One woman, three wild horses and 5330km through the Australian bush

Wild – at – Heart

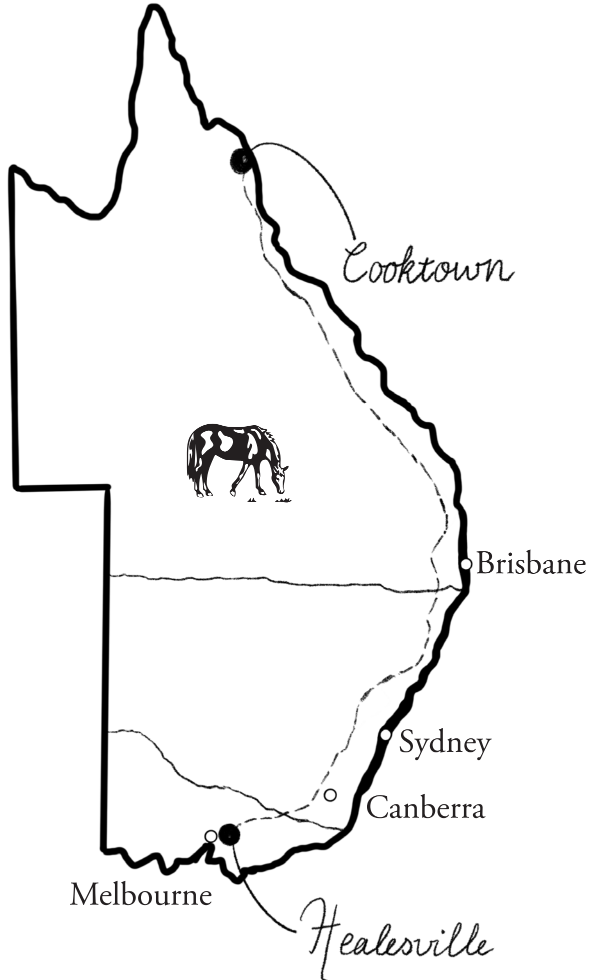
Alienor le Gouvello

Translated by Catherine de Saint Phalle
with photography by Cat Vinton

From a young age, Aliénor had a passion for travelling. She has embarked on numerous adventures across the globe including a horseback trek through Mongolia and a sidecar motorbike expedition from Siberia to Paris. She was living in a remote community near Uluru when she first discovered the existence of brumbies and hatched a plan to embark on her most ambitious solo expedition to date: more than 5000 kilometres on horseback across the Bicentennial National Trail. She is now the only woman to have finished the trek alone with her horses Roxanne, River and Cooper.

Catherine de Saint Phalle was born in London, and spent most of her childhood straddling Sussex and Paris. Bilingual from the start, translation came naturally. She started writing at the age of seven and has not stopped since. She translated *On the Road* by Kerouac into French and transformed it into a radio play which was broadcast on France Culture. She's the author of nine books, six of which are novels, the latest three are in English, published by Transit Lounge. Her home has been Australia since 2003.

The Bicentennial National Trail



2 Starting Tough

Section 12: Healesville to Omeo

426 kilometres

17 November 2015 to 4 January 2016

D-day. I crawl out of my sleeping bag. We'd set up camp in a shed. It's still dark and I've hardly slept. The air is fresh. I stare at the sunrise in disbelief. It's so madly beautiful, it fills me with hope. I check my gear and the food rations for the umpteenth time. The weight must be perfectly balanced on the pack saddle before it's loaded onto Roxanne. The local press and a small group of onlookers surround us. I can feel my heart sinking at the idea of being separated from my dog, Fox. But we have to obey the rules of the Trail – no dogs in national parks – and that section in Victoria is mostly all parkland. Tenderly, I prepare my horses, patting them, whispering to them. The first hitch in this big challenge: the friend who

had proposed logistic support with her four-wheel drive for a month decided at the last minute to ride with me, and has asked someone else to drive the backup vehicle instead. The horse she's just bought is not trained for the job. Rather than being a help, she's complicating things for me before we've even set off. Well, I've no other alternative.

Finally, we're in the saddle, moving towards the sign that indicates the beginning of the horse trail. I touch the stone bearing Dan Seymour's plaque – this man lead the inaugural BNT journey in the early seventies with his two horses and his dog. Sponsored by RM Williams, who had become a patron, the Trail was conceived to link all the different stock routes. To this day thirty-seven people have managed to complete the Trail – some on foot, some on a bicycle, some on horseback, changing horses on the way. Up to now, only one woman has completed it alone, riding horses. No-one has done it with three wild ones.

