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# ‘What better excuse for a real adventure’: History, Memory and Tourism on the Kokoda Trail

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Rapidly growing numbers of Australian tourists visiting overseas battle sites associated with Australian military history have attracted academic interest from a broad range of disciplines including history, sociology and tourism. While several historians have examined the motivations of tourists visiting Gallipoli and the Western Front, we know very little about what drives Australians to walk the Kokoda Track – a site much closer to home.

Between July and November 1942, a group of ill-equipped allied troops fought a successful campaign along the track to prevent Japanese forces from capturing Port Moresby. After the war, the unconventional battleground was slowly reclaimed by the jungle and the track resumed

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its function as a centuries old route between villages. Prior to 2001, few Australians had journeyed across the Kokoda Track, which winds 96km through the Owen Stanley Ranges in Papua New Guinea. Just over a decade later, the track supports a competitive tourism industry, dominated by Australian companies, and attracts thousands of Australians each year: from middle-aged businessmen, school groups and grandparents to politicians, professional athletes and celebrities. Trekking is not an easy undertaking. Tourists spend an average of \$4000 each on a journey ranging from five to ten days, during which they battle thick rainforest, river crossings, steep inclines and knife-edge ridges – often in torrential rain or stifling humidity. A visit to Gallipoli is easily incorporated into a European holiday, but trekking Kokoda is costly, requires physical training and presents a higher perceived risk.

This study applies an interdisciplinary methodology, drawing upon scholarship from history and tourism studies, to explore what trekking Kokoda means to Australians who undertake the journey. My analysis will draw from personal testimonies and quantitative surveys of 107 trekkers to more fully understand the duality of battlefield tourism destinations as sites of commemoration and, unavoidably, sites of commerce. In doing so, I will be building upon the pioneering work of Hank Nelson who interrogated Kokoda mythmaking and popular history, recognising that the site had been commodified by memory industries such as tourism and publishing.<sup>1</sup>

The range of meanings that Australians associate with the Kokoda Trail must be viewed in the context of the Anzac Legend, a powerful mythology surrounding Australian military history and national identity. The idea of war as a creative act, through which men and nations were made, pervaded Edwardian military tradition and the Gallipoli campaign is often described as the moment of Australian nationhood.<sup>2</sup> Qualities associated with Australasian volunteers during the campaign, such as mateship, larrikinism, courage, endurance and sacrifice, were said to exemplify a unique national character.<sup>3</sup> Many of these qualities predated the First World War, originating from the romantic idealism of the pioneer myth and the noble bushman. Indeed, Richard White has argued that 'With the landing at Gallipoli in April 1915, the ready made myth was given a name, a time and a place'.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the First World War, the Anzac Legend served as a cohesive force during a deeply divisive conflict. The Second World War was more

widely supported and Australian servicemen, including those of the Kokoda campaign, were incorporated into Anzac mythology. During the 1970s, protests against the Vietnam War led to Anzac becoming associated with social division rather than cohesion. Attendances at Anzac Day services held in Australia began to fall and it appeared that the Legend was destined to fade from national collective memory. In fact, the opposite occurred.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, interest in Australian military history and commemoration underwent an astonishing resurgence. Since this time, attendances at Anzac Day services have risen and the 'Anzac Spirit' has been increasingly held up as representative of a set of civic values that Australians should aspire towards. Historians have attributed the resurgence to several factors including a memory boom in the Western world since the 1970s, state-sanctioned commemoration and a longing for identity and community in an increasingly secular, multicultural and globalised world.<sup>5</sup> Several Australian historians have explored ways in which federal and state governments have leveraged Anzac to endorse policy and promoted the mythology in school curriculums, museums, documentaries and spectacular commemorative events.<sup>6</sup> Others have outlined ways in which Anzac commemoration is participatory and democratic.<sup>7</sup> Many historians have argued that remembering war entails a great deal of forgetting, and oppose the extent to which Anzac now dominates the Australian national story. Academics including Manning Clark and, more recently, Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds have questioned the veracity of the 'Anzac Spirit' as unique to Australia and universally represented by all diggers.<sup>8</sup> Yet, despite critique, age has neither wearied nor condemned Anzac mythology.

The Anzac Legend is no longer solely confined to the First World War. Not only has the mythology been incorporated into successive military engagements, from the Second World War to Afghanistan: it increasingly manifests during times of civilian crisis. The Western Australian Returned and Services League of Australia (RSL) website states that the 'Anzac Spirit' is evoked in 'times of hardship' such as floods and bush fires.<sup>9</sup> The Kokoda Campaign did not enlist an ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) fighting force and the dynamic – and thoroughly modern – mythology associated with the site

must be examined on its own terms. Yet it is vital to acknowledge these meanings as an extension of the Anzac tradition.

