

Sometimes, the most interesting & unusual adventures in life are the least expected one's, where pure chance collides & intercepts with reality.

That's exactly what unfolded for me recently whilst photographing the beautiful autumnal colours in my new hometown of Jamieson.

I'd no idea I was about to stumble across a modern day adventurer, especially in a small high country town amidst a global pandemic. So it was with both surprise & delight to learn from a fellow Jamiesonian, that camped where the Goulburn & Jamieson rivers merge, was an eccentric bloke leading a team of five camels on an around Australia trek.

It wasn't difficult to find John Elliott, his team of dromedaries and faithful K9 companion, Bruski. It seemed such an odd juxtaposition to see his camels amidst towering Mountain Ash and golden Poplar trees besides a high country river, and I wondered if, in Jamieson's 160-year history, such a sight had been witnessed before. I suspected not.

Sitting for a chat by John's campfire, it soon became apparent he'd undertaken an epic adventure, having already spent 13 months on the road from his starting point at Coonarr Beach in Queensland. But who is John Elliott, and why was he walking with five camels and a dog, around Australia, and what on Earth was he doing in Jamieson? Turns out, John's back story had as many twists & turns as his own route, which originally was conceived as an east to west trek across Australia, but had now morphed into an epic trip through every state and territory of the continent.

John, 38, hails from Perth, where he established himself as a business powerhouse after starting his own multi award winning insurance brokerage from the ground up along with other entrepreneurial pursuits.



Having a cuppa at the campfire in the bush, John and Stuart accompanied by Bruski the dog

The Camelman

By: Stuart Grant (text & photo)

John Elliott



John Elliott, 38,
from Perth,
Australia,
with one of his
five camels

On the long walk with his camels
on a epic journey across Australia,
already 13 months on the road

But measuring success in fiscal terms for a decade, and defining himself by wealth & the trimmings, soon lost the sense of challenge and fulfilment John craved. He decided it was time to step back from his life of excess, tune into something completely different, and base his decisions and happiness beyond dollar values alone. Then, in late 2017, someone mentioned camel trekking to John over dinner, and changed everything. Soon after, he'd resigned as CEO of his own company, given away or sold most of his possessions, and emerged himself for the next year into learning the varied skills he'd require to undertake such a trip, and acquire a team of camels.

Nearly 3000 kilometres later, with Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory behind him, not to mention drought & bushfires, John was hoping to head to Tasmania, but border closures meant a detour was in order, so he decided to aim for Lakes Entrance, where friends run Camel Connection, a specialty camel trek, beach ride & camel training operation where John had initially learnt his craft almost two years before.

His short cut would mean taking his camels through country befitting the Man from Snowy River, and traversing already snow sprinkled 1540 metre high Mt. Skene to arrive on the Gippsland side of the high country ranges in Licola.

John's camels became his closest friends during his walkabout across Australia

Walking through the main street of Jamieson with his camels

Bruski, John's loyal companion

Walking through the main street of Jamieson with his camels; Ted, Jackson, Arthur, Bill & baby Charlie, John's caravan bought out lots of curious locals, as well as broad smiles to many faces.

For the mostly quiet town & its residents, it was a brief reprieve from restrictions keeping folk house bound, and a memorable & unique day in the story of the community.

However, the next chapter in John's story became memorable for all the wrongs reasons. Nearly six inches of heavy rainfall & snow over the next few days meant he had to bail up in a high country hut until conditions improved. But things went pear shaped soon after when Arthur, his number 'three' camel, stood on, and broke a log supporting the outside edge of the track they were attempting to walk out on.

Cutting Arthur free from the line as he began to fall, John was catapulted over the edge with Arthur, tumbling through blackberries until he stopped, whilst Arthur, with all of his packs on, careened a further 15 metres down the steep slope..., coming to rest against trees, just 10 metres short of the raging Jamieson River.

Miraculously, John was able to get Arthur unloaded & upright, and tether him branch to branch as he coaxed him diagonally forward. Struggling already for an hour, John then discovered both lead camels Ted & Arthur had also fallen off the track as they attempted to turn around.

It was a nightmare scenario, well beyond his capability, so John used his Garmin GPS device to text a friend who raised the alarm. Within hours, local CFA, Police, SES and Jamieson locals deployed to assist in the tricky recovery effort, which, with ingenuity and manpower, was finally completed in darkness with all men, beasts & equipment safe.

Suffice to say, it was not an anticipated part of John's adventure, and it left him shaken, cut & bruised. Vets from Mansfield assessed the camels the following day, and all were cleared of injury, though Arthur, who had tumbled the farthest, was ordered on light duties, and wasn't to wear a saddle or carry a load for a week.

Hearing about John's plight from a local involved in the rescue, I felt compelled to grab some provisions and offer some assistance knowing John was staying put for a day or two. Arriving the day after his ordeal, John was in remarkably good spirits. It was the calm after the storm, knowing he was now safe, and ever so grateful for the rescue effort that ensured he and his camels had survived relatively unscathed.

We again sat around John's fire, and over dinner he told me it had been a good day, because a couple of things had gone horribly wrong, but many more things had gone right. I couldn't

Bruski leading the pack: John, the camels and baby Charlie



This is 'shopping' groceries & veggies a different way



Snow and sleet ensuring a frigid affair,
it's scraping ice & snow time !



argue with his stoic logic or help admire his perspective, as well as his will to press on.

