

Hidden Outback Transcript

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● Outback Experience: 14,000km on foot through the Outback

Swiss traveller and writer Sarah Marquis takes us on her personal journey through the Outback: a solo journey of inspiration and adventure.

Sarah Marquis, Swiss adventurer: Australia has been really close to my heart for many years. I chose to walk, to do a discovery, to travel with my two feet. It's been twenty years, and I'm walking all over the world for the same reason: to be in nature and discover life through the most natural way. The most natural design that we can have, walking. The perfect speed.

I started to dream about Australia a year before I started walking. That's a year of preparation. I'm from Switzerland, I live in the Alps. I used that terrain to train. It was really practical for me in any season really. In preparation for a year I used endurance training which was really interesting for me to train my body in a soft way: one step after the other because I was going to start walking with thirty kilograms on my backpack, so it has to be a really slow process. Your body reacts straight away if you are pushing the body too much. So, one day after another. I put five kilograms in my backpack. A month later I put six kilograms. A month later I put seven kilograms. At the end of the first year of training you get to the stage when you actually can carry thirty kilograms. For that journey, I also gained fifteen kilograms on top of my actual weight because I'm carrying a thirty kilogram backpack so that's half of my weight – I needed to put some weight on. My medical guy said 'you have to be prepared for everything. I'm going to teach you how to stitch yourself in case you've got a problem.' Also I had preparation for what I was going to find in the outback. The plants and everything. I learned by heart five hundred plants. The nutrition, it's a big part of my planning. As you know, in Australia, especially in the centre, you find different species, particularly the reptiles. For that purpose I went to see a really good specialist. He taught me about snakes and tried to find a solution of living with them in harmony and not against them. A year later I got to Australia, with my brother, who was in charge of all the re-supply points...

All the preparation was not finished yet because I needed to find a topographic map, like army maps, for every square that I was going to walk in. So it's worth 8000 Swiss Francs, which is £6000, of topographic maps.

Every three to four months I had a re-supply point.

I had to test how to survive in a desert area. The most important thing is the water, of course. There's a few little tricks, but there is a really good one. You dig a hole in the ground and put a plastic bag on top. It's transpiration between the night time and the day time. You can collect a bit of water in the morning. There's another solution. You take a plastic bag and wrap it around a tree, so it's like a sauna. You can collect the water from the tree in the plastic. That's another trick. Really practical during the day time. So that's two ways of collecting water when there's not any water at all.

So what am I going to carry all the time in that big backpack? It's a few different things. To start with, I make one flytrap, like that. It's really practical for catching flies for protein. I've got something that was for the garden originally that I could use to catch birds. Then there's the slingshot for the birds also, and I had another thing with me that was really useful – a blowgun. Head lamp, pharmacy, water pump. Everything is really light. Has to be really light. It's all titanium, my pots and cups. The most heavy material is the topographic maps, the tent, and I've got a container for the water that can carry 12 litres of water at one time, and I've got hard sacks with me. Really practical to dig a hole in the desert area.

One day, it's the 20th June, my birthday. It was my thirtieth birthday actually. So I decided what I was going to do for my birthday: sit in front of the telly eating chocolate? Or doing something really

important things in the desert. To cook them, you don't cut through them, like with chicken or fish where you open everything and clean everything. We don't do that here. We open here a little bit with a little stick and take the guts out. Then we cook it whole. Make a fire, cook it in the sand and put the sand on top. All the juice inside, the hydration, stays inside. The hydration goes inside your body. That's really important. We'll see more detail about that later. Then here, the poisonous snakes. We've got sixteen deadly snakes in the world, fourteen of them in Australia. So, when I went to see the specialist in Lausanne in Switzerland, he said to me 'Sarah, you're lovely. But you've got no idea about snakes. I can't even picture myself giving you any tips about them because it takes a lifetime to know how to deal with those snakes. It would be really dangerous for you to get close to those snakes.' What he did, actually, was find a solution for me to kill them from far away with a blowgun. I was able to eat snakes with the blowgun.

