

SLOW TRAIN TO

When *Nicolas Rothwell* set out with a band of scientists and outback travellers,



KALLAKOOPAH

none knew they were about to experience a rare wonder at Australia's arid heart.

At first, it is nothing but a far-off gleam before your eyes, a flash amidst the monotone of sand dunes. Then it becomes a hazy, shaking dance of light, veiled by ancient coolibahs, almost indistinguishable from the afternoon mirages. Only at the last instant, as you crest the final sandcliff, does it reveal itself: a thread of bright water, broad, majestic. After days of trudging through the dry desert, there it is: the Kallakoopah Creek, the last unknown river system of the inland – the secret at the dead heart of Australia.

Perhaps 20 westerners – on a generous estimate – have followed the full length of this elusive channel over the century and a half since it was first reached, and its course roughly sketched by explorers and

early pastoralists as they fanned out across the arid Centre and probed the outer fringes of the Simpson Desert. No other river of the inland has been left so silent and so untravelled: it lies on the far fringes of pastoral country, concealed from European eyes by low sand ramparts and by crumbling, unemphatic claypans. Its landscape has been preserved until now by good fortune, and its deep aridity, and by its status as in-between country, without obvious features, exploitable resources or attractions. The Kallakoopah is an anabranch of Warburton River, the chief waterway that links the floodplains of the Channel Country to Lake Eyre. Its creek-line runs for more than 200 mazy kilometres, almost looping back upon itself, tracing out a huge question mark between the

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dunes. It forms the key link in the slender life-chains of the Simpson Desert: it is both laboratory of untouched nature and window into the deep past; it is the most fragile and vulnerable of landscapes – and it is, at last, coming under threat.

TODAY, THOUGH, IT REMAINS PRISTINE: there is not a single vehicle track to be seen along its central course. The only viable way to get here, across wide swaths of saltbush and claypan, is by camel. In fact, camels – their smells and sounds, their load-bearing capacity, their propensity for cud-spitting – lie at the heart of this story: they are its vital supporting cast, and it is largely thanks to their efforts that, late one afternoon this July, a group of 15 scientific surveyors and bush adventurers found themselves staring out across the wide, bird-choked expanse of the Kallakoopah, edged by bright red samphire bushes, and fuller and fresher than it had ever been seen by European eyes.

At the head of the first camel-string, gazing across, hand shielding his forehead explorer-style, stands an unusual kind of pioneer – Andrew Harper, 44, the “camel man” of the red Centre. Raised in Deniliquin and schooled in the pastoral industry, Harper is at once a desert traveller, a historian of the inland, a philosopher of environmental balance and the owner of the Outback Camel Company – a most quixotic business which specialises in escorting wilderness lovers on walking trips through remote desert country around Alice Springs. There’s a good deal of tradition feeding into this venture, although it makes keen use of the latest in topographic mapping, sat-phones and GPS navigation aids.

Harper is following in the steps of the great inland explorers of the 19th century, who succeeded in making their most spectacular desert crossings only thanks to the arrival in Australia, in 1860, of the first camels. He custom-makes his own camel gear – indeed, one of his company’s amazingly ramshackle, stick-and-rope saddles decorates the entrance hallway to the South Australian Museum’s exhibition devoted to the Muslim cameleers of the Outback.

But Harper and his camel-trains are much more than mere throwbacks, or representatives of a near-defunct lineage. He walks the desert



with convictions in mind. Balance is the key to cameleering: if the loads hanging down from the two sides of a camel’s saddle are even a fraction out of true, the animal will be unable to perform its majestic, loping trek through unwatered country. Balance is also the principle that underpins this expedition, and all Harper’s trips into the arid zone: it spreads through the minds of those who walk beside him, like a mantra. Balance becomes the essence of life, the goal of travel: there is an ideal equipoise to be struck between wilderness and man’s eye, between respect for nature and the quest for knowledge.

Top, a fossilised fragment of *Diprotodon*, a giant marsupial extinct for 50,000 years; above, biologist Tony Robinson looks for animal remains under a wedge-tailed eagle’s nest.



