

THE BEGINNERS' GUIDE TO HIKING

The founder of Coastrek, **Di Westaway**, wants to get more women outdoors and moving, and says the hiking adventures are more about improving mental health and building friendships than showing off fitness



Coastrek founder Di Westaway, left, at North Curl Curl; participants at Margaret River, WA; and, below left, Gordons Bay at Coogee is part of the Coastrek trail. Pictures: Tim Hunter, Daniela Tommasi Photography, John Appleyard

I'm here to tell you: this isn't for hikers. It's for the women who don't see themselves as one ... yet. There is a quiet revolution happening on our trails. Over the past few years, hiking has surged in popularity, evolving from a niche hobby for "outdoorsy" types into Australia's favourite way to recharge.

In fact, participation in bushwalking and hiking has grown by nearly 30 per cent over the past decade, as more of us trade the fluorescent lights of the gym for the dappled sunlight of the bushland.

But despite its popularity, many women still think "hikers" are a different breed: people with expensive GPS watches, knees of steel and a knack for navigation.

If the word hiking makes you think of getting lost in the wilderness, dodging snakes or spiders or – worst of all – running out of chocolate, let's reset that image right now. If you can walk, you can hike.

Whether you are navigating a career, raising a family or moving through the transitions of midlife, hiking is the ultimate "guilt-free" multi-tasking tool. It is medicine for your mind and a playground

for your body. Hiking is in your nature, and it's my mission to show you how to claim in. No pressure. No perfection. Just fun, fitness, friends and fresh air.

WHAT HIKING ACTUALLY IS (AND WHAT IT ISN'T)

Let's start with the basics, because fear alone stops many women before they even begin.

If you can walk around the block, you can hike.

■ **Walking:** Everyday movement, usually on footpaths, roads and hard, flat surfaces in urban areas.

■ **Hiking:** Walking on natural trails in beautiful locations to energise yourself through nature.

■ **Trekking:** Challenging long-distance hiking that creates natural exhilaration along with mindful meditation.

■ **Hiking events:** These are mini adventures that help you prepare for a hiking challenge and then support you every step of the way. Australia's most popular, and scenic hiking event is called Coastrek.

Coastrek is a 20-50km team trekking challenge for fun, fitness, friendship, fresh air and fundraising.

Coastrek isn't a race. It's more about talking than trekking.

It's a team hiking challenge designed to motivate you to get

fitter and feel fabulous in beautiful locations around Australia.

And that's the key message here: Hiking is not about competition, it's about camaraderie.

It's not about being fit, it's about getting fitter with friends.

WHY HIKING WORKS (ESPECIALLY FOR WOMEN)

Hiking is one of the most powerful – and also

wellbeing, resilience and mood while reducing depression, anxiety and stress – particularly for women. Time in nature has been shown to:

- Reduce stress, anxiety and depression.
- Improve mood and mental clarity.
- Improve cognitive functioning and creativity.
- **Physical benefits**
- Cardiovascular fitness
- Strength and power
- Bone density
- Endurance
- Immunity

All without the boredom, pressure and expense of the gym.

■ **Social benefits**

- Hiking is talking.
- Hiking with friends is therapy.
- Hiking with friends in nature is medicine.
- For many women, hiking is the ultimate girls' day out: no fuss, no makeup, no frills, no bad jokes. Just pure fun in the sun.
- For women in midlife, post-natal and perimenopause years, hiking is a powerful reset.

HOW TO START (EVEN IF YOU'RE BUSY, TIRED OR UNMOTIVATED)

You don't need hours of free time or endless motivation.

■ **How often?**

Two to three times a week including one maxi and two mini hikes.

■ **How long?**

Twenty minutes for the minis and an hour or two for the maxis.

■ **Where?**

- Local walking tracks
- Coastal paths
- Bush trails
- Botanic gardens
- Anywhere in nature
- **Who to walk with**
- A friend
- Your baby in a backpack
- Your teenagers
- Your dog
- Your girl gang
- Your mum.

Busy mums, working women, tired women – this is for you. It's multi-tasking on steroids because you can combine fun, fitness, friends and fresh air.

It's a guilt-free way to put your own oxygen mask on first.

If you wait until life is calm, you'll never start.

WHAT TO WEAR (AND WHAT YOU DON'T NEED)

You do not need fancy gear to begin.

■ **Clothing**

- Comfortable activewear you can move in.
- A breathable top.
- Leggings or shorts.
- A light jacket for wind or rain.

■ **Footwear**

- Comfortable trail runners or sneakers are perfect.
- You don't need hiking boots unless you're on rough terrain in extreme weather. (I walk in HOKAs when I'm doing a big trek.)

■ **Socks.** For a beginner, any socks will do, but for your one to two-hour Sunday morning hike, sport socks or Injinjis (performance socks) would help prevent blisters better.

■ **What you don't need to be chic**

- Matching outfits
- Expensive brands
- Technical gear from day one.

- Increase distance or time gradually by 10 per cent.
- Add hills gradually and hike them gently to start.
- Make walking, even just 10 minutes, a daily practice.
- Take a rest/recovery day including yoga, stretching, hot/cold plunge, sauna.
- If you feel tired, slow down.
- If you miss a day, move on.
- If you struggle with motivation, sign up for a hiking event, and when it's over, sign up for another.

OUTDOOR CONDITIONS AND SAFETY

Being prepared builds confidence.

- Check the weather.
- Start earlier in the day.
- Stick to marked trails.
- Tell someone where you're going.
- Walk with friends.
- Safety isn't about fear, it's about smart planning.

MINDSET: THE REAL GAME CHANGER

Hiking is a mind, body, spirit workout, not just a walk.

Showing up matters most.

Walking and talking reduces stress. Silence restores your nervous systems. Nature does what no screen ever can: it slows you down and calms your mind.

You don't have to feel motivated to start. You just have to start.

THE ENDING I WISH I'D HEARD SOONER

Hiking didn't just change my fitness; it changed my life.

- It showed me that I could keep going when things felt hard.
- That consistency beats motivation.
- That community makes everything easier.

And to the women reading this who feel too busy, too unfit, too late ... I see you. I was you.

You don't need more discipline. You don't need more time. You don't need to become someone else.

You just need one hike with your buddy. And then another. You can do this.

And you don't have to do it alone.

The 2026 Coastrek season kicks off on March 27 on Sydney's Northern Beaches, with events rolling out nationally across iconic coastal and wild locations. Join thousands of others reclaiming their health, confidence and connection, one step at a time. Women can sign up now to a 2026 Coastrek event. Registrations for Sydney's event close tomorrow. Sign up at coastrek.com.au