

## Snake hunt

I have never understood my son's fascination with snakes. They spend 99% of the time sunbathing and 1% killing. Still, from the very beginning of our family's once-in-a-lifetime round-the-world trip, Jonny was obsessed with finding one.

If it was going to happen anywhere I'd thought it would be Africa, but we drew a blank in Ethiopia, our first stop. "Have you seen a snake?" was the regular opening whenever we met a new host. Often the answer was, "Yes!" and Jonny would jump around in excitement - though once a few days had passed and nothing had slithered into view, a melancholic gloom would descend that no amount of salt flats or safaris could alleviate.

At a Tanzanian reptile farm we peered at a bored black mamba in a glass box, and gaped at the photographs of a lion skinning a python up a tree. Would this do?

"The thing is," said Jonny, as he and his brother watched a captive crocodile chow down on some chicks, "I really want to see one in the wild..."

It was on to Asia, and the first thing we noticed at our Cambodian homestay was an alluring bottle of golden alcohol infused with a small cobra. This was more like it! We dined at the top-end Bugs Café and, as Jonny's obsession had no moral boundaries, slurped down a bowl of snake soup. They were clearly out there (and inside us). Then, ambling along a dusty road, we finally found one, a stringy little creature about three feet long, pristine in every way except for the tyre marks on its torso.

"The thing is," said Jonny, as he and his brother twirled the deceased reptile around in front of the local cat, "I'd really like to see one in the wild AND alive..."

At this point the rest of us started to lose the will to live. This trip was not supposed to be one long snake hunt. But Jonny was becoming homesick and we wanted him happy, so we indulged him. In Bangkok we spent a day at a snake venom extraction unit draped with pythons (alive, but not wild). We took the train south to a river in the jungle, where a fisherwoman caught a snake in her net (wild, but not, once she'd bashed it to death on a rock, alive). We saw another one on the road later that day, and promptly ran it over.

We hit the jackpot in western Australia. Walking home one night, the road lit by the southern stars, a single streetlight and the sparks of a crackling electricity pylon, I spotted a slim curved shape, like a long eucalyptus leaf, on the pavement ahead. We froze. The shape moved. I turned on my torch and suggested the boys might want to put on some shoes. There it was, at last! A snake. Not only wild, but alive (albeit slightly shocked by the sudden hysteria).

Reptile hunt over, we could be tourists again. We snorkelled on a reef and batted away swarms of flies on a sheep station. A total of three days passed before he cracked.

"The thing is," said Jonny, as he and his brother swung themselves disconsolately along some rusty monkey bars, "I'd really like to see one in the wild AND alive AND just a little bit bigger."

I made him promise not to tell his father.

We flew to Adelaide to stay in a caravan park, and put snakes out of our mind. One afternoon we drove south to a wild stretch of coast and stood with an aged fisherman watching some surfers. A pod of dolphins cruised up and down catching the waves. It was raw and magical, but Jonny was still out of sorts. We were on the most amazing journey. What on earth could make him happy?

Thirsty, we turned back, crossing the wooden bridge connecting the dunes and the carpark. And then it happened. A man, wiggling his arm frantically up and down, pointed underneath the bridge into the sandy gully. Moving languidly between the shrubs, was a thick dark brown serpent. It was wild. It was alive. It was colossal. It was conveniently cruising around at a distance close enough to gawp at but far enough to avoid death. It was perfect.

Locals joined us to watch and “strewth” over it. “Eastern brown,” one identified, “It’s a whopper!” I looked at Jonny, willing him to be satisfied. It was never going to be better than this. Goddammit, the family couldn’t take much more. He scuffed his toe on the ground, as the snake slowly slid away into the bush.

I held my breath, and he opened his mouth to speak.