

ROAD TRIP

AMAZING JOURNEYS, SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES

SCALING THE SCENIC RIM

This guided hike in south-east Queensland offers total immersion in nature and lashings of luxury

WORDS & PHOTOS BRIAR JENSEN

'WHERE... ARE YOU?' whistles the male with whip-cracking final inflection. 'Here, here' trills the female in response. Eastern whipbird banter between the sexes ricochets from the undergrowth and becomes the soundtrack to our saunter along Queensland's Scenic Rim. "He's got separation anxiety," someone quips, and when there's no response from the female, we joke about her waning enthusiasm for such a needy bloke. I love this ornithological 'translation' by guide Grady Thompson, who also does a hilarious impersonation of the paradise riflebird

mating dance. Along with our other guide, Simon Harley, known affectionately by his surname, they're a walking Wikipedia duo with a side of light entertainment.

Spicers Scenic Rim Trail traverses the Great Dividing Range, about 110km southwest of Brisbane, from Thornton in the north to Cunningham's Gap in the south. It's the only Queensland inclusion in the Great Walks of Australia portfolio of luxury pack-free walks.

Spicers was founded by Jude and Graham 'Skroo' Turner, who co-founded Flight Centre. They grew up around here and

Ancient volcanoes sculpted the Scenic Rim into a spectacular and bountiful landscape.



purchased two farms at either end of Main Range National Park, rehabilitating them into nature reserves in perpetuity. It was always Jude's dream to connect them with a multi-day walk. In 2011 the Queensland government called for ecotourism ventures and their submission for a trail with two eco-camps in the national park was approved. Following a \$10 million investment, the trail opened in 2020 and I'm tackling the 60km four-day walk option.

The pick-up and drop-off point is at Spicers Hidden Vale in Grandchester, which is the perfect laidback luxury

retreat to bookend the walk. I arrive at midday and head off with general manager Daniel Lewis to spot koalas in the wild. Within minutes we spy a bundle of grey fur butt-wedged in a tree fork. Then Daniel spots a nocturnal sugar glider clinging to a fence, its gliding membrane snared on the barbed wire. With a blanket and wire cutters, we snip it free and hurry it to Hidden Vale Wildlife Centre, a purpose-built research facility that the Turner Foundation operates in partnership with the University of Queensland.



From left to right: bracket fungi resemble elephants' feet on trees; moreish nibblies and sundowners are provided at the end of each day; the ladder (aka Skroo's folly) ensures we don't disturb rock wallabies; a grove of piccabeen palms; the scarlet flowers of a giant spear lily.

Hidden Vale is renowned for its paddock to plate philosophy, and I spend the afternoon indulging in the culinary offerings of its market garden tour, a wine and cheese appreciation session, cocktail class and dinner in *Homage* restaurant. I finish my day with a soak in the outdoor bathtub on my timber cottage's deck.

DAY ONE (11KM)

The next morning, I meet Harley, Grady, and fellow walkers aged from their forties to their seventies. Groups are capped at 12, but we're a party of eight, with two couples from Queensland and one from Melbourne travelling with their adult daughter.

"There are lots of lovely switchbacks," grins Grady about today's 700-metre ascent. He points out our route on a sculpted timber topographic chart. I fixate on the multiple layers of routed plywood contour lines and hope I've trained hard enough. It's a 40-minute drive to the trail head within Thornton View Nature Reserve, where Grady acknowledges the traditional owners of the land, the Yuggera Ugarapul people.

A goat track leads up through grass trees, whose singed cinnamon skirts underscore needles of new growth as bright green as the grass sprouting from the scorched earth. The 2019 fires denuded the dry sclerophyll forest so it offers scant shade. "It's water and shade appreciation day," says Harley.

