

If you've ever stood, alone, somewhere in the vastness of an Australian desert, then you'd be familiar with the extraordinariness of its silence. You're in the middle of bloody nowhere, after all, and there is a sense of great nothingness in all that vastness. But there is also an unshakeable sense of power.

It is one thing to spend a few days within this space from the safety of a car or tour bus. It is quite another to arm yourself with food, water and a GPS and head out, on foot, into that silence. Yet that's precisely what I did.

The aptly-named Big Red Run is just that: an organised run (or walk) through the endless, undulating landscape of western Queensland's outback, where, over the course of six days, 80-odd participants navigate their way across 250 kilometres of some of Australia's most beautiful, brutal lands.

Though there are plenty of superhuman runners who take part in this event – the kind who'd consider my entire week's exercise a morning warm-up – there are also a surprising amount of 'normals' here. Ordinary Aussies who, like me, are here because how often do you get to explore your physical and mental limits, sleep under the stars, swap stories around the campfire, be inspired by motivational speakers, raise funds for a worthwhile cause, and above all, connect intimately with Mother Earth?

If it still sounds like a crazy undertaking... well, it is. But as 'ordinary' Australian and founder Greg Donovan says, "nothing significant is ever achieved from within one's comfort zone" – and he has a point. Donovan founded the event as a means of fundraising for research into Type 1 Diabetes, which his son suffers from, and he has pushed us to get 'uncomfortable', too. There's a sense of goodwill from the get-go – all runners are required to fundraise \$1000 before they can run – along with a sense of journey, since everyone has already trekked to the red dunes of Birdsville, some 1500 kilometres from the coastline, just to be here.

On arrival we're checked to ensure we've brought enough food and water, as well as wet and cold weather gear, a first aid kit, whistle, emergency blanket and compass – and they're strict about it. Though we're here for fun safety is paramount, and to that end we're also each issued with a course map and GPS tracker, which not only has an emergency alarm button, but tracks your movement to alert supervisors if you stop moving for too long. (There is also a helicopter on standby at all times, to ensure that no one suffers from a fate similar to that of Turia Pitt's, the young Australian woman who was, tragically, severely burnt after being trapped by a remote bushfire while running an ultra marathon.)

Next thing you know, we're at the starting line, imbued with the excitement and camaraderie of any festive gathering. Suddenly, it's all starting to feel a little bit too real... >>

THE BIG RED RUN

Think a 250-kilometre run through the Simpson Desert sounds mad? So did **CATHY FINCH** – until she did it. Now she reckons you should, too...



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SETTING OFF FROM BIRDSVILLE PUB

I've never even run the possibility of a marathon through my mind, so I'm not sure I have it in me to jog for an hour, let alone several. But I do have a deep affection for the outback, with its wide open spaces and scorching red sunsets. I have a photographer's eye for windswept dunes, desert flowers and soaring eagles and I know that opportunities such as this, to camp under the stars surrounded by wild desert beauty away from traditional roads or even sand tracks, are rare. And I'm fit and active enough to consider myself a fairly outdoorsy type of person. Besides, this is an opportunity to experience the landscape in an entirely new way – I'm going to give it everything I've got. As we set off on day one, the course (which sets off in freezing temperatures from the iconic Birdsville Pub built in 1884) sees us turn from the town bitumen to gravel tracks and then off into open clay pans, salt lakes, rocks and spinifex, weaving through extensive rolling sand dunes. Over the next few days we'll run over uncharted and untracked parts of the famous Simpson Desert, covering different terrain each day while staying (somewhat) close to Birdsville.



ACROSS THE GIBBER PLAINS

I thought I knew this country so well, but at the 30-kilometre mark on day one, I feel like a fresh-faced visitor. The seemingly flat desert clay pans, which I've seen so many times before from a passenger seat, are actually littered with huge sink holes – cracks in the earth so large they threaten to swallow me whole if I don't pay attention. But that pales into insignificance alongside the opportunity to be at one with the landscape. The rhythm of my slow jog is surprisingly hypnotic. After a while I'm no longer seeing what's around me; I'm breathing it and feeling it underneath my feet. The silence is everywhere.

