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THIS WAY TO YESTERDAY

It stretches 600 miles and 200m years back in time, via beaches and epic forests. Nigel Summerley walks Australia's Bibbulmun Track



Mad Dog is a man of few words. Two words, in fact: Mad and Dog. I know this because I have seen his entry in one of the creative writing books left at the free camp sites on the 600-mile Bibbulmun Track, on the southern edge of Western Australia.

Where others leave poetry, sketches or philosophical reflections on some of their 50 or so days and nights on "the Bibb", he takes up a whole A4 page with six capital letters spelling out his adopted name. All that's known about him is that he lives on the track, forever walking north to south and back again. He's been known to walk at night, and often walks in the rain rather than take shelter.

Bibb expert and "adventure doctor" Dave Bomba, who joined me on my track trip, told me he once encountered Mad Dog. Dr Dave, as he is known, said: "Despite his moniker, he's a gentle, polite man. Very unassuming — you could pass him on the track with little more than a hello, without realising who you were talking to."

Those same words might well apply to Dr Dave himself. He has a science PhD, but left the indoor world of academic research for the outdoor world of the Bibb. And few know more about the track and those who walk it. Mad Dog is not typical. Some people ("end-to-enders") do the whole thing (once is usually enough), but there are many who just do a day or two, or a week.

So what's the big attraction? For a start, it's big. And, on top of that, it's beautiful. It takes you through bush and forest, up towers of granite, and along the overpowering coast of the Southern Ocean. You may see whales, dolphins, pythons and possums, bandicoots and bats, and you'll definitely see gigantic trees that exist nowhere else on the planet.

The track runs from Kalamunda down to the old whaling port of Albany, nearly all the way through state forest, national parks and nature reserves. I focused on walking part of the southern sector, in the expert company of Dr Dave — but always with the hope of an encounter with Mad Dog.

Whether you're walking the whole Bibb or part of it, you can stay on the track — in free camp sites, a day's walk apart — or in small-town B&Bs along the way. The ideal base for the southern stretches is Karma Chalets and Karisma Spa, just outside the town of Denmark, a former logging town, 4½ hours' drive from Perth. From here, Dr Dave's Wilderness Getaways outfit can ferry you daily to and from different sections of the track, to walk guided or unguided.

The track's waymark is the *wagyl* (pronounced woggle), the rainbow serpent of Aboriginal folklore, and its name is taken from the Bibbulmun indigenous people, renowned for walking long distances. Their name has been translated as "land of many breasts", an indication of the fertility of the area. I didn't see many breasts, or women, or indeed men, during day after day of walking. But fertility was everywhere. Particularly in the karri forest. Karri are 300ft eucalyptus trees. Not to be confused with the jarrah (another eucalyptus, but with a different, fibrous bark) or the marri (also a eucalyptus, but a "bloodwood" that leaks dark red resin). While jarrahs and marris dominate the northern Bibb, the karri reign over much of the south.

On the ascent from Denmark to the summit of Mount Hallowell, we passed through thick karri forest, punctuated with granite boulders that increased in size the higher we climbed, some of them as big as six-storey buildings. Guided by the *wagyls*, we negotiated a path that was seldom easy.

As well as snake logos, this is the home of real and venomous serpents:

the tiger snake and the dugite. They may be there at any moment among the grass trees, tassel flowers and sword grass. But the only one I saw was a crowned snake, dozing by the side of the path. "Its bite wouldn't kill you," said Dr Dave. "It'd just make you quite ill." We moved on.

Liveliwer were the stick-ant nests, some 2ft tall. Dr Dave explained that when the ants are frantically busy, it's about to rain. They were. It did.

Sliding over wet granite slopes, we made our way up Mount Hallowell, with amazing views over Wilson Inlet, the Nullaki peninsula and the

9ft long and the thickness of a man's arm, and their bite can kill. We didn't see any. I wasn't complaining.

WE PUSHED on through the coastal heathlands, past bright orange swamp bottlebrush. Dr Dave showed me soap bushes that can not only be used as, er, soap, but can also be added to water to stun fish. We sampled the charmingly named snottygobble bush, whose small fruits contain enough anaesthetic to ease toothache. Then we returned to the coast for a swim in a lagoon between ocean and beach.

My last day was further west again, through the tingle forest of Walpole-Nornalup National Park. While I was still having trouble telling my jarrah from my marri, there was no difficulty identifying a giant tingle (also a eucalyptus). They live to be 400 years old and 200ft tall. As they age, they spread out skirt-like buttresses at their base, and then the inner trunk tends to die away, leaving them like fairy-tale hollow trees, often with clefts that allow you to walk inside them.

One old track hand told me: "The best place to camp is inside a hollow tingle. You're unlikely to be hit by another tree coming down, and if the one you're in falls, it won't hit you." In 1990, a German tourist was having his picture taken inside a tingle when it came down. He escaped unscathed.

