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## Call of the Outback

01 July 2010

*Nigel Hopkins*

**Master horseman Bill Willoughby is proof that outback tourism is flourishing. Join him as he saddles up for the Great Australian Outback Cattle Drive.**



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He has been called a horse whisperer, perhaps the best in Australia, but Bill Willoughby doesn't think much of the description. "So-called horse whisperers have developed cult followings in recent years," he says, "but that's all there is to it. It's a cult. In fact, there's nothing they know that wasn't known by Genghis Khan." But Willoughby, like his father Tom before him, might just know horses better than anyone else. He knows their minds and their secret desires. He knows how to win their trust. Willoughby is not only an accomplished horse whisperer, but some people also consider him to be the best horse breaker in the country.

This makes him the perfect horseman to put in charge of this year's Great Australian Outback Cattle Drive, the fourth since 2002. From July 30 to August 29, six five-day horseback tours will take place in South Australia's outback at Anna Creek, the world's largest cattle station. It's the centrepiece of a list of attractions bringing a new focus on outback tourism, from scenic flights over the newly flooded

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Lake Eyre and Cooper Creek river system to hot-air balloon flights over rugged Wilpena Pound, upmarket walking safaris and luxury accommodation.

In the Outback Cattle Drive, up to 50 very temporary tourist drovers, herded by the 13 real drovers on Willoughby's team, will take 500 head of cattle on a gentle 14km stroll on each of the four days of the tour.

"The cattle will feel like General Custer at [the battle of] Little Bighorn: surrounded," Willoughby says with a grin. Apart from drovers almost outnumbering the cattle, comfy beds, hot showers, cold beers and even a travelling library, it will almost feel like the real thing.

Willoughby will have assembled more than 100 horses for the cattle drive, 70 of them character-checked and tourist-friendly for the visitors, the rest for him and his team. The process began months ago at his 250ha home property, Glen Orrock, near Booleroo Centre in the Lower Flinders Ranges.

Willoughby has the stiff gait of the serial horseman whose legs have been hammered too many times. Like his father, who won 13 national rodeo championships and was one of the best-known horsemen in Australia, he has won so many professional rodeo events in the past 40 years he has lost count.

"I used to enter everything," he says. "Bull riding, steer wrestling, roping, roughriding. All are challenging in their own way, but when it comes to true grit, bull riding is the ultimate challenge. When you climb into the chute to sit on one of the rankest bulls in Australia, you're on your own. No-one can help you."

In 1995, aged 42, Willoughby entered the ranks of the all-time greats when he won The Man From Snowy River, competing against 50 of Australia's finest horsemen in a gruelling 10-event, two-day test of horsemanship. He won \$10,000 and was on the front page of every major newspaper in the country. Even more satisfying was the Wilmington rodeo in 2002, when he won the Tom Willoughby Memorial trophy for All Round Cowboy, named after his father.

He can't remember ever falling off a horse, "but I've been thrown a few times. I can remember some pretty nasty wrecks, though I never really got smashed up." He's had a hip replaced, which could have been caused when a bucking horse tipped upside down in the chute; also, a scrub bull "jumped on my knee in the bush – really made a mess of it". A back reconstruction at least didn't come from riding: "I crushed a disc working too hard, lifting lengths of railway line; something four men should've been doing."

So, rough-and-tumble rodeo riding, his great love, had to end, but his other life was able to continue: Willoughby has now worked on more than 50 films, telemovies and television series as horse master, sometimes doubling for actors such as Mel Gibson, Sam Neill and Tom Burlinson.

Like his father, Willoughby left home at 17 to work on a cattle and sheep property in South Australia's mid-north. When that job ended,

Willoughby, by now married to Barbara, stayed on in the region, breaking horses and contract mustering. "I must have been in the right place at the right time," he says. "I saw an advertisement for someone to work as an offsider to Heath Harris, [who was] at that time Australia's guru movie horse wrangler, on Breaker Morant."

