

DANIEL PARSONS

Force of nature

This exhausting but exhilarating walk is a metaphor for life

DENISE CULLEN

There is a point on every multi-day hike when a trek turns into a trudge. For me, it comes halfway through the second day of the new Gidjuum Gulganyi Walk in northern NSW.

Covering around 17km through the rainforest's humidity, this stretch includes 734 large stone steps; a spiral staircase to the sky. I curse every last one as I haul myself ever higher.

Yet each time I fantasise about faking an injury, so I'd have to be choppered out, we reach another rest stop at another lookout, each offering different, spectacular views of caldera peaks, lush valleys and densely packed Gondwanan greenery. They make the sweaty effort worthwhile and, as I learn over four days on the trail, this trade-off is the whole point.

One of the newest of the NSW Great Walks, the 42km Gidjuum Gulganyi Walk links Mount Jerusalem and Nightcap National Parks in the Tweed Byron Hinterland. Led by Connect Adventures guide Jason Little, our 10-strong group set off on a relatively undemanding first day from Unicorn Falls. I find my natural pace among the laggards of the group.

Tackling switchbacks, creek crossings, and carpets of fallen Bangalow palm fronds, we settle in to enjoy nature's slow reveal – lizards darting under leaves, orange fungi on fallen logs, a pair of grey goshawks circling above the canopy.

Gidjuum Gulganyi (meaning Old People's Track) traces the southern rim of the Tweed caldera formed when the Wollumbin (Mount Warning) volcano erupted 23 million years ago. It also travels through the ancestral lands of the Widjabul Wia-bal and Minjungbal people of the Bundjalung Nation, following traditional songlines and trading routes.

Hikers pass within coo-ee of culturally significant sites, though they are yet to be signposted.



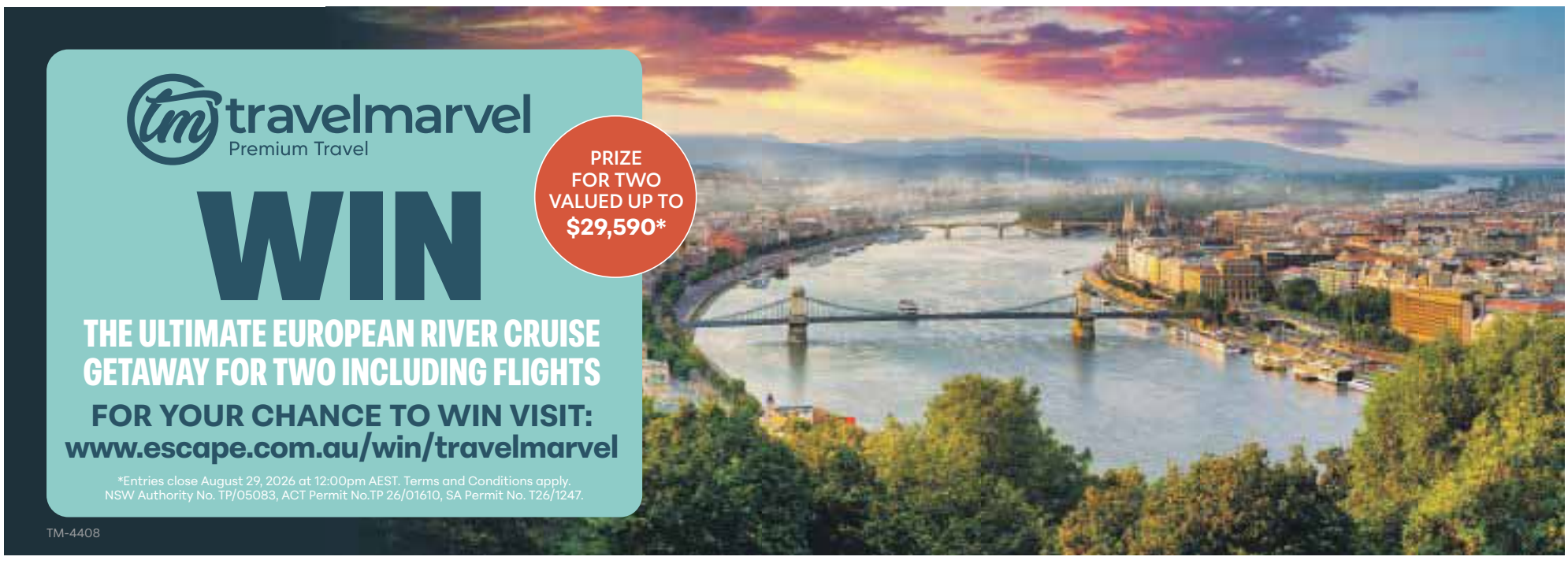
Manns Road track, top; Sand Ridge Campground, above

Matthew Wiseman, of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, says negotiations with traditional owners are ongoing, with cultural heritage signage expected in 2027.

