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# SURPRISES



We left the city on April Fools Day. So I should have seen it coming. I wanted to be the first person in history to cross all seven of Australia's major deserts in one journey. It started as an adventure. It started on a motor cycle. Both these ideas were ripped out from under me about half way across. East of Coober Pedy, hidden by a crest in the road, a bulldust hole ripped the front off and very nearly did me in. I stood up and saw the bike spread out like road-kill. I

tried to fix it. Two days later, a thousand kilometres, numerous adjustments and hairy test-rides, the whole bold adventure and my 'grand history' were collapsing around me.

Deep in a sleepless night, some new thing found me. By lunchtime we had hit the rough unknowns of the track westward, travelling only in the back-up vehicles. I had thought that to do this from behind a window was like watching it on television. Big Sky had more to give me than I realized. To my surprise, I finished the Seven Deserts Journey three months later with a whole new life. That's why I am talking with you now.

Many desert travellers get the same surprise. Rae Witham recently returned from deep in the Simpson Desert and wrote:

Subject: The desert in my heart. The dictionary says: *desert* : *a&n* - *uninhabited, desolate; uncultivated, barren*. So it came as a great surprise - not a place of desolation but warmth and wonder. This ancient red land teeming with life though apparently arid. The magnificent river gums tell of a hidden life source. Blue skies dotted with pink clouds reflecting the sand below. The tracks of abundant wild life, though seldom seen, tell their own story.

We came not quite knowing what we were seeking but God spoke through the beauty and solitude of this place. The peace and space, the daily rhythm of sunrise and sunset and community gathered around the campfire, wrapped in a star studded canopy, expanded the depths within. We reflected and we grew.

I was sad to leave our camp in the river bed and vowed to return again but in the meantime the desert sings in my heart - a song of love and joy and a strength to tap into like the roots of the river gums to the hidden water springs.<sup>1</sup>

It's like that for just about all desert travellers. Like Rae and like me, a sense of Big Life gradually rattles into place beside the danger. It is different for everyone but always the same. The desert has many gifts to give and this book is a map to some of them. For me, this experience has re-connected me with all the things that I ever knew.

Now, year after year and journey after journey, I see people find something more in the desert. And I see that these journeys really matter. But some of my friends, say, 'What would you want to do THAT for?' - a question for which they don't want the answer.

So why go into the vast deserts of Australia? Why does this matter? I am not talking tourism. I am not talking blokey heroics. I am not talking romantic escapism. There are much better reasons to enter the tracks and find their life. For instance, seventy percent of this continent is desert, so how do we know where we are and who we are, unless we experience Australia for what it really is? In the colonial era they landed off the ships and onto the beaches, barely able to comprehend the land they were standing on, nor its many peoples. We haven't come far. Eighty four percent of us still live at the beach. It is time to become Australian.

There are two even more urgent reasons to take this journey.

Firstly, we can learn to live better with less. We have created a civilisation that has generated mountains of waste in land and sea and atmosphere, and dug dangerous



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holes in the climate. The planet needs to be cured of our consumerism, and we all need to detox from 'stuff'. We all know this but we simply don't have what it takes to live better. We can't blame anyone else anymore – it is our consumerism that drives this dirty engine. We can learn to live better with less. We don't yet see what that will be, and we don't know if we can. Stress. Deep-reaching, narcissistic stress. Politicians avoid saying it, lest we voters all have a hissy fit. Each one of us has to really want this. Sage and safe policies will not help us enough.

Something has to speak to our thirsty hearts and show us that we can have a greater love of life with a smaller load of baggage. The desert says it well. For millennia, all the world's religious traditions speak of the inward beauty that comes from a fierce landscape. The Buddhists head to their ice mountains. The Orthodox go to their desert monasteries. The Muslims go into the deserts. If we can learn to fathom it, Australia's desert wilderness could be an incredible resource for a needy world. A simple transformation is possible, close at hand, and it is not easy. I have been watching it happen to me, to hundreds of others on desert journeys, and on other wilderness journeys.

Secondly, there is another reason. For every one of us, our journey through life crosses many 'deserts', the harsh terrain of the soul. Each of us wears the subtle effects of dispossession, tragedies and trauma, of cruelty, failure and illness. My own drive to head off to the arid lands emerged from the fog of four years of major illness. When the fog lifted, more was revealed. Our inner deserts are hard places. But I have good news for you. We need not be so afraid. Deserts are not barren, god-forsaken, waterless wastelands. The desert's bad reputation comes from armchair counsellors. The real desert showed me that while the experience was harsh, hope remained incredibly strong. My weaknesses can be strengths.



