

Off to the races

A rural community embraces its diversity with a festival celebrating culture...and camels.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MANDY MCKEESICK



Troy Richardson and Wookatook romp in lengths ahead of the rest of the field to win their heat in front of a large crowd at the annual Tara Festival.



The Tara Festival is a family-friendly event, where even children get a chance to ride the camels.



◀ With galloping camels being almost impossible to steer and just as hard to stop, the mid-race action gets frantic in a heat of the Camel Cup at Tara.

▼ Cameleer Glenda Sutton (at left) and her one-humped racing partner, Chief, celebrate a win in a heat with Tara Festival committee member Lou Thornbury.



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CLOSE YOUR EYES for a moment and listen. There’s the hum of a didgeridoo, splutter of a chainsaw, acoustic twang of Creedence Clearwater Revival and the shrill call of a bagpipe. “They’re quick out of the barriers today,” a race-caller spruiks, and then there’s a low animal sound you can’t quite place. Now take note of the smells – definitely something animal, motorbike fumes, spicy curry, freshly baked bread.

Confused? Now open your eyes. You’re face to face with a woolly-headed camel as it gurgles and groans, a race-caller is chasing yabbies, someone is performing a haka and two mad motorcyclists are preparing to enter a steel-meshed Globe of Death.

You’ve found yourself at the Tara Festival of Culture and Camel Races.

It’s hard to arrive at one word to encapsulate this festival, which is held every two years in the rural town of Tara on the Western Downs of southern Queensland. Madcap springs to mind; eclectic comes close; kaleidoscopic, perhaps. But, while the senses and vocabulary are reeling, it’s fair to say it’s one hell of a show.

Country strong

Tara is renowned for agricultural and pastoral activities, particularly prime hard-wheat production. It has a population of little more than 2000, fewer than half of whom live in town. In the 1980s some of the area’s agricultural land was subdivided into small rural acreages, or lifestyle blocks, leading to an influx of new residents – although it was nothing compared with festival time, when the population soars to 16,000.

“We wanted to do something special for Tara,” says festival committee member Lou Thornbury of the event’s origins. “We did the ‘sports shears’ for a couple of years, but that faded, and then we saw camel races in Boulia [in far western Queensland] and thought, ‘That looks like fun.’ So in 2000 I went to Boulia to learn about organising a camel race and in 2001 we held the first Camel Cup here in Tara.”

Lou’s husband, Richard Thornbury, chimes in: “Mary Youngberry was starting a cultural festival at the same time to recognise all the different nationalities moving into the area with the subdivisions. So we combined to become the Tara Festival of Culture and Camel Races.

Clawing to the finish

It’s mid-morning on the first of the festival’s three days and the crowd is three-deep around an unpretentious ring where Goondiwindi stock agent Alex Paterson is auctioning yabbies. “Have a look at the legs on this one,” he says. “Its sire won this race three years ago.” The crowd suspends disbelief and laughs. “Anything under \$150 is cheap,” Alex continues, “and you know they’re only going to get dearer as the alcohol sets in.”

A syndicate from Brisbane outlays \$190 and squeals erupt as their blue-clawed crustacean stumbles across the line in first place, earning them a cool \$710.

“The highest price paid for a yabby was \$2500 several years ago,” says Tara local and yabby coordinator Linda Petersen (now president of Tara

▶ Although it’s an aquatic creature, a yabby can travel more than 50km across land between waterholes.



Festival Inc.). “A group of boys who’d been working on the mines were here for a good time. They opened their wallets and it was all green! Unfortunately, their yabby didn’t win.”

Yabby racing isn’t even the main event. That gong goes to the camels.

In the mounting yard, John Richardson’s bullock camel Wookatook is hooshed (sitting) and waiting for its jockey. It gurgles and mumbles and appears to be discussing race tactics with its trainer.

Nearby, Rod Sansom’s Captain is more fractious. New to racing, his growls (Captain’s not Rod’s) are more menacing and he spits his nerves around the ring. “This is Gambler,” Condamine trainer Jack Dempsey says of his bullock. “It will be a gamble if he runs straight.”

To race a camel, a harness is strapped under and around its mid-section with a padded, though seemingly insignificant, seat for a jockey located behind the hump. Once the ▶

SCIENTIFIC NAME: Cherax destructor



“And they’re off and racing!” Alex Peterson cries out at the start of another yabby race at the Tara Festival.



Bernard Mangakahia encourages audience participation in his show *Mana: The Spirit of Polynesia*.



