

TRACKS IN THE SAND

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Steve was my buddy. He had been on an expedition across the Canadian Rockies with me in a birch bark canoe when he had lost the top part of his thumb, sawn off by a nylon rope when the canoe got caught in a vicious current. His whole top thumb joint was gone but some sort of vestigial nail was lurking and a thin crescent regrew so it looked almost normal, until you took a second glance. The accident had happened while towing the canoe through deep, ice-cold rapids. Now I was asking Steve to do some more towing, this time through the opposite terrain – dry not wet, hot not cold, in fact the hottest, driest section of the Sahara, down in the righthand corner of Egypt that borders Libya and Sudan. We would be taking turns towing a homemade trolley – four motorcycle wheels and a baseboard that carried water for ten days, over 100 litres of the stuff. Our mission: to find a lost temple deep in the Sahara.

A strange German explorer called Carlo Bergmann – Google him and you can see his amazing desert discoveries – had found evidence that ancient Egyptians had penetrated far into the Egyptian desert. Cologne University had spent 20 years looking for evidence of the Pharaohs in the desert and found precisely zero... They drove 4WDs and lived high on the hog. Carlo Bergmann had two camels and went alone, season after season,

searching for the old routes through the desert and meticulously following up clues in the manuscripts of the first explorers of the region a hundred years earlier. In one piece of research he'd found a local reference to a stone temple 18 hours southwest by camel from Dakhla oasis in southern Egypt, the place where Steve and I would start our journey. A camel caravan can average five kilometres an hour, so Bergmann reckoned on the stone temple being 90-plus kilometres into the desert – but what he found was far more intriguing. Because Bergmann was very concerned about his discovery, the exact location remained a secret. But retracing Bergmann's track, we might just get lucky....

We didn't have camels and we didn't have 4WDs. I had been in the desert only a few times and, frankly, the place scared me. Or rather camels plus desert, or cars plus desert unnerved me. I needed to keep it simple. Also, in keeping with my tightwad approach to adventure travel, I had decided manpower was the best way forward. And, to be honest, I'd also become a little bored with the clichéd image of the lone Westerner with camels or dusty jeep and existential freedom, etc. It was time to burst the bubble and what better way than a pretty ludicrous-looking trolley made in a few hours in the Cairo bazaar? The axles and wheels had been fitted to a piece of plywood I had bought for US\$5 from a scrap wood shop out near the Cairo ring road. The metal work had been fabricated late at night in a workshop that specialised in making bicycle-powered delivery vehicles – heavy-duty stuff that was reflected in the 30kg weight of the trolley. But the one thing I'd learnt in my few trips into the desert was that most of it wasn't soft sand, and this beast would roll very easily over the hard, dried-up lakebeds and gravel plains that constitute most of the Sahara. Just so long as we could get across the dune barrier....

This had been remarked upon by every desert explorer leaving Dakhla in the last hundred years. Between 10 and 20km south of the oasis was a barrier of dunes which varied in width from five to 30km, depending on where you tried to cross. The maps were not much use – they were still mostly white blanks and Google Earth just seemed like

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cheating. To me there is always a fine line in travel between ignorance and over-preparation. I often like to visit places with no map or guidebook; of course sometimes I crash and burn and miss all the great sights. But sometimes, just sometimes I stumble on something brilliant and overlooked and joyous to behold and I am the first to remark upon it. One thing is certain: when you travel without decent maps, you spend a lot more time looking at the place you're travelling through. Which is the main idea.

We drove to Dakhla along the desert road with the trolley on the roof in bits. We assembled it and left the car in the garage of a government hotel in the oasis. By mid-morning it was getting hot. Though this was early November and the cooler season should have arrived, it was still 30°C in the daytime. We now had to negotiate about 5km of sandy fields and irrigated gardens that marked the outer rim of the oasis. Every time we thought we'd finally be in the real desert, there would be another dank and reedy irrigation ditch to cross.

The dark, still slightly earthy sand was soft and dirty and the trolley sank into the surface. Our sweat was soon caked in dirt. Even though we let the tyres down until they were squidgy, we still had a hard time pulling the trolley. There was a simple rope attached to the front and, like a tethered beast, the man in front just heaved and struggled forward. We passed the last palm trees, the last bits of spiky grass and small tamarisk bushes. The stagnant smell of the irrigation ditches gave way to the dusty, almost smoky smell of the desert – very faint, almost no smell at all. The sun was going down. By the end of the first day I calculated I'd drunk ten litres of water – we had budgeted on drinking five.

Ten litres washing through your system takes out all the minerals and electrolytes. Small wonder that I was throwing up at sunset when we finally made camp behind a small conical hill, mercifully out of sight of the last dwelling and the fields.

