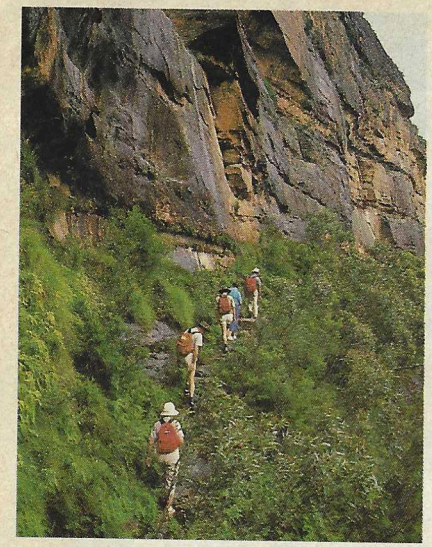
The joys of one of our most popular outdoor activities

Australia's big boom in bushwalking

BY RICHARD DEUTCH

AS BUSHWALKER Robert Rankin starts the downward trek from the top of Mount Kosciusko, no-one else is in sight. But the patchwork of lakes and valleys that make up Kosciusko National Park don't remain deserted for long. As Rankin rounds a bend, he spots a long file of hikers stretching far down the side of the mountain range. Within a few minutes, more than a hundred pass him, striding determinedly uphill. Ambling on, he marvels at their energy. It takes all sorts: striders

Walking at Lake Rhona in Tasmania's spectacular Denison Ranges; among wildflowers in Kosciusko National Park; in the Antarctic beech forest in the New England region of New South Wales



Porters Pass track, Blue Mountains, NSW

and strollers alike have made bushwalking one of the nation's increasingly popular exercises. A recent government survey found one in 40 Australians – some 400,000 of us – regularly step out into the bush. On average we cover up to ten kilometres a day while enjoying one of the most satisfying recreations, recommended some 2000 years ago by the Greek physician Hippocrates as an essential ingredient of a healthy life style.

With over 3200 national parks and reserves of all kinds throughout the country, Australia has more kilometres of walking tracks and trails – where you may also ride a horse or bicycle – than anyone can count. There is ample provision for what Rankin in his book, *Classic Wild Walks of Australia*, calls the urge "to become deeply in tune with your surroundings – far more so than by merely viewing them from the window of a passing vehicle or from a road-side lookout."

Many walking clubs and national parks produce maps and guides; about a hundred such publications – either free or costing just a few dollars – are available in Victoria alone. Local councils often produce leaflets about walks within their area, and more comprehensive books map selected routes all over the country. There is also a bushwalkers' magazine, *Wild*, with a circulation exceeding 18,000. Its editors were startled to hear recently from two New South Wales bushwalkers who had walked the length of the Great Dividing Range, starting at Dergholm, western Victoria, and ending 6700 kilometres later at the tip of Cape York, Queensland.

There are less strenuous ways to sample the pleasures of walking. You can plan a day's route on a map. Take a bicycle in your car and leave it padlocked at one end of the path. Then park the car at the other end and walk to the bike and cycle back. Or try a circular walk, between, say, four and 20 kilometres, that starts and ends at the same point. These walks, ideally providing both "carrots" such as panoramic views and "cop-outs" – short cuts back to the start – are often devised by keen ramblers who begin by writing magazine feature stories

on bushwalking and later turn to penning pamphlets and books.

Walking is a companionable pleasure, particularly for members of Australia's hundreds of walking clubs. The Victorian Federation of Walking Clubs has more than 50 affiliated clubs with 8000 members. Clubs often run outings which, in many cases, nonmembers are welcome to join. So do adult-education organizations and commercial firms. For those with the time and money, some hundred companies market walking holidays and combination cycling-and-walking holidays in the most picturesque areas of Australia. "Business is expanding rapidly," says Colin Pont, manager of World Expeditions, based in Sydney. He reports a 100-per-cent increase in customers in the past year, all eager to tackle routes graded from "difficult" to "moderate" and "easy."

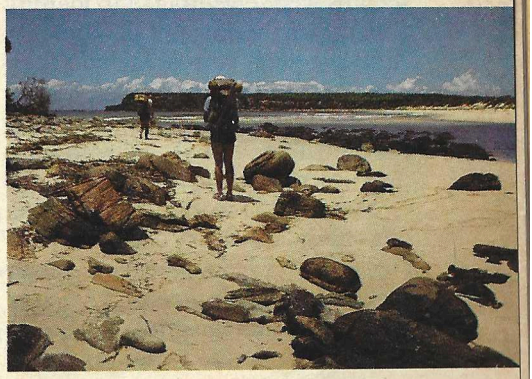
It is generally reckoned that three kilometres an hour is a comfortable pace on the flat, allowing for pauses. The Victorian Federation suggests that ten to 12 kilometres a day is the maximum for beginners, with 15 to 20 kilometres a reasonable distance for the more experienced. "Just pretend that the camp site is just round the next bend," advises Rankin.

If you aim to cover rough terrain, you'll need special walking boots. In 1988, customers of the nationwide Paddy Pallin chain of equipment shops bought some 8000 pairs. Most people pay around $150, though at the top end of the market special boots can cost twice that. Rucksack and rain jacket will add as much again. Orders for walking gear, increasing by up to 15 per cent a year, reflect the Aussie determination to keep striding out in all weathers.

