

# *21 Ways to Improve Your Camping Lifestyle*

**Bill Revill**



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## **21 Ways to Improve Your Camping Lifestyle**

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Written and published by freelance writer and remote lifestyle expert Bill Revill. His latest e-book ***An Aussie Nomad's Guide to Life on Wheels*** is featured at: <http://www.authorsden.com/billrevill>  
For a comprehensive FREE Info Pack regarding Bill's e-book, contact Bill at: [wrevill@inet.net.au](mailto:wrevill@inet.net.au)

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# INTRODUCTION

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Across the past 36 years or more, my wife and I have spent most of our free time -- and now virtually all of our time -- in the Australian outdoors. We started, as many do, with a small nylon tent and minimal camping gear, all loaded into the boot of the family car. It wasn't long, however, before we graduated to a more robust outfit: canvas tent and basic off-roader, followed by the relative luxury of a camper trailer. Finally, in 2001 we adopted a permanent RV lifestyle, with a fully equipped, 18-foot caravan and heavy-duty 4WD.

Sure, these days we do appreciate a little more comfort, but in all honesty our best times have been good old-fashioned camping in the remote Aussie bush -- most often the high country -- using our Toyota Troop Carrier as a "mobile bedroom". The Troopie was totally weatherproof, relatively spacious, and quick to set up once a campsite had been found. And that faithful old truck also took us pretty much wherever we chose to point it.

In fact, it was in that configuration -- over 19 years -- in which our most memorable trips unfolded, and our combined outdoor skills and camping expertise gradually developed. We lived rough and we lived remote, and this has not changed all that much now that we're fulltime caravan roadies.

The 21 chapters that follow are just a sample of the many outdoor "lessons" we went through. Much of the content was published over several years in my monthly column for a national outdoors magazine. In other cases, the material was run as articles in the same or similar periodicals. Nevertheless, all of the content -- and the lessons -- are as relevant as ever to people who seek to develop their camping and outdoor skills.

Naturally, one of the secrets to perfecting any skill is to maintain an open mind. Because no matter where you go, or to whom you speak, whenever your particular interest or favourite pastime is involved, at some point you'll say: "Now there's a good idea!" Camping and RV lifestyle techniques are no different in that regard.

And although most of our travelling these days is with a comfy caravan in tow, we still unhook our "home" and go bush as often as the mood takes us. After all, those outdoor lessons just never seem to end!

I trust this collection of ideas serves to increase both your enjoyment and effectiveness during your own time in the outdoors.

*Bill Reville*

[wrevill@inet.net.au](mailto:wrevill@inet.net.au)

<http://www.authorsden.com/billrevill>

**PS:** Non-Australian readers may find certain Aussie words or activities new to them. If you strike an "indecipherable" segment -- or would like further explanation -- feel free to contact me via email as above.

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# 1

## A CHEAPSKATE'S GUIDE TO BARE-BONES CAMPING

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**T**alk about Catch 22: families attracted to the *economies* of a camping holiday get a real shock when they find out that even a basic outfit is likely to set them back upwards of a grand. Sure, with care that same set of gear should see them through many holidays over many years, but what if circumstances change? If the family drifts away from camping, perhaps into basket weaving, has the expense been justified? Maybe not.

It all gets back to the oft repeated advice: Take one step at a time until you know in which direction your outdoor interests are steering you. In other words, it's best not to outlay major dollars until you're pretty clear on what it is you want to do, and where you want to do it.

That being the case, what I'd like to suggest is this: For as little as \$90 (that's right, nine-zero), you can put a toe in the water. Let me demonstrate how.

Firstly, though, I'll make three assumptions: (1) you have a car; (2) your early trips will be two or three days away at most; and (3) you have access to a few regular household items (which we'll get to shortly).

OK, first up, let's consider the tent. Well, unless you have one already, or you win one in a raffle, forget it. A tent is not essential to *getting started* in camping.