We could look back at our own narrow-tyred tracks now cutting through clean, rather than churned-up, sand. There is a subtle shift from car tracks and messed-up sand being the norm to pristine sand

and no tracks of any kind. When, after hours of nothing, you find a single car track unspooling like two ribbons over a line of dunes it somehow looks mystical and strange, like the yellow brick road, a path somewhere important....

There are few better feelings than sipping a cup of tea in the desert while watching the sun set, the immense quiet when the wind finally dies down, the sharp and welcome chill of nightfall.

Sleeping under the stars, without a tent, I watched the slow turn of the Great Bear and Cassiopeia rotating around the pole star. It was like a clock; from their relative positions I began to be able to guess the hour. The dawn came cold and stealthy; we almost missed the moment when the sun broke the long, flat horizon in a sudden rupturing dazzle, filling all around us with instant warmth.

There was no breakfast for me but just tea with sugar. We had already evolved a system for the trolley: one at the front and one leaning/pushing on the back with the rucksack frame as a kind of handle, as if the whole trolley was some kind of giant old person's walker designed for the limping idiot at the back. The one benefit of being at the back was you could alter the angle at which your feet hit the ground. This was supremely important if you wanted to avoid the hot-stinging nightmare of a full-sole blister, popped but quickly refilling.... Steve meanwhile was fine. He told me he never got blisters, which, annoyingly, seemed to be true.

All too soon, we were at the dune barrier.

Our luck was in as the north-facing side was hard-packed and only the flip side was loose sand – which we descended by lowering the trolley by the rope, one guiding it to make sure it didn't flip over. The trolley ran well on the hard sand – I say hard though perhaps a 4WD drive would have cracked through the crust and sunk, but for our comparatively light trolley with under-inflated tyres it was not a problem. The great German desert explorer Gerhard Rohlfs made much of the difficulties of this set of dunes – which he crossed with twenty camels in 1873 – but then he did have some sponsors at home

he needed to impress with his hardships. Amazingly – to us – we crossed in about three hours, onto a completely flat plain of hard sand that seemed to stretch forever. ‘I think I can see another line of dunes in the distance,’ said Steve. Well, maybe.

The hard sand gave way to a surface of flattened rock that was sharp in places. It was hard to tell, as it was all white in colour and the sun was burning down all white. I was drinking far less than yesterday – mostly as hot sweet tea, which worked much better than simply swigging from the bottle. But somehow we managed to puncture a tyre.

We had a spare and a spare inner tube and I quickly changed the punctured one. But when I tried to use the foot pump, it creaked twice and exploded – sand had blown inside its innermost workings, and pumping down hard on it broke it away from its frame. It was useless and unfixable. By some strange happenstance I had thrown an old bicycle pump into my bag but with no connector. So we still couldn't inflate the tyre.

Soft tyres in the desert are good. They keep you afloat on softer sand. But flat tyres are useless, terrible in fact. The hard wheel pushes through them into the surface. The tyre skids round the wheel and gets destroyed. If we couldn't re-inflate the tyre we'd be in trouble.

Of course the connector from the foot pump was a different size – but I saw that the end piece – if I cut it off – could be jammed with tape into the bicycle pump. We had duct tape and surgical tape and using both in liberal quantities, I fashioned a new and barbaric pump connector. The tyre re-inflated and we were on our way. This simple mechanical fix was almost the most dramatic point in the whole journey – when you're all alone and far from home, that's often the case.

But where was the lost temple? And all the Stone Age artefacts I had promised Steve? In my previous sojourns into the desert I had always found perfectly chipped stone tools. In the hotel where we stayed there was a pile of such tools found by other tourists. I scanned the ground in front of me, hardly looking ahead. Nothing. Not that there was a huge amount to see in the distance either – a few black bumps far away, which we steered for, using the GPS as a compass heading southwest as Bergmann had.

As I hinted earlier, it wasn't a temple he found. The cathedral-sized lump of rock, roughly worked around its base with a sort of dry stone wall, actually turned out to be a ‘water mountain’. This was a water reservoir and storage point in the last days before the desert completely dried out around 3500 years ago. On the walls of the water mountain were fifth-dynasty hieroglyphic carvings alongside a good number of earlier nomadic rock art; this was a unique site in Egypt, showing the demise of one culture and the rise of another. It also demonstrated that the extent of pharaonic rule was much greater than previously imagined.

Things were going easier now. We had a routine: one man at the front for 45 minutes and then at the back for 45 minutes. Unlike an hour, which sounds quite long if the going is hot and blistering, 45 minutes sounds almost bearable. Slowly we made progress. Going around 4km an hour, we made 30km on the second day.

