



Lucy and Wombat celebrating their completion of Peru and arrival to Ecuador, where she became the first woman to walk the length of the Southern Hemisphere

Credit: Danyal Taylor

[Profile]

Lucy Barnard

Just your ordinary, extraordinary adventurer.

Words *Megan Holbeck*

Hundreds of thousands of people must have heard of George Meegan's record-setting walk up the length of the Americas—"the longest unbroken march of all time"—since he began in 1977. Thousands of them have read *The Longest Walk*, his book detailing the ordeals, the triumphs, and the sheer unfathomability of starting the walk with a Japanese girlfriend (who, due to language barriers thought the trip would be done by bus!) and finishing it seven years later, joined by his now wife and two kids. But not many of these people have seriously thought of repeating it. Still fewer have decided this is a trip to replicate, and they are the person to do it, breaking down gender barriers along the way.

Here are some numbers. Thirty thousand: the number of kilometres of Meegan's walk. Four: the average number of people annually setting off on the journey in some variation, with most quitting within a year, broken by the brutal Patagonian weather. Three: the number of people who have officially walked from Argentina to Alaska. One: the number of those who have completed the trip from the polar-most extreme cities—Ushuaia in Argentina to Barrow in Alaska. That one person is, of course, George Meegan. But soon that number may double, because one aspirant has made it further than nearly any other wanna-be: Australian Lucy Barnard, who has—over a period of three years—covered 10,000km before COVID-19 forced her to pause in April 2020.

'IT'S JUST WALKING. HOW HARD COULD IT BE?'

I first spoke to Lucy in May 2020 when she was fresh out of hotel quarantine, back home in Brisbane with her family, luxuriating in fine food and freedom. Six months later, we meet in Sydney. In a burst of wild-haired, arm-waving energy, Lucy jumps out of a car with a huge, eye-crinkling smile. After our greetings, she confesses she's not sure I'm the right person; she's got prosopagnosia—an inability to recognise people's faces—before she launches into talking about what she's been up to and what she's got planned. She bubbles with enthusiasm, confidence and friendliness, and seems simultaneously competent and chaotic.

And she is hilarious to boot. Unphased by problems, decisions, and unknown situations, she lives more in the moment than anyone I've ever met. Which is probably why she's the perfect person to attempt this trip.

Barnard's adventure was seeded in early 2015 when she was on a solo holiday in Patagonia. A lifelong adventure lover, she was there to walk and climb, kayak and explore. Her plans were cramped by illness and injury, and she was irritated by a male companion who queried her fitness and abilities, commenting that he'd "never let her" attempt to climb Aconcagua—the highest peak in South America, but well within her abilities.

She'd chosen Meegan's book as her holiday read, and was affronted to find that in the 32 years since he'd finished—one year less than her entire life—the trip had never been done by a woman. It was a disappointment she couldn't shake.

"I really don't like it when there are barriers between the achievements of men and women because I feel like it's proof that women aren't as capable as men. And when I see a barrier, I feel like the gap needs to be closed. It just seemed like something that I was capable of doing. It's just walking. How hard could it be?"

And so the idea was born. Lucy returned to Australia for two years of saving, planning and preparing. It was far from a dream run. Just over a year before she left, she took part in an endurance-cycling fundraiser and was hit by a car, ending up temporarily paralysed and with head injuries so severe she couldn't speak. Months of rehab followed, until her doctor said her best chance for a full recovery was to put herself in a learning environment where she was faced with lots of decisions, a learning environment (she says on her blog) "like ... travelling the length of the world in countries with foreign languages." To give herself a deadline, she bought a flight but kept it secret. Six months before she left, however, Lucy faced the grief of her dad dying. Despite this, she strode out of Ushuaia on 19 February, 2017.

