

Walking with Beasts

Quentin Chester on exploring the Simpson Desert with camels

Another desert dawn. The air seeping through the parted flap of my swag is dew-heavy and night-chilled. Opening the gap a little wider reveals a pale sky flecked with stars, many still sharp and bright. A crest of orange dune ramps along the horizon. It's like countless other awakenings among spinifex and warming sand—all except for the occasional metallic clang breaking the stillness. That's the sound of a fellow traveller, a bell-toting camel called Wobble, who's munching on his breakfast a few metres away.

Wobble is one of nineteen 'humps' in our walking party, which is cruising around a small patch in the east of the Simpson Desert. Much more than mere bearers of gear and supplies, these camels have become our guides and loyal companions. The sight of them strung together with laden saddles, whether silhouetted atop a dune or crossing an empty gibber plain, stirs all sorts of images. Their steady presence seems somehow to conjure an entire era of whitefella exploration and settlement, a time when Afghan cameleers and their teams crisscrossed inland Australia.

Upholding a little of this tradition is just one of the motivations for our trip leader, Andrew Harper: 'What we do with the camels hasn't been invented for tourism. It's been here for 150 years and we've just tweaked it a little. We try to keep it authentic. The heritage roots of what we do are very strong.'

Over the past 15 years Andrew has escorted dozens of groups across the Simpson and other stretches of inland Australia. In keeping with his philosophy, these trips are not camel riding safaris, but authentic walking treks—some lasting four weeks or more and covering several hundreds of kilometres, blazing new routes across the major deserts. If anyone in this country warrants the title ‘modern-day explorer’, it’s this self-made cameleer. In 1999 he walked 4637 kilometres, following the Tropic of Capricorn from west to east across the continent. Three years later he and Kieran Kelly made the first recorded crossing on foot of the lower Tanami Desert by whitefellas.

Camels were the key to the success of these journeys. Among those breakfasting with Wobble are veterans such as TC (tall camel) and Morgan, which have been with Andrew almost every step of the way. True to his stockman heritage, he runs the desert treks in a low-key, no-fuss mode. They are like a joint venture, where the experience and instinctive strengths of the camels often count for as much as any map direction or human command.

In joining the caravan as walkers we are invited to respect this unspoken yet businesslike arrangement. At the same time it’s impossible not to be swayed by the individual quirks of the camels’ characters—their expressions both imperious and gently comic, the bellowing conversations, the yawns, the curl of their long, whiskered lips and the gleam in those big billiard-ball eyes.

As creatures supremely adapted to overland travel they are exemplars of the patience needed for the long haul. There is something about the tempo of a camel’s stride and

their observant, calm and slightly quizzical demeanour that affects us all. They're imposing creatures that deserve to be taken seriously—but, as we soon discover, not too seriously.

With each unfolding day the routine of loading and unloading, the campfires and the drift of people and camels riding the rolling swell of dune and plain create a sense of freedom and quiet purpose. Soon enough everyone finds their rhythm in the landscape. The cameleers might be our nominal guides, but the journey really takes its lead from the mood and details of the moment: a bird sighted, the shape of a dune or even a shared story or joke.

The Simpson Desert is an immense sprawl of dunes covering more than 170000 square kilometres. Driven into shape by the prevailing winds, these long sand ridges run parallel from north-west to south-east. Though hundreds of four-wheel drive parties romp across the desert every year, the vast majority of the Simpson is inaccessible to conventional transport. That's where the camels come in. Far from being some quaint exercise in nostalgia or novelty transport, they remain the peerless off-road vehicle. And being on foot offers an altogether different intimacy with place compared to gazing through tinted car windows.

In many of the world's mountain and desert regions walking in the company of pack animals—be they alpacas, mules or yaks—is a longstanding tradition. However, for most Australians it's still something of an oddity. Indeed, for some wilderness purists the idea of sharing their precious bush experience with any non-native creature—let alone

being beholden to them for load carrying—is taboo. Go far enough inland, however, and that thinking starts to fray. Self-sufficiency only goes so far in the vastness of the desert.

Five days into our walk, and if anyone in this party still has qualms about the camels, they are doing a good job of hiding their concerns. Although we have only crossed about a dozen of this desert's 1100 dunes, the logic of having the camels along—if only to freight our water supplies—seems unarguable. Over the years the Simpson has been traversed by all sorts of adventurous types marching between supply dumps and hauling carts of gear. For most of us, however, the only practical and sustainable way to reach the interior is with a willing team of trained camels.

