



ONE SERIOUSLY OUTBACK ADVENTURE

CRAIG TANSLEY climbs on board Australia's last great cattle muster to find his inner cowboy...

Chook's the bloke who hands the orders out round here; he could do with a new set of front teeth but he'd sooner keep driving till he drops, like his father before him, than start late on any modelling career. "Let's get one thing clear," he says from the corner of a mouth that's never wasted a single word. "The order of priority round here goes like this: me cattle first, me horses next, then people. Any of you need resuscitating, you can bugger off, I'd rather save me last breath for me horse."

Roll on up, ladies and gents, to the one and only Harry Redford Cattle Drive, the last muster of its kind in Australia. Should you dare climb aboard, it'll be your task to help Chook (head drover David Hay) guide hundreds of cattle through some of the most rugged pastures in all of Queensland, riding a motley crew of ex-racehorses. "These buggers should be in tins in Caboolture," Chook says. "They aren't pony club horses. You gotta control this lot, don't go thinking just 'cause you know how to ride a brainless horse on a trail ride that you know how to ride a horse."

Don't go expecting any niceties either – showers come courtesy of the baby wipes you're advised to bring with you... and the odd muddy dam along the way. At night you'll bed down in a swag on the red dust with a cowboy snoring like a chainsaw beside you.

"If you want the Hilton, you're in the wrong place," Chook flexes his questionable PR muscles again. "But youse are lucky, the dunny's got a seat this year." Lucky – in the Chook book, at least – means sitting on a drum (with a seat) above a hole in the ground, inside a three-sided corrugated tin shed; though you should see the view – there's an entire sky of shooting stars to stare at from your perch at dawn. If you want to witness outback Australia in all its rough-edged glory, you won't find a better spot than the Harry Redford Cattle Drive.

Now in its 12th year and run entirely by volunteers, the Harry Redford Cattle Drive is how a practical-thinking group of locals figured on keeping their community alive;

Below: Horse mustering is a tough gig – these cowboys take a nap. Right: With over 600 cattle on the move, you really need to have a lot of horse sense to be a successful stockman or woman.



by giving outsiders like us a reason to visit somewhere we wouldn't otherwise. Round these parts of west Queensland, towns have a habit of dying off and blowing away on the dry, dusty breeze. The town of Aramac's not much more than a bakery, a butcher, a fire station and a pub, but it's what these folk call home, and they love it with a fervour that shows right through to their eyeballs.

I've flown into the heart of cowboy country sporting a straw hat that looks part-sombrero, a fancy pair of Country Road suede boots (whose heel will lift clean off within my first half-hour of riding) and pantyhose (well, no-one likes chafing). On arrival I'm whisked away without ceremony to a makeshift bush camp 50 kilometres or so out of Aramac; along a track overrun with inquisitive brolgas and emus, then deposited with my pack onto the bare earth. "Make camp before sun down, don't take it too far away either or something'll bite or trample ya in the night," I'm instructed.

After a welcome shin-dig that every man, woman, child and dog within 160 kilometres of Aramac turns up to, I sleep under a billion, bulging, blinking stars. But the serenity ends all too suddenly when the generator kicks into life at 5am and I'm blinded by a bright arc of light. "Go on, get up," someone shouts. Across from me, an old cowboy kicks the fire back to life, while a production line of locals in cowboy hats (do they sleep with them on?) appear from the shadows and set to work. Kilos of bacon, eggs, steak, chops and tomatoes sizzle and spit on a huge hot plate set across a drum of hot coals, while a massive pot of billy tea boils slowly.

"I've had people on this drive from overseas who've seen Uluru, the Barrier Reef, Kakadu... but they reckon they haven't really seen Australia till they got here," cattle drive chairman Gary Peoples says to me, somehow channelling my thoughts. Before the surrealism of the occasion can truly hit me, Chook emerges from the shadows. "Eat up, mate," he orders. "We'll be doing 18 kays today and there's no bloody stops for morning tea."

While the Harry Redford Cattle Drive is a clever tourism initiative, there's no forgetting the higher purpose to mustering livestock. Rules in this part of the world dictate we must travel at least 10 kilometres a day or the cattle will strip too much grass; and round these parts that's more important than keeping a bunch of city slickers satisfied.

