

Going the distance

Life is good for Geoff Bailey, but only because he has placed one foot in front of the next and walked on ... as WILLIAM VERITY discovers.

Geoff Bailey sits in the office of his native plant nursery, his rough-haired face sneering at his feet, exclaiming after the daily walk with his master up Jamberoo Mountain.

A small, maggoty, smiling, bearded man with a quiet yet engaging manner, Bailey wears the tan uniform - snobbies and short-sleeved shirt - of a nurseryman. He carries with him the quiet satisfaction of a man enjoying himself. A man with a thriving business, a loving relationship, hard-won self-knowledge, plenty of friends and still near the peak of physical fitness.

At the age of 55, Bailey is a man at home in his life - but it has not always been this way. His paths have not always been smooth or well-defined.

"I am a happy and satisfied man," he says as he dunks a tea-bag. "but I have paid my dues."

Wauking has been the thread that has stitched the man together and a passion that threatens to become the healthiest of obsessions.

As Bailey describes how putting one foot in front of another has transformed his life, his eyes light up with something close to a spiritual zeal.

"When you are doing those long-distance walks, your life is compressed to what is happening that day," Bailey says. "Everything else is taken away from it."

"You're not worrying about family or phones ringing or paying bills. Your whole focus is on where you are going to eat, where you are

going to pitch your tent and where you are going to walk the next day.

"This transition takes about two weeks where it goes from being a holiday to being a way of life."

"In that two-weeks, all this stuff that clouds your thinking is stripped away. You then have a certain clarity that you can't get when you're in everyday life here."

"It washes through you over three or four days and it's a wonderful feeling. It's just a very good place to have your mind."

The last time Bailey appeared in the pages of the *Weekender*, he had just completed a 2200km trek through Europe from Holland to the Mediterranean. That was 1993, when - at the age of 40 - his life had finally begun to shift.

The walk - the first of a series of long-distance treks - was the beginning of a new dawn after a period in his 20s when he only left him for a walking tour guide in Nepal), and he was doing time in an admin job at the University of Wollongong where he was neither needed nor wanted.

"I was working at the teachers' college as an administrator and when it merged with the university, I became what they called a super nurseryman which meant they didn't know what to do with me," Bailey said.

"I was never comfortable working in an office. I have always been an outdoors person. But I was brought up in the time when you left school, got a job and then stuck to it. So I joined the public service."



Jamberoo Native Nursery owner Geoff Bailey's passion for trekking has taken him to some of the world's most remote areas. PICTURE: GREG TROMAN

Bailey grew up in the Blue Mountains, the son of a train driver and a teacher, in an era where good parenting meant letting your children roam free to create their own mischief.

As a boy, he would muck around in the bush, cutting a track to a nearby swimming hole or running up and down the mountain cliffs for his high school sports training.

in an office job he hated. But he convinced to grow plants, first for friends and later expanding it to a backyard operation open on the weekends.

Then he met a former jillaroo called Kate - on a walk, of course - and after a few twists and turns, they moved in together. About the same time, the laws changed to force developers, councils and government agencies like the RTA or Sydney Water to revegetate their areas with native plants.

Always a planner, Bailey saw his opportunity and opened Jamberoo Native Nursery.

These days, he employs 15 people, supplies Bunnings with all their native plants and has projects throughout Sydney and the Illawarra.

Better still, the business is at a stage where it allows him to walk four weeks in New Zealand at Christmas, two weeks in Australia at Easter, a month in Europe in July and another month in the Indian Himalayas in October.

At home, he has a large bookcase filled with maps of some of the world's remotest areas and another, larger, bookcase packed with travel guides.

"My life has really come together in the last 10 years and in the last five years in particular," he said.

"I am a planner and I could see this happening if I could get all the pieces to line up."

"My life has options and for the first 20 years of my working life, I didn't have many options."

Geoff Bailey is on his way.

I am a happy and satisfied man but I have paid my dues.

Moving to Jamberoo, he bought a bush block with his wife and together, they built a house in the rainforest, propagating their own native plants for the landscaping because none were available commercially.

The couple rewarded themselves with a trek in Nepal - Bailey's first trip overseas, at the age of 30 - where his wife fell in love with the tour guide and eventually married him.

The years that followed were dark ones for Bailey, living alone and paying off a divorce settlement



Bailey spends more than three months a year on long-distance walks on mountain ranges from New Zealand to European nations to the Indian Himalayas.