

# The big wet

FOUR MEN, TWO DOGS AND THREE CAMELS SET OUT TO EXPLORE BROOME AND ITS SURROUNDS IN THE CHANGEABLE WET SEASON.

STORY **ANDY TOPE** PHOTOS **DEE KRAMER**

OMINOUS CLOUDS gathered along the horizon, hiding a deep rumble that was felt through the earth. Lightning danced above the shed as we awaited news of two potential cyclones heading our way off the Indonesian coastline. It created a feeling of uncertainty that was to remain with us throughout the coming days, for the wet season waits for no one. It just is and it just does.

It was February in Broome, WA, when the weather displays moods to challenge the most hardy of travellers. While this time of year is potentially uncomfortable – not to mention hazardous – the land comes to life. Animals are in abundance and water flows as the ambience ranges from languorous to uncompromising fury.

Why had we decided to go at this time? I'd like to think

that sheer adventure had something to do with it – to simply wander through the wet season and be acquainted with its moods, even if just for a short while. Our crew comprised four people, two dogs and three camels.

Luke Campbell, who runs camel expeditions from Broome, was our friend and guide. Luke was taking his camel 'Bull' and dogs 'Steak' and 'Cranky'. Bob Looker, who operates camel tours on Cable Beach, was taking his two camels 'Charlie' and 'One Arm'. Also included were Sydney photographer Dee Kramer and myself (I had been doing some temporary labouring jobs in Broome after finishing my studies). Our departure point was Luke's place in Buckley's Plains, about 10 kilometres north of Cable Beach and two kilometres inland. The plan was to head north, exploring the wet season as far as

we could before turning back for Luke's place; all over about 10-14 days, dependent on the ferocity of cyclones.

Luke knew the area well as he had arrived in Broome on foot from Alice Springs with Bull. He had constructed a trailer for Bull to tow so that we could store our gear. The trailer was a homemade invention consisting of an old Land Rover roof placed over a two-wheeled boat trailer. AstroTurf was used as the floor covering while chicken fencing was extended from the roof to create an enclosure. The rear of the cabin contained a flyscreen door that was bent at either end, acting as a type of storage tray that Luke coined 'the kitchen', and a leaf spring from a car was added to the front, which acted as a third wheel to steady the trailer throughout the constant scraping and bouncing that occurred during motion.

The journey began at 5.45am and from then on we were at the mercy of the wet season and pending cyclones. But it all began well and, apart from several fallen trees, the dirt tracks provided fairly smooth sailing. We were headed towards Barred Creek, about 20 kilometres north of Cable Beach.

After several hours, we arrived at an elevated point just south of the creek, about a kilometre inland from the coast. Dark clouds were brewing and we prepared camp. But as evening came, so did the hard rain, forcing us to take shelter under our tarps. After a quiet chat we attempted sleep, with Cranky and Steak joining us under the tarps and the camels enjoying the cooling downfall outside.

Early the next morning a rainbow stretched across the sky over the ocean. Inland towards the marshes lay a waterhole, where wild dogs were taking a drink while the sun rose slowly above the trees. We continued northwards, encountering large

puddles and mud amid the bushland dotted with large termite mounds. We were forced to stop when one of the trailer tyres punctured. We were feeling the humid conditions now and the march flies had begun their relentless biting of flesh.

The wet season was in control, coercing us to find shelter inside an old empty water-tank we had found inland from Barred Creek. We made camp under a colourful February sky as the daylight descended into darkness. Our varied family sat around the fire under a starless sky before we sought out comfort inside the old water-tank to escape the flies.

The next morning, a decision was made to continue on foot as our attempt at repairing the tyre proved unsuccessful. The camels were loaded and any supplies deemed unnecessary were left in the wagon now hidden behind the old tank. We began pushing through dirt tracks and arid bushland north-west towards the coastline. It appeared that Cyclone Nicholas was menacingly close. The horizon seemed like an enormous aqueous desert storm. Lightning cracked across the sea and while the tide rushed to greet us we plodded on. Now in sight, and not a moment too soon, was James Saxon's house.

James is an old friend of Luke's who lives on a small headland above the beach at Quondong Point, 40km north of Broome. James showed us to a nearby property referred to as 'the Meena block' on which there was a large shed where we could stay. After unloading our gear it began to pour, continuing well into the night.

The wild weather had slowed our journey but not our appetites and the next morning we attempted to go fishing, but our lines were blown sideways across the beach. Luke, though, had other ideas and he waded into the shallows, hunting

Dogs 'Cranky' and 'Steak' follow Luke Campbell and his camel 'Bull' as they head towards Quondong, WA, under ominous signs of approaching Cyclone Nicholas.





