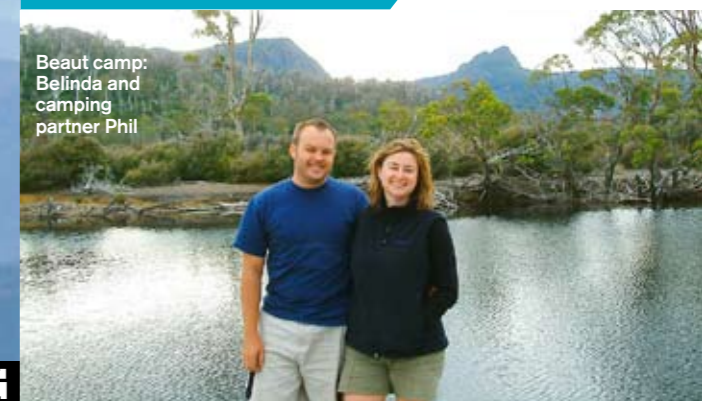


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INSIDE

A closer look
at your Fitness,
Health, Nutrition,
Relationships,
Beauty and Style

Beaut camp:
Belinda and
camping
partner Phil



YOU CAN DO THIS **CAMPING**

On the wild side

► Belinda Jackson packs her swag and heads to Tassie's Overland Track for a six-day sabbatical from urban life

The moon has sunk behind the mountains, leaving in its wake a night so dark I can barely see the outline of my hand inside my tent, pitched in Tasmania's wilderness. So I scramble for the torch when I hear urgent scratching and the rustle of plastic on the other side of the nylon. I unzip the tent as quietly as I can, flood the annex with light and see two enormous, blood-red eyes staring back at me, just half a metre from my face. It's the biggest brush-tail possum I've ever seen. I squeal; it squeals. I curse; it takes its long, black claws out of my food bag and hightails it out of the annex. I tidy the mugs and pot he knocked over in his haste, clip a padlock on the pack and curl back into my sleeping bag. If he can pick the lock, he's welcome to my food.

The Overland Track is Australia's iconic multi-day hiking trail, a 65km, one-way route stretching from Cradle Mountain in the north down to scenic Lake St Clair, which takes most people six days to complete. It sure is scenic, but the first day out was a demonstration of why my hiking partner Phil and I were carrying thermals, snow gear, emergency snacks and lots of sun cream. After bussing from Launceston to the trailhead, we began our hike straight into fine, oncoming drizzle. Which turned into needling rain. Which morphed into sharp hail. By the time we reached our lunch stop at Kitchen Hut, on the slopes of Cradle Mountain, the hail and rain had joined forces, and the hut was crammed with a walking group whose guide was busy offering tea, hot soup and biscuits, and talking about the three men who'd been choppered off the mountainside earlier that day. >>

Hikers' speak

SCROGGIN

Snacks closely guarded as "survival food", eg, cashews, dried fruit and chocolate.

SPONDONICLES

A prized, often much-coveted tool for gripping hot cooking pots.

FAKAWI

A tribal name taken by a group of walkers, paddlers or campers who find themselves in a nameless, featureless region. As in, "We're (where?) the Fakawi."

DAMPER

The state of your spirits after forcing down the traditional bread of the same name that's baked in the ground and often eaten with golden syrup.

WALKABOUT

An aimless adventure, usually had on one's own, in the Never Never.



Cooeee!



When the weather calmed down, we layered on our thermals and waterproof trousers, and headed out again. As the wind dropped, tiny flakes of snow settled on us and the soft, lush mounds of rare alpine cushion grass that lined the track. The snow deadened any sound, except for my own rasping breath, and we paused to catch flakes on our tongues.

Phil and I had been hiking in Europe for the past six years, including Ireland, Norway and some pretty hairy places in Russia, so we felt like pro campers, but this was our first Australian trek, and it threw everything at us – swamps, rogue wildlife and blistering sunshine. You can trek the Overland as part of a group where, it's whispered, you get soft, downy beds and wine with dinner, or you can go as an independent hiker where bush dunnies are a luxury and the only chance for a wash is in the biting cold springs that trickle slowly one day, and flood the route the next. Needless to say, this is not glamour camping. Hair washing doesn't happen. Add a 15kg-plus pack on your back, with all your food, a tent, first-aid kit, bedding and stove, and

it gets downright rugged.

So why do it? For the solitude, the chance to escape the city, and the silence. We got all that, as well as a cracking workout. It requires a medium level of fitness to carry your pack up the steepest ascent (which occurs on the first day) but also the stamina to keep going for the full six days. After just one day on the track, my body starts to demand more kilojoules to get me through, so breakfast was a big affair of rough brewed coffee and porridge. Then I continued to ferret through pockets for water and energy hits such as dried fruit or chocolate – luckily all the munching

helped to lighten my load. After a particularly strenuous climb up to the saddle leading to Mt Ossa, Tasmania's highest peak, we thought nothing of pulling out our gas stove to cook up a "mystery meal". From our pack supplies, we concoct a mess of rice flavoured with homemade spice mix and chunks of fried salami, more water and whatever else could go into the meal that would get us to the next hut, named Kia Ora. There are rough huts along the Overland Track, which get busy in the peak season, so carrying a tent lets you pitch away from the noise and bustle and immerse yourself in the wilderness' silence.

For the final leg to the edge of Lake St Clair, you can catch the ferry down to the visitor's centre or hike one last day out – we chose the lazy ferry route, and pitched near the water's edge that evening. It was time to celebrate with a swim, the first chance for a good wash in five days. As I hit the still mountain water in Australia's deepest lake, my shouts reverberated from the cliffs, breaking the silence and freaking out the wildlife.

