

# THE

The incredible view  
from Flat Rock Lookout.



# LONG

# WALK

What started as a walk on a whim morphed into a three and a half year adventure along the GNW.

Words and Photos  
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**Clockwise from left** Day one, blissfully unaware of just how long this walk is going to take; picturesque boardwalk near Berowra; just one of the many, many trail markers we passed.



**Clockwise from left** Relaxing above Brisbane Water National Park; we both used a number of different packs throughout the walk, including this one from Aarn.



**F**IRST, A WORD OF WARNING: before undertaking any 250km walk it is essential to make a thorough plan. The route, equipment, meals, transport and weather conditions must be scrutinised and checked down to the last detail. On no account should you cobble together a plan in the pub the night before over a schooner of ale and a smartphone. Yet somehow that is what happened.

Paul and I were only looking for a day walk but because the Blue Mountains, our regular haunt, was a swirling cauldron of fire, so we were forced to look further afield. Or nearer, as it turned out. I'd known about the Great North Walk (GNW) for years but had dismissed it on account of its length – if I had the time to walk 250km I'd probably go somewhere more exotic, like Africa or Nepal. I'd never contemplated doing a walk in sections either; it just wasn't my thing. Nevertheless, a co-worker had recently mentioned the walk and hence it popped into my head the night we were brainstorming for a location.

The GNW markets itself as Australia's most accessible walking track, and that may be true given the percentage of our population that lives nearby. Certainly a good deal of it is near to public transport, which we intended using as much as possible. The idea for a 'Sydney to Hunter' track was originally researched by local bushwalkers Gary McDougall and Leigh Shearer-Heriot in the early 1980s, then, in 1986, their idea was picked up as a bicentennial project and rushed to completion for 1988. The track is now administered by the Depart-

ment of Primary Industries (Lands).

At first we decided to hike the section through Lane Cove National Park, which was close enough to access by train but avoided the 5km of paved roads that threaded through the riverside suburbs. However, we quickly realised that should we decide one day to do more sections of the GNW we would regret not beginning at its official start point. Thus we met up at 9am on a clear spring day, slightly baffled and sore of head, at the obelisk in Macquarie Place.

**OCT 2013: SYDNEY TO THORNLEIGH, 35.0KM**

A brisk stroll from the obelisk, the original Mile Stone for all roads leading out of Sydney, brought us to our first river crossing – the ferry from Circular Quay to Woolwich Wharf. Soon afterwards we were among the mangroves of Buffalo Creek, out of sight of concrete and glass, and it took little imagination to picture ourselves deep in some coastal wilderness, weeks from civilisation. This coastal wetland sanctuary is just the first of several diverse habitats through which the GNW passes, including sandstone plateaus, national forest, coastline and quiet river valleys. To a city dweller the ibis looked incongruous among the mangroves; I was used to seeing them in their natural habitat, perched on inner city dumpsters with beaks clearly evolved for ripping open bin bags and scavenging within.

Most of the day was spent in Lane Cove NP. This 372ha protected area is only 10km from Sydney CBD and follows the Lane Cove River virtually to its source, a beautifully serene

stroll disturbed only by the distant hum of articulated trucks. The delights of the track began to wear off as we crested late afternoon, the jumble of loose rocks underfoot not my preferred walking surface at this stage of the day. "Hopefully around the corner it turns into a deep pile Axminster carpet?" I fantasised aloud. "Possibly a lightly sprung conveyor belt," agreed Paul. It seems that 35km might have been just a tad too far for a spur-of-the-moment stroll.

We reached Thornleigh Oval at 5:30pm, where it struck us that we'd walked from the centre of the country's largest city to a quaint country village in eight hours, or a regular day of work. It had been hard but somewhere along the line my perspective had changed. Maybe undertaking a long hike in sections wouldn't be so bad? It might be fun to have a goal to aim for, and whenever we felt like a bush walk we wouldn't have to think about where to go; it'd be right there in front of us. We'd unintentionally started something, and both of us knew we wouldn't be able to stop until we'd reached Newcastle.

**MAR 2014: THORNLEIGH TO COWAN, 34.1KM**

Somehow, a whole summer had passed since



our first tentative steps along the Great North Walk. It's not that Paul and I weren't keen to get back out there but summer is busy with other activities and we had agreed from the start that the GNW was something we would fall back on when all other options had been exhausted. So, after a summer that included climbing in Mt Cook National Park, hiking the Tongariro Circuit and canyoning in the Blue Mountains, we finally found ourselves back at Thornleigh train station on a warm autumn morning, packed for an overnighter.