Tourism to Australian battlefields is not a new phenomenon but the Anzac resurgence and democratisation of travel ushered in a new generation of visitors. The earliest visits to overseas battlegrounds occurred in the 1920s but were limited to those who possessed the resources to undertake the long and expensive journey. Historian Ken Inglis travelled to Gallipoli in 1965 with a group of Anzac veterans to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the campaign, later publishing detailed accounts of the experience.<sup>10</sup> In 2002 historian Bruce Scates analysed qualitative testimonies of 200 Australian tourists at Gallipoli and the Western Front in an attempt to understand 'what pilgrimage means to those who have undertaken it'.<sup>11</sup> While acknowledging that 'one might think that such a journey had more to do with tourism and consumption than it does with pilgrimage or history', Scates insisted the experience transcended 'mere sightseeing', arguing the journey was highly meaningful for Australians, facilitating a personal reckoning with national history.<sup>12</sup> Mark McKenna and Stuart Ward believed Scates did not go far enough in critically examining testimonies, arguing that meanings 'pilgrims' attributed to Gallipoli had more to do with the politics of nationalism, than history.<sup>13</sup> Additional studies have explored the relationship between individuals and nation, outlining the ways in which meanings associated with Gallipoli are socially constructed (and contested) in Australia and the impact of tourism on national collective memory.<sup>14</sup>

In recognition of the relationship between Australian military history and national identity, historians routinely describe tourism to overseas battlegrounds as 'secular pilgrimage'; journeys in pursuit of meaning and belonging in a society characterised by secularisation, globalisation, individualism and consumer capitalism. Tourism scholars also recognise that national identity is central to these journeys but have investigated a broader range of motivations, recognising that leisure travel can have spiritual elements too.

In contrast to historians, who have been quick to describe individuals who travel to sites associated with Australian military history as 'pilgrims', scholars of tourism have increasingly debated the best ways to differentiate pilgrimage and leisure tourism. They argue that it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between these two

categories of travellers. Not only do tourists and pilgrims require the same fundamentals of leisure time, disposable income and social sanction; they also share the same infrastructure.<sup>15</sup> Tourism, too, has been linked to personal growth, search for origins and a hunger for meaning. Nelson Graburn has compared modern tourism to religious pilgrimages arguing that ‘the rewards of modern tourism are phrased in terms of values we hold up for worship: mental and physical health, social status, and diverse, exotic experiences’.<sup>16</sup> Over the course of the twentieth century, the sacred began to intertwine with the secular as religious sources of identity that urged servitude and contemplation, shifted to individualist sources of identity prioritising personal fulfilment.<sup>17</sup>

Studies from the discipline of tourism, designed to enhance marketing and management outcomes, recognise the industry is highly competitive and characterised by the search for new experiences: prioritising quantitative data over qualitative interviews and exploring a broader range of tourist motivations. Kenneth Hyde and Serhat Harman surveyed 400 people attending Anzac Day services at Gallipoli to uncover motivations for making the journey. They found that tourists who travelled the longest distances displayed motives most similar to those of ‘secular pilgrims’, while young Australians based in Europe prioritised novelty seeking and social motives – characteristics more closely aligned with leisure tourism.<sup>18</sup> Insights from tourism scholars assert an uncomfortable ambiguity, reminding us that sites associated with Australian military history are simultaneously sites of commemoration and commoditisation.

If it were possible to identify the defining moment at which the Kokoda Track re-entered the Australian consciousness, it would surely be Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating falling to his knees and kissing the base of a memorial at Kokoda during the fiftieth anniversary commemorations in 1992, a gesture intended to ‘indelibly mark Kokoda in Australia’s collective memory’.<sup>19</sup> The ability of collective memory to unite a diverse population through a shared past and future means it is intimately linked with national identity and Keating later proclaimed that Kokoda was ‘the place where I believe the depth and soul of the Australian nation was confirmed’.<sup>20</sup> Ten years later, Liberal Prime Minister John Howard visited Kokoda to unveil the Isurava Memorial. He hoped the site would become ‘a magnet for young Australians, like

Gallipoli'.<sup>21</sup> Combined with social and economic reform in Papua New Guinea, the development of tourist infrastructure and increasing public interest, Howard's visit provided the impetus for a period of exponential tourist growth. By the time Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd walked the track in 2006, the tourist industry had undergone five years of rapid expansion. State-sanctioned commemorations contributed to a growing mythology surrounding Kokoda and the manufacture of meaning was followed by the inevitable consumption of meaning by Australian consumers.

