

[ Megan Holbeck ]



WILD THINGS

# Glowing in the dark

Memories and hope: both still shining in 2020's gloom.

It's November as I write this. According to my mental calendar, we should be eating hot cross buns and sliding gently into autumn, and instead we're building up to Christmas. The blur of 2020 has obscured half the year, but time has also warped and stretched, passing incredibly slowly. Weeks have dragged over months, while winter extended over a couple of years.

Looking at the actual, physical calendar on my wall shows why time is misbehaving: This year hasn't gone according to plan. I mistook my timetable of dreams for a schedule, and have spent months scratching off trips, events, adventure and work, as well as whole chunks of normality. So rather than dwell on what I've cancelled—Tassie trail running, sailing trips, European skiing and more—I decided to reminisce on the joys of past adventures.

With a bit of distance, each of these trips has condensed into single recollections. A week spent climbing in Scotland's north has shrunk to a sea-level traverse through a long, dark, rock arch beneath the ruins of a Viking fort, the sound of waves echoing all around. My fear is there, providing back story and atmosphere—rising with the time, the tide and the swell—but the feeling is one of space, wonder and intense gratitude. A wintery weekend in the Victorian high country is contained within the warmth, safety and snugliness of my tent as I drifted off to sleep, the wind howling outside. I know I got wet and cold, but that evening is a bubble of time, an escape from hectic city life. A nighttime pee on a glacier captures a trekking trip to Nepal, the surrounding peaks gleaming in the moonlight and the world

intensely hushed. A three-day paddle along Lake Malawi condenses into a local soccer game at sunset, the boundary line formed by hundreds of spectators who'd streamed in from surrounding villages.

There's a library of these highlight reels in my mind, each one polished by use. Some have lessons attached: learn to navigate; remember Band-aids; mountaineering is not your thing. Others give insights into friendships, ageing, my attitude to risk and discomfort. And even though the memories are smooth and

**“In this uphill slog of a year, the extra time spent outdoors and the renewed appreciation for what we've got might help us to focus on what really matters: health, the environment, community and purpose.”**

shiny, I'm aware that the reality wasn't. Rough bits were there—with effort I can remember them in all their scabby details—but they no longer matter. Their purpose is to give texture to the rest.

Each of these memories represents hundreds of others, a good percentage of which were spent wondering why. Why I was slogging up a hill in the heat, thighs burning, back aching, throat parched, my legs stinging as sweat trickled into a network of scratches. Or why I'd ruined a beautiful day by taking my kids, as the sound of whinging following me around otherwise quiet tracks. There are so

many variations of terror, discomfort and general over-it-ness that every trip contains liberal sprinklings.

What you get out of a trip is individual and determined over time. It's the culmination of everything that's happening and gone before: your knowledge of a place, its history, geography, nature and surrounds. Past trips, your companions, the weather and atmosphere. What you're going through, physically, mentally and emotionally. How you've changed, what you need, and what you find. Add in some challenges, an achievement or two, and give it time and space to percolate, make sense, gain flavour.

Looking back over 2020 through this lens, the memories start to glint. Finishing 'school' early and spending the afternoon snorkelling, seeing colourful fish, camouflaged rays, tiny squid squirting puffs of ink. Sharing a celebratory tub of ice cream to mark halfway on the Bondi to Manly walk. Elsewhere, at other times, watching cockatoos scare off a goanna, whales putting on a show, and soldier crabs scuttling and disappearing.

Nature gives us this ability to focus on the wonder, the lessons, and what actually matters in life. In this uphill slog of a year, the extra time spent outdoors and the renewed appreciation for what we've got might help us to focus on what really matters: health, the environment, community and purpose. Because in the long term, these are the things that will determine the shape of our lives. If we can harness this hiatus, use it to change our priorities from short-term comfort to long-term sustainability, to cultivate an expansive long-term view and the commitment to follow through, it might be enough to begin changing the world.