Despite the forecast rain the sky was cloudless but very humid, and it felt as if a storm could break at any time. We followed Berowra Creek from its headwaters all the way to the suburb of Berowra Waters, crossing Calna Creek on the way. At that time Calna Creek was spanned by a 1980s army-built log bridge, but being good little hikers we had done our research and discovered that the bridge had collapsed the previous year. Signs either end

**Soon afterwards we were among the mangroves of Buffalo Creek, out of sight of concrete and glass.**

warned that only two persons at a time should use the bridge and internet rumour suggested these had been ignored. The two pieces of the structure still lay across the water but with an impossibly wide gap between them, and we would have been facing an early evening swim except for one bushwalking forum that advised the creek was wadeable 500m upstream. Fortunately we got away with only wet knees

before pitching camp. [NB. A new bridge was opened in August 2015 and the creek is now crossable with dry feet.]

The next day's section from Berowra to Cowan was labelled 'Moderate, with hard bits' but I contend that the 'hard bits' made up 90 per cent of the route. The track took us steeply up to the tops of Berowra Reserve, through eucalypts, black boys, cut steps, iron rungs set in the boulders, and the familiar sandstone overhangs. After two and a half hours of up and down we huffed into Cowan, very ready for a lunch break, which we took under the eaves of the local shop. And thank goodness we did; we hadn't even finished our cheese and crackers when the sky collapsed in a sheet of solid water. Brooklyn, our goal for the day, was still 12km away but to walk in this would be like trying to hike through the gorge beneath Victoria Falls – we would likely drown. There was nothing for it but to pull the plug.

**MAY 2015: COWAN TO WOY WOY, 28.4KM**

Somehow we'd kept ourselves busy for over a year before feeling the pull of the GNW again, during which time I'd trained for and run (and won) an ultra marathon, and together we'd





**Clockwise from left** Sunset on the rocks near Little Wobby; Oasis at Kariong Brook Falls.



**Clockwise from left** Descending from the tops to Galston Gorge; the sea signals the beginning of the end of our epic mission; a red-bellied black snake slithers quietly away.

done a month-long cycle tour of New Zealand's South Island (see *AGO* Jan-Feb 2016). We were fit and ready to recommence our mission.

This section marked our only real divergence from the official GNW. After a pleasant enough walk to Brooklyn, the Hawkesbury River (slightly too deep to wade) could only be crossed to Patonga Wharf by water taxi. This was going to work out rather expensive between the two of us so we hatched an alternative plan: the scheduled ferry service to the isolated community of Little Wobby. This charming row of houses sits between the lapping waves of the Hawkesbury and the looming cliffs of the peninsula with not so much as a footpath to spare. Once we'd disembarked the final boat of the day we picked our way through front yards and over rickety wooden platforms to the village's southernmost house, and from there to an empty beach where we made camp in the warm glow of sunset.

The next day we tackled the Highway Ridge track up through Brisbane Water National Park. Not being part of the formal GNW the route wasn't signposted and the initial ascent was an exercise in bush bashing, followed by an indistinct trail marked only by the occasional bit of pink tape tied to a log. Once on the ridge we somehow got completely turned around and heading firmly south, and only numerous consultations with map, compass and GPS persuaded us of our error. Many scrambles, scratches and fallen branches later we finally rejoined the GNW just south of Mt

## Rounding a corner beneath a sandstone overhang north of Mt Wondabyne we came across a delightful waterfall and pool: Kariong Brook Falls

Wondabyne, before heading east to Woy Woy and a train home. Despite being the most difficult section so far, and not recommended for the leisurely GNW section hiker, the day had been thoroughly enjoyable.

### JUL 2015: WOY WOY TO SOMERSBY, 33.6KM

A mere two months later we were back, and with a special guest no less. Gerda's introduction to the GNW, albeit under perfect blue winter skies, was anything but gentle as we chose the most direct route from Woy Woy station back to the track. From an old junkyard we bush bashed up a creek beside the train line; deadfall, mossy boulders, tangled bushes – this was tick heaven.

I almost felt like apologising on behalf of the GNW but we eventually found a fire trail and

Gerda was rewarded soon enough with possibly the loveliest spot on the entire walk. Rounding a corner beneath a sandstone overhang north of Mt Wondabyne we came across a delightful little waterfall and pool: Kariong Brook Falls. The dappled glade was a perfect lunch spot and source of cool water and fully revived us for the afternoon stint – enjoyable singletrack alongside Piles Creek and, after crossing the Pacific Highway, a long section following Mooney Mooney Creek.

After a night at one of several nice camp spots along the creek, the next day saw us on the approach to Somersby, a small rural hamlet based around a primary school and a single store. The map's scale seemed to have grown overnight as we fairly bounded along, eating up the distance. Unfortunately the proximity of 'civilisation' meant more firetrail than usual and even a few kilometres of unwelcome tarmac. With the absence of a rail line we fell back on hitching a ride on the school bus into Gosford and the train station there.

### OCT 2015: SOMERSBY TO BASIN CAMPSITE, 42.0KM

The disappearance of public transport altogether from this point on forced us to engage in a combination of bribery and cajoling to ensure a pick-up by Gerda at our finish point,

somewhere in the middle of Olney State Forest, three days later. A greasy breakfast at Somersby Store set us up for the weekend, one that began grey and drizzly but soon transformed into a sweltering heat wave.