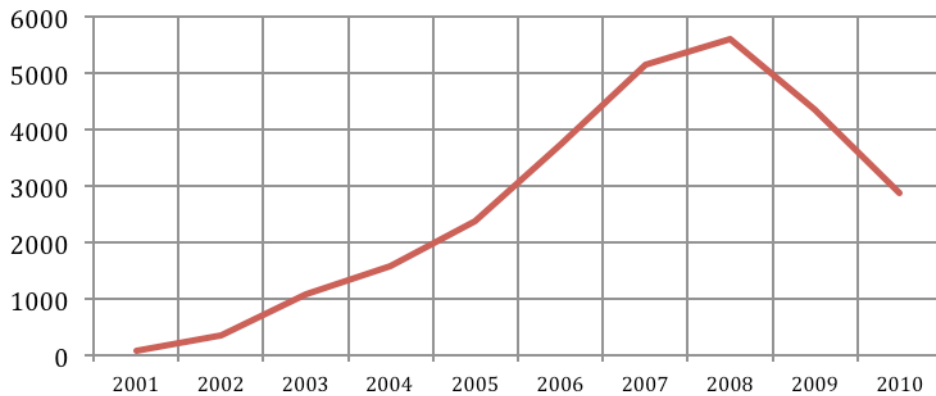
Politicians were not the only ones who realised that Anzac sells. Kokoda's mythology was quickly commoditised by a burgeoning memory industry. The 'popular image' of the Kokoda campaign tends to reflect Keating's original vision: the heroic defence of the nation against a powerful foreign invader; a series of battles fought by Australians, on Australian territory, in defence of Australia.<sup>22</sup> Evocative portrayals of wartime history and the trekking experience were not confined to Anzac Day but communicated throughout the year in news media, television specials, documentaries and film. Several bestselling books on Kokoda were published from 2000. Hank Nelson argued that storytelling was characterised by 'enthusiastic retellings of the story, stronger assertions of Kokoda's importance in World War II and in Australian history, and renewed claims for the qualities of the men who fought there'.<sup>23</sup>

Historians have contested several aspects of this popular history of Kokoda. Hank Nelson and Peter Stanley have questioned assertions that the allied victory represented the turning point of the Pacific War and the idea that the troops 'saved Australia' from invasion by the Japanese.<sup>24</sup> The 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels' forged strong relationships with Australian troops and made a vital contribution the war effort. However, Alan Powell has criticised monolithic representations of indigenous peoples that marginalise the reality that they were a 'subdued, conscripted, colonised race'.<sup>25</sup> Historical complexities are often absent from popular representations which emphasise the bravery and endurance of Australian soldiers and their success against all odds – ordinary men acting under extraordinary hardship.

Over the past twenty years, Kokoda trekking has evolved from a hobby industry, run by military history enthusiasts, to a competitive tourist industry dominated by Australian companies.<sup>26</sup> Early entrepreneurs recognised an opportunity to create a new tourism

industry on the heels of the growing popularity of Gallipoli. Tour operator Charlie Lynn, an Australian politician and former Vietnam veteran, first trekked Kokoda in 1991 and realised that ‘it seemed obvious... if we could somehow identify all the battle-sites and train local guides, then young Australian trekkers would want to come – just as they have at Gallipoli over recent years’.<sup>27</sup> In 2001, the first year trek permits were issued to monitor tourist numbers, seventy-six people walked the trail. Just ten years later, over twenty-five thousand Australians have trekked Kokoda, with a staggering 5621 trekkers making the journey in a single year in 2008.<sup>28</sup> Rapid growth and overcrowding became problematic, with increasing concerns about safety and the Global Financial Crisis resulting in tourist numbers falling dramatically in 2009. But recent bookings appear to indicate a return to sustainable levels.

Figure 1: Kokoda Trail – trek permits sold per annum



Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Trekkers	76	365	1074	1584	2374	3747	5146	5621	4364	2871

Source: Kokoda Track Authority (KTA)

In order to undertake a critical analysis of the tourist experience beyond the paradigms of existing studies, I applied an interdisciplinary methodology that incorporated personal testimony, favoured by historians, that allowed trekkers to share their thoughts about the experience in their own words, alongside a quantitative survey, like those utilised in tourism studies.<sup>29</sup> A self-administered online survey was completed by 107 Australians between April-August 2011.

Respondents were targeted with A5 flyers distributed at Kokoda and social media and trekker forums were harnessed to raise awareness of the survey and tap into large trekker communities online. Demographic and psychographic data was obtained through a series of closed and open-ended questions and trekker motivations were assessed using a Likert scale. The written testimony was optional and invited trekkers to write whatever they wished about their experience. There was no word limit: respondents could write a couple of sentences or several paragraphs. Very few declined, many offering candid and detailed descriptions of their travel experience.

The ensuing analysis is based on a non-representative sample of Australian tourists.<sup>30</sup> While the sample size was not large enough, nor the acquisition of survey respondents random enough (due to self selection bias) to extrapolate findings to the entire population of Kokoda trekkers, written testimonies provided a rich evidence base for thematic analysis.<sup>31</sup> (I am deeply indebted to trekkers who assigned me with trust and confidence and generously shared their stories and personal experiences. I respect the intentions of trekkers, the achievement of completing the trail and recognise Kokoda as a powerful, and often life changing experience.)