It was in pursuit of perfect balance that Harper, last Christmas, at the end of another hard season of outback travelling, decided on a new agenda for his camels and his company. After careful consultations in the tight-knit world of camel enthusiasts and long talks with scientists and scholars of the Centre he set up Australian Desert Expeditions, intending to take artists and scientific researchers deep into unseen country. It would be journey-making as mental and emotional discovery – a way to take trips at once internal and external, with the rhythmic sway of camels as the constant accompaniment.

But where to begin this new chapter? Harper had been surveying the arid zone for more than a decade by the time these ideas began to take form inside his head. He examined the maps: vast swaths of the desert interior remained obscure or only lightly examined by scientific surveys. Past explorations had taken Harper and his teams through the far stretches of the western deserts – the Gibson, the saltpan landscape around Lake Amadeus and the bare north Tanami. His camels had already crossed the Simpson in a straight transect across the 1100 dunes that run in forbidding parallel. But there was still a reach of isolated country, little known, that seemed to be beckoning him: the white zone of sandplain that extends from the Macumba river east, across the lower Simpson, marked out by salt lakes,



until the ultra-marginal cattle stations of the Birdsville Track come into view: an empty quarter, listed on the maps as part of the Simpson Desert Regional Reserve. Through this landscape runs the Kallakoopah – a salt riverbed that, in rare flood seasons, fills with a pulse of water flowing down from Queensland and transforms the dead heart into an ephemeral wetland, rich in colours and the first flush of life.

Harper's cameleers had skirted its western fringe the year before on a commercial trip. They found the pools in the salt-creek channel red with clays and oxides; they saw weathering, half-exposed fossils in its sandcliffs. It was ideal: he had the target for his inaugural expedition. He contacted his associates in museums and government departments, and built a team of archeologists, botanists and fellow travellers. And so, at dawn one frosty winter morning, the first Australian Desert Expeditions camel cavalcade headed off from a base camp near Kalamurina homestead, bound for a distant, almost ghostly watercourse – a river that might, or might not, be there.

AHUNDRED MILLENNIA AGO, IN the Kallakoopah's glory days, the pattern of the country was quite different: the Centre was alive with giant marsupial megafauna, the inland rivers flowed in rhythm, primeval trees and scrub plants filled the landscape – and the

faint traces of that prehistory can still be glimpsed protruding between the dune-fields that skirt the salt creek-line today. This is the province of the expedition's archeologist, Dr Mike Smith of the National Museum of Australia, the renaissance man of Australian desert studies. Smith, who doubles as historian and fossil detective, as anatomist of cultures and connoisseur of literary byways, loves nothing more than explaining his enthusiasms on the go: a walk through deserts in his company swiftly becomes a seminar, a swirl of thoughts, with striking interruptions along the way, as he darts left and right to pick up stone tool fragments half-buried in the sand. "Look," he calls out, "we're getting into fossiliferous country – my nostrils are starting to twitch! See that high bluff there, with two layers of colours: almost certainly that corresponds to the two main fossil periods round here."

Smith's portrait of the inland is a dynamic one. All through deep time, as he likes to put it, the weather of the Centre swung like a metronome. Every 100,000 years, between ice ages, a wet period would come, and the river systems flowing into the Lake Eyre basin would be activated – but a gradual, overarching trend towards greater aridity was dominant. About 60,000 years ago, shortly before early man reached Australia, the Centre dried for good: the heartbeat of the inland stopped. The Kallakoopah region, in its bleak splendour,

Archeologist Mike Smith, the "renaissance man of Australian desert studies", writes up his field notes at camp.

preserves that moment. But all deserts are palimpsests: you can read time's many layers on their surface; the scripts of different histories are plain. Here, lying on the claypans as if freshly tossed aside, are the stone blades and adzes abandoned by the Wangkanguru people, nomads who roamed between the central Simpson and the shores of Lake Eyre, and used the Kallakoopah as their highway for 2500 years – until the establishment of missions in the late 19th century drew them from their harsh ancestral home. Even as they left, western pioneers came in: dogged men, leading camel trains, on a vain quest for inland waters and pastoral country. The first systematic Crown Lands survey of the Kallakoopah was mounted in 1874, by an expedition under the gloomy John Lewis. He reached the creek-line, and filed what may be the most negative report in the entire history of Australian exploration. "The country is simply frightful. To take a view from any slight elevation of the bare sandhills, sandcliffs and utter want of vegetation is sufficient to create thirst, without having to travel over it."

