

SECURITY ON THE ROAD

A TRAVELLER'S GUIDE



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1. Introduction

Welcome to “Security On The Road - A Traveller’s Guide”. So you’ve bought your dream escape vehicle and you’re ready to explore Australia. Then it hits you - will we be safe on the road?

Urban myths and scary stories abound... shady characters stalking people on deserted back roads, people disappearing without a trace and so on. But what’s the truth?

Are you really likely to encounter unsavoury characters or be surrounded by mobs of knife-wielding maniacs in the middle of the night? Or be run off the road by marauding gangs and have all of your prized possessions stolen?

Of course I’m exaggerating a little here, but you get my point. How safe is it “out there” and what should you look out for? What steps should you take to protect yourself? What useful tips should you keep in mind to make sure your possessions aren’t stolen and you aren’t assaulted... or worse?

Which places should you avoid? Are you safe travelling alone? Can you leave your camper, motorhome or caravan unattended?

We’ll answer these questions for you - and a whole lot more.

I hope you enjoy this guide. And remember - for fantastic destinations in Outback Australia, check out our website at www.topwiretraveller.com

Happy travels!

Andrew Murray

2. Use Your Head

People often ask, "What do you take with you on the road to defend yourself?"

Perhaps the best piece of advice I've heard is also the simplest, "My brain".

Until recently, I had no idea people were carrying weapons in their vehicles, under their seats, in overhead consoles or even under mattresses. Anything from baseball bats and cricket bats, to pipes, knives and occasionally even shotguns!

In fact, last year a gentleman proudly showed me an ex-Special Forces Vietnam-era machete he kept hidden under his driver's seat, "just in case". It had a huge double-sided blade. One side was razor-sharp, "I could easily take your head off with one slice"... and he could have! The back was an evil-looking creation of serrated blades, designed to rip someone apart after stabbing them. What, are we living in a war zone?

What Are We Afraid Of?

So are we all becoming a little paranoid? Maybe we've watched too many American cop shows or re-runs of Mad Max and Wolfe Creek. Or maybe we think the world is less safe now than in "the good old days". Who knows?

Whatever the reasons, it seems travellers are feeling less safe on the road now than ever before.

Commonsense

When it comes to security on the road - from personal safety all the way through to securing your vehicle - your *brain* is far and away the best security device. Use commonsense. Don't let the "scary monster" stories cloud your judgement.

If you go out for the day, lock your motorhome or caravan door and pack away loose items. If you have a tent or camper, a small cheap padlock will deter opportunistic thieves.

You wouldn't leave your front door wide open and your laptop on the front lawn in the 'burbs if you went out. So why would you think it was okay to leave your expensive fishing rods and brand new camping cookware out the front of your tent unattended?

Again, use your commonsense. If you have iPads, mobile phones, laptops, fishing gear - anything of value that can easily be picked up in one hand - take them with you when you go out. Or lock them away out of sight.

You'll find most theft from campsites is impulsive and opportunistic. Even if someone jumps the fence intent on stealing, they'll be looking for light items with a high value that can be easily carried.

Remember, if someone *really* wants to get inside your camper or caravan, they'll find a way in. This might sound a bit scary at first, but the same applies to your "safe" suburban home. Let's take this one step further. Say you're in your camper, motorhome or caravan. It's the middle of the night and you hear someone trying to break in. What happens when you yell out? Does the thief come

charging into your space and beat you and your partner to a pulp then steal everything you own? Of course not, they'll simply run off.

Take the same scenario in a suburban home. You awaken to hear someone scruffling through your possessions in another room. You get up to chase them off. What's just happened? Most likely, you've cornered them in a room. How are they going to escape? By knocking you out of the way and going out the way they came in. You can easily end up badly injured.

So what's safer - your camper or your house? Depends on your point of view, but I'll take the camper any day.

And when was the last time someone broke into your house while you were sleeping? It does happen - in fact it happened to us. But let's face it, this is (hopefully) a once in a lifetime event at best. In other words it's pretty unlikely to happen, either at home or in your camper.

Beware The Campground "Expert"

If there's one thing you *must* avoid, it is the dreaded Campground Expert. You know the type - his (yes, nearly always "his" not "her") natural habitat is caravan parks... beside the barbeque or wherever an unsuspecting audience congregates.

Now this particular gentleman will have advice, wisdom and solutions to everything from immigration ("I'm not racist, but...") to the best 4WD on the market - otherwise known as "whatever he happens to be driving at the moment".

