Desert queen

When Paula Constant decides to stretch her legs, she doesn't just head to the corner store. Now at the halfway point of her mammoth trek across the Sahara, she pauses to reflect on her unlikely journey

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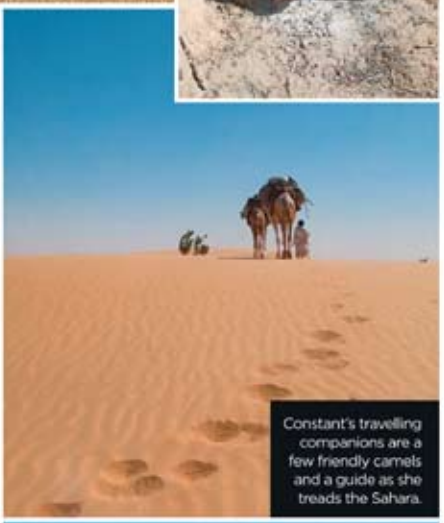

Constant's travelling companions are a few friendly camels and a guide as she treads the Sahara.

Mauritania is a northwest African nation of one million square kilometres. Yet a mere three million people call the Islamic republic home, perhaps because its location on the western extremity of the Sahara makes it mostly a dry biscuit of sand, rock and clay – baked at temperatures of up to 49 degrees.

It's also where a 33-year-old Australian woman attempting to cross the world's largest desert on foot nearly perished almost before she had begun.

Ever since she was a little girl in Mansfield, near Victoria's Mount Buller, Paula Constant had dreamt of far-removed landscapes. "The African desert and Arabian nights seemed impossibly exotic," she says.

But the gale-strength sandstorm she encountered in November last year was beyond her wildest imaginings. Only four weeks before, on October 26, flanked by an Arab guide and three cargo-lugging camels, she had set off on her audacious walking odyssey from the Mauritanian coast city of Nouadhibou. It was to be a 7900km journey that would bring her out at the other side of the desert, in Cairo, around September this year.

Just 700km into the trek, she was hit by that sandstorm. "My guide, Khabuss, was an ex-military man who walked incredibly fast, often 8km per hour to my 5–6km," recalls Constant, now back in Melbourne on an enforced break after rebel violence in Niger stalled her adventure. "After we entered some dunes, the sandstorm gained force and visibility lessened dramatically. I was unable to walk as quickly as Khabuss and very soon lost sight of him altogether.

"At that point, I began following the trace left by the camel he was leading. Unfortunately, that camel was also the one carrying all of our water.

"After about an hour, I estimated him to be at least 2km ahead of me," Constant continues. "The wind was furious and I was struggling to find the camel's tracks. I was frankly terrified. No matter how much I trusted Khabuss, no matter how well he knew the desert, nobody can beat a sandstorm. I didn't know whether to stop and wait for him – but for how long could I survive with no water? Right then, I knew that dying was a real possibility."

Clinging to the two remaining camels, Constant chose to push on. It was another two hours before she caught up with Khabuss. He said he had never doubted her ability to successfully tail him. She was thirsty, exhausted and shaken.

"I was aware that I had landed myself in an unnecessarily dangerous situation, and vowed it wouldn't happen again," she says. "I made it clear that from then on, the maximum distance between my guide and me would be no more than 100m."

Why would you do it? Why, as a relatively unfit primary-school teacher with no second language or expedition experience, would you contemplate traversing the harshest environment on earth on foot?

Constant's case is less a search for meaning and more a mission of doing. Still, having eclipsed the halfway mark – clocking up 4200km to the village of Tillia in Niger – she is happy to admit that navigating the peaks and troughs of a relentless dune sea can't help but crystallise one's perspective, sometimes in the most surprising ways.

"During the walk, I don't look in a mirror for a month at a time," she says. "I have my hair braided when I'm in the towns, so it always looks OK. Maybe it's because you're concentrating more on how you feel than how you look, but I never feel >

more beautiful than I do in the desert."

Deeply tanned, Constant appears genuinely overwhelmed – and more than a touch relieved. The first 25 years of her life, she explains, were blotted by dissatisfaction. Despite an active childhood spent riding horses and competitively skiing and rowing, she and convention were never a good fit. "I felt very enclosed by school and systems," says Constant, the second of three children.

She loved to write, fantasised about travel, and would bury herself in the memoirs of explorers. But high-school career counsellors struggled to manifest her passions into options. In 1993, she dropped out of an arts degree and spent the following few years floating through Melbourne share houses, working transient bar and restaurant jobs.

"I was feeling defeated and pretty lost," she says. "I just felt like I'd achieved nothing and was going nowhere." She then enrolled in a Bachelor of Education by correspondence.

Around the same time, she met her husband-to-be, chef Gary Constant. In 1999, six months after their wedding, the couple headed to Broome, Western Australia. "All I'd ever wanted to do was travel and write books," she says. "And Gary had always aspired to be a photographer. We supported ourselves with odd jobs in Broome but, after a year there, we could see that every man and his dog were bumming around the Kimberley in a four-wheel-drive, trying to find those magic pictures. There were more books on outback Australia than you could poke a stick at."

One morning, as the pair discussed venturing abroad, Africa leapt into Constant's thoughts. She consulted the internet, trawling the blogs of recent Western adventurers to the continent. "The focus seemed to be their car. Whether their axle had broken or the tyres had gone down. They didn't seem to meet any Africans. And while they'd photographed the continent, they'd done it through the car window. They didn't experience it."