Moving north of Somersby marked a definite change in the mood of the GNW. Gone were the meandering creek valleys, sparkling bays and sandstone plateaux. Instead we encountered more and more forest fire trails along low mountain ridges. Scribbly gums and stringybark trees shaded us from the burning sun and the wildlife, mostly nocturnal, became more abundant, as did the dirtbikers. A red-bellied black snake sunning itself in the path was infinitely preferable to a succession of noisy petrol-heads.

At some point on the first day I calculated that we had reached roughly the halfway point. Halfway, and it'd only taken us two years! Where does the time go? Disappointingly there was no congratulatory signpost to be seen but we celebrated anyway with a photo and some brief reminiscence about our first steps in Lane Cove NP. Ah, those were the days!

The next day was characterised by flies as we each walked along in our own personal buzzing cloud, but our spirits were lifted by the contour path around a beautiful natural amphitheatre leading to the village of Yarramalong. Two ice creams later saw us begin 11km of road, the longest stretch on the whole GNW, and while there were worse places than the peaceful Yarramalong Valley to be pound-



ing tarmac, it was still nice to get back in amongst the trees for our second night.

We arrived at our Basin Campsite rendezvous several hours early, having underestimated our speed to make sure Gerda was not kept waiting. Our thoughtfulness was rewarded with hot Chinese food and cold beer. Best pick-up ever!

### MAY 2016: BASIN CAMPSITE TO WATAGAN HQ, 47.0KM

It was only after another hectic summer that we found time to drive to Basin Campsite one Friday evening. I was feeling strong from recent multiday hikes around Patagonia's Torres del Paine and on Tasmania's Overland Track, useful since we were about to tackle the highest section of the GNW – the Watagan Mountains.

The forest roads continued much the same as before but now water started to become a serious issue. Descending Mt Warralong, the high point of the entire walk, we expected to be able to fill our bottles in Watagan Creek

but found it polluted by farm runoff. After another steep and thirsty ascent we managed to coax some dodgy-looking yellow liquid from the rainwater tank at Flat Rock Lookout, but it was barely enough to last the night. We ran out completely at breakfast but made it to the Congewai Valley alive, only to discover the water there also undrinkable. It would have been folly to begin the steep ascent of the Watagans without water so we were forced to ask for help at a farmhouse, where fortunately they revealed the presence of a dedicated GNW water tank just up the track. We were saved!

The remaining fire trails along the spine of the Myall Range were long and somewhat tedious and we were relieved to arrive at Watagan HQ to meet our wonderful collaborator, who drove us back to Basin Campsite to collect the other car.

### OCT 2016: WATAGAN HQ TO TERALBA, 27.0KM

Gerda's final favour was to return us to Watagan HQ for the penultimate leg, and with





**Clockwise from left** An impromptu halfway mark celebration; a beautiful camping glade near the Congewai Valley; so close we can almost smell the beer.

a long day walk ahead the three of us drove up the night before to camp. Sadly our evening's relaxation was spoiled by a group of rednecks blasting rock music from their ute and competing to throw their empty beer bottles the deepest into the forest. When they roared off at 3am I couldn't help hoping they'd wrap themselves and their throbbing woofers around a tree.

The day began with several glorious panoramas including a view of our final destination, still almost 50km away, from Heaton's Lookout. The other highlight of the morning was a burnt-out van at the edge of the escarpment that looked suspiciously like a torched getaway vehicle. After that excitement the afternoon was less interesting: virtually the entire Sugarloaf range was monotonous fire trail and began to feel like a chore, with the last 6km to Teralba station all on tarmac. At least we could finally catch a train home again.

### MAR 2017: TERALBA TO NEWCASTLE, 27.0KM

It was a weekend in late summer, almost three and a half years after starting, that we decided to finally finish the GNW. At an average speed of around 200m per day we were understandably keen to see off this project come hell or high water, and the latter is exactly what we would be getting with the forecast for classic Sydney thunderstorms.

By this time it took two and a half hours to get to the start, water streaming down the train windows as we sped past towns through which we walked so long ago I could hardly picture them. The rain paused as we strolled along the esplanade to Warner's Bay but as we turned inland it settled in for the day – constant drizzle with occasional heavy showers.

A mixture of pavement and sparse bushland brought us to the coast, only 8km from Newcastle. The beach was a heart-warming sight but our relief was short-lived as the rain began in earnest and we rushed to erect shelter.

We were up and at it early on the final day and took only one and a half hours to walk into Newcastle. The last victorious strides turned into a farce as we scurried hither and thither trying to find the official end point. The signage sort of petered out and the map was inconclusive so we were reduced to Googling the GNW to see where it finished – Queen's Wharf Tower, apparently. I'm not sure what I was hoping for – back-slapping, cake, dancing girls maybe, but there was no sign, no plaque, nothing. It was a bit of an anticlimax. Worse, the pubs weren't even open. How on earth were we supposed to plan our next adventure? 📍