Do not, I repeat *DO NOT* mention the issue of security whilst travelling. If you do, he will no doubt regale you with spine-tingling tales of terror on the roads. Then if you're doubly unlucky, someone else in the group will try to outdo the Campground Expert with their own tales of woe and horror.

Step back and take these stories with a grain of salt. These people have a way of sounding mighty convincing and they live by the creed of never letting facts get in the way of a good story!

If you can bear to listen for more than a few seconds, you'll notice how these things *never* actually happen to them personally. Rather, the unfortunate victim will be "a friend of my mate" or "my mate's cousin" or "a bloke we ran into at Cunnamulla the other day" and the like.

Are You Safe Travelling Alone?

Yes you are. Again, use your judgement. You wouldn't walk down a dark, creepy alley in a city during the dead of night by yourself. Similarly, don't walk home alone through a shady neighborhood in a town with a less than perfect reputation.

If you're travelling to remote areas alone, keep in touch with a friend or family member back at home. Tell them where you're going and how long you'll be out of contact. This is just as important when you're travelling as a couple or a family.

And be prepared. Take plenty of water and food. Buy an EPIRB (Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon) or hire a satellite phone. If your vehicle breaks down or you are injured, you need to be able to call for help.

Why is this so important? Well, some places in Australia are still very remote. For example, we drove from Meekatharra to Wiluna in Western Australia, just over 180km on a dirt road. Whilst this

doesn't sound particularly challenging - and it wasn't - this country is remote and unforgiving. The minute you drive out of town, you're on your own.

We saw one vehicle as we were leaving Meekatharra, then no one until we reached Wiluna. It was late November and summer had arrived early, so the temperature was hovering in the high 30's.

With four of us - two adults and two children - we made sure we had stacks of water and plenty of food, just in case.



SOME PLACES ARE PRETTY REMOTE - YAY, NO PEOPLE!!

You'll find Murphy's Law at work here. If you are prepared, nothing untoward will happen. If you're not, well...

So yes, you are safe travelling alone. Just be prepared.

Be sociable. Once you get away from the major cities, people will look out for you if you're on your own. Don't be afraid of being attacked or targetted. Fellow travellers will be willing and happy to

help you out. You'll find people are there to experience the destination - nearly everyone will say g'day and ask about your travels. You might not even realise, but they'll also be keeping an eye on you and making sure you're okay.

If you have your wits about you, you'll quickly learn to get a "feel" for a place. What do I mean by this? Well, say you drive into a small settlement. In a matter of seconds, you'll decide if the place "feels" right or not. Generally your first impressions are pretty well spot on. Take notice of your gut instincts. They are rarely wrong.

Do You Need "Protection"?

Earlier I mentioned how some people are carrying weapons of some description, presumably for self-defence. Do you need protection?

One side of the fence will argue that they'll never use their weapon unless someone attacks them or breaks in - it'll be there just in case. Or they'll use it to threaten someone who is menacing them.

I simply can't buy this argument. First up, I've never actually met anyone travelling around Australia who has been personally threatened, attacked or placed in a position where they needed a weapon to defend themselves. I'm not saying this doesn't *ever* happen - but what's the likelihood? Do these same people keep a shotgun beside their bed at home "just in case"?

No doubt some of you will strongly disagree with me. Perhaps you're thinking of the horror Joanne Lees and Peter Falconio endured at the hands of Lesley Murdoch on the Buchanan Highway. Or the evil deeds of Ivan Milat. Or... or what?

Two - admittedly horrendous - events in a couple of decades. Does this justify carrying a shotgun "just in case"?

Perhaps more disturbingly, your own weapon can be turned upon you in the blink of an eye. Imagine being confronted by someone much younger and fitter than yourself, intoxicated or on drugs. For whatever reason, the situation spirals out of control. You grab your baseball bat, the other person rips it out of your hands. What's going to happen now? Best case, you'll lose a baseball bat. Worse case, you'll end up in a battered pile on the ground.

Secondly, are you going to carry your weapon everywhere you go? Somehow I think you might cause a bit of a commotion if you walk through a campground with a shotgun! So what are you going to do - ask the person who is harassing you to wait here a minute while you go and get your baseball bat out of the caravan?

And I'm not even going to touch the subject of legalities - carrying a concealed weapon, firearms offences and so on. You can figure out the potential consequences, I'm sure.

So no, you don't need "protection". For goodness sake, we're in Australia. Again, a small amount of commonsense goes a long way.

Can You Leave Your Gear Unattended?

It depends. For example, we have no hesitation in leaving our slide-on camper unattended in pretty well any country town, remote campsite or National Park. As long as we're well away from a major population centre, we're comfortable doing this.

