

# Aussie Drovers

MAKING IT IN A MOST BRUTALLY  
BEAUTIFUL LAND—THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN  
COWBOY TRADITION



Story and photography by Thomas C. Wilmer

**T**HE ENDLESS PANORAMA OF THE BRUTALLY beautiful Australian Outback cattle country is a mysterious realm of unimaginably isolated expanse—a world the Aussies sometimes refer to as “the back of beyond” and the land of “never, never.”

Commonly dubbed “the bush” by locals, the Outback is a sparsely populated world of extremes where temperatures can sizzle above 130 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer and bite below freezing during winter nights. It’s also a place where a neighbor can easily be a four-hour drive away and light aircraft and helicopters are more essential than the ubiquitous *ute* (pickup truck) or trusty steed. This is a land where a drought can last seven or more years and a wet season with four inches of rain is superb.

The unpredictable weather and paucity of rainfall are the engines that drive daily conversations on cattle stations, and dictate emotional highs and lows. “Just about the time you’re ready to pack ’er in, it rains and you remember why you love it out here,” says 73-year-old, fifth-generation stockman Eric Oldfield. His second cousin, Shane Oldfield, adds, “It can be tough on ya in the midst of a drought — just ask my wife, Debbie. But when it does rain, why there isn’t a better bloody drug in the world that a doctor could prescribe for ya.”

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**W**ITH THE ABILITY TO HANDLE AS LITTLE as one head per square mile, a typical Outback cattle station averages 1,500 to 2,000 square miles. To be economically viable, stations need to be massive. Sixty kilometers from the outpost of Marree, in the heart of the Gibber Plain, is the 600,000-acre Dulkaninna Station. Eighty-seven-year-old George Bell, a revered icon of the Outback, has been on the Dulkaninna since 1932 and it's been in the family since 1896. Most cattle stations are multi-generation family affairs. George's 58-year-old son, Daryl, and his wife, Sharon, run the day-to-day operations along with their grown children.

As Daryl and I bound across the flat, sparsely vegetated Dulkaninna, we stop at a surprisingly fertile area. "You should have seen this area back in 1974 when we got 28 inches," he says with a mixture of pride and sorrow. "It rained more than six inches in one stretch, and in no time the grass shot up taller than the handlebars on my bike. I raced back home to tell Sharon to plan on adding an additional 1,000 head. But the next day, when I took Sharon out there, the grass was gone, munched down to stubble." Overnight a storm of locusts had come through and devoured everything for miles around.

Eric Oldfield hops off his horse and grabs a handful of the talcum-fine bull-dust from a desiccated riverbed. "For such soft and gentle earth, it's amazing how tough and harsh it can be," he says with mixed awe and reverence. "In spite of the toughness of the land, it just gets in your soul and you can't get it out. One year in 10 might be exceptionally good, but that's good enough to keep the spirit going. After it rains or floods, you come out here and you too will say 'This is God's own country.' Following a flood up north in the Channel Country, the grass shoots up

taller than yer head and there's ample feed for three years." Oldfield's lifelong friend and fellow stockman Keith Rasheed nods knowingly. "To make it in the bush, a bloke's gotta ride the punches pretty well."

And riding the punches is something the cattle station owners do exceedingly well. Shane Oldfield, whose family has been on the 1,000-square-mile Clayton Station since 1955, says, "We're in our seventh year of drought, and we've had to reduce our stock from 3,000 head to 1,200. And for the first time ever we also sold off half our breeders last year—just to hang on."

The saving grace at Clayton Station has been an increased reliance on Shane Oldfield's horse-breeding expertise. "We're presently running about 150 head, and we sell a truckload of 12 horses every two to three months," he says.

"Fortunately the market is strong right now," Shane gazes up at the blazing noonday sun and swats a handful of flies away. "Anyone can manage this country in good seasons, but only the good managers survive the droughts. Like our stock, only the strong survive out here."

George Bell pipes up: "Some years ago we got into the road transport business to bolster our cattle income during drought years, along with raising and selling appaloosas and cross-breeding feral bush donkeys with draft horses." Sharon Bell adds that they normally run about 2,000 breeders, Hereford and Hereford-Angus cross. "But at the moment," she says, "because of this once-in-a-100-year drought, we have de-stocked down to 500 breeders. We've also gone 100 percent certified organic, although our product's tenderness tends to be less consistent than feedlot beef and so far we have not been able to command a premium for our product. I think it's really a matter of reeducating the consumer."

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## Outback Lingo

**Y**ou might not be able to get that coveted accent down, but study this list and you'll at least know what those Aussie cowboys are talking about.

