

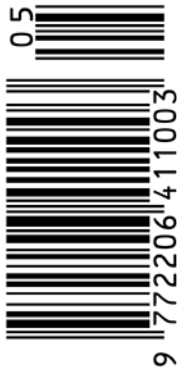
TRAVEL PLAY LIVE

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ADVENTURE x EMPOWER x INSPIRE x DREAM x CHANGE

A Strength **WITHIN**

More people had walked on the moon than completed the entire 1700 kilometre Great Himalayan Trail...until an ordinary Sydney mum took it on.



It gave me enough courage to know that I'd be okay out of my comfort zone and that I can get through.

WRITTEN BY TRACEY CROKE

Heather Hawkins came “out of recovery” from her Coogee home to meet me at the World Expeditions office in Sydney. As the lift opens, I scan the room for a fatigued 51-year-old. The receptionist introduces me to a cheery woman with a glow that looks fresh out of a wellness retreat. “Hi I’m Heather,” she beams.

The only clue I’ve got that Heather has just spent the past five months crossing 16 high altitude passes, with only ten rest days, is her loose fitting pair of jeans. It could well be a part of her chilled relaxed style, or down to some weight loss (six kilograms she later confirms), but I can’t help wondering if she’s camouflaging a superwoman outfit. The latter would explain a lot.

For starters, it would explain how, in the space of a few years, Heather propelled from “having a go” at a family fun run in an “old pair of gardening shorts” to running grueling multi-day ultra races and winning a polar marathon in one of the planet’s harshest environments. It would certainly explain the resilience needed to take on the world’s longest and highest alpine walking track - an extraordinary 152-day trek from east to west Nepal - literally learning the ropes on the way.

“I’m just an ordinary Sydney mum,” she says looking me right in the eye. For Heather, that could be taking dog Rusty for a walk, ocean swimming at Coogee beach and then rustling up a batch of banana bread – voted the tastiest according to her two grownup children, Bek, 23, and Callum, 21. It also means smashing out

some of the world’s greatest challenges often “on a whim,” she laughs.

Heather is the first to admit she has time to pursue her dreams of living life to the full after she and husband Doug – both surf lifesavers – sold their business and retired early in their late forties. But what makes Heather’s achievements all the more extraordinary is her self-styled training regime.

Apart from moral support from her family and “Ted the Girl” - her childhood teddy who joins her on every challenge - there are no expert trainers in the background, no nutrition gurus, not even Googled tips. “I do what’s right for me,” she says.

This is a one-woman endurance show who knows herself well and trusts her own judgment and intuition – instincts

that possibly saved her life – because, for Heather, completing The Great Himalaya Trail was a realisation of a much bigger journey. “I’m just so grateful to be alive,” she says.

In 2007, Heather, a former nurse, was busy running a video production business with husband Doug, when “her world stood still.” She’d been suffering from abdominal bloating and little bit of discomfort. “At first I wrote it off as a heavy month, but when it persisted, I thought I better go and get it checked out.” She explains.

The following morning she dropped the kids off at school and went to see her GP. A few hours later she was sitting with scans in hand dealing with the shock diagnosis of ovarian cancer.

“The doctor could see from the scans it was quite a large tumor on the ovary

- about a 7cm growth at that stage. By the time I came to have surgery a week later it was 20cm, it was incredibly fast growing,” she recalls.

Thankfully, surgery dealt with the cancer, and pathology tests showed it hadn’t spread. Heather feels her fast actions and faith in her own intuition saved her life. “Ovarian cancer is hard to define,” she says shaking her head, “but I just sensed something wasn’t right.”

The experience made Heather reassess her life and it changed her whole headspace about getting really fit and healthy. Two years later in 2009, Heather took her bronze medal in Surf Lifesaving.

Although she didn’t know it at that time, swimming longer distances in open water and paddling huge rescue boards pushed Heather’s limits for things to

come. “It gave me enough courage to know that I’d be okay out of my comfort zone and that I can get through. That was certainly a game-changer, becoming a surf lifesaver meant a great deal to me.”

Heather’s running spark came after five cancer-free years in 2012 aged 47. She got off to a sketchy start at the Mothers Day Classic – a 4km family fun run to raise funds for breast cancer. Daughter Bek and son Cal ran in support.

