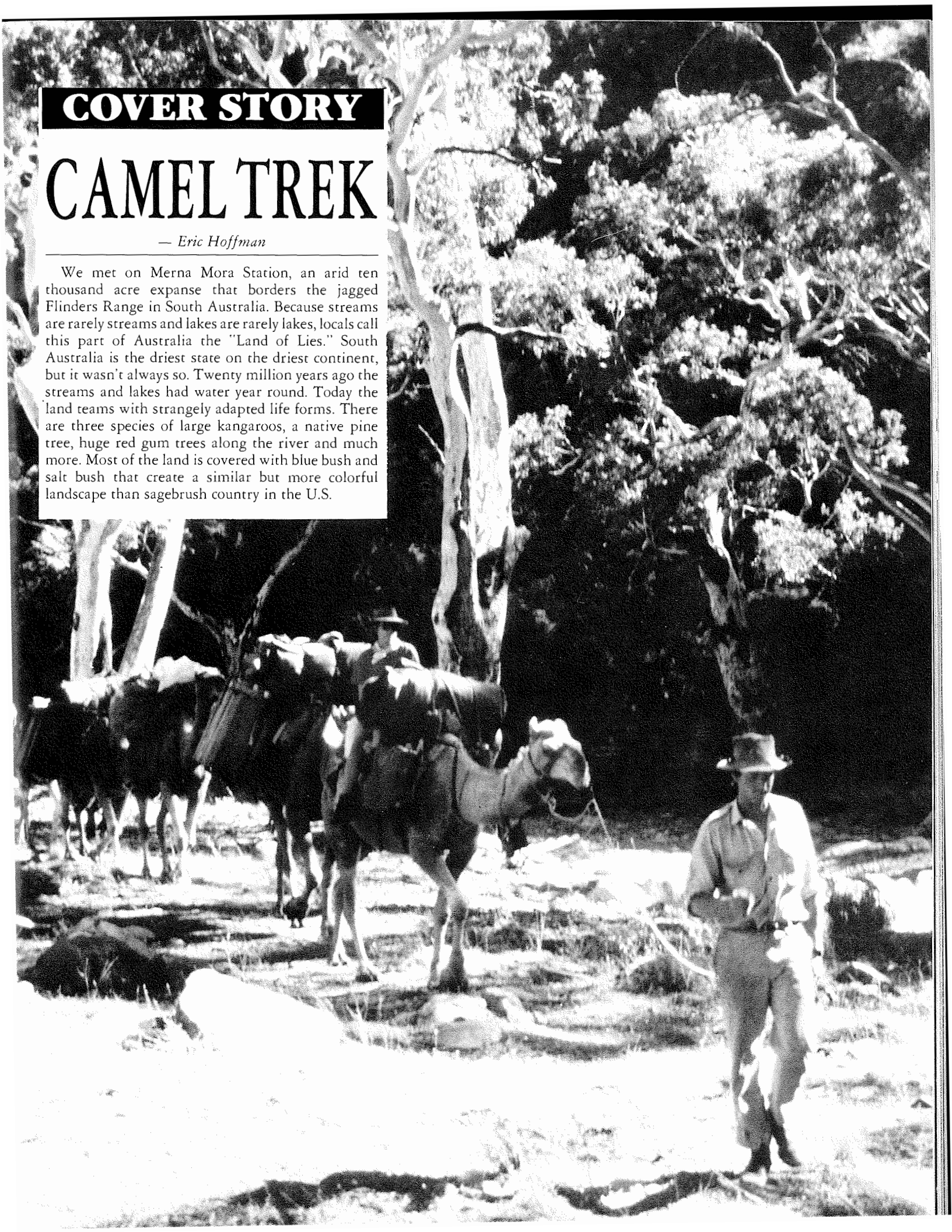


COVER STORY

CAMEL TREK

— Eric Hoffman

We met on Merna Mora Station, an arid ten thousand acre expanse that borders the jagged Flinders Range in South Australia. Because streams are rarely streams and lakes are rarely lakes, locals call this part of Australia the "Land of Lies." South Australia is the driest state on the driest continent, but it wasn't always so. Twenty million years ago the streams and lakes had water year round. Today the land teams with strangely adapted life forms. There are three species of large kangaroos, a native pine tree, huge red gum trees along the river and much more. Most of the land is covered with blue bush and salt bush that create a similar but more colorful landscape than sagebrush country in the U.S.