Figure 2: Gender

<b>Gender</b>	<b>%</b>
Male	73
Female	27
Total	100

Source: Self-administered online survey of 107 Australian trekkers (2011)

Figure 3: Age

<b>Age</b>	<b>%</b>
Under 25	11
25-34	24
35-44	31
45-54	25
Over 55	9

Source: Self-administered online survey of 107 Australian trekkers (2011)



Figure 4: Education

<b>Education</b>	<b>%</b>
Year 10	7
Year 11	3
Year 12	7
Tafe certificate	7
Diploma / degree	66
Masters / PhD	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Self-administered online survey of 107 Australian trekkers (2011)

Figure 5: Rating average

<b>What factors influenced your decision to trek Kokoda?</b>	<b>Rating average</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>
To undertake an adventure	4.23	4.26	4.17
To commemorate and remember the Anzacs	4.17	4.13	4.27
Unique travel experience that few have undertaken	4.04	4.06	3.97
Learn about Australian history	3.91	3.87	4.00
Challenge my fitness and endurance	3.84	3.87	3.77
Celebrate what it means to be Australian	3.79	3.79	3.80
To stand on sacred ground	3.65	3.64	3.70
To discover a different culture / environment	3.60	3.48	3.90
A journey of self discovery	3.45	3.38	3.63
Personal transformation and growth	3.28	3.14	3.63
This is a spiritual journey for me	3.00	2.86	3.37
I wanted to explore Papua New Guinea	2.99	2.97	3.03
Develop leadership and team building skills	2.64	2.64	2.63
Learn about my family history	2.42	2.26	2.83

Respondents rated factors that motivated them to walk the Kokoda Track from 'Not Important' (1) to 'Extremely Important' (5), allowing the calculation of a 'rating average' that indicates the popularity of each answer within the sample group.

Source: Self-administered online survey of 107 Australian trekkers (2011)

The appeal of the Kokoda Track spans several generations of Australians but demographic data reveals insights into this diverse group. Middle-aged, university educated males were over-represented within the

sample population with 73 per cent of the trekkers male and 56 per cent aged between 35-54. The appeal of the track to men may reflect the fact that war has historically served, not only a test of Australian nationhood but as a test of manhood.<sup>32</sup> The white, male Anzac digger embodies idealised Australian masculinity and this icon has become associated with a set of aspirational values linked to citizenship including mateship, courage and sacrifice.<sup>33</sup> Several historians have argued that women have been excluded from the Anzac Legend. Yet, it seems critique has not precluded women in contemporary Australia from identifying with, and contributing to, the mythology surrounding Kokoda. The journey appealed to a significant number of female trekkers.<sup>34</sup> An overwhelming majority of them, 76 per cent, were university educated. This finding defies existing tourist archetypes. While heritage tourism is strongly linked to high levels of education, these sites typically attract higher numbers of female tourists.<sup>35</sup> Neither does the data reflect archetypes for adventure tourism, which tends to attract younger males.<sup>36</sup>

Survey responses and written testimonies can help shed light on these complex journeys. A qualitative testimony invited Australian tourists to 'write whatever they wished' about the trekking experience, alongside a quantitative survey that required them to rate factors that motivated them to walk the Kokoda Track from 'Not Important' (1) to 'Extremely Important' (5). Responses allowed the calculation of a 'rating average' that indicated the popularity of each answer within the sample group. Yet tourist motivations are multiple and intertwined and exploring data in order of popularity risks obscuring complexity and meaning. Instead, I have taken a thematic approach, prioritising analysis of qualitative testimonies over quantitative data, engaging with survey data to provide context and transparency and explore complexity and contradictions. The resulting analysis can be broadly divided into meanings associated with national identity and those extending beyond this, indicating that the Kokoda Track has come to represent both a test of nation and a test of self. In addition to an expression of national identity, Anzac mythology has been appropriated by Australian tourists at Kokoda to represent individualistic goals of personal development and transformation – motivations that originate from the site's military history but extend beyond it.

#### THE TEST OF NATION: KOKODA AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

In 1992, Paul Keating described Kokoda as representing 'the canon of Australian life... the ideals to which we aspire, the values by which we live'. And today Kokoda allows individuals to enact a performative demonstration of Australian citizenship.<sup>37</sup> As aspirational qualities associated with the Anzac Legend became linked with the unique physical and mental demands of the track, trekking as a public demonstration of these values became increasingly popular. The journey has been attempted by numerous politicians, sporting personalities and Australian celebrities, including a Miss World entrant.<sup>38</sup> Most trekkers agreed that walking the track was a way to 'celebrate what it means to be Australian' (rating average 3.79). John, 47, believed 'it would be extremely beneficial for as many Australians as possible to experience the Kokoda track'.<sup>39</sup>

As an embodiment of Australian values, the track is often portrayed in the media as having a transformative effect on those excluded from Australian society. Walking the track offers an opportunity for redemption. Several groups of 'out-of-control' Australian teenagers have walked Kokoda in an effort to learn discipline and teamwork and the journey has even been perceived as an antidote to racial tension.<sup>40</sup> During the 2005 Cronulla Riots, Australian-Lebanese student, Ali Ammar stole an Australian flag from an RSL club and set it ablaze. After nine months in juvenile detention, the RSL club sponsored Ali to walk the track in 2007.<sup>41</sup> Enthusiastic media coverage of these journeys has reinforced links between citizenship and commemoration.