What you will need, however, are at least three tarps (about 6 feet by 8 feet minimum size). These can be the el-cheapo blue plastic, or even painter's plastic drop sheets.

One tarp slung from the roof of your car across to a couple of trees becomes your "tent" -- a stand-up-height canopy to protect you from the morning dew or lousy weather. Of course in some climatic regions, even this may not be necessary. Another tarp becomes a ground sheet upon which to make your bed, while the third is a spare, but it might be needed to cover your bed, your gear, or your firewood.

The bed itself need be no more than a strip of two to three inch thick foam as a mattress (laid on the ground sheet), plus a couple of blankets folded and pinned to form a sleeping bag. Pillows are optional, but if you have a few at home anyway, why not indulge yourself a little?

If the weather looks like turning nasty, your beds should be made up beneath the canopy, with that spare tarp over the blankets (overlapping the sides all round), and then pegged down at the corners. It should finish up similar to a basic swag.

Cooking and eating in the bush can be equally as basic. A bare-bones kit comprises a frying pan, saucepan, billycan or kettle, can opener, plus plates, mugs and knife/fork/spoon for each of your group. Egg flipper and paring knife are optional.

All of this can be borrowed from the kitchen at home, but plastic or enamel plates stand up better to the rigours of outdoor life. Mind you, it's very likely that all of your catering hardware can be purchased second-hand at charity shops or markets for under \$20. Provided you give it a good scrub-up before leaving home, and plan meals to suit the cooking gear you have, you can't go too far wrong.

Most, if not all, your cooking can be on the campfire. A lightweight, folding grill helps to stand pots on, but is by no means essential. As backup, an LPG/propane single-burner cooker is handy at times, so look out for one at weekend markets. (But be sure the gas cylinder bears an inspection stamp less than ten years old or you'll be up for this extra cost before you can get it filled.)

A few other items worth having along are several water containers (recycled fruit juice bottles are fine), an axe, and a small shovel for toilet disposal purposes. As far as lighting goes, you shouldn't need anything more sophisticated than a couple of torches -- providing you remember to get all your camp chores out of the way and beds made up before sunset.

That's all. You'll notice no icebox or car fridge is mentioned. Nor have I suggested table and chairs. Without doubt these are nice to have -- even very handy -- but as any bushwalker can confirm, they certainly fall well short of essential. (As I pointed out up front, this *is* a cheapskate's camping guide!)

During your early days, after each trip decide on any additional items that you *honestly* believe you *must* have next time, then add these (recycled items if possible) to your camping gear. Build up your outfit gradually but purposefully and before too long you'll be camping in relative luxury!

On the other hand, if after a couple of trips you decide it might be better to go with the basket weaving, all you've lost is a bit of loose change.

#### **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?

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Few campers have not, at one time or another, considered this question of four-wheel drive ownership, evidently with a view to enhancing their time in the out-of-doors.

So, regarding the question from the viewpoint of *need*, here's my answer:

*A definite "Maybe"!*

You see it's all to do with your outdoor *lifestyle*. Many people mistakenly believe that, since camping takes place in "The Bush", they obviously need a four-wheel drive. Not true. Well, not necessarily true anyway.

Confused? Let's go back a step or two.

Firstly, there are a few pertinent questions that only you can answer. For example: Will your family be camping *alone* in some reasonably *remote* areas? If so, how often?

But don't rush your answer; it needs to be totally honest. I mean, we all *believe* we'll be regularly taking off on hairy-chested, backcountry expeditions. The reality is, though, because of family or economic considerations -- or genuine lack of experience -- life simply doesn't turn out that way. Which is one of the reasons you'll see so many late model 4WDs in used car yards. What's the point in tying up maybe \$10,000 - \$20,000 more than the equivalent 2WD configuration might cost, only to find later that you just don't need a vehicle with two diffs?

On the other hand, if you enjoy getting away from the tourists and holiday hordes, or camping with your family in splendid isolation, then for you a 4WD -- or at least an AWD "soft roader" -- may, indeed, be a good idea.