The places where you need to be careful are coastal caravan parks and major tourist drawcards during school holidays and long weekends or anywhere within the bounds of a day trip from one of these.

Why? Well, there are two types of tourists.

The first type are travellers. They are out there to explore and experience Australia. Travellers generally help each other out and keep an eye on each other's gear.

The second type are the ones who basically don't care about anyone else. They don't care if they leave rubbish behind, don't care if they're keeping the whole campground awake all night and don't respect the country they're on.

You know the type I'm talking about - the ones who yell and swear at the tops of their voices, drink 15 rums then decide it's a good idea to see if they can drive up a steep bank in a National Park, ripping it apart in the process. The ones who hook their winches onto a locked gate and drag it off its hinges because they have a "right" to drive on any track they like. The ones who leave mountains of rubbish behind because it's not their problem if the bins are full. The ones who destroy everyone else's peace and quiet, simply because they don't care.

Unfortunately the second type are often the same people who will come across an unattended camp setup in a secluded area and decide to help themselves to whatever gear is lying around. They have no respect for others or others' possessions.

Thankfully these low-lives are virtually non-existent once you get away from populated areas.

Put it this way. I wouldn't hesitate to leave my camp setup unattended for the day at King Edward River campground in the Kimberleys for example. However, there's no way I'd do the same in Blue Mountains National Park west of Sydney or say Yalgorup National Park south of Perth. They're simply too close to a large population centre.

So before you go off on a day trip from your campsite, have a think about where you are, whether the people around you are "Type 1" or "Type 2" and how close you are to a major population centre. Once again, use your commonsense.

3. Some Scenarios

Remember how I said earlier that your brain is your best form of defence? Well, we'll go through some example scenarios of what you might encounter when travelling.

You'll notice in every example that if you use some commonsense and a bit of logic, you massively decrease the chances of anything happening to you or your possessions.

Highway Overnight Rest Areas

Let's say you're caught out late on the road, just you and your partner. You'd normally be set up for the night by now, relaxing in your camp chair. However you're still on the road.

It's dark, you're tired and you need to stop. You haven't seen another car or truck on the road for over an hour. You see an overnight Rest Area ahead, so you pull in and take a look.



WE AWOKE TO THIS SUNSET AFTER FINDING AT SPOT BETWEEN CEDUNA AND PORT AUGUSTA AFTER DARK - DOWN A SIDE ROAD. THIS VIEW WAS A COMPLETELY UNEXPECTED SURPRISE!

It's secluded, pitch black and no one else is there. Beer bottles and rubbish are strewn around and someone has obviously had a large bonfire burning recently. The ground is dug up - someone has been chucking donuts. You're fairly close to a town... and it's Saturday night.

What would you do? Would you stay there overnight?

I wouldn't.

The sensible thing is to go on or backtrack until you find a side road (assuming you're not too tired to drive of course). Go a little way down the side road and find somewhere to pull over for the night. You'll generally be far safer here than back in that Rest Area on the main road. In other words, get off the main road.

Now let's add another element.

Same scenario, however now you're travelling with two other couples. The whole situation has completely changed. There's a lot of truth in the adage "safety in numbers".

Think about it. Say a group of idiots turn up from the local town in several cars, planning to have a massive bonfire. If you're on your own, they'll probably go ahead and do it. However if they rock up and see a group of people already there, then they're far less likely to stay.

Broken Down Vehicle, Remote Area

This is a difficult one. Once you leave populated areas and hit the back roads, there's an unwritten rule about helping people. For example, we recently had to stop on a back road in Western New South Wales to fix a minor problem. As I jumped out of the truck, a farmer appeared in his ute. He pulled up to make sure we were okay.

I've lost count of the number of times we've stopped to make sure someone is okay. These are random samples:

- A lone European backpacker on the Great Central Road between Uluru and the Western Australian goldfields. His van had a hole in the transmission sump and help was on its way. We made sure he had plenty of water and enough food.
- A family north of Lawn Hill in Western Queensland. Their vehicle had blown a tyre at high speed and rolled on a dirt road. We made sure they were all okay, had water and enough food. Again, help was on its way, so we asked if they wanted us to wait with them until help arrived.
- A couple of European tourists on a back road in South-East NSW. Their motorhome had a flat tyre and they were waiting for the NRMA. We made sure they were okay before leaving them.

In turn, they are hundreds of times when we've pulled up to have lunch or a short break and someone has stopped to make sure we're okay.

And don't only stop for other travellers in cars and 4WDs. Truckies, motorcyclists, bicyclists... the list is endless. Just remember, you might be the only vehicle they'll see all day. So if they're in trouble, you need to help.