CAMEL TREK

Australian Clyde Haldane and I arrived at Merna Mora Station late one afternoon and sat down to tea with eighty-six year old Elsie Fels. Elsie owns and runs the station. She talked of the tough times: the worst of the drought years in the 1930s when the land was engulfed in great dust clouds that obliterated the landscape for days. The pastoralists who survived that period often ate their meals under a sheet to keep the dust out of their food. The land had been overgrazed and droughts sometimes "lingered for a few years." According to Elsie, human survival was contingent "on strong hands and a good heart".

The camel operation is at the east end of the station. For twenty minutes we bumped and maneuvered Clyde's aging Citroen across the faint dirt track that cuts across blue bush country. From a mile off the camels were the most prominent feature in the landscape. A small paddock held about twenty animals of varying sizes and colors: two black ones, but mostly hues of tawny brown. The obvious question was how could such a harsh environment sustain such large animals.

Compared to llamas, dromedaries are huge. Most of the animals weighed three-quarters of a ton and stood nearly eight feet tall. We wondered how such a large animal could be managed when it became recalcitrant. Did the same techniques for making a llama manageable apply to a camel?

We met our companions for the trek: Rex Ellis, owner of the camel operation, who has crossed by camel most of Australia's immense deserts; Stephen Issac, a 22-year-old college graduate visiting Australia from England; Mandy Player a fifteen-year-old high school student from Adelaide, and Roz Noble and Jack Barnes, our cameleers. Roz and Jack's expertise covered everything from cooking bush tucker (food), to intimate knowledge of camel psychology. The camels — Tina, Gidge, Shaluk, Bejah, Governor and Cooper — rounded out our assembly. We planned to trek a 90-mile loop working north along the base of the Flinders, cutting into the heart of the 3,000-foot high range at Bunyerroo Gorge, then continuing north through the Aroona Valley, which falls between the Heysen and ABC ranges. About 50 miles from our starting point we'd swing west

again through Ponchilna Gorge and out onto an immense plain with a view of perfectly flat Lake Torrens. From here we'd work our way in a more or less straight line 40 miles back to our starting point. On a crude map our route amounted to a ninety-mile loop in the shape of the letter "P."

The outing would be a test. We'd be going places few people had trodden, and see immense vistas and oddly adapted plants and wildlife found nowhere else on earth. There would be few watering spots, high temperatures, dust and flies. For me, working with camels was the main attraction. Having trekked hundreds of miles with llamas, I was eager to work with one-humped dromedaries.

Dromedaries in Australia are a non-native species. In the 1870s Pakistani and Indian immigrants brought them into Australia, and they became the chief carriers of goods into desert areas. Entire settlements were built and maintained in areas otherwise inhospitable. Camels, loaded with 500 to 700 pounds each, walked in strings of eighty animals to and from remote mining areas like Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie. Camels brought in the water and carried out the gold. In marginally productive wheat areas, camels were harnessed seven abreast to large plows weighing several tons. They became the preferred working animal. City planners even accommodated their idiosyncrasies. Camels don't back up well, so most main streets were incredibly wide — up to 50 yards. This way, camels working in teams could turn around.

In the early 1900s, motor vehicles and trains linked the areas served by camels, and Australia's reliance on camel power came to an end. In many of the small dusty towns the only reminders are the inappropriately wide streets. The camels were thanklessly and thoughtlessly released into the wild where they adapted well to the inhospitable environment. Today there are over 100,000 wild camels in Australia — the largest wild camel population in the world. They are largely seen as a pest species, and on many stations they are shot on sight. If you want a camel, you must capture one. With the great distances and their penchant for sticking to rugged country, capturing one can be a formidable challenge. Only a handful of Australians have done it.

