



CHASE A DROVER'S LIFE

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A TRULY UNIQUE ADVENTURE THEN PACK YOUR SWAG, SADDLE UP AND HEAD FOR THE BIG SKIES OF CENTRAL QUEENSLAND'S OUTBACK, TO TAKE PART IN THE ANNUAL HARRY REDFORD CATTLE DRIVE. TONI KRASICKI SHARES HER EXPERIENCE.

MY EARLY MORNING WAKE up call comes just as the first signs of the sun brighten the eastern horizon. By the time I have stumbled out of my toasty warm swag to wrap cold hands around a hot cup of billy tea, the sky has turned several shades of orange and deep purple, promising another big blue sky day.

There are no 'sleep-ins' when you're out droving cattle, not even for city slickers moonlighting as drovers; we're packed up, saddled and ready to move out by 7.30am. Boss drover David 'Chook' Crawford and his right hand man, wife Anne, and a handful of experienced drovers, are keen to get the 15 recruits moving the cattle sooner rather than later.

Now in its 11th year, the Harry Redford

Cattle Drive moves about 600 head of cattle 200km along a stock route in the Aramac and Murrumbidgee region in central Queensland's outback (just over an hour from Longreach). The drive is funded by rookie drovers like myself who pay up to \$350 a day for the experience, and local volunteers come along as cooks, horse tailors and, of course, to help Chook with the cattle for the three weeks of the drive.

I've got to admit – I'm a little nervous. Horseriding is not my forte, especially on well-trained Australian stock horses that can smell a rookie for miles, but I'm determined to experience this iconic ride. With a large herd to choose from, there's a horse to suit every level of riding experience – from first timers to Olympians!

Over three days I score three different

horses; the slow and steady Duke who prefers to eat than ride, the leggy ex-racehorse Stutter who has me looking down upon other riders, and the sassy Madonna who has no intention of babysitting a novice. After four or five hours in the saddle, I look forward to stretching my legs. There's no trotting or cantering, just a steady pace to keep up with the cattle, so chafing isn't the problem. If your sitting bones need a break, though, you can swap saddle for the dinner cart wagon and keep former Aramac mayor, Gary Peoples, company.

Gary, Chairman of the committee behind the drive, has been part of the show from the very beginning. He says that most people ride for at least three

WHILE YOU'RE THERE VISIT:

- **The Stockman's Hall of Fame** in Longreach
- **QANTAS Founders Outback Museum** in Longreach
- **The Thomson River for a sunset cruise** in Longreach
- **Longreach School of Distance Education** or the 'School of the Air'
- **Kinnon & Co** for a Cobb & Co Stagecoach Ride in Longreach
- **The historic town of Aramac**
- **The Tree of Knowledge in Barcaldine** (The origin of the formal organisation of the Australian Labor Party)



to four days (the minimum allowed is three) and some stay for the entire drive, making the most of the other events along the way such as the Harry Redford Rodeo, Camp Cookout and the Aramac Races. Expect to ride between 10 to 18km a day with most of the miles covered before lunch, then after a two hour rest, it's a shorter ride of a few hours to camp to water the horses, brush them down and hobble them for the night.

Named after the legendary bushranger Harry Redford, probably better known as Captain Starlight, the cattle drive aims to relive a cattle duffing experience, minus the stealing of cattle. The story goes that in March 1870, Harry and his band of accomplices set out from Bowen Downs with 600 to 1,000 head of stolen cattle, including an easily recognisable imported white bull. His daring escapade had him herd his mob 800km overland along the famed Strzelecki Track to South Australia, through the same country where Burke and Wills had perished 10 years before.

It's an authentic, true blue Aussie outback experience, and it won't

disappoint those looking to unleash their inner stockman. Be prepared to get dusty, cold, wet, hot and dirty, and don't expect a daily shower as it depends on the camp. One night we camped on a property and used the old shearers

showers and also had a chance to watch a couple of the locals show off their skills at sheep shearing. The other nights we camped on a dusty patch of ground with the only privacy, apart from your swag, behind the half-screened dunny.

Days can get really hot and the nights cold and dewy, but there's nothing better than lying back in a comfy swag with a

belly full of hearty camp food, including piping hot damper, and staring up at starry skies. The nightly entertainment is centred on the campfire where new drovers are welcomed and the old farewelled, and maybe you'll get to hear a bush yarn or two.

Being away from computers, reliable phone service and peak hour traffic is bliss, and you'd swear you're a character in your own spaghetti western. It's not until I spot a sign marking the Tropic

YOUR PACKING CHECKLIST

- ✓ Swag
- ✓ Wide brimmed hat
- ✓ Riding helmet
- ✓ Shoes or boots with a small heel (no trainers or hiking and work boots)
- Comfortable jeans or riding pants, preferably with no inner seams to prevent chaffing
- ✓ Long sleeved light-weight shirt
- ✓ A Camelbak style water bottle
- ✓ A warm jacket for when the sun goes down and early mornings
- ✓ Waterproof jacket
- ✓ Torch

BRUSH UP ON YOUR DROVING LINGO BEFORE YOU GO:

- **'Boss drover':** The person in charge of the drive that leads the cattle and the other drovers.
- **'Stockman':** An Australian term referring to someone who rides a horse and works with cattle and sheep.
- **'Ringer':** Someone who works with the horses, saddling them up etc.
- **'Hobble your horse':** Place a leather 'hobble' around the front legs of your horse during the lunch break and overnight graze so they don't run away.
- **'Square 'em up':** Bring the cattle in to form a tighter herd.

of Capricorn, that I'm roused from the rhythm of my horses stride and brought back to some sort of reality.

The writer travelled courtesy of Tourism Queensland. In 2013 the Harry Redford Cattle Drive runs from 4 to 28 May. For more information and prices visit www.harryredford.com.au and www.queenslandholidays.com.au

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