
CAMELS?

In particular, how I found myself riding them, is a question I'm often asked.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's my father was sent by the British Civil Service to a small island in the Persian Gulf. Bahrain was to become our next home. My mother joined him there after Easter and by July my brother and I had moved in to.

Despite being a country where women did not usually go out and about without male escorts and in European dress, I was fortunate enough to be given the opportunity to learn a bit about the local culture and customs. Due to both my father's position there and a cousin who had married into a local family. A very large and very generous family, who took me under their wing. Hence, I was introduced and subsequently invited to local events and family do's. Their close links with the ruling family led to the ruler inviting me to go to a Camel Race Meeting in which his own camels would be participating.

This was a first for me and a very colourful experience. So different from my experiences of watching the Grand National horse race in England with my paternal grandparents. It was loud and I mean very loud! With lots of strange sounds and the expected thundering of the camels feet but nothing like that of horseshoes meeting with the green turf of Ascot or Epsom. Plus, at times hilariously funny.



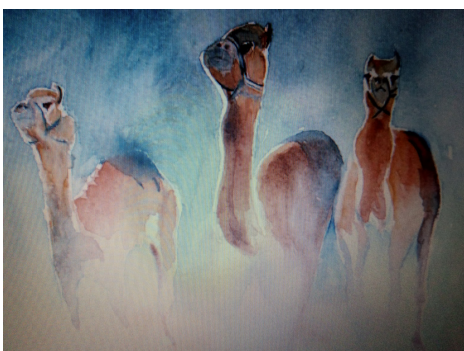
Did you know that camels have “minds of their own”? They can be very stubborn. Did I say very? I think I mean extremely stubborn. Just think donkey and add in very large teeth, spitting (that is by the camel not rider; although they might have been tempted to) and determinedly heavy placing of their fore feet. And you may come some way towards getting the picture. However, it was thrilling when they passed by at, to me, incredible speed, on those huge feet. Leaving behind them a huge cloud of sandy dust that made you feel very gritty in some very unusual places.

We went down to congratulate the winner, carefully avoiding his nashers and awarding his jockey the prize. His grin was almost as wide as the camel's! Another new experience for me was standing close to an animal whose head was higher than my own. When I expressed my interest in how difficult it was to ride a camel to the rider it was to result in a shock. I was with the invisible click of fingers bodily picked up by the Sheik's two large bodyguards and flung onto the racing saddle. I was atop the big beast and being volubly being encouraged to try. Thankfully my outfit was accommodating! So I did just that. Very carefully led in a decorous circle by the groom holding his reins. Did I take in the view from this heightened position? Of course not! I was witless and clinging onto the bass topped pommel for dear life!

My very limited riding experience on my cousin, Heather's horse, interestingly named Saladin, in the fields surrounding Edinburgh went straight out of the window as I found I was lurching from side to side. The movement reminiscent of being in a small rowing boat on choppy water. Added into this was the up and down factor of the animal's gait. Much like channel crossings to France in the English Channel. It suddenly made me laugh when I realised that I actually rather enjoyed it. Much to my kind host's amusement.

The result? Not “A Ticket to Ride” as in a popular Beatles song, but an invitation to ride his camels whenever I was home for holidays. If I liked it and got better, I might even find myself entered into a race. A private one. Women did not do that so of thing in public; or private for that matter, ever. My future career as a camel jockey seemed assured. Not one that my parents had ever considered for me I'm sure. However, despite several rides, I was not cut out for a place in the annals of history as a lady camel jockey. I was not a gifted enough rider to be entrusted with a highly prized racing of the stables of His Royal Highness under the dangerous conditions of the racetrack after all. Upon reflection, perhaps a wise move; but as a teenager my disappointment was keen.

Do I miss it? No. Being spat at by grumpy, if magnificent beasts, is not the most pleasant experience I've ever had. I much preferred, water-skiing, you went faster!



My 40th birthday gift to remind me of my racing days in the 70's