



# AGE BEFORE BEAUTY

WORDS AND PHOTOS JOHN NEWBERY

**Walking the Kokoda Track is an awe-inspiring prospect but its punishing climbs don't get any easier as you get older. As John Newbery found out, the rewards are well worth the pain.**

**W**hen one of my sub-50-year-old friends suggested about 12 months back we organise a Kokoda trek in PNG, my main condition was that we book for July, the driest month in the tropics. Having seen archival wartime footage of our soldiers tramping through the mud, it seemed that avoiding the rain would be highly advisable. At my age, I wouldn't even contemplate a trek between October and March.

## Doing the research

Once we had made up our minds to do it we went internet searching for a reputable operator. When you're the wrong side of 50, you're not so interested in "personal development, leadership development and facing your own challenges" as in having a really positive and safe experience.

It's important the operator has comprehensive insurance in case you need a medical evacuation. You want comfortable tents and sleeping bags and porters to carry heavy equipment. Charlie Lynn's Adventure Kokoda offered all that, so we went with him. There were no petty rules with Charlie, walk at your own pace and enjoy a nip of OP rum at the end of a hard day.

## Push-ups and check ups

The pre-trip training made us appreciate how important it was to know your fitness level. I weigh 85kg, and I'm sorry I didn't work a bit harder in the months before the trek to get about 7kg off. It would have made a difference.

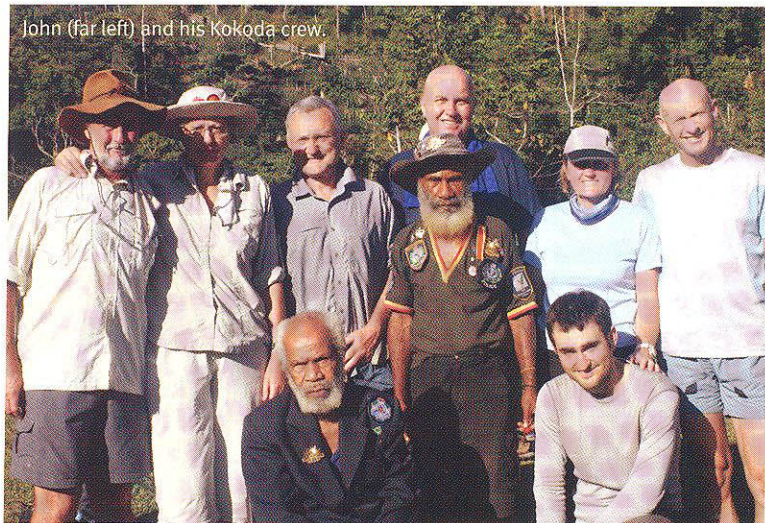
The group of seven we put together for our trek included three 55-year-olds and a 57-year-old. We were all reasonably fit but we knew that 10 days of constant climbing and descending would require a different sort of fitness to what we each had. So we set up training regimes based on two to three 10-20km training walks per week, including hills and stairs.

Charlie's company insists over-50s have a detailed health check before trekking, partly for insurance reasons. I'd never had a full medical before, but despite being a bit reticent, was relieved to find my heart was normal and I didn't have some undiagnosed disorder.

Trekking companies also provide you with a list of drugs and medications as long as your left arm, and the average GP will want to inoculate you against every tropical disease known to humankind... at considerable expense.



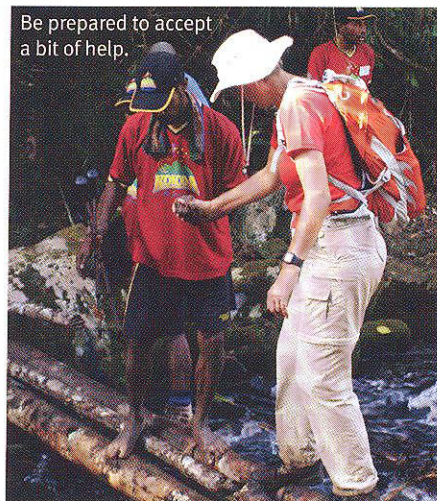
John (far left) and his Kokoda crew.



Walkers were treated to a traditional greeting.



Be prepared to accept a bit of help.



**“Early on we resolved to only carry day packs and to use porters for our heavier gear.”**

What you do about this is ultimately up to you. My hepatitis and tetanus covers were reasonably up to date so I avoided further jabs, but I did get malaria prevention tablets. Having said that, we hardly saw a mosquito, but it's not worth the risk. We bought most of the suggested medicines from the list but the ones we really used were anti-inflammatories, insect repellent (although no-one seemed to get bitten or stung by anything), pain killers, anti-histamines and anti-bacterial and anti-fungal foot creams (as precautions).