After a year and a half of intensive preparation, it's a strange, exhilarating experience to see my dream taking shape in the real world. *Are my horses and I ready for this crazy expedition?* I ask myself, as we slowly blend into a forest of giant eucalypts and lush ferns – simmering with life. We hear all kinds of insects, and an orchestra of kookaburras, parrots and lyrebirds. A few wallabies hop across our path. For this

very first day, I have chosen to ride Cooper. Roxanne is the packhorse, and River, the youngest, whom I want to spare, is at rest. I've planned to ride 20 to 40 kilometres a day.

My brumbies follow, and are adapting rather well to the gradually rising path. My friend's horse, on the other hand, is very nervous. The four-wheel drive has trouble following us, and flounders on this nearly unmarked rugged four-wheel track. For me, the vehicle is vital. It's transporting horse feed for this gruelling section, and dozens of litres of water, which would be too heavy for my horses to carry. The backup vehicle is meant to transport most of the equipment, so the weight on the packhorse can be increased gradually, as the horses grow accustomed to sharing this daily task. I've been warned that water could be scarce in the following days, when I reach the top of the mountains – and a horse downs 20 litres of water per day.

The first bivouac night is with a fire, and an electric fence fed by a solar panel for my horses. Their forelegs are hobbled with two leather bracelets linked by chain, and sometimes a side hobble, too, which is attached to a posterior leg. But my friend's horse worries us until morning. Her last-minute disruption is driving me nuts. How could she imagine riding with me on a whim, when my horses and I have been preparing ourselves for months?

As we rise in altitude, the horizons rise in majesty. The rivers we cross and the grasses we tread are nearly too clear and deeply green to be true. We've been gone for only four days but my companions are starting to feel the kilometres in their legs. River, the youngest, seems to prefer lolling in the grass rather than eating it. We reach the first shelter, Keppel Hut. The shack – freshly rebuilt after being destroyed in bushfires, the first dating from 1983 – is a welcome surprise. Farmers stayed here when they were mustering their cattle to their summer pastures. The night is pretty cold.

After a week, the nights grow even colder as the mountains loom closer. Our team hasn't quite hit its stride and the ground is becoming steeper and steeper. My horses are balking, and my friend is no help at all. And, this evening, by the campfire, she announces that she's leaving us.

I'm torn between relief and the niggling worry of facing alone one of the most challenging sections of the Trail – Butcher Country. The aptly named 1325-metre-high Mount Terrible is part of it. I'm concerned about travelling across mountain peaks where water is rare and weather unpredictable.

That same night, while lost in thought gathering wood, luck looks my way. Just as I'm wondering how I'm going to cover this precipitous terrain, a man and his horses materialise from the surrounding trees. Like me, he has one packhorse and

rides another. His chestnut geldings are Tennessee Walkers, a breed from the US developed to be a comfortable and hardy horse, capable of travelling great distances. The rider, dressed in a long Driza-Bone and a dog-eared cowboy hat – its stains and holes bearing witness to all it's been through – is in his sixties. Gentle-eyed, and rough around the edges, he's coming towards us. Swallowing half his words, in the Australian way, he greets us. His name is Finnie. I invite him to set up camp near us, but ask him to keep his horses apart from ours. Sitting around the fire, we chat. I share my dilemma with him. This guy I've only just met proves himself to be a lover and horse-riding encyclopedia of the Trail. He proposes to take his horses back home the very next day and then meet me as soon as possible with his four-wheel drive. His decision to help me through the hostile territory to come is taken in the spur of the moment.

Early in the morning, I get ready to leave – alone this time. Finnie and my friend have left me. I no longer have the four-wheel drive's support. We only left eight days ago, and, for the first time, my horses must bear all the equipment and three weeks' worth of food rations. To put the cherry on the cake,

the sun has given up the ghost and a solid drizzle sets in. I'm more worried about my ability to manage the animals, and the search for water and resources, than about loneliness. The next four days test our stamina, and the night we reach the designated camping site in the Trail guide we're in a dark forest. There isn't a blade of grass for the horses; there is only dead trunks littering the dry earth. My companions will rest on an empty stomach – with no backup vehicle, there's no pellets. I'm ashamed to eat in front of them. We've done so many kilometres through trying ground already, and the next waterhole is too far to reach before night.