Then, we've got the navigation. I'm not a GPS person, more a map person. The GPS uses a lot of battery. I had a solar panel with me to save every little bit of energy that I could have. When you navigate with a map you are always wrong, not the map. With a computer, you can say 'oh, the computer is wrong' when you get upset. The map is never wrong. It's always the human factor that is wrong. So everything was done with a map. If you're reading nature carefully, if you read your map carefully... I used to read my map at night time for hours and hours to keep my map in my head to know where to go. Sometimes you have to climb trees to know where to go. You have to use the landscape.

So we're going to the next point. Katoomba. We're going to walk here a bit closer to civilisation, because we're going to walk on the Great Dividing Branch. That's the longest walk between two points. It's 4000 kilometres.

So, as we can see I've been prepared for all that trip. But you can never be prepared 100 percent. You can be prepared but then you have to let it go. So, what happened that day, I was on the top of that ridge and I saw a few cattle away on the bottom. I thought if it's cattle it has to be water, because a cow has to drink two times a day. There must be water around. So from the top of that ridge I walked down and there was a really rough, old, dusty farm. It looked really abandoned, there was no one around. Empty. So I opened the really old fence and there was obviously nobody there. So I looked in at the windmill and walked in really confident, and a guy came. A huge really rough guy, said 'what are you doing there!', yelling at me, tattoos everywhere. I was a bit scared because I was so sure of myself that there was nobody there. So I said 'water, water, that's all I need, water!' because I was a bit scared. He said 'go in the back, there's a tank there with water. Take it and just get out of here.' So I got my backpack from my back, put the water in my twelve litres container. I was so happy to have twelve litres of water - it's a lot! I was so happy, and I was looking at him... a bit scary though. Then, I was nearly ready to put my backpack on my back, I saw the dog. Really tiny, had the lead on, his head was down, so sad! I looked at the dog, looked at the farmer again and I noticed that he had a gun on his shoulder. Then, I realised what could happen. So it was two seconds. I put my backpack on, stole the dog, and ran away! I was walking with the 30kg backpack, the dog, looking at the farmer at the same time. The farmer was yelling at me 'what are you doing? You're going to have so much trouble with that dog!' As a woman, I'm a bit spontaneous, you know.

So, minutes later, we stopped running. I started talking to that dog. I realised first of all that I had a dog with me now. Then, second thing, one rule only. You have to carry what you're using. So I said to him, 'you have to carry your own stuff, dear. I'm not going to carry it for you.'

I made the first backpack for him. I cut some stuff from my bag and I put it on him. Every morning that was his job. He was so proud about carrying his own stuff. His name is Joe. He's a sweetheart like you can't even imagine. He's a half-breed: half dingo and half blue heeler. He's a bit of a wild spirit. He's so sweet and he can be so wild. He really got into the journey with me. We had some good times and also some really hard times. He walked with me twelve hours a day, and he's done 12,000 kilometres with me. It was an amazing journey together. We had some tough times though.

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A little bit before that... he was like that: stuck. Couldn't go forwards, couldn't go backwards, stuck. He was looking at me with his head down, I was like 'what's going on here?'. So I put out the tarp, put him on top, and looked at his paws. There were huge sticky things going into his paws. Poor thing. He had them all over his feet. I thought 'what am I going to put on his feet?' I took everything out of my backpack and I couldn't find anything, because I've got just what I need, really, I don't have extra stuff. So I got to the point where I had a big rubber thing, and then at the bottom of my backpack I've got that little thing, as a woman, that I need once a month. 'Ah yes, I know what I'm going to do.' So I take my hygienic pad, Always pad, Alldays pad, put it under his feet, a bit of rubber around, and here we go! We crossed the desert like that. So we went through some hard times. There's always a solution somewhere.

So it's been for me a really special moment through my everyday life when I stop for my tea. I'm happy to talk to people about it here because in Switzerland they don't understand the tea-time things. So I stop and my little teapot is just what my cup can contain. So I've got once a day my little cup of tea. It's my precious time for me.

So sometimes it's better not to go out hunting because you know there's nothing out there. You have to be wise of your time, energy, you have to be conserving. So that's a special time. I woke up this morning... did anyone see the sun rise this morning? It was amazing. Really great.