The camels on our trek had been

plucked from the wild by cameleers to carry adventure-minded tourists into remote regions. Today, camels are often toted all over Australia in pursuit of tourist dollars. They sometimes serve in the wine growing Baroosa Valley as a novelty. Other times they make 25-day desert crossings, sometimes going without water for twenty days while carrying heavy loads. But in all of Australia, probably no more than 300 camels are at work toting people and baggage. The rest are surviving on their wits.

Camels can step over a five-foot high fence. To prevent trained camels from rejoining wild ones, their front legs are hobbled when they aren't working.

On the first day of our trip the camels were brought forth hobbled. Each shuffled along — accepting its shackles — in short quarter steps to our staging area. Cameleer John Barnes gave his first command. "Hoosh," he said quietly. The response was immediate. Each giant dromedary sat down in llama-like motion and not another command was necessary as we went about sorting and loading gear. Camels are somewhat head shy, and when a person draws too close, they bend their long necks and tilt their heads away. Only one camel, twenty-year-old Gidge, seemed to like being touched on the head.

Compared to most llama packs in the U.S., Australian camel packs are "low tech" affairs. They are assemblies of canvas bags stuffed with straw and wood held together with rope. Packing camels requires tying knots and improvising when something gives way under the weight of a load. The packs ride well, but working with them can be time-consuming. The camels sat like statues staring straight ahead. Occasionally, when a girth was tightened or a load strapped into place, an animal let out a groan. There was no spitting, but good reason for the groaning. Chalook, a large neutered male, was loaded with about 400 pounds. Chalook, Bejah and Gidge would carry the most weight and serve as pack animals only. Governor, Tina and Cooper carried lighter loads and saddles for riding. Each animal's lead was secured to its halter and to the base of the animal's neck in front of it. This aspect of control is similar to that used with llamas, but with camels there is an emergency brake in the form of a nose peg.

Nose pegs are surgically placed through

CAMEL TREK

one nostril. When a camel is working, a short piece of twine is tied from the peg to the lead rope. The twine is attached with enough slack to allow it to remain tension free as long as the camel moves at the pace of others in the string. If the animal slows, jerks its head or bolts out of line, the nose twine becomes taut and the plug pulls tightly against the inside of the camel's nostril. Leading a camel by a nose peg is comparable to leading someone around with a bit of rope tied to an earring in a pierced ear. On many camels the pegs are not used unless the animal becomes hard to handle. Camels hate nose pegs. Pegs are the all-powerful whammy humans have devised to control their great strength and considerable cunning.

After an hour and a half the camels were loaded and John gave a second command, "Ibna." Suddenly the living statues rolled onto their feet and we were off. From the start the camels walked in single file, and in a few minutes the string settled into a stride that went unchanged for the rest of the day. Though their walking stride looks sluggish and slow,

possibly due to their exceptionally long legs, a camel is a fast walker — faster than a llama. A person must move at a fast clip to keep up. On downhill sections, the camels had a tendency to walk faster than John, who controlled all six animals with a single lead rope. When they moved too fast, John used the third command, ooboo (meaning slow down).

By nightfall, we had travelled fifteen miles and stopped to camp on the dry sandy bed of Bunyeroo Creek among immense red gums (a type of eucalyptus shaped vaguely like a huge oak). We dined on a four-course meal concocted by cameleer Roz Noble. Shortly before bedtime the camels, who were hobbled and foraging free on the semi-arid blue bush and salt bush, were secured to trees and bushes. Even a hobbled camel can travel many miles if allowed to roam all night.

By the second day I was free-riding Governor, who had only been ridden free-rein on a few prior occasions. It was a challenge for both of us. All camels can be taught to reliably and safely work in a

string, but free-reining is a different matter. Most of the human injuries incurred on camels in Australia happen in free-reining situations, but my apprehension was overridden by an opportunity that seemed too good to pass up.

The reins work from the single nose plug. I decided the best start would be to let Governor tag along after the string while we learned to understand one another. I gave the command, "Ibna," and he rolled to his feet. At first Governor didn't realize we were unattached and obediently took his place in line. We ambled along as if nothing had changed until Governor figured it out. He'd snatch mouthfuls of vegetation and in the process found during his short stops that the rest of the camels kept going. His smallish round ears perked up. When the string moved away he'd rush to catch up, sometimes breaking into a trot. It was time for me to take command.

