

TEXAS HIGHWAYS—CAMEL TREK—MALLORY

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Caravan of Dreams

Camel Trekking through Big Bend Ranch State Park

As our caravan crosses the Chihuahuan Desert of Big Bend Ranch State Park, I see why Jefferson Davis liked camels.

In 1855, the American secretary of war (later president of the Confederacy) formed an experimental camel corps to explore the desert Southwest gained from Mexico after the 1846-1848 American-Mexican War. He shipped 74 camels from North Africa to Texas. Headquartered at Camp Verde, near Kerrville, the sure-footed, hardy beasts made two expeditions, one to Big Bend and one to California.

Sure-footed? “Oh yeah,” I think, loping down a rocky slope. Hardy? “Ditto,” I muse, guzzling canteen water under a sweltering sun. My camel, Richard, and the caravan’s five other gelded male, one-humped dromedaries can go a week without water or food.

Outbreak of the Civil War quashed Davis’ camel campaign. But, some 140 years later, camels are back...thanks to former zookeeper Doug Baum.

For years, Doug dreamed of teaching people about camels and their Southwestern legacy. In 1995, he brought camels from Australia to form the Texas Camel Corps, based in Valley Mills, near Waco. With a current herd of six camels, Doug entertains and educates folks at schools, churches, frontier forts,

and private events. He leases them for movies and commercials. He even uses them in an Arizona at-risk youth program called VisionQuest.

In 1999 Doug also began offering camel treks across this ruggedly beautiful 280,000-acre state park. It's the same terrain traversed in 1859-1860 by the U.S. Camel Corps' Lt. William Echols and his intrepid cameleers. Intrepid?

Us greenhorn cameleers? Hardly. Phil Jensen's an East Texas rancher. Andrée Richmond's an Arizona artist. Central Texan Jay McGranahan is out on a lark between jobs.

Most intrepid is Sue Kubacki, who flew with 16-year-old son Andrew from Detroit, Michigan to what looks like the surface of the moon with cactus.

Sue rides lead camel, Chewbacca, named for the *Star Wars* character. That makes her lead guinea pig, first among us to mount a prone camel. "Say 'couch' (pronounced iKSSSHHH). He'll get up," Doug, ever the jocular guide, says with a sly grin. "Get on. Hang On!" he shouts as one "couch" jolts Chewbacca's derrier skyward, and his front unfolds like a spring-loaded jackknife. Sue hangs on!

Camels originated in North America 40 million years ago, then migrated across the Bering Sea land bridge to Asia, Arabia, and North Africa. Some may spit and bite, but ours seem adorable. They eat apples from our hands. They nuzzle us like 2,000-pound puppies. And their gait (right feet step together, then left feet step together) rocks us like a ship at sea—hence the nickname, "ship of the desert." Besides, they wear an apparently permanent silly smile.

In any event, I'm *sure* my eight-foot-high camelback perch is *the way* to experience this prickly landscape.

Throughout our two-day, 11-mile trek, Doug and fellow guide Steven Evans of Uvalde talk about the park's ranching heritage, geology, and wildlife. We saunter past creosote bushes, sotol, ocotillo, and lechugilla. We stir up mule deer and javelinas. During lunch, we hike to Leyva Canyon's water pools (*tinajas*) and Spanish-era Indian pictographs.

Our overnight camp is an idyllic, dream-like setting called *Papalotito Escondido* (Little Hidden Windmill), site of a working wooden windmill from the 1920s. As the sun sets and a full moon rises, we devour guacamole, stuffed jalapeños, chicken fajitas, and Dutch-oven cobbler. Then, around a roaring campfire, Steven on fiddle and Doug on guitar serenade us with Texas tunes, Irish jigs, and even Sixties-era Motown sounds, in honor of "Motor City" Sue.

Sue says she'll cherish her Texas camel adventure. I concur.

I'll remember the camel's sway, the cameleers' camaraderie, the fiddle's melody, and Doug's propensity to kiss his camels and call them "sweetie." And I'll remember the enduring image of camel and rider once again silhouetted against the Big Bend sky.

