



Sahara crossing

by Christy Henchie

In the previous edition of SA Horseman, we placed a letter by Christy Henchie, telling of their plans to cross Africa from north to south on horseback. The following report was filed after they had crossed the Sahara.

Having never been in the desert before, I had very little idea what to expect of the Libyan Sahara. I suppose I always had a romantic image of rolling sand dunes, palm trees and oases offering sanctuary from the heat. As we set out from Ajadabiya to cross 400 km of Sahara to Tobruk, I discovered that this was far from true.

Our team has five members – three horses and two riders. We are currently on a horseback expedition from the most northern point of Africa to the most southern point. The riders are myself, Christy Henchie, horse fanatic, and the man behind this trip, Billy Brenchley, a farrier. The horses are Chami, an eight-year-old Tunisian Barb, Ennahali, a six-year-old Tunisian Arab/Barb, and Rahaal, an eight-year-old Libyan mix-bred pony.

This ride across this stretch of the Sahara was to be our most difficult test yet. To help our team was a Libyan man, Abdul Nassir. He carried water, food and equipment in his vehicle. Our original intention had been to ride the 400 km in as short a time as possible, averaging 40-50 km a day. However, after the first 30 km of difficult going, we came to a full stop. Rough, sharp stones littered the hard ground with no room for a hoof between them. This forced us onto the abrasive tar where we had to cope with speeding overloaded cars and many large trucks thundering past us. The horses in this area are shod with a full metal plate, but our three horses are barefoot and this harsh terrain was not easy to cross.

Days one and two

On our second day's ride my horse, Chami, injured himself. He pushed on through the pain barrier and I didn't even know he was hurt until we stopped for the night. This is just a small indication of how the Barb breed aims to please. The pain and stress combined with the extreme heat caused him to dehydrate. That night Chami was reluctant to eat, but he drank relatively well and we were able to give him some electrolytes.

Injury time-out

The next day, Chami was dead lame in all four feet. The dehydration had limited the blood circulation to his hooves. This, and the fact that his soles had been chiselled out by the terrain we had had to cross, and that he was still recovering from previous injuries and postural problems, gave him a mild form of laminitis. We were forced to rest for two days to give him time to recover sufficiently to carry on. We treated him with electrolytes and anti-inflammatory painkillers. He really struggled with the heat. We built him a tent to protect him from the sun and created some airconditioning by wrapping him in a hessian sack, soaking it with water and leaving the wind to cool him down. This was very effective and brought his temperature down from 39,6°C to 38,9°C.

We decided that it would be best not to ride Chami for the rest of the desert crossing. This left us with a bit of a dilemma because Rahaal, our pack pony, was still recovering from his castration and a previous shoulder injury. We were left with no option but to share Billy's trusty horse, Ennahali. One of us rode and the other walked. Our rate of movement slowed considerably and we only managed 30 km a day, 15 km in the morning and 15 km in the evening.

We tried to move in the cool of the day and were on the road before sunrise every morning and after sunset every night. In the middle of the day we rested under a cover made out of feed sacks. The heat was intense, averaging 45°C every day and creating shimmering mirages in the distance. The wind was a blessing, although it blew into a raging sandstorm every afternoon, blurring our vision and covering everything with grit and dust. Even though we had a support



Water, beautiful water!

vehicle, our water usage was limited to only drinking water for both horse and human. Each night the anxiety of trying to find a patch of sand or ground soft enough for the horses to lie down on and rest, ate away at us. However, being visited by the small, bushy-tailed desert foxes was reward enough.

Oasis in the desert

We rested again at the petrol station at the 200 km mark that amazingly, had a patch of green grass. The horses dived into the grazing, thinking they were in seventh heaven! With unlimited water made available to us, this was definitely an oasis, although not the kind I had imagined. It took us 19 days to cross the Sahara instead of the intended eight, but we arrived safely in Tobruk – a little tired, tanned and smelly. The horses recovered quickly and will be stronger both physically and mentally after their first desert experience.

As the saying goes, things are not always as they seem. The Sahara may be of harsh terrain, with no trees or plants to speak of and rock stretching as far as the eye can see. But it is also a place of beauty. Every day sunrise and sunset paint the horizon with vibrant colours. The night sky is studded with diamonds and the moon is so close you can almost touch it. It leaves one with a sense of awe and the realisation that the desert must be treated with the respect that it deserves.

(Follow the progress of Christie and Billy and their three horses on their website, www.africanhoofprints.com) **SAH**