

# Kokoda - a walk in the park; if you're a porter

By Tertia Butcher

**Trekking through the Kokoda Track is like a walk in the park; a lush and colourful botanical garden. It is the most beautiful stretch of land I have ever seen – with the tallest trees, the most colourful butterflies and most beautiful flowers and endless choko vines.**

**But it is physically the most gruelling non-alpine hike in the world.**

**In Chris McClelland's words - *The Kokoda Track is a billion steps; any one of which the average Western human being in a lifetime would normally try to avoid.***

**Our Travelscene Hay group completed the Kokoda challenge on Sunday, July 11 – ahead of schedule and without injury. Our porters were the fittest men and most caring souls on this planet. Here is our story:**

Sibona is my best friend.

Sibona and my two hiking poles got me through the Kokoda challenge.

They say nothing can prepare you for the Kokoda experience.

They are right.

You cannot put into words this mental and physical challenge. Seven days of torture, heat, physical exhaustion, aching limbs and for some nausea and splitting headaches.

And at night, no comfortable chair or bed – just you, your sleeping mat and a small tent.

But Kokoda is also seven days of walking through a virtual botanical garden, visiting the neatest villages you will ever see and getting to know some of the most endearing people you will ever meet.

We were told that the porters on the track are incredible – in fact, they are unbelievable.

For seven days Sibona was my shadow, my rescuer and my carrier.

He walked behind me on the track when he knew there were steep sections ahead where I would need a firm push from behind and would appear like a flash of lightning next to me, a split second before I needed to be hoisted up on even steeper sections. On the steep downhills he often placed his foot in front of me to stop me from sliding.

Sibona has no shoes. This bare-footed 18 year-old young man weighs no more than 40 kilograms and he is easily the strongest man I know.

His grip on my arm was like steel, hoisting me up steep cliffs and over even steeper hillside sections with only one hand whilst carrying my heavy backpack. Often he would be holding my camera and two hiking poles in the other hand, especially over dangerous river crossings.

Just like the legendary wartime Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels, our porters guided us across the treacherous Kokoda Track to the safety of Kokoda Village.

We started our trek at Ower's Corner the previous Sunday where a jubilant group had just arrived, having walked the opposite, and easier, way to us.

Watching them jumping for joy and enthusiastically hugging each other as they completed their big challenge, I took heart from the fact they still had so much energy after what is meant to be a Seven Day Death March. I felt confident that my super-fit group would have no worries.

Then I looked at the jubilant young people and realised they were only 16 year olds; a high school group from Victoria.

Our group of 16 ranged in age from 18 to 68.

We all had our 'down' days, especially when there were a lot of 'ups'. We soon learned never to look up – not only will the demons in your head tell you that you cannot physically walk almost vertically like a fly on a wall, but you will also trip over the exposed

tree roots.

As our youngest trekker, Will, said in an interview on ABC Radio earlier this week, the highlights were each time you made in to the top.

*"The rest of the time it is eyes down and one foot in front of the other – one step at a time."*

You knew there was a hard bit coming up when everyone in front of you stop talking and we all learnt not to take notice of our porters promising that there would be "no more ups". We walked up to eight hours each day in extreme heat and over some of the most gruelling terrain on earth.

How anyone fought a battle here is beyond me.

None of us knew that we could sweat so much and for once in our lifetimes it was considered healthy to eat salt.

On our fourth and fifth days we heard the sound most dreaded by trekkers – a helicopter.

This means only one thing; someone along the track did not make it and is being evacuated.

We were very fortunate to meet Bill James, author of Field Guide to the Kokoda Track, on our trek one morning.

Each one of us was armed with Bill's book which was a wonderful guide, complemented by 'history lessons' at selected sites by our World War II historian, Ken Butcher.

Considering that Papua New Guinea was the first time Australia fought for its own soil, Kokoda should receive greater national recognition. But we were blessed to have been able to walk the track and learn more about this important part of Australia's history.

Our porters were all from Kagi Village which sits on a hilltop, halfway between Kokoda and Ower's Corner. We had an overnight stay in their village and that evening the children entertained us with their beautiful harmonious voices.

Like Kagi, most of the villages along the track are Seventh Day Adventist and on the Saturday we were fortunate to be walking through a village whilst the locals were in church. Again, listening to their voices of praise will always stay with me.

Because of their deep faith, the people on Kokoda are amongst the most honest I have ever come across and the children in particular have an open love of the Lord.

Kokoda was a character-building and bonding experience for our group. We enjoyed excellent team dynamics, with everyone helping each other and looking out for one another.

We chose the Melbourne-based company, No Roads to organise our trek, based on their good safety record and reputation for providing good food along the Track.

All the meals were cooked in two large pots, carried by the group porters from camp site to camp site each day. The menu changed every day and we always looked forward to the next meal.

We were not disappointed and many of us actually gained weight – while walking eight hours a day for a week!

I was a little worried on the first day though when I noticed two of the group porters carrying uncooked chickens in a plastic bag, with no refrigeration.

We were in the tropics and I knew my Western stomach would object to tonight's meal. Relief - the chooks were for the porters.

I will do it again. I will again put myself through 18 months of hard training and seven days of hell just to be able to walk in the steps of our war heroes and to once more hear the voices of the children of Kagi Village.

Next week: Chris McClelland's view on the Kokoda experience.



Dirty, tired and very thirsty - our happy group arrives in Kokoda after seven hard days on the track (from left) back: Mick Lawrie, Jim Hunt, Phil Ruddick, Lynne McWilliam, Ken Cunningham, Bec Woods, Tertia Butcher, Ken Butcher, Cheryl Marmont, Chris McClelland (front) Cameron Clark, Jason Hannaford, Ron Lipscombe, Patti Hobbs, Will Butcher and Peter Beal.



Snaking our way along a steep 'down'.



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