

# Fulltime RV Lifestyles

## *The Most Frequently Asked Questions*

by  
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An extract from the e-book  
***An Aussie Nomad's Guide to Life on Wheels***  
by Bill Revill



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## **INTRODUCTION**

**T**alk about obvious. There we were, set up for the night and pretty much hidden amongst the trees well to the rear of a quiet outback rest area. What gave us away, I guess, were the overloaded Toyota Troop Carrier, our 18-foot solar-powered caravan, and a raft of other gypsy gear. A couple of Grey Nomads, no doubt about it!

So it wasn't too long before a caravanning couple wandered across from their nearby rest-stop to say "G'day". And their timing was excellent: the kettle had just reached the boil, and for the next half-hour, over tea and bikkies, they enthusiastically quizzed us about life on the road. How? Why? Where? Problems? That sort of thing.

In fact approaches of this sort, by total strangers, have become quite frequent over recent years — perhaps it's fair to assume that more and more people are considering the lifestyle. As well, there was my recreational course '*Living On the Road*' that we ran for the Centre for Adult Education in Melbourne a few years back which produced a constant stream of similar enquiries from course participants. Still more recently, during our stint as caretakers for a busy caravan park in country Victoria, we enjoyed daily opportunities to play the role of evangelists for 'Freedom Road'.

The point is, over all this time, certain patterns started to emerge; many of the questions came at us time and time again. It seemed that, despite the interest and attraction in this low-cost, carefree lifestyle, many people lacked the confidence and [know-how](#) to take that initial step. Understandably, for some it seems just a little too daunting.

Perhaps it's time to delve a little more deeply into what we have found to be the most common of these concerns so that, with deeper insight, we might put them all to rest.

So, let's get started. In the following pages is a selection of the sorts of questions we and other fulltime travellers are frequently asked. Should you require more information, these and many other issues are covered in detail in our new series of budget-priced [e-books](#).

## ■ Living on the road? That's no different to being a tourist, is it?

**W**ell, that all depends on **why** you want to hit the road in the first place. And for how long. Sure, many people we meet are simply out there on an extended vacation, hauling an RV from one attraction to the next, between one tourist park and another. They collect a few memories and souvenirs, meet like-minded travellers at 'happy hour' each afternoon around the circle of camp chairs, and when the cash runs out — or road weariness sets in — it's back to their mothballed home somewhere back in suburbia.

Fine. If that's sounds like what you're after, you'll certainly find plenty of company out on the highway. But to my way of thinking — indeed, [the philosophy behind our lifestyle](#) — a 'tourist' is **not** the same as a 'nomad'. Confused?

Let me explain: Tourists tend to travel light; they carry just what they need for 'X' weeks on the road. They usually have some sort of schedule or plan to which they try to adhere, based on estimated costs, plus a steady accumulation of 'ticks in tourist boxes'. By and large, they are simply on another holiday, defined (and most often limited) by start and finish dates.

On the other hand, true 'nomads' — 'grey' or otherwise — carry, not only all the usual RV tourist clutter, they also carry their 'lives' with them. Family heirlooms, memorabilia, books, tools, various sources of entertainment, a full range of clothing, personal documentation (medical, financial, etc.), and hobbies are just a few examples. As well, true nomads tend not to have a plan or timetable, preferring to make their 'where to next' decisions on the move, maybe day by day. If they find a pleasant spot, they might stay over for several days, weeks, even months — perhaps seeking work to boost the bank balance as required. Theirs is a multi-faceted lifestyle, comprising a personal mix of elements such as [exploration](#), alternative lifestyle, pursuit of personal interests, [camping](#), recreation, and....yes, tourism.

So, which do *you* seek? This is a question that **must** be fully explored before making any decision at all regarding 'where', or 'how', or 'for how long'. Because herein lies the most fundamental question of all: 'Why?'

## ■ Isn't it dangerous, camping in the bush on your own?

**P**robably less dangerous than the Botanical Gardens in any big city! Sure, there are no ironclad guarantees, but after 38 years in bush camps and rest areas across the country, Jill and I have not had one significant problem with our fellow humans. Besides, given a few simple precautions, [campsite security](#) is *almost* assured. Precautions such as:

- If possible, avoid camping within 20 kilometers of a town.
- Stop early enough to check over the site, the location of any 'neighbours', and the frequency of passing traffic. If the site shows evidence of excessive use, consider moving on to a quieter spot.

