



# Walk it off

Want to keep fit and stay (relatively) sane? Try walking with a purpose, writes **Nick Dall**.

“ Every time you walk with a purpose, you’re doing all these good things to your health, while at the same time sparing the planet some CO<sub>2</sub> emissions ”

MAYBE YOU'RE THE kind of oke who'd never even contemplate walking the Comrades, let alone actually running the thing. And you know what? That's okay. I'm sure not built for 89km of physical and mental torture, and for all I know, neither are you. But just because you're not a sadomasochist, it doesn't mean you can't hit the tarmac. I pound the pavements every single day, but I do it in chinos and black slip-ons.

Most South Africans enjoy a good walk. On weekdays we take Wagter for a quick lap of the local park or school fields (and look the other way while he does his business on the halfway line), while on weekends we take him to the nearest beach, forest or mine dump (depending on where you live). We know that walking is good for our bodies and even better for our minds, but we don't seem to *smaak* that a walk doesn't have to be crammed

into the corners of our day: it could be part of our day.

I'm talking about walking with a purpose. To the shops. To work. To the hairdresser. Whatever blows your hair back. Every time you walk with a purpose, you're doing all these good things to your health, while at the same time sparing the planet some CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. I'm not saying you should ditch your car – hell no, not in this country. But I am saying that it's sometimes worth using some other form of transport to get from A to B.

### Around the world in 80 paces

I've always been fond of a good walk. I remember choosing to walk home from school sometimes, much to the bemusement (and relief) of mother dearest, but it was living abroad that opened my eyes to urban walking's true potential.

The first place I tried it was Perugia, a hill town in Italy. All the ups and downs made it far from ideal as a training ground, but nevertheless, I was hooked. Then I moved to Bologna – flat, compact and blessed with magnificent architecture and wide pavements, it was an urban walker's paradise. In winter it snowed, but still I eschewed the buses in favour of my daily trudge.

I took it to another level in Mendoza, Argentina, calculating exact timings between my different workplaces, and never arriving more than a minute early or late. I will admit that La Paz, Bolivia, was something of a challenge. There were certain routes – straight up Andean precipices, for example – that called for taxis, but I did find a circuitous, but flat, route to work that conveniently passed my favourite pancake-and-hot-beverage stall. Admittedly, this →



rather negated the health benefits of that particular amble, but if you were struggling to breathe at 4 000m altitude, you might feel you deserved a pancake too.

Vietnam was even more of a mission: picking my way through roadside mechanics' workshops, fetid snail restaurants and heated games of mah-jong contested by octogenarians became tedious. In fact, I pretty much threw in the towel and restricted my walking to my own quiet, beachside neighbourhood.

## No place like roam

Now I am back home, though, and I'm rediscovering what a wonderful place Mzansi is for walking. Not convinced? Of course, there is a not-so-*lekker* side to urban walking, so let's deal with all that stuff before we move on.

Rain can be a problem (unless you live in Upington). You could get yourself a fancy rain suit, but it'd probably cost more than your monthly car repayments. Or an umbrella, but they're useless in the wind. Or you could just accept that some days you'll have to take the car. Obviously there are times when the weather changes unexpectedly (especially in iKapa) – that's why I always carry a disposable raincoat and a fold-up umbrella in my bag.

If you're walking to work, shoes can be an issue. What's good for your heel arches might not be quite as good for the company dress code. Luckily you have options, depending on your job. Some employers might accept smart black takkies, especially if you work in KZN, while others insist on something made out of dead cow. If you fall into the second category, hopefully you've got an office

of your own where you can perform the old switcheroo.

You might also think that the dogs will be neglected if you get home exhausted from your daily commute. On the contrary: I've found that the more I walk, the more I want to walk. Basil and Ruby, my neurotic rescue *braks*, have never been happier.

You can't carry as much shopping if you're on foot. If you're a diehard, you could take a backpack and do some impromptu training for the Amatola Trail, although it might be better to bite the bullet and give in to the fact that the weekly grocery shopping is best transported in some sort of motor vehicle. You don't want to become the neighbourhood weirdo.

In this country, one always has to think of security. Obviously there are areas →

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Walking qualifies as a weight-bearing exercise, and the health benefits include increased cardiovascular and pulmonary fitness, reduced risk of heart disease and stroke, and greater bone density.

I wouldn't walk through, but these are areas I'd also prefer not to drive through. The people I encounter on my walks are non-threatening: domestic workers plodding up from the station; mothers taking their kids to nursery school; elderly couples exercising even older schnauzers.

### Swept off your feet

Now that we've got those little niggles out of the way, let's move on to the positives of urban walking.

Punctuality is one. This may sound like complete bollocks, but bear with me. As long as you leave home on time, you'll get to your destination on time. No traffic jams (not yet, at least), robots or flat tyres to worry about mean that you won't even need to glance at your watch once along the way. You'll become an expert at measuring distances in minutes, and will be the envy of your Mandy in accounts as you clock in with a minute to spare, day after day.

Not having to park is another. When last did you arrive at a shopping centre, or

an office park, and walk directly to your exact destination? Precisely. At the risk of sounding like L Ron Hubbard, this is about so much more than time-saving: it reduces stress levels and promotes harmony in the populace. At least, that's what I think.

You'll see a lot more than you would from the car. I have witnessed owls perched on rooftops in the early-morning gloom, and just last week I was lucky enough to stare down a juvenile goshawk from only two feet away. The sights are not only natural: I would never have noticed the slogan emblazoned on the side of a metalworker's bakkie had I not been walking: 'THE BEST IN THE WELD.'

In our vast country, I think the single biggest obstacle to urban walking is distance. I limit myself to a 5km radius, but even that's a bit excessive, I think. Most people wouldn't want to walk much more than 3km. There are ways around this problem, though. You could get off the train a couple of stations

early (my *boet* in Joburg catches the Gautrain to Sandton and walks from there, so no e-tolls for him!), or you could even park your car in a nice, quiet parking lot a few kays from the office. When I worked in the CBD, I used to park up near the Mount Nelson Hotel and walk to work through the Company Gardens. Soon I was on first-name terms with all the peanut vendors and even the odd squirrel.

But it's not only the daily commute that can be turned into a stroll. You could walk to somewhere a bit out of the way to buy your lunchtime samoosa, or you could use a local dentist or pet shop or bank, or – for goodness sake – you could walk down to the corner café to get bread, milk and fags every second day.

Give it a bash, and soon you'll be thanking me. Or at least your doctor, your psychologist and your medical aid will be. Who knows? Maybe you'll even be shopping for Poly Shorts before the year is out. ■