

21 Ways to Improve Your Camping Lifestyle

Bill Revill



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INTRODUCTION

A

Bill Revill

PS:

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1

A CHEAPSKATE'S GUIDE TO BARE-BONES CAMPING

T

economies

getting started

must

is

honestly

BARE-BONES CAMPING KIT

(For 2 people)

Prices are indicative only and based on charity shops
or secondhand retailers where practical

3 Plastic Tarps (6'x8')	\$6 each
2 Foam Strips (2 ft wide)	\$10 each
2 Pillows (from home)	NIL
Blankets (from home)	NIL
2 Torches (with batteries)	\$8 each
Frying pan	\$3
Saucepan	\$2
Kettle	\$3
Plates, mugs	\$5
KFS set, can opener (home)	NIL
Axe	\$10
Shovel	\$5
Water containers (recycled)	NIL
Misc. pegs, ropes, safety pins	\$8

POSSIBLE TOTAL OUTLAY: \$90

2

DO I NEED A FOUR-WHEEL DRIVE?

F

need

A definite "Maybe"!

lifestyle

alone

remote

believe

and

WHAT MAKES A 4WD CAPABLE?

The subject of relative vehicle capability has been debated for years. However, based on almost 40 years of 4WD operation and ownership, here's my twenty cents worth:

The things that make a 4WD more capable in "off road" conditions -- driver experience aside -- in an approximate order of importance are:

- **Low-range gearing:** A "low-low" gear ratio around 35:1 is getting pretty serious, but 40:1 or lower (ie, higher number numerically) is outstanding.
- **Engine power:** All else being equal, torque produced by a six-cylinder engine out-performs a four in tough terrain. But just as critical is the gross vehicle mass (and overall "power to weight ratio").
- **Ground clearance:** At least 200 mm under vehicle differentials is a good benchmark. But other features can negate that advantage, such as excessive rear overhang, low slung suspension or front end components, and low body sills.
- **Off-road accessories:** For *extreme terrain* (and increased confidence), locking differentials extend vehicle capability enormously. Suspension modifications to improve wheel travel are also worth considering, as are front-mounted winch, and (to a lesser degree) aggressive tread tyres. It should be kept in mind, though, these sorts of add-ons are *generally* unnecessary for the vast majority of bush driving situations.

Regarding the equally long-running debates on diesel versus petrol engines, and automatic versus manual transmissions, there really is no clear-cut answer when the factors above are put into perspective. The solution lies in where each individual driver feels most comfortable.

The most important point is this: All four-wheel drives are not the same. It is extremely foolhardy to expect "light duty" AWDs -- as good as they may be within their limitations -- to safely negotiate the same terrain as "heavy duty" machines. Even so, in *most* backcountry circumstances, the capabilities of the "off-roaders" are likely to be all you require to overcome terrain difficulties encountered.

3

THE JOY OF SOLITUDE

A

before

either side

“I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself than be crowded on a velvet cushion”.

“To each his own”

WINTER CAMPING: THE STUFF YOU NEED

1. **Warm clothing**, which might include jackets, pullovers, thermal underwear, thick socks, beanies, gloves (or mittens), scarves, overcoats, and waterproof footwear.
2. **Extra bedding**, such as sleeping bags rated for, say, *minus* 10 degrees. Alternatively, throw in a couple of good (woollen) blankets for each person to wrap around their sleeping bag. (Large safety pins can be handy here.) Also, a sleeping bag liner made from a surplus flannelette sheet is a great idea for chilly nights in the bush.
3. **Aboveground beds** are much better than airbeds or mattresses laid out on cold ground. The “springrest” style stretcher is the best you’ll find, but other types of camp beds will do the job, just so long as they keep you up off the deck.
4. **A groundsheet** is useful, spread over the tent floor, since in winter there’s higher probability that moisture (or rain) will find its way inside at some stage. Quality canvas is by far the most robust material for groundsheets.
5. **Newspaper** finds a few extra jobs around winter campsites, like fire starting, extra insulation between stretcher and mattress, and...well, reading when the wet weather sets in!
6. **A campfire** becomes the centrepiece of your camp after sunset, since the winter chill can settle over the countryside pretty rapidly, particularly in mountain areas. This means that you will have to take along a couple of bow saws, or better yet, a small chainsaw. That pile of firewood needs to be substantial!
7. **Extra awnings** are important, too, since there may be times when everyone is crowded under cover during rain -- or snow! Rig up one or two tarpaulins -- using rope, tent poles, elastic straps, and tent pegs -- with the main living area handy to the warmth of your campfire. (But don’t have an awning closer than two meters to the fire’s edge.)

