



WILDSIDE

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Trip Review: Little River Gorge

by Jono



bottom of first big waterfall

To mark the end of our Uni degrees, a few adventurous companions and I headed off on an epic journey through the regularly passed, but seldom explored, Little River Gorge. Located in East Gippsland, The Little River confluences with the Snowy a few kilometres downstream of McKillop's Bridge. The multi-day trip is a combination of outstanding remote canyoning, rock hopping and hiking through the deepest gorge in Victoria. The only way out once you're in the gorge is to keep going, with little chance of escape up the sides, as the walls of the gorge are hundreds of metres high.

The group met at the start of the gorge and made camp. Two of our group had never abseiled with a belay device before and with the multitude of 15 to 30 metre abseils over the next few days we thought it best to rig up a quick demonstration off the bridge crossing Little River at our makeshift campsite.

Little River Falls (where there is a popular tourist walk to a spectacular lookout platform) marks the start of the trip down the gorge, with either a 30 metre abseil down the falls, or the quicker option of a sketchy scramble over the viewing platform's railings and around the side. With our determination to make short work of the previous group of MUMC's effort of four days through the gorge, we opted for the sketchy scramble, which left time for our best explorer poses at the base of the falls for a photo.



one of many abseils



plunge pool

hours which gave us plenty of time to enjoy the rich ecosystem until the banks started to steepen. Eventually, we arrived at the first waterfall of the gorge and managed to find a down climb, made easier by lowering the packs on the rope from the top. Very soon after, the walls of the gorge started to rise dramatically and the growth on the sides starts to thin out. Progress from now on was a combination of rock hopping and wading through the shallows of the river.

After a few more abseils the pools begin to deepen and pack swims become more frequent. The sides of the gorge are absolutely enormous by this stage, combined with the vast array of wildlife and very little sign of human impact, made us all feel like privileged visitors to this seldom explored part of the world.

The last abseil of the trip involves rappelling off a few trees at the top of a spectacular waterfall. But before the rappel begins each member had to jump over a large gap between two ledges. With a long distance to the ground, the abseil is a little daunting for the less experienced, all in all requiring a bit of time, patience and encouragement.



wading the Little River

After the last rappel, the gorge changes dramatically again as the walls start to shrink and river becomes less steep. The pools become longer and deeper and some lengthier pack swims become more frequent. This went on for a few hours, with the floating through the cool pools being a relaxing break for our sore muscles. There are a few spots where you can jump off the side-walls into deeper pools and these provided a little too much entertainment and time started to tick on. We had fought our way through the gorge and come out the other side in under a day (it usually takes a couple of days) and we now faced one hell of a bush-bash to get to a suitable camp spot.

Finding a camp-site became a hellish battle with brutish blackberry bushes, and we finally gave in and made camp on a sandy island in the middle of the river. We made a fire to thaw out our damp and weary bodies and fell asleep under the starry sky almost instantaneously after dinner.

The next morning, after a quick cup of tea, saw quite a few more hours of bush-bashing and wading through the river to the confluence with the Snowy River. The mass of tangled vegetation made progress slow, but a few encounters with some less than friendly snakes kept us moving. A quick lunch at the confluence and then a few hours making our way upstream to McKillop's Bridge and we were at the cars.

The Little River gorge is an amazing adventure requiring a fair amount of prior experience in rope techniques to explore its depths. The price for the experience is definitely paid on the walk out to McKillop's bridge, but it is definitely worth every drop of sweat and blood for anyone looking for a genuine Victorian adventure.

The actual gorge doesn't start for a few kilometres, which meant there was some wading down the thigh deep river for a couple of

Tech Talk: Exped insulated sleeping mats

by Anja

Exped insulated sleeping mats are available to suit a range of end uses, from snow camping, to comfy car camping and ultra-light hiking models. Choosing which model is right for you can seem confusing initially, but there are a couple of simple points to consider which help narrow down the options to the mat best suited to your needs.

Do you like going for long hikes, or do you prefer camping out of your car? In the former case your main considerations will be considering weight, size and comfort. If you are camping out of the car, you can afford yourself even more comfort as space and weight are not as much a priority.

Exped mats inflate in one of two ways which can influence your decision. The SIM models use a foam insert which draws air in when the valve is open therefore making them 'self-inflating'. The other family of mats are baffled 'air-mattresses' which are either blown up using your mouth or preferably with a pump (some models have built in pumps, others use a pump-bag). As a general rule, similar sized self-inflating mats are slightly heavier and do not pack up quite as small as the insulated air mattresses. Also worth noting is that all Exped models have separate one-way valves for inflation and deflation.