That was enough for most people. The lower Simpson stayed locked up: only a handful of desperate horse-thieves, keen to smuggle stolen animals from the western side of the desert to stations in the Channel Country, tried to penetrate the sand barrier. There was a brief, futile flurry of oil drilling and prospecting in the '70s, and, since then, next to nothing. Wind, and silence.

TODAY, THOUGH, THAT SILENCE IS BROKEN. Across the dunes and salt-pans come strange sounds: the swish of rhythmic steps, the creak of saddle-bags. Laughter, too, stray words, snatches of conversations, picked up, fragmenting: above all else, the noise of camels, chewing contentedly, or burbling, hissing, and groaning as they pause on their march through the landscape.

All around the advancing phalanx of scientists, the country is nothing like their expectations. Everything should be grey, and still, and drab. But rains have fallen – not just up the catchment, but close by, dampening the claypans, filling the waterholes. Yellow daisies coat the dunes; there are overflying squadrons of duck, pelicans and cormorants. Tony Robinson, doyen of South Australian field biologists, strides ahead, wearing his trademark floppy clothes, which seem permanently on the brink of disintegration, and clutching his sample bag. At his side walks the wiry Brian Blaylock, secretary of Birds SA, binoculars to his eyes as he counts the species flitting through the cane-grass and stands of sandhill acacia. There's a pallid cuckoo, the grass wrens are calling – and what's that mad, metallic, chinking sound above? Blaylock produces his "opportunity records" notepad with a flourish, and marks the sighting: Horsfield's bronze-cuckoo is flying in the desert sky.

Behind the scientists, the "cobs" (paying participants on the trek) fan out – each one of them a committed desert walker. There's Michael Sexton, a regional doctor, and his sculptor wife, Jan; there's philanthropist

John McBride, a Japan specialist and expert on the intricacies of the tea ceremony; and in the rear, with his loping gait, comes 75-year-old bush ironist Tim Scales, squinting up with his one good eye. "If I were on my own in this country, without the sun shining," Scales deadpans, "I'd probably just wander round in a circle for a while until I ran into my own arse: I suppose rigor mortis really set in some while ago..."

AN UNUSUAL COMPANY – AND WE haven't even got to the cameleers, led by Harper himself, a man who regards walking as the natural condition for the human body, who decorates his hat-brim with daisy blooms, and who communes at the deepest level with his constant travelling companion, the hyperactive sheepdog George. Beside the camels, divided into their two "strings", walk the crew, calling out a constant stream of instructions and encouragements – for camels, despite their aloof air, are herd animals, and need to feel themselves enveloped by routines and directives. "Steady camels, steady," runs the refrain whenever broken ground or dune-slopes confront the strings, while stops for running repairs or saddle adjustments require a slowing, lulling sound: "Ooo-dooo," repeated several times. But if you want your camel to sit, and adopt its rest position, assumed by folding its legs into a bizarre concertina, you must say, in a voice of stern, expectant command, "Hoosh down, camel" – an instruction that descends from the Baluchi language used by the "Afghan" cameleers of the Outback more than a century ago.