Depending on your destination, you might also give some thought to the possibility of snow and mud on the tracks and roads in and out of the area. These scenarios are highly likely, for example, when camping in mountainous terrain.

Snow chains could therefore be worthwhile insurance, as might jumper cables, towrope, even perhaps a small hand winch. Improvised traction aids in the form of heavy rubber mats have proved useful at times, too. And since most cars these days already have anti-freeze coolant in the radiator this shouldn’t require extra preparation. (Though it can’t hurt to check.)

4

HIGHWAY CAMPSITES

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The ideal site

-
-
-
-
-
-

and

Stop early

Choice of accommodation

Organise your gear

Creature comforts

ROADSIDE CAMPSITES: A FEW TO CONSIDER

- * **Established rest areas.** Look for those that are well away from traffic, with a degree of privacy. Avoid truck parking areas.
- * **Side-tracks.** Good sites are often found 50 metres off the highway. If in doubt, check on foot. (A 4WD can be a real asset here.)
- * **Abandoned roads.** Disused sections of highway offer flat, robust sites often well back from the new section of highway.
- * **Bridges.** Sometimes have supplementary (low-level) crossings or access. Watch for livestock and stock routes, and don't camp too close to the watercourse.
- * **Railways.** Increasingly abandoned. Redundant track crossings, service roads, sidings and buildings are common throughout Australia.
- * **Gravel dumps.** Provide a good, all-weather surface but may be too close to passing traffic for a good night's sleep.
- * **Abandoned farms and huts.** Check or seek permission if possible. Try not to be too obtrusive. (Remember: Privacy = Security)
- * **Others.** State forests, remote beaches, sports grounds, country schoolyards, car parks, racetracks, silos, halls, churches, cemeteries, quarries, etc, etc.

If all else fails, ask the locals. (After all, they know their area best!)

5

TLC FOR TENTS

Y

loosely

6

LET'S HEAR IT FOR THE TENT PEG

I

uppermost



7

CAMPSITE HANDYMAN

H

both sides

CAMPSITE REPAIR KIT

(Suggested contents)

Waterproof adhesive tape (eg, "Gaffa")	Seam sealing wax (or candle)
Silicone sealant	Filament tape
Heavy needle and thread (or sewing awl)	Airbed repair kit (eg, Coghlan's)
Duct tape	Eyelet kit
Plastic coated tie wire	Nylon cable ties (several sizes)
Nylon sash cord (or "para" cord)	Safety pins (med-large)
String	RP7 or WD40 (or similar)
Length of wire (eg, coat hanger)	Garbage bags
Kwik Grip (or similar adhesive)	Stanley knife (or scissors)
Miscellaneous spares (eg, mantles, gas jet, lamp glass, torch bulb, misc. nuts, bolts, screws, washers)	Canvas patches

8

THE LOST ART OF IMPROVISATION

O

might

all

after

REMEMBER HOUSEHOLD CANDLES?

Standard paraffin wax candles represent one of the oldest forms of technology available, yet modern campers rarely give them serious consideration. In fact candles have been used on domestic and industrial lighting tasks for over three hundred years! Even when stacked up alongside today's high-tech outdoor lighting options, candles still represent a cheap, reasonably efficient light.

