

Two Comical Desert Mammals

There are, indisputably, two species of mammalian snob in our desert ...

One has accomplished and established an egotistic and cocky colony within an increasingly wider territory, as cities expand acquisitively into the domain of the other.

One is an indigenous snob – the other is a foreign snob. One is a certain category with the genus 'expatriate' – the other is the genus 'camelus'

The crucial contrast between these two genera of snob is that one will endure and outlast the other. The expatriate in question, overvalues his rank and status and dislikes his 'supposed' inferiors, who in turn jokingly mock and scorn such farcical, ludicrous, and absurd behaviour. The species has a questionable future.

The camel, nevertheless, is the accepted, popular, and uncontested monarch of the desert – and all by birth. He has the indisputable copyright on pride, arrogance, affectation and haughtiness which he exhibits in his droll and comic carriage. His stance is mimicked with ease by the expatriate pretender – a long neck, a pointed pompous chin, an irritated glance through veiled, bored and disinterested eyes, a carriage of dominant deportment and an irritable demeanour.

THE CAMEL

The genealogy of the camel can be traced back to between 40 – 60 million years ago (the Eocene epoch). About 3 million years ago, the primal camel began its relocation package by crossing two newly emerged

land-bridges southwards into South America and westwards to Asia.

Haplessly, it then became extinct in its place of origin. The two emigrant stocks then went their own evolutionary ways to how we know them today – Llama, Alpaca, Guanaco, Vicuna in South America, and Bactrian and Dromedary Camels in Asia.

Camels plod along cropping large amounts of indigestible fibrous food and low growing leaves, which are fermented in their three chambered stomach. The camels' digestive system is highly specialised to enable them to survive on dry, thorny vegetation that would not support other mammals. The food is torn up and swallowed, rapidly passing into the first two chambers and later, when the animal is at rest and secure, the food is brought back into the mouth in small lumps, thoroughly chewed and swallowed. This system allows the camel to obtain as much food as possible in a short time, and then consume it later at leisure.

Being admirably adapted for both cold and hot desert conditions, the camel is able to survive for very long periods without water. It is food, not water, that is stored in the hump, and this fat can be broken down within the body to give energy when required.

The feet have two toes and undivided padded soles, preventing the animal sinking into soft sand or deep snow.

The nostrils can be completely closed to keep out sand, and with a double row of interlocking eyelashes, the eyes are protected against sun, sand, snow and glare.

The skin has no sweat glands, and this helps to prevent the loss of moisture from the body.

The camel does not store water, it conserves it efficiently. One way it does this, is by producing extremely dry faeces and a highly concentrated urine containing little water.

ON THE STEPPES OF ASIA – THE BACTRIAN CAMEL

The Bactrian – or two-humped camel – is the Central Asian species inhabiting rocky and desolate habitats, such as the Gobi Desert of Mongolia. The name is from the region of Bactria, North of Afghanistan, that was once thought to be its original home.

In many of these areas, the temperatures in winter can drop well below freezing. The Bactrian Camel will grow a long, thick and shaggy winter coat, giving it a dishevelled, moth-eaten, frumpish appearance. In Spring, the long coat is moulted, leaving a thin layer on the chin, forequarters and lopsided humps, making it look even more ruffled and unkempt.

SHIPS OF THE DESERT – THE DROMEDARY CAMEL

The Arabian Camel – also known as a Dromedary, or one-humped camel – is slightly taller than the Bactrian, although much the same weight when fully grown – about 450-650 kg. These camels may be found in Africa, as well as Australia, where they are believed to have escaped from exploration parties. The Dromedary is most suited for riding and racing.

During the hottest months in the desert, the camel is able to withstand levels of

dehydration that would kill other mammals. They may function perfectly with a water loss amounting to 30% of their body weight. Man starts to lose his faculties at 5%.

The Arabian camel has an impressive capacity for drinking water, swallowing up to 135 litres at a rate of 15 litres a minute. It can regain its normal weight with one drink, provided that its water loss did not exceed 20%. During the colder months, a camel may walk for up to 1,000 km without a drink.

Rival male camels will often fight to establish dominance. They confront one another at a safe distance, raise their heads and display their manes. As they approach each other, they gurgle, spit, defecate and beat their tails against themselves in an attempt to intimidate the other. To fight, they stand neck-to-neck, while each one attempts to push over and bite its' adversary.

THE EXPATRIATE SNOB ...

Unfortunately, unlikely to be rendered extinct in his country of origin because he relocated, the expatriate snob may discover that emulating the camel's affectations and characteristics will not progress his status.

We all hear and admire the camel – he is a genuine, generous, benevolent and important beast. He is a vital companion for mobility and protection, and provides hair for clothing, hide for leather, milk and flesh for food, protection and dried droppings as fuel.

Edward Lear wrote a wonderful story on 'How the Camel got his Hump'. Had he known, he could have written a humorous story on 'How the Expatriate Snob is Haughtier than the Camel'.

POLLY HEALY
Country Life Magazine, Dubai