With camel Arthur unable to carry his usual load, and no etched in plans for the week, I decided to offer my Toyota Troopy as a 'beast of burden' for the next challenge of John's journey over Mt. Skene into Licola. It proved to be a whole new challenge in itself.

Just walking the camels out of the steep 4x4 track leading to the Jamieson - Licola Road, with distant views of fresh snow on the surrounding mountain peaks, took a bit of encouragement. With more &

more snow predicted, we pressed on toward the summit of Mt. Skene, arriving late afternoon, only to find a cameraman from 'The Project' awaiting our arrival for a remote interview with John. With a surprise TV appearance done and daylight fading under ominous skies, we decided to bunker down close to the road given the worsening weather conditions.

True to predictions, Mt. Skene bestowed a good dose of high country reality on us overnight with wild winds, snow and sleet ensuring a frigid affair, though John displayed his camp cooking prowess with a slow cooked beef brisket & mash on our fire to ensure we stayed really warm.

After a long day hike with the 'caravan' of camels, it's time to set up camp, unload and feed the camels, get the campfire going for the kettle, for a good cuppa coffee and slow cooked beef brisket & mash for dinner

Following John and his camels
steep uphill with my trusty Troopy



The special bags keeping
John's clothing and gear dry



Their clunking
us find them d



The camels coped well, despite the freezing conditions, as sub zero conditions are common in the deserts of Australia, where a population of around a million wild camels still roam, descendent from stock released by Afghan cameleers when mechanised transportation replaced their working days of lugging goods and opening up the harsh & remote outback of Australia.

After scraping ice & snow of everything, including the camels, we made good our retreat down the mountain to a camp below the snowline.

Ted, Jackson, Arthur, Bill and Charlie seemed happier and settled, penned in for the night. But on waking next morning, the boys were nowhere to be seen.

It was a sinking realisation, with only impenetrable forest in every direction, and no idea which way they'd decided to go for a midnight stroll. But to our surprise & great relief, we were eventually able to track them back atop the mountain to our previous camp, above the snowline, by following scat, their fresh tracks in the snow and finally hearing their clunking bells. It's fair to say, John's high country shortcut was becoming more of an endurance challenge, but at least for the final walk down to Licola, it was mostly with gravity assist.

'Happy' John, after getting his camels back after they'd decided to go for a midnight stroll



g bells made
down the track



Sunset, and soon a sky full of stars,
the perfect campsite in the Australian bush



Ready to go, John's adventure
across Australia continuous





We also had the assistance of some forestry workers we'd met the previous day, who dropped in a bottle of rum to ensure some additional warmth for the night, besides the fire.

Descending through tree fern laden gullies through low hanging mist, we detoured via a dirt road into the upper Licola valley where cows followed our progress in adjoining paddocks. We stopped for a quick chat with local Ralph Barrowclough amidst his collection of old Landrovers beside the track, before finally arriving beside the Mc. Allister River & town.

Other Licola locals had heard of John's camel exploits, and welcomed us on arriving with a hot feed and a few drinks. For me, it was my last night chatting and laughing around a glowing fire, having shared in an epic & unexpected adventure of my own. I'm confident it's not the last campfire I'll share with John.

For Ted, Jackson, Arthur, Bill, Charlie, Bruski, & their human, the trail over the Victorian high country from Jamieson to Licola had certainly had its share of tribulations.

But as often, it's those unforeseen challenges that make for the most epic adventures & unforgettable memories ■



Ted, Jackson, Arthur, Bill, Charlie, Bruski, & John following their dream on their epic adventure across Australia

Stuart Grant has spent most of his life peering through the viewfinder of a camera and there has never been a dull moment. Armed with talent and conviction, Stuart's led the sort of life many others dream about. He's set foot on every continent and sailed across oceans, along the way creating a stunning portfolio of photographs.



Throughout Stuart's photographic journey travel & adventure have been common themes and his love & appreciation of the outdoors comes through in his striking and evocative images. He began by selling his images to the travel/tourism market in the late 80's after combining his work as a driver guide conducting 4x4 tours throughout Australia with his passion for photography. A year abroad in which he sailed across the Atlantic ocean and then drove 40000



Meeting Ralph Barrowclough amidst his collection of old Landrovers beside the track



John, Bruski and Stuart, here the roads do separate, their travels ends here, John moves on exploring Australia while Stuart and his trusty Toyota Troopy heading home

miles visiting the National Parks of the US and Canada further fuelled his desire to pursue his dream of turning pro. His work has been published as far and wide as his travels in everything from post cards of the Top End to the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games official sport programs.

Stuart has often combined his skills as a writer with his images and had many feature works published including a story for Australian Geographic on the restoration of Australia's only remaining WW2 B-24 Liberator bomber. He's a regular contributor to many of Australia's top motoring, motorcycle, boating and adventure lifestyle magazines and he has a commercial client base including Daimler Truck Group, BMW Australia, Renault Australia, and Scania Australia.

Knowing Stuart for many years, it's a honour for Beyond Boundaries to publish this.

