



DESERT RECONNECTION

'Let's head to a desert' isn't usually the first thought when we want to get away from it all, but a sojourn into our arid interior allows us to disconnect from the human construct and reconnect to the natural world.



I was celebrating. After driving and bush bashing for nearly 800km my husband and I came to the end of the Talawana Track, where it intersected with the even-more remote Gary Highway at Windy Corner, deep in the Gibson Desert of Western Australia. We hadn't passed any form of human habitation in three days, and now had only 200km north to find supplies, which was comforting because we had fuel budgeted for 1,000km in total. I was pumped. Then I read the visitor's book.

The book, nailed to a rusty 44-gallon drum, spoke of doom and despair: "the road 8km north is blocked by floodwater", "impassable, no way around", "we were forced to turn back south" were some of the messages from this desert version of the daily news. Life was suddenly distilled into perfect live-in-the-moment clarity.

The desert can do that to you; challenge you in one moment, offer you splendid rewards in another. It teaches you to be aware of your surroundings, to strip away the artificial world we have built around ourselves and to connect to the cycles of nature. These were some of the reasons why we embarked upon a four-month trip through 10 Australian deserts in 2021.

The first thing that falls away as you travel into our arid interior is the days of the week. It doesn't matter one iota if it is Sunday or Thursday. The hours of the day are next to go. Why do you need to know its 9:15 am when the sun tells you it is still morning?

Time in the desert will reset your circadian rhythm – naturally waking with first light and being ready to sleep not long after the last bruising of sunset has drained from the sky. The moon and its phases become more important. You will find yourself looking for the waning moon in the

Days revolve around basics such as sourcing or preserving water, navigation, cooking around a campfire, and revelling in nature's beauty and bounty.

east, then waiting for the dark to pass and the new moon to reappear in the west, knowing from now on the nights will get brighter.

In many respects the desert belongs to the night. High temperatures during the day keep much of the wildlife hidden, but even if you haven't seen another human in days, you are not alone. A dingo howling will attest to that, and small tracks intersecting on sand dunes indicate the presence of a busy nocturnal society – lizards and insects and tiny marsupials, fighting the war against feral foxes and cats that would drive them permanently from their homes.

Desert travel will simplify your life. A well-prepared and well-supplied adventure will provide everything you need and little of what you want. Days revolve around basics such as sourcing or preserving water, navigation, cooking around a campfire, and revelling in nature's beauty and bounty; a white-gum waterhole, honey grevilleas against a salmon-coloured sand dune, a massed flock of iridescent budgies, a dingo footprint by your camp.



One night we camped near a small claypan on a coolabah watercourse and, when cooking, eating, and cleaning-up were complete, I went back to that claypan, kicked off my shoes and did yoga under the moonlight. The claypan was the perfect yoga mat – hard yet springy, hollow yet firm, and although it's hard to describe, it was probably the most grounded and connected to the earth I have ever felt. It made me want to dance, run, and moon worship all night; energy flowing and spirits, no doubt, circling. Maybe this is true mindfulness.

And so it was at Windy Corner with the prospect of being stranded in the Gibson Desert. We were mindful. We read the 'news' and took note of the 'social media' comments in the visitor book, and then we made our own decisions – confident in our preparedness and our own ability and common sense. We drove that 8km north and found the road was indeed under a lake of floodwater. We did not panic nor turn back. We went around. The preceding three months in the desert had reconnected us with the land and with each other.

Now back in civilisation I appreciate shelter from the wind, water on tap (literally), and flushing toilets, but people crowd in on me and streetlights obscure the moon. Restlessness will return me to the deserts one day, to their vastness and moving horizons, heeding the siren call of a life lived simply in tune with the natural world.

Memorable moments

- Acquiring 'bush pin-stripping' in the Gibson Desert as red-flowering holly grevillea scratched at our vehicle on the way to Veever's Meteorite Crater
- Camping in a swale in the Strzelecki Desert where crimson chats and black honeyeaters flitted and dined on eremophila (a common desert plant)
- Finding pale, almost white, sand dunes in the Tirari Desert, and watching as they transitioned to red as we drove north through the Simpson Desert
- Finding an Indigenous well, a government rain gauge, and signs of rocket testing in the Great Victoria Desert
- Using a hand pump to source groundwater from a bore in the Little Sandy Desert; not smelling it first and putting it into my mouth to realise it was fouled by something in an advanced state of decomposition – definitely memorable
- Spending three days of a COVID lockdown by a remote waterhole close to the Pedikra Desert



Five desert misconceptions, busted

Myth: Deserts are barren

Reality: The majority of Australian deserts are vegetated; in some places so vegetated it is not possible to drive a vehicle through without it acquiring plenty of 'bush pin-stripping'. Those bare, windswept dunes you may be imagining are actually more plentiful on the coast.

Myth: Deserts are just lots of sand dunes

Reality: While sand dunes (and their plentiful vegetation) are a common feature of Australian deserts, they share the stage with swales (valleys between the dunes), clay pans, salt lakes, gibber (stone) plains, flat-topped hills, woodlands, grasslands, and intermittent watercourses (and the odd meteorite crater).

Myth: Sand dunes are all red

Reality: The colour of desert sand often depends on its source. Sand close to salt lakes (where much of it originates) will be pale in colour, while sand far away has had time to oxidise (rust) and takes a darker colour.

Myth: There is no water in the desert

Reality: Water can occur in the desert – in bores, which draw sweet sand-filtered water from aquifers deep underground, in gnamma holes, which are holes dug into the rock by Indigenous people and covered to prevent evaporation and predation, from artesian springs such as the oasis of Dalhousie, in intermittent creeks after rain, and in floodwater. Water may be there – it may just be hard to find.

Myth: Finding water in the desert is a blessing

Reality: While water is vital for the environment and those who live there, water in the desert can be deadly for the traveller. Imagine planning and fuel budgeting for that 1,000km trip only to be stopped by floodwaters at the 800km mark. Or worse still, becoming bogged for weeks with no hope of road rescue.

MANDY MCKEESICK