The next morning, I'm appalled when I realise how much time I need to pack all our gear after breakfast. Between preparing the horses and allocating the equipment, three hours go by before we can set off. I suddenly wonder if I'm not setting about this the wrong way. By the end of the day, as luck has it, a reward greets us. I find a place to stop along a river with thick, luscious, tasty grass for Roxanne, River and Cooper. It's a struggle against time – a strong wind has picked up. I choose my camp near the water deliberately, setting up my tent away from the trees. The river and its flowing current are a welcome opportunity for me to wash myself. I'm longing to keep clean. The water rushes over the stones, along with my worries.

After taking care of the horses, I hobble them, so they can graze on the lovely grass, which they missed out on the night before. The Big River, full of tranquil waterholes, runs peacefully through a state forest. I'm cooking over my fire, which burns bright with the branches I have scavenged, when a fisherman appears in his four-wheel drive. In his sixties, he has a warm expression peeping out from under his beanie hat, and a slight silhouette. He tells me his name is Bill and warns me about the weather forecast: an approaching storm with winds of 130 kilometres an hour. He's concerned about us. I reassure him. The horses, formerly wild, have been through worse. All night, the wind howls, and we're surrounded by the eerie sound of creaking branches and falling trees. The skies seem to be ripping themselves apart. At one point, my tent, though securely tethered, is suddenly slammed to the ground as if by a gigantic hand. I go out into the gale to check on the horses several times during the night. They're standing strong in the face of it all.

At daybreak, I discover the extent of the damage: dozens of trees have been torn down by the storm. I decide to take a good day's rest to allow my companions to enjoy the high-quality grass around here. Bill returns – he's still worried about me. He tells me about the campers a few kilometres from here who ended up in hospital when their tent was hit by falling

trees. Then he goes off fishing again; the woods and the river are his home. At the end of the day, he returns with a gift – a rainbow trout. I'm so happy to eat something so fresh and delicate, and cook it on glowing embers. What a treat …

The next day, we get ready for the climb up Mount Terrible. Three hours of preparation are again necessary before setting off. We climb, and climb, and climb, painstakingly. Soon, the forest ground drops away, far below. Cooper keeps pulling back, testing my patience. I walk alongside the horses to relieve them, but each of Cooper's tugs nearly yanks my arm off. The ground is rocky and abrupt, and we're impeded by trees that were felled by the storm, sometimes having to wend our way around, over or under the trunks littering our path.

We reach the foothills of the Australian Alps. Even if the mornings are cool, the sun beats down on us all through the day. As the slopes become more precipitous, my companions find it difficult to walk in sync. One or the other of the geldings is always lagging behind, slowing our progress, and I have to pull him up. Roxanne, my mare, staunchly at my side, takes the lead. I thank my lucky stars she's with me.

Swearing like a trooper, sweating profusely, I reach the summit of Mount Terrible. My steeds are dripping, and the geldings seem to be wondering why I'm putting them through this misery. I look at Cooper and tell him he's stronger and

braver than he thinks; he must stop being such a sook. The people who've imagined this trek are sadists, I tell myself. Why take a horse into such places, at such heights? Twenty times during the ascent, I ask myself what I'm doing here. I'm so focused on the incredible efforts that such a trek imposes on us that I'm incapable of hearing the birds or looking at anything else but the path in front of me. Two attributes of these mountains, loose stones and scree, dog our pilgrims' progress. In 1988, an old Trail coordinator, Ian Taylor, admitted that some portions of the Trail were unbelievably harsh, adding: 'We wanted the users of the Trail to feel a little of what a settler's life had been.' Well, they've succeeded.

The following days are not much more encouraging; the summits are as gruelling as those of Mount Terrible. Giddying descents, which are even harder on the horses, come in rapid succession, Cooper and River using their legs as breaks as much as they can. The region is also infested with snakes – I see them on our path. I scan the track ahead to safeguard the horses from being bitten. When I spot a tiger snake taking a nap on the narrow track, and it refuses to skedaddle when I throw stones at him – the usual way to make them flee – we are forced to make a detour through the trees on the slope.