- Try to set up where you can't be seen from the road. (Most often, privacy equates to security.)
- Keep camp lights to a minimum. And if you establish a [campfire](#), keep it small, preferably low in a trench about 30 cm deep.
- Stay hooked up in 'quick departure' mode, at least for the first night.

### ■ **Doesn't it cost a bundle to set yourself up to be independent of RV parks?**

**Y**es, it can be expensive. But dollar outlay is in direct proportion to the level of [independence](#) you're aiming for, and over what period of time. For just one or two nights at a stretch on 'unimproved' campsites, for instance, all you should need, over and above normal RV touring gear, are a small shovel and a roll of toilet tissue!

Your car battery, LPGas supplies, and standard water tanks should easily handle a couple of nights. So you could stay in RV parks every third or fourth night and never have to carry much more than you do now. By keeping food and consumables topped up as you travel, those serendipitous free campsites are yours for the using.

Of course when you come across a particularly nice spot, where you'd like to stay *beyond* a couple of days, some additional hardware can be handy. Things you might consider include:

- Extra 12-volt battery power, or a small generator.
- Extra water tank, or a couple of 20 litre plastic containers.
- Extra LPG (perhaps an extra 9kg cylinder).
- Additional refrigeration, or at least an icebox.
- Chemical toilet (plus a privacy tent if you feel the need).
- A bush shower (same tent).
- A good flashlight or two.
- [Solar power](#) (for lengthy stays only).

### ■ **Isn't a 4x4 vehicle necessary for this sort of lifestyle?**

**T**he short answer is "No"; the longer, more elaborate answer is "Maybe". In my experience the vast majority of Aussie travellers do **not** need a [four-wheel drive](#) — or for that matter, even one of the 'softer' all-wheel drive (AWD) options.

When you look around, though, that's hard to believe; every second caravanner seems to have one! But I wonder how many can honestly claim to **need** the extra traction and site accessibility that expensive 4WD / AWD provides. I suspect very few.

However. . . (Isn't there always a "However"?). . . Getting back to those idyllic bush campsites: a 4x4 potentially opens up so many more of them. Also, it provides such an extra margin of accessibility and safety that for a **long-term** nomadic lifestyle, it really is

a wise investment. And considering, as I said earlier, security equals safety, then 4WD / AWD does that for you too.

One final point in favour of 4WD: Because they are generally heavier than equivalent conventional vehicles, larger caravans and trailers therefore become options under towing regulations. For permanent 'roadies', that can be a real plus.

## ■ **Our entire outfit will have to be new and top quality, won't it?**

One thing that never ceases to amaze is the endless variety of travelling outfits on Aussie highways and backroads. You'll see cavernous converted buses, through ancient Volkswagens, to overloaded pushbikes — and everything imaginable in between.

The key word when [considering your options](#) is COMPROMISE, because no matter what you ultimately decide is best for you, in so many ways it is going to involve some give and take. And the very first compromise you need to confront is how much money you're willing to outlay in setting yourself up.

On the other hand, there's nothing wrong with using whatever outfit you currently have. Provided it's all in good nick, has been well maintained, gets a thorough checkover before you leave, and it suits your plans and aspirations, chances are it will do the job. So what if you have to spend money on repairs somewhere along the way? You'll be so far ahead financially that those up-front savings might support your travels for years!

Now. . . here's the "However": Extra outlay for quality and serviceability — in any of your gear — almost always pays off somewhere down the track. It's a simple fact of life. And considering that we nomads frequently find ourselves in some lonely, out-of-the-way places, no one could blame you for spending a little more for safety and peace of mind.

Remember, though, overall condition of the tow vehicle is, *generally speaking*, more important than that of your caravan or trailer — compromise here could still salvage a reasonable saving.

## ■ **How long will it take us to travel right around Australia?**

It's incredible the number of Australians who have no real idea just how *vast* this continent is. Many speak glibly, for instance, of their up-coming "three-month trip" around Australia, as if it's a leisurely drive into the country and back.

That's not to say it can't be done in three months. Of course it can. But what is the point of a frantic, stressful dash, collecting teaspoons and T-shirts so you can tell your friends you've "been there and done it".

Again, it gets back to **your** plans and aspirations. If dinner party conversation is all you want, then go for it. But if you truly want to see — or better, *experience* — this huge land of ours, then six months is the absolute minimum. Even then there's an awful lot you're going to miss!