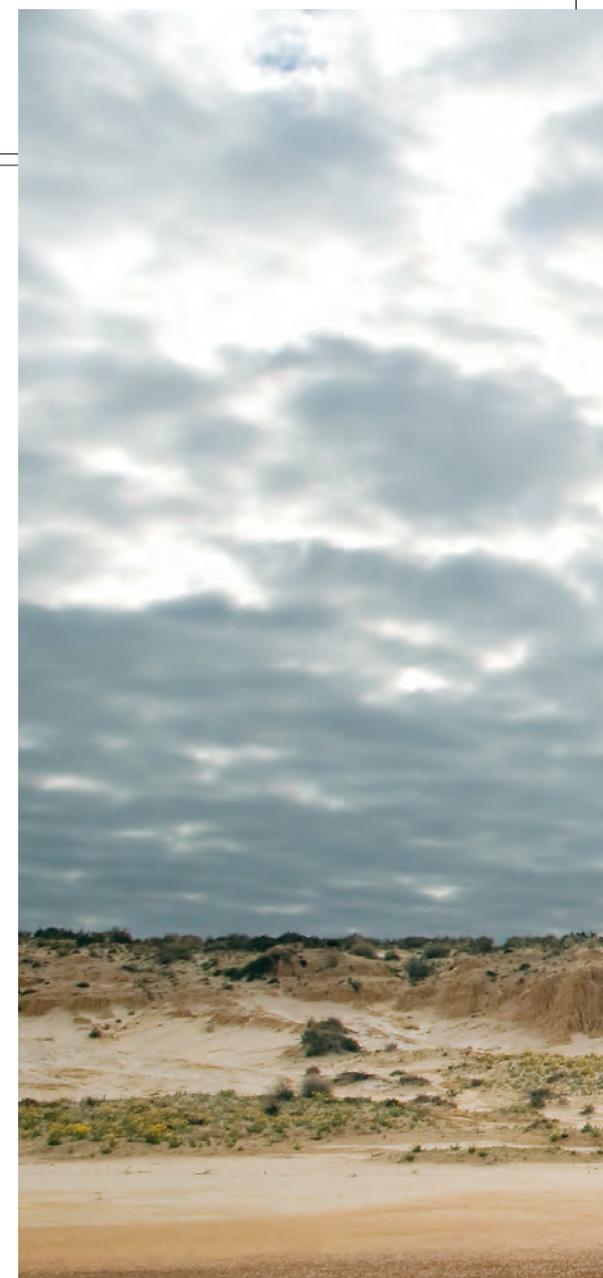
Today's cameleers, however, are far removed from those first pioneers of desert travel. The elite team gathered for the Kallakoopah trip are mostly young, and of an intellectual cast of mind, and seem inclined to compose life-ways very distant from the modern urban norm. At the head of the second camel-string walks Josef Schofield, a remote area nurse turned bushman, a long-time student of the inland, who brings with him a library of scholastic texts in a dedicated camel-saddle. Alongside is his partner, the elfin Danae Moore, a master of camel depth psychology, and, hanging back mid-string, the even-tempered, Blundstone-wearing Ingrid Elmitt, a trained mechanic and Reiki enthusiast who disdains possessions and fixed abodes, and leads an almost abstract, nomadic life. There is a distinct species of style, or chic, associated with the profession of cameleer: belts bristling with bush knives and Leatherman tools, baggy, ancient op-shop clothes and ripped, faded Akubras seem *de rigueur*, though Elmitt is sporting a somewhat radical green felt floppy number she scored on eBay for \$8 not long ago. "Hats are important out here," says Sallwa Hourani, an artist possessed by love for camels, purity and isolation, who sees deserts as places of special intensity and edge. "These old Akubras can give you surprisingly good protection from camel bites." But the last of the old-school cameleers doesn't quite fit this cultural pattern: the yarn-spinning, port-dispensing



John Wilkinson, "Wilko", now 86, a veteran of World War II and the pastoral station life on the Plenty Highway, downplays sentiment in his version of the man-camel relationship. "Camels are aloof," he says. "They're a challenge. I don't want their love, I want their respect. I like being in their company."