Indeed, two or three 20 cm candles can provide most lighting needs around the average campsite for less than 30c a night. And as an emergency light source, they're ideal.

Candles serve other purposes also. A small (2 cm) stub, for instance, makes an effective fire starter in damp conditions, while dry candle wax is an excellent lubricant for zippers (and squeaking car fan belts). As well, bushwalkers over the years have been waterproofing their matches by dipping the heads in melted candle wax.

Of course, being an open-flame light source, candles do present a level of danger if used inside a tent or caravan. And because they consume oxygen, ventilation is essential. However, most potential problems can be overcome by utilising some sort of holder-cum-reflector, variations of which can be found in bushwalking stores, or you could make your own easily enough by cutting the side out of an aluminium drink can.

9

TARP CAMPING

T

inwards



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NO-SWEAT CAMPFIRES

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11

MAPS FOR CAMPERS

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Road Atlas

CAMPING IN THE “LONG PADDOCK”

As an acknowledgement to drovers and stockmen who still, on occasion, move livestock “on the hoof” along roadsides in rural and outback areas, the strip of grassed land bordering most highways and backroads across Australia is often referred to as “the long paddock”. In times of drought in particular, travellers might come across large herds of sheep or cattle being moved parallel to the highway, under the control of two or three drovers on horseback or motorbike, assisted in most cases by the ubiquitous working dogs. (Obviously, drivers should slow down and exercise caution as livestock close to the roadside are easily “spooked”, sometimes rushing headlong into traffic.)

The most interesting feature of the “long paddock” is that, quite frequently, campers and travellers will find extensive, cleared areas set back from the highway, suitable for overnight camps. Indeed, these are often located beside a river, or surrounding a government bore to allow stock to be rested and watered overnight.

In many cases these “stock camps” are available to travellers providing these basic rules are followed:

1. Although the majority of “long paddock” campsites are on government owned land, some are private property. The only clues may be fence lines, signs and stock grids.
2. If the camp is in use (or a herd is not far off) it is unavailable to the public.
3. Always set up camp some distance from watering points as stock may arrive during the night.
4. As usual, your rubbish must be taken away with you when you leave.
5. No soaps or detergents should be used directly in rivers or watering troughs. Take the water some distance away before using it for showering, laundry, whatever.
6. Take extreme care with campfires.

12

MEALS ON THE MOVE

T

13

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM AN ICEBOX

W

almost

loosely

PREFER TRUE REFRIGERATION?

For motorised campers, the options become a little easier to live with. Certainly, for short trips, an icebox remains a possibility, but beyond that, “real” fridges ought to be considered. And here’s where outdoor lifestyle plays a part.

For continuous, day-after-day travelling, 12 volt compressor-style fridges are best, while for static camps, lean toward a LPG/propane operated model. Here’s why:

- **Compressor fridges:** Although generally around twice the price of equivalent “absorption” types, compressor fridges operate more effectively while travelling. Being a “true” fridge they don’t have to be perfectly level for best performance (as absorption fridges do). The usual power source is 12 volt, though most have an AC/240 volt feature also. The downside with compressor fridges when running off the vehicle’s 12 volt system is that they use lots of power, particularly in hot weather. In fact, if operating on “freeze”, or on a very cold setting, your battery could be flat after only six or seven hours at the campsite. For this reason, serious campers often fit a second, high-capacity accessory battery in their vehicle, or (where permitted) use a 240 volt generator.
- **Absorption fridges:** Also called “heat exchange” refrigeration, these most often have a third operating mode: LPG. Indeed, for camping, this is the most efficient refrigeration available; a four or five kilogram LPG bottle provides ten or more days of operation. But keep in mind that an absorption fridge must be level so get it set up as soon as possible in a shaded spot, using a bubble level (or glass of water) to check the level. They can be used while driving but only on 12 volt, *never* on LPG. Even so, operation on the move is often less than satisfactory (although a bag of ice helps significantly). Most standard RV fridges are absorption types, either two-way (LPG, 240 volt) or three-way (with 12 volt also).

