



## **The Working Holiday**

### **working while travelling is fun – if you follow the rules**

People have been doing it for decades, travelling the open road, scoring a job here and there to pay their way. During the Great Depression in the thirties, many ordinary Australians had no option but to become Sundowners. That was the name given to those who went walkabout from sunup to sundown in search of work to support families they had to leave behind. These days the tradition continues, and in most respects it is out of choice, not necessity. There is work to be had, both long and short term; so anyone who fancies trying a bit of farm labouring, packing, or fruit picking as part of the holiday experience should have no trouble getting a job or two if they are in the right place.

Wandering itinerants aren't solely home grown: tourists come from all over the world to get a taste of our vast country; staying a while in one area before moving on to another; in particular back-packers. Caravan parks cater for them; local shops rely on them for a profit-boost during harvest seasons; and farmers couldn't survive without them. They are a handy, renewable source of labour to fill those jobs that many Aussies shy away from; perhaps being averse to relocating out of their comfort zone; but mainly because it's generally what we call hard yakka, and that's not in their very selective job description. I imagine the same would apply to any kind of casual work; but for this article I am going to concentrate on the popular traveller's hankering for a bit of fruit picking. That's mainly because my wife and I were modern-day Sundowners for over seven years and made a good living from picking. Plus, we travelled to parts of the country we'd never seen before.

In the main, many jobs require little previous experience and the techniques can be learned along the way. Employers are generally tolerant in this regard and don't expect everyone to get the hang of it immediately; but they can't abide slackers and cheats who are shown the gate very quick smart and in no uncertain terms. Although fruit picking might seem by some to be an easy, mindless job that anyone could do; we've seen those who never even lasted a day before quitting. As for the more stalwart, they are on a promise of a great time; as long as they know and follow the rules.

Perhaps the most important consideration for overseas visitors is to check the legal requirements for foreign workers. Current work visas are a prerequisite; and the authorities conduct the occasional blitz to round up anyone working without one. Needless to say, the consequences are usually swift and may see the culprits packed off home on the next plane. I am also informed that there is a limit to how long an individual may stay and work in one area before moving on. It pays to research the legalities. Acquiring the right paperwork is, I believe, a simple process; and for the sake of a trouble-free stay it's best to tick all of the boxes.

Farms and orchards around Australia grow a variety of fruits and vegetables; but nearly all are seasonal. With a few exceptions, pickers are paid for piece-work. That means the employer pays a certain price for the weight or quantity of whatever is picked. Practices do vary from farm to farm; but in the main plastic or wooden bins are used; and once each is filled, the agreed price is paid for this alone. It might be that some tractor work is necessary to take the filled bins from the orchard to a loading area some distance away. No matter how long this takes, there's no pay for it, and time away from picking as a consequence has to be accepted. Other equipment such as cherry pickers (the machines) and forklifts could be needed; but they are usually reserved for use only by licensed operators.

With respect to how and how not to pick depends on the type of fruit. Apples and pears are susceptible to bruising so care has to be taken; and for these, along with cherries and some other fruits, the stalks must still be attached. So too mandarins which are cut off with special snips leaving a small stub of the stalk. This prevents them from drying out. Cut too long, however, will cause the woody stalks to scratch and damage other fruit in the bin. Farmers take a dim view of this; and particularly of those who think they can pick faster by pulling the mandarins from the tree, minus the stalks. Aside from losing the farmer a good market price, this is regarded as cheating by other pickers who are doing the right thing. They will also have a few words to say to the "bandicoots" that raid the lower branches of a row of trees allotted to another picker when they think they won't be seen. They will be by someone – there are eyes everywhere; along with the strong possibility of rough justice for the poachers.

Colour-picking takes longer and is usually better paid; in some instances by the hour. It is different to stripping the entire tree; rather just taking single pieces of fruit that are sufficiently ripe for market, leaving the rest to be picked later. Nectarines and peaches come into this category; but a warning about the latter – the fur on the skins can cause itching. Some combat the problem by coating faces and necks with cheap talcum powder. Others like us weren't as badly affected and just put up with the irritation.

Things may have changed since we went on the road in 2002, like the horrendous bushfires that destroyed many farms in 2019; but farmers are a resilient lot and will be back into production as soon as they can be. So, anyone who fancies giving picking a go, make the enquiries first, then bite the bullet. For one reason or another, you'll be talking about your working holiday for years to come.

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