Many of our group also used high-quality bandaids and elastic strapping on feet and ankles. All this gets to be more important when you're over 50 and not as flexible as you once were. Our doctor companions took great delight in explaining how connective tissue changes and stiffens up as you age.

### Water packs and Scooby snacks

I'm not big on vitamin supplements, but high-energy trek snacks are a great addition to a 50-year-old's day pack. Power bars, high carbohydrate gels, beef jerky, whatever you like . . . they can really give you a lift on tough climbs between set meals. And liquids: you can't afford to under- or over-hydrate.

One of our company badly over-hydrated and got really sick after drinking about eight litres of water on a particularly hot day. My partner Robyn and I carried a one litre bottle of water and a litre of Staminade – to replace lost electrolytes – between us within easy reach, and an additional one litre bladder of water each inside our backpacks for emergencies.

### To porter or not to porter

Early on we resolved to only carry day packs and to use porters for our heavier gear. Charlie's advice was that unless you're as fit in your 50s as you were in your 20s (and have the same waist measurement) then carting a 20kg+ pack on the track is not a good idea. He was right. Our day packs still weighed around 8kg, which was plenty. The rest of our gear which the porters lugged was limited to 12.5kg.

Our total group size ended up being 28, and 16 of us used porters. About half the group were 50+, with our oldest member, Paddy, aged 67. We had four other doctors and five pilots in our group as well, ranging in age from the early 40s to 50. Some carried their own packs; they'd done similar training to the rest of us but with 15kg loads on their backs. Some of our group were glad they elected to carry full packs, some were sorry.

### The kit & caboodle

On other matters physical, footwear and clothing are particularly important for us 50+ers. Boots don't have to be the most expensive models, but should be light, have good grippy soles and hopefully be waterproof. Modern boots require minimal breaking in, so if in doubt invest in a new pair a bit before your trek.

Robyn trusted an old tried-and-true pair of boots which virtually disintegrated along the way.

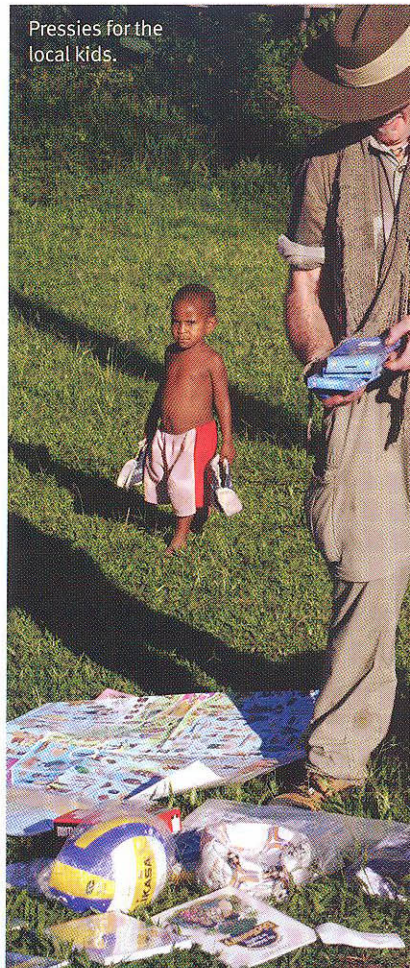
Don't scrimp on socks. We paid \$35 a pair for the best our trekking store had, and had minimal foot problems as a result. Buy



The walk takes some organising.



Pressies for the local kids.