As the sun went down and I wrapped myself in my sleeping bag to get my body temperature back to normal, I heard a soft thump-thump. A little Tasmanian paddymelon, a sweet-faced, pear-shaped wallaby, loped into view. Moments later, it was followed by the cat-like spotted-tailed quoll, then an eagle overhead, and they explored the glade where my tent was pitched. I got the solitude I was looking for. **WH**

The peak season to hike the Overland Track is from 1 November to 30 April. \$150/adults, \$120/concession, overlandtrack.com.au

STEPS TO BEING A HAPPY CAMPER

BUFF UP Hit the gym at least three times a week for a month before going backpacking. Do barbell squats (three sets of 15 reps with a light weight) and get on the stairclimber for 30 minutes twice a week.

STAY SAFE Ask the park's information office about weather conditions, permits, wildlife, and where to find water on your planned route. Stick to well-maintained trails marked with signs. Leave your detailed itinerary at the trailhead's registry.

PLAN MEALS Bring high-carb, easy-to-make food like instant oats, ready-made rice and pasta. Also bring some versatile protein sources, such as peanut butter and hard cheeses.

PACK SMART For optimum stability, load your bag according to the diagram at right: (1) lunch, (2) rain gear, (3) maps, (4) clothes, (5) cooking gear, (6) food, (7) more clothes, (8) tent, (9) sleeping bag.



Paddling the Prom, Vic



Road to nowhere

Outdoor Australia's Sam Gibbs recommends camping trails worth going the distance for.

WILSONS PROMONTORY NATIONAL PARK, VIC

A playground for Melbourneites, the Prom is only three hours' drive from the city and caters to all levels of camping. The family-friendly Tidal River ground is a facility-packed gateway into the park, from which you can kayak, snorkel, ride, walk, or picnic on the beach. The multi-day hiking and camping available in the park is also superb and accessible to entry-level hikers. Go to parkweb.vic.gov.au, or call 1800 350 552.

HINCHINBROOK ISLAND NATIONAL PARK, QLD

For those who long for a Castaway wilderness experience, Hinchinbrook's your spot. So popular is the island's Thorsborne Trail that all walkers must book their place on the trail in advance. It's a must-do for experienced walkers and campers. Go to epa.qld.gov.au, or call (07) 4066 8601.

Action packed

The dirt on bush camping essentials

TENT

Pop up the Blackwolf Dragonfly Tent in a snap. The one-piece continuous pole assembly means there's no scrabbling for missing pieces in the dark. Weighing less than 3kg, this lightweight, storm-proof shelter is spacious enough for two people (really) – plus packs and boots. \$289, Five05



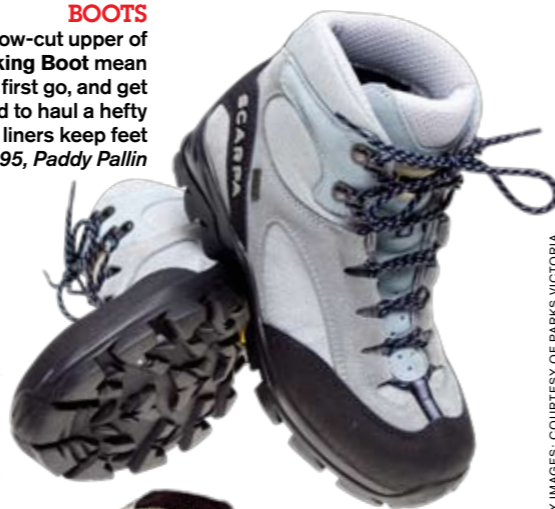
TREKKING POLES

Save your knees on descents and stay balanced on slippery trails with the Komperdell C3 Airshock Trekking Poles. The anti-stock system stops you from jarring your joints. \$149.95 each, Paddy Pallin



BOOTS

The soft midsole and low-cut upper of the Scarpa ZG65 Hiking Boot mean you can break these in first go, and get the support you need to haul a hefty backpack. The Gore-Tex liners keep feet dry. \$149.95, Paddy Pallin



SWEAT TOWEL

Wipe off the day's scum before bed with the Sea To Summit Tek Towel. Don't worry about mould: you can wring out the quick-drying microfibre in minutes. \$24.95, Paddy Pallin



BACKPACK

A contoured fit designed for women's curves makes the Osprey Ariel 651 backpack one of the comfiest packs around. \$379.95, Paddy Pallin



MEAL KIT

Save room for extra sleepwear with the Light My Fire Outdoor Meal Kit. The award-winning Scandinavian design manages to streamline all you need for a meal in one stylish package. \$39.95, Paddy Pallin



JACKET

Avoid chafing after surprise rain showers with the Berghaus Blade Jacket. Made from breathable fabric, it provides wet-weather protection in an easy scrunch-down design. \$269.95, Paddy Pallin



TWO-IN-ONE RADIO/TORCH

The Dynamo Wind-Up Radio With LED Torch gives you light without the need for batteries, so you can tune in to the news mid-trail. \$34.95, Neco



MOZZIE REPELLANT

Stay bug and chemical-free with the New Mountain Portable Mosquito Repellent Diffuser. Created from fallen sandalwood, not wood cut from trees, the burnable sticks keep pests at bay. \$24.95, Neco

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANTHONY ADAMSON; GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF PARKS VICTORIA