

Researchers Down Under

By

Sarah Giles

Texas A&M University

I will admit that my interest in geology began with my love of the movie series *Indiana Jones*, where a couple years ago I was watching the series for the hundredth time with my family when I told my parents excitedly “I want a job like that!” What I meant was, I wanted a job where I could travel around the world, roaming foreign terrain in a quest for knowledge. My parents both being enthusiastic geologists quickly informed me that their careers allowed them both an office and field mode of practice. However, having been subject to countless hiking trips where they picked up a rock excitedly or pointed at an outcrop and droned on about how it formed, I automatically closed my ears to their suggestion. When I went to college, I knew I loved science, but I was indecisive of what which one in particular I wanted to study. I began in Environmental Studies, where I was required to take a geology class, and after the first geology lecture and laboratory assignment, I was hooked.

I found what area of geology I was passionate about this past summer, when I worked as a research and field assistant in South Australia. When the plane landed in Adelaide, I had no idea what I was in for, but as our field vehicle raced down the dusty outback highway, passing herds of kangaroo and massive twisted gum trees, I was enthralled by the adventure I was embarking upon. For six weeks we rose with the sun, mapping and sampling, measuring sections and studying outcrops. My research investigated a suprasalt minibasin adjacent to a salt diapir, and the more I researched the more I was intrigued by salt tectonics. My mind ran wild with all the questions that still needed answers, and I discovered how scientists could devote their careers to uncovering mysteries in science. My excitement made me adventurous, and one afternoon towards the end of our Australia field season, we had just hiked to the top of a peak and we were discussing the terrain below. Out of the corner of my eye I caught my shadow, and with my field gear on and a large field hat, I thought I looked a bit like Indiana Jones. With adventure on my mind and a flush in my cheeks, I admit I felt like him too.

My biggest fear before traveling to Australia was that I wouldn't be able to handle camping for weeks at a time. The first evening after we had arrived in the field, we had just finished setting up camp and were gathered around the campfire. The flames lit up the features on our faces as we laughed and ate our tacos (which tasted even better cooked over an open flame) and I realized that I was doing it! It was only the first day and I had three more weeks to go, but I had lasted the first four hours in

the field! From there, it only became easier. When there was a problem, such as a flat tire on the field vehicle, I found that instead of becoming frazzled I became an excellent problem solver. It was exhilarating, to have a setback and have to solve it with the materials around you. I have never been so alive in my life as I was in the Australian outback. It was where science and survival laced their fingers together, daring you to thrive, daring you to discover what you were capable of.

On the plane ride back to Texas from Australia, I was filled with a sense of melancholy. Though I had memories of Australia to last me a lifetime, I felt that I was leaving a piece of myself down under, leaving the geologist I had become in Australia. However, this despondency vanished when I was taken on a camping field trip for a geology class. That first day of the trip, with my notebook opened and my hand lens hanging around my neck, I took a deep breath and smiled at the surrounding landscape. I could feel my heart racing and my feet aching with restlessness. I was ready to hike, to hammer at rocks and solve problems. I was *her* again. The Sarah I had thought I left in South Australia. It was then that I realized that it did not matter where I was in the world, as long as I was out in the field solving geologic problems I would be energized and innovative, eager to discover answers and the next great adventure.

As I embark upon a career dedicated to the Earth, I hope to encounter challenges that strengthen me as a scientist and fuel my passion for geology. Though I will never be Indiana Jones, brawling in airplanes and maneuvering booby-traps, I am content to be Sarah Giles, gathering samples on a mountainside and deciphering geologic puzzles.