I get into the rhythm of using a walking pole and add a gentle breeze to our list of appreciations. A short rock scramble requiring hands and feet is easy enough, but in the wet it would be a waterfall. A vertical steel ladder up a 30-metre rock face adds a frisson of excitement. Ostensibly to avoid rock wallaby territory, the ladder is also known as 'Skroo's folly', an expensive adventure apparatus that had to be helicoptered in. We spot some wallabies camouflaged against the basalt rocks by their

After a shower in our ensuite rooms in the farmhouse, there are drinks and canapes around the firepit

brindled brown fur and kohl-smudged faces.

Harnessed on, everyone climbs with aplomb, even those with a fear of heights. Harley says the oldest to climb was in their eighties, but most inspiring was a blind chap who did the walk with an aide. By lunchtime we are high on the Mistake Range, so named as the explorer Allan Cunningham mistakenly claimed it was part of the Great Dividing Range. Below us is Laidley Valley, a patchwork of cultivated paddocks forming the region's food bowl. In the distance, Brisbane's skyscrapers stencil the horizon.

Like *Mary Poppins'* capacious carpet bag, the guides' packs produce burners for freshly brewed coffee, a blend called *Glossy Black*, the proceeds of which protect the habitat of rare glossy black-cockatoos. Out come bliss balls and banana bread for morning teas, while watermelon and lollies appear for mid-afternoon pick-me-ups.

On Mount Mistake Station enormous grass trees resemble botanical candelabra, one supporting 14 candle-like flower spikes. In the late afternoon, an apparition appears on the cliff edge: our hostess Kerrilee. She dispenses cool towels and elderflower cordial followed by prosecco or beer. This becomes our reviving afternoon ritual.

After a shower in our ensuite rooms in the farmhouse (rebuilt after the 2019 fires), there are drinks and canapes around the firepit before a dinner of slow-cooked lamb and spiced apple pie, followed by Baileys in the lounge.



The farmhouse at Mount
Mistake is the perfect
place to unwind.

DAY TWO (17KM)

Harley suggests we engage low-range 4WD for the long uphill logging track called The Winder, named after a logging winch. Timber getters moved here in the late 1800s for red cedar, dubbed 'red gold', then moved on to hoop pine and carabeen. Logging continued until the mid-1980s and abandoned machinery rusts beside the track. Now wild pigs plunder the forest.

We cross into Main Range National Park, on the Great Dividing Range, a remnant shield volcano last active 24 million years ago. Its eastern escarpment, chiselled by erosion, is now a vertical rock garden of giant spear lilies. Their scarlet flowering stalk rises from between three-metre-long leaves and can take up to 13 years to emerge, bending under the weight of its blooms.

We walk further back in time into Gondwanan sub-tropical rainforest whose roots stretch back 180 million years. It's part of the Gondwana Rainforest of Australia World Heritage Area. Like a cool embrace the temperature drops a couple of degrees, layers of canopy diffuse the light and sounds are softer. "It takes one thousand years to make one centimetre of topsoil," says Harley, before a dire warning about giant stinging trees, whose hairy leaves inflict excruciating pain even if brushed gently, let alone used in lieu of loo paper.

Here Harley introduces us to the Indigenous concept of *dadirri* (da-did-ee). The word comes from the people of the Daly River region and elder Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann describes it as, "Inner deep listening and quiet still awareness. To listen deeply is to connect. It is something like what you call contemplation."

To facilitate *dadirri* we walk solo, several minutes apart and focus our senses on the flutter of a falling leaf, the earthy humus aroma, the warmth of slanting sunbeams, the shadow of a flying bird. I notice delicate fungi, silken spider webs and flitting rufus

fantails. Our guides are far more attuned though, pointing out a python curled in the undergrowth, trapdoor spider tunnels, and tadpoles of the Fleay's barred frog in a creek.

Our accommodation for the next two nights is Amphitheatre Ecocamp and then Timber Getters Ecocamp. They were both constructed offsite from sustainably sourced materials and perch in the bush like tree houses, imparting a cosy ski-lodge ambiance, with a fireplace in the lounge and shelves of reference books. Elevated walkways lead to individual sleeping pods with king-size beds. I turn on the electric blanket and leave the cantilevered wall to the deck open, falling asleep to rustling leaves punctuated by southern boobook owls.