That was in 1979 and was soon followed by a job as horse master on Gallipoli (1981). It was a boom time for outdoor period movies in Australia and soon Willoughby added films such as *The Man From Snowy River* (1982), *We Of The Never Never* (1982) and *Phar Lap* (1983). Some scenes in *The Lighthorsemen* (1987), which he regards as his single biggest challenge, had nearly 400 actors, extras and crew on horses.

"Those early movies were exciting," he says. "We had great, old-school filmmakers who made movies for real. They put their money and their trust in you and backed you all the way. There were fewer rules, but hardly anyone was hurt – certainly no animals."

Things started to change in the late 1980s: more rules, more occupational health and safety regulations, lower budgets and "directors who hired experts and then told them how to do their job" – and the public taste for big outdoor epics was waning. Willoughby thought it was all over until the TV series *McLeod's Daughters* came along. He was its horse master for seven years. "I had to not only provide and train the horses, but also to teach the cast to ride and perform as though they were born in the saddle," he says. "It was easy for the cast to act and some rode quite well, but when they had to do both together their riding skills went out the window."

Willoughby grew to like the movie industry, despite its difficulties: "I learnt a lot about people and I learnt a lot about myself. I often had to negotiate my way through a wall of egos, whereas in the past I'd just have turned my horse and cantered away."

He also learnt he couldn't rely on it to pay the bills. In 1986 he and Barbara had moved to Glen Orrock, a farm once owned by Barbara's grandfather, where they set up the horse-training business that has been their true love. Not far from the house are the breaking yards Willoughby built, along with tack rooms filled with horse gear and the saddles and whips he makes as a hobby. A couple of smart dogs hide under the fence away from flailing hooves.

Willoughby moves quietly, almost stealthily, as he calms a foal having her first day in school while her anxious mother looks on. "Never pat the face, only the neck or shoulder," he says. "Don't try to catch them. Walk away, let them come to you. No pressure."

It's horse whispering at work, getting inside the mind of the well-bred foal that in three years will be worth up to \$20,000; winning the trust of this young cattle horse. "They can be cheeky young buggers at this age," he says. "Sometimes I have to turn the whispering volume up pretty high to get the job done."

### **Outback riches**

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Surprise emus and kangaroos while serenely sailing over some of

Australia's most rugged country in a hot-air balloon. Sensational views of Wilpena Pound and the Chace Range. *Goldrush Ballooning*, +61 8 8536 4500. [www.goldrushballooning.com.au](http://www.goldrushballooning.com.au)

#### **Arkaba Walking Safari**

Explore dry creek beds, isolated waterholes, craggy ridge lines and hills covered in cypress pines along the ancient ramparts of Wilpena Pound. Arkaba Station has some of the best walking country in Australia, with guides who will show you secret spots on the property and recount stories of explorers, Aborigines and settlers. 1300 790 561 (Australia only). [www.arkabastation.com](http://www.arkabastation.com)

#### **Lake Eyre by Air**

Lake Eyre has filled with water only four times in the past century, but is doing so again as water flows in from Cooper Creek. Get the full impact of this spectacular country with local air charter flights. Wright's Air (William Creek, +61 8 8670 7962), Central Air Services (Rawnsley Park, +61 8 8648 0040/+61 8 8648 0008).

#### **Racing Camels**

Thirteen camel races, including the famous Marree Australian Camel Cup, are held annually (July 3 this year) in Marree as a tribute to the pioneering contribution made by the Afghan cameleers. [www.marree.com.au](http://www.marree.com.au)

#### **4WD Walkabout**

Chauffeured 4WD tours in the Flinders Ranges are a window into traditional Adnyamathanha life, with visits to traditional significant sites, ancient cave paintings and the sharing of Aboriginal culture. +61 8 8285 5033. [www.bookabee.com.au](http://www.bookabee.com.au)

#### **First Base**

The newly upgraded Wadlata Outback Centre in Port Augusta is a brilliant way to get a feel for the outback before heading further north. Learn about the region's environment, characters and Aboriginal culture. [www.wadlata.com.au](http://www.wadlata.com.au)

**Source** *Qantas The Australian Way* June 2010

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