



Photography Nick Cubbin

By Greg Bearup

# DON'T FENCE ME IN

**SHE RETRACED AN EPIC 1600KM JOURNEY  
ACROSS THE OUTBACK. BUT LINDSEY COLE'S  
ADVENTURE DIDN'T END THERE**

**a** couple of months ago Dr Max Tischler, an expert on the small mammals, reptiles and birds of the Australian Outback, was leading a camel trek through the Simpson Desert. The purpose of this journey, run by Australian Desert Expeditions, was to take scientists out to fossick for ecological gems hidden in the sands. They were accompanied by paying punters who help fund the science.

On these trips there's a lot of time to talk and few distractions. People reveal themselves in the hours and weeks plodding across the sand hills with the camels and camping under the stars. And on this trip Tischler got to hear a remarkable story from Lindsey Cole, an English adventurer, who'd fallen madly and deeply in love with a fence.

Tischler has been venturing into Australia's deserts for years and has known people who have perished in them. So he has a great admiration for what Cole did last year, walking 1600km for 10 weeks alone through the East Pilbara. She followed in the footsteps of three Aboriginal girls, Molly Craig, her sister Daisy and their cousin Gracie. In 1931, forcibly removed from their families in the remote Pilbara community of Jigalong and transported to Moore River Native Settlement, north of Perth, they escaped the next day and used the rabbit-proof fence – constructed between 1901 and 1907 to keep pests out of pastoral areas – to find their way home.

It was an endeavour described by the writer Tony Stephens as “one of the most remarkable feats of endurance and courage in Australian history”. The story was immortalised in the book *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, by Daisy's daughter, Doris Pilkington, and later in a 2002 film directed by Phillip Noyce.

And it inspired Cole to embark on a most unusual journey. “What Lindsey did is incredibly physically demanding, pushing a trolley containing all her food and water and gear, day after day, week after week through the desert,” says Tischler. But to overcome the loneliness and become attuned to the desert's rhythms is the greater achievement. “She would often talk to me about the fence as though it was her companion. It was

one of the ways she was able to cope with being alone for that length of time. There were times when she had to drift away from the fence to get around some terrain and there was a yearning to get back to it... It is almost like her lost lover.”

*For the three runaways, the fence was a symbol of love, home and security.*

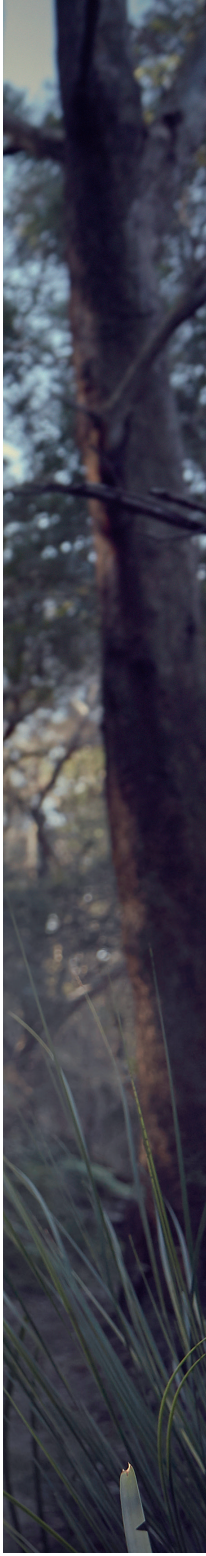
– Doris Pilkington,  
*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*

**I catch up with Cole, 34, in a cafe in Sydney's Kings Cross at the end of her epic adventure.** Since she arrived in Australia in May last year, not only has she walked the rabbit-proof fence and been on a five-week camel trek with Tischler, she has hitched around the entire continent by truck. In a few days she will fly back to England.

We settle down in the cafe and she orders a big breakfast. She's an engaging storyteller with a raspy voice and a girlie giggle. Her eyes sparkle whenever she smiles or gets excited. Her hair is a tangle of blonde and she's dressed in hippie pants, an old, stained, knitted jumper with pineapples on it and a pair of worn desert boots. She looks like she's wandered up from Woolloomooloo after a night in a hostel for the homeless. In fact, she's just hitched into town on a truck from Adelaide. She's ready to go home now, she reckons.

Cole first came to Australia 10 years ago as a 24-year-old on her big tour of discovery. She'd planned to drive around the country in a van. She made it to Byron Bay, went to the Blues and Roots Festival and broke her ankle while sliding about in the mud. During her recuperation she devoured a pile of DVDs and books, including *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. The story wormed its way into her soul. She was about to set off on her antipodean fling when her father died unexpectedly and she flew home for his funeral, her grand tour over before it began.

“I really, really struggled,” she tells me. “I felt I had all this pain with the death of my dad and I just couldn't get it out. I actually started to harm myself. I started cutting myself” She knew she needed to find another outlet for her anguish and so she began training for the London Triathlon. “I hadn't ridden a bike since I was 10 and found it really hard but I kept thinking, “This is nothing





compared to walking across the desert at the age of 10, barefoot – harden up, Linds.”