DAY THREE (16KM)

'Net negative ascent,' meaning more downs than ups, is how Grady spins today's undulating route from ridgetops to ravines on rocky, root-strewn tracks; or 'type two fun', which is fun in retrospect as opposed to in the moment. But I love these tracks and during *dadirri* I appreciate the morning play of light and the peaty petrichor smell. A rustle from the undergrowth turns out to be a regent bower bird that takes flight in a flash of black and golden yellow. Harley says he's only seen one other in three years of guiding here.

We scamper along the escarpment to Old Sylvesters Lookout. The exposed rocky outcrop is bursting with blooms, petite purple sage, papery golden daisies, and a profusion of scarlet spear lilies buzzing with native bees. In twos, Harley escorts us to the edge of the outcrop (weather permitting) for orientating views along the edge of the caldera.

After lunch we enter a grove of piccabeen palms and encounter granddaddy hoop pines and yellow carabeen trees with

From left to right: a sugar glider caught in a barbed wire fence is rescued and taken to Hidden Vale Wildlife Centre; grass trees that look like botanical candelabra; traversing the ridgetop of Mount Cordeaux.



gigantic buttress roots. Grady demonstrates how Aboriginal people used them to communicate by hitting with a stone and emanating a hollow thud through the bush.

DAY FOUR (16KM)

We feel like forest people now, senses finely tuned to our surroundings. We recognise the alarm calls of satin bower birds and notice a red triangle slug someone thinks resembles a fancy dessert decorated with raspberry coulis. A fallen bird's nest is so exquisitely felted with lichen, moss and possum fur it would scoop the prize pool at any country show.

At a public campground we realise we haven't seen anyone outside our group the whole trip. This area used to see huge Aboriginal corroborees as clans gathered for the bunya harvest, feasting on the nutritious kernels in the football-sized nuts, while trading, arranging marriages and resolving law. The festivals ceased with white settlement.


Bunyas are keystone species of Gondwanan forests, the kernels originally propagated by megafauna. We contemplate the incredible forest ecosystem, including the mycorrhizal network beneath our feet that links individual plants for the transfer of water and nutrients. I've never felt more connected to nature.

Bare Rock is the highest point of the hike at 1168 metres, affording 360-degree views. We're in awe of the landscape, euphoric at our achievement, and grateful to be here. Traversing the ridgetop like a tightrope, dramatic drop-offs plunge into the valleys below. At Mount Cordeaux a pair of satin bower birds balance on a grass tree flower and rainbow lorikeets take flight in a confetti explosion of colour.

Civilisation reaches us before we reach it - the sounds of chatting day walkers and trucks changing gears through

Cunninghams Gap. But the bush offers up a final farewell of multiple Albert's lyrebird sightings.

At Spicers Hidden Peaks, as we sip prosecco and soak our feet around the firepit where tonight's dinner of rib eye dangles in the smoke, we compare highlights of the hike. For some it's the challenging walk or comfy beds, others the wildlife and Indigenous stories, but everyone agrees just being present in nature is profoundly rewarding.

As Miriam-Rose says, "When we listen to the land, we are made whole again." 

GREAT WALKS OF AUSTRALIA

Great Walks of Australia (GWA) was established in 2013 to promote Australia's best pack-free, multi-day, guided hiking experiences. From six founding walks, it has grown to 12 across the country. Member walks hold advanced eco-tourism credentials and partner with local businesses, creating wide-reaching economic benefits for regional communities, and passionate guides foster immersive experiences that linger long after the last step.

"It's such a privilege to take walkers to see places of high conservation value and significance," says GWA executive officer Liz O'Rourke. "That in turn helps the walks foster a new wave of supporters to help protect them for the future."

The walks vary in length and challenge in a variety of spectacular locations. Liz says walking has a host of well-being benefits: "Most of us live busy lives and are often disconnected from nature. When you take time to walk the land, you will always be deeply rewarded."

For more information, visit greatwalksofaustralia.com.au and scenicrimtrail.com.