And she kept going for more than three years, walking the length of Argentina, Chile, Peru and Ecuador. After a year she picked up a companion—a blue heeler puppy called Wombat. A dog was always part of her plan: her blog name *Tangles + Tail* references her crazy locks and planned pooch. Companionship





Credit: Andera Torselli

Clockwise from top left:

1,000km into her journey, Lucy says goodbye to Florencia (Flor) Lopez in El Chalten, Argentina after a month of recovering from illness and injury

A modernised stretch of the Incan roads along the Andes of Peru

Seeking shade with a makeshift roadside refuge in the Atacama Desert, Peru

Pulling a Monowalker hiking trailer necessary to haul additional supplies across the Atacama Desert, Chile



Credit: Kat Krikorian



Credit: Danyal Taylor



Credit: Lucy Barnard

was a big draw, but the main reason was security. “People see him and say, ‘Lobo, lobo’—which is wolf—and I’m like, ‘Yes, be careful. He bites.’” It’s obvious how much Wombat means to her, how much he adds to her trip. She talks of having someone to touch, make eye contact with; how he forced her to look after herself. And of the grief that sidles in now on solo walks, when she keenly feels his absence.

ON TRACK

As we set off for a walk, bookended by coffee and ice creams, along part of Sydney Harbour’s Spit to Manly Track, Lucy tells me about her journey, interspersed with reflections on books, movies, social media, feminism and family. When she arrived in Argentina, her first step was throwing out all her plans due to border issues. She quickly became comfortable with ditching or constantly readjusting plans. She would work with a detailed idea of her next week, and a rough plan for the rest of a country, but not thinking far beyond that.

Some sections of her journey sound wonderful. In our first conversation, the hardships of lockdown and walking were foremost. But by December, she’s more reflective. She talks of Peru as a highlight, of following the Great Inca Trail through some of the most stunning landscapes she’s ever hiked. In an article published in *Sidetracked* Magazine, Barnard describes following in the footsteps of the Chasqui, an elite group of boys who ran in relay to pass messages and gifts throughout the length

of the Incan Empire. They were able to transmit messages from Cusco to Quito in a week, a distance that took her more than six months to cover. “[I] passed ruins, pyramids, and remnants of lost civilisations, and became so accustomed to isolation that by the time I emerged in the Andes, the sound of rivers gave me a

“The logistics, decisions and compromises were endless. Her body has had to learn to cope with whatever she can get to survive.”

sense of being cured from a strange form of deafness.” There was delightful food, intriguing archaeology, spontaneous hospitality, and the willingness to share customs and stories.

But as we chat, and later as I read her blog, it becomes clear that the good bits—the happy walking through spectacular scenery appreciating the vastness of nature; the finding of amazing remote campsites; the establishment of intense relationships with people met along the way—are just a part of her epic trip. Mixed up with this highlight reel is the rest, the majority of it far more stressful and way harder than these romantic snapshots.

As Lucy said, “I had to make so many decisions that were all survival decisions, every day...I was either undernourished, or overeating to compensate. It’s a pretty dingy life. But once you’re out walking, it’s a really privileged one as well.”



Credit: Emanuel Garcea

The logistics, decisions and compromises were endless. There was the constant focus on food, especially as Lucy is a coeliac—her health depends on her maintaining a strict gluten-free diet, with no wheat, rye or barley—and her body has had to learn to cope with whatever she can get to survive. There was the hunt for water. The making do with inadequate, outdated maps and information. The bouts of food poisoning. The random illnesses. There was time pressure, too, as most countries only give out three-month visas: Before lockdown, she hadn't had a day off for more than 18 months. (Really, properly off, without working on logistics or updates.) There was the finding of secure campsites. The dealing with the interest piqued by a solo female traveller. The waiting, sometimes for months, for so many things: equipment; recovery from illness or injury; a new bank card after the last one expired and the replacement kept being sent to Australia. It's not a holiday, it's a life, just a very unusual one.

Which is kind of Barnard's point. She wants to prove that anyone can do amazing things: they just have to decide they want to. "I don't have any particular special talent. I've never excelled in any sports...I just wanted to show everyday people that if they want to go and do something unusual then they should."