Such doggedness is typical of dedicated walkers like Peter Treseder of Sydney, who holds the record for the "tiger walk" from Kiandra to Perisher, covering 70 kilometres of bush in just over six hours. "Tiger walking" originated in the 1930s when nine Sydney bushwalkers decided to pit their skills against time, terrain and each other as a challenge. They joined the first initials of their surnames and ended up with the acronym "Tigers All." Thus "tiger walking" was born. (An Englishman, George Meegan, holds the record for the longest overland walk: 30,431 kilometres from the tip of South America to northern Alaska, a journey lasting six years and nine months.)

No less indefatigable are those

Beachwalking at Nodgee Nature Reserve



who work to maintain, extend and integrate trail networks into a nationwide system of tracks and preserve the bush through which they wind. A prime example of what enthusiasts can achieve is Western Australia's Bibbulmun Track. In 1972, the Perth Bushwalkers, Western Walking Club, the WA Scout Association and other groups suggested establishing a long-distance walk through the state's southwest. After numerous teething troubles – the proposed walk had to be rerouted to avoid a bauxite mine and several water-catchment areas closed to the public – the track was opened in 1979. The full route is now 650 kilometres long, though most walkers cover only a section of the track, or take one of its 11 circular offshoots. Subsequently, in 1985, Prime Minister Bob Hawke and then Premier of Western Australia Brian Burke announced a million-dollar Heritage Trails Network grant. A range of local organizations, including local government, community bodies and schools were encouraged to identify and create heritage trails and, by June last year, all funding had been allocated. The network is now a clearly signposted series of 152 routes within 95 trails, all with their own descriptive brochures.

Much of the work of maintaining our bush trails is done without any financial help. Local volunteer groups often help keep paths clear and repair trail signs and surfaces.

Few people realize just how wide our network of tracks is. Many disused railways could be turned into tracks, such as the Lilydale-Warburton track in Victoria. Countless kilometres of old stock routes, coach roads and tracks that have been surveyed but never graded or surfaced – so-called "paper roads" – have been assimilated into the new National Trail through Queensland. South Australia is investigating turning stock routes and defunct railways into walking paths. Waterways, fire trails and, according to the national Sport and Recreation Ministers' Council, "any other multipurpose route" are usually open to everyone.

Camaraderie. Then there are the multiplying nature trails in national parks and urban bushland areas, where visitors can learn about the animal and plant life along the way. The Ku-ring-gai Wildflower Garden in Sydney has some carefully planned nature walks and trails, as does Lilly Pilly Gully Nature Trail in Victoria's Wilson's Promontory National Park.

Sensory trails, like those near Lamington National Park in Queensland or Black Mountain Reserve in the Australian Capital Territory, were originally designed to provide the partially sighted with access to nature trails, but they are now also proving popular with sighted people. There are also walks with a touch of history: in Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park in northern Sydney, a range of walks spans several thousand years of history, from

Aboriginal engravings to a sphinx carved from a sandstone bluff by a World War I veteran in 1925. In rural New South Wales, the 372-kilometre Hume and Hovell track follows closely the explorers' route.

The Northern Territory's plains, escarpments and gorges make for magnificent walking country. Seasoned walkers can tackle the more rugged territory in Kakadu National Park on a seven-day adventure outlined in Rankin's *Classic Wild Walks*. Families can hike around Uluru or through Butterfly and Katherine gorges on routes mapped out by Tyrone Thomas in his handy paperback, *20 Best Walks in Australia*.

Thomas advises inexperienced walkers to allow an extra ten to 20 per cent over the time recommended for the walks in his book. Serious walkers would never dream of doing such a thing. For them it is the challenge, enjoyment of the bush and camaraderie that prove irresistible.

Particularly popular are the 20 or so long-distance paths in Tasmania. One of the most arduous is the Western Arthur Range, in southwestern Tasmania. The crossing from Scott's Peak Dam to Lake Rosanne, through some of Australia's most spectacular scenery, can be done in a week, but sudden changes of weather can make it dangerous even for experienced walkers: slopes that are easy walking in fair weather lead to climbs that can be conquered only with the aid of a rope and should not be attempted at all in rough weather.

There are no prizes for those diehards who decide to go for such long walks, but there are many satisfactions. Says Treseder, "Through bushwalking you can learn about nature, meet people, and get the satisfaction of facing a real challenge."

Since 1988, Australia's walkers have faced a remarkable new challenge: the National Trail, which runs roughly along the Great Dividing Range from Cooktown in Queensland to Healesville, Victoria. The route was first proposed by outfitter R. M. Williams; the trail was cleared and marked mostly by hundreds of volunteers, who are now its chief maintenance workers. The 5000-kilometre trail, which passes through a wide variety of terrain from open grassland to dense bush, rainforest to alpine heath, is one of the longest in the world. But as Treseder points out, "You don't have to look hard to find an adventurous walk in Australia. Just take the car into the bush, and when you see something that looks interesting, get out and go!"

PHOTOS: MAIN PICTURE, DAVE WATTS/A.N.T. PHOTO LIBRARY; INSET LEFT, J. AND E.S. BAKER/A.N.T. PHOTO LIBRARY; OTHERS, INTERNATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHIC LIBRARY

THERE ARE good reasons to believe that if you give the government, or anyone else, breathing time, they will spend the time breathing.

– Hugh Anderson in *The Gazette*, Montreal