My shame can be compassion. My relentless ego can be a friend. I met myself again. I met God again. In the vast dark sky of all the things we can never know, there are brilliant-cut diamonds to light our way. My experience may not be your experience. You have to get your own. It is not just for the few. It is not too hard.

Real deserts are full of life. We found water sources in the heart of each one. Sometimes a *warta*, a north-west peoples' word for a puddle after the rains. Sometimes a *jiwari*, a rock hole found by following dingoes and birds. Sometimes a *jila*, a deep permanent water source like the Dalhousie Hot Springs in the Simpson Desert. I will refer to these later. They are connected by tracks that Aboriginals have sung since time immemorial.

I have followed many rivers that never reached the sea. I have wondered in a forest that drinks from rivers deep below the sand dunes of the Simpson Desert. It is a parable. If we could understand what the deep-water means in the deserts of our thirsty hearts, we could go free to explore our inner deserts. If we don't, we will probably become neurotic, ungrateful and lonely. So say all the great religions, with one exception - the religion that the Western world is so immersed in, materialism. Yes, you are going to have to think for yourself on this one. So, for the sake of the planet and for ourselves, let's make the journey. Can I show you what it's like to enter the desert and stay there a while? In this book, we will travel for one week into the Australian desert. Who is coming on this journey? The characters are all fictitious. Their experiences, however, are all true stories, derived from the accounts of early desert explorers and many travellers past and present, including my doctoral research. (The endnotes are for those with that interest.)

We will travel the desert tracks and camp each night where there is firewood and maybe a windbreak. One group will cook on the open fire, and the rest of us will saunter around the sunset. The campfire is great for sharing life-stories, just as it has been for Aboriginal people since time immemorial. A dozen people around a terrific camp-oven meal makes a sacred place.

Day by day, as they come to us, we will drill down through five layers of stories. First the larger histories of Aborigines and then the Immigrant pioneers and explorers. Third is the story of the desert environment itself, including the very felt presence of the stars and galaxies. And there is a story of the Mystery that we encounter with the multiple senses of body and heart. That is God's desert story, and there is a lot of it. Lastly, we will travel through our own personal stories, the inner deserts of the group who are travelling together. Well, you have met me, so who else is coming, and why?

We meet at the *Campfire of the Heart* retreat house in the Alice, nervous and new to it, for tomorrow we head off.

'Welcome everyone on your Spirit Journey. I am Ian Robinson and I am the leader of the expedition. I have led twenty or thirty previous journeys like this, and I am still learning from the experience. This is Trevor, he is the assistant leader. More on structure and safety later. I am keen to know who I am travelling with this week, so can we go around the circle and say our name, something about ourselves (your choice) and why you are mad enough to want to spend a week in the desert with perfect strangers!'

Trevor starts us off. He is middle aged and his words are measured. 'I am Trevor Donnybrook. As Ian said I am here as an assistant leader. I came on a journey for my own benefit last year,' and now his hands move in a small arc in front of him, which was really something special for me. I hope you have a great time too. My family tell me I am a control freak,' he smiles, 'so I am here to learn something about being a servant and a support person.' People nod and smile back.

'OK everyone, you have been warned!' I said. Next to Trevor is a younger man, sleeves rolled back, with large walking boots. 'Hi, I am Justin. I've done quite a few wilderness trips on foot - South West Tasmania, Himalayas, and last year in the Kimberleys. I am planning a desert walk for a few weeks out here next year and this is a good way to get to know some of the country first.' Very strong. He looks to the person next to him.

