

Complicated Camels of the Outback

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Camels look distinctly regal when they sit. Maybe it's their long arched necks. Maybe it's their aloof stare under heavy eyelids and lashes. Or maybe it's just because they've seen all this activity before. The beasts are clearly unconcerned in the pre-dawn darkness as their guides prepare them for another trek to watch the sunrise on Uluru -- Ayers Rock -- in the Australian Outback.



A ride on these stately animals offers a chance to connect with something very old since they are descended from the camels that did the hard jobs in harsh conditions



It isn't unusual to see a sign warning about camels in the area in Australia's Outback. Photo courtesy of Steve Murray.

that helped to build Australia. Changing times have diminished their status, though, and their future on the continent is charged with controversy. But no one is thinking about this in the crisp morning as visitors cluster around, snapping photographs and talking in hushed tones.

Today is just about Uluru.

Camels were brought to Australia because they were better matched than horses to the wild terrain and brutal heat. Early explorers imported both dromedary (one-hump) and Bactrian (two-hump) camels, but the dromedary, adapted to the deserts of the Middle East, soon became more popular.

These animals helped to colonize western and central Australia since a full-grown animal can carry up to 1,300 pounds and camel caravans can move up to 25 miles per day in the desert. In their heyday they were the backbone of the economy. Camels hauled food and water to gold mines, wire for the Overland Telegraph and supplies to railheads for transport. Regardless of their origin, the cameleers who accompanied them were simply called "Afghans." Today one of the world's great rail journeys across the continent of Australia is named "the Ghan."

Dromedaries are about 7 feet high at their hump, which offers a commanding view to the rider. First, however, there's the problem of getting up there, and camels don't make it easy. Guides help riders onto padded saddles equipped with strong metal handles like the ones on amusement park rides. Then they give a little advice about how to hang on as they urge the animals to stand. It's always a three-step sequence for camel and passenger: The camel lurches up on its front knees as the rider leans forward in the seat. Then it rises up on its long hind legs as the rider leans back and finally straightens its front legs as the rider leans forward again.

The still desert air tends to swallow conversations on the ride to Uluru. The colors that accompany sunrise are hypnotic, however, and visitors tend to quiet down with the growing dawn as they contemplate the shifting hues. The sorrowful groan of a camel is often the only sound that punctuates the quiet.

Camels are built for heat. Their hump contains fat, not water. Fat around the body

interferes with heat control, so concentrating here keeps the animal cooler. Metabolizing fat produces water, of course, but a camel's needs are small. Their red blood cells function even with water loss, and water vapor is recycled when they breathe. Their color changes with the seasons to reflect the sun, and even their posture is optimized to desert floors as they sit slightly above the ground for all-around air circulation.

Camels have big foot pads to navigate sand, and they walk by moving front and back limbs on one side and then on the other. Their gait on the morning trek to Uluru makes for a comfortable ride, certainly better than a horse in this terrain. Their pace is unhurried, just like the Outback.

With motorized transport arriving in the 1920s, the Australian government ordered the camels destroyed. Instead, the loyal cameleers turned them loose. The men found other jobs and married into local communities.

The camels survived in the harsh country, however, and continued to breed. Today the descendants of these working herds are the only feral dromedaries in the world. With a lifespan of up to 50 years, the camel population grew, and today more than a million animals wander Australia, eating vegetation and knocking down fences.

Visitors return to the resort corral with uniquely personal memories of the stark Uluru landscape. The trek isn't over, though, until everyone is standing on the ground again, and getting off is a multistep process, too. The camel sinks to its front knees (rider leans back), folds its back legs (rider leans forward) and then settles on its forelegs (rider shifts back a little). Then it's time to climb off.

Tamed camels are the exception in Australia. Unfortunately, wild camels are now viewed as pests, and their control is both a national problem and a national controversy. Their foraging causes soil erosion and damage to fences, cattle-watering holes and farm property. In remote regions of the country, they compete for food resources with native wildlife and damage natural habitats. Damage costs can be astronomical for both ranchers and the government.

Australia is a huge continent, and wild camels roam much of it. Finding and culling them is difficult, and many Australians object to that solution anyway. Friendlier programs include efforts to export them as breeding stock for camel-racing stables and to seed tourist operations around the world, but the problem is far from solved. It's sad to contrast the essential tool of the 19th century with the unwanted problem of today.

A tour by camel is a chance to shadow the pioneers of Australia's past -- to relive the tasks of getting from here to there through remote and unforgiving country with a capable companion. Carrying tourists around the outback isn't so different for these camels as carrying supplies was for their ancestors. And owing to their resourcefulness, these animals will probably be a part of Australia for a long time to come -- for better or worse.

WHEN YOU GO

An overview of Uluru camel touring can be found at www.ayersrockresort.com.au/camel-tours. I traveled with Outback Camel Tours at Ayers Rock Resort, but camel-touring operations can be found all around Australia. An Internet search is likely to turn up something along your itinerary. Operators offer experiences anywhere from five-minute "try-it-out" rides to five- and seven-day wilderness safaris.

The cost is about \$108 per person for a full 2.5-hour trek that includes snacks and about \$68 per person for a 45-minute "express" ride.

Weather can be extreme in the Outback, so this is something to consider when you are scheduling a visit. The summer (December to February) high temperature average is 100 degrees, but it has reached 113 degrees. The winter (June to August) low temperature average is 40 degrees but has reached 20 degrees. Winter and spring (September to November) provide the best temperatures and the clearest weather.

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