Over 19 days the cattle drive will cover 200 kilometres, but few visitors complete the entire circuit; instead visitors can choose how far they wish to ride. We'll be following in the footsteps of brazen outlaw Captain Starlight (aka Harry Redford) who, with just two companions, drove a thousand head of stolen cattle 1400 kilometres across the most inhospitable country in Australia for three months in 1870. His feat of endurance so impressed the jurors at his subsequent trial that they let Harry go.

I'm no Captain Starlight, but I've ridden a little over the years, though Chook's appraisal of trail riders has me questioning whether I should've nominated myself as advanced. You don't have to be an experienced horse rider to come here, but you have to be honest, or you'll get hurt (they have quieter horses for beginners). We move out 622 head of cattle, each rider finding a position around the >>

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IMAGES THIS SPREAD AND PREVIOUS: BRUCE HUTCHINSON PHOTOGRAPHY

HOLIDAYS ON HORSEBACK

DON'T UNSADDLE JUST YET – THERE ARE MORE GREAT HORSEBACK EXPERIENCES AROUND AUSTRALIA. HERE ARE FIVE OF THE BEST.

1 HORSEBACK WINERY TOURS, VIC

LENGTH: ONE DAY

Vino and ponies; is there a happier match? Based in Red Hill on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, Horseback Winery Tours have been taking travellers to wineries on horseback for 15 years, with plans to open a new five-million-dollar equestrian centre and cellar door. Weaving through farmland, down picturesque country roads and across rolling hills overlooking the sea, the tours then stop at cellar doors such as Red Hill Estate, Olive Grove and T'Gallant Winemakers. Pick up a bottle (or box), which you collect at the end of your ride. Among the packages is a three- and five-hour option (from \$160 and \$250 per person, respectively).

horsebackwinerytours.com.au

2 SNOWY RIVER HORSEBACK ADVENTURES, NSW

LENGTH: 2-5 DAYS

The Man from Snowy River meets a touch of luxe with Snowy River Horseback Adventures. Designed for experienced riders, the two-to-five-day treks meander along tracks used by wild brumbies in Kosciuskoo National Park, through snowgum forests, along crystal clear streams and up peaks with postcard-perfect valley views. Then after a day of spectacular scenery, retreat to the grand Old Ingebirah Homestead for a hot shower (or spa bath), a sumptuous three-course meal and relax on the verandah or in front of a cosy log fire. snowyriverhorsebackadventure.com.au

3 KELLY'S RANCH RIDING SCHOOL, NT

LENGTH: 2.5 HOURS

Run by long-time stockman Jerry Kelly, a traditional owner of the region in Tennant Creek, these tours are a lesson in both horse riding and local bush tucker. From private riding lessons (\$50 per adult) to scenic trail rides through the surrounding wilderness (\$150 per person), all options cater to various skill levels and ages. Along the way, Kelly also points out native food sources and tells tales from the 'good ol' days', topped off with a cup of billy tea and a slice of damper cooked on an open fire. kellysranch.com.au

4 JILLAROO TRAINING AT HOME VALLEY STATION, WA

LENGTH: ONE DAY

Set alongside the spectacular Cockburn Ranges in WA's iconic Kimberley region, this once-thriving cattle station now hosts a range of horse riding experiences for guests. There's childrens' pony rides (\$15 per child) to guided trail rides along the Pentecost River (\$120 per person), but it is the Mini Cattle Muster option (from \$290 per person) that's the most unique. That is, with the help of Home Valley's resident ringers, guests (regardless of riding ability) can learn how to ride for a real cattle muster in true jillaroo/jackaroo fashion. hvstation.com.au

5 ULURU CAMEL TOURS, NT

LENGTH: ONE DAY

OK, we admit it, this isn't strictly a horse-riding experience, but it's still an unforgettable outback experience on a four-legged steed. Set in Australia's most iconic outback location, with Uluru and Kata Tjuta as memorable backdrops, there's a number of rides available including Camel Express tours during the day (from \$75), as well as sunrise and sunset tours (from \$119). But the ultimate ride is arriving by camel to a Sounds of Silence dinner – a bush-tucker inspired buffet under the stars, enhanced by a traditional dance performance and a talk from the resident 'star talker' (from \$275). ayersrockresort.com.au

THE DETAILS

GETTING THERE

• Fly from Brisbane to Longreach or Barcardine with QantasLink (qantas.com.au) depending on the day of your arrival – check when you book. You'll be transferred from either airport by the cattle drive organisers.

