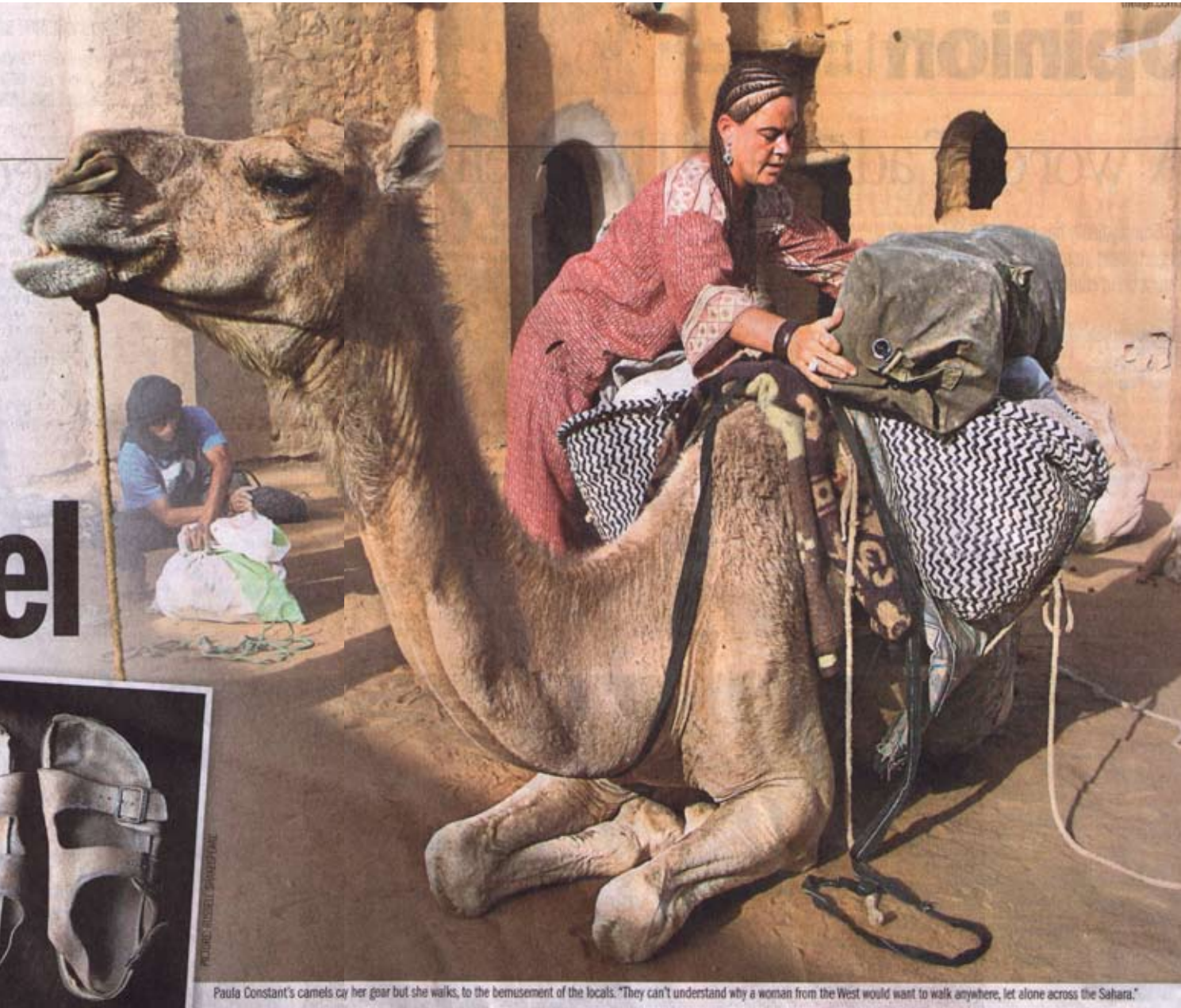


Metro

Have camel, will travel

Paula Constant grew up in Mansfield, boarded at MLC and taught struggling children in London. But she's at her happiest tackling the Sahara. By **Geoff Strong**.



Paula Constant's camels carry her gear but she walks, to the bemusement of the locals. "They can't understand why a woman from the West would want to walk anywhere, let alone across the Sahara."