My personal solution? I have the RV fridge (3-way operation), a portable camp fridge of the absorption type (for LPG operation when camping), a compressor fridge for efficient operation while on the road, and of course the good old icebox serves as back up when required.

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POTS AND PANS

W

MY PERSONAL LUNCH-STOP KIT

(For 'on-the-move camping trips without RV)

Single burner LPG stove (with cylinder)	Kettle
Cast-iron frying pan	Small saucepan
Folding toaster (for LPG stove)	Food tongs
Plastic plates and mugs	Paring knife
Jaffle iron ("Toastie")	Can opener
Water container (at least 1L)	Egg flipper
Plastic bags (for rubbish)	Tissues (or hand towel)
One each: dessertspoon, teaspoon	Matches
knife & fork	

All items fit snugly in a plastic "hobby crate".

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BUSH CATERING: THE EXPERT'S KIT

I

THE VERSATILE BARBECUE GRILL

To gain the best possible camping experience, campfire cooking is almost obligatory, providing a campfire is permitted. And for total flexibility, a barbecue grill (or a steel plate) is an extremely useful accessory.

The advantage of an open grill on the campfire is that it can be used as both a general cooking surface for pots and pans, or as a barbecue grill once the fire has burned down to a bed of hot coals (or barbecue briquettes). A fire-to-food distance of somewhere between 15 and 25 centimeters -- depending on heat output -- usually works best. For most families, a grill size of 50 cm x 40 cm is sufficient, but note here that discarded refrigerator shelves should be strictly avoided as their various coatings can be toxic when heated.

The common alternative to the grill is the steel barbecue plate that, although heavier, does make for excellent barbecuing of a wide variety of foods. The problem of leaping flames searing the food is eliminated, but a solid plate is not as versatile as a grill for general cooking with pots and pans. A 40 cm x 25 cm plate of at least 4 – 5 mm thickness is a good size for small groups.

For the best of both worlds, a good approach to campfire cooking is the dual-purpose barbecue -- half plate, half grill -- available in a range of sizes from camping stores. Most are fitted with sturdy folding legs that position the cooking surfaces at the appropriate height above the fire. If the grill or plate is not fitted with legs, bricks or rocks will do, or you could support it on cans filled with sand. But check for stability before you commence cooking!

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FREQUENT SHOWERS

S

17

BASINS, BUCKETS, AND BATHTUBS

L

CAMPERS' LAUNDRY

In addition to commercial laundromats and caravan parks, campers and travellers have three practical laundry options:

- **Plastic tub or bucket:** If you carry a container large enough, washing (and rinsing) can most often be completed during lunch stops or overnight camps, with clothes then hung on makeshift clotheslines strung out nearby.
- **Sealed container:** A “nappy bucket” or suitable container with a leak-proof lid can be used in the same way as the plastic tub or, better still, left to “agitate” while you travel, water, clothes and detergent sloshing about with the motion of the vehicle or caravan. (But be sure to anchor it firmly in place!) Rinsing can also be done as you drive, or at your next stop.
- **Portable clothes washer:** There are a couple of types made for campers and caravanners (both of similar capacity), but the slightly more sophisticated *Wonderwash* is a tad easier to operate. Either can be used in “wash-as-you-drive” mode as above, or hand operated as you relax with a drink at your next campsite.

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**FEET: AN OWNER'S GUIDE TO
OPERATION & MAINTENANCE**

A

GETTING THE BEST FROM CAMPING BOOTS

1. When buying new boots, wear your “bush socks”. Try on **both** boots.
2. Be sure to buy boots that fit properly, with room for toes to move, but without slipping at the heels.
3. Don't allow dirt and mud to remain caked on for long periods. Brush or wash off as soon as possible, then allow boots to dry.
4. Boots are best dried in a warm, shaded spot, not beside the campfire.
4. Cleaning preserves your boots. A good quality polish (or leather treatment like Nikwax or Dubbin) keeps leather moist and supple, particularly if boots are stored for long periods.
5. Synthetic materials and suede can be brushed with warm, soapy water, rinsed off, then allowed to dry. Never use solvents.
7. Lace-ups should be snug rather than tight. Replace worn laces.

