

# OUR TOP 13 TIPS FOR TRAVELLING IN THE OUTBACK

## A TRAVELLER'S GUIDE



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# Our Top 13 Tips For Travelling in the Outback

We've had a few people ask for general tips when travelling in the Outback. General tips for what you should and shouldn't do, and what to look out for if you haven't travelled outback before.



So here's our advice... our top 13 tips for outback travel.

## 1. Getting Fuel

You can't get very far without fuel. Goes without saying, really.

So once you get into the outback, don't worry about the price. It's far cheaper to pay a bit more, than pay for the cost of a recovery if you run out in the middle of nowhere.

Fill up at every chance. Why? Because the next place might not have fuel. More remote places might only get a fuel delivery every few weeks, so there's a fair chance they may not have fuel.

If you get to a town where there's more than one service station, try to observe where the trucks and the locals fill up. This way, it's less likely you'll get a tankful of bad fuel.

## 2. Carrying Extra Fuel

Many of you won't have extra fuel tanks onboard. So you might need to carry an extra jerry can or two, just in case.

The best place to carry fuel is in jerry can holders on your camper trailer or trailer. If you don't have a trailer, then you might have to store it on your roof. This isn't great, as the extra weight up high means your vehicle will be less stable than normal.

If your only option is to store the jerry cans on top of your roof rack, consider using short 10 litre jerry cans instead of the taller 20 litre ones.

Another option is jerry can holders in a swing-away cradle, mounted to the back of your vehicle. The back's not a great option either. In the unlikely event someone runs up the back of your vehicle, then the results can be messy.

Diesel's not such a problem because it's not volatile. But petrol needs to be treated with great care. Never store petrol jerry cans at the back of your vehicle... if someone runs into you, it can explode from sparks.

And *never* carry petrol jerry cans inside the cab of a wagon. Petrol releases volatile fumes and can make you very sick. Not only this, the fumes can explode if there's a spark inside the cab.

Carrying fuel inside your cab is never a good idea, even if it's diesel. One small spill or leak makes a big mess!

So if possible, store jerry cans on a trailer or in the tray if you have a dual cab ute. Next best option is on the roof in short 10 litre jerry cans. And for diesel, last resort is at the back of your vehicle or inside the cab of your wagon in the back compartment.

### 3. How Much Extra Fuel?

Have a look at the distances between fuel before you leave home. Most places, you won't need jerry cans if you top up at every available place.

But if you do, allow an extra 25% fuel usage. Why? Because your vehicle will be heavily loaded, so it'll use more fuel. And don't underestimate how much extra fuel you'll use when pushing into a headwind all day. This alone can increase your fuel consumption by 25% if you don't back off a bit.

### 4. Road Manners

When you're on a dirt road and a vehicle comes the other way, slow right down. Don't shower them with rocks. It's just commonsense and good manners... but unfortunately this is a bridge too far for a lot of people.

I've lost count of the times oncoming vehicles have flown past us at over 100km/h, throwing up rocks into our windscreen. Our windscreen has plenty of "bullet holes" as testament to this.

We've written an article on [all you need to know about driving on dirt roads here](#).

### 5. Size Does Matter

If you remember this, you'll go a long way towards a safe outback trip.

Always give a larger vehicle room on dirt roads. If you're in a 4WD and a small truck comes towards you, slow down and move as far as you can to the left. If you're in a small truck and a larger truck comes towards you, do the same... and so on.

Larger vehicles can't pull up or avoid obstacles as quickly as you can.

We travel in a small 4WD Isuzu truck. We've had many instances of oncoming vehicles stubbornly sitting in the middle of the road or racing us to a one lane bridge. I can tell you, it's not much fun when you're forced off the road while driving a truck!

We even had an instance of a 4WD trying to push us back across a causeway in northern Queensland once... **after** we had already started across the causeway! They finally admitted defeat and backed up.

I guess what I'm trying to say is, use a bit of commonsense. A larger vehicle simply can't slow down or pull up as quickly as a smaller vehicle.

A small amount of courtesy on the road goes a long way.

## 6. Let Others Overtake

If you're on a dirt road, always keep a close eye in your mirrors for vehicles coming up behind you. It can be difficult when you're sending up a plume of thick dust. But you'll usually see them in your mirrors as you go around a bend or slow down for a corner or rough road.