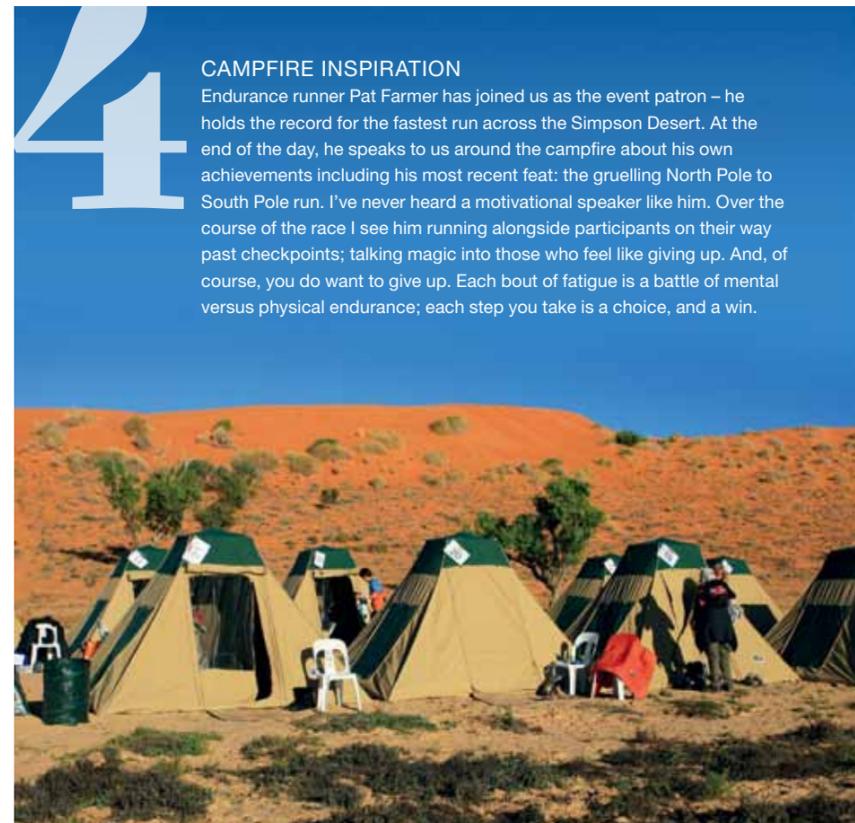


REACHING BIG RED

Despite aching feet and impossible fatigue, you can't help but appreciate the vastness of the terrain. From the top of dunes, you can see where sand gathers in not just mounds or little castles, but huge red spines of shifting inland beach. Our first day's run ends on top of Big Red,



a 40-metre dune at the start of a line-up of over 1100 dunes, which sprawl from Birdsville to Alice Springs. Coolibah trees starched white with corellas reflect in Lake Nappanerica on one side of the dunes; barren clay pans border us on the other. I'm shattered.



CAMPFIRE INSPIRATION

Endurance runner Pat Farmer has joined us as the event patron – he holds the record for the fastest run across the Simpson Desert. At the end of the day, he speaks to us around the campfire about his own achievements including his most recent feat: the gruelling North Pole to South Pole run. I've never heard a motivational speaker like him. Over the course of the race I see him running alongside participants on their way past checkpoints; talking magic into those who feel like giving up. And, of course, you do want to give up. Each bout of fatigue is a battle of mental versus physical endurance; each step you take is a choice, and a win.