Commemoration was a priority for most trekkers, with 79.4 per cent of respondents agreeing that walking the track to 'commemorate and remember the Anzacs' was 'extremely important' or 'very important' (rating average: 4.17). Attendance at Anzac Day services in Australia and overseas has increased since the 1980s and popularity is expected to grow in the lead up to the Anzac centenary in 2015. However, the development of year-round Anzac tourism industries now facilitates remembrance beyond this 'one day of the year'. Sam, a 44 year old from Sydney, believed that 'the true Kokoda experience' centred on 'paying homage to the Diggers that defended our country and lifestyle against incredible odds at supreme personal sacrifice'.<sup>42</sup> Trekker testimonies and survey data reveal important insights into just what Australian tourists are 'remembering'.

While 70 per cent of trekkers felt it was 'extremely important' or 'very important' to learn about Australian history on the track (rating average 3.91), it was far more common for trekkers to write about the physical and mental toughness required for the journey than its history. This is not evidence that history is absent from the journey, but an indication that it has become intertwined with other motives. Academics often link the rise in popularity of battlefield tourism with a surge of interest in genealogy. But my research reveals this is not always the case.<sup>43</sup> Learning about family history was a low priority for most trekkers, although this was considerably more popular for women (rating average 2.83) than males (rating average 2.26). Rachel, 34, admitted she wanted to retrace her grandfather's footsteps because 'he never spoke much about his experiences' and she 'wanted to find out a little more about where he went and what he did'.<sup>44</sup> Intriguingly, testimonies revealed a common belief that Kokoda's history has been 'forgotten'. Andy, aged 43, thought 'Australians should be ashamed of how little we as a nation know about Kokoda and what was thought at the time as the Battle for Australia [sic]'.<sup>45</sup> Joanne, aged 50, was hugely disappointed about the lack of recognition of Kokoda, which she felt was 'often overlooked within our education system, within news coverage and in general Aussie culture'.<sup>46</sup> The idea of Kokoda as a 'forgotten' battle site remains a prominent aspect of the site's mythology, but this is very much at odds with the high levels of coverage in the media and increasing numbers of trekkers and best-selling books.

Collective memory of the Kokoda Campaign is inseparable from the natural environment and local communities who live along it. The assistance of indigenous peoples of Papua New Guinea (PNG) became fundamental to the success of the allied war effort, with local conscripts providing invaluable service as guides and porters along the track. They became known as 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels'. The majority of tours are led by Australian guides, supported by local porters, and interactions with the local people are seen by many trekkers as a highlight of their trip. There is a sense of being part of history; relationships with porters echo the historical relationship between Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels and diggers. George, 52, said: 'The Papuans of today are as helpful as their forefathers were in 1942, simply beautiful people'.<sup>47</sup> For Jason, 40, meeting one of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels was 'the highlight of my trip'.<sup>48</sup> Yet, for the most part, Australian tourists are driven by a desire to undertake the

challenge of trekking rather than a desire to explore PNG. Australian guides are preferred by the majority of trekkers as local guides are not perceived as authorities on Australian military history, which is generally more important to trekkers than local cultural knowledge. PNG culture is most often explored in the context of the track's Australian heritage.<sup>49</sup>

Survey results revealed significant differences in the ways in which men and women contextualised the journey as an experience inside or outside of their own culture. The motivation to 'explore Papua New Guinea' was considered 'extremely important' by 23.3 per cent of women surveyed, in contrast to 6.5 per cent of men (rating average 2.99). The motivation to 'discover a different culture/environment' reflected a more dramatic gender difference: 43.3 per cent of women agreed this was 'extremely important' compared to 11.7 per cent men. These results may suggest that women are more likely to be driven by interests that go beyond the site's military history and requires further investigation.

