

Spectacular charity trek the mother of all walks



Part of the Coastrek route near Bunker Bay. Picture: Daniela Tommasi

MUM'S THE WORD

Coastrek claims its Dunsborough route is "certainly the wildest and most remote" of its locations. That certainly wasn't a joke, as LAURA NEWELL discovers

Giggling maniacally with one foot in a bush and the other suspended in mid-air trying to avoid a goanna carcass — all while a friend a few feet away shrieks "my boob is bleeding!" — I

remember the warning I had been given just days earlier: "It can be hairy out there."

The warning was from veteran hiker Di Westaway as she prepared me for a 20km adventure walk on the South West coast that she promised would change my life.

It was a big call and, honestly, I wasn't convinced.

The walk — from Cape Naturaliste lighthouse to Dunsborough — is a new route for Coastrek, the organisation Westaway unwittingly founded on her 40th birthday, and I had been asked to give it a go and help to

persuade the denizens of Perth to experience it for themselves in October.

As luck would have it, the weekend picked for my walk was that of my own 40th birthday. And so, roping in my friend Catherine for moral support, and bribed with the promise of a big spa-bath room at the glorious Pullman Bunker Bay Resort at the end of the day, I agreed to put my best foot forward — albeit with some grim reservations about my ability to pull off 20km in one afternoon.

Billed as Australia's most iconic hiking challenge, Coastrek describes the Dunsborough route as “certainly the wildest and most remote” of their locations, journeying “along some of the most idyllic coastal trails in the world”. They weren't joking.

Participants can choose between two distances — an all-day route of 35km traversing some of the Cape-to-Cape track, or new this year a twilight walk spanning 20km.

Normally, those taking part do so in a team of four with pre-organised stops and first aid help on hand as well as transport to and from the route. But unlike those taking part in the official Coastrek event, Catherine and I would be walking without the aid of a support team, so I organised a chat with Westaway as part of our preparation so I knew what we were letting ourselves in for.

It was also to warn her ahead of time that if I'm not at a desk, cleaning up after the dog or supervising reading homework, dinner or a bath for my five-year-old daughter, I'm a bit of a couch potato these days.

As we chatted on a video call, Westaway calmed my fears, telling me Coastrek started as a challenge to herself as she hit the big four zero — to get out more and clear her head as she struggled with loss of identity amid motherhood and the breakdown of her marriage — and that it was OK to find the walk a little daunting.

Now in her 60s, Westaway said

she never imagined her “impulsive decision” to climb a mountain would end up more than 20 years later with her heading up an

organisation facilitating five adventure walks across the country each year, with all the events this year raising cash for the Heart Foundation.

“I was heading for my 40s in a very, very dysfunctional marriage with two young children thinking that their life was pretty miserable — I was in a pretty bad place. And out of the blue, a friend's personal trainer invited me to join an extreme challenge to climb the highest mountain (Aconcagua) in the southern hemisphere, which was a mountain in South America, in the Andes,” she said.

“And I just thought, wow, that sounds like a ridiculous, amazing thing to do. And like a great way to ‘celebrate’ turning 40. So I signed up without having a clue what I was getting myself in for.

“And as you do when you're doing something scary and ridiculous, you invite your best friend to go up to join you. So I invited my girlfriend and the two of us went off on this extreme mountain climb.

“(We) just had the most extraordinary experience — both of us had a life-changing experience in different ways.”

But, in what comes as a surprise to me as we chat, Westaway didn't actually reach the top of the mountain.

“We were beginners, we were novices,” she laughs as if it was a totally obvious outcome. “Once we picked ourselves up and went, ‘Oh, we thought we were gonna be heroes’ and we weren't, we kind of regrouped.

“And for me, it means I had discovered a whole world of adventure that even a middle-age mum with young children could be part of. And not only was there a world out there

of adventure that I'd never contemplated, but also the adventure was something that would motivate me to get fit.”

Westaway said she'd let her fitness slide during her late 30s as she'd struggled with the inherent challenges motherhood.

“I'd been into fitness, I was a teacher, and I'd let it all slide and got into that working mum grind, I guess — not making time for yourself and just looking after everybody else,” she said.

In a desk job, at 30kg overweight and with my daily workout more normally involving lifting a glass of shiraz each evening rather than heading out for a jog, she was speaking my language.

“So this extreme adventure had got me again. And I was like ‘wow’, not only is there happiness after midlife marriage, and family responsibilities, but you can actually sort of reclaim, I guess, a sense of yourself and your identity as being something other than just a mum. And I don't mean that negatively — but for me, it felt a bit thankless, I guess.”

Having returned from her trek disappointed at not reaching the top, but not defeated, Westaway decided “I wanted more of that” and she thought she might not be alone.

“If I was feeling that way, there's probably other mums that were also feeling that way. So I put it out in the local school newsletter when my kids went to school. They were in primary school at the time.

“We got this little group of about eight of us together, and we started going out on a Monday night. We put the kids to bed and we'd go out at 7.30 and we'd put very big backpacks on and we'd hike around the bush of the Northern Beaches of Sydney for three hours to keep ourselves fit, but specifically for an adventure.

“So the first adventure was to climb Mount Kilimanjaro and the

next was to trek to Everest base camp. So we had these big, enormous goals.

“And that was what motivated us to go hiking at night while the kids were in bed and just squeeze these kinds of adventures around mum stuff.”

Westaway had obviously stumbled on to something powerful because the group kept on growing with some 150 women across Sydney. But she realised that planning adventures so far from home meant many women weren't able to take part, so she decided to start something closer to home.

That adventure was a 100km hike along the coast of Sydney.

“(I wanted) to see if I could entice more women to join because it wasn't a big overseas trip, so it meant it was affordable. And that turned into Coastrek.