The full moon. When you live in the bush for a while it's the one special time when everybody's going to party. Every little thing is moving in the bush. They're not sleeping, everybody is out there. It's a special time. So you're out there also, you're not sleeping during that time. It's a good time for hunting also.

So let's go to our next point. Those red spots, the re-supply points... what am I doing there? I'm changing all my gear. The boots are running out. For your information, a boot can go as far as 2000 kilometres. No more. You have to change after 2000 kilometres. So my average of walking 30 kilometres a day, 1000 a month, that's how we count that. So in those points, my brother comes along. It's an amazing time. I'm just like a little princess. He's cooking for me. I can talk to my family, especially my mother because she's getting anxious about what's going on in the desert. Even if she's used to it over the years, because it's been a while since I've been walking, it was still nice to talk to her.

I'm eating like a pig, basically, for three or four days. I'm getting some energy building up. You're more hungry than you think because the stomach is getting smaller. I've got with me two t-shirts, one pants, four underwear and four pairs of socks. That's all. So what happens when you finish the fourth pair of socks? You realise that the first one was not that smelly! You go back to the first one. Then you're kind of happy to use the second one. And hopefully when you get to the fourth one, you turn them around and start again. That's a good trick. Between those two re-supply points I can't wash myself at all. Water is so precious that you don't use water to wash yourself.

Then, obviously when you walk you use your feet, that was the first supply point (slide). It happened at the first bit. I realised that my boots can't go further away than 2000 kilometres. After about 2000 kilometres they go a bit fluffy and the structure goes away so you get blisters everywhere. So I used the chicken sewing lessons there. But then, you have to get used to the pain. When I had those things I stitched myself it was so painful that I tried to sleep with the boots on. I'd wake up in the morning and it was a really bad idea – it was like a soup inside. So then, I'd take them off at the end of the day. It was even worse – I couldn't put them on the next day. It was even more painful. Then I found the perfect solution. I realised that it's only painful when you stop. When the blood doesn't get the message that you're walking anymore and the pain goes to your brain. When you stop you feel it, but when you walk you don't feel that much. Like a lot of things it's common sense. So what happens when you have to stop, you don't stop. You drink water, you look at the landscape, you take a picture, but you don't stop. You have to stop once at the end of the day but it's alright.

So the next bit is a bit of a journey because Australia is also a lot to do with heat, flies, smell, wind, beauty, it's all included. When I got to that bit there it was so hot. Fifty degrees. What to do in fifty degrees – you lose too much water. I had to walk by night. It is always possible to do things, to find a way. To not lose water, not lose hydration, you have to walk by night. It's a bit harder, but whatever. So in my trip, in my seventeen months of walking, I walked six months by night.

I was talking about those things there (slide). They're a terrible thing. They're always there. When you wake up they're with you. They're there all the time. The only time they're not there is when it's night time coming and you've got the peace. It's the noise... buzz! It takes two months to get used to those flies. They're coming in your nose, eyes, ears. Not easy anymore.

So let's say we're going walking together. We're starting here. So how are we navigating this sort of landscape? We're looking at the landscape properly and we notice a little bump here. If it's the right direction approximately we're going to start walking that way. So, from here to there it's three days' walk. That's the magic thing about the desert, the outback, that red sand. You never know – you feel things are really close but it's not at all. So you discover that – you discover that proximity was not really close. Then, it was a long story, but I had a fire going on. The best time of day for me was when the heat was going down, the sun was going down and there was no noise going on. Quiet. When you get your energy is when everybody goes down to relax at that time.

Ok, let's go to Kalgoorlie. We're going to cross there a really famous flat land called Nullarbor Plain. First of all, the cops caught me here. Police stopped me there. Said 'where are you going?' 'Oh, west,' I said to them. 'West? Where west? You're not going to cross Nullarbor Plain.' I said 'oh, why not?' They said, 'are you crazy? Japanese guys are doing it by bike and are dying halfway. We're not going to let you go into that harsh land. No!' and they stopped me in the police station. And we went to the police station and I said 'you know what, I like it here!' it was the first time I'd had air conditioning in nearly a year. I said 'can I get water?' 'oh, yeah, the drinking machine is there.' I could drink water out of things... I found that really interesting. Anyway, they didn't find my joke very funny and they got pissed off with me after a while. They said 'go on, get out there. You're going to die out there after a while, we're going to find you in a doggie bag and that's your fault.'