It set her off on a course of adventure. She roller-skated to a friend’s birthday in Cornwall in a nude-suit, to a place called Bude – it rhymed, to Bude in the nude, and made sense at the time. She then roller-skated to Paris. And then she put an ad in a paper calling for companions to cycle the length of Africa, almost 10,000km over five months. In between she worked as a freelance journalist on documentaries and saved for her next adventure.

“I become obsessed with the rabbit-proof fence and the story of the girls,” she says. She went to Kings College London to speak to experts on Australian history (they weren’t much help), she emailed people and she searched for maps of the fence. “I didn’t even know if it was still there.” And then, after missing out on a freelance job, she booked a one-way ticket to Australia. Her mum didn’t want her to go, pleading: “You don’t even like camping.” But that was camping in cramped English grounds in English weather. This would be different, out in the majesty of the Australian Outback.

On a stopover in Singapore, she sat in a massage chair waiting for a connecting flight. She got chatting to an old Australian bloke sitting next to her and told him what she was doing. “That little Aboriginal girl, Molly, she’s my hero,” the man, aged in his 70s, told her. His mother had been poor and single with three small kids. “It happened to white kids as well you know,” he said, recounting his mother’s screams as he and his siblings were forcibly removed to the care of the state.

Cole landed in Perth and did the three-day Bob Cooper Outback Survival course. And then she travelled to Newman, 1200km north, to familiarise herself with the country and meet the relatives

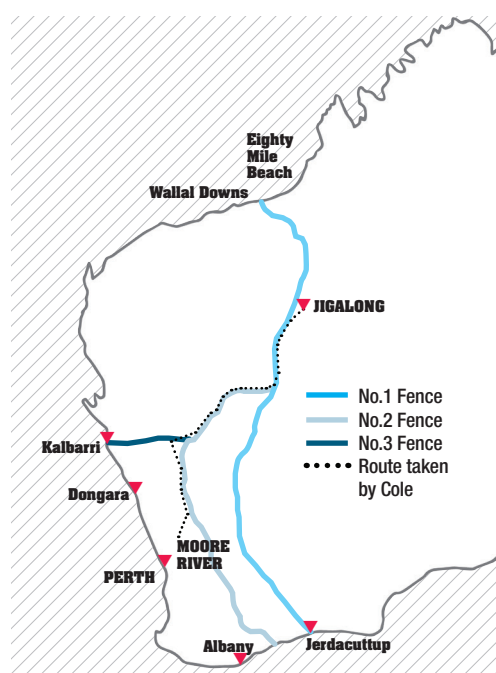


of Molly and Daisy. “I wanted to ask them if they’d mind if I did it,” she says. “I didn’t want to insult anyone. They were fine with it. I asked them if they wanted to join me and they laughed. ‘Do you think I’m a bit weird?’” They laughed again.

At the end of June last year she set off from the Moore River Native Settlement, 135km north of Perth, with a trolley stacked with lentils, rice, couscous, Nutella, powdered milk, water, clothes, a sleeping bag, tent, cooker, a satellite tracker and two books – *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* and Robyn Davidson’s *Tracks*. “Rabbit-Proof Fence was like my Bible; I wanted to see how Molly felt along the way.” She posted more food to homesteads she would pass along the way. Fully laden, her trolley weighed almost 50kg.

*One day about midday, when the sun was high in the sky, Daisy and Gracie heard an excited shriek from Molly, who usually walked ahead of them. “Here it is, I’ve found it... I’ve found the rabbit-proof fence... This will take us all the way home to Jigalong.”*

**It took two weeks for Cole to reach the fence** and on the day she set off rain pelted down – it was the Pilbara’s wettest and coldest winter in



Lines in the sand:  
Cole follows the  
rabbit-proof fence

years. Her boots, made for the desert, became saturated. “I got horrible blisters, my heels just fell off.” And so for the first fortnight she wore thongs, gaffer-taped to her feet, as she pushed on, waiting for her wounds to mend. She describes her first encounter with the fence as one of the greatest days of her life. The night before she’d stayed at a homestead and in the morning the family pointed her in the right direction. “To them it was just a fence, to me it was like...” she says, throwing her hands out in rapture. “They were a bit baffled by my excitement.” One man’s pest control was another woman’s nirvana.

She didn’t care how far she walked each day and averaged more than 25km, pushing or pulling her trolley through the sand and over rocks, taking only the occasional day off. It got dark early; she would make a camp fire and zip herself up in her sleeping bag but wouldn’t sleep until around 11pm. “I was just mesmerised by the fire and the stars,” she says. At times while walking, her mind would achieve a state of bliss. “Sometimes I would think of nothing and that was the most beautiful thing. It was meditative without intending to be.”

Every encounter became significant. She would stop at flowers; “every one was exquisite”. She’d get down on her knees to observe an orderly line of ants carrying petals across her track with military precision and then wonder why, further along, the ants would be scurrying around maniacally. The call of every bird was orchestral. “It was pure simplicity, stripping everything back to the fundamentals of life and living,” she says.

One day she felt a presence behind her and turned to see a dingo a metre away. “He stared at me and I stared at him and we stood there for a little while. It was a lovely encounter.” Another time she came across a herd of feral camels; an enormous bull moved to the front of his harem and sized her up. The stand-off lasted a good 10 minutes.

