

Exploring Australia's natural beauty by venturing *Off The Beaten Track*

Why leave a sealed road? Well, why not? Who knows what adventure may lie ahead?

Apart from private properties, aboriginal reserves and some national parks, there are thousands of kilometres of remote roads and tracks throughout Australia that are accessible to most travellers without the need for expensive vehicles or equipment. Generally this is referred to as going 'Off-Road'.

What can "Off-Road" travel refer to?

The term 'Off-Road' can mean different things to different people. In essence it refers to leaving a bitumen road and travelling on roads that can range from smooth to full of pot holes or corrugations. It also includes anything from a wide road to tracks the width of the vehicle itself.

To some intrepid travellers, going off-road means exploring out of the way places. Although many of Australia's tourist attractions can be reached by staying on good roads, some of the gems can require a diversion from the black top.

There can be a huge difference between travelling along a recently graded Birdsville Track, potholes and creek crossings while trying to reach Cape York. Motoring organisations like the RAA offer lots of tips on tackling the outback. It is important to realise that road condition can vary from season to season and year to year.

Most things are possible with a little care

While obviously smooth roads and tracks are preferred, even a road with a rough surface can in most cases be safely dealt with as long as speeds are reduced appropriately. Most damage to RVs and tow vehicles, or for that matter crashes are the result of travelling at too high a speed for the prevailing conditions. Modern vehicles tend to isolate the occupants from the rigours of uneven road surfaces. Consequently the driver may be lulled into a false sense of security. The golden rule is – *'the rougher the road, the slower the speed'*! Even more so when towing a trailer.

Benefits of taking the RV Off-Road

We all know that Australia is a vast country and that it is not possible to explore all of it in one lifetime. Yet the journey should be as important as the destination, so it is worth exploring as much as possible in any one region. Taking a side journey along a dusty track can certainly bring many surprises.

Australia is rich in diverse fauna and flora. While some of this can be observed when driving along the many 1000's of kilometres of sealed roads, the rarer species are often

to be found in the more remote areas. If intending to travel to or through national parks, aboriginal settlements or areas with limited access check if permits are required.

Travelling a little further a field also increase the use of your RV. As the unit general represents a big investment, the more different uses that it is given, the cheaper the actual ownership becomes. Of course it is possible and sometimes recommended, to take guided tours, but exploring on your own can have lots of benefits, and usually you quickly discover that you are not the only one doing this, irrespective of where to venture in Australia.

Which units are suitable?

As the more experienced will know, there is off-road and off-road. As mentioned, there can be a big difference between a graded unsealed road and a narrow track full of potholes. A fully fledged off road enthusiast will most likely own a 4WD filled with all their camping gear and not tow anything.

If sleeping in a swag is not the preferred option, one of the myriads of camper trailers available may do the job. However if you do not want your travels restricted, choose an Off-Road single axle model that is no wider, longer and higher than the tow vehicle.

Most well built towing type caravans will handle unsealed roads as long as the speed is adjusted to suit the conditions. RV dealers or manufacturers can advise whether their particular model is suitable for your intended journeys.



Sedans can capably handle off-road conditions

In many cases a family sedan can be suitable for off-road travel. One advantage of 4WD type vehicles is the additional ground clearance. Note that vehicles like the Ford Territory and Toyota Kluger are available as 2WDs, which can be a good compromise.

Before you go

Planning and preparation is crucial in ensuring trouble free and relaxing holidays. Organisations that can help included the Caravan & Camping Industries Association of South Australia (CCIASA), RAA, Tourist Information Centres, Government Departments and of course the internet.

Apart from deciding where to go and stay, checking road conditions when venturing off the bitumen is most important.

Websites like www.transport.sa.gov.au/quicklinks/northern_roads/northern.asp can be most informative. However, there is no point in checking road conditions 6 months before departure.

Have the RV serviced by a specialist who is a member of the CCIASA. Refer to a listing under the Find A Supplier section of the CCIASA website. If intending to travel in remote areas, mention this at the time of booking in the vehicle.

Reliable communication can be very beneficial in case of an emergency. Mobile telephones that operate well in metropolitan areas will often not provide contact when travelling in the outback. And a 24/7 '1800' or similar number is no use if there is no phone contact.

One option is a UHF radio. A model with scanning facilities is a must. A HF radio has more benefits but is also more expensive. Seek advice from an expert as to the best unit to purchase. Correct installation is just as important as the right type. Access to the outside world can be improved by belonging to the National 4WD Radio Network. If you would like information simply visit: www.vks737.on.net.

It is a good idea to let friends and relatives know where you intend to travel and how long you will be away. In remote areas advise the local police station of your intentions. As there is safety in numbers, seek out others that may be interested in going to the same places.

Extras to take

If you are likely to spend sometime away from where you can obtain supplies, take enough water, food, fuel and anything else that may be needed to last several days. Not so much that you may get lost as a breakdown.

Ensure that the spare tyre is in good condition. You may consider that taking a second one is good insurance. Tools like a suitable jack and wheel brace are a must. A basic tool kit and a shovel could also come in handy.

Although you will no doubt have the tow vehicle service before departure, appropriate spares like hoses and belts as well as tools to fit these are generally recommended. Coolant and engine oil should also be on the list. Discuss this with a knowledgeable mechanic, car dealer or RAA Technical Department.

It should go without saying that you would not leave home without a comprehensive First Aid kit. These can be obtained from organisations like Australian Red Cross on 8443 9700 or St John Ambulance on 8306 6920. Always carry First Aid Kit in cool location and check prior to each trip that contents are in good condition.

Environmental considerations

The often stated golden rule for outback travel is – '*Leave nothing but your foot prints*'. We could also add – '*Leave nothing but wheel tracks*'. But in case of the latter, make



Always check on road conditions before leaving the bitumen

sure it is along tracks and roads. As much of the soil and flora is fragile, do not drive over or park on anything other than designated areas.

Whatever you take with you and whatever waste you create, take it home with you or dispose of it in a responsible manner. Do not bury any waste matter or throw it in a camp fire. Always check on and adhere to any fire restrictions. Lighting a fire on a fire ban day can result in an expensive fine.

More Tips

For those travelling in the outback, the Department of Transport, Energy & Infrastructure offers the following tips.

Plan your trip in advance and make sure you:

- *get a good night's sleep before departing*
- *stay somewhere overnight if you are on a long journey*
- *share the driving if you can*
- *plan to travel for no longer than eight to ten hours a day*
- *take at least a 15 minute break from driving every 2 hours*
- *take a 20 minute power nap when drowsy*
- *stop at a roadhouse for a coffee break and to stretch*
- *do not drive during hours when you are normally asleep*
- *always carry a current road map.*

If you intend to take a GPS make sure that you understand all the features and take the operating manual with you.

Useful websites:

www.transport.sa.gov.au/quicklinks/northern_roads/northern.asp

www.southaustralia.com/OutbackDriving.aspx - Tips on Outback Driving

www.atn.com.au/sa/south/outbacktips.htm

www.southaustralia.com - Tourism Information

<http://stjohn.com.au> – First Aid Kits

www.exploroz.com/Vehicle/Trailers/Towing.aspx - More Tips

www.vks737.on.net. – Reliable Communication

More detailed information as well as organisations and businesses that offer assistance can be found on the CCIASA website www.CaravanAndCampingSA.com.au

Also, visit www.CaravanAndCampingSA.com to request a free copy of The National Caravan and Recreational Vehicle Towing Guide.