



THE LONG PADDOCK

Droving a mob of cattle from Queensland to the Riverina along traditional public stock routes is a dusty taste of the real outback Australia. **FIONA BRUTSCHER** saddles up and hits the trail.

PHOTOGRAPHY **JOSH SMITH**



Head drover Bill Little rounding up stragglers; the herd takes a mid-afternoon watering hole break north of Narrabri (left)



Releasing cattle from an overnight holding area on the stock route south of Trangie, central NSW

SEVERAL thousand head of cattle should be pretty hard to miss. The vastness of the Australian outback, however, can put such a huge mob into perspective. A no less surprising discovery is that the stock routes of Queensland and New South Wales are busier than they've been in a decade. Much of the increased traffic is thanks to possibly the biggest cattle drive in Australian history.

The cattle were initially trucked from stations in north-west Queensland to Winton and Longreach. Then, over a period of more than six months, 70 drovers walked some 18,000 head of cattle, in a dozen separate mobs, 2000km along public stock routes from central Queensland to Uardry Station near Hay in the NSW Riverina.

South Australian multimillionaire pastoralist Tom Brinkworth made the unconventional decision to move his latest major purchase (the biggest livestock sale between a single owner and buyer in Australian history) to its destination the old-fashioned way, in the midst of a widespread drought affecting more than half of Queensland and north-western NSW. The septuagenarian farmer's vast

landholdings – more than 1,000,000ha and 100 farms with 500,000 livestock in SA, the Riverina and western NSW – meant there was no rush to get his young heifers to a saturated market. Months of contented grazing and walking would hopefully result in the herd fetching higher prices.

The stock has been under the steady hand of boss drover Bill Little, a tall, wiry man with the composure of someone who knows his place in the world – even if that place is the proverbial back o' Bourke.

THE FACT that drovers are still working in this day and age proves that the dream of the outback pioneer is alive and well. Little is living that dream. The drover's day begins before first light and finishes well after the smouldering sun has dropped beyond the horizon. Days in the saddle are long, conditions can be extreme and glimpses of civilisation few and far between.

The rewards are breathtaking vistas of the country in all its rugged beauty and the bonding experience of life on the road. The mateship between the drovers is largely expressed in good-natured ribbing and irreverent jokes at each other's expense. Speculation as to who >



Casual cowboys

Anyone can join Bill Little's team of drovers for a few days or weeks – if they can find him in the vast network of Queensland stock routes. For a droving experience that is equally adventurous, but more organised, consider the following:

+ KIMBERLEY HERITAGE CATTLE DRIVE, WA

Outback stations don't come more picture-perfect than Home Valley Station. The Faraway Downs droving scenes for Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* (2008) were filmed here, and the sweeping vistas are just as jaw-dropping in reality. On the Heritage Cattle Drive, guests explore the stark beauty of the Kimberley in the footsteps of legendary pastoralist Patsy Durack. hvstation.com.au

+ PUSH TO THE BUSH CATTLE DRIVE, VICTORIA

The first Australian cattle drives pushed the boundaries of early European settlements past their coastal comfort zone into the unknown beyond the Great Dividing Range. On Lovick's five-day Push to the Bush through the Victorian high country each December, riders negotiate mountains, forests and streams, droving a mob of bush cattle to the Jamieson River Valley. lovicks.com.au/rides

+ HERITAGE CATTLE DRIVE, VICTORIA

The Forge family farm in sub-alpine Victoria is a working cattle station that also offers riding holidays and lessons. The highlight of the year is the big cattle drive down the King Valley, followed by a team penning and cutting event. Part of the family's annual routine, it's also an opportunity to share an authentic droving experience with a maximum of 20 guests. forgesfarm.com

+ HARRY REDFORD CATTLE DRIVE, QUEENSLAND

The Harry Redford Cattle Drive takes 19 days and covers some 200km of central Queensland, following the Redford Trail between Muttaborra and Lake Dunn, via Bowen Downs and Aramac. The trail is named after Redford (aka Captain Starlight), a 19th-century cattle duffer who drove a mob of 1000 cattle along the route. Held in May (2014 drive is fully booked). harryredford.com.au



Drover Lydia Newbury pushes cattle into an overnight holding pen

Once the mob is released from its makeshift night enclosure, the animals slowly begin moving towards the next source of water, raising clouds of dust from arid earth compacted by the heavy hooves of the millions of livestock that have trampled these routes for more than a century.

Some local farmers criticised the epic drive, questioning whether the mobs should be allowed to pass through drought-stricken districts, depleting already insufficient resources. Little reasons, "The stock routes are there for everyone. They're owned by the government and if you want to ride your horse, go camping or ride your bike along the stock routes, you're welcome to use them, just like the national parks. The stock routes are like veins running throughout the state, all connected."

FROM THE BACK OF A HORSE, the "long paddock" feels like a sanctuary of sorts. Just a few kilometres from the main road, it's a world apart.

The tranquillity is enhanced by the steady pace. Riding back and forth to keep the mob moving in the right direction leaves plenty of time to take in the surroundings. Plains stretch east, fringed by the distant outline of the Great Dividing Range. In the other direction lies flat farmland as far as the eye can see. The stock routes also provide a habitat for wildlife. Inquisitive marsupials, snakes and hovering birds of prey are constant companions.

Yet it's becoming increasingly hard to find people willing to endure the hardships of the job. As Little says, "The modern person likes to have his privacy, likes to have his Saturdays and Sundays."

On the stock routes, there's no day off and little privacy. What it does offer is the opportunity to see real outback Australia and to experience the hardworking lifestyle of a bygone era.

might play Little in a film about his life culminates in a fairly unfavourable comparison to Hugh Jackman, just to ensure recent media attention doesn't go to the boss drover's head.

Visitors are given a warm Queenslander welcome, in the shape of a cold beer and a generous helping of rum, and regaled with tales of bush dentistry, confrontations with local farmers and the odd night out on the town. However, late nights are rare. No matter what time the drovers crawl into their swags, the next morning will see them rising at the crack of dawn, seven days a week. Cattle don't know hangovers, but they get thirsty, hungry and – according to stock-route regulations – have to cover a minimum of 10km every day.