By gently pressuring the nose plug I could alter his direction. Our first learning experience with the plug resulted in a fit of sorts. Governor sat down and roared.

Most llama pack designers would find a guarantee like ours, a little hard to swallow

Our Guarantee

"Try the Sopris Pack Saddle for 30 days and if you are not completely satisfied, send it back to us in good condition and we will refund your money. I will then send your saddle to my Uncle Tant in Iowa, who said he would personally eat any Sopris Pack Saddle that came back from an unsatisfied customer."

Even Tant Benson, the #1 designer of the Sopris Pack Saddle, was impressed with my display of courage when this guarantee appeared on our brochure almost three years ago. If I remember correctly his exact words were — "You've got the nerve! There's alot of people in my home town who would like to see me eat a saddle!"

Uncle Tant does have a little indigestion occassionally but it's not caused from eating pack saddles. Packers across the U.S. and in two foreign countries are using the Sopris Pack Saddle and we haven't had one returned yet.

Packers like the way it packs. Llamas like the way it feels. Uncle Tant is concerned about our guarantee . . . falling into the hands of the enemy.

Mt. Sopris Llamas Unltd.

Charles & Sandra Hackbarth
0270 Co. Rd. 111 • Carbondale, CO 81623
(303) 963-3604 Write or call for brochure



CAMEL TREK

He jumped up and roared. We went in a tight circle. I hung on. He settled down. I gingerly assigned different directions to Governor (always in the direction the string was moving). He readily responded. In time the very slightest pressure changed his direction without any complaint. Governor was allowed to eat — a luxury not afforded to the string. The culinary reward seemed to cushion the stress. In time we passed the camel string and worked our way a half mile or so in front of the string. I'd allow him to eat until the string caught up and then command him ahead.

By the second day of free-reining, Governor was doing very well and no longer protested. He didn't mind working ahead of or behind the string as long as he could see them or hear their bells. However, if we were out of sight of the other camels and the distant bells stopped, Governor stopped in his tracks and listened intently. Knowing the whereabouts of the other camels was very important to him.

Halfway through the third day, Governor and I met a new test. We were in front of the string working our way along the ABC Range. Suddenly a small feral goat appeared, but unlike the other goats, it didn't run away. "Baah, baah," it called out. Governor stopped and stared. Camels, like llamas, rarely spook so I was unconcerned and was scrambling in my camera bag for the right lens when Governor decided to retreat. He turned and began to ramble in the direction of the camels who were a quarter mile or so behind. I realized I'd missed an important cue. The string and their bells had disappeared and Governor was on camelid overload!

We were moving quickly and I opted not to try an all out stop. Instead, I cautiously guided Governor in a wide arc hoping he'd regain his composure. We made three large circles across the arid landscape. Not until the string appeared was Governor up to facing the tiny goat.

Our last days on the trail we did battle with flies and the flies won. There were countless multitudes whose millions of tiny wing beats created a maddening whine in our ears. Although they didn't bite, the flies were readily inhaled up our nostrils. Cooking in such conditions was challenging, and eating was done while walking, skipping or running usually

CAMEL TREK

while swishing one hand in front of your face. The only reprieve was nightfall. As soon as the sun went down, they disappeared.

When our trip ended, we unloaded the camels and they stoically shuffled off with their bells clanging. They'd have a half-day's rest before being loaded for a two-day truck trip to Alice Springs. There they'd haul a group of customers across the Simpson desert in a 25-day crossing, most of it without water. Our 90-mile outing was just a shakedown cruise for the long hauls that lay ahead. "It would be hard to imagine a better behaved working animal than a camel," said Clyde as we bounced along a dirt track in a car again. I agreed. The camels' performances were greater than my wildest expectations. I was already thinking of which American deserts I would cross on one when I got back to the States. It was then that I realized I had become a camel-convert. I pondered the addictive hold camelids have over me as we raced down the highway towards one of civilization's most alluring features — a warm shower.



Eric Hoffman is on assignment in Australia writing *Adventuring in Australia* for Sierra Club Books/Random House. 🐪