

WALKING *the TALK*

Stephanie Johnston discovers that tackling South Australia's Heysen Trail can become a never-ending journey.



AS GROWING HORDES of Adelaide's middle-aged men take to cycling and lycra, many women are more likely to be donning hiking boots and poles. The popular Waterfall Gully to Mount Lofty summit hike provides ample evidence of this phenomenon, and as that path rapidly morphs into a congested outdoor training track, those who enjoy the pleasures of walking in more peaceful surrounds find themselves venturing further afield.

This has led many to follow South Australia's 1200-kilometre Heysen Trail, passing through some of the state's most

diverse and breathtaking landscapes. The walk takes you from Cape Jervis at the bottom of the Fleurieu Peninsula to Parachilna Gorge at the top of the Flinders Ranges. It traverses spectacular coastal scenery, native bushland, pine forests, vineyards and historic towns, as well as rich farmland, rugged ranges and remote outback terrain.

If you're a marathon runner it's possible to run the length of the Heysen in just a fortnight (Victorian adventure runner Richard Bowles notched a new record last year when he ran from north to south in 14 days, 8 hours and 32 minutes). It is usually walked south to north in 50 to 60 days, and it's now possible to spread those 60 days over six years by joining a formal *End-to-End* walk organised by the Friends of the Heysen Trail.

Jo Chesher became one of the first to tackle the trail that way when she joined the pioneer "millennium" group, which set out from Cape Jervis in the year 2000. She and younger sister Dee had decided they needed to get out in the fresh air and meet some new people. A walking group seemed just the ticket, although Jo recalls it took a little while to learn the ropes.

"I remember the morning that I took the first step on that long journey north. The cars had been left at the point where we would end the day's walk and a bus had taken us to the start. The group was kitted up but milling about and chatting. My sister and I spotted a local deli and wandered over for a latte to start the day. Not a good move. We weren't aware of the unwritten code – that once gathered together in the Heysen name you didn't leave the flock for something as frivolous as a coffee fix."

As they progressed along the trail, the sisters discovered that while pre-



Above right: Jo Chesher is about to finish her second End-to-End tour. **Top:** More walkers who finished the Heysen Trail last year; a canola field near Hamilton. **Bottom:** Natural beauty, near Burra Gorge. **Opposite page:** Stepping over one of many stiles (top) and spectacular views at Yourambulla Range, near Hawker. Images courtesy Robert Alcock, Jo Chesher and Stephanie Johnston.

walk forays into delis are not acceptable, sitting on the pavement with your own ground coffee beans, plunger and mug is. "It was these subtle nuances that separated experienced trail walkers from the newbies," says Jo.

My friend Mary and I could have done with their advice before our first Heysen foray, when a coffee and sandwich pit stop on the way to the meeting point almost caused us to miss the bus. Friends since our primary school days, we reverted to naughty schoolgirl mode as we scurried to join the busload full of very serious looking bushwalkers.

Now at the end of our first *End-to-End* season, we feel thoroughly initiated. Like Jo and her sister, one of the first things we learned (other than coffee etiquette) was to "follow the fence". The trail traverses numerous farming properties, so it's important to respect this rule. Our stile-stepping style has evolved over time: we pack our sandwiches, scroggin and sweet treats the night before, and newly-acquired navigational skills have





Above: The Heysen Trail winds past beaches along the Fleurieu Peninsula. Top: Yakka grass trees are a common sight along the trek.


us arriving in plenty of time for the early morning gathering.

One of the pleasures of the *End-to-End* endeavour is that there is no rush to engage with your fellow walkers. This is no speed dating experience; you have six years to get to know one another! As the trail winds its way north past the Barossa, the routine changes from one day a month to whole weekends away, and in the sixth and final year, the walks beyond Quorn are conducted as week-long walks.

Jo says relationships evolve as the trek goes on. "Accommodation ranged from rather salubrious B&Bs complete with spas, to hauling out the swag ... and I got to know my walking buddies so much better. Instead of just noting

the weight of their backpacks or the state of their boots, I discovered who wore dressing gowns to the shared amenities and who just did a quick wrap-around with the closest towel; who wouldn't leave for the walk the following morning without putting their eyes on, and who liked to stay up late for that last nightcap."

Mary and I have already formed new friendships, enjoyed an incredible range of scenery and tackled some challenging terrain on our first leg along the Fleurieu coastline. The views along the cliffs and beaches are unsurpassed; the yaccas and wildlife take you back to pre-settlement times. Coming up close and personal with cows and sheep in open pasture keeps you on your toes, while an almost vertical ascent up one cliff-face also involved fingers.

When Jo completed the millennium walk in 2006, part of her wanted to walk those last few steps in the warm Flinders Ranges sunshine and to climb over that last stile in Parachilna Gorge. "But another part of me didn't want the journey to end," she says. The solution? Jo will next year complete her second tour of the Heysen, and that *End-to-End* group is already contemplating doing an about-face and heading back south. 

Bookings for the next End-to-End walk open April 6; the walk begins May 3.

Details: heysentrail.asn.au

BEHIND THE HEYSEN

The idea for a trail was first aired in 1969 by chemical engineer, conservationist and explorer Warren Bonython, who was inspired by long-distance walking trails then coming into vogue overseas – the 3200 kilometre Appalachian Trail and 4000 kilometre Pacific Crest Trail in America, and Britain's 400 kilometre Pennine Way. Bonython started thinking about a trail through the Mount Lofty Ranges, but also carried fresh in his memory a trek completed the year before, along the full length of the Flinders. The end result was a combination of the two.

An early task was to find a name. There was no single geographical name for the "geologically contemporaneous" Mount Lofty and Flinders Ranges, nor was it easy to identify any one individual explorer or prominent citizen whose name could meaningfully be linked with both regions. "We then thought of Sir Hans Heysen, who had perfected the artistic rendering of the gum tree in the Mount Lofty Ranges and had brought the glories of the Flinders Ranges to the world's notice," reported Bonython in his history of the trail.

The track's design was stalled by several years due to government politics and local resistance. The first 50 kilometres was eventually laid between Mount Lofty and Mount Magnificent in 1978, with the legendary Terry Lavender overseeing the majority of the trail's construction until its completion in 1992.