Lucy is far from the stoic adventurer: Her stories, videos and photos are full of embarrassment and mistakes as well as beauty and connections. Her dog farts in the tent in the middle of a video; she describes limping into town with gut-rot and holes in her tights; she delights in the luxury of a hot shower and a free meal in a café. Throughout it all, she retains humour and patience, two things she credits as essential for recovering from a head injury, but that are also indispensable for doing a 30,000km walk and enjoying it.

Because that's vital to Lucy, too. She's acutely aware of the difficulties: the physical toll, the loneliness, the worst bits of "... feeling like I'm not present in the relationships that are the most important", missing major milestones and her aging family. She balances these sacrifices against her personal goals, which aren't just about getting into the record books, or proving a point for women, or covering the distance—she's also there for the experience.

Which is why a question about how much longer her trip will take causes obvious discomfort. Her smile drops while trying to phrase a response that's useful, accurate and polite. I can see her thinking, "Has she not listened to anything I've said about how I can't plan?" The eventual answer is about two-and-a-half years once she gets going. But she adds that she should be

“It was pretty miserable,” she says. “I was like, I’m done. I quit.”

almost finished by now, explaining that American Holly Harrison walked from Argentina to Alaska in a year and a half. "But that's intense—that's a sport, not an expedition." Lucy, instead, wants to see things, meet people, have time for connections along the way.

She talks with great fondness of friends from the trail. Of how after her first 1,000km of walking, she limped into El Chalten in Argentina with a broken rucksack digging into her spine, with boils on her feet, with food poisoning and no toilet paper and recent episodes of public disgrace.

"It was pretty miserable," she says. "I was like, 'I'm done. I quit.'" And this really lovely lady (Flor) took me in and looked after me and gave me that knowing, motherly look where they're listening to everything you say but they're thinking, 'You'll see. You'll be okay.'... Sure enough, a month later, she waved me off."

It's not hard envisioning this. As much as she is doing it to prove she can, Lucy is also a raging extrovert who finds it impossible not to enjoy herself for very long. It's easy to imagine her arriving at a café, communicating in big smiles and broken Spanish and making friends for life, who'll feed her three lunches, love her tales and her dog, and drive out of town the following week to bring her parcels of chocolate.

Lucy also gets support from further afield. Sometimes it's from friends who've come and joined her. Often, it's from her tribe of engaged followers on social media, who give her massive impetus to keep heading north. "When I'm in trouble, they

Arriving in Conchucos, Peru, in search of clean water and a warm meal



Credit: Danyal Taylor



Cotopaxi Volcano, Ecuador

Credit: Lucy Barnard



Lucy in Sydney, December 2020

Credit: Megan Holbeck

always pull me out of my slump, without fail. There's always some mum who writes to me about how much her daughter loves me, emotionally blackmailing me to keep going." It's not just encouragement, either. While the expedition is mostly financed from Lucy's savings, sponsors supply gear, and followers regularly send treats and supplies; through her blog they donate to her 'chocolate and toilet paper' fund. After hearing

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she was miserable, a friend's mum transferred \$500 for a new pair of shoes, something Lucy describes as blackmail: "There was no way that I could then quit!"

HITTING PAUSE

Of Lucy's list of the most likely reasons she might have to stop, a global pandemic was not near the top (Heading the list instead were: "It's too hard being alone." Or: "The food's too boring to deal with.") But when she crossed the border into Colombia in March 2020, COVID-19 was on the horizon. The country went into lockdown a week or so later, with Lucy and Wombat only allowed out of their hostel room twice a week. After a month, her security advisers Phase Zero asked when she was leaving.

"People were going hungry, and that's really why I came home. [In Colombia] if you're starving and you need help from your neighbours, or you need food, you hang a red sheet in your window to signify that you're desperate, you need help. And there were suburbs in Colombia where everyone had red flags."