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SURVIVING A FOREST FIRE

E

PORTABLE FIREPLACE

Digging a fire pit for each campfire is not the friendliest thing we can do for the environment. Not to mention the hard work! And in some places -- like national parks and commercial campgrounds -- only established fireplaces can be used (if there happens to be one available).

An alternative approach -- particularly for campers who travel about the country quite a bit -- is to carry your own fireplace. No digging, increased safety, and ready in seconds. In many tightly supervised camping areas and roadside stopovers, an appropriate portable fireplace often gets the official nod of approval.

The handiest and toughest of all is the oil drum off-cut: A 15 – 20 cm section cut from the bottom of a 205 litre steel oil drum (what used to be known as a 44 gallon drum). If raised off the ground slightly using rocks, bricks or steel tent pegs (to allow the bottom to stay cooler), and with a few centimeters of soil spread across the bottom for insulation, this type of fireplace lasts several years of heavy use.

Next in usefulness is the “half-20 litre” fireplace, which consists of a metal 20 litre drum cut length-wise in half, with perhaps a steel grate inserted to keep the fire from sitting directly on the metal (which shortens its life). Here again, a layer of dirt beneath the fire helps extend the serviceability of the fireplace. Also, some form of steel legs are recommended to stop the drum tilting once your fire is alight, or chock it with bricks or tent pegs.

Other possibilities are steel containers of various kinds, steel wheelbarrows, or Webber-style barbecues. Provided they are made of sufficiently thick steel, have breather holes punched around the outside for airflow, and before lighting the fire the bottom is protected with soil (or aluminium foil), most can be turned into useful portable fireplaces.

20

COFFEE TIN SURVIVAL KIT

I,

MY SURVIVAL KIT CONTENTS

<u>Survival Need</u>	<u>“Must Have”</u>	<u>“Should Have”</u>	<u>“Could Have”</u>
Protection			
Water			
Shelter			
Fire			
Food			
Location			

21

BUSH ETIQUETTE

B

etiquette

GARBAGE DISPOSAL

Pollution of campsites and rest areas with garbage (and even worse forms of human waste!) is one of the real problems and frustrations campers and travellers have to contend with, sometimes on a daily basis. There may, in fact, be occasions when, to make use of an otherwise excellent site, you first need to spend a half-hour with plastic bags, shovel and gloves cleaning the place up.

At the personal level, the most we can do day-to-day is (1) ensure we don't add to the problem, and (2) wherever practical, do our bit by clearing some of the rubbish from campsites and rest areas.

Always travel with either full-size, plastic disposal bags ("garbags") or a good supply of plastic supermarket bags. The latter tend to be easier to handle and dispose of at roadside collection points (and they have myriad other uses also).

Where garbage is concerned, campers and travellers have, essentially, three choices (or any combination):

1. Progressively burn food scraps and paper waste on the campfire (but make certain that it burns away completely). Don't be fooled into believing that a few scraps thrown into the grass are soon eaten by "bush critters". Generally, that doesn't work; it simply attracts hordes of insect pests. Also, do a final check for rubbish around the fireplace **and the entire campsite** before moving on.
2. Bag all non-burnables, plastics, bottles, cans etc. (storing it out of reach of ants, flies and wildlife). Some campers prefer to blacken empty cans on the fire to burn off food scraps, then crush them to reduce bulk.
3. As frequently as possible, deposit all rubbish in an approved bin or roadside collection point. This could be a combination of campsite rubbish that you have previously "burned, bashed, bagged and brought out", along with any additional garbage arising during your travels.

EPILOGUE

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Bill Reuell