Globe of Death riders Sam Fennell (at left) and Justin Ryan pause for a moment on their Yamahas.



Members of the Pissed and Broke team celebrate in their own way at the Tara Festival.

jockeys are mounted, handlers lead the beasts to the starting line, avoiding long legs and snaky necks, and then the race is on. Camels ease into a gallop. Well, most of them do. Gambler turns 360 degrees and nearly takes out his handler before rejoining the field.

Jockey Chontelle Jannese sums up the spectacle. “You never know what’s going to happen, but it’s a good adrenaline rush,” she says. “There are also days when I think, ‘Just get me caught.’” By ‘caught’ she means caught – literally. Once the camels are racing, the jockeys have little to no steering and definitely no brakes. Past the finish line, the camels come to a halt at a hessian fence and the handlers, ferried there on the back of a ute, catch the camels and can then offload the jockeys.

Good on the dance floor

The camel and yabby races alternate. “This one’s bred in the purple,” Alex calls out as he continues spruiking the crustaceans to the crowd that’s now six-deep around the ring. Meanwhile, cultural performers are in full swing on three stages around the ground.

The entertainment is a nonstop parade of talent, which more often than not requires audience participation. Bernard Mana, in his Spirit of Polynesia show, entices two blokes to don wigs and join him on stage for a haka. Alvin Rostant and Jorge Morales have a

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line-up of wannabe reggae dancers channelling their inner Caribbean shimmy. Three young girls clad in camel hats stare wistfully at a performer from the Heilani dance troupe. There are didgeridoos and bagpipes, steel drums and country guitars. There is even a crowd-pulling appearance by the 2017 winner of *The Voice Australia* competition, Judah Kelly, fortuitously booked before he found television fame.

The cultural entertainment is reflected in the array of food, from Japanese miso soup to Spanish paella, Greek souvlaki and wild-caught barramundi. Jim Smith even has what’s claimed to be the world’s first mobile bakery and can churn out 1000 pies in an hour.

The roar of a small motor advertises Matty G. who is carving a camel from a block of wood – with a chainsaw. The throb of larger engines advertises Justin Ryan and Sam Fennell, two young blokes for whom riding

their Yamaha TTR 125cc motorbikes upside down in a steel-mesh globe is all in a day’s work. “I broke my scapula eight weeks ago,” Justin says, “but it’s good enough.” Their questionable sanity is eclipsed only by their MC, Jack Wilson, who stands in the globe as Justin and Sam fly around him dangerously like deranged mosquitoes. “Make some noise for the boys,” Jack urges the spellbound crowd. “If the bikes stall, the boys fall.”

Revved up from the Globe Riders, the crowd gets into party mood. Pissed and Broke, a group of caravaners who are part of the 2000-strong contingent camped around the ground, wish to conduct their own race down the straight on inflatable animals. The request is politely declined.

An inspector calls

Overseeing the merriment are Senior Constables Dave Masters and Simon Shilton from the Queensland Mounted Police. Horses traditionally don’t like camels and although Dave’s Manny has seen it all before, Merlin, Simon’s Percheron, is wide-eyed and nervous as he takes in the strange beasts being led to the start of another race.

Tara farmers Mark Thomson and Jim Moran are the race officials at the barriers, lining up the camels and then firing a shotgun to get proceedings underway. “We only have 12 people on the whole committee and can

always use more,” Mark says, “but you do what you can for your community.” Between them, Mark and Jim help run the horseraces, show society, clay target club and hospital auxiliary. Their contributions are typical of those in country towns.

The 400m Cup is the final event on today’s program and it’s won by genuine legends of the camel-racing fraternity – Glenda Sutton and her camel, Chief. They have won the Boulia and Bedourie cups and will be hot favourites for tomorrow’s 600m Cup. Glenda has been training and riding camels for 20 years. “It’s not for the weak-hearted,” she says, laughing. “You have to be brave about everything. You have to push forward no matter what, and you have to ignore the size of the animal. You’re working with 90 per cent mind and 10 per cent body.”

Glenda and Chief retire for the day as Alex Paterson fires up the crowd, which now forms a solid wall between the yabby ring and conveniently placed bar. The patrons lap it up. They have lost money on yabbies and camels, dined on exotic dishes, rumbaed through some Latin dancing and are still trying to work out how to describe this festival to their mates, but one thing’s for sure – they’ll be back tomorrow, and have already booked their tickets for the next Tara Festival of Culture and Camel Races. **AG**

THE NEXT Tara Festival is 2–4 August 2019.