Each Exped mat has a warmth rating which is measured as an R-value (the same method used in housing insulation), which is a measure of thermal resistance. Put simply, if you double the amount of insulation the thermal resistance (R) is also doubled. Therefore a mat with twice the R-value will be twice as warm. As a guide, an R-value of 2 will be suitable for the warmer seasons, R-3 suitable for year round use and R-5 and above for use while snow camping or for people who sleep cold.

In most of the Exped range, mats are available in a standard or ultralight shell material. The standard models use 75 denier polyester with a soft brushed finish, while the UL range use 20 denier polyester. The extra fabric in the standard finish makes these mats more durable, but the UL range benefit from being considerably smaller and lighter.

Throughout the Exped range, mats are available in different heights, lengths and widths. These are reflected in the model name. The number represents the height of the mat and they are available in 2.5cm, 3.8cm, 5cm, 7.5cm, 9cm and 10cm. The letter(s) represent the length and width and are available in XS: 120 x 52, S: 163 x 52cm, M: 183 x 52cm, LW: 197 x 65cm and LXW: 197 x 77cm.



The Exped sleeping mat range

The self inflatable Exped SIM Lite and SIM UL range are self-inflating mats suitable for pack carrying and are available in either 2.5cm or 3.8cm heights. The fact they are self-inflating makes them very convenient and they are a popular choice for school camps!

The Exped range of baffled air-mattresses are available in either synthetic or 700+ loft down filled models. Because the weight and bulk of the insulation is low, these mats are able to offer more height and warmth (and therefore comfort) than the hiking range of self-inflating mats. The down filled models are definitely the warmest mats available. They were developed in collaboration with the Swiss Army and our most popular model, the Downmat 7M, is rated down to a temperature of -24C.

The downmats are warmer than the synmats. If you are undecided between the down or synthetic models it is worth remembering that unlike sleeping bags, a mat rated for cold temperatures will not make you overheat. This is because a mat regulates the difference between the ground temperature and the sleepers temperature, while sleeping bags capture the heat which would otherwise be lost to the air.

Now, for those who would like the *absolute* comfort experience in outdoor sleeping mats, the Exped SIM Comfort range and the Mega Mat are made for exactly that purpose. The top sheet is made from a soft velvety fabric. Hook-and-loop strips on the sides to allow one or more mats to be connected into a double bed. They are available in thicknesses of 5cm, 7.5cm and 10cm. The comfort mats use a higher density foam core which provides extra lumbar support.

Product Review: MSR Snowshoes

by Nick

Quite a few years ago a good friend of mine hurt his knee badly in a ski accident and was told he would risk further damage to his knee if he were to continue skiing. He would still come up to the snow because his wife is a keen skier, but we'd leave him each morning to hit the slopes. One day he told me that he'd bought a pair of snowshoes and that if he didn't enjoy the snowshoeing he'd probably give up the snow trips. I must confess that I didn't really believe him when he told me he'd had a great first day on his snowshoes and had visited all these places that he'd never been to before.

I decided I'd go on a walk with him out to Mt Tabletop which is near Dinner Plain. As soon as we left the groomed trail it was immediately obvious what snowshoes do so well: stop you sinking into the snow. It wasn't long until we reached a steep sheltered descent and while I was sinking up to my hips my mate in his snowshoes was still walking on top of the snow.

In frustration I asked my friend to let me try his snowshoes and being someone who likes snow activities, I was an instant convert. My friend had researched his purchase and when I asked him what were the best ones to get he said 'MSR, because they allow a natural walking rhythm, are light yet durable and provide protection against slipping in icy conditions.'

Ever since that first snowshoe walk I have always taken time out each winter to go snowshoeing. I really like how the slower pace encourages you to take notice of your surroundings and the fact that they encourage you to explore out of the way places that may not be accessible on skis. I've personally found that using adjustable trekking or ski poles does make a lot of difference if you want to go up or down steep hills.

This year we will be stocking the ever reliable MSR Evo and in addition we will have the mens and womens versions of the Revo Explore which are a little lighter and have a climbing heel.