When we pause at Whiskey Creek for fresh salad rolls, nature presses in. Surrounded by the mossy gods of the rainforest, struck by the brooding hush and sense of deep time, I feel something approaching awe.

That night, we walk into camp to find our tents already pitched on elevated wooden platforms, air beds dressed, and preparations for a meal under way.

Purists claim the only true way to tackle the Gidjuum







TREVOR WORDEN

Mount Warning, above; Minyon Falls, above right

Gulganyi Walk is alone, carrying all your own food and gear on foot. Realists, like me, instead sign up with Connect Adventures, one of only two operators licensed to guide small groups on this trail.

Guests carry nothing more than a daypack, while support vehicles handle the rest. Each afternoon, Kathryn Woods, Little's partner in business and life, hosts a "happy hour" showcasing locally sourced food and drink, including Brookfarm's saltbush-dusted macadamias, oozy Tweed Valley Whey camembert and hard kombucha from Murwillumbah-based Ventura Brewing. After a challenging day on the trail, there is no greater luxury than to find this all waiting.

But I am not prepared for just how tough day two will be. This steep uphill section is freshly forged and the most difficult to create, Wiseman tells me. Part of the challenge involves the 500m altitude gain. About 200 helicopter drops were needed to deposit 139 tonnes of stone for those loathsome steps.

The $7.34m trail took six years to plan and build, progress slowed by what Wiseman dryly calls "trials and tribulations", including bushfires in 2019, floods in 2022, and storms in 2024.

The Gidjuum Gulganyi Walk finally opened in April 2025 and climbing it, step by helicopter-dropped step, it's not hard to see why it took so long.

After lunch on the second day, sensing I am approaching my limit, Little offers a smile and a slice of dried mango.

"Multi-day hikes are a metaphor for life," he ventures. "It's an emotional rollercoaster, with highs and lows and a lot of slogging it out to get to the good bits."

A little further on, we reach the Postman's Tree, a towering eucalyptus where, as early as the 1880s, postmen working the Lismore to Murwillumbah delivery route used to shelter overnight. One postie stashed his blankets in the base of the tree. Days later, when he went to unroll them, he found two dingoes curled up inside. Dingoes still roam the area "but they're quite scared of people", Wiseman says.

A fierce wind picks up that night at Yelgun Kyoomgun ("sun and stars") campground. Venturing out for a midnight loo run, I watch the tall gums around us swaying wildly, creating the illusion of blinking stars.

The following day, we walk through fire-scarred open woodland, riotous epicormic growth bursting from charred tree trunks. A carpet python glides out of sight at our approach and two chunky land mullets (giant skinks) vanish under fallen branches.

After 13km of what Little billed as "a nice leisurely recovery walk", we reach the edge of Wanganui Gorge, riven with tumbling waterfalls and looking positively prehistoric. Given the reptiles we've seen, I wouldn't be surprised to see a herd of dinosaurs emerge from the mist. Instead, there is a flock of raucous yellow-tailed black cockatoos, spiralling and squabbling at dusk.

The next morning, after sunrise coffee, we follow the cliff tops of Wanganui Gorge towards Minyon Falls, a spectacular 130m single-plunge waterfall. This is the official end of the Gidjuum Gulganyi Walk, but with Connect Adventures, we push down to the base of the falls, where the thundering cascade creates a perpetual spray and natural icy plunge pools.

Here, nature's sheer force is palpable, the atmosphere electric.

We've slogged it out. We've got to the good bits.

Denise Cullen was a guest of Connect Adventures.

IN THE KNOW

Designed to be walked from north to south, the official Gidjuum Gulganyi Walk stretches 42km from the Manns Road track head near Unicorn Falls to Minyon Falls lookout. Connect Adventures has a different start point and leads hikers to the base of Minyon Falls and out via an alternative route, making for a 48km total. The 4-day/3-night walk is $2165 a person, including guides, all gear, meals, snacks and transfers to and from Byron Bay or Murwillumbah.

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