For a few days, we travel through areas that have been ravaged by bushfires. In February 2009, thousands of hectares

of trees burned up in the Black Saturday bushfires. The surviving black-and-grey trunks are like ghosts – the dead souls of this cemetery I must cross. It's daytime in summer, and the tops of these mountains are a furnace. My jeans are too warm – I sometimes take them off and walk in just my underwear and boots. The only ones who can see me and laugh are my horses. When we reach the top of a mountain, we enjoy a smoky, blue ridgeline torn up by shreds of mist. But this respite is of short duration. Far, far in the distance, through a gap in the trees, with its entourage of climbs and drops, one can make out the next peak.

The ascent of Lazarini Spur is the most harrowing. A landscape of sinuous paths, its vegetation of dense trees is such that, from the sky, it must seem like a carpet. For two weeks now, I have been on foot, pulling River or Cooper up these steep climbs and down these abrupt descents. I start swearing, and set River free. 'Go,' I tell him, 'do what you want. I'm sick of dragging you along.' Letting him go is a sign of total despair. I have no idea if he'll follow us. When one of the horses starts pulling on a downward slope, it makes the whole experience extremely hard for all of us. I, for one, am spreadeagled between the one behind and those pulling ahead – each of us in a precarious position. So, exhausted, I set him loose, restore him to freedom, and continue on with

Roxanne and Cooper, petrified at the idea that River will not follow. His feet are visibly hurting him on this mountainous terrain, but after a few minutes on his own, picking his way along, he gently joins us. Relieved, I keep on like this until we reach our camp.

That night, we've only travelled 15 kilometres and we arrive much too late to set up a bivouac. I'm wrecked – my whole body is hurting, and I'm bruised from head to toe from falling over on the rocky ground. I don't know how I'll find the strength to put up my tent or to fence off an area for the horses. I sleep as if I've fallen into a well.

Night does its silent work, and the next morning I'm ready to go. I have been getting used to the idea that it takes us time to get ready. I rise earlier and earlier. Yet, after another ascent with Cooper and River being as uncooperative as ever, I lose it. I throw the reins on the ground, dripping with sweat and exhausted from bracing myself while pulling the two geldings along as I walk at their sides. I squat down in tears and ask myself seriously if I'm going to manage 5000 kilometres with these two obstinate mules. Suddenly, I spring to my feet in agony. I have been crouching on a nest of jack jumper ants, and they've stung my bum. Nature has forced me to get back on my feet, reminding me that there's a battle to be fought and that it's no use whinging.

I'm ashamed of my tears. I look at Roxanne and talk to her, begging her to help me.

An idea comes to me for a new system that I hope will help us in our ascent. I pass a leather hobble strap around Roxanne's neck and attach the two geldings to her, so she can pull them up.

This new method starts to yield results, but it's dicey on steep paths. If one of the horses loses their footing, the others will be dragged down, too. I myself often slip in the descents. But we're starting to form a team thanks to this system, which brings them to understand that they can't opt out of their fair share of the work. From now on, Cooper and River climb the slopes more vigorously, strengthened by their intestinal fortitude.

Habits set in. Up early, we're on the move till the mid-afternoon. I don't stop for lunch, so as to avoid keeping my companions standing with weight on their backs. At the end of each leg, I look after them first. It's a rule I never bend. I relieve the pack horse of his or her saddle, which is the heaviest. I wash them and check them over for any wounds, and then I hobble them so they can graze. I go to bed early.

Water, grass, and shade are my three priorities in choosing where to set up my bivouac. Every day, I create an ephemeral home in the bush. Dependent on the wind, I choose where

to build my campfire, surrounding it with river stones. I erect my tent, and lay out my saddle gear to dry off the sweat. The sheepskin I sleep on is also my armchair in front of the fire. At sundown, I unravel the electric tape that will serve as my horses' enclosure for the night – always positioned close by me so I can hear them. I study the following day's navigation plan. The guide's survey is not always precise or up to date. To add an additional difficulty, the Trail was conceived in twelve sections from north to south, but because I started from the south I must read it upside-down – and the directions can get absurd. Another golden rule: I must never leave behind any trace of my presence.

After a trying day – still in the Lazarini Spur section – when approaching the planned camping spot, I hear bells. I move closer and meet a couple of Australians, Kathryn and Preston, with their horses. In her thirties, she's brown haired, blue eyed, with a gentle face. He's a darker blond, a little older, with a few days' stubble and a benign expression. They're riding down the Trail, towards the south, at bookends with me. Water is quite far away, and we help each other out in retrieving it. It's so nice to meet them, and they're so friendly. They started on the Trail fifteen months ago and have 5000 kilometres under their belts, while I have a puny two hundred from two weeks' riding.

