



Expedition artist

For several months each year Jo Bertini walks alongside camels, recording through paintings and sketches, the work of scientists in the desert.

Story By Mandy McKeesick

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Expedition artist: the title conjures mental images of grizzled men taking on Australia's unknown desert heart, discovering new species and recording the outback as they follow star and compass. Although the title suggests an occupation lost to history, here, sitting cross-legged on a rippled red dune in the Simpson Desert, is the petite frame of Jo Bertini. All is still in this space save for her hands, which fly across an open sketchbook detailing the camel string below her, and the cameleers and scientists who comprise the modern-day expeditions.

Jo grew up on a property near Oberon in central New South Wales. She then lived in Italy for 10 years before returning home in 1991. Wanting reconnection with her country, she travelled to Alice Springs and from there took annual sojourns to remote areas and Indigenous communities as part of her life as an artist.

In 2006 Jo was commissioned to paint a portrait of Tracks author Robyn Davison as she ventured once more into the arid lands with camels, and on that assignment Jo met her partner Andrew Harper. She joined his Australian Desert Expeditions (ADE), which supports scientific research using camels to access remote areas, and for the past 10 years has spent up to eight weeks at a time walking with camels by day and sleeping in a swag at night.

As expedition artist, Jo records all facets of the surveys, does specific scientific sketches, maps areas of Aboriginal significance and captures the shifting moods of the landscape. "I like to change people's perception of the red, barren desert," she says. "It is a place full of colours and plants and flowers and richness; a true desert garden with birdlife, frogs and even fish."