

SPECIAL ANZAC CENTENARY ISSUE

GREAT WALKS

AUSTRALIA'S BUSHWALKING MAGAZINE

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

Australian Alps Walking Track

Tassie's Acropolis peak

Great Himalaya Trail

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Grose Valley

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PNG's latest WWII trails

Exploring the Light

Horse Memorial

PLUS

How to walk 800km

15 outer shell jackets

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Bushwalking with babies

Great walking destinations

Mount Lofty Ranges, D'Aguiar NP, Dandenong NP, Fromelles
Cradle Mountain-Lake St Claire NP, Black Cat Track

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Gear, guts and gumption

Great Walks looks at what it takes to hike the iconic long-distance Australian Alps Walking Track.

The idea to do the Australian Alps Walking Track (AAWT) came late 2013. We started our hike in Walhalla in October 2014. We walked 800km and it took 51 days. In between lay a year of preparation and planning. We needed equipment that withstood the harsh and changing weather conditions, food that was nutritious and lightweight without being repetitive, and other items that would make us fully self-sufficient. Sonja had to pitch the idea to her employer early on, so her company could make arrangements to cover her ten weeks of leave.

Equipment

We took a three-person, four-season tent that enabled us to keep our packs inside and cook within the vestibule. For their excellent weight-to-warmth ratio, we chose sleeping bags with a

temperature rating of -10°C and a weight of 1200gm each.

We used a Steripen for sterilising water on the track. A PLB helped us to let family and friends know our location. Thanks to a solar charger and 12 rechargeable batteries, we never had to restore two spare lithium batteries which we also carried, just in case.

In addition to the usual set of clothing we took gloves, merino mid-layers, thermals, fleece jackets, and a second pair of shoes for crossing rivers. Nordic poles, a methylated spirit cooker and a comprehensive first aid kit complemented our gear. Except for the sleeping mats, everything fitted into our backpacks of 80 and 90L respectively.

Food and food depots

There is not even the most basic infrastructure along or close to the AAWT. That is why our food supply needed to be self-

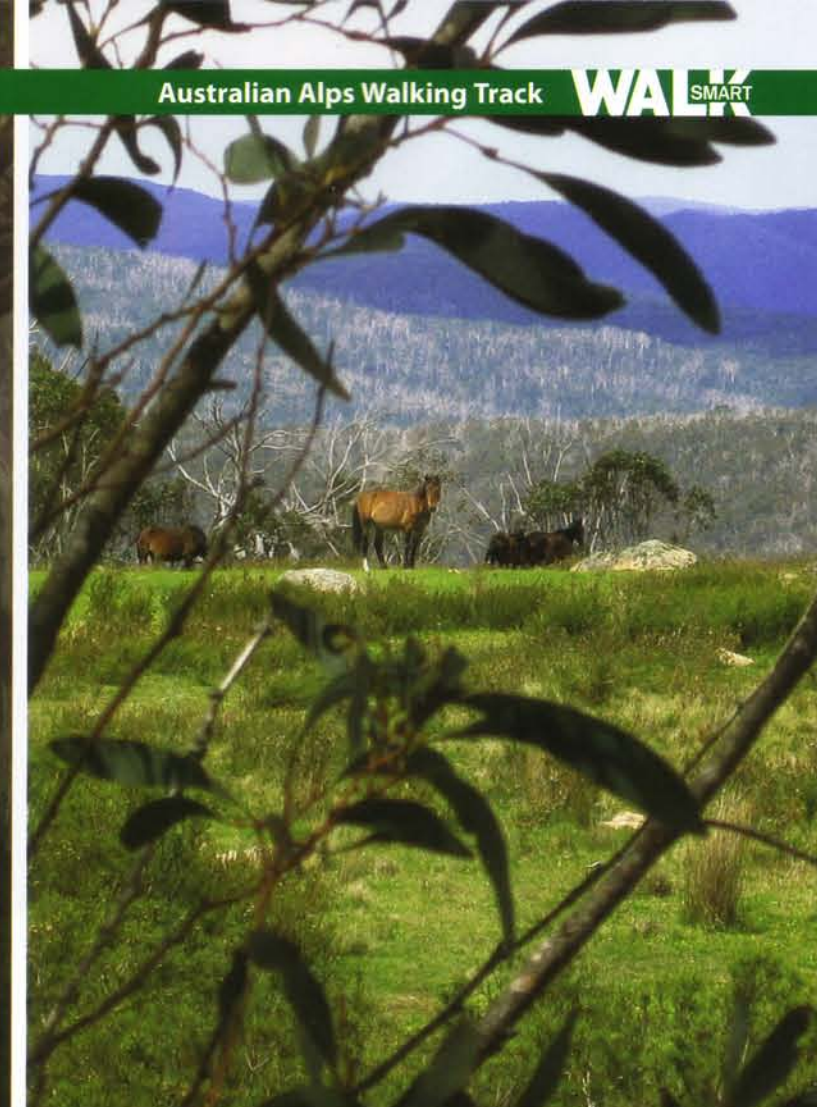
sufficient. We chose food that was high calorific, low weight, non-perishable and enjoyable. Based on the average Australian calorie consumption guideline of about 2000kcal per person/day, we assumed a 3000kcal/day consumption for our trip. A full day's portion was not to weigh more than 1kg per person.