The irony is that, just as cameleering traditions are being revived in the outback, the nation is wrestling with an inadvertent legacy of the end of the pioneering era. When large numbers of camels were let loose into the bush, they dispersed across a huge swathe of inland Australia. Just days before our departure for the Simpson, the Federal Government announced \$19 million of funding to help cull and control the hordes of wild camels now causing environmental havoc across Central Australia. With estimated numbers in excess of one million, this feral population has a major impact on native vegetation and waterholes, as well as causing damage to property and remote communities.

In a way, the success of such herds reinforces the merits of employing properly managed camel strings to explore these habitats. Significantly, it's not just outback enthusiasts who are embracing camel trekking but also an increasing array of scientists

and scholars. In 2007 Andrew Harper founded Australian Desert Expeditions (ADE) as a way of supporting journeys with a sharper environmental and historical focus. The ethos here dovetails with that of non-government conservation outfits such as Australian Wildlife Conservancy and Bush Heritage Australia, where research and public participation help grow our knowledge of country.

Recent ADE trips have included biological surveys on Kalamurina Wildlife Sanctuary at the northern end of Lake Eyre. Even in its early days this organisation has been involved in discoveries of fossil and archaeological sites, plant and animal surveys and significant anthropological studies. All of which underlines the fact that our deserts and arid lands have many more secrets to reveal.

That's certainly true for anyone with a glint in the eye for wild places. As wondrous as it might be to saunter about South-west Tassie, the Blue Mountains or a Queensland rainforest, from another perspective these are colourful side dishes. Given that more than 70 per cent of the continent receives less than 500 millimetres of rain a year, there is a strong case for turning inland and acknowledging the reality of Australia's arid heartland. Do that and, whichever way you look at them, the deserts stack up as our greatest wildernesses.

Flaunting such claims is easy. Finding ways to live and share the encounter with these places is much harder. Most of us are culturally and emotionally geared to a world of summits, rivers and wooded valleys. Our mode of travel is goal driven: there are known ridges to climb and peaks for bagging. We're wired for schedules and fixed destinations.

By contrast, deserts rarely present conventional highlights. There might be an isolated waterhole or outcrop, but most of the time the terrain, at least from the outside, doesn't offer a single narrative line to follow. Like camels, these places get a bad press. They're stereotyped as empty and monotonous. The word is, this is a continent with a 'dead heart'. Unfortunately, it's a judgment easily reinforced by the view from a speeding vehicle.

Yet, travelling on foot, the felt experience is somehow never repetitive. As Andrew Harper explains: 'It creeps up on you. By the end of a day what started out looking subdued actually becomes quite powerful. Things are always changing on the ground and every dune is different. You get these landscapes within landscapes.'

Nor are deserts ever really dead. As history keeps revealing, the interior is more like a sleeping giant, waiting for that occasional year when a monsoon system strays south or a surge of floodwaters arrives from the tropics in a rush. In a matter of days the desert blasts into brilliant life, as we found on the newly-grassed floodplains among the dunes just northwest of Birdsville. No doubt in the years to come bright sparks will craft new ways to explore deserts on foot - with and without camels. Perhaps too, these sandy expanses of dune and Spinifex will take their rightful place in the wilderness pantheon. As the popularity of the Larapinta Trail shows, arid walking can attract a loyal following. Not only that, but if climate change really takes hold, then a lot more people down south will need to brush up on their desert skills. But for now, on this clear morning in the Simpson, it feels both natural and reassuring to be with Wobble and his cohorts as

they stand loaded and roped together in the time-honoured manner. Once the camels set sail, the day really begins.

Covering ground is only part of what we seem to be about on this ten-day walk. Through the course of the morning the walkers disperse and come together in eddies of conversation. Some of us stay close to the camels. Others are happiest taking solitary tangents off the dunes. Away in the distance you might hear a snippet of song or the creak of a shifting saddle. Each of us seems to be joined to an unfolding world, intricate with natural detail: a dragon lizard sunning itself on a branch, the tessellated bark of a bloodwood or the patterns a bent piece of cane grass has scribed on a windy dune-top.

The point is, this is a different kind of walking experience, one that's a world away from pounding along with a big pack on a single-file track. Under the arch of the desert sky you're free to be in the vastness of the dune spaces. More than that, though, we're lifted into a continuum of experience. Here the endless drift of the dunes and the steady swing of the camels stride seem to put us on the kind of trajectory no map can depict – an exploratory path alive with history and promise.