A month later, Constant came across a photo of Sir Wilfred Thesiger in his book, *The Last Nomad*, which chronicled his four decades in Africa's remote deserts. The Englishman, who spent five years living among the Bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula's Great Sandy Desert (Rub'al Khali), travelled on foot or by animal transport, such as camel. "The moment I read Thesiger's book, I knew it was what I wanted to do," recalls Constant.

For three years Constant and her husband lived in England, planning and saving. Having qualified as a primary-school teacher, she found a job teaching at a tough north London school. Gary was with her for the preliminary sector of the adventure, a mammoth training walk that kicked off on August 1, 2004. Over 12 months and 5000km, they walked together from London to southern Morocco. The next stage would be a 3000km trek south through the deserts of Morocco and Western Sahara.

"The walk was always about the west-to-east Sahara crossing," Constant says. "But the political situation didn't allow us to go east into Algeria from Morocco – the border is shut. So what I wanted to do was walk down to the border of Mauritania, near where we could start. I thought we could learn the language, culture and camel handling."

Yet, six weeks into this phase, she and Gary split. They have since divorced. Constant doesn't blame the walk. "It was more that our marriage was falling apart on a whole lot of levels," she says. "Still, it came as a shock when he said he wanted to leave the walk. I said, 'The marriage as well, or just the walk?' He said, 'Well, I'm not sure.' I was pretty stunned."

She agonised over whether to carry on. She had paid two reliable guides more than $10,000 to steer her to Dakhla in the Western Sahara, not far from Mauritania. But she was now a solitary woman at the mercy of an alien and unpredictable world.

"Eventually, egoistically, or somewhat stupidly, I felt there was something rather romantic and dramatic about a woman striding through the desert alone." Five months later, she had completed her desert 'prequel'. And so the real journey could begin.

The Sahara, more than nine million square kilometres in total, can be breathtaking. "The dunes can change from white to red," Constant says, "as though somebody drew a line down the centre."

But most extreme of all is the irony that, in the heart of such extraordinary spaciousness, Constant never felt alone. "My joke is that as soon as you brew tea, you'll see a turban pop over the hill," she says.

Tuareg and other ethnic nomads still ply the desert with herds of sheep and goats, utilising oases for water, trade and provisioning stops. As many as six families might be camped in a spot, and social exigencies such as the sharing of tea and exchange of small gifts are mandatory.

"In this culture, personal space is non-existent," Constant says. "It's a communal life and the difficult thing, too, is that I feel isolated within another culture. I've learnt a bit of Arabic, but you can't express yourself; you're constantly struggling to understand the conversation and you're always answering the same questions."

Her guides are generally nomads, whom she hires en route and who stay with her for up to 800km. On the whole, she has been lucky with her choices, bar one. She sacked her first guide, just 280km in – his method of lashing her baggage to their camels resulted in her laptop and RBGAN (a high-speed device enabling web and email access via satellite) crashing, irreparably, onto a rocky surface.

Constant acknowledges her guides could pose a more menacing threat than plain ineptitude. "I think with every guide, certainly the inference is that if I were up for a sexual relationship, they would be, too," she says. "But normally that can be deflected with a good sense of humour. And I know it would be the height of disrespect for a Muslim man to force himself on a lone woman.

"The other thing is I have a nine-inch blade Tuareg knife. And I guess, if they tried it, I'd go for them."

She prefers to focus on the benefits of a good guide: a compass-perfect knowledge, protection and, in effect, a human passport. "He speaks the dialect of the region and normally knows most of its nomads – so he's your access into tents and can act as a barrier between you and other people as well."

Constant recounts one instance when a car-load of shadowy figures "pulled up in front of us and jumped down, ostentatiously carrying their guns". Demanding money, the men punched her young guide several times. Constant was forced to hand over the local currency equivalent of $500.

"There have been a lot of times when unsavoury characters have come into my camp. You know they're bandits because they have fancy turbans, robes, sunglasses and nice watches," she says. "But I can honestly say that I've never felt my life was in danger. People involved in contraband smuggling aren't really interested in tourists."

Constant has managed to sidestep innumerable remnant landmines from past internal conflicts and even stave off the odd deadly snake. But when she crossed the border from Mali into Niger, in early May, she was not in good health, suffering an acute recurrence of a urinary tract infection. She was treated in hospital, but not before police had picked her up and shuffled her on through diplomatic hands, all the way up to the Minister of Interior, Albade Abouba. The upshot of a meeting with a very harassed minister was that Constant would not be granted a visa, due to the dangers posed by armed Tuareg rebels in the country's north.

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"I was advised to return to Australia and come back to Niger in October, when it will be cooler and, by which time, the political situation should have stabilised," she says. "I was disappointed. I wanted to do the crossing in one hit."

To date, Constant has made most of her ground in the desert winter, when daytime temperatures rarely climb above the high 20s. Travelling for about seven hours, from sun-up to just after noon, and carrying a maximum of 120 litres of water in jerry cans, she has accomplished 25–30km per day.

"With walking, you do really become part of the landscape around you," she says. "You become absorbed in the small things, like geography and constellations. You're just totally immersed in where you are. It's never boring."

She has received $40,000 in sponsorship from Dove and Birkenstock and, as far as she is aware, when she finishes her journey – probably in May next year – she'll be the first woman to have made a guided solo-walking crossing of the Sahara. She's planning a book on her escapades, maybe two.

"I have 3700km to go. In all, I have walked more than 12,000km from London. But this has never been about breaking records. Every individual needs to find success for themselves. And, for me, success is succeeding at something you value: putting yourself into a challenging environment – culturally, emotionally, intellectually and physically – and not just surviving it, but entering it properly, with acceptance. Not fighting it, but living it." **SM**