Her greatest concern was the prospect of unexpectedly encountering humans. There were times when the fence came near lonely bush roads. In the flat Outback, when a car approaches from a distance its lights appear as a single beam. She’d lie dead still in her sleeping bag, her eyes and ears alert, until the potential danger had passed.

At times she chided herself for being too soft; the girls had done this without shoes, a trolley or a satellite tracker. In fact, they’d had people hunting them, police on horses and black trackers, trying to hunt them down and take them back. Cole could let her friends and family know she

was safe. She could drop into homesteads for a shower. She could pull out if it all got too hard.

But the fence kept her going. She never felt lonely, not while she had her fence. "I have never been so in love with an experience or a landscape or a thing. I fell deeply in love with the fence." At times she had to leave the fence, because of the terrain. She recorded one of these moments on her phone. "I am totally lost and I am getting really frustrated. For the last two hours I've been trying to make it back to the fence but my tracker is not working... and," she says, on verge of tears, "I've got friggig PMT as well!"

*After their meal they sat around the blazing fire and yarned until they grew weary and settled down to a peaceful sleep near the fire. Soon they would be reunited with their mothers... That night they slept a dreamless sleep.*

After almost 10 weeks in the desert, Cole approached Jigalong with trepidation. Molly's daughter, Maria, lived there and Cole had been in contact with her to ask if she'd like to walk the last few kilometres with her into town. She had no idea if she'd turn up. "Oh, quite sad," she says to her phone on the morning of the last day. "Despite Molly and Daisy having a camel ride at this point. They would have been overwhelmed with excitement at this time. They would have been greeted by their whole community and family. I am not sure if I will have anyone..."

But Maria came with a carload of kids and dogs to greet her. It was an emotional meeting. "I think Lindsey is a very special lady because she followed the rabbit-proof fence here," said Maria. "And that makes us very happy." They walked together for the last five kilometres into Jigalong.

"She was appreciative someone had valued her mother's story as much as she did," Cole tells me. "It

was another of the best days of my life... we didn't say much to each other but we both understood."

*The girls walked slowly towards their mothers' camp where their family sat... the wailing began slowly at first then grew louder as more people joined the group.*

She stayed a week in Jigalong, hanging out with Maria and her family, who took her to Molly's grave and then out hunting for honey ants. Some days they just sat, contented in the silence.

**From Jigalong, Cole hitched a ride in a truck** to Port Hedland, where Daisy was living in a retirement home. "Meeting Daisy was just incredible," says Cole. "To meet this 96-year-old lady, who had made the same journey 86 years before, was quite emotional." One of her grandsons came along to explain to Daisy what Cole had done. The old woman couldn't remember walking the fence. It didn't matter. "We shared a giggle and I held her hand for a while." She told all the nurses about the hero they had in their care.

She could never have imagined a more perfect finish than meeting Daisy. "It made it quite impos-

sible for me to just return home, and so I didn't." Instead she hitched a ride in a truck back to Perth and hatched an idea. She'd come to Australia more than 10 years ago to circle the country in a van, why not do it in trucks? And so she decided to record the experience and interview the truckies about their lives. She has hours of recordings, although she hasn't worked out how she will use them. She started in Darwin in February and in 12 separate rides made it all the way around Australia by May, stopping off with friends along the way.

She would spend many hours in the trucker's lounge at roadhouses, waiting for the right lift. If she felt uncomfortable she wouldn't get in the truck. Before hopping on board she would take a photo of the trucker and his truck. "I had a little GoPro and I would film us talking. If they didn't want that, it defeated the point of having a lift. It also beefed up my safety."

A lot of them were Pauline Hanson supporters. But their attitudes towards Aborigines were broadly sympathetic. Nearly all had seen *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. "One of the last guys I caught a ride with, probably my favourite truckie, had seen the movie three times. He was just in awe of what the girls had done. He found it harrowing what Australia had done. It was so overwhelming chatting about it." His grandmother had been part of the Stolen Generations and he had only recently learnt of his own Aboriginal heritage.

In Townsville, she was at a truck stop and a guy came up to her and said: "Are you Lindsey Cole?" He wanted to shake her hand. She'd become famous in the trucking world. "One guy, he couldn't give me a lift, but I had spent the whole weekend in a Brisbane roadhouse and this guy slipped 50 bucks in my pocket and said, "Shh, good luck."

"They were kind and warm-hearted people and they became very protective of me. We would talk about everything – relationships, ex-partners, social situations, politics." One of the drivers spoke for so long that she had to ask him to stop so she could go to sleep. Because she was interested in hearing their stories, it made her own journey all the more interesting.

Now Cole's big adventure has come to an end and she's preparing fly back to England. "But I am not scared anymore," she tells me. "I was really scared before. Before I always struggled to conform to society whereas now I have met so many inspiring people; what is conforming? I am stronger in the head now." ●

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►For video of Lindsey Cole on her trek, go to [theaustralian.com.au/twam](http://theaustralian.com.au/twam) ►

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Perfect finish: meeting Daisy; walking with Maria and her family