**MOB** a herd of cattle

**MUSTER** to round up cattle

**RINGER** the person who works mainly in the stock camps and with cattle in yards on either horses or bikes

**COWBOY** a person whose job it is to kill the bullocks, chop wood, and do miscellaneous work around the station

**JACKAROO** and **JILLAROO** station hands, often college-age kids learning the craft

**BAIT LAYER** the station or camp cook

**TUCKER** food, served from a tucker box

**TUCKER BOX** chuck wagon

**HAVE A FEED** to eat

**HAVE A SHOUT** to have a drink in the pub

**BORE** drilled well

**BORE RUNNER** a station hand who keeps an eye on windmills and sets up gas pumps to keep water flowing

**PODDY DODGERS** those who steal unbranded cattle from other stations

**PINCHING CATTLE** same as poddy dodging

**CLEAN SKINS** young, unbranded calves

**ROAD TRAIN** a truck and trailer cattle transport

**THE BIG SMOKE** a large city

**UTE** short for "utility," a k a pickup truck

**STATION** the Aussie equivalent of the American ranch

**A**N OUTBACK VISIONARY, 58-YEAR-OLD David Brook, whose great-grandparents settled in the Outback in the late 1870s, started the OBE Organic Beef consortium in 1995, along with 12 other Channel Country cattle producers. "Back in 1918, my dad took a stockman's job on Cordillo Downs for three dollars a week," Brook says. Today the Brook family owns Cordillo, along with Kamaran Downs, Adria Downs, and Murnpeowie (combined 6.6 million acres) with an average carrying capacity of 35,000 head.

To Brook's way of ranching, organic beef production is perfectly suited to Outback conditions. "We have standing native pasture all year round with no need to import stock feed. Our native grass, with a nice grain head and herbage in the winter, grows naturally without need for artificial fertilizers." The feed quality is such that supplements and hormonal growth implants are never used. And the climate works in his favor: "The aridity and low humidity of the semi-desert means there are no parasites, internal or external, for which there would otherwise be a need to treat with a chemical-based dip or drench."

Getting the beef to market remains an arduous task. Until recently, roads out here were mere tracks forged through sand dunes, stone-strewn plains, and thick bull dust. Even today, the tracks are mainly gravel roads. George Bell smiles like Yoda as he explains: "The 600-kilometer journey from Marree up to Birdsville, just across the border in Queensland, took five weeks when I moved out here in 1932. Heck, there weren't any roads at all! Today it's an easy five-hour drive."

Cars and trucks were virtually nonexistent in the Outback until after WWII. "The four-wheel drive army surplus Blitzes and Jeeps changed our world out here," Bell says. "Eventually they transformed how we mustered cows. Today, mustering is done with four-wheel drives and motorbikes, along with air-planes and helicopters—rarely on horseback."

Communicating with the outside world has evolved along with transportation. "Back in 1937 we got pedal-operated wireless units from the Royal Flying Doctor Service," Bell says. "A shortwave frequency was reserved for emergency calls." Back in the day, the radio was also the women's lifeline. Eric Oldfield's wife, Beverly, remembers what it was like. "Each morning at 9 a.m. we'd have a group 'galah' session, named after a chatty Aussie bird, over the long-wave band so as to not interfere with emergency communications. Everyone was on the air at once. Three times a day, we'd get on the air and the wives on all the stations would talk and share. Everyone knew where the mail truck was, what the kids were up to, who was coming and going. We'd also get news from the outside world when we tuned in the BBC."

Things changed with the advent of high-tech. "When we got radio telephones and then mobiles, why that was the end of an era in the Outback," Eric Oldfield says. "People no longer talked as a connected community."



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**E**RIC OLDFIELD DIDN'T KNOW IT AT THE time, but when he led a cattle drive of 600 head back in 1972, it was to become the last drive down the Birdsville Track, with Eric immortalized as the last drover. Twenty-nine years later, Eric and mate Keith Rasheed, a second-generation stock route manager, recollected the days when stockmen made the rough but rewarding month-and-a-half-long drive along the Birdsville Track to the Marree railhead. Over a pint of rum, Rasheed dreamed of reviving the drive so others could “experience a vanished Outback tradition.” Oldfield deemed the idea “bloody brilliant.”

The first thought was to re-create a drive for friends and fellow cattlemen. But before long the South Australian Tourism Commission and Tourism Australia got behind the idea, and Rasheed's and Oldfield's vision became a reality. Open to participants from across Australia and around the world, the first Great Australian Outback Cattle Drive, with Eric Oldfield once again leading a mob of cattle as boss-drover, was held in 2002. The drive was a smashing success and a reprise event was held in 2005 with another drive scheduled for May and June 2007.