I'm full of admiration for the good physical condition of their five horses. I like hearing the cowbells that hang around their steeds' necks. Perfectly organised, hampered by very little equipment, they've accumulated a fount of knowledge about the horses and the lay of the land, and they share this wealth of information with me. In return, I give them precision detail on what they'll be riding into. Preston has talent as a farrier; he has furnished his five horses with boots, and horseshoes in very light aluminium. I ask him to check my brumbies' feet. He assures me they're still in good nick, but tells me they won't be able to stay that way for thousands of kilometres. They'll need horseshoes or boots. This worries me, because I'm about three weeks from the first local community. Thanks to Preston and Kathryn, I learn that copra, dried coconut albumen, mixed with water, can be used as a dietary supplement for the horses. This powder, very light to carry, expands in contact with water. The next day, I say goodbye to the benevolent duo and tell them how grateful I am. They give me my first horse bell and warn me that the next tracks scale terrible peaks and that I will find myself very isolated.

Two days later, sitting resting in a field on the bank of Macalister River, I see a white Land Cruiser pick-up driving towards me. It's Finnie – all battered cowboy hat, gap-toothed smile and deceptively vacant blue-eyed gaze – who has managed to find us in this steep, craggy landscape. I'm awe-struck and so happy to see him. The man has found his way, without any means of communication, following my horses' footprints like a tracker. I'm relieved, too – I know his help will be so precious, two days from crossing the famous Butcher Country, known for its lack of water and feed. Finnie has brought up lots of fresh produce, and his favourites 'froffies' (beers). Ever the bushman, limping on his bowlegs because of a bad knee, he cooks me a delicious lunch on his fire, which renews me physically and morally.

We check out the next few days' navigation together, and, suddenly, while we're each absorbed in our daily tasks, a large, white, four-wheel drive Land Cruiser looms up, charging straight at us. It stops, and three sinister-looking men climb out, dressed in military fatigues, armed to the teeth – daggers, ammunition belts, boot knives – and holding a growling, drooling pit bull, straining on his leash. These men, probably hunters, between forty and fifty, don't look Australian. One of them is wearing yellow aviator sunglasses that make him look like he's from another time. They prowl arrogantly around our

camp, before addressing us with their heavy Eastern European accents. Then they start talking between themselves, but we can't understand a single word. They have large dead snakes and a dingo on the roof of their four-wheel drive. Blood drips from the car, and they boast of shooting at anything that moves. Finnie and I feign the utmost calm. Presumably, they're trying to intimidate us. Then they ask us questions. Wary, we keep our answers as vague as we can, and I avoid alluding to my solo trek. Neither of us has any difficulty imagining their dark intentions. After a 20 minute discussion that feels like a century, they finally depart. That night, locked in my tent with my knife under my pillow, I don't sleep a wink, terrified at the idea of them returning. Finnie spends his night in the back of his pick-up, his rifle at hand's reach.

At daybreak, we tackle the Butcher Country ascent. For this trek, I set off on foot with my horses, and Finnie goes ahead of us in his four-wheel drive to assess the terrain. His vehicle is having a hard time; the incline is so steep and the washouts so great that the track has had to be levelled out every 20 metres to facilitate passage. Finnie waits for me every few kilometres, with his usual kindness. I arrive scarlet-faced, panting, my horses shrouded in misty clouds of sweat, and we take a break to give us time to catch our breath. Finnie offers a cool drink. The higher we rise, the more the landscape

changes. The grass, scarcer now, is only snowgrass, burnt by the snow which covers it for the main part of the year.

We haven't gotten through many kilometres, but Finnie's presence allows us to bivouac where we fancy, because he has water and food for the horses. He notices that his four-wheel drive's coil springs are damaged. At the end of the afternoon, in the dying light, we share a few 'froffies' and enjoy the escarpments, the blue, misty peaks, unravelling the immensity of Australia before us. In the dry dusk air, eagles, rulers of this land, pierce the silence with their strident calls. I love the baroque shapes that the clouds form in the setting sun. We discuss possible scenarios. He envisages, if his four-wheel drive can't make it to the next leg, continuing with me on one of my horses.

That night, it rains. When we wake up in the morning, the world is wrapped in a dense fog. But the clock is still ticking, and we have a long day ahead of us in which to reach a shelter called Howitt Hut.