Just as well, for the tasks of animal management run round the clock, from hobbling at camp to shepherding at dusk, as the camels browse amidst the acacias and the daisies, allowing the quirks of their individual personalities full expression. Nugget, the small, angelic, foul-breathed rear camel of the back

From top, Josef Schofield tends the campfire; his fellow cameleer, Ingrid Elmitt, looks after her charges; and a sun-bleached camel skeleton bears testimony to the harsh environment.



string, believes in his own omnipotence, while Banjo is distinctly fond of rolling on the ground and tossing off his saddle. The cameleers spend hours lost in detailed study of their charges: for Elmitt and Hourani, Morgan, the large load-carrier at the end of "A" string, has the personality of a brickie's labourer who does yoga classes on weekends, while Chewy, the only girl camel on the trip, is definitely a man's woman, a voluptuous, loving creature, a cross between Marilyn Monroe and Xena the Warrior Princess.

Even these levels of psychic engagement, though, don't come close to Andrew Harper's connection with his animals. At the expedition's mid-point, high on a dune overlooking the channel of the Kallakoopah, at dusk, Harper stands beside T.C. and Morgan, two of his favourite camels, and his thoughts begin to roam. "The desert has a multitude of moods," he says. "It can be tranquil, and it can convey trauma and abandonment. But I've never seen anything like this – the curve of the river, the blue on the water, the red cliffs, the peace – and what makes it is that we walked here, with the camels. It's as if we're all part of the landscape now."

HARPER HAS A RIGOROUS CAST OF MIND: his desire to know the deserts grew naturally from his work on west Queensland stations in the '90s, when he would stare at the Tropic of Capricorn sign, and yearn to trace its



course. On a backpacking journey through Africa he saw working camels and realised they were the ideal way into the deep inland. When he came back he joined the Outback Camel Company, which had been set up in Alice Springs by bush traveller Rex Ellis, and worked there, learning the cameleer's craft, for several years. In 1999, to raise money for the Flying Doctor Service, he walked across Australia, straight along the Tropic line, with his favourite camels: it took 226 days. "I know these animals, their idiosyncrasies, their moods. I know them well. I know when T.C.'s having a bad day, and when Morgan thinks the Bunyip's after him."

Eventually, he bought the OCC from Ellis, and began planning a shift in its mission. Harper's sense of history is strong: when he was at school, he fell in love with one of the urtexts of camel culture, Wilfred Thesiger's *Arabian Sands*. He sees himself as the inheritor of traditions bequeathed by the 19th century Afghans, whose skills made possible the triumphant explorations of precursors like Ernest Giles and Cecil Madigan. "Even in this day of four-wheel-drive travelling," he says, "the best way to see the deserts is on foot. With the demise of the stockman and his horse, and the Aboriginal leaving of the Simpson Desert in the early 1900s, very few people walk this desert any more. Consequently, the stories the desert holds have been missed over the last few decades."

Harper and his team leave no hint of their passage behind them; they treat the desert sands as fragile, and beautiful, and worthy of respect. "It's country that deserves to be approached gently, so its mood is revealed," he explains. "It doesn't deserve tyre tracks and vehicle convoys. The way people have always approached the Kallakooah waterholes was on foot, as we have today. That reveals the country." The tradition has its place, as part of the Australian past, a threatened heritage: but there is another, more pragmatic reason for outback camel travel – and this reason underlies Harper's decision to set up his Australian Desert Expeditions project and march into empty country. It is simply this: scientific expeditions and surveys mounted by vehicle or helicopter move fast, and miss the context of what they see and find. The knowledge they gather is point by point, and incomplete, while teams who walk on foot, with their equipment borne beside them, can reach deeper into empty, untracked country, and once there can proceed in slow, focused fashion, alert to all it holds.

Australian Desert Expeditions is a small part of a revolutionary tide in thinking about the bush, and all inland Australia. Even as the pastoral industry becomes better capitalised and more efficient, it has become clear that large tracts of remote Australia are too fragile for cattle. Much of the far north has been returned to Aboriginal groups: several new,

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non-indigenous land-holders have dedicated pastoral leases to heritage and conservation, and a group of nature conservancies have moved to take control of large tracts of desert and savannah country. Australian Desert Expeditions – which is acquiring the status of an environmental charity, and is dependent on government research contracts, sponsorship and private support – aims, like these new defenders of the land, to study and explain the country. Harper devises his trips, and then approaches museums and government research groups to take part. Both the South Australian Department for Environment and Heritage and the National Museum of Australia plan to send experts on his trips next year, and both organisations would be logical long-term backers for Harper's venture; but both are constrained by the usual financial straitjackets, and so their leading scientists are participating today as volunteers.