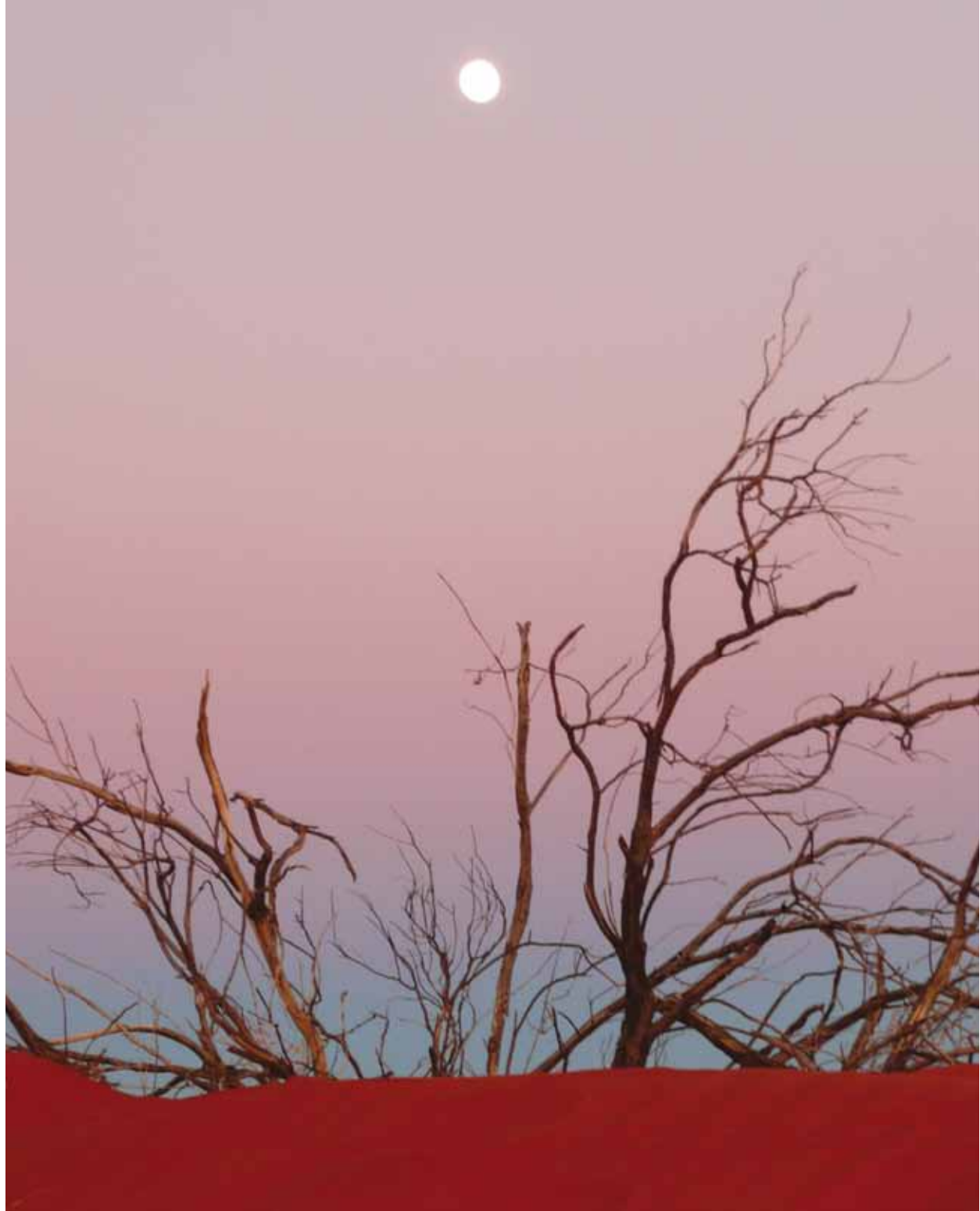
'Hello, everyone,' she looks around the circle, 'I am Gail. I am just so glad to be here I can hardly believe it. I am a full time carer for my severely disabled adult son at home, he is twenty four, and this is my first break for three years. I am so looking forward to the outback colours, and the freedom of the bush.'

'Will you need to be in touch with home during this week, Gail?' I ask, 'We have a satellite phone for emergency calls. Do they have the number?'

'I gave it to them, but no, another family member is looking after Benjamin, thank you, and they warned me, they told me, that I must not ring up. That I should take this time for myself. They told me.'

'Well, in that case I am going to hide the sat-phone.' We all laugh. 'This will be a precious week for you.' She can just nod, bite her lip and look at her feet.

The middle aged man in the red cap is next. 'Roger is my name. I am a painter-artist, that is, so you know I am dead broke! Some years ago I spent time with an







Indigenous community up north on an arts project and something about their spirituality and their sense of time and colour really touched me. I have been reading and meditating but then I heard about this desert journey from a friend. I am hoping I can bring these experiences into one. I brought my camera and I expect I will be the last on board every time. That's what happened on a previous trip.'