We set off, and Finnie leaves, keen to test his vehicle. I walk slowly with my horses in the pouring rain, which obstructs our vision. A strong blizzard rises, blowing straight at us. It bothers the horses, who walk with their heads sideways. A horse has no front vision and can only see from the sides. My head is bent, with my Driza-Bone coat reaching to my

feet. With my cowboy hat, riding alone in the mountains, I feel like the 'man from Snowy River.' Isn't the poem about brumbies, after all? I'm hoping I'll be as successful on these steep slopes as he was.

Drenched to the bone and hardly able to see my way, I'm relieved to catch a glimpse of the humble mountain shelter. At 1545 metres, it was built around the start of the twentieth century. It's one of the highest shelters in Victoria. In this rudimentary shack, you find cut wood, a few tin cans of food, matches and a stone fireplace: the bare essentials for survival. Around the fire, I dry my equipment and my clothes. Finnie and I drink a few 'froffies', happy to be under a roof in this storm. 'Love, you've been kissed on the ass by an angel,' he tells me. I fall into a deep sleep on the wooden sleeping platform.

Next morning, I wake up at the sound of the bell I've hung around Roxanne's neck to a perfect blue sky. I've made myself a new friend, a red robin or *miro boodang*, perched on the windowsill, bold as brass. I step out of the hut, stunned by the view. Snow gums, wildflowers and yellow gentians frame the plateau. Clouds of butterflies patrol the pastures of snowgrass. The peaks of Mount Howitt, Bogong and Feathertop claim the distant horizon. Finnie is leaving us. He's going home. I decide to linger and enjoy this mesmerising place. Roxanne,

River and Cooper play in a paddock, which is already fenced for cattle. They're having a field day, rearing and kicking under the sky in pure enjoyment.

When I leave Howitt Plains Hut, the Trail morphs into a single mountain path plunging down into Wonnangatta Valley, becoming so narrow that you have to search for it all the way. Till now the horses could walk three abreast, but here it's impossible. I have to dismount to guide the horses, meandering between the trees, which is quite a feat. Cooper, the laziest, keeps getting on my nerves. Instead of following in single file, he follows his own agenda, and almost has us all tumbling down to the bottom of the valley below. When I'm already having a difficult time with the packhorse, who has a wider load, Cooper keeps on going on the wrong side of trees, dragging us backwards.

This descent is hard work but mentally gratifying. The views that greet me at every turn seem to insist that everything is worth it. In this extreme wilderness, Wonnangatta Valley is very wide, its flanks covered with yellowed grass and enormous dark-green trees. The trees stand, alive with beauty, handing me their stunning reward in answer to all my efforts. I see a few stone ruins, vestiges of the first settlers and of the gold-diggers of the last years of the 1860s.

On our way up again, since the Trail evolves from valleys

into peaks, we find ourselves bereft of water. Coerced into travelling additional kilometres in search of an alternative, we must make do with a pretty nauseating greenish pond. I have water purifying pills, but this is beyond any purifying … As fate has it, I meet a cyclist who, between periods of work, has been following sections of the Trail for a couple of years. He's the definition of the lightweight, rugged traveller. He has very little gear on his bike. Soap and toothbrush are definitely absent from his kit's bare essentials, and his hair appears to host a nest of unwanted guests. He explains that I was lucky in the high Victorian country, because its streams are so pristine, but I should have a water filter. In spite of his oddities, he's friendly and I enjoy his company. We filter enough water for the night and the next day. Without him I would have had to make do with half a litre of drinking water till the next day's camp. (*Kissed by an angel again*, I think to myself.)

I continue my progression in this wild area, with its abrupt slopes – so tough to handle. Before the descents, I adjust the pack saddle's harness. If it slips towards the horse's neck, it could create a wound. On the plateau, I stumble upon a group of four-wheel drive enthusiasts – a television crew. They're filming a documentary on the most adventuresome treks in Australia. The producer asks me, rather arrogantly, to get out of the way on a steep path. I refuse. I was there

before him. Finally, he decides not to use it, judging it to be too risky. My horses and I handle it without too much trouble, and most importantly without incident. There's a certain satisfaction in this.

