

**BTF member and two times End-to-Ender Steve Willems set out last year to make a documentary about the Track and ran into trouble very early on! Read Steve's account below to find out more:**

Ever since my first end-to-end I've felt the need to make a documentary and share the Bibbulmun Track experience. After years of plotting I finally came back in 2019 with my friend Caroline, who walked with me filming the Overland and the Hume and Hovell Tracks. We chose to start in September for the wildflower season, which fills the bush with life and colour.

To get the best results we carried four cameras. Caroline had two small ones for vlogging, selfies and close-ups, while I carried the main camera and a drone. To keep everything powered we had a solar panel, spare batteries, chargers and several power banks. Along with sixteen kilos of food and equipment I also had eight kilos of film gear and a three-kilo camera.

We left the Northern Terminus excited by what lay ahead, but the first challenge hit us sooner than we expected. After leaving Hewett's Hill I began to struggle and fall behind. I worried it might be the extra weight, but that night at Helena I was hit by severe chest pains, so intense we set my tent away from the shelter so I wouldn't disturb anyone else. I spent a sleepless night in agony. The next morning it was clear I couldn't continue. Caroline managed to call an ambulance, which picked me up with the help of the Department of Parks and Wildlife and took me to hospital. I had a one-inch gallstone stuck in the tube of my gallbladder, which was severely infected. They operated that day while Caroline found a hotel nearby. I was depressed. I'd been planning this trip for years and now it was already over.

It didn't take much to agree that Caroline should keep going—she'd made too many sacrifices to be there. But it wasn't that simple. I had introduced her to overnight hiking just a year before and she'd never been out alone. This would be a personal challenge. The next day Caroline was dropped back on the Track and set off nervously to navigate by herself while filming everything she could. It didn't take long to develop trust in her own abilities and enjoy walking alone. Even though the Track is well marked you still need to be careful, but with enough

preparation and confidence anyone can do it. And she wasn't really alone, meeting a variety of people including other solo women, some who became our hiker family, most notably Lisa and Rujo who walked with us to the end.



*There's plenty of wildlife about.*

Three days in hospital thinking about the Track made me determined to keep going; I just needed to heal. I found a cheap hotel and filled my days maintaining fitness, walking around the city and doing laps of Kings Park. My drama turned out to be good for both of us. It made me change to a healthier diet while giving Caroline the confidence to hike on her own. Personal growth is all part of the journey. Two weeks after my operation I caught a bus to Collie and re-joined Caroline back on the Track.



*Caution, hikers ahead near Greens Pool, Denmark.*

"Don't lift more than 5kg for eight weeks" the doctors told me. "You don't want to risk opening your wounds and getting a hernia." Lifting my pack without straining my abdomen took some getting used to. Caroline would help, hauling it up so I could put my arms through the straps. The hiking was good and I didn't struggle, but it did make filming a challenge.

Filming adds a lot more effort to the walk. We couldn't simply leave camp; we had to film our departure. We couldn't experience ordinary moments the same way as other hikers, like finding ourselves walking



*Half way! Now we're veterans.*



*Caroline has fun wading through the Pingerup Plains*

deep in hypnotic thought. The magic was constantly broken as we had to think, assess, react, stop, start, shoot. Caroline had to wait for me to get ahead or catch up. And then I had to wait for her as she got close-ups of flowers or vlogged her thoughts. We also had to walk a lot more. Caroline would cross the same bridge several times to get different angles or walk the same section over and over. She climbed the Gloucester Tree four times and crossed Irwin Inlet six times. We'd be out all day, taking ten hours to walk

what others did in six. That meant long days on our feet and less time in camp. We were always the last to arrive and we were always tired.

Sometimes filming spoiled the experience, and not just for us. We tried not interfering with other hikers in camp but that couldn't be helped. Luckily, everyone was not only patient, but supportive, and our main hiking family put up with us like a true family does. Lisa, Rujo and Fi threw a birthday party for Caroline at Mount Chance,



*Filming on Parry beach.*



*Steve climbs the Gloucester Tree in Pemberton.*

where section hikers we met at Schafer had left her a treasure hunt leading to a bottle of wine.

Unlike the quiet Hume and Hovell or Alpine Trails, it's the community of walkers on the Bibbulmun Track that makes it extra special. Not just sharing meals in town, but chatting in shelters over hot tea, or a friendly face passing by to give support on a hard day. It's a solitary yet shared experience that surprises many walkers and can't be understood until you live it.

We had twenty SD cards which would last about a week. We also sent a bounce box from town to town with hard drives and a laptop. In town we'd clear the cards onto hard drives, including a backup I carried. Each card would take half an hour to copy, so the more we filmed the longer it took. Then we'd pack up the box and mail it to the next town. By the end of the trip we had over 120 hours and six terabytes of footage.

The walk was everything we hoped for—beauty, wildlife, storms and sun. Emotional freedoms, spiritual revelations, personal challenges, peace, community, adventure. Despite the work it was a magical journey. Arriving at the Southern Terminus didn't feel like the end. There was no sense of triumph or relief. It felt like the next day we'd simply pack up again and keep going.

Instead we had to go home...

Our walk was part of a bigger project documenting the experience of long-distance hiking. Check out [www.gwotw.com](http://www.gwotw.com) and drop us a line if you'd like to know more.

**Steve Willems**