rise like ghosts from the darkened forest. Native to southwestern WA, these eucalypts have long been a favourite of loggers and the sawmill at Pemberton closed only a year ago after more than a century of operation.

Before we reach Pemberton the trail leads us through heritage-listed Donnelly River Village, roughly the halfway point of the entire trail. Formed around a timber mill built in the 1950's, the village comprised of 35 workers cottages, a boarding house, school, butcher and general store. The mill closed in 1978 and now a community group collectively owns the entire village, with houses rented out to holidaymakers.

The biggest draw card here though is the wildlife. The adoption of a wild emu as a pet decades ago has led to subsequent generations of emus, kangaroos and green twenty-eight parrots becoming tame enough to hand feed, and the menagerie gathers daily around the cute wooden general store, hustling for food pellets from children.

After 26 days on the move I throw my pack down in the boarding house, now a converted bunkhouse for hikers, and sit out on the porch with my feet up. An emu and his chicks saunter peacefully along the road in the late afternoon sun and plumes of smoke start rising from chimneys. As I sip on a glass of red wine I reminisce about the fabulous hiking the trail has offered so far and wonder what the second half has in store for me. 🌀

Read pt2 of Laura's Bibbulmun walk next issue!