The only time we'd think twice is if there was a large group and they had more than one vehicle. Even then, chances are they just need to borrow a tool they don't have or maybe some water for their radiator.

If you're travelling alone, maybe lock the doors before you reach them. Once stopped, wind your window down part-way and stay in your vehicle until you're convinced the situation is safe. Be alert and look for obvious signs like people approaching both sides of your vehicle from behind. You'll quickly sum up the scene and decide whether or not it's safe.

Again, trust your instincts.

Always stop. In remote areas, someone's life might depend on you. If you're alone, be careful, on the alert and ready for signs that something's not quite right.

City Caravan Park

In all of our travels around Australia, we've only encountered unsavoury situations a few times.

The first was in a major capital city. The caravan park/campground was huge, completely full and we were packed in like sardines. That night, several campers around us had many of their possessions stolen.

The second was a major regional city. We were warned that low-lives were jumping the fence and stealing loose items at night. The people beside us had several small items stolen. Having said this, people were leaving phones and iPads outside on tables at night. Whilst they shouldn't have to worry about theft, *why make it easy* for someone to steal your things? Pack them away out of sight.



THIS PLACE (A CAPITAL CITY) WAS HORRIBLE - HUNDREDS OF TINY CAMPSITES WITH NO SPACE IN BETWEEN. A GOLDMINE FOR THIEVES.

Again, I go back to the rule of thumb about large population centres. Unfortunately, you'll always get a select few who believe your things are theirs to take. We have never seen or heard of any incidents in remote areas. I'm sure it does happen, but it's rare. Take extra care when you're in a large caravan park or campground.

Town Campsites

Town campsites are common. Towns will often open their showground in busy seasons, either for free camping or for a nominal fee. These places are predominantly full of grey nomads in caravans or motorhomes.

Grey nomads are a friendly bunch. And the bonus is you'll generally have people around the campsite all day. They'll quickly notice if someone is behaving suspiciously.

The only downside is that the security of a town campsite is generally not as good as a caravan park. So if you're in a city, be careful. Don't leave anything out at night, just in case.

Sometimes you'll see a town campsite with no fences at all. We stayed at one in a regional town in Northern Western Australia. The town had a few issues with crime. By chance, we were camped near the middle of the campsite. The next morning, we found out that many people who had set up around the unfenced perimeter had items stolen.

So if you have to stay at a town campsite with no fences, it might be wise to stay away from the perimeter.

Small Town, Large Fence

This one is counter-intuitive. You'll roll into a small remote town in the middle of nowhere and find the campground is surrounded by an imposing fence - often built of corrugated iron and sometimes with barbed wire along the top.

Your first thought might be to turn around and get out of the place. However, don't be too quick to leave. Yes, the town clearly has a crime problem. But the fence tells you that they're probably pretty keen to look after travellers - after all, travellers' dollars keep some of these towns alive.

If you're really not sure, walk into the campground and have a talk to a few people camped there. Find out if they've had any problems, then make a decision about whether to stay or go.

Remote Campsite

We've camped at hundreds of remote places with no other campers around. Not once did we feel unsafe. By far the best campsites are the ones where you're completely alone.

Many people are fearful of camping by themselves in the middle of nowhere and that's a shame. They don't know what they're missing out on. It can be a humbling experience:

- A blanket of stars from one horizon to the next.
- Utter and all-encompassing blackness on a moonless night.
- Complete silence where the only sound you can hear is the ringing in your ears.
- The sounds of wildlife moving around you in the dark.

You quickly realise what a small insignificant dot you are in the universe.

I digress. They're really not much to say about security here, except to say it's not an issue. Just be prepared and take plenty of water and food. Buy an EPIRB or hire a satellite phone for your personal safety in case of emergency.



THIS IS MORE LIKE IT - NOT A SOUL WITHIN AT LEAST A 100KM RADIUS. FANTASTIC!

Campgrounds Close To Large Urban Areas

Here, I'm referring to National Park campgrounds near a major city for example. Be careful.

Again, you don't need to worry about personal safety. However, your possessions are another story.

In the section, "Can You Leave Your Gear Unattended?" I spoke about certain members of society who believe your possessions are theirs for the taking. Well, campgrounds close to urban areas are a prime target.

Another tip. When you drive in, look out for large groups camping together. They're often the ones who'll want to party all night.

Again, you'll get a "feel" for the place. We've camped in large, busy National Park campgrounds and felt perfectly comfortable leaving our things unattended. Be friendly to your "neighbours" and maybe have a yarn. Then when you go out for the day, these people will keep an eye on your things - as you would for them.

