

Difficult enough by vehicle, let alone on foot.

A WALKER on the CANNING

Words by Phil Bianchi

Pics By Gaynor Schoeman

I couldn't believe it when I heard that a woman was going to walk the Canning Stock Route solo. Then, when I heard she was an overseas tourist, my first thoughts were, 'she's crazy' and hoped this wasn't going to be another tourist underestimating the desert at the cost of their life.



Who was this woman? Did she know what she was getting into? The internet soon revealed Gaynor Schoeman was a 46 year old South African adventurer, an accomplished open water sailor, paraglider and deep sea diver. She had backpacked through South America, sailed up the west coast of Madagascar in a dugout, crossed the Atlantic twice and retired undefeated as South Africa's first female full contact fighter/kick boxer. In 2012 she broke her back paragliding and although her back had healed, she was concerned the injury could flare up under the load of a 30kg backpack and prevent completion of the CSR walk. Gaynor did not take the CSR lightly. She had already hitchhiked the CSR twice and was well aware that she needed to plan carefully, be cautious and not take any unnecessary risks.

In preparation for the walk, Gaynor and friend Andy Sutcliffe travelled north along the CSR in a 47 Series Landcruiser burying food and water approximately 21 kms apart, recording the waypoints on two GPS's and marking the locations with ribbons and two sticks. Details were also written into a notebook as a backup. On the 31 May 2013, Gaynor left

Billiluna with an overloaded back pack of 38 kgs and headed south on her solo walk. Andy accompanied her for the first few hours to see her off safely before returning to Kalgoorlie via the highways. On day one Gaynor staggered for 16 kms under the weight of her kit to her first drop. Sleep that first night was fitful due to the rigours of starting out and the yips and howls of dingoes.

By day four Gaynor had unloaded non-essential items, asking CSR travellers to take them to Kunawarritji (Well 33) for her. By the end of the first week she had streamlined her pack to 30 kgs which was the general weight for the next two months. A book - Bob

"On day one Gaynor staggered for 16 kilometres under the weight of her (38kg) kit to her first drop."

Cooper's Outback Survival Guide, although precious, was burned page by page as she read it, because it too



represented unnecessary weight. She looked after her feet with great care. Each night they were cleaned carefully and inspected for 'hot spots' and blisters taped

◀ *On an advance trip, food and water were buried a day's walk apart. This pic: Sorting rations at Durba Springs.*

up with Fixomull tape as prevention against infection and more blisters.

The longest time between seeing travellers was four days, the average two days. Gaynor looked forward to these interactions as they broke the loneliness and brought some relief from the stress which comes from being alone. CSR travellers took on the role of 'bush telegraph' bringing her news of events along the Canning – Pamela Armstrong's northbound supported walk, the successful northbound unsupported cyclists Tom Walwyn and Scott Felter from the UK and Canada respectively, the Polish aborted southbound cyclists. They also acted as 'Canning Postal Workers' taking



▲ Gaynor timed her arrival at a food drop to coincide with a midday meal. Note the sling shot to ward of animals.

parcels of excess food and equipment to Kunawarritji and bringing her letters and care parcels from Andy. The news that most unsettled her in the early stages of the walk was from northbound travellers telling of dingo

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packs attracted to trackside bodies of camels shot by travellers. A lone walker and a pack of dingoes was not a good mix.

Gaynor was soon in a routine of walking an average of 29 kms per day. Instead of arriving at food drops at night, she now timed her arrival to coincide with a midday meal, giving her the opportunity to wash, rest, eat and drink as much as she could in order to reduce excess weight in the back pack. Gaynor's buried supplies contained food for a day and 10 litres of water in two 5 litre plastic/foil wine cask like bladders. Each day she had enough water to attend to hygiene, rehydrate and top up her water containers. Of the 30kgs backpack weight, water weighed in at 6-8kgs in the warmer north and 4-5kgs in the cooler south.

Finding her supplies was usually easy. However at Well 46 she found that a well meaning traveller tidied up by putting all the drums in one spot; they had moved the drum under which her cache was buried which resulted in her digging seven holes with her Trangia plate before finding her stash! She had plenty of food - thanks to South African sponsors, her 92 year old grandmother selling her car so supplies could be purchased in Australia and Springbok Foods Australia providing her foods which formed the bulk of her requirements. Gaynor catered for a 4,500 calorie intake per day, but exhaustion had the effect of diminishing her appetite and she found she struggled to force feed herself to gagging point, realising that despite this, she was losing weight.