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<http://www.theage.com.au/news/travel/have-camel-will-travel/2007/07/29/1185647735305.html>

HE walks into Cairo, according to her plans, in April next year. By then, Paula Constant will have trudged 8000 kilometres through the sand dunes, rocky plains and prickly grass of one of the planet's most forbidding landscapes. In the process she will have shed many kilograms, several laptop computers, a considerable amount of money and a husband.

More enduring so far has been the companionship of her three camels, one carrying a solar panel to charge electronic equipment such as her global positioning device and satellite phone. There has also been a string of nine local Bedouin guides, two of whom she has had to sack and another two who have saved her life.

At her journey's end, which she hopes will be in front of Egypt's pyramids, the 33-year-old from Mansfield believes she will become the first woman to cross the Sahara by foot.

Now, though, she is back in Australia, forced to break her journey in Niger, in central Africa, on account of an event all too common on that continent — an armed rebellion verging on civil war. In May the Niger government impounded her camels, confiscated her passport, put her under virtual house arrest and finally shipped her out of the country.

Her exit came with a promise she would be allowed back, possibly in October when the government assured her the uprising would be over. This was, they said, because the rebel Tuareg tribes would return to their lucrative salt trade then.

Such an outcome would be a double bonus. She hopes to join one of their salt caravans for the most dangerous part of her journey. The 650 kilometres from Agadez to Bilma in north-east Niger has little water and because there is no grass, the camel's fodder must be carried on their backs. In the meantime her camels are in the care of a friend in the village of Tillia, where the government stopped her.

With intense eyes, a firm

"When you walk, travel is about not having a choice. You have to stay where you arrive even if you don't like it."



PICTURE: RODGER CUMMINS

jawline and strong physique, Constant impresses as a woman of determination, someone best not trifled with. These are attributes she confesses have probably served well in a male-dominated Islamic tribal environment where women keep to their tents and certainly don't handle camels.

Such an aura does not diminish her as a marriage prospect though, and the number of proposals so far she estimates to be about 1000. So, having walked 4200 kilometres since she began in the Mauritanian capital Nouadhibou, that averages at one offer every 4.2 kilometres.

Questions of marriage are, however, outnumbered by the more obvious one — why is she doing it? From a European perspective, the question springs from perceptions of the dangers facing a woman in such a culture. Constant answers that she is usually treated with considerable respect, even when sitting around a campfire with bandits brandishing Kalashnikov assault rifles.

She finds it far more confronting when it is posed by the local Bedouin women. "First, they can't understand why a woman from a prosperous Western country would want to walk anywhere, let alone across the Sahara. Second, they want to know why I don't have a husband, lots of children and a home. Then they want to know why I am not riding the camels I do have. Most of the Westerners the locals see in countries like Mali and Niger are French or

American tourists in four-wheel-drives."

For male consumption, though, she maintains the pretence that she still has a husband who is temporarily away filming while she undertakes the trek by herself. This claim is usually accepted, making her off-limits to amorous advances.

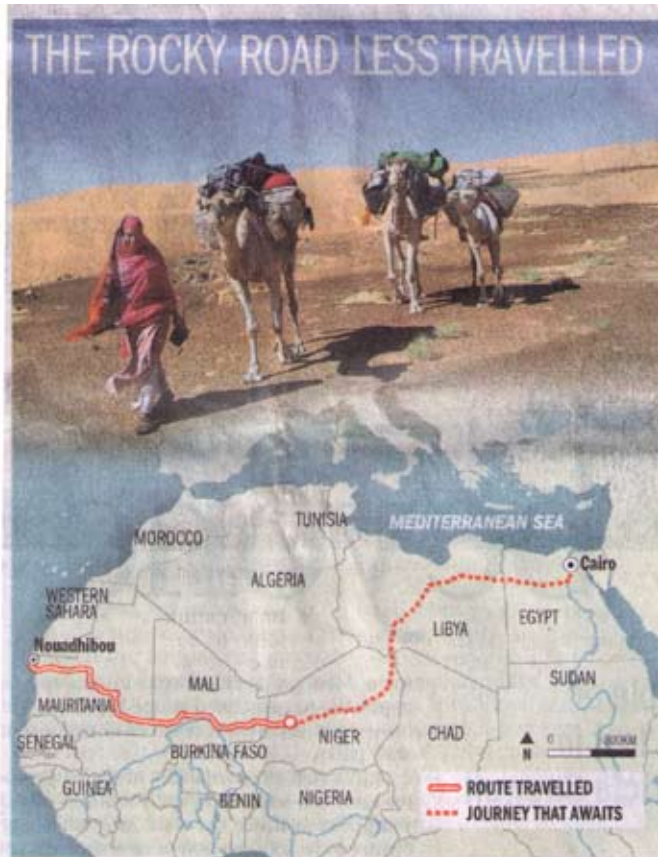
CONSTANT spent her childhood in Mansfield, a landscape she still loves. Her father Frank Walshe was town clerk there until 1990. She went to the local high school and then Methodist Ladies College as a boarder. "For most of the time at MLC, though, I seem to have been suspended," she says.