A week after her phone call with Phase Zero, Lucy was on the last plane out of Medellin. She'd been busy, finding a home for Wombat with Santiago, an ultramarathon-running dog trainer, and driving for 20 hours to spend two days with him, as well as organising travel permits, transport and flights. Then it was home to Brisbane via Florida, Denver, San Francisco, before spending two weeks of hotel quarantine in Sydney.

Lucy—who had for years prior been in almost perpetual motion—ended up in confinement for a total of 51 days. It took a toll on her body. For the first two weeks, her muscles atrophied; she woke up nightly in burning pain. She knew what it was, having experienced the same thing after her accident. She's struggled since to get her fitness back, although it's not something she worries about. "I know that one week, two weeks of walking, and it'll be fine...But I love being active and I love it when I'm in a routine, and I've never not been in a routine with a solid focus before." There has also been, since returning, the joy of catching up with her family, of meeting her sister's new twins, of eating and showering to her heart's content.

Lucy—*naturally*—finds positives in her enforced pause. From the records' perspective, it's a free pass, as well as a wonderful chance to catch up with loved ones and a forced opportunity to reflect on whether she still wants to be walking. (She

does.) But there's a catch to this hiatus. Because while the break is a luxury—a time to recover, regroup, plan, catch up—it's also left her drifting. When asked what she misses about being on her mission, she answers: "Just my identity and my job, because right now, I don't have that. I spent so much time building it up, and now I'm losing traction."

The COVID pause has also taken away her ability to control her life and decisions. She's ready but unable to go, missing a goal for motivation. And despite the support of friends and family, she's eating into her savings, and is worried about running out of money to finish what she started.

But being Lucy, this isn't keeping her down. She's concentrating on improving at the 'admin side' of modern adventuring—becoming a better, more efficient writer and photographer, streamlining her blogging and vlogging, sorting out gear and routes. She's been on adventures around the country: a three-week trip to the desert as a cameleer on one of Australian Desert Expeditions' scientific surveys; on walks and adventures in Canberra, NSW and Queensland. She's planning a winter trip to the Snowy Mountains to practice for the final 500km push across Alaska, when she'll face temperatures down to -40°C. And she's looking for financial sponsorship to ease the pressure.

She'll go as soon as she sensibly can. The best time to resume is February, avoiding Central America's monsoon and its risks of flash floods and hurricanes, so it's unlikely she'll leave this year. But when she does, there will be a reunion with Wombat in Colombia, before they walk together through Central America (Panama, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala), up the west coast of Mexico, USA and Canada, and then wait until winter when the ice roads in Alaska freeze so she can complete the final 500km. She describes it as like walking into the set of *Game of Thrones*, and she's already excited, having contacted the mayor of Barrow, who wants to organise a potluck dinner

when she arrives. (This highlights two of Lucy's priorities: She's very keen to include people in both her plans and her limelight; and she's excited by both food and celebrations.)

Lucy is already the first woman to walk South America's length, and I doubt that will be the only record she will eventually hold. I can already picture her Alaskan feast, Lucy and Wombat charming the mayor and the locals, relishing the warm food and the company. And when she walks into town it'll be thanks

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to her resilience and attitude, as summed up on her blog with customary style: "I'm not going to say that, at times, I wouldn't rather be wrapped around a toilet than be walking into oblivion. Sometimes I really would. Sometimes I have. But in these moments, I can draw on what's important and remind myself (painfully) that I've chosen to be where I am, think of what the alternatives are, and if I really wanted, I could plan myself out of here just as easily as I planned my way in." **W**

To read more about Lucy (or to donate to her Chocolate and Toilet Paper Fund), go to tanglesandtail.com or follow her on Instagram at [tanglesandtail](https://www.instagram.com/tanglesandtail). And if you're in the corporate world, says Lucy, a financial sponsor wouldn't go astray!

CONTRIBUTOR: Megan Holbeck is a writer based in Sydney. She's convinced that an 'adventure-mindset' is a real thing, and cultivates it at every opportunity. Sometimes it even works.



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