Her biggest scare was a bull camel in rut. On the previous hitch hiking trips, camels were never a problem. Crossing Lake Tobin, however, a randy bull camel galloped towards her from about one



▲ **Cold drinks from passing travellers were gratefully consumed.** Pic: Dot Cook

▼ **Travelling light. Home amongst the spinifex has a very small footprint.**



kilometre away, his head held high and tail flying, positively bristling with pheromones. She was out in the open with nowhere to run, nothing to climb or hide behind. Blowing her whistle in an attempt to scare him off was ineffective. She was terrified and struggled to appear confident and show no fear whilst walking at a steady pace. She raised her arms, extending them as far out as she could in an effort to make herself appear bigger, that didn't work either. The camel was closing in. As a

last resort, she began to croon in a sing song voice about how beautiful and pretty he was. The bull reacted as if he'd been slapped in the face; he slowed down, as did the two female camels pacing alongside him. They walked parallel to Gaynor about 150 metres out, the male never taking his eyes off her. Was he trying to work out what she was? They gradually allowed the gap to widen and then watched her disappear over the horizon. Seriously shaken, Gaynor considered herself incredibly fortunate to have escaped unharmed. Would she be so lucky next time?

The incident with the bull camel left a deep impression. Each day Gaynor would scan the horizon from every dune she crested, looking for camels. Gaynor's most often asked question of northbound travellers was: 'Have you seen any camels?' She soon found the answers to be unreliable as most

travellers remarked that they had seen very few if any camels, only for Gaynor to come across a bull camel or great herd of them. How did they miss them! There were many instances where, with trepidation, she had to negotiate her way past great herds of camels.

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She was not charged again. Often camels would feint a charge, but they always broke off when she did not falter and continued to walk without showing fear.

Between Well 36 and Well 37 Gaynor and northbound walker Pamela Armstrong met. Pam was now driving her vehicle after her driver pulled out near Kunawarritji. She part walked part drove the balance of the track to Billiluna.

Another incident sharp in her mind was at Well 36. Gaynor had set up her camp when a convoy of three vehicles arrived; they set up nearby and soon got a fire going. Then one of them thoughtlessly dragged the whip pole from the nearby well and added it to the fire. Gaynor remarked that this was a piece of history and shouldn't be burned. The response from the oxygen thief was; 'If it's between the termites to enjoy the wood or me, then I win'. What could she, on her own do, so she backed off?

Travellers would remark how much they had been looking forward to meeting the walkers and that they had been following their tracks from both the north and the south. They would stop their vehicles and pull out a chair for her to sit on and rest her weary aching feet, make her a cup of tea or coffee or ice cold soft drink, bringing out the biscuits and cake and giving



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her precious gifts of fresh fruit and occasionally a vegetable. On the rare occasion a meal and hot water was shared. These moments were cherished by Gaynor, the company and the fresh food were gratefully received, and the hot shower or bucket of water, pure bliss. There were a myriad of questions; 'Aren't you afraid to be out here on your own? Don't you get scared? What do you have in your supply drops? What do you eat? Have you got enough water? Where is your vehicle? Why are you doing this?' If Gaynor ever needed anything, like additional batteries or even a water bladder (hers met with a cooking accident) these gifts appeared like magic.

Gaynor completed the first solo walk of the Canning Stock Route on 5 August 2013. It took her 66 days (including 10 rest days), somewhat faster than the 90 days she expected. The walk shattered her, however; it took many months before she overcame the raw feeling of isolation and loneliness and even today says that the walk has left its mark on her. With a book in the making, Gaynor

now tells of the positive changes the walk has influenced in her life. What are Gaynor's next plans; she recently said; 'I don't know what the desert has planned for me, I just know that I must return.' She intends to walk the CSR again and is likely to do so for many years to come.

There are many ways Gaynor still wants to experience the CSR. One is unsupported, without resupply, utilising only what the desert has to offer, but with another walker. She realises that this may not be possible but is exploring the possibilities and would like to spend time with Aboriginal people and on the trail itself learning what she can.

On the other end of the spectrum, which is dear to her heart, is to walk with other women, supported. Gaynor feels that there is so much the desert has to teach us about ourselves and women especially will grow from the experience.

I'm sure all readers will agree Gaynor is one tough and very determined lady and we wish her the best for her future endeavours.