IT'S NO LONGER A RACE

Nightly camps are a unique sleep beneath an endless sea of stars and as each sunrise dawns over our remote locations, we overcome aching muscles to present at the start line with growing determination and resolve. Some people are here to raise money for a cause. Others are on a personal quest. For all of us, though, it's no longer a race. It's not even an event. It's camaraderie at its finest, intertwined in a stunning desert land. >>

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CROSSING THE FINISH LINE

After a week of trials, triumphs, friendships and achievements, the run back into the town of Birdsville is emotional. The finish line means many different things to many different people but one thing is for sure... everyone's a winner under this big blue outback sky. ■



THE DETAILS

- The Big Red Run is a six-day, 250-kilometre run (or walk) through the Simpson Desert, starting and ending at Birdsville Pub. Too much? Sign up for The Little Red Run – just 150 kilometres (!) over six days. Or get a team of three or more together and take it in turns to run as a relay. You can also tag along as a supporter, or work as a race volunteer. The 2014 Big Red Run is held 2–7 July.

GETTING THERE

- Birdsville is 1585 kilometres west of Brisbane. You can drive a 2WD into town, but we wouldn't recommend it – all

roads are unsealed and require adequate off-road driving preparation.

- Skytrans offer domestic flights from major Queensland airports; skytrans.com.au.

STAYING THERE

- Accommodation for runners is provided in eight-person marquees at Birdsville both before and after the event, and campsites at various desert stations during the event. Motel accommodation in Birdsville before and after the event can be booked at your own expense.

NEED TO KNOW

- It's not cheap. Entry fee to

both the Big or Little Red Run is \$2650. Supporters cost \$395 per adult or \$295 per child.

- A minimum of \$1000 fundraising is required, too – but it's for a good cause and all competitor and supporter entrants receive free tickets to the Big Red Music Festival valued at \$245, held after the Big Red Run (9–10 July).

- You'll need moderate levels of fitness and an excellent pair of well-sealed, non-mesh shoes (or gaiters) to avoid sand and Spinifex spikes. For more info see bigredrun.com.au

RACES WITHOUT RUNNING

Fancy more fun, less run? That's OK – here are five more ways to get competitive in the outback without breaking a sweat.

CAMEL CUP, NT
(12 JULY)

Alice Springs' annual Lasseters Camel Cup is as the event slogan promises: "temperamental, terribly unpredictable and very entertaining".

Drawing crowds of 5000-plus, the day is a spectacle as riders race to the finish line... that's if their noble steeds feel like cooperating. Outside the arena is more family-friendly entertainment with dancers, rides, food stalls and Mr and Miss Camel challenges. camelcup.com.au

YABBY RACES, QLD
(3 SEPTEMBER)

Whoever said race meets require four-legged competitors? Windorah's annual International Yabby Races, 1200 kilometres west of Brisbane, is a testament to just that, attracting hundreds of passersby for the night as they make the voyage to the Birdsville Races. The 10 competing yabbies in each race (there's four main events) are named and auctioned off beforehand, with funds raised going back to the local community and the Royal Flying Doctor Service. outbacknow.com.au

LIGHTNING RIDGE BIG DIG, NSW
(18–20 APRIL)

Every Easter long weekend, this little opal-mining town (730 kilometres north-west of Sydney), comes alive with its annual festival that centres around The Big Dig. That is, a large mound of soil is dumped in the main street hiding \$10,000 worth of local opals inside. You'll need to buy tickets to go into the draw to compete, or watch on as those drawn dig madly to find the sparkly treasure. But the competitions don't end there – throughout this three-day fest there's also a busk-off for buskers, horse races and the Miner's Challenge, which sees opal miners, coal miners and hard rock miners compete against each other to showcase who has the fastest skills. lightningridgeinfo.com.au

BIRDSVILLE RACES, QLD
(5–6 SEPTEMBER)

Home to the granddaddy of outback races, Birdsville (700 kilometres south-west of Longreach) swells from a population of about 100 to 6000 during this iconic event. And if you tire of the trackside races, head to the town's main drag for the 'Not the Birdsville Races' event, where wooden horses are raced down the street, drawn by reel and string. And beyond the fillies, fascinators and 80,000 beer cans consumed each year, there's also live music, comedy acts and cocktail parties, with funds raised going to the Royal Flying Doctor Service. birdsvillerraces.com