Historian Paul Connerton has argued that performance is vital to establishing and maintaining relationships between memory and place.<sup>50</sup> Historical re-enactments are a common feature of tours, affirming Jennifer Iles' conviction that battle sites are often 'limited in their ability to tell their own story'.<sup>51</sup> Tim, aged 39, described how 'we took turns in reading soldiers' notes while 'sitting down viewing the same terrain as they would have'.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Sarah, aged 27, reflected that standing on the exact location of specific battles 'made real the stories I'd read in books'. An evocative amalgamation of the past, combined with physical immediacy, meant that she 'could really picture the paths and hardship they followed and imagine how hard it would have been on those paths when it was dark, wet, overgrown and under fire'.<sup>53</sup> Sarah's experience brings to mind David Lowenthal's description of the ways in which heritage allows tourists to 'mourn worlds known to be irrevocably lost – yet more vividly felt, more lucid, more real than the murky and ambiguous present'.<sup>54</sup> Scott, 36, believed that the physical nature of the experience imbued it with authenticity, saying that 'the Kokoda track really offers a tougher experience [than Gallipoli] which gave it 'a more genuine feel'.<sup>55</sup> While Lowenthal has argued that the general public 'neither seek historical veracity nor mind its absence', several trekkers critiqued assumptions of authenticity.<sup>56</sup> Pat recognised that tourists were not walking the entire track which 'started and ended on the coasts' and

was disappointed that 'other villages, their people and history are forgotten'.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Peter, 37, felt 'frustrated' by trekkers who sought to 'walk in the footsteps of their ANZAC forebears' as many of the militia did not walk the entire track.<sup>58</sup> The physical discomfort endured while 're-enacting' the trek, which can include fatigue, hunger, blisters (or more severe injuries), humidity and torrential rain, serves to heighten emotions and contribute to perceived historical authenticity.

Emotions were commonly discussed in trekker testimonies which frequently describe the track as 'more emotional than physical'.<sup>59</sup> Trekkers were often unable to put their experience into words. Helen, aged 28, admitted that 'there's no real way to accurately describe the experience, and the mix of emotions along the way'.<sup>60</sup> Bobby, aged 35, made the journey with his father and said: 'I'd rarely seen my father cry previously in my 35 years... he cried more on the trip than collectively over my life'.<sup>61</sup> Emotion has long been recognised as a key characteristic of battlefield tourism. Indeed, the very first study of tourism to Australian battle sites by Bruce Scates was an effort to reconstruct the emotional world of travellers at Gallipoli. Recent investigations from tourism scholars cite emotion as a definitive aspect of consumer culture, and have correlated intense emotions experienced by tourists at Gallipoli with higher levels of visitor satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth promotion. While tourism is generally viewed as a *hedonic* experience, negative emotions, such as grief, fear and anger can make a positive contribution to this consumption experience.<sup>62</sup> These findings were reflected in Kokoda trekker testimonies which often equated intense emotions with a positive overall travel experience.

Anzac landscapes are routinely described by academics, politicians, public servants and the media as 'sacred' and tourists as 'pilgrims', few tourists use this language to describe their own experience.<sup>63</sup> While 59.8 per cent of Kokoda trekkers believed the motivation to 'stand on sacred ground' was 'important' or 'very important' (rating average 3.65) – 39.3 per cent of trekkers agreed with the statement that 'this is a spiritual journey for me' – few described the track or the journey as 'sacred' in their testimonies. This does not negate the fact that trekking Kokoda is an often deeply meaningful experience for Australians. Elizabeth Weiss Ozorak has noted that 'it is not surprising that the twentieth century with its unprecedented emphasis on psychological self-enhancement has

seen a resurgence of pilgrimage' and it follows that trekkers employ the language of self, rather than the language of nation.<sup>64</sup>

#### **THE TEST OF SELF: KOKODA AND INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY**

The single most popular motivation for walking the Kokoda Track was not to learn about history or commemorate war veterans but the desire to 'undertake an adventure' (rating average 4.23). The motive was shared by both male and female trekkers, 50.5 per cent of whom believed it was 'extremely important'. Kokoda is a packaged tourism commodity, characterised by a seductive combination of potent mythology, physical effort and perceived risk. And the journey offers a unique travel experience for those who wish to 'get off the beaten track'. There are no mobile phones, laptops, televisions, roads or cars on the track and many tourists relish an opportunity to go back to basics and 'get away from the hustle and bustle of normal life'.<sup>65</sup> The 'simple life' of villagers, that appeared so much in contrast to their own, was often romanticised by trekkers. Warren, 29, was profoundly affected by locals that 'live with so little but are so happy in life'.<sup>66</sup> In contrast, Belinda, 41, was 'under no illusion as to the lives they lead', but admired their 'beautiful positive outlook in life', admitting: 'I found myself envious at times'.<sup>67</sup>

In contrast to those seeking an escape from consumer culture, many trekkers enjoy the social currency and prestige that comes from undertaking such an iconic journey. As travel became democratised over the late twentieth century, where one travelled increasingly came to represent status and identity. Both male and female trekkers agreed that the fact that Kokoda was a 'unique travel experience that not many have undertaken' was an important motivator (rating average 4.04). Warren, 29, said that 'none of my friends had done it and only a few thousand people in the world had done it' was 'one of the motivating factors to do the trek'.<sup>68</sup> Far from being off-putting, the barriers to walking the track are major drawcards. Josh, 22, insisted that: 'I wouldn't have it any other way' because 'if it was going to be an easy and comfortable holiday then everyone would do it'.<sup>69</sup> That increasing numbers of tourists could potentially threaten this exclusivity was not apparent in testimonies, an absence that sits in contrast to a recent news articles arguing that 'Kokoda is the new Bali', or that 'it seems everyone either knows someone, or knows someone who knows someone, or has a story about someone who has done the trek'.<sup>70</sup> A journey along the track does not

just provide an opportunity for Australian tourists to affirm belonging to a shared national identity: it offers a way to assert difference and individuality.

