

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR ANCESTORS – ESTABLISHING A SENSE OF PLACE

David Jenns

Affiliation:

IndyACT – Managing Director, Libra. david.jenns@libra-uae.com

Introduction

When I first arrived in the UAE, as an instructor at the Higher Colleges of Technology in Al Ain in 1996, I became fascinated by the desert and the world of the bedou, the nomads that roamed the vast seas of sand by camel before the arrival of the car. However, with the discovery of oil in the region and the onset of modernization, many of the traditions and heritage activities have been lost to today's youth who are caught up with the exponential growth of an oil rich country, wholeheartedly keen to embrace 21st century values. Many of the young men and women of today's GCC are in danger of losing their connection with their natural environment and from traditions such as riding camels.

The UAE has diverse natural terrain that spans from fjord like coasts, spectacular mountains, savannahs and great sands seas that is synonymous with the region. These areas were once abundant with predators including Arabian wolves and leopards, and hares, gazelles, bustards and eagles. The rate of construction and development has been so extensive, vast areas have been consumed by the beast of progress. Many of the youth remain in these smart cities somehow cocooned from the natural world situated a few kilometres away from the urban sprawl.

While working at Sharjah Higher College of Technology I devised a programme that attempted to promote national identity, re-establish contact with local heritage and to expose young Nationals to the diverse and outstanding natural beauty of the UAE. By September I had received approval to start planning to lead traditional camel expedition or "Qafilah" across the country. Aptly titled "In The Footsteps of Our Ancestors" the journey retraces a traditional camel caravan from an ancient harbor nestled amongst the Fjords of the Hajar Mountains to Sharjah one of the earliest settlements in the Northern Emirates.

So, as the sun broke on the morning of Saturday 22nd November, along with nine students and twelve camels, dressed in traditional kandorah and gutrah, we rode out of Dibba Al Hisn to embark on our historic journey. Prior to the start of the expedition, quite remarkably, only one of the students had experience of riding a camel. By day one all had become competent in riding and had been given lessons in navigation and basic campcraft. With camels it is important that, where possible, the caravan is single file, as soon as more than two ride abreast a race tends to break out, subtly at first which then leads to a full gallop and chaos. We learnt this very early on in the first day and we were very keen not to repeat it involuntarily. We headed along a wide floodplain into the intimidating Hajar Mountains, lunch was egg noodles cooked under the welcoming shade of an acacia. Although considered winter, temperatures still could hit over twenty five degrees celcius during the hottest part of the day.

Thirty five kilometers and seven agonizing hours of riding, we reached our first campsite, a plateau in the Hajar overlooking the plains thousands of feet below. We set about hobbling the camels, striking camp and preparing food. Over dinner around the "majlis" we discussed our achievements and what we had learnt from this experience. In the tradition of the forefathers, life revolved around the rhythm of the day, breaking camp before sunrise and traveling across the desert through the day pitching camp as the sunsets.



Fig 1. Dawn in the Savannah (©Brad Moody).



Fig2. Author discussing the next day's journey (©Brad Moody).

On the sixth days we reached the University City, our final destination, to a procession of thousands of students from the various college campuses. They had been kept updated by GPS transponders uploaded onto the expedition webpage and by the students daily blog uploaded by a satellite modem stowed on one of the camels. The expedition had covered over 160km of the most challenging terrain in the world and had left only footprints behind, similar to those of our ancestors. . . .

Programmes such as these have created a debate within the local community on the importance of maintaining connections with the past. The students that participated gained a great deal by experiencing the hardships endured by their families, but it also gave them insights to the diversity and beauty of Arabia.

David Jenns has been developing and managing Physical Education Programs in United Arab Emirates for almost twelve years. In 2004, David was elected as a Fellow of The Royal Geographical Society, for his efforts in developing a wilderness education and outdoor leadership programme with UAE National Students in The Abu Dhabi Emirate. He is currently Managing Director of Libra and Director of Education for Absolute Adventure Education.



Fig3. Campfire in the high dunes (©Brad Moody).