One evening, a while later, when camping on high ground in the middle of summer, a freezing cold descends and it starts snowing. My horses, with their short, summer coats, are not equipped for such weather. A thin layer of snow freezes my companions to the bone. They shake all night, and I have no rugs to offer them. Roxanne's shaking is the worst; I cover her with a synthetic tarp normally used to protect my equipment. In the days following, Cooper and River develop pulmonary infections. A yellow excretion oozes from their nostrils. They cough. I draw some antibiotics from my veterinary kit, which I inject into their necks twice a day. It's an intramuscular injection, with a long needle. I carefully change sides every time. It must be painful, but they seem to bear it very well.

Luckily, we're approaching a small town, Omeo, where new treatment will be available – and a few days' rest. That night, I hear rustling in the saddlebags and go out to discover that a family of water rats has disposed of our food rations. In the morning, I discover that they've even gnawed the saddlebags' leather itself. Damning them, the next day I hang our victuals to a tree.

We left on 17th of November, and we are a week away from Omeo – the only township in Section 12 of the BNT. I had given myself this objective to reach by Christmas. I arrive in this small town on the 22nd of December, which is at 685-metres altitude and counts only 400 souls. After living in the bush cut-off from everything for six weeks, even this meeting with 'society' causes a trance-like shock. Showing-off a tad, I choose to ride down the main street with my three horses on the way to the pub, and I'm irresistibly reminded of the Westerns I used to enjoy with my father as a kid. But the sound of my horses' hooves triggers a memory of the echo of hooves on the cobblestones of a village in France. In my late teens, I took a herd of horses up the Ardèche. Even a line of Victor Hugo's poem springs to mind: 'To hear your hooves, ringing on the ceiling of dreams'.

The owner of the pub offers me one of his paddocks to house my brumbies and my tent in. The inhabitants of Omeo are welcoming, as people often are in rural areas. At the pub, I meet old locals, real cowboys always ready to share a beer while relating stories from their youths as drovers. Their faces are weathered by the sun and by their harsh lives. Pot-bellied

because of their beer-loving tendencies, the locals' tales reveal a part of the country's history – of the settlers, when life was tough and wild. I like their drawl. Some of these men are amusing, others are poignant.

This small locality was renowned in the 1850s during the goldrush, and its population went up to nine thousand. Even if today Omeo can only boast a very small population, its few beautiful colonial buildings still stand, like disproportionate giants, as witnesses of its past. The town's name, Omeo, means 'mountain' in the Aboriginal language. This is where I want to spend Christmas – an ideal opportunity for my brumbies to recover and for me to reorganise my equipment, to have some repairs done, as well as for me to prepare the logistics of the following weeks in the bush. I'm hunting everywhere for some boots to protect my companions' hooves. Kathryn and Preston were adamant that my horses' feet couldn't make the five-thousand-plus kilometres without them. I have sometimes resorted to using anti-inflammatories for their aching hooves, but it's not something I want to do long-term. I can't find a vet anywhere in the town, so I ask a local. He agrees to look at them out of the kindness of his heart and helps me in my search for boots. Besides, River and Cooper haven't completely recovered from their coughs. Before returning to the bush, I must check with my vet over

the phone to see if he can send me extra medication. Luckily, there's a post office!

Omeo was known as the toughest and wildest township in this part of Australia. In this place, where so little services and shops are available, the inhabitants of the bush are used to being autonomous like everyone else in these remote rural areas – are able to handle all sorts of repairs and do leatherwork in their back sheds. In the garage of a friendly local, I get my rat-nibbled saddlebags repaired. I meet there an extraordinary half-Russian-half-Rumanian man, who lived in New Zealand and married an Englishwoman. The couple have settled in a nearby farm, have Guy Fawkes River National Park brumbies themselves, and they invite me to spend Christmas Eve with them. I'm stunned to encounter other people who are as passionate about these versatile horses as I am. She even competes in archery competitions on her brumby.

I abandon some of my heavier equipment – I've got to relieve my mounts of every possible ounce. I unstrap my cumbersome satellite telephone, which I've hardly used, having mainly relied on my SPOT tracker. I've already let go of my swag, and I've abandoned my large, sophisticated camera – too complicated to use when managing three horses, anyway.

This township marks the end of Section 12. The saying that those on the trail often share, 'Victoria makes you or breaks you!', fits the bill. We've got through this difficult stretch, and we've pulled it off.

In the pub, on Christmas day, a tall Christmas tree reigns in the dining room. Beer flows freely, children run around in circles of joy; Australian traditions are respected. Everyone seems to have adopted me, even if my adventure leaves many of the slightly misogynistic bushmen sceptical.