Our typical day started with muesli, powdered milk and tea for breakfast, and a muesli bar for morning tea. Lunch consisted of wraps (with salami or sardines, and cheese), couscous (with tuna and sun dried olives), or scrambled egg (with biltong and freeze-dried vegetables). Nuts and dried fruit (mango, papaya, oranges) made up afternoon tea, and an assortment of 20(!) different dishes constituted dinner. Chef Sonya Muhlsimmer, in the middle of writing a new recipe book for bushwalkers, provided us with recipes for pasta puttanesca, dumpling hotpot

and camp stroganoff, along with desserts like fresh chocolate cake and crumbles.

Most foods, such as pasta, rice, powdered milk and egg, vegetables and spices were sourced from a local grocery store. Specialised stores assisted with freeze dried ingredients and fruits.

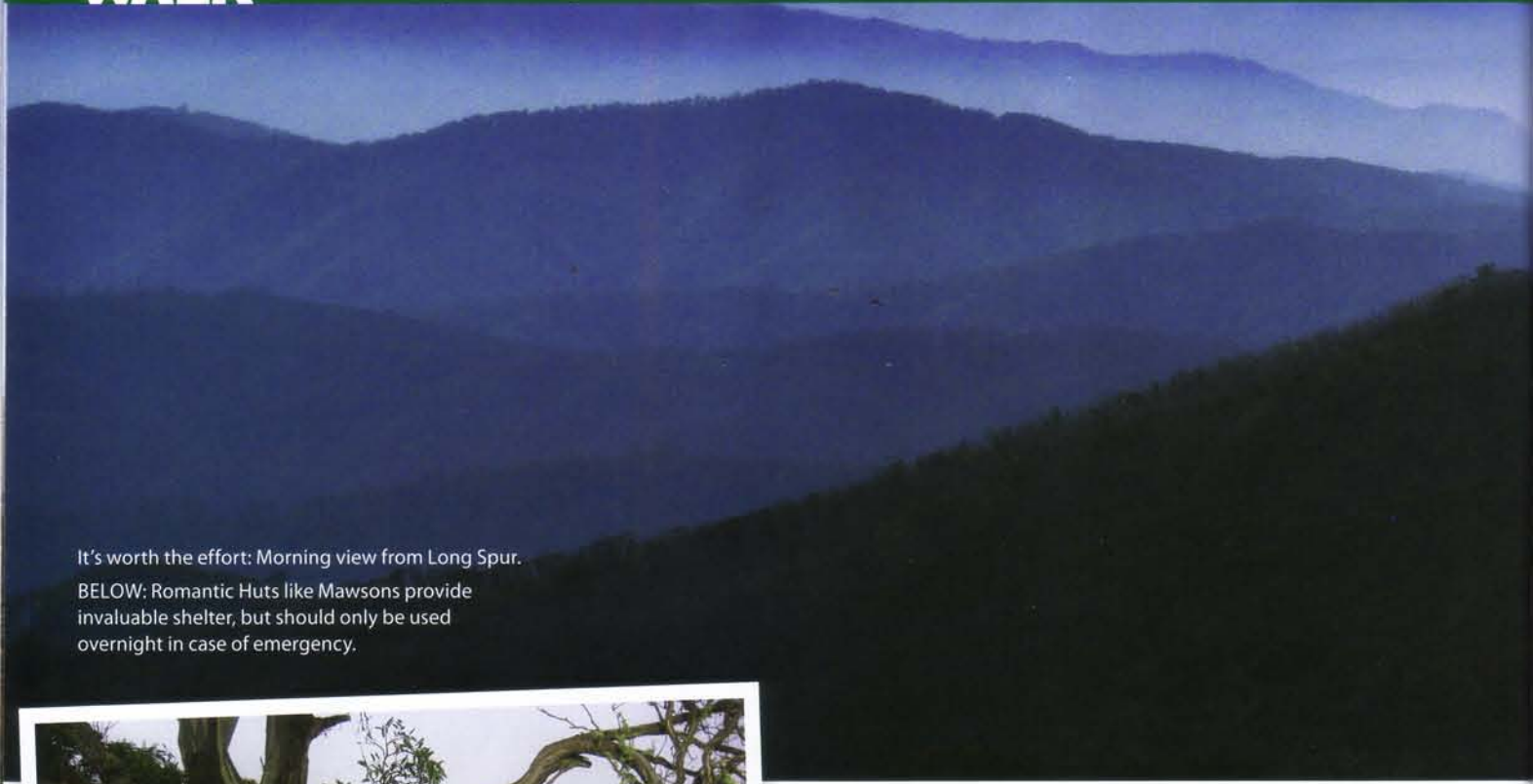
We vacuum-packed, labelled and allocated our individual portions over three weekends, to finally store them into tamper-proof containers. These were allocated to nine designated food drops, between four and nine hiking days apart. These locations were dependent on the accessibility of roads and the intersection with the AAWT. It took nearly five days and 1,800km to drive as we deposited the drops on the way down to the start. The containers were hidden under branches and bushes – not