By good fortune, the ultra-marginal Kalamurina cattle station, Australian Desert Expeditions' base camp at the southern fringe of the Kallakooah catchment, has just been offered to a non-profit environmental body, which hopes to operate it as an arid region reserve. Harper now plans to explore through the lower Simpson from this starting point for several years. And what might he find? The yield from the first trip is already providing surprises. Not only was the deep desert green and rich with life; not only were plants and

birds present in their range in new and subtle patterns, while Aboriginal artefacts were distributed in suggestive scatters down trading routes along the river corridor; more than this, the whole region seems to be a paradise for fossil hunters.

Mike Smith hoped at the outset of the trip to find some signs of the great megafauna of prehistory. His optimism was fulfilled in spectacular style. On a sandcliff of the Kallakoopah, to his astonishment, he confirmed the tentative identification of a complete skeleton of *Genyornis*, the large, flightless bird of the ancient Centre. The next day, at lunchtime, the two camel-strings pulled up on a sand-plain: between them, lightly embedded in the dirt, was an eroding skull of the hippo-sized *Diprotodon*, the largest marsupial that ever lived. A couple of days on, after stumbling across endless fragments of Pleistocene-era turtles and crocodiles, and a set of bones scored by the telltale tooth-marks of the *Thylacoleo*, or marsupial lion, Smith was scouring the surrounds of another creek-side camp when he found the remains of *Procoptodon*, the giant short-faced kangaroo – the biggest kangaroo ever to roam the inland. All the stars of the megafauna in a handful of magic days.

PERHAPS ONE MIGHT EXPECT TO find one or two fossils along this channel, close by Lake Callabonna, the salt lake where the first great troves of ancient marsupial bones were discovered a century ago. But in quite such profusion? The point, of course, is that the inland remains full of secrets: two centuries after Western man took possession of the



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continent, the contents of its heart are little known. But the future of this empty zone is, at best, clouded.

On the last day of travel before reaching the expedition’s mid-point water-dump, at a northern bend of the Kallakoopah, Harper and his cameleers execute a delicate traverse of a salt-lake channel, leading the loaded animals across, biblical style, two by two, and up to a high plateau beneath a pale sand-dune. An old, sketchy mining survey track from the ’70s leads close to this lookout – and a couple of 4WD expeditions have made forays in and left their souvenirs behind: a fireplace from a decade ago, with its foil and cellophane still in the ashes; a part-burnt can of Diet Sprite, with the helpful words “Don’t Litter” on the lid. Adventure tour companies have this area on their wish list, and are keenly hoping to

force through a new track from the network of driving trails that now spans the centre of the Simpson desert. The trend of ever-greater touristic invasiveness is plain: a decade ago, 3000 vehicles, with perhaps 10,000 people on board, crossed the Simpson. Today the number is at least double – and gouged-out tyre-tracks deface the desert’s dune-fields at every turn along the old seismic lines.

That night, around the fire, an impromptu symposium, sad and serious, springs up, with the scientists and the cameleers pondering an exquisite set of dilemmas. One explores, naturally, to increase knowledge: but knowledge of country breeds desire to see it, and experience its mysteries. Mike Smith, who believes in public access to the bush, works for a public museum and co-operates with outback driving groups, nevertheless warns of “an army of 4WDs with GPS devices just over the next sand-dune”. He suggests a limited-access scheme to this most vulnerable part of the arid inland. Tony Robinson, with decades of experience in the deep deserts of South Australia, argues for special access only to two points on the river channel, and protected wilderness status for the rest.

Andrew Harper stays quiet: he looks out at his chosen country – serene, and calm, and still, but for the soft sound of camel bells. The temperature has plunged to zero. The stars light up the dunes and salt-pans. And the wide, curving river channel, like the promise of a secret, glows. ☉

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