The landscape began to change. We entered a white space on the map that was actually riven with dry, sandy canyons. We kept a lookout for rock art but the rock was all rotten and shattered by heat and cold. Rock art, as I'd later discover, was usually on unexposed or north-facing flanks of harder limestone where it could not be eroded; around here it was all reddish crumbly sandstone. And still no tools. Steve was cheerful, though, and towing well. We had reduced our water intake to about four litres a day – at least half in tea and cooking. It seemed that the body was fooled into absorbing water better if it was part of food or a hot drink than if you just glugged it cold (or tepid). Maybe plain water sent a signal that water was not scarce and it got diverted into cooling via sweat. Or maybe it was adding sugar and salt that helped. Either way we were inadvertently copying the Bedouin way of dealing with thirst as they rarely drink unadorned water.

Another day, another camp. We used the boxes of water (we had boxes full of water bottles) as protection from the wind for cooking. In the afternoon the wind could suddenly get up, only to die out around 9pm. Sitting round a tiny crackling fire of sticks picked up while walking, with the wind howling and stars visible with incredible

nearness and clarity above, is my memory of the desert night. When author and desert pilot Antoine de Saint-Exupéry called his memoir *Wind, Sand and Stars*, he got it absolutely right.

Walking on sand has a certain nightmarish quality about it. Every footfall is the same. The only variation is whether it is hard or soft sand. Soft sand becomes something feared and loathed as you lose power with every step sinking in. And every footstep being the same, the sand moulding in the same way, means the very same part of the foot gets rubbed time and again. No matter how slowly you walk in shoes or boots, your feet get sweaty and the skin becomes soft, as soft as having sat in a warm bath for an hour. The damage is terrible! Next time I will definitely wear open-toed sandals.

Steve said he was OK. He took off his boots and socks at every rest stop, though, wiggling his toes in the dry sand. Maybe that was his secret.

The air first thing in the morning was always cool and 100 percent clear. We were now almost 100km from any kind of road or human habitation and must have been inhaling the cleanest and most refreshing air on earth. Champagne air....

We entered a region of hundreds of small, 100-metre-high conical hills. It was like a place of giant termite mounds. They were made of shale, sometimes still with a limestone cap that had prevented their complete erosion. The shadows cast by the hills provided welcome relief. Steve, with his excellent eyesight, spotted *alam* – stone markers hundreds of years old that marked the old camel routes through the desert. Those routes are gone now but the markers remain. One of Bergmann's techniques was to follow such *alam* tracks and see what lay on either side. It seems that the ancient caravan routes lay on top of even more ancient Egyptian trade routes through the desert. Now we were getting somewhere.

But after another day of toil, the alams seemed to have vaporised in the clear desert air. There was nothing now, no tracks of any kind. Just sand. Small two-metre dunes. More flat sand. A vast bed of compacted gravel. Then we saw something rather chilling: our own tracks, our

own wheel marks – two narrow lines suddenly crossing our path. It was straight out of Robinson Crusoe. We must be totally lost, we thought. The GPS (admittedly an old model) must be completely wrong.... We're going to die out here.

But a closer look at these tracks showed that though they were cut through the gravel surface, they were filled with white sand, fine white sand that had blown into them over ages. I measured the width – though the tyres were as narrow as ours, the gauge was marginally wider, only an inch or two, but enough for me to know these were not our tracks. They had been made much, much earlier. I had read about tracks in gravel lasting in the desert for a hundred years or more and these looked like those made by a very light small car – similar to an Austin Seven or a Baby Ford. Sure enough, I later discovered that in 1934 the Ford Motor Company had sponsored several adventurous explorers to take their 'baby' Fords deep into the Sahara.

The ancient car tracks extended into nothingness on either side. Ahead there was a shimmering mirage, a kind we had become quite used to where castle-like shapes moved each time we tried to fix their position. We had come far enough. Made our own track. Maybe that was enough.

A year later I went back into the same desert with some Bedouin driving a 4WD. We were there to drop water for a camel trip a friend was making. The experienced Bedouin driver tried but couldn't get through the dune barrier. We made a big swinging detour around the end of the dunes some 50km west of the oasis. Quite by chance we found a fresh track. This was, of course, unusual. No one came into this part of the desert, not even the smugglers from Libya who preferred a more northerly route. The track was maybe a week old, the Bedouin said. We followed it because that is what you do in the desert: tracks are always less unpredictable than open country. Hours later I saw something I knew – an outline of rock I had seen on Bergmann's photographs. It was the water mountain. The tracks had been made by the Cologne University team Bergmann had recently told about his discovery. But it felt good to find it by chance, following tracks in the sand.