I journeyed Down Under specifically to participate in the 2005 cattle drive. The drive takes a month and a half to complete, but most people sign up to ride for one four-night, five-day segment, although a few avid enthusiasts saddle up for two weeks or more. Just getting there was part of the adventure.

Three hours after the twin-engine Cessna's dawn departure from Adelaide, we arrived in the heart of the Outback. After a sandwich and a couple of pints in the legendary Birdsville Pub, we climbed into a four-wheel drive for a dusty two-hour ride to our campsite, where we met the drovers, support staff, and our horses.

Overland, it's a 15-hour drive from Adelaide (“The Big Smoke”) to the trailhead. Most participants arrived in cars and vans; some chartered or flew their own airplanes and helicopters. All the essentials were provided. Two-person tents were set with bedding and battery-powered reading lamps and carpeting. Outback-spiced meals were prepared, saddles and safety equipment were supplied, and hot showers and flush toilets were provided in a converted semi-trailer. There was even an attending physician who rode along, just in case.

Some participants were experienced riders; others had never been in the saddle before. Some were wealthy and retired; others were young college-age adventurers. One day I rode with a schoolteacher on my right while the chairman of the Australian Stock Exchange, Maurice Newman, rode on my left flank.

Evenings around the campfire provided priceless opportunities. Aboriginal stockmen recounted their myths and legends of Dreamtime and ancient trade routes; cattle station owners shared insights into their daily lives, while cowboy singers, guitarists and balladeers added mystique to the expedition. Fortunately, the cattle drive takes place in winter, so daytime

temperatures ranged in the 70s and 80s with cool evenings.

We awoke with the first glimmer of morning light and watched as blotchy cumulous clouds blazed crimson red and then slowly faded to pastel pink. After a breakfast of eggs and sausage we saddled up for our first day on the drive.

As we adjusted to hornless saddles and stirrups, our horses' hooves stirred up the bull dust. Within moments a fine film of red earth tinged the air, dried my lips, and coated my camera lens. I quickly accepted that a blanket of grit would swath me for the week. Ah, and then there were the flies—the never-ending swatting is jokingly referred to as the “Aussie Wave.” Some locals, and visitors alike, consider wearing a fly veil an essential Outback accoutrement.

It didn't require rocket science to realize that not one of our horses hailed from the pony-ride-dude-ranch circuit. The steeds were all working ranch horses, and my mount was an instinctively independent operator when it came to retrieving wayward cows. In semi-city-slicker fashion, I naively thought we'd be traveling down the track at a decent clip, but Eric Oldfield, riding

next to me, explained, “Nope, we ride real slow to keep the weight on. I guess that's why we say out here that we're walking the cattle rather than driving 'em.”

While riding herd I noticed that most aromas, other than close-up campfire smoke, manure, and horse sweat, were consumed by the Simpson Desert's dry air. I thought about the dust and flies, the parched riverbeds, and most remarkably the vast, undulating flatlands and periodic barren sand dunes. But the overarching impression was utter quiet. Except for the snorting of horses and cows and the chafing of leather, it was starkly still. Unforgiving, remote, brutally beautiful.

David Brook summed up the Outback experience. “The Outback is a place of great opportunity with great potential for innovation. As a landscape in Australia, it is highly sought after by city people; regretfully, most find the hurdle of distance and dirt roads too tough and they never get here. But, in their hearts, at the core of their Australian identity, you'll find ‘Waltzing Matilda,’ the writings of Banjo Paterson, and the Outback.”

## Outback Culture

**THE PUB** Virtually every Outback outpost has a gas station and a general store and there will definitely be a “hotel” with a pub that serves as the community center and a clearinghouse for news and gossip.

**SELF-RELIANCE AND INDEPENDENCE** Melded with interdependence, these individualistic attributes are essential to Outback life. Keith Rasheed proudly claims, “Virtually everyone can cook; repair a car, radio, and water pump; and doctor the injured. It's a necessity for survival out here.”

**CAMELS** Cameleers came from Afghanistan in the 1800s to run camel trains throughout the Outback. The North-South transcontinental railroad from Adelaide through Alice Springs to Darwin is called the “Ghan” in memory of the Afghanistan cameleers. At one time, more than 1,000 camels were based in Marree. Camel trains of 70 or more would regularly head up the Birdsville Track, carrying everything from corrugated roofing and timber to food supplies, farm implements, and even the occasional piano. Today, approximately 700,000 feral camels roam the wilds of Australia.



**DEPENDENT INDEPENDENCE** In the Outback, the great distances between neighbors create strong bonds and reliance upon one another in good times and bad. Telling stories and sharing gossip are vital aspects of Outback social life. Sharon Bell on Dulkaninna Station says, “I wouldn't think a thing of going over to my neighbor's place for a spot of tea in the morning, even though it's a 60-kilometer round trip drive.”

