

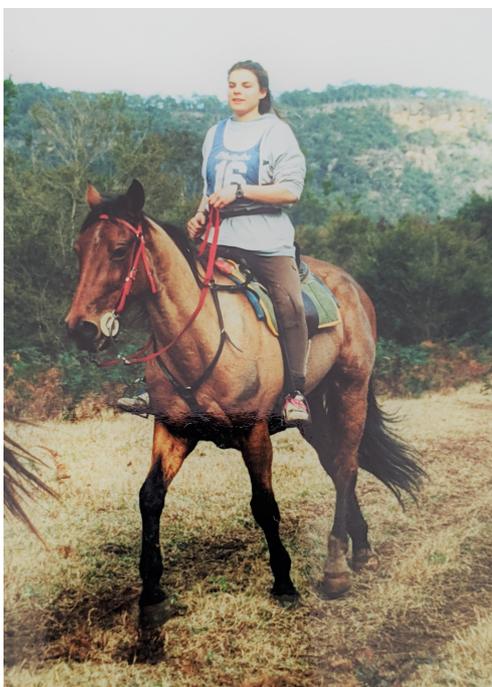
My 2019 Shahzada Story

by Darien Feary

Shahzada 2019 was the year I got to ride. After 3 years of watching from the vetting area (which I also love), I had the privilege of riding a seasoned, proven Shahzada horse around the best ride ever. Not only that, I also had my sister Clare to show me how to do it. So, this is a story of being extremely fortunate. Yet I write this as the beautiful Shahzada tracks are burning, and as the hard-working Valley community are fighting for their properties. It might be a very long time before some of the trails show their wildflowers and the wildlife that Shahzada riders are spoilt with every year. If only that freezing rain we rode in on Friday would come back. It really is a special place, and a special group of people that make this unforgettable ride happen every year.

Completing Shahzada 400km was only ever a childhood dream that I never actually imagined would be achievable now, in my 40's. My first unsuccessful attempt at Shahzada was back in 1992, during the days when we rode in Akubra hats and military saddles (or bareback, Murray Fox!). Searle Johnston and Kristen Proudfoot were my teachers back then. Searle introduced me to the world of endurance back when I was 10 years old. He was tough, and I just had to hang on...literally...as he showed me how to train horses. We may have been known as the 'Bendora girls' back then, but the experience Searle gave me determined the trajectory of my life – horses were always my love, but endurance riding gave me confidence, self-worth, and my aspiration to do something with my life that involved two things; horses, and making a difference somehow.

Like all endurance riders, I experienced tie-ups, colic's, and even the unfortunate sudden death of one of Searle's horses underneath me while I was training it. I was a teenager, but I remember these events vividly because they affect you. Well, I had no understanding of anything back then and now really value the education veterinary medicine has given me. Ironically, vet school in Sydney took me away from the very thing that made me want to become a vet. I missed horses and riding like my right arm. Reflecting on that, it makes sense to me what wise women have said; "you can have everything in life, just not all at the same time".



Darien riding Kimba
at Shahzada in 1992.

Fast track 27 years later, and I am far from riding-fit I can tell you! Riding 400km on a horse that will only trot (if you ever want to stop her) was an experience for my body that it will never forget!

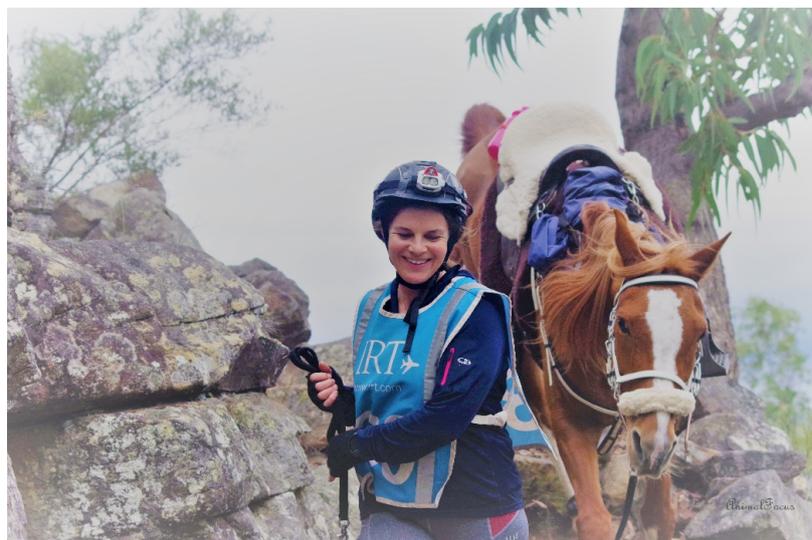


The star of my Shahzada story is the mare Avita.

Ava belongs to Clare and Rob Catlin. I rode her through her first 80km ride 10 years ago and she is exactly the same horse as she was back then; with a fierce determination, strength, and stamina that you better go along with. There is no disagreeing with this lady. She knows how to get the job done. I have huge respect for her. As Rob Catlin reassured me after his successful Shahzada marathons riding her, "Ava will pull your arms out for 3 days, but you will be loving your forward moving steed on Thursday and Friday!" How true that was. At the end of 400km, I would have happily gotten on and ridden out again the next day, and the ones after that. I think Ava might not have loved that idea as much...

Highlights of my Shahzada:

The Hills: I loved the hills more than the flatter sections. My favourites were Careflight and Short Whelums – so pretty. Prestons and the Steps were great challenges and the road out to Prestons was stunning.



Friends: What a great comradery between riders; pulling into check points to share hay and water and chat with familiar faces was just the best. So was riding with my sister Clare, Emily Streckfuss, Stu Lymbery, Kylie Jonkers, Sue Todd, Levi, and my buddy for Thursday and Friday; young junior star Modena Foster!



Super horse + sunrises + hills + friends = happy place 🌑 😊



The ride community: Every time we entered the vet area we were met with smiling, encouraging TPR's, vets, and ride organisers (I even got spoilt with swigs of Haydn's girly latte's 🍷 😊). The business of getting your horse through the week is serious, but the "git-up" was an hilarious mood-lightener. Kym Hagan's horse and Haydo dancing duo were particularly entertaining!

Our camp: All Shahzada endurance riders look after each other, encourage each other, and there is nothing like a camp full of all-round top horse people – which is why we were the winners of the team event! It was a proud moment to be part of this team of horseman: Gavin Peacock, Rhys Norman, and Mitch Ravillion.

No achievement is without its challenges. Even before the ride started Rob Catlin gave up his horse for Clare to ride, and still let me ride Ava. A selfless gesture that meant we had a strapper AND a chef, but Rob missed out. Seeing Clare vet out, followed by other great horses and riders, drives home the reality that Shahzada is no average ride. I can now truly say from experience that Shahzada is, and always will be, the Ultimate Test of horse and horsemanship. I understand why people come back to do this ride every year. I will never forget it.