Personal development was not cited in surveys as a primary reason for trekking. However, the overwhelming majority of written testimonies speak about personal transformation and change. Tony, 50, walked the track with his two sons hoping the lessons learned would translate to their future success. He thought that 'perhaps in later adult life when others say they can't do something... they will develop the internal strength to understand that if they can complete the Kokoda trek, they can do anything that they are prepared to set their minds to'.<sup>71</sup> Similarly Bette, 51, believed that 'I emerged physically and psychologically stronger. I'm a lot more confident and calmer, even after four years'.<sup>72</sup> Several deemed the trip as completely life changing. Steve, 31, stated that 'looking back, the trek was the beginning of a new chapter in my life and only good things have come from that chapter'.<sup>73</sup>

While the trauma experienced by Australian soldiers during the Kokoda campaign left an indelible mark on many, few tourists questioned the appropriateness of re-creating this journey as commemoration. Paul, 35, walked the track with his father in memory of his grandfather who served in Papua New Guinea during the Second World War. He admitted that his grandfather 'suffered mentally from the whole thing' and 'probably would have called us "bloody fools" for doing it'.<sup>74</sup> Historian Eric Leed has argued that travel can function as a test, stating that 'in the difficult and dangerous journey, the self of the traveller is impoverished and reduced to its essentials, allowing one to see what those essentials are'.<sup>75</sup> The physical and mental challenge of Kokoda is an archetypal classical heroic or epic journey in which the test is not damaging to the individual, but results in increased stature and certainty of self.<sup>76</sup>

Heroic journeys are generally associated with masculinity but testimonies suggest that this discourse has been appropriated by women at Kokoda, for whom personal development narratives resonated far more strongly than men. While 36.7 per cent of women stated that 'personal transformation and growth' was 'extremely important', only 14.3 per cent of men agreed. Similarly, 26.7 per cent of women thought that trekking as a 'journey of self discovery' was 'extremely important' compared to 15.6 per cent of men. Jessica, 31, remarked: 'I didn't do it so



much for the history'; 'Kokoda was, for me, a journey of self discovery. I chose to do it to push my personal limits and see if I could achieve something so great'.<sup>77</sup> For some the journey can even provide transcendence: 33.3 per cent of women felt that trekking as a 'spiritual journey' was 'extremely important', compared to 7.8 per cent of men.

Tourism studies recognise that women tend to face more constraints than men in seeking access to leisure time due to the fact they may occupy several roles – mother, caregiver, housekeeper, career – and may feel they have less time for, or fewer claims to, autonomous leisure.<sup>78</sup> Tourism is also a commodity and several scholars have examined the relationship between consumer capitalism and spirituality arguing that empowerment for Western women often equates to the power to spend on themselves.<sup>79</sup> My own analysis concurs in that trekking Kokoda can represent self-definition and independence for Australia women. While survey data does not support the same kind of connection for male trekkers, their written testimonies, which frequently include words such as 'achievement', 'transformation' and 'life-changing', indicate that men are not excluded from personal development narratives, but are less likely to categorise the experience as such.

The publicity generated from trekking Kokoda has led to the journey becoming a popular method of raising awareness of and funds for charities. The challenge of completing the track 'against all odds' has inspired several trekkers to overcome disability or injury to make the journey. Paralympian Kurt Fearnley crawled the track in ten days in 2009 to raise money for men's health groups Beyondblue and Movember.<sup>80</sup> In 2011 a group of sight-impaired trekkers completed the journey to raise money for Guide Dogs Australia, followed soon after by several Australian servicemen as part of their rehabilitation from debilitating battle injuries sustained in Afghanistan.<sup>81</sup> The idea has become so popular that many tour operators have developed in-house charity and fundraising services. These journeys evince innovative ways in which the mythology surrounding the Kokoda campaign has been appropriated to represent symbolic battles against cancer, disability and mental illness.