The answer can only be revealed by an honest appraisal of your camping history, the highs and lows throughout that history, and the direction in which you *and* your family would like your outdoor activities to proceed.

Mind you, a 4WD -- even AWD -- can extend your horizons considerably. Whether alone, or in company with another family or two, the wider choice of outdoor destinations that becomes available makes that additional investment somewhat easier to justify. With their higher ground clearance, significantly increased traction for those tricky access tracks (particularly after rain), and (most often) improved load carrying and towing abilities, the average 4WD/AWD won't be beaten for the more adventurous camping lifestyles.

And that's not all. These days, a 4WD doesn't have to be a second car (as they tended to be a few years back) since levels of comfort in most models are on a par with conventional family station wagons. Reliability, ruggedness and resale value of the 4WD also help ensure that, to some extent, the price difference becomes academic.

But having said all that, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that, scattered across this vast continent, there are thousands of superb campsites, including national and state parks, and commercial campgrounds. Since the vast majority of these are easily accessible to the family car, you do need to be certain that there will, in fact, be a reasonable return on that higher investment.

For my family and I believe there has been. Well...maybe.

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### 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

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As camping experiences go, it's not one I have any desire to revisit: Kids and dogs were running amok; a football almost penetrated our tent wall; and late into the night, groups of loud voiced, giggling revellers wandered among closely packed tents and campervans. The highlight of each day, it seemed, was gathering around somebody's barbecue, until the point of inebriation was reached or exceeded.

After two nights of that, we moved on.

I mean, if transposing a suburban "lifestyle" (of sorts) to a busy campground for a week or two is what you seek from your camping holidays, fine. We all have different priorities. Most often, though, what motivates my family and I is quite the opposite: peace and quite.

Problem is, with camping and most other outdoor activities currently enjoying boom times, our quest for solitude becomes increasingly frustrated. Nevertheless, I believe we've hit upon a few secrets that lovers of seclusion might like to consider.

For example, we reckon the two key factors influencing the number of people you come across in the outdoors are SEASON and DESTINATION. To put it another way, if you are serious about avoiding the human crush:

- a. For your camping, choose a time of year that most other people avoid; and...
- b. Look for destinations with little mass appeal, ie, no tourist facilities, no big-ticket attractions, no annual events.

Surprisingly, you will still find a marvelous range of options available to you. After all, you're left with maybe half the year, and more than three quarters of the country from which to choose!

Without doubt, worst times of all to be seeking outdoor peace and quiet are Easter, Christmas, school holidays, and long weekends. But here's a clue: weekends *either side* of Easter, and the week *before* Boxing Day, are usually very good times to get away.

Generally speaking, searching for solitude also means that pre-trip planning becomes even more important. In fact, if considering relatively remote areas, and times of less-than-predictable weather patterns, my advice would be to strive for a level of self-sufficiency significantly higher than might otherwise be the case.

Food and water, for instance, are appreciably less obtainable in the lonely spots, while LPG, ice, lighting, and general equipment levels should also be more carefully thought out. If lousy weather is even remotely possible, it has to be factored in.

Since we're talking about out-of-the-way campsites, the trip invariably involves some combination of: longer distances, gravel roads (tourists hate them!), reduced fuel supplies, and increased risk of mechanical problems (or getting bogged). Unsurprisingly then, a four-wheel drive vehicle -- while not essential -- can be a solitude seeker's greatest asset. The corollary being: larger caravans, campervans or motorhomes could well become their worst nightmare!

Well, if you are still wondering whether the search is worth the sacrifice, perhaps you'll be more comfortable if you remain with the outdoor party set. Sure, finding solitude involves a little extra work -- perhaps even some risk and discomfort -- but I believe Thoreau got it right when he said: *"I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself than be crowded on a velvet cushion"*.

Of course someone else said: *"To each his own"*. Hmmmm.

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### 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.)

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