'We have been warned!' said the senior woman next to him. 'I am Nancy. I have just retired from 43 years of secondary teaching - geography, geology and history. That means I have rocks in my head but they are all old.' She looks around for a laugh, but no one gets it. 'I realized quite suddenly last year on a holiday trip to Patagonia that it is twenty years since I went to the inland of Australia. We went on a ramshackle old bus to Ayers Rock as we called it then, 'Uluru' now, and I rode a camel. I just love the sense of the great age of Australia.'

'Thank you, Nancy, are you OK if we ask you geography questions about the landscape from time to time? It will add a lot to the experience. Thanks.'

'G'day, I am Jack Elvay,' says the young man in canvas pants. 'I'm a mechanic. I love coming outback in four wheel drives and going to stations and fixing things and that. There's just a lot of God out here and I hope we all get a good dose of prayer and fellowship.' He gives a short nod and a kind smile and folds his hands. No one knows quite what to make of this sort of language but he seems OK. He will rescue our vehicles if we break down so that can't be bad.

'We have asked Jack to bring his experience as an off-roader and mechanic,' I said. 'He will be one of the car leaders.'

A woman of similar age is next to him. 'Hello, everyone, I'm not sure why I am here. My name is Vic by the way. I am not at all religious like but I guess I am looking for some time to think about my next step. I am just finishing my thesis like and wondering what's next for me. I spent some time in India like a few years ago and it so got into my head that it changed me. It would be pretty exciting if the desert will do that for me now. What about you?' she motions to the woman next to her, older, much larger but with a permanently poised smile.

'I was in Pakistan for many years, so it would be good to talk about your India experience, Vic, is it Vic? Becci is my name. I was a missionary who caught a dreadful tropical bug and had to come home. I have only been able to work part time for many years. Some friends at church suggested I come and I just leapt at the opportunity to do something like this that I could never do on my own. I used to be into any adventures I could find but this chronic 'friend' of mine has tied me down. I haven't camped for so long I have forgotten how, but the lovely lady on

the phone when I rang up said that would not be a problem?' Her eyebrows go up with her question.

'Not a problem', Trevor says, 'I can help you. And others can too.'

The others are wondering what they have just been told. But they hope it is as nice as it sounds - all working together, no pressure.

So, that's it. The potential for these people is ringing in my head like a big bell.

I go on about cooking, toileting, finding your way back to camp, detailing safety standards, and we take a lottery of who is driving with whom. People rearrange into groups to talk and say their name again. Becci hasn't driven for years. When we tell her she will get lessons and will drive the four wheel drive she gets excited and infectiously happy.

'One other thing that I hope you will be OK with. Each morning, just before setting off, we get in a huddle like a sporting team. It is a physically close moment intended to help us to check into sacred space for the day and not 'just a trip'. Any number of us can offer a prayer or some words of blessing or a thought or a thanksgiving or a song. No one has to say anything. What to say? Well, while I might pray a Christian prayer, it is not being assumed that you somehow should pretend to be a Christian - it is just me offering my deepest prayer. We are all different, and respect for that is one of the best parts about being a community. Just bless us in the best way you can - atheist vibes, Catholic cross, silence - it's up to you. The huddle doesn't go for long, the leader of the day may say something about where we are going but, as I say, each in our own way is supported to check into the sacred together.'

General murmuring. That's been a shift of thinking for some. Most people are used to a custom wherein, if any one present is not religious, no one can say anything about God. It leaves the shared space to be defined as atheist. It is a 'lowest common denominator' approach. However, these morning huddles present a pluralist spirituality. In that space you can be what you are, explore what you need to, and ignore what you need to. Even if the words seem strange, the depth of goodwill that rises authentically actually blesses everyone alike. It is simple, not always smooth, and in the circle you see a lot of shoes. I'll just let them think on it tonight.

Next, we go outside and try out the tents or swags. Becci knew what to do and tried hard but her pain defeated her and Trevor had to do most of it for her. Nancy was the last to set up, she was busy talking to Vic. Early night for an early morning.

So that's the crew. Come with us tomorrow to find this thirsty heart. Face the mirages of the salt lakes and of our urban civilization. A week in the desert, travelling most days, campfires at night, a spade for a toilet. Let's go. The open desert, the 'second Australia', is inviting Australians to come out and learn a new kind of freedom. It makes us feel at home in the universe and sends us home in a new way. The current global challenges will require such strength of spirit. Rae's experience shows that a desert journey is just that source of strength.