Trip Review: Overnight bushwalking with kids

by Nick



dinner time at camp

During the winter Mies and I would make our way down to the creek each weekend, climb around on the rocks, feed the ducks and visit the playground on the way home. Because I like being outside, I think she has begun to like it too and most of our quality time is either spent in the garden, at a park or going on walks. We've even been to the snow twice now.

By the time summer came around again, we were busy with our new son Aalto. Two kids is definitely a lot more work than one! We have other friends with kids and we all got together and did some car camping at the Cathedral Ranges. This was great because there were so many adults around that it made it easy to slip off and do a few fun things like go climbing for the first time in while.

Mies and my sister's birthdays' are only a day apart. I gave them both a bit of hiking kit and arranged another overnight trip for the three of us. Even though Viv and Aalto didn't come, it did give Mum a bit of quiet time at home. Mies was now two years old and she was able to walk the three hours to the campsite we'd picked. Before we left I wasn't really sure how she'd go, but every time I'd go to lift her over a fallen log or protect her from a steep fall she would violently protest, insisting that she could do it herself... and she did (mostly). It's always hard to know what's going through a kids mind but my best guess was that she was on a jungle adventure, like in the storybooks we'd been reading.

In the many years I have been working at The Wilderness Shop, I have noticed an interesting trend when it comes to overnight bushwalking with children: very few people do it! What generally happens is that people do lots of trips while they're at Uni and in the years that follow, but once they have kids they tend to focus on car based camping trips. Then, twenty years later, we see parents who are looking to get back into overnight bushwalking now that their kids have grown-up and don't really want to spend time with their parents...

I now have two children of my own, one is two and a half and the other six months old. Being an avid bushwalker myself, I wanted to challenge the norm and see for myself if it was practical to do overnight trips with young children. The following article documents the things that I've learnt over the past two years; the things that worked and the things that didn't.



When kids are really young they are very small, very light, can't move by themselves and don't argue back! So for the first six or twelve months you can pretty much take them where ever you like. I started out by going for long walks along the creek that is near my house and then started going on day walks to places that weren't too far from Melbourne.

When our daughter Mies was about 4 months old we decided that we should try a short overnight walk. The most daunting thing logistically was how to carry all the stuff we were going to need, considering that one parent is going to be carrying the baby. As we were in uncharted waters we decided that we would limit ourselves to a one night walk. We chose the Lerderberg Gorge because I knew a beautiful campsite about an hour and a half walk each way. To save space and weight we'd have lunch before we left the first day and return to the car for lunch the second day.

Viv carried Mies and a small daypack and I took a large rucksack. Before we knew it we'd made it to a nice gravelly beach beside the river. The walls of the gorge were towering above us. For the rest of the day we didn't really do much except for nibble at food and bask in the sun. Mies was a bit young to notice what was going on, but she enjoyed lying on her back staring at the leaves blowing back and forth.

As our daughter got older she started to crawl and then to walk. Since the last trip my sister took some interest in coming along for a similar walk. Mies wasn't really old enough to do any of the bushwalking herself and I think she would have got a bit frustrated if the walk was any longer than two hours. Having my sister along was definitely a help. Mies was about 14 months old now and well and truly mobile. Another pair of eyes gave Viv and I a real chance to relax and unwind without having to worry about the water's edge which was a favourite spot to feebly throw stones into the water and watch them splash.



One thing to keep in mind when you're walking with kids is that you need to stop more often than if you were walking by yourself. Kids get more tired than us and they also find it harder to concentrate on one thing for too long. We found stopping every 30 to 45 minutes for a quick snack, drink of water and a play made the world of difference to everyone's morale.

Who knows where the future will take us, but the plan at the moment is to slowly build up the length of time the kids can walk. Maybe we'll go over to New Zealand and do some walks where you go from hut to hut?

So anyway, that's the end. I'm sure for many of you out there this has opened up more questions than it's provided answers, but I've found that's the nature of life. Feel free to come in to the shop and have a chat if you have any questions about kids and the outdoors. I won't have all the answers but it's always good to have someone to bounce ideas off.

In regards to gear you'll need. We usually use re-useable cloth nappies at home, but we've found it much easier to use disposables when camping and you can even get compostable nappies these days. Make sure you get a good child carrier with plenty of storage space, like the ones LittleLife, Mont or Deuter make. They definitely make it a lot more comfortable and solve some of the storage issues. We invested in a WE Tectite 4 tent which easily sleeps four people and only weighs 2.67 kg.



WE Tectite 4 at campsite