And therein lies the beauty of a **fulltime** travelling lifestyle. You can stop wherever, whenever, and for as many days or weeks as you like. Side-trips and detours are never a hassle, while the stress of timetables or calendars is a thing of the past. To see Australia in detail takes as long as you want it to.

Besides, the trip of your lifetime deserves to be allocated an appropriate portion of your life. To my mind, that means at least one full year — or better still, no timeframe at all.

### ■ **What sort of fridge do you recommend for fulltime travel?**

**L**et's start with the fridge fitted in your RV. More than likely it's an absorption (or 'heat exchange') type, either in two-way (240 volt / LPGas) or three-way (12-volt as well) configuration (eg, Electrolux). As good as these fridges are, they do have some peculiarities that you ought to be aware of.

Most importantly, an absorption fridge must be level — or at least moving — for efficient operation, and to avoid possible damage to the unit. During overnight stops, in either bush camps (on LPG) or caravan parks (in Oz, usually 240-volt), this is rarely a problem once you're properly set up. But on the road, 12-volt operation is likely to disappoint, given the ups and downs of the average Aussie landscape. (One option here is to place a few frozen blocks or a bag of ice among the fridge contents.)

The other popular variety of travelling fridge is the compressor type (similar in operation to a normal domestic fridge). These are usually configured for both 12-volt and 240-volt operation only (eg, Engel), but do *not* need to be level to give of their best. So, while driving (with fridge running on 12-volt) they are the more efficient, by a huge margin.

The downside of compressor fridges, though, is that, running on 12-volt with the vehicle *switched off* (ie, the vehicle battery no longer being replenished by the alternator), they use so much power that a flat battery is a common result — possibly in less than two hours!

So, getting back to our question: The answer lies hidden amongst *your* travel plans. If, for example, all your overnight stops are to be in tourist parks, then either refrigeration type does the job. Nevertheless, keep in mind that travelling between caravan parks the absorption type (on 12-volt operation) usually likes a helping hand, while a 12-volt compressor fridge easily guarantees a 'coldie' from one hook up to the next.

On the other hand, travellers who hope to take advantage of unpowered sites or extended layovers in bush camps are best advised to look to LPG since, once the van or the fridge is level, an absorption fridge provides excellent performance at reasonable cost. (Remember, though, using LPG for both refrigeration *and* cooking may require a gas cylinder in reserve.)



My recommendation? A three-way (ie, absorption) fridge in the RV, with a compressor portable in the vehicle. To avoid embarrassment under bush camp conditions, a dual-battery installation provides extra 12-volt power, while an additional 9 kg cylinder offers plenty of LPG in reserve.

This arrangement covers almost all eventualities with the possible exception of long-term camps (say, three weeks or more) requiring extra fridge space. In that case I also take along a second, portable LPG fridge (eg, Finch) to run on a 4 kg bottle, set up level beneath an awning. On the road, this third fridge often doubles as an icebox.

## ■ **Boredom? How can that be, on a fulltime holiday in a country like Oz?**

**Y**es, this seems to be something of a 'Catch-22' when discussing such an otherwise idyllic lifestyle! But make no mistake, boredom is real, even during that once-in-a-lifetime holiday.

The problem arises in several ways:

- Leaving behind a favourite pastime or hobby, or your circle of friends.
- The inevitable long stretches of endless, featureless highway.
- Stuck indoors during days of bad weather, which in turn results in . . .
- The effects of 'cabin fever', ie, too much time in each other's 'hip pocket'!

The solution is to be aware that at some stage boredom *does* strike. But if you keep those four likely causes in mind, you can overcome the doldrums with a number of simple strategies:

- Stay alert in each new town or region for activities, shows, markets, sporting fixtures, garage sales, etc. that may be of interest. (Check local tourist information centres and notice boards.)
- Seek opportunities to socialize, make new friends, discuss new topics and listen to different points of view.
- Have an *easily portable* hobby — individually or together — that keeps you content for hours on end. (Activities with the added potential to make a few extra dollars provide inbuilt motivation!)
- Carry a selection of books, which can be replaced or exchanged as you travel (eg, at charity shops, markets, RV park swap-bins).
- Don't pretend you can live completely without TV, movies or good music.
- Every so often, each partner should get out **alone** on walks, exercise, or for a period of lazy reflection on the beach.
- Respect each other's need for privacy, 'space', and personal point of view.
- Practice the art of 'doing nothing', perhaps simply enjoying the positives of the 'big picture', assisted by low-key conversation or music.