THE DRIVE

• Visitors can ride for a minimum

of six days in the drive's first week, then a minimum of three days in its second and third weeks. It costs \$360 per person, per day (\$330 for children under 16), which includes all meals and transfers. This year's Harry Redford Drive, running from 3 May, is already fully booked (though call for cancellations). They are accepting

bookings for the next drive in May 2015. harryredford.com.au

NEED TO KNOW

• Tell organisers if you'd like to hire a swag (\$20 per day) – there's a limited number to hire – or bring your own with you.
• It can get below zero at night so bring plenty of warm clothing – opt for layers.

• You don't need riding experience but be very clear (and honest) when filling out your questionnaire as to your riding ability.
• Helmets aren't compulsory but are available.
• Alcoholic drinks are not included as part of the day rate, but are very reasonably priced (\$4 for beer and wine, \$5 for spirits).

Above: There's no room for anyone on their high horse – this experience is "no frills, plenty of thrills"

Right: In contrast to the day's hard work, when the dust and sun sets it's incredibly peaceful

herd. I'm clearly out of my league on my mount, Sneezee, who's shifty and nervous under me; any time I turn his head with my reins he dances on the spot, kicking out his hoofs at anything around him. Eventually, he settles back to an uneven walk. Around us kangaroos leap about a barren land broken up by flowering gums and riverbeds of brown, muddy water. I step in alongside Chook, watching how he controls an entire herd of cattle, a lifetime of experience going into every movement.

We ride on like this for hours, driving the cattle ever-forward, changing positions alongside the herd; chasing strays and bringing them back to the pack. At noon we stop to eat, finding a log for a seat, gorging ourselves on cakes baked by the old ladies of Aramac who sit by proudly, reveling reluctantly in the praise.

"It's a community effort, this," Peoples says to me. "Everyone takes their holiday time off to help. We're a little town just battling to stay afloat. Everyone here is someone's mum, or dad, or son, or grand-kid, or niece, or nephew."

After lunch the ride hits new territory, spindly trees block our way and negotiating a path through becomes an all-absorbing assignment. I'd grown tired of the pedestrian pace this morning, but as the afternoon wears on I find myself consumed by the task at hand, trying to anticipate bottle-necks and obstacles ahead. When three head of cattle leave the formation and Chook yells at me to bring them in, I drop back anxiously. It's an untidy procedure; I take a minute

more than any real cowboy would've and Sneezee dances through a series of ungainly 360-degree spins, but eventually the cattle scramble back into line. "Good work, mate," Chook lies and I ride just that little bit higher in the saddle.

In the evening, after we corral our horses for the night, I sit on an old plastic chair with a couple of old cowboys saying nothing at all. We sit like this for some time, staring into space, breathing in everything around us. I hit my swag by 8pm, struggling hard to keep my eyes open long enough to watch the shooting star show high above my canvas bed.

Days go on like this, though I never tire of the repetition, instead I find comfort in the routine and my surroundings that change ever so subtly as each day wears itself out. Each ride brings me closer to understanding the cattle that move around me, and the horse underneath me; and I begin to deconstruct every turn I make, trying to make myself more than a mere spectator on the droving team.

And then like that, I'm gone... back to the airport; to a city of concrete and high-rise. I miss the open spaces most of all, and the countless shooting stars, and the sound the horses make at night as they wander about in their corral a hundred metres or so from where I lie in the dark. I even miss Chook and his dying breed of hard-arsed cowboy drovers you won't find anywhere else on Earth. "It's hard to get good drovers these days," Chook told me one day as we rode. "The young blokes all left for the mines. It's a dying art, droving. One day there's gonna be none of us bloody left." ■

DID YOU KNOW?

You can catch a game of 'horse soccer' in Queensland's outback town of Hughenden – about 350 kilometres north of Longreach. It's one of 20 sporting events at the biennial Great Western Games, held in July 2015. flinders.qld.gov.au