4. What Security Options Do You Have?

Personal Security

What do I mean by "Personal Security"? Quite simply, your own and fellow companions' safety. And what's the best way to stay safe? Use your brain - commonsense goes a long way.

- Don't camp on the edge of a dodgy town. Either go into the town and camp in a safe caravan park/campground or drive out of town and camp on a quiet back road.
- By all means camp at designated overnight rest areas. Just have a think about the place. If you're on a deserted highway in the middle of the nowhere, what's near you? Any bad towns nearby? If not, then you'll most likely have the place to yourself - apart from the trucks of course.
- Avoid camping near large groups who'll most likely want to party all night. They won't be a threat, but you might be a threat to them if they keep you awake all night!
- Forget about guns, knives, baseball bats and whatever else you can think of. It might be a noble idea - protecting your loved ones and all that. However, the reality is likely very different. Firstly, you probably won't have your weapon of choice near you in the extremely unlikely event you'll need it. Secondly, if you do try to use it you may well have the weapon turned against you. Just forget about weapons.

I could go on, but I'm sure you're getting the idea by now. *Personal security is really not a major issue when you're travelling this great land of ours.*

Vehicle Security

There's two parts to this. The first is securing your actual vehicle. The second is securing your possessions in or on the vehicle.

Your Vehicle:

Theft of 4WDs does happen. Often thieves will target a particular vehicle type. For example, older model Nissan Patrols are a target. They're stripped down and sold for parts.

The best solution here is a GPS vehicle tracking device. Assuming you notice your vehicle has been stolen within a few days, then you can use the GPS tracker to find it. This really is cheap insurance for your vehicle security.

Some people are also starting to use the old-style steering locks again. These are the ones that hook onto your steering wheel and under the brake pedal. They're a simple solution and a great idea. However, they don't stop a thief with a tilt tray or tow truck from stealing your vehicle.

Possessions In/On Your Vehicle:

Say you have a roof basket and a canvas rack pack. You might also have some Maxtrax and a shovel or maybe some jerry cans on your vehicle.

The only time you really need to be careful is in regional towns or cities, and you leave the vehicle unattended in a carpark for example.

In this instance, one of you stay with the vehicle while the other person shops. If you're alone, try to park on a busy main street where there's lots of people around. Outside a coffee shop is a good spot.

Or park somewhere close by, where you can actually see the vehicle.

Watch what the locals do. If you see people parking then walking away and leaving their windows down, then obviously you don't need to worry too much!

Caravan/Camper Security

All of the principles for "Vehicle Security" apply equally to caravan/camper security, with one important addition. They can be hitched up and towed away.

Unfortunately, theft of caravans and camper trailers is fairly common. I wouldn't be too worried if you're set up somewhere. Why would a thief bother to pack down the camper trailer before stealing it?

Rather, they are most commonly stolen from storage facilities or when parked on the street. Wheel clamps, clamps that fit over the hitch point and lockable wire rope cables are all good options. An online search will yield all sorts of weird and wonderful contraptions.

Again, think about how you would stop a thief from loading your pride and joy onto a tilt tray. Preventing this is a pretty big ask. They don't care if the wheels won't turn - they'll just drag it on with a winch.

Probably the best device is a GPS tracker, although you'll have to think where the power is going to be supplied from.

Items like solar panels and jerry cans should be removed and stored elsewhere.

Camping Possessions

Say you're set up somewhere and everything is out and being used. Use all the tactics you've learnt so far - befriend your "neighbours", keep valuable items like laptops out of sight, store away anything of value that can be easily stolen and... wait for it... use your brain.

At night, stow away anything of value. Don't leave iPads sitting on the table outside, grab that expensive fishing rod and bring it inside, don't leave your DSLR camera sitting on the front seat of your vehicle - just commonsense really.

And be realistic. If you're in a crowded caravan park on the East Coast at Christmas time then chances are something will go missing if you leave it out. But say you're camped at Mt Barnett in the Kimberleys for example. You'll be surrounded by like-minded travellers. If they see someone sniffing around your site - extremely unlikely by the way - then they'll sort it out pretty quickly.

5. Last Thoughts

Hopefully by now you've come to the conclusion that Australia is actually a safe place to travel around.

Contrary to popular belief, the most remote places are the safest. The chances of some homicidal maniac turning up at the exact place where you're camping and hacking you to pieces with a bread knife are pretty well nil.

Forget about the horror stories and tales of woe.

Just get out there and enjoy it - use your commonsense, use your brain...