She says she remembers so clearly rummaging in the wardrobe and finding an old pair of runners and gardening shorts. “I looked just gorgeous,” she laughs. A cycling accident many years earlier left husband Doug with long-term knee injuries and supporting from the sidelines while the rest of the family set off on the 4km loop. Unfortunately, Heather’s swimming

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fitness didn't seem to help. "About halfway, I remember thinking this is tough, it's a long way." She sat down on the grass and almost gave up until Bek and Cal urged her to the finish.

Determined to do better, Heather returned to Centennial Park the following day and ran it again. "That was a huge light-bulb moment," she says, and on the momentum she immediately signed up for the 14km City to Surf.

Within the space of a few months, Heather had gone from gasping for breath in her gardening shorts to comfortably running half marathons. She continued ticking challenges off her "second chance at life" list with full 42-kilometre marathons. When her big five-0 approached, she wanted to mark the occasion with something really special.

In her quest to have a truly fabulous and healthy a midlife crisis, Heather stepped out of her comfort zone once again. She entered The North Pole Marathon - a race on a shifting ice floe in minus 40 Degrees Celsius, where every inch of skin needs to be covered to prevent serious frost bite.

Heather signed up with 43 other competitors (10 women and 34 men) of all experiences from elite athletes to those, like Heather, who wanted a lifetime adventure.

"Incredibly surreal" is how she describes running ten laps of four kilometres around a Russian research base. "There were guards with rifles in case polar bears wandered past," For the Polar Bears' sake, none did, she happily reports. However, pounding ice that's only two metres thick in places is not without other risks. Along with Polar Bear spotting, competitors had to lookout for cracks opening in the ice floe.

So how does a sun drenched Sydney-sider even prepare for a challenge where you have to run in thermals, multiple layers and a balaclava you can barely breathe in? "I thought about finding a butcher with an industrial freezer and seeing if I could convince them to put a treadmill in there." I burst out laughing. "No really, I tried," Heather smiles, but with only eight weeks to prepare, her ingenious plan was a non-runner.

However, can-do Heather figured the soft sand would be good training for running in ankle-to-knee deep snow conditions. She got that right, but mostly she learnt the

hard way - on the run itself.

Heather's preparation went spectacularly wrong in the first lap. She was sweating from too many layers, which in extreme cold is a fast track to hypothermia. "Also my hand and foot warmers froze - the ones you crack that are meant to stay warm for eight to twelve hours. I had to get them out quickly." After one lap, Heather was already in the heated support tent making survival adjustments and losing time.

Another non life-threatening problem actually turned out to be her salvation. "I listen to music when I run, but I didn't know that batteries die in extreme cold."

Nevertheless, her frozen iPhone became a blessing in disguise. "I was left very much with my thoughts and I dedicated each lap to people I know - cancer sufferers and survivors, friends and family. I had a purpose to each lap and that really willed me along and somehow I didn't feel

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fatigued."

After six hours and fifty-eight minutes of discovering a greater inner strength and realising a new level of endurance, Heather was the first female across the line and finished eighth overall beating 27 men. "To run through a ribbon and hold up the Aussie flag was just an incredible wonderful moment that I'll never forget."

But celebration and recovery had to wait. The struggles and needs of others had Heather summoning extra energy to aid those who finished up to another eight hours after her. She got stuck back into nursing helping doctors in the medical tent treat competitors who were suffering from hypothermia.

The experience helped Heather take on the World Marathon Challenge just a few months later - seven marathons on seven continents in seven days.

The clock starts at the first marathon in Antarctica. From there, the field of 15 mixed ability athletes are at the mercy of commercial airlines and jetlag, surviving only on adrenaline and a few hours sleep on the plane....and jelly snakes in Heather's case.

After "the frozen continent," the race continues through temperatures that fluctuate by 50 Degrees Celsius in North and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia and finally Australia. A fall in Morocco set her back and she had to "dig deep" to enjoy the highlight of a Sydney finish, where friends and family turned out in the middle of the night to cheer her in at 9th place.

From a fun run all those years ago, that initial ambition to get "healthy and fit" came full circle in February this year when Heather, Cal and Bek and Bek's boyfriend Matt, decided to take on another challenge as a family. Until that point, more people had walked on the moon than completed this The Great Himalaya trail. If successful, Heather and her family would equal that figure at 12. Husband and dad Doug was supportive as ever. "He knew it was an adventure we wanted to have."