Fog closing in on Mt McDonald Range.

ABOVE RIGHT: One of many highlights: Watching brumbies in the wild.

RIGHT: Food preparation at home.



It's worth the effort: Morning view from Long Spur.
BELOW: Romantic Huts like Mawsons provide invaluable shelter, but should only be used overnight in case of emergency.



buried, because National Parks prefer soil to be undisturbed. Thankfully, none of our food had perished or been touched by either humans or animals.

Water

There are plenty of dry ridges along the AAWT and even though there are water sources available away from these ridges they can be depleted towards the end of summer. Taking this into consideration, we started the hike in early spring and were able to refill our bottles (about six litres per person) at least once a day. However, not every source shown in our guide actually had water. We spent 90 minutes searching for water in the gully below Murray Hut Site in the first week of November, but in vain. Staying at Mt Wills Hut six days later, the water tank was so close to empty we had to "fish" water from the bottom with a rope and a pot.

Navigation

A main misunderstanding about the AAWT is the notion that it is a designated track that leads every step from its start in Walhalla, Vic to its end in Tharwa, ACT. Instead, this 'track' follows some well-maintained trails, a lot of barely visible foot pads (a track - not necessarily an official one - formed by wear and tear of multiple

people hiking it) or heavily overgrown fire access roads, and it very often goes through scrub and bush or wide grassy plains with no pad at all – especially when choosing some of its most scenic and rewarding variants in the Snowy Mountains' region, as we did.

Quality of marking and cairning along the way varies significantly. Thanks to a series of new AAWT markers, there are now quite a number of sections where it is practically impossible to get lost. On the other hand, all such navigational aid is lacking along several stretches through Wilderness Areas, and will not be there in the future either, as it is the Parks' strategy to keep these areas pristine. Here, feral pig and brumby tracks can easily trick hikers, leading them into nowhere.

A compass, altimeter and a set of topographic maps with a scale of at most 1:50,000 are therefore necessary equipment for the AAWT. Additionally, our adventure of 818km has shown there is considerably less stress and uncertainty during the hike when familiarising oneself with the route at home already. Walking the AAWT in one's mind by reading maps carefully and repeatedly, and learning to translate their information into scenery and natural conditions can help provide a knowledge of the walk similar to having been there before.

When using a GPS, it can prove disastrous to blindly rely on recorded tracks from the internet. However, taking such data as a starting point for programming your own route by crosschecking it with digital maps and satellite views (Google Earth) has shown to be a smart and time-efficient strategy for us. Also, doing your own programming assists in 'learning' about the walk, and is similar to intensely studying maps.

In the wilderness, the increased accuracy of most hand-held GPS devices will even allow walking in fog – a no-no when using traditional instruments. However, such a strategy is only safe when displaying considerable respect to obstacles that might conflict with the route: slippery cliffs, rocky sections, snow fields or overgrown passages. To assist in finding a way not only around them, but also back to the route, the via-points on the GPS should never be programmed further than 50-100m apart.

