

# Sahara shake-up

Former MediaCorp Radio Gold 90FM DJ **STEVEN SHALOWITZ** is on a round-the-world journey after leaving Singapore. Having detailed his preparations last week, the Chicago resident recalls his shocking introduction to Libya.

ABLEL, the cook, was the easiest member of our camping crew to spot.

Although a Tuareg, a people known as “The Blue Men of the Desert” for their indigo turbans and robes, Ablel’s head covering, or *shash*, was the colour of a yellow highlighter.

Waking each morning before sunrise during my week-long expedition through south-western Libya, I saw this bright yellow mass illuminated in the distance, preparing breakfast.

After having visited Greco-Roman ruins along Libya’s northern coast, my seven travelling companions and I were enjoying this portion of the country punctuated by sand dunes, Neolithic rock art and lakes fringed with date palms.

Thanks in part to the hospitality of Ablel and his fellow tribesmen, my fears of travelling in the Sahara were put to rest after our arrival in the desert in the middle of the night.

We sat around a campfire under a sky resembling a planetarium ceiling, sipping Tuareg tea — a sweet brew with a frothy head — listening to our crew singing traditional tunes.

By day four of our desert odyssey, I was already enjoying my “less-is-more” lifestyle. I woke that morning and could already see Ablel’s *shash* popping about at the far end of the camp.

As I approached, he whispered “*Sabah al-kher*” — good morning — so as not to awaken the rest of the crew.

He filled my enamel basin with boiling water and I tiptoed back to my tent — if you can call it tiptoeing, in the sand — and took my morning birdbath.

## HEADING FOR A FALL

After breakfast, Mohammed, our local guide, helped me with my own *shash*. Sporting a beard, sunglasses and with my head and face completely covered in 5m of turquoise cloth I felt like a participant in a witness protection programme.

My camel — a beautiful soft white beast whose name I can neither pronounce nor remember — was ready for me, and I for him, remembering to wear biking shorts underneath my trousers for added comfort.

I

was feeling confident that morning and decided to take the reins myself.

As I rocked back and forth atop the camel, the stunning landscape unfolded; blackened sandstone in fanciful formations rising from the ochre ground created a “Toto, I’ve got a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore” sensation.

But nearly two hours out, my “ship of the desert” turned into the Titanic.

Approaching a shrub, my camel wildly sprinted from the rest of the group without warning.

While bobbing up and down — and relived I’d worn my padded biking shorts — I knew I’d fall.

Strangely, it wasn’t my life flashing before my eyes but the warning in the pre-trip departure notes sent by the tour operator: “Anyone participating must acknowledge the inherent risk in perhaps falling from the saddle and accept all responsibility.”

Galloping away, my concern was less over myself than my new digital camera clutched in my right hand.

Suddenly, the saddle shifted to the side of the camel and I was thrown to the ground.

## BRUISED, BUT NOT BROKEN

After I hit the earth — luckily on a stone-free patch — our tour leader dashed over with the medical kit to attend to my bloody cuts.

Still shaken, I was determined not to let the incident crush my purpose for coming: To test myself, to rough it, to get out of my comfort zone. I got back on another camel and continued with the journey — though this time I had the camel minder take the reins.

When I returned to camp that night, Ablel and the others shouted “Tuareg, Tuareg” — my fall, no doubt, made me a member of their tribe. I was elated to be part of their brotherhood, and was curious whether any of their mishaps on a camel caused tremendous pain in the ribs and back and left their clothes covered in a mess of blood, sand, camel hair and antiseptic cream.

Our desert odyssey over, I noticed several foreigners whose arms were in makeshift slings waiting with us at the Sebha Airport for the flight back north to Tripoli. I knew what they had probably gone through.

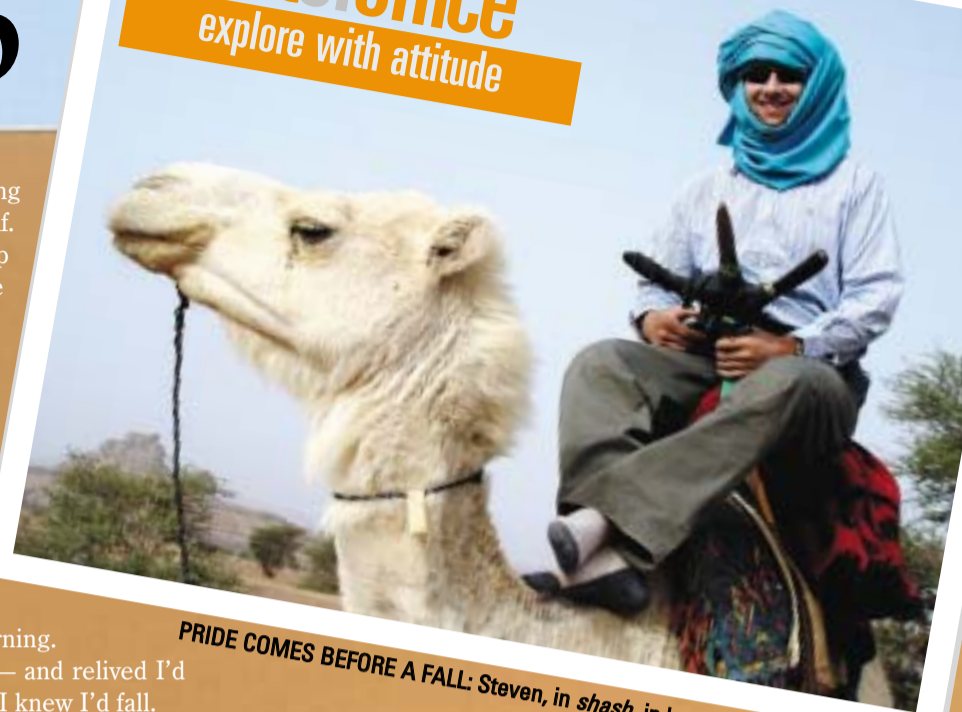
But I was lucky. There were no broken bones.

And I am in no way angry by either my carelessness or by the environment which spawned it.

Rather, I’ll always remember the Sahara not by my accident, but in the words of the Tuareg writer Ibrahim Al Koni: “If water washes the body, the desert cleans the soul.”

Look out for Steven Shalowitz’ final piece on his Libya trip next Thursday. For more on travel, turn to our Traveller section on Pages 28 and 29.

outofoffice  
explore with attitude



PRIDE COMES BEFORE A FALL: Steven, in *shash*, in happier times with his camel.



COLOUR ME BEAUTIFUL: The unmissably-bright attire of the nomadic Tuaregs.