The 1,700 kilometre traverse of Nepal, from Mount Kanchenjunga in the east to Yari Valley in the west, took the Hawkins family into wildest and most remote mountain environments on the planet. "We only stayed in tea houses four

nights of the whole trek, the rest was camping, sometimes on glaciers."

Nepal relies heavily on income from trekkers hiring support, paying for camps and buying their fresh produce along the way. The Great Himalaya trail goes through the most isolated mountain communities that currently receive little to no income from this source.

Although described in mountaineering terms as "technical grading- basic", this adventure is classed as an intermediate mountain expedition and not for the faint hearted. The team trekked over 16 passes above 5000 metres, negotiating narrow ledges and terrain that required harnesses, ropes and crampons.

While son Cal has technical mountaineering experience, the rest of the team learnt the skills on the go. Experienced Sherpas set fixed lines ahead and made sure that all in the team

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**HEATHER'S
TOP THREE TIPS
FOR TREKKING
THE GREAT
HIMALAYA TRAIL**

- Invest in a great pair of leather trekking boots and spend plenty of time breaking them in pre trek.
- Prepare yourself physically: train on hills, stairs and walk on mountainous trails wearing your backpack, also do some rock climbing, as this will increase your confidence and agility over high passes and traversing glaciers.
- Buy a diary (or three!) so you can record your experience - it makes for a wonderful personal record later.

were sufficiently trained and competent. "The logistics of the trail are quite mind-boggling. We were so incredibly well looked after."

In the first few days, Heather describes being left breathless by climbing a few steps. "It was incredibly steep and rocky at altitude, but we became fit as we went. We might do six kilometres daily, towards the end we were doing over twenty and keeping up with our Sherpa team."

Emotions rose as the team passed through areas affected by the earthquake, which hit Nepal on 28th April 2015. Langtang, once a popular trekking region, was already reeling from earthquake damage, when a few days later, a huge landslide buried Langtang Village killing over a thousand people.

Heather joins in the global chorus of Nepal visitors who continually praise the resilience of the people. "It was so

confronting, but people are so positive. It was wonderful to see rebuilding had started, people had moved back, some teahouses were up and running and trekkers were coming back."

Sharing the experience as a family added to the purpose of the journey. "Seeing how well my son and daughter coped, strengthening our bond as a family - we've always been close but sharing those experiences has made us a lot stronger.

And there were moments of deep reflection. Sitting on a narrow ledge overlooking the Honku basin - a vast panorama surrounded by sharp rugged peaks, Heather realised this journey didn't start in Kathmandu, but in that doctors surgery almost ten years ago. "I had a moment of clarity.... this journey consolidated all these experiences from the past. I was breathless and cold but felt on top of the world. I came back a far more

whole person I felt who learnt to live in the moment."

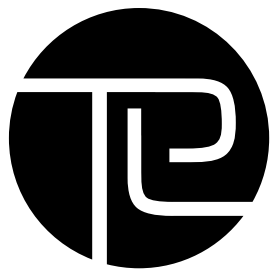
From the wonders of Nepal and clinging to life-affirming ledges, Heather had no worries settling back in to regular Sydney life with Doug. "After I hugged Doug, the first thing we did was drive down Coogee beach, got a takeaway coffee and stood at the headland looking out at the open space and listening to the waves- I'd pictured that for weeks."

So what's next for Heather the ordinary Sydney mum? She's got her eye on running the world's highest marathon in a desert around a bunch of Volcanoes. This time I don't make the mistake of laughing because I know she isn't joking. In fact, I would believe Heather if she told me she was planning to run an ultra race on the moon in between baking batches of banana bread for a Surf Lifesaver fundraiser. I stand to say goodbye. We instinctively

hug and I'm already thinking how much Heather resembles her namesake plant, which softly flourishes in the harshest of alpine environments where others give up.

Heather is a humble, determined, inspiring and resilient survivor. It's a perfectly natural strength - but I can't help giving her a cheeky pat on her back... just to make sure she hasn't got a cape stuffed up there.

Heather completed the Great Himalaya Trail with World Expeditions. The Great Himalaya Trail can be broken into separate treks that can be completed individually or joined together.



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