**MAIL RUN** The mail truck served as the lifeline for Outback stockmen. From the 1930s through the mid-50s, Tom Kruse ran the mail truck out of Marree. His picture is often seen on walls of Outback homes, placed in a position of sacred honor, and he is immortalized on film in *The Back of Beyond*. The mail run delivered necessities but, just as important, conveyed vital news of neighbors and the outside world.

**CATTLE** “Every station has their own preferred breed,” says Shane Oldfield. “We have proven over the years the poll Hereford is best suited for us, being a lot hardier than most other breeds. It really gets down to a personal preference. Some stockmen run Short Horns, Aberdeen Angus, Brahmans, while others prefer Santa Gertrudus.” There are approximately 20 million people and 25 million cows in Australia.

# The Great Australian Outback Cattle Drive

**T**he cattle drive offers the rare opportunity to experience a hands-on taste of the stockman's arduous life while riding through primordial Outback territory. Side trips during the drive include visits to ancient aboriginal sites, abandoned railway and telegraph stations, and natural wonders, and aerial flight-seeing adventures. The 2007 Cattle Drive, Saturday May 5th through Sunday June 10th, is limited to approximately 70 participants per four-night, five-day segment. The drive will wend its way down the Oodnadatta Track from the outpost of Oodnadatta to Marree. For more information, visit [www.cattledrive.com.au](http://www.cattledrive.com.au).

**ADELAIDE** A trip to South Australia would not be complete without experiencing Adelaide. The city of 1 million-plus feels more like a town of 50,000. Late-19th-century brick and stone buildings and a river coursing through town add to its laid-back appeal.

**STAY** The Hyatt Regency Adelaide reposes in the heart of Adelaide within easy walking distance to anywhere in town. The Hyatt has been named the official Hotel of the 2007 Great Australian Outback Cattle Drive. <http://adelaide.regency.hyatt.com/hyatt/hotels/index.jsp>. Another good option in the heart of town is Majestic Roof Garden Hotel with its ultra-sophisticated techno accommodations. <http://www.majestichotels.com.au/roof.html>

**OUTBACK** Out in the Outback, you can still be upscale. Wilpena Pound Resort,

situated in the majestic and ancient Flinders Ranges in countryside reminiscent of New Mexico, is the ideal base camp for Outback explorations. A leisurely five-hour drive north from Adelaide, Wilpena is an oasis offering accommodations ranging from four-star luxury to rugged tent campsites, along with fine Aussie cuisine, a country store, gift shop, and full bar. Wilpena's wilderness trails wend past ancient gorges, some of the world's oldest fossils, Aboriginal rock paintings, and bounding kangaroo. Flight-seeing trips onboard Wilpena light aircraft offer spectacular bird's-eye views of the Flinders and the sprawling Outback. Arkaba Station, located close to and managed by Wilpena, offers an elegantly restored cottage that sleeps six. [www.wilpenapound.com.au](http://www.wilpenapound.com.au)

The Prairie Hotel is a historic Outback hotel with all the creature comforts you could desire. Located in the Flinders Ranges

with the Outback right out your front door, The Prairie is coveted for its upscale accommodations and fine cuisine. Its “Flinders Feral Food” menu selections include emu and kangaroo. [www.prairiehotel.com.au](http://www.prairiehotel.com.au).

A sister property to The Prairie, The Northstar Inn is located closer to Adelaide and is equally alluring for its creature comforts and spectacular setting. [www.northstarinn.com.au](http://www.northstarinn.com.au). Rawnsley Park eco-villas, also situated in the Flinders Ranges, has won rave reviews for their ecological sensitivity and upscale accommodations. [www.rawnsleypark.com.au](http://www.rawnsleypark.com.au).

**GO** Qantas Airways provided the first aircraft in the 1920s for the Royal Flying Doctor Service, a vital lifeline that continues today for Outback residents. The name QANTAS is an acronym for Queensland And Northern Territories Aerial Service. For specific information about flights to Australia on Qantas, visit [www.QantasUSA.com](http://www.QantasUSA.com). Once in Australia, getting to the Outback and the cattle drive involve additional travel by air or train. For Regional Express Airlines, visit [www.regionalexpress.com.au](http://www.regionalexpress.com.au); for Great Southern Rail “The Ghan” from Adelaide or Alice Springs, visit [www.gsr.com.au](http://www.gsr.com.au).

**MORE** For more information about Outback travel or other destinations in Australia, contact South Australian Tourism at (888) 768-8428 or visit [www.southoz.com](http://www.southoz.com); also visit Tourism Australia at [www.australia.com](http://www.australia.com).