That's how I got to the Nullarbor Plain. It's a really magic place in Australia. There's really nothing there. My mother used to say to me, 'Sarah, could you tell me why you're going up there? Because if I look at that thing there's not much there.' There's actually quite a lot there. I discovered every five hundred kilometres the nature changed completely. You have to get out there and see and touch and feel things. And when you get out there you've got friends there. Those little things... they're incredible. Marsupials get used to everything. They can adapt to everything. When they've got droughts coming on they can hold babies in them. It's incredible. Nature is incredible. And when there's a little bit of rain they can make babies, one two three babies, one after another.

I was in that area in wintertime again. It's a year now since I started walking. Once again there's nothing to eat. We understand the trick of condensation, that works really well. But then, I meet those guys (slide). A thorny devil. A little lizard like that walking like that. He's not very stable. Takes times to move from one centimetre to another. He's using the trick of condensation. He's collecting water in those spiky things. That's enough to keep him alive. Also he's eating 5000 ants a day. I like him very much. I'd just like to show you a bit of my friend there.

Then we've got those guys there (slide of camels). I was really jealous because they've got 300 litres of water on their backs and I can't have that. They were introduced in early 1900s because they used them to do the gold digging, and then they decided they didn't need them anymore. They put them in the middle of Australia thinking they were going to die, but actually they didn't. There's more than 100,000 camels inside Australia nowadays.

It's the most common question for me, 'what do you do when you've got one of those days when you're not feeling well, you've had enough of everything, sick of everything?' So on those days I used to sleep. Sleep for me is the best medicine. When you feel bad, put your pyjamas on, get into

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bed and sleep for eight hours straight. When you wake up the next day it's sunshine and you start again. That's how I went all the way around.

So we get to the last bit. Really important one because I'm going to go through the Gibson Desert. Before that, I want to show you my friend. It's the tree. Those trees, they're incredible. When you get to meet a tree in the middle of flatland it's like going back home. You feel cosy. It's like having a roof on top of your head. That kind of tree is a really rare one in the Gibson Desert. They're all really special. It's a source of energy. All smelling really good. When you're doing those things it means walking alone as a female, as a woman. So what if something happens? What is my backup plan? I don't have a backup plan. I don't have any option of a backup plan. What if I die there? That's one thing that I have to understand when I'm doing one of those things – I can die out there. I realised that all of nature works like that. The sun rises and goes down – it's like birth and death. Everything works on that cycle. Some cycles are really small, others are really long. We are all going there. By being more conscious about the time we're here... we're so lucky to be here. By understanding that moment and being able to feel it makes my life more precious every day. Nature gives me a vision of being here in one piece and happy. It's not a question about length it's about intensity. Talking about intensity in a desertic area, the outback, as we know there's not much rain. But when it does rain it's like an amazing journey starting. A little bit of rain, I'm talking about a few drops, not a shower, it's a few drops, the next day everything pops up from the ground. Every colour you can imagine, it's coming out of nowhere. It's incredible. It's like rebirth. It's really strong when you're in the middle of that you just feel it.

So now we're in the middle of Gibson Desert. And again there's not much there. But we've got those flowers. And I noticed there were some birds going around those flowers. They're going in the base of that flower. So I'm going to do the same thing. By looking at how nature does, you find a solution. It doesn't go from the reverse. We're supposed to look at nature to find the right solution for us to be able to live on, not the reverse. That's what I did. Surprisingly I found that at the base of that plant there's a really juicy sweet syrup.

See? When you think you're alone there, not really. Weird stuff happens out there. So when I get there I've got 900 dunes to go. It's not about number, it's not about kilometres, it's all about the journey. As a woman, from Switzerland, when I saw that I knew there was chocolate! You've got that sense of humour. You have to be really fluent with yourself, your capability, flexibility of understanding of what's going on around you. I'm alone all the time, so you've built that sense of humour. Important things start to be less important and you get to the basics really.