## ■ Which RV is best: caravan or motorhome?

Like I said earlier, once out on the road you'll come across a vast range of personalised approaches to the question of "how to go about it". Like human fingerprints, no two are identical!

The message is this: There is no 'right' way to do it, nor is there even a 'best way'. There is only **your way**. Unfortunately, though, that's for you to work out!

That said, it's obvious that caravans and motorhomes are far and away the most [popular approaches to fulltime or long-term travelling](#). Sure, anything else *can* do it, but as the weeks become months some of the more 'Spartan', low-comfort outfits will severely test your resolve!

Here are my 'Rules of Thumb' (Well, some aren't exclusively mine, but I certainly subscribe to them!):

- Determine exactly what **your** trip / vacation / lifestyle is likely to involve regarding plans, duration, destinations, activities, likes and dislikes, personal needs, etc.
- If virtually all your stopovers are to be one or two night affairs, moving on each day, a motorhome is likely to be (for you) the way to go.
- If stops are unplanned (the best kind) and could extend over several days (or weeks?) – perhaps to see the sights, earn some money, or to soak up the place – then a caravan (once set up on site) allows complete freedom of vehicle movement.
- Don't decide until you've tried both approaches. Take a few trips with rental outfits to see what appears to suit you best. But . . .
- Don't rush the decision based on a (secret) fear of towing. Sure, it's different, sometimes even tricky, but it is something we all can learn and get used to. Admittedly, for some, towing a van is never relaxing, but once set up on site, relaxation in your 'home on wheels' is total.
- When a motorhome needs repairs or overnight work during a trip, alternative accommodation (eg, motel, cabin) is a common outcome.

Naturally, there are other issues to consider in any realistic assessment of these lifestyle variations, but they tend to centre more on 'adjustment' factors – things that help us get the most from our mobile accommodation. Nevertheless, the more research you do, such as reading, talking, looking, and analysing, the more suitable your final decision becomes.

Suitable **for you**, that is.

## ■ Where do you find all those free campsites you're always talking about?

In any country the size of Australia – and given the sparseness of our population across maybe three-quarters of the landmass – free campsites can be found virtually everywhere. Sure, we must always respect private property, fences, signed

restrictions, stock grazing or wildlife habitats, and even areas where work activities are in full swing. But by and large any 'suitable' spot alongside our rural roads and highways can, potentially, be considered an overnight 'freebie'.

Of course some of the best stopovers turn up when you are not entirely ready to stop for the day (though good spots are *always* worth serious consideration). In that case, why not mark it on your map for future reference? Otherwise, consider these points:

- Privacy? (Most important – remember it's another word for *security*.)
- Nearest town? (20 km is a good *minimum*)
- Overnight noise? (eg, distance from the highway)
- Accessibility in and out? (What if it rains?)
- Maneuverability on the site? (ie, room to move about and set up)

Generally speaking, detailed maps provide advanced notice of probable freebies: state forest, bush tracks, railway tracks, silos, ruins, churches, rest areas, rivers, bridges, beaches, etc. But even so, the vast majority is likely to be those serendipitous discoveries that dot the Aussie landscape.

The best advice is to stay alert for likely campsites, no matter where you are.

## ■ **How can we stay in touch with family and friends for months on end?**

**T**he need to be with close family and friends is understandable, particularly among retirees with new grandchildren requiring their frequent 'attention'. But in many ways this can become another rationalisation for the stay-at-home life – a 'cop-out' as we Baby Boomers used to call it!

But there are so many ways to, firstly, get family and friends involved in your new lifestyle, and secondly, to stay in touch, that once or twice a year face-to-face visits become an adventure in themselves.

One popular, pre-departure idea is to get close family involved, even enthusiastic, about your plans: what you'll be doing, where you're going and how you'll live on the road. In the case of grandkids, you could buy them a map of Australia to hang on their wall. As you telephone, write, or otherwise make contact, encourage them to track your whereabouts on the map, while keeping a journal or scrapbook of your adventures.

Also, keep a diary of birthdays, current addresses and contact details, plus a list of 'special' hobbies and interests that family members and close friends may follow. This allows your communications to become more personalised and interesting to them, rather than the all-to-easy, 'multi-addressee' type of email (or photocopied letter) that always seems (and is) so impersonal at the receiving end.

Of course, these days there are so many ways we can keep in touch. There are all those new-fangled electronic communications media – such as mobile phone, email, Internet, text messages, digital photos, video, and so on – along with all that old-

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