

Caroline Grossmith fulfilled an ambition last week when she rode the Venetian Camel Trail

Horses get the hump

Report and photos by
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IF YOU SAW or met people limping or complaining of stiffness and bruises in places they never thought possible last week, then chances are you happened across one of the merry band of riders who accepted Caroline Grossmith's invitation to ride along the Venetian Camel Trail.

With more than a year of planning behind her, countless reces to check out the trail, and the support of a superb back-up team, 20 riders joined Caroline to experience parts of the 162km trek across the Troodos Mountains.

In use until the 1950s, the Camel Trail was set up by the Venetians as a trade route to carry smelted copper from the mines in Troodos and other produce and supplies originating from the region, to Paphos and towns further west. The trail incorporates three bridges built by the Venetians and, despite it only being 50 years since camel trains were regularly used in Cyprus, there is surprisingly little official information about the trail or the camel trains.

Caroline began researching the route in January last year after a suggestion from friends who used to live in Episkopi. Sue and Tim Finnigan (who joined the trip for three days) had spent time in the mountains visiting the many Byzantine churches to be found there and were aware of the three Venetian bridges in the region.

As the idea grew, Caroline was soon spending every spare moment in the mountains, often with the help of her family, locating the Elia, Kelephos and Roudhias Bridges, mapping feasible routes between and around them and identifying potential camping areas. Caroline said: "I originally planned to use horses from Dhekalia Saddle Club and planned the trip to last four days, staying at Kelephos Bridge in the middle, but as word got about, the interest grew. Geoff Fryatt, who runs the Rambling Association suggested other places for us to stay and we realised we could extend the trip to six days, two three-day teams. As the idea evolved, we were able to invite people to join the ride for just one or two days."



Above: Caroline saddles up one of the horses after lunch in Pera Vasa



Left: The horses were corralled outside the lodges in Milkouri for the night

The group left Milkouri on the Friday morning for the ride to Vretsia, a deserted Turkish Cypriot village in the hills, passing Kelephos Bridge on the way.

Phini, from where the horses were boxed back to Troodos.

Despite the logistics involved and the few mishaps, Caroline said organising the trip was never an onerous task. She paid tribute to the back-up team, saying that without them it would have been impossible. "I really need to say thank you to so many people. First, to the long-suffering Bede, in charge of the support team. His planning meant that people who were joining us for a couple of days were able to get back to their cars and the equipment that we needed was always where we needed it."

"Fantastic Mr Fox", David, cooked and got our rations and Bob May stuck with us driving, bottle washing and loading and unpacking for the whole week. Zane was to-ing and fro-ing to Episkopi to pick up

Eventually, using nine horses owned by Jhannis Mandria, whose business is based at Troodos Square, and with a back-up team comprising the 'fantastic' Captain David Fox from Ration Troop who organised the food, Garrison Commander and Caroline's husband, Colonel Bede Grossmith, Bob May, who offered his services for the whole trip despite having no interest in horses, and Zane McLaughlin, also from Ration Troop, the six-day riding expedition took place from April 28 to May 3.

Following a night in the mountains, the first day involved a fairly short warm-up ride from Troodos to Mandria via the Caledonian Falls for lunch. The second day's 34km ride from Mandria to Milkouri presented a series of challenges, including steep inclines that meant everyone had to dismount and lead their horses while trying to stay upright themselves! They passed Elia Bridge before turning north to ride up a beautiful leafy valley to spend the night in Milkouri's self-catering chalets.

It was at Vretsia that Caroline's carefully made planned plans went slightly awry. It started with a simple face-off between the local stallion (who took exception to strangers on his patch) and Tarzan, the head of Jhannis's group of horses, that was quickly averted. Following a night spent camping under the stars (for some!), the riders took the horses on a circular picnic route around Vretsia valley, lunching at a ruined aqueduct. Then the fun really started. Caroline said: "Jimmy, one of Jhannis's horses fell ill and we had to take him to the stables at Episkopi where he spent the next few days recovering, and Jhannis got in the middle of two horses having an argument and received a kick that fractured his shinbone, putting him out of action."

With Jhannis back at his base in Troodos after being treated at Paphos hospital, and Jimmy tucked up in Episkopi, the group carried on alone. The last two days saw the riders retracing the steps of the first team back to Pera Vasa, Milkouri, eventually finishing at

rations, Sue Finnigan drove large 4x4s down very steep and dodgy tracks when she'd never been off-road before and the vet, Hamish Denham, arranged an emergency drugs drop for the sick horse! Helen McKenzie and Sue Mantovari recced with me and provided the horse box and even my uncle and aunt, Marilyn and Michael, who were visiting from England got roped in. Thanks also to Charles Dickie for organising us to stay with the horses at Milkouri.

"It was also a great experience for everyone," she added. "Our youngest rider was Roseanna Walker, aged 12, and she rode for three days - the rest of us were older and in various states of repair - before and after the ride! Most of the old and bold riders said they were doing things that they'd never done before and the scenery, seeing the snow on Troodos, avoiding enormous thunderstorms, the sunrises and sunsets and being miles from anywhere was fantastic. We slept under the stars, listened to nightingales in Milkouri and learnt an awful lot about the horses. It was a great team-building exercise."

As well as great personal experiences, another good thing to come out of the expedition is that the Camel Trail is now starting to be marked for other people who want to explore the trails. During the course of her research, Caroline approached the Forestry Commission, Troodos Visitors' Centre and the Tourist Board asking for information. Little or nothing was available officially but now, due to increased interest, signs marking the routes are being erected.

The trail crossing the three bridges is only 30km from Phini to Vretsia and the terrain means it is ideal for walkers and mountain bikers.

For information about the lodges at Milkouri (an extra 28km added to the east-west route) where the camel trail team stayed overnight, contact Charles Dickie on 9941 1477, and Evagoras at the Vretsia Village Tavern, which is an ideal spot for scout and guide camps, on 9963 6195.



Photo: David Johnson



Above: The riders set off on the track through the mountains on their way to Milkouri. Above right: The trail took the intrepid bunch over scenic, mountainous terrain. Above left: A very hungry band of riders tuck into dinner