So, the best advice that I can give you is to get out there first. Take some advice, not too much. Don't get too scared of snakes, crocodiles, all those weird animals that you can find in Australia. They're all amazing! It's all amazing. It's just a matter of understanding them. Always, always when you put your shoes on in the morning, never put your shoes straight on. Always turn them before in this country. Because it's a house for spiders, scorpions, whatever – they're all crawling and going everywhere! So just turn them before you put them on because they like that.

I had only one expectation. I know when you don't have expectations you're not sad of not finding what you're looking for. So I only had one expectation. I had been reading a lot about aboriginal people. I thought about all those areas I was going through and was expecting an amazing meeting with aboriginal people. So what I saw on my way so far was the aboriginal community with the shame of alcohol consumption. They've got a lot of problems like diabetes because the whites came with white bread, all this kind of food. They had a really nice diet before, but things change. Now they've got all kinds of health issues out there. When I get to that place there, nearly the end of my trip, I thought, 'this is it. I'm not going to meet any aboriginal people.' I get to Kunawarritji. From there, I turn back to Alice Springs. We nearly made it. Nearly at the end. I was tired, I lost a lot of weight, and I started to get some lactic problems with my legs and my body was really tired. One day I was walking in the dunes area and I remember a black-out. I was going a bit dizzy and then nothing. I woke up and I heard some weird language going on. That was so abnormal. I was

by a fireplace. People were around me. Then I discovered my aboriginal family. They saved me, actually. Gave me water. And I lived with them for a while. That's my mum. The good thing about being a woman, for once, is that I went hunting with the women. So the women hunt with the women, men hunt sometimes when they're really starving, once a month basically, with men. So they're hiding under the tree when it's too hot outside. The women do a lot but we're used to that! So I was going hunting with the women and I was so proud about being able to go with those women. I'd been hunting for more than 16 months now so I was thinking, 'I'm not going to be too bad,' and I went hunting with them. So they've got big sticks, they're barefoot and they're talking loudly all the time. I was hunting like that (tiptoeing), making as little noise as possible when I was hunting by myself. These women were chatting really loudly and talking. While they were talking they were looking at their friend. They were barefoot, touching the hole, there. And then going around again, and going like that [makes clicking noise]. One. I was like 'what? What has she done?' she's got one and I haven't even seen anything. So I follow her so that next time she catches one I will know how she's done that. And she starts again talking with her friend. [clicks] Two. Anyway, she's done that two three four times. I couldn't tell you how she's done it. She knew there was something out there. She knew there was a goanna there. How did she know that? That's the mystery of that connection with nature. That's the mystery of those amazing people there. They really amaze me every second that I spend with them. They have a really big sense of humour. They're so cheerful all the time, they're laughing all the time. They're really happy persons. See that.(slide) So, look at me carefully. You're not going to see me so happy. I'm really, really happy. You know when you've got that feeling that you're in the right spot at the right moment and you're supposed to be there? That was one of those moments. So I had that really big question in me that said, 'I'm not staying there, so why aren't I leaving?' so I decided to go away and finish my trip, for one reason. To be able to talk to you guys today. To be able to share that amazing journey I went through, but mostly to see that we've got that earth beneath our feet and we belong to that earth not the other way around. We've got a real connection with that earth. We're supposed to look after her really. And one day, obviously, my feet touched really weird ground. Concrete. It was hard on my legs. And I wasn't the only one to find it weird. See how Joe is doing? (slide) It was weird. There were cars everywhere. Strong smell. The Swiss TV was there to ask me questions. She said 'so, you got there?' and I said 'it's really weird, it's green, it's smelly, it's a lot of noise there.' If you look carefully at how I speak it's difficult to speak. I started my trip with that atmosphere of thinking that I have to live the present moment. I just realised I was finishing my trip there because I recognised the street. I didn't get ready for finishing that journey really. It just hit me really badly that it's not going to be another day with amazing tea time. It's not going to be another day with amazing sunrise. But I'm going to be able to open my fridge and find food in my fridge. I'm going to be able to have a bath and look at the water coming out of the tap. So the confrontation of those two worlds hit me the last 300 metres. So I've got 17 months that I'm walking now, and I've walked 14,000 kilometres, and that's the finish point for me. And as usual, my brother is there, waiting for me.