She seemed to have just as much trouble fitting into university. A year into an education degree, she dropped out. She gravitated to bar work and ultimately to Broome in Western Australia, where she met her former husband, an Englishman called Gary.

Completing her degree by correspondence, she worked as a primary teacher in London with classes of 30 students, of whom only about two could speak English.

"From childhood I have been fascinated by the stories of adventurers and explorers, especially Wilfred Thesiger, an Englishman who lived among the Bedouin in the early 20th century. I have also been intrigued by the Arabic language, particularly Bedouin Arabic.

"The idea of driving through Africa seemed shallow and unsatisfactory; it automatically



puts the traveller in the position of viewing the surrounds through the television-like screen of a car window.

"Also when you walk, travel is about not having a choice. You have to stay where you arrive even if you don't much like it."

She learnt both Arabic and French to communicate in the central African countries, many of which had been French colonies, but she quickly discovered most locals communicate in

an entirely different language Tamashek, of which she knows little.

This has been one of the difficulties in hiring guides. "Most of those who can speak French or Arabic are official guides used to travelling around with tourists in four-wheel-drives. They just don't want to take off with a woman walking with three camels.

"So when I need a guide, I have to spend quite a bit of time looking, sometimes a week

or more. Often people know about me well before I arrive in a village, this strange white woman walking with camels. Sometimes I am passed on through relatives of the same family.

"This has happened with guides too. They usually only stay with me for the area they know but sometimes they pass me on to another family member."

Not all of her experience with guides has been so positive. The first guide she hired had to be fired after two weeks when he repeatedly refused to follow her instructions and packed her belongings on the camels so incompetently, much was damaged including her first laptop computer. But she waited until she was at a well-populated watering place before she sacked him just in case he became violent.

Two other guides proved much more valuable.

At one stage they almost ran out of water and her guide took the camels to fill up at a water hole he knew four kilometres from their path. "He didn't get back for 36 hours and I had only 250 millilitres in the bottom of a jerry can. It turned out the well he went to was dry, so he headed to another 15 kilometres away, which was out of his normal territory. On the way he came across some bandits who tried to steal the camels. He lost control of them and didn't find them again until nightfall.

She never panicked, though. "I was stuck on top of sand dunes surviving on tinned fruit. I had the satellite phone and I knew of another well nine kilometres away, so I had a good chance of survival."

Another near disaster involved a snake, a creature she felt rather blasé about having grown up in the Australian countryside. "Rather carelessly I had tied the lead to one of the camels around my waist. Then I saw a sand viper coming straight towards me flat out. I couldn't get out of the way.

"I leapt up and screamed really loudly, which did nothing for my sense of authority with the guide, but in one movement he picked up a rock and nailed it on the head. If it had got me I would have been dead."

The journey has cost her more money than she can count but she has had sponsorship from two sources — Birkenstock footwear, which also provided the sandals in which she has so far walked, and Dove cosmetics. "This is one brand that seems to have recognition among African women. When I was in Morocco and other parts of North Africa, I would go to the hammam communal bathhouse as a means of meeting women. Whenever I pulled out the Dove cream, women would always ask if they could have some."

The trans-Sahara walk is not the first long trek she has undertaken. In 2004 she and former husband Gary left London to walk through Europe to Morocco. She has written a book about that adventure.

The two had been together eight years but it was in the first weeks of the Sahara trek that things fell apart. "Gary left after a month, it just wasn't what he wanted to do. The marriage was coming to an end anyway."

So she went on by herself — half way across Africa so far.