“And I added a charity element because I realised that if you raise the money and some awareness for charitable cause, as part of your hiking adventure, then more people care about what you're doing. So it was this kind of unique combination of my passion for health and fitness, my interest in getting mums out, because I knew I needed that.

“And also my understanding that we could do more good on the planet if we attached ourselves to a cause.”

Well, she had me sold, even if I still doubted my fitness was even close to being up to the challenge.

And so, on an unseasonably sunny and warm day in May, Catherine — a friend I had met at a crochet class — and I headed out to the start of the new twilight trail

at Cape Naturaliste Lighthouse.

We began in high spirits, but we'd both be lying if we said it was easygoing the whole way. There were definitely points at which we considered calling our husbands (both having travelled down south with us, but having taken off to a string of wineries the moment we set out on the walking track) to pick us up earlier than planned.

Particularly challenging was the several kilometres spent walking on soft sand along Bunker Bay beach, and the subsequent steep climb up towards Eagle Bay as the sun beat down on us.

But, just as Westaway had foretold, the incredible views, frequent stops to tip sand out of our shoes and munch on lollies, our conversation and camaraderie kept us going.

Deep and meaningful conversations that in your 20s might be more commonly held in a nightclub toilet as you bemoan that last tequila shot have pretty much died out by the time you hit your 40s in favour of a brief scroll through social media or a hastily sent text message as you steal a custard cream into your mouth while hiding in the pantry so the five-year-old doesn't spot it.

But Westaway had promised the walk would change all that.

“We use it as a time of reflection,” she had said. “I think you're putting yourself into a situation where you are going to be courageous, you're going to bond with your girlfriend in a way that you might not have thought of.

“The conversations that flow from spending a whole day hiking out in nature with someone, they

are not like any other conversations you ever have.

“They go from the superficial to the deep. And it can be quite reflective and exploratory. And yeah, I think things come up that you really don't expect.”

While Catherine and I had been friends for a while, before this trip we hadn't spoken too much about our past, nor shared too many deep and meaningful moments — our conversations usually turning on details of crochet patterns or a sale at Spotlight.

But as we walked, helping each other navigate the sometimes very tricky terrain — which we followed through an app on my phone — we both expressed shock at some of the confessions we shared over the hours we spent on foot spanning our hopes, fears and the odd dirty joke.

It wasn't until we sat at dinner later that night though — having watched the sun set over the spectacular, still ocean in Dunsborough as we crossed the finish line triumphantly — that I realised Catherine now knew more about me than almost any other female friend.

We had laughed as one of us did something silly (catching a breast on a tree branch — Catherine), nearly cried in relief as we ran towards a precious toilet stop (eating something for lunch that doesn't agree with you — me), swore as we avoided spiky plant fronds and squealed as we slipped off wet rocks (both of us).

But more than all that we had put the world right with much of the conversation surrounding my feelings on turning 40 and Catherine, who is slightly older

than me, on her own landmark birthdays.

“You’re not just doing (the walk) randomly just because you think it’s a fun thing to do. You’re doing it at this turning point in your life,” Westaway had said to me.

While my legs were definitely not happy with me at the end of 20km of hard yakka without anywhere near the training Coastrek advise (and very handily offer when you sign up for the walk), I have to admit, she was right.

I came out of the walk with a very close friend, a new appreciation and respect for what my body can do and having seen some of the most jaw-droppingly gorgeous scenery the world has to offer at every turn.

So, if you are looking for a challenge that will change your own life for the better, strengthen your friendships and fitness, as well as doing a lot of good for a very worthy charity, this event might well be the one for you.

Laura Newell was a guest of Pullman Bunker Bay Resort, they have not seen or approved this story.

fact file

■ This year’s Coastrek Margaret River event will be held on October 27, 2023. To register your team of four, visit coastrek.com.au. Registration closes on September 17.

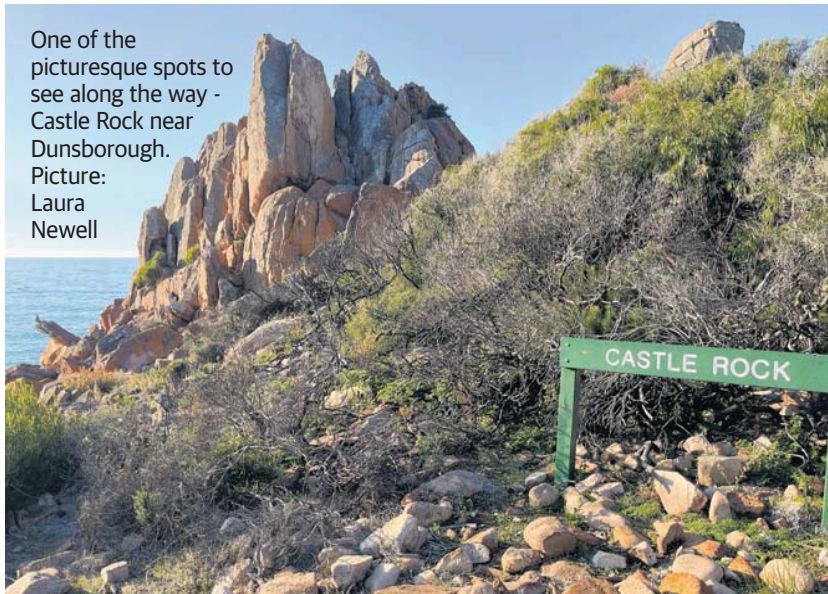


With Catherine Maher, right, near the end of their 20km adventure hike.



The scenery was stunning on this clear May day. Pictures: Laura Newell

One of the
picturesque spots to
see along the way -
Castle Rock near
Dunsborough.
Picture:
Laura
Newell



Di Westaway. Picture: Rob Mulally