The tingle forest, where granite gives way to brown laterite (or coffee rock), is similar to the environment of Gondwana, the supercontinent of the southern hemisphere that started to break up about 200m years ago. "For me, the Bibb is a journey through time, giving you a chance to look back on the way it was then," said Dr Dave.

At the Valley of the Giants camp site, in among the tingles, I came across a lone walker who fitted the description of the man I most wanted to meet: forties, 6ft, short hair, clean-shaven, but rough-looking, taciturn,

and with an oversized backpack. He was reluctant to talk, but when he did, he spoke not the working-class Aussie of Mad Dog, but French. He said he was walking the southern half. Had he done the track before? Yes, end to end, six years ago. Why had he come back? He shrugged and his glance directed my eyes into the endless magical forest that was everywhere around us.

The Frenchman and I silently agreed there were no words to explain the lure of the Bibb. As Mad Dog has discovered, it could simply be the walk of your life.

Travel details: Nigel Summerley travelled as a guest of Tourism Australia (australia.com) and Qantas (0845 774 7767, qantas.com), which flies from Heathrow to Perth via Dubai; from £788. Or try Cathay Pacific (020 8834 8888, cathaypacific.com) or Singapore Airlines (020 8961 6993, singaporeair.com).

Wexas (020 7838 5892, wexas.com) has six days on the Bibbulmun Track from £2,179pp, including daily transfers from the Karma Chalets, guiding, most meals, park fees and Qantas flights from Heathrow.

Wilderness Getaways (0061 8-9848 2814, wildernessgetaways.com.au), which has three-night Bibb walking packages from £720pp (five nights from £1,137pp), including accommodation, meals, transfers and a guide. Self-guided packages start at £320pp for three nights. Or try the Bibbulmun Track Foundation (9481 0551, bibbulmuntrack.org.au).

Nigel Summerley's novel, *Like a Flower*, is out now as an ebook (ReadersWritersDirect £4.99)

SUNDAY TIMES DIGITAL
Western Australia walkabout: see a slideshow from the Bibbulmun Track at thesundaytimes.co.uk/travel



Southern Ocean. The end of our climb coincided with the return of the sun and we dried out before beginning our descent to Monkey Rock (it looks like a giant gorilla's head in granite).

Next day, we headed west, dropping down to the coast and walking in an environment shaped by the wind and the salt air. There were tea trees, coastal she-oaks and peppermint trees surrounded by sword grass, with wrens and honeyeaters in the air. "I call this Tiger Snake Alley," said Dr Dave helpfully, as we entered a green tunnel formed by the peppermint canopy. "I've seen some monsters here." Tiger snakes can grow up to

2,000ft, mostly downwards. It remains as nature intended, and is accessible only to those with special permission. Cape to Cape Explorer Tours (459 452038, capetocapetours.com.au) can arrange private visits for £36pp, including helmets and torches, a light supper and a guide.

...AND ONE IN VICTORIA
Major improvements have recently been carried out on the 60-mile Great Ocean Walk, in Victoria. It's an awesome trip, from Apollo Bay, 120 miles southwest of Melbourne, to the spectacular limestone stacks of the Twelve Apostles, via beaches, cliff tops and rainforest, to see penguins, koalas and kangaroos. Hike for a day or a week and stay on camp sites or in cottages (visitvictoria.com).

WILD JOURNEYS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

THE HIKE

If you fancy a shorter end-to-end, the Cape to Cape Track runs 78 miles up the coast of Western Australia, from Cape Leeuwin to Cape Naturaliste via Margaret River, and can be done in seven days. It's a walk through a world of morning rainbows, giant grass trees, beaches and headlands. There are camp sites, caravan parks and B&Bs along the way. Gene Hardy, an academic turned adventure expert, runs Cape to Cape Explorer Tours (00 61-459 452038, capetocapetours.com.au) and has eight-night walking packages from £1,490pp, full-board, including transfers and guides.

THE CYCLE TRAIL

If you want the long haul but faster, the Munda Biddi is a new 685-mile cycle trail, starting in the Perth hills and taking in forests and river valleys en route to Albany. The route follows bush tracks, firebreaks and disused railway lines and has sections suitable for all levels of cycling experience. Spend nights in B&Bs or at free camp sites a day's ride apart (894 812483, mundabiddi.org.au).

THE TREETOP WALK

For the wilderness experience in half a day, try the Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk, amid the

the underground exploration
Some of Western Australia's most breathtaking sights are below ground, thanks to cave systems in the limestone karst. One of the longest, deepest and most overwhelming is Giants Cave, near Margaret River. Protected from any Wookkey Hole-isation by the Department of Environment and Conservation, this series of eight chambers extends for almost