Last but not least, taking a GPS onto the walk must not mean saving the additional weight of a traditional compass, altimeter

and paper maps. A GPS is a fragile device. It can break down unexpectedly and depends on batteries that might run out. Exclusively relying on a GPS in navigation can, when becoming defunct, cause even more danger and uncertainty than it helps to avoid when working properly.

Being lost ...

... along the AAWT demands no different behaviour than being lost in any of Australia's remote areas. Firstly, don't panic. Secondly, if you still know the way back, make it to the last point where you had orientation. Check out what went wrong there (or afterwards). If you cannot make it back, take plenty of time to figure out where you are. If you have an idea, try to prove it wrong, as this provides additional certainty. If you are in a group, discuss opinions about scenic points you can see, comparing them with the map, distances and so on, and try to establish a position everyone agrees on. If it justifies the effort, head to a point with views that might give more orientation. Thirdly, after heading on, check the theory of your position at regular instances.

Bad weather

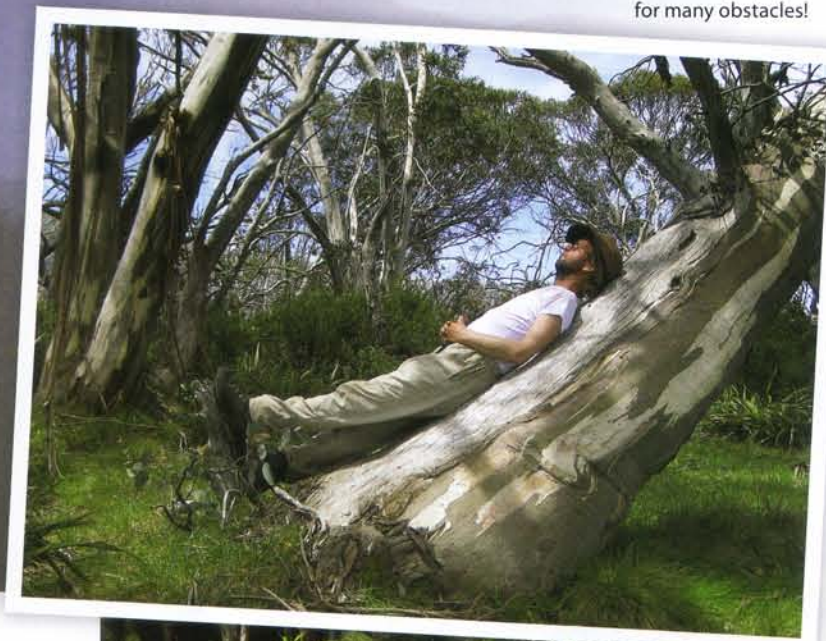
Except for turning a hike on the AAWT into a race, there is not much reason against waiting for improvement, once the weather deteriorates. Drying equipment, cleaning up the mess of a soggy day causes considerable effort and often costs more time than what was saved by walking on. Knowing some basic cloud formations and what they mean in relation to forecasting helped us to plan ahead. Having such foresight and, for example, pitching a tent at a safe spot before a thunderstorm starts may perhaps not provide with as good a yarn as fighting through a series of spectacular flashes and masses of pouring water. But not everybody survives that, and only the living can tell.

Day to Day Life

Our alarm would go off at daylight around 5 am. We took plenty of time getting ready and were usually on the track between 7 and 8 am. When possible, we pitched the tent an hour or two before sunset so we could enjoy nature and the scenery, cook and eat outside. Cold rivers and creeks replaced hot showers. Every

BELOW: Resting helps lift the mood and enhance endurance.

BOTTOM: Be prepared for many obstacles!



6-8 days we had a scheduled rest-day and we managed to wash our clothes twice during the trip.

There were literally no arguments on the track, because we had allocated different responsibilities to each of us. Jakob was in charge of programming the route and GPS, general navigation and giving directions, while Sonja had the function of a scout, finding the best route between two points. Sonja was in charge of food and nutrition, while Jakob did the cooking. Jakob kept a diary on the condition of the track, while Sonja focussed her diary on the daily experience.

NEED TO KNOW

For info about hiking the Australian Alps Walking Track visit www.australialps.environment.gov.au. To read more about Sonja and Jakob's trip visit www.hikeforhuts.org.