

# Brand new horizon

In an effort to escape her hectic city life, Wendy Bithell moved to Byron Bay and stepped into the darkness, writes **Samantha Day**.

**F**rom internet developer to bushwalk leader, Wendy Bithell's career change has been spectacular.

As an Aussie expatriate in Britain, she worked for the BBC for eight years, helping the huge news organisation maximise its use of the internet. But the call of the Australian outdoors – in particular, the North Coast – proved irresistible and she now runs a night-time bushwalking business near Byron Bay.

Bithell says terrorist attacks on London in 2005 helped convince her Australia was the place to be.

"Before the London bombings I had already decided to come back to Australia," she says. "But what I saw that day was traumatic and, as I could film, I was sent out to shoot what was happening.

"I just remember thinking 'Yeah, I'm getting out of this place. It's too crazy here.' It was the final nudge for me to head back home."

Bithell's British experience started on a much brighter note.

At age 30 she caught the travel bug and headed to London for a new adventure. On arrival she sat down in an internet cafe and taught herself HTML, the language used to create documents on the internet.

A confessed nerd, she always had an appreciation of new technology, particularly computers, from a young age.

She began her time at the BBC in administration, displaying her fresh knowledge of the internet.

"The job was new for me but it was really new for everyone there because the technology was so contemporary," Bithell says.

"It was a super-exciting time to be involved because they were always at the cutting edge."

When she returned to Australia, Bithell worked briefly in a job that eroded her spirit. During this time she continued to ponder her life's passions and thought of one that had long been tucked away.

"I wanted to get out of Sydney and I needed a better quality of life," she says. "So I looked to my past, my old hobbies and interests, and it rekindled my love for the environment and the outdoors – a passion I've always had.

"I thought maybe I could use my degree, which was in environmental science, and go back to the thing that I love, which

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Wendy Bithell

is bushwalking, but Byron Bay is such a competitive place during the day. That's when I thought of doing the walks at night using night-vision technology."

Bithell travelled to Byron Bay with her best friend to test the market. They researched to see if people in the area would participate in the bushwalks or try some trails in the nearby national parks.

Her business, Vision Walks, was established last year.

During the day, Bithell organises her night walks, then uses her bus to pick up the bushwalkers from around Byron Bay, Ballina and Lennox Head.

For the night bushwalks, participants enter Nightcap National Park at 8pm and use

their goggles for a one-hour trek. Vision Walks is the first bushwalking company in Australia to use this technology.

"First we set off to see a colony of glow worms and they're amazing because they look just like fairy lights," Bithell says.

"Generally we see between two and eight animals a night, and bandicoots, possums and koalas have been the most regular."

After the walk, Bithell takes her groups to the top of Minyon Falls, where they sit with mugs of hot chocolate and marshmallows and look at the stars. The experience is vastly different from how she spent her nights in London.

"I sit there sometimes and think, 'I used to work in an office and have meetings all the time and now I'm sitting here staring at the stars with a hot chocolate in my hand.' There's just no contest," she says.

Bithell believes her soul is intact again. She is doing something she cares deeply about and she loves the fact she can educate people about the vastness and beauty of the Australian environment.

She has no regrets about her past jobs and knows they have led her to a new and happier path where she is no longer restricted by a desk and can engage with her clients on a more personal level.

"I care deeply about customer service. If someone has a birthday walk, I always make sure I bring a cake with us up to Minyon Falls," she says. "It's only something small but to see the look on their face makes it all worth it."

Now 42, Bithell is confident she will continue with this job for years. "I love doing this and I'm really happy. I can spend time with my family and there's just no comparison to working in the city," she says.



**Vision ...** Wendy Bithell looked beyond the obvious in setting up her business.

## Salary spotlight

**Starting out** To be a taxi driver in Australia, you generally need an AQF (Australian Qualifications Framework) Certificate II or higher and at least one year's experience. Tasks include using a mobile computer system and radio to find information on waiting passengers, picking up passengers, checking destinations, determining the most appropriate route and driving passengers to these destinations.

**Salary** The Federal Government says taxi drivers earn an average of \$700 a week or \$36,400 annually.

## Taxi driver

Seventy per cent of the workforce is employed full-time.

**Demographic** There are 36,300 taxi drivers working in Australia. The average age is 48 and 94 per cent are male.

**Prospects** The Federal Government predicts that employment opportunities in the next five years will be slight. The vacancy level for taxi drivers is moderate. Vacancies arising from new positions are expected to provide 66 per cent of openings.  
**Samantha Day**