

Camping Oz-Style Back to nature – Fair Dinkum

No disrespect to caravan and Winnebago enthusiasts, but that's really caravanning and Winnebagoing with all the home trimmings. As for sleeping under the stars in the bush and sharing my sleeping bag with a snake, I've never been that keen. This is about living in a tent and making the best of the inconveniences. Maybe that sounds masochistic. Why would anyone who wasn't a few roos short in the top paddock want to spend a vacation just suffering for the sake of it? Well, because it's fun and it's different. We did it for two years when we were fruit-picking, and had a ball. Other Aussies do it too; plus a raft of overseas backpackers; some even live to tell the tale. Now I am having a lend of you – I hope you know that. Truly, if you want to see the Land of Oz fair dinkum, a camping holiday is the way to go.



The first requirement is a vehicle of a decent size capable of carrying all the gear; and, depending on the level of comfort expected, that can be considerable. 4-wheel drives are a good bet, especially if the plan is to go off-road. If not, then a station wagon should be adequate. Next come the tents. More than one, you might be thinking? Let's put it like this: Australia's a big country with a lot to see, and you can't always get to a particular destination in a single day. This can mean an overnight stop or three. Imagine taking an hour or two setting up camp after maybe an eight-hour drive, then packing it all away again before setting off in the morning. That is doing it hard; so a nylon dome tent big enough for sleeping the crew is ideal. These small tents are light, easy to put up and take down; and are compact so they can be squeezed into an accessible place at the back of the car. Before buying one, just take the number of people it is claimed to sleep with a pinch of salt – this only works for short sardines!

Obviously you'll need something to sleep on and in. The second is easy – a good quality sleeping bag will do the trick. The "on" part is a matter of choice. We stayed close to the ground, cushioned by self-inflating mattresses which roll up relatively small. Some use air-beds, which are okay if you have a pump or good lungs. Others go for a camp bed – a canvas sheet stretched on a sprung-steel frame. All of these pack up quite small. Then there was the family who set up next to us in one park. It took them an age, mainly because their rig rivaled the Taj Mahal in size which they needed to fit in their double bed-base complete with inner-spring mattress, plus bunks for the kids. Maybe they had the kitchen sink stashed somewhere, but I never saw it.

Okay, at long last you're on the road and looking for a spot to set up for the night. Alongside or close to some major roads you could come across the odd pull-in. These are pretty basic, often just a cleared area of bush with a garbage can and little else – no toilets, water or showers. They are usually limited stay – 2 or 3 nights max – and although they cost nothing, they are exposed; and there's no security, so users have to take their chances – know what I mean? You can also pick up broken glass or other things hiding in the dirt that puncture tyres; which reminds me - keep the spare wheel, jack and wrench in the back, not the wheel well; otherwise you'll have to unpack half the car if you get a flat!

You'll probably pick a tourist park for a longer stay and can benefit from the standard facilities; they are, however, fairly civilised, so if you fancy getting closer to nature you might like to give one of the National Parks a try. Campsites are generally provided, as are a few amenities like drop-toilets, maybe showers, and barbecues. Not all have fresh water on tap, so it's best to take a 20 litre container or two with you. Costs are very reasonable and if they have to be paid to a Ranger or camp host, have a yarn with them about what the area has to offer. Books are available from tourist bureaus listing the various parks around Australia, and it would be worth grabbing a copy.

You may, of course, decide to go completely bush for the real deal. That can be magic; it can also get you into strife if not careful. Rainfall in some regions is scarce for a good part of the year leaving rivers and creeks bone dry. They might appear ideal to pitch a tent in their nice clean sand, but please don't! Even if the sky's blue and there's not a sign of rain overhead or coming, it might be. 300 Ks upstream it could be chucking it down, and that deluge will arrive soon enough without notice to take out all in its path. Waterways that are flowing seem a handy supply for water; just test it first before drinking because it could be salty. Occasionally you'll come across what seems like a great swimming hole. Beneath that inviting mirrored surface, however, could be dangers in the shape of submerged branches, other snags and weed that can drown the unsuspecting. If you're up North, don't even think about it – the crocs won't when they have you for lunch! Something else to think about is shade. Trees are great for that; but they also drop branches and sap, not to mention splatters of guano from birds perched in them. One final request – be careful lighting open fires anywhere, and abide by the current fire restrictions. Despite all of this, it will be an experience not to be missed for those with a hankering for adventure who include some commonsense in their gear.

Once you eventually get to where you're going, you'll probably be staying for a while and deserve a bit of cossetting. There are larger versions of dome tents which are quite spacious with reasonable head-room, but we prefer the rectangular frame type. They look similar to a canvas shed and come in various sizes. If you've never put one of these up before, be prepared for a few laughs, especially from any audience watching at the time. The first effort is always the worst, but you'll soon get the hang of it. The bigger ones usually have divided bedrooms with a sitting/eating area at the front. There will be windows: some clear plastic, others just fly-screen with roll-up flaps on the outside – great for letting the breeze through on a hot night while keeping the mozzies at bay. Most have an outside canopy over the entrance wall: a shady spot for alfresco eating; and if you're in a proper tourist park you can sit under it with a coldie while being entertained by caravanners who haven't yet got the hang of reversing.

Should you be seriously contemplating an Aussie camping vacation, and what you've read so far hasn't turned you off the idea entirely, pay ASOH a visit in a couple of months to check out Camping Oz Style Part 2. That will be about cooking – the basic equipment you'll need and a few tips to help you serve something other than canned beans. How would you fancy knocking up pizza, quiche, meat and potato pie, or some pan-fried cakes and cookies? They can all be done, and more, no worries. You'll be able to make even the caravan mob envious.

CAMPING CHECKLIST

Safety items: First aid kit.

Small fire extinguisher.

Battery radio tuned to ABC local channel; plus spare batteries.

Road maps – don't rely on satellite navigators.

Mobile phone – an EPIRB (personal emergency beacon) if going off-road.

Sun block and insect repellent.

Plenty of drinking water.

Basic equipment:

Tents: a small overnighter (dome-type), plus a larger, long-stay tent.

Ground sheet: a poly tarp big enough to lay under the main tent, plus 4 corner pegs.

A hammer or mallet, plus spare tent pegs.

Outside mat: shade cloth, plus 4 corner pegs – reduces sand inside and water flows through.

Door mat/foot wiper for inside main entrance.

A polypropylene washing line, plus clothes pegs.

Self-inflating mattresses or floor cushioning: camp stretchers if desired.

Sleeping bags, plus extra doonas or blankets and pillows for each person.

Folding chairs and table.

Dustpan and brush.

Water containers: 2 X 20 litre, plus personal drinking bottles.

An Esky or insulated cooler box.

Cooking stove, gas bottle, pans and utensils.

Plates, bowls, cutlery and mugs for each person.

Dishwashing bowl, liquid, sponges, scourer and drying towels.

Plastic 9 litre bucket – handy for fishing, and carting hot water from the camper's kitchen.

Battery lantern, plus hand flashlights and spare batteries.

Extras: a roll of waterproof cloth tape to fix rips in canvas.

a length of strong cord for guy-rope repairs.

4 or more storm guy ropes (for obvious reasons) with long steel pegs.

4 or more long sand pegs for the really soft stuff.

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