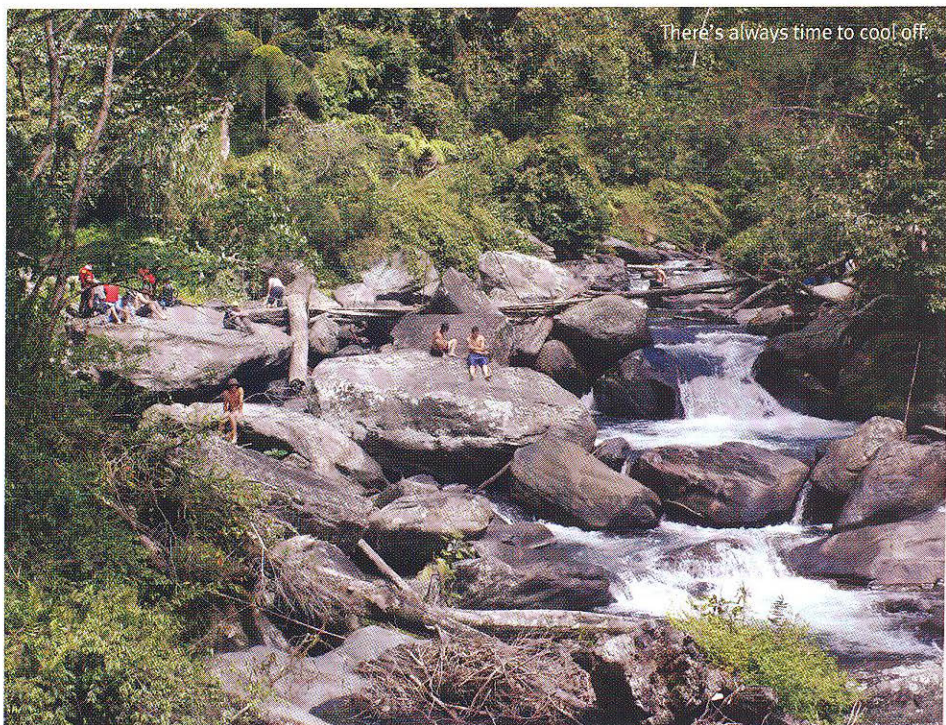
## 12 TOP TRAINING TIPS

So you've made up your mind to take on a multi-day walk. Here are some pre-trip tips worth considering:

- Have a medical check up
- Set up a training regime
- Monitor results in a log book
- Incorporate hills and stairs
- Wear a weighty backpack
- Train with your group
- Keep your meals up and eat healthy
- Replace the odd beer or wine with a juice
- Vary the direction and distance you walk
- Work on your flexibility
- Stretch before and after activity
- Visualise your goal and how you'll feel achieving it

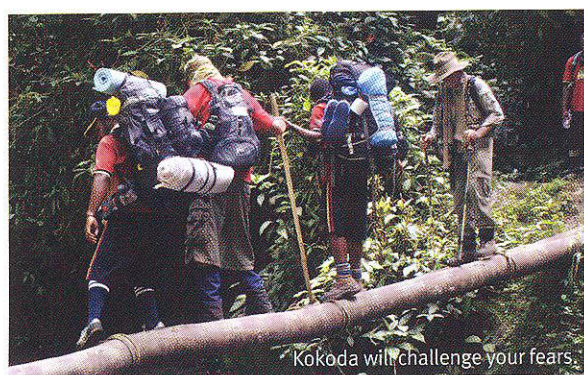
**Attitude. It's one of the most important ingredients on a successful trek. This requires you to leave your pride at the airport . . . for coping with pit toilets alone.**

There's always time to cool off.

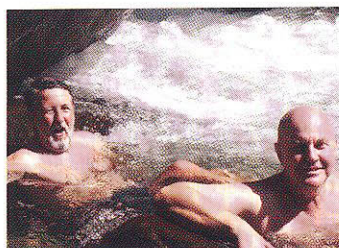




Walkers and porters are given a trip rundown.



Kokoda will challenge your fears.



## NEED TO KNOW

PNG Tourism  
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Information for Aussies 50+  
Website: [www.seniors.gov.au](http://www.seniors.gov.au)  
Phone: 1800 500 853

super-quick-dry shirts, slacks or shorts (such as those made by Columbia) so if you get wet in a river crossing or rain shower, your body heat will dry them out – and avoid chafing.

Using trekking poles makes life much easier, whether it's one or two. I used a pair of inexpensive aluminium poles to steady myself on downhill sections and help lever myself up on climbs. At one stage I fell on one and bent it badly; if it had been high-tech carbon fibre, which some of the group used, one of the doctors would probably have been picking shards of fibre out of my backside. Some poles broke on our trip, and the porters happily replaced them with wooden sticks, which they then decorated for our trekkers at stops along the way.

### It's all in the mind

Attitude. It's one of the most important ingredients on a successful trek. This requires you to leave your pride at the airport . . . for coping with pit toilets alone. But more than that, if a porter helps you, gratefully accept it. Charlie had quite skilfully put our group of 28 together so that we all got on and supported each other in stressful physical and emotional situations. The docs gave at least two injections along the way, one for severe nausea, one for severe disc pain.

We tended to form into small groups of four or five for each day's trekking, based on the speed we wanted to walk at, got to know each other well and really looked after each other through inevitable slips, falls and low times.

The last important message for 50+ trekkers has to be: keep up your PMA (positive mental attitude). Lots of age-based challenges and aches and pains dissipate if your PMA is engaged.

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