The Kokoda trekking industry has been linked to elite sports from early in its development. Australian Football League (AFL) team, the Sydney Swans, walked the track in 2000, well before it had become a mainstream tourist destination. And since this time the journey has

become a common pre-season training exercise for professional sporting teams.<sup>82</sup> For Australians who wish to 'challenge fitness and stamina', the 96km journey across the Owen Stanley Ranges can represent the ultimate endurance obstacle course: 71.9 per cent of trekkers agreed that this was 'extremely important' or 'very important' in their decision to make the journey (rating average 3.84). All trekkers are required to undergo health checks in Australia and commit to a preparatory training regime. For Alex, 44, the journey was 'an excuse for a real adventure and to get fit'.<sup>83</sup> In contrast, Sam, who trekked Kokoda with his father, believed that 'to turn the Track into an endurance race is somewhat defeatist on military history'.<sup>84</sup> Several testimonies indicated that not all tourists found trekking as difficult as they expected. Charlotte, 28, stated: 'I mostly went for my own fitness challenge but I personally didn't think it was that hard'.<sup>85</sup> The physical intensity of the journey is a core aspect of Kokoda's mythology but testimonies reveal that this attribute is sometimes contested.

Kokoda is a highly personal journey for each trekker but sharing the experience with others is also a distinctive feature. David, 42, felt that 'perhaps the most important aspect of the Kokoda experience was to share it with someone you are close to'.<sup>86</sup> Several parents made the journey with their children, or mentioned they would like to bring them when they were older. The hardships of the trek mean that strangers quickly forge strong and lasting friendships. Thomas, 66, met some 'very close friends' on his journey. Peta, 23, revealed that 'today I still regularly catch up with these people as the bond we built was very strong'.<sup>87</sup> The relationship building aspect of the trekking experience has been commodified by tour operators who offer executive leadership programs to corporate clients and opportunities to host business meetings and retreats on the track.<sup>88</sup> The desire to 'develop leadership and team building skills' appealed to a niche group of trekkers (rating average 2.64). The strength of the track as social experience, however, is truly epitomised by 'Singles Kokoda', a tour product designed to bring together like-minded individuals to find love on the track.<sup>89</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The meanings attributed to sites of war and remembrance by historians are most often examined within the context of national identity but Kokoda is not easily categorised. The experience of trekking Kokoda cannot be separated from its history as an Australian battle site and its

popularity is undoubtedly linked to the resurgence of Anzac. However, trekker testimonies reveal that meanings Australian tourists associate with the journey extend far beyond Australian national identity.

The Kokoda track represents a heroic journey, outside the constraints of everyday life, and it follows that the single most popular motive for tourists was to ‘undertake an adventure’, rather than ‘remember the Anzacs’. Trekking offers tourists a potent synthesis of a physical and mental challenge, alongside a life affirming national mythology of ‘success against all odds’. There is no archetypal trekker. While male, middle-aged, university educated trekkers were over-represented in survey results, the journey also appeals to female trekkers who are more likely to associate their experience with aspirational goals of self-improvement and transformation. The result is a fascinating manifestation of the ‘Anzac Spirit’ in consumer culture, where aspirational individual characteristics are harnessed to reflect contemporary personal development narratives. At the centre of this lies an uncomfortable paradox: while trekkers flock to Kokoda with the aim of self-improvement, many of the soldiers who served in the campaign returned to Australia as broken men.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>8</sup> For an early critique of the Anzac Legend see Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia (Volume 5)*, Heinemann, London, 1981. For a contemporary critique see Reynolds and Lake, op cit.

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- <sup>11</sup> Scates' original study of Gallipoli tourists, published in 2002, drew upon 200 testimonies. In 2006, Scates expanded his findings into a book which drew upon 700 testimonies administered over a ten-year period. See Bruce Scates, 'In Gallipoli's Shadow: Pilgrimage, Memory, Mourning and the Great War', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol 33, no 119, 2002, pp1-21; Bruce Scates, *Return to Gallipoli: Walking the Battlefields of the Great War*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006.
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- <sup>16</sup> Graburn, op cit, p28.
- <sup>17</sup> Several scholars have argued that modern pilgrimages are a response to a growing emphasis on psychological self-enhancement in the modern world. Elizabeth Weiss-Ozorak, 'The View from the Edge: Pilgrimage and Transformation', in William H. Swatos Jr (ed), *On the Road to Being There: Studies in Pilgrimage and Tourism in Late Modernity*, Brill Publishing, Boston, 2006; Z. Bauman, 'From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity', in Stuart Hall and P. Du Gay (eds), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Sage, California, 1996, pp19-38.
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- <sup>29</sup> Survey design was a careful process involving an examination of several studies across a range of disciplines. After compiling a draft survey, I undertook a pilot study and finalised survey design in response to feedback obtained during this process. The self-administered online survey was hosted at [www.mykokoda.com.au](http://www.mykokoda.com.au) and promoted using a press release, Twitter (@MyKokoda), online trekker forums and a flyer distributed in PNG.
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- <sup>46</sup> Joanne, age 50, female.
- <sup>47</sup> George, age 52, male.
- <sup>48</sup> Jason, age 40, male.
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- <sup>59</sup> Jack, age 53, male.
- <sup>60</sup> Helen, age 28, female.
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- <sup>72</sup> Bette, age 51, female.
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