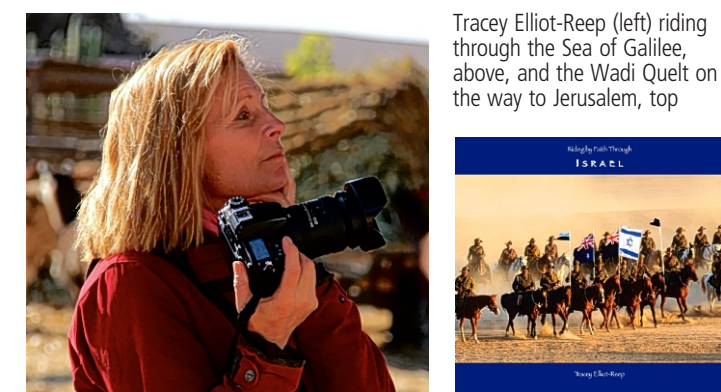


Tracey 'riding by faith' on amazing Israeli pilgrimage



Gillian Molesworth reviews Tracey Elliot-Reep's latest book about her ridden pilgrimage to some of Christianity's most sacred sites



Tracey Elliot-Reep (left) riding through the Sea of Galilee, above, and the Wadi Quelt on the way to Jerusalem, top



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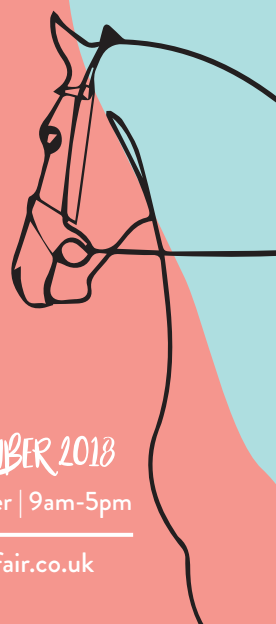
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The phrase "riding by faith" has never rung truer for indomitable horsewoman and explorer, Tracey Elliot-Reep, than when she undertook a ridden pilgrimage around Israel.

With her trademark combination of British derring-do and bonkers optimism, this Dartmoor native hired two horses (a little rusty under saddle, as they hadn't been ridden in years - yikes) to undertake a lengthy tour of some of Christianity's most sacred sites. In modern times, these are also some of the world's most hotly contested: from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank, and the holy city of Jerusalem.

It was a journey Tracey had been considering for a while, but she knew the time was right when she got wind of the re-enactment of the Charge of Beersheba. Hailed as the last of the great cavalry charges in warfare, this surprise assault was led by brave soldiers of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) during the First World War.

Some 800 riders charged shoulder-to-shoulder across the

dessert, evening light gleaming on their bayonet points; and after a lot of dust, shouting and chaotic fighting, captured troops and guns, and took the day.

A hundred years later, in October 2017, their descendants honoured their triumph and their sacrifice by re-creating it - though not, sadly, on the descendants of the original horses. Of the hundreds of brave "Walers", those sure-footed mounts from New South Wales imported for the Allied campaign in the Middle East, very few returned to tell the tale.

A photographer by trade, Tracey was determined to record the event on film. Not only did she capture the spirit of the charge, she also took some portraits of the participants, many of them descendants of the ANZAC soldiers, each with a story to tell.

The ANZAC charge was not the only centenary Tracey wanted to mark. She aimed to finish her ride in Jerusalem, a hundred years after Lord Allenby and the Allies liberated the city from 400 years of Ottoman rule.

So, that was the plan. It only

remained for Tracey to meet her hired horses, arranged through a friend: a greying paint called Zorg and a palomino called Sussita. Zorg was spooky and Sussita had a habit of flinging herself backwards, regularly breaking headcollars and bridles. What could possibly go wrong?

Well, a lot, actually. The main challenge in this arid part of the world, one that has faced many generations of humans living here, is water. Tracey had to figure out how to keep herself and her horses hydrated while travelling. She couldn't read Hebrew, so some of the local maps were a challenge. I'm sure she'd forgive me for saying she wasn't a technology whiz on the phone either.

Then there's the terrain itself. Modern Israel is crisscrossed by not only roads but also many, many fences. On almost a daily basis Tracey had to figure out how to get through or around big padlocked chain-link boundaries of some kind, some forbiddingly laced with barbed wire.

Through this all are constant reminders of conflict past and

present: one striking picture shows her horses sniffing an abandoned tank, and Tracey experiences military convoys, gunfire and planes roaring overhead.

What I enjoy about Tracey's books are the blend of her romanticism and her visions, and the very practical way in which she faces daily challenges on these riding adventures of hers (other destinations include Ireland, New Zealand, Southern Europe, and the USA from South to North). One minute she is talking about prophets who see angels on her shoulders, and the next she is describing how she had to re-load the pack horse three times to balance the load, or protect her rations from wild pigs by thumping the tent.

Truly she describes some situations that take your breath away: crossing motorways and bridges with trucks thundering past; camping metres away from armoured jeeps and land mines; sliding down ravines and scrambling up mountain tracks with a sheer drop on one side.

There are also moments of in-

tense beauty: two male ibex goats clashing their curved horns together; an oasis spotted from above, the moment when a curve of a hill reveals an ancient monastery carved into the rock.

Many people helped Tracey on her route across Israel, and she loyally documents them all. This inventory of fellow horsemen and women is fascinating in itself. Many live on kibbutzes, collective farms; others have their own ranches, some modelled on the American West. Inspiring stories show how horses in the Middle East are uniting Jews and Arabs, and also, as in England, helping people with disabilities. Israel is a melting pot of lots of different countries and cultures, and this is reflected in Tracey's book.

Tracey will be launching the book at various locations in the Westcountry through November and December, including the Westcountry Equine Fair at Westpoint in Exeter on December 1 and 2.

Riding By Faith through Israel is a mix of history and geography. You can buy it for £17.50 from Tracey's website, traceyellioreep.com

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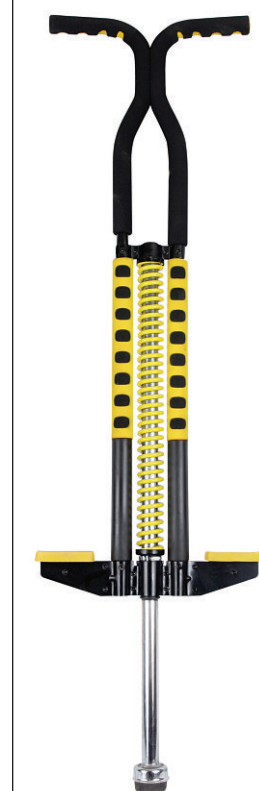
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Excerpt from the diary of Ernest Pauls

Written on November 1, 1917, the day after the Charge of Beersheeba:

"We lined up behind a set of hills and came out at the gallop. We had five miles to go into town. At about three miles we came on the Turks' first line. Two lines of our men went straight on and the third line took up a dismounted assault on the front line defences. Half an hour after the commencement we were right into Beersheeba rounding up large bodies of prisoners, guns etc. 'Shock action' they call these tactics and very successful as the enemy was taken absolutely by surprise, as will be recognised by the fact that six of our troop captured a whole battery of field artillery. The 12th and 4th Regt, were the two Regts to enter Beersheeba. Our Regt (about 150 strong) took over 800 prisoners alone.

"This is absolutely the greatest charge ever made in the history of the campaign in this front, and will live in history forever. Sad to relate some of the best pals a man ever had went under."