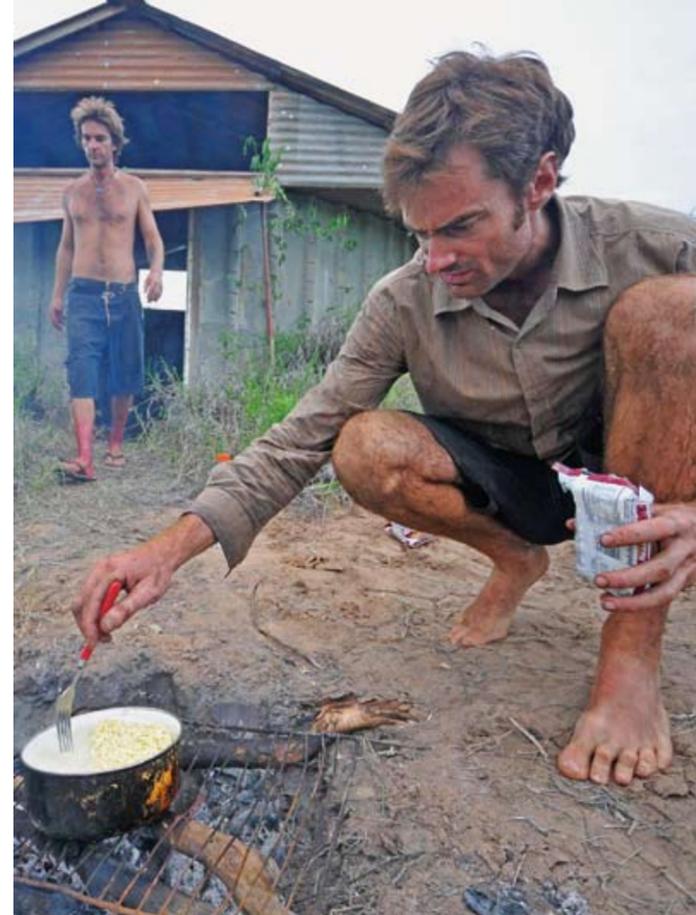
patiently with his spear. A while later, he emerged triumphant with a couple of stingrays. It wasn't the meal we had ultimately hoped for, but thoughts of fresh seafood had materialised at last. After removing the barbs, Luke put the rays straight in a hot pan over the fire – guts and all. "This is how it's done in the old way," he says. With the addition of a little sea-salt and lemon, it was an excellent feed. For dessert, Bob brought out a bottle of good old honey whiskey before we settled down under another starless sky.

James thundered in at 2.30am, his radio blasting as he set about lighting candles. He had stayed awake listening to the ABC and had learned that Cyclone Nicholas was now only 300km to the north-west and was expected to be upon us within a day. We decided to head towards Broome immediately. To the sound of cicadas and rain, we began our journey back to the old water-tank armed with a new trailer tyre courtesy of James. Several hours later, we arrived wet and tired. We mended the trailer wheel and continued our journey through hard rain and wind towards Waterbank Station. Bull persisted the whole way with the little heeler Cranky nipping at his feet.

As the light faded, we arrived at Waterbank Station, 10km north of Luke's place. Bob started a fire. As it crackled under the shelter of a station shed, the rain came with such ferocity that I lay awake wondering if anybody was worried about us.

The following morning, though, revealed a clear sky and it appeared that danger had passed. I was getting used to roughing it and felt a change within me. Luke glanced toward me remarking: "You look more human, mate." I began to wonder how long it would take me to become accustomed to this lifestyle, a lifestyle that Luke had adapted to long ago. With the camels now loaded, though, and the dogs ready, the final stretch of our journey began.

Bull, One Arm and Charlie perked up a little at the realisation they were heading home to Luke's place. Steak appeared blissfully unfazed and Cranky continued nipping at Bull's heels. As for the humans, the next couple of hours went by fairly quickly as we soaked up the smells of the bushland after the rains. Finally arriving at Luke's, we had escaped the danger of Cyclone Nicholas, experienced some of Broome's varying faces and satisfied our urge for adventure – at least for now.



Andy Tope cooks up noodles with Bob Looker outside their makeshift home at the old water tank and (right) Luke spears dinner in the form of a stingray. OPPOSITE: Luke, Bull and Andy on the way back to Waterbank Station and (bottom) Luke and Dee Kramer stuff a punctured wagon tyre with grass.





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