Once Bitten...

IT WAS pretty much the trip of a lifetime for me. I was travelling and working around Australia- and I mean around it! I wasn't doing the 'same old, same old' of Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne; bar tending, waitressing and selling on the phone. I was going into the outback where all the real work was done.

Australia's sheep farms are vast and too big to comprehend. Some farmers use helicopters to help them keep an eye on their stock. The farm I was working on wasn't that fancy but there was still an eye-watering amount of land to cover and four-wheel drives (known as 'utes') were a must.

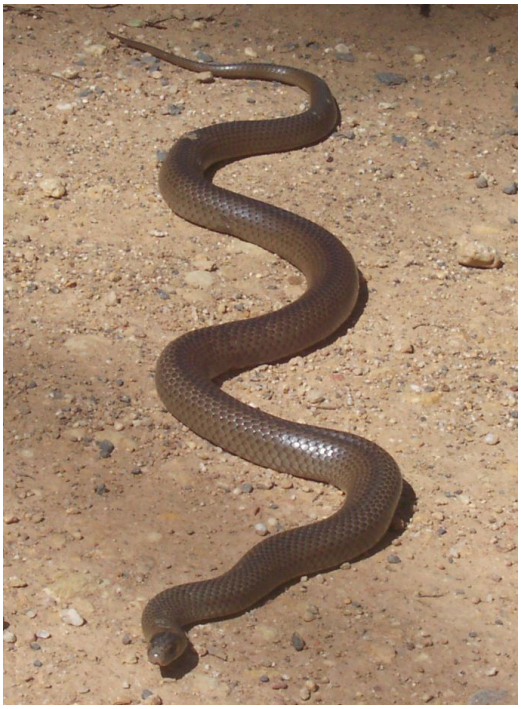
When we were out in the fields, we were always vigilant for snakes. I am not a lover of belly crawlers (who is?) and so I was especially careful to wear protective footwear (despite the heat), check the ground as I walked and the inside of the ute if it had been left for a while. So far I'd seen a few snakes but, as most people had assured me, they don't waste time on humans and skitter away as soon as they spot you. Phew!

I'd been on the farm about a week and had got to know my fellow workers pretty well by then. Working alongside them all day every day helps you to forge a bond quickly. We had decided to have a fancy dress party on Saturday afternoon to celebrate a birthday. Being stuck out in the bush, we had to improvise costumes with whatever we had with us. I decided to go as an Egyptian queen. I put my long hair up, stuck some of my necklaces on my head, went mad with the black eyeliner, popped my flip flops on and wrapped myself in a white sheet as my 'robe'. We all looked pretty silly to be honest but that was the point really. We were having a good time- eating burgers and sausages from the 'barbie', dancing to old eighties pop songs- when I suddenly remembered I'd left my mobile in the ute. I wanted it to facetime my mum later that night. With the time difference between Australia and the UK, I had to wait until almost the middle of the night to call her. Without thinking, I ran out to the old barn where we parked all

the off roaders. I scrambled up into the passenger side of the ute and leaned over the seat to get my phone which was safely stowed in the storage compartment near the gear stick. I grabbed it and triumphantly straightened up and jumped out of the truck.

The next thing I knew was a sharp pain in my leg. I swung round and looked down into the malicious eyes of an insipid coffee-coloured snake. My worst fear had materialised. Its head was rearing and its mouth was wide open. It seems I had jumped onto its tail and of course, stupidly, I was wearing flip flops...

I remember screaming but not much else. I fell over, whether that was shock or venom I don't know. I was very, very lucky. Brett, one of our crew, heard me and came out to investigate. I managed to stammer the word 'snake'. He put me in the ute and started driving for the nearest hospital. Brett didn't even stop to explain to the rest of them, he knew there was no time to waste and thank goodness he did, I've learned since that it was an Eastern Brown that got me; the second most toxic land snake in the world. It might appear unremarkable - being the colour of your mum's velour sofa - but looks can be deceiving.



In the few minutes it took to get there, paralysis set in. I couldn't feel my legs and I started to panic. Brett was trying to reassure me. Despite being in the bush and away from all major hospitals, the local cottage hospital held anti-venom for all venomous snakes known in the area. He rang ahead and told them we were coming. He guessed it could be an Eastern Brown as they often hang out in barns and the quick onset of symptoms was typical. Apparently Brett lifted me bodily from the truck and ran inside holding me like a baby. What must that have looked like? He was dressed as a caveman and I was wearing a sheet! I barely remember the next few hours. I found out later that it took more than one dose of anti-venom to counteract the effects and that it was touch and go for a while. Eastern Browns are responsible for more snake bite deaths in Australia than any other species.

Thanks to the quick thinking of my fellow worker, I did pull through. But it just goes to show, you can't let your guard down for a moment. Oh, and avoid flip flops in the bush - even if you are an Egyptian queen!