Put your left indicator on and gradually slow down. Whatever you do, don't stop suddenly. They might not see you in the dust and can easily run into you.

And if you have a UHF, try to call them up (usually channel 40) and tell them you're going to pull over and let them overtake.

It's much easier driving when you don't have someone pushing you to go faster... and it's common courtesy.

## 7. Passing Road Trains

Many outback roads are dirt or a single lane of tar. When a road train comes towards you, pull off the road and stop.



On dirt roads, a road train will usually send up a cloud of dust so thick that you won't be able to see your bonnet. If you don't stop, you're driving blind... potentially straight into another oncoming vehicle.

On the one lane tar roads, a road train **has to** stay on the blacktop. If it drops wheels onto the gravel, the whole combination can roll over. Best case, it will send up a huge shower of rocks that you'll be driving straight into.

## 8. Overtaking Road Trains

How do you overtake a road train? Carefully!

Before you decide to overtake a road train, think about where you are on your journey. If you're 15 minutes out of a town you're planning to stop at and the truck's rolling along at 90km/h, then you might as well sit back and follow them. There's really nothing to be gained in overtaking them.

If you do decide to tuck in behind the truck, back off and leave plenty of room for other vehicles to overtake you, and to safely pull in between you and the truck.

But if you decide to overtake, then first up, try to call them up on the UHF radio (usually channel 40). Ask them to let you know when the road ahead is clear, so you can get around them.

If they don't respond on the UHF, wait until you can see a long way ahead before pulling out to overtake.

And **never** cut in after you've overtaken them.

If you're midway through overtaking and you see a vehicle approaching, don't try to race the road train to overtake it. Instead, back off and drop back in behind them.

Be extra careful if the road is narrow and you're towing. If you drop a wheel off the right edge of the tar, it can grab and make you swerve. Worst case, it can flip you over.

## 9. Road Train Overtaking You

What if a truck or road train appears in your mirrors and wants to overtake *you*?

Before we go on, I should explain the little-known mysteries of vehicle speedometers. Trucks over a certain weight limit are speed limited to 100km/h (some road trains are speed limited to 90km/h, depending on what state you're in).

The electronic speed limiters will not allow the truck to go over the set speed. The only exception is downhill, where gravity takes over. Even that's less common now, with modern electronics in some new trucks taking control and slowing down the truck.

Yes, we've all heard the stories of trucks speeding past at well over the speed limit. And a tiny minority of truck owners do tamper with their speed limiters. But the fines are massive and they are, like I said it's a tiny minority.

99.9% of these “speeding truck” stories are in fact because the storyteller’s speedometer is reading incorrectly.

Passenger vehicles have a 10% accuracy tolerance on their speedos. So your speedo can be showing 100km/h when in fact you’re only doing 90km/h. Our Pajero used to do this.

So don’t be alarmed if a truck comes up behind you. And here’s what you do:

1. Call them up on the UHF. Tell them you’ll back off when they overtake. Why call them up? Because now they know how you’re going to react when they pull out to overtake.
2. If you can’t get a reply on the UHF, the following still applies.
3. **Maintain a constant speed until they’ve pulled out into the other lane.** Do not slow down and definitely don’t speed up.
4. Once they start to overtake you, back off. This way, they’re not on the wrong side of the road for any longer than necessary.
5. When the back of the truck is clear of your vehicle, flash your lights. This lets them know it’s safe to pull back in.

There, that wasn’t too scary was it! 😊

## 10. Wet Dirt Roads

Sometimes in the outback, you’ll be caught in a rain event. And more than likely, all dirt roads will close.

Now, you might be tempted to push on to your next destination through the mud and slush. After all, it would be a lot of fun and make a great campfire story in years to come.

Don’t. Don’t do it.

Why not? Three reasons. The first is, just because a dirt road doesn’t have “Road Closed” signs doesn’t mean it’s not closed. Rural councils don’t have the resources to do this.

They rely on commonsense and local knowledge. The locals will have the sense not to drive on a wet dirt road.

Reason #2? Just one vehicle can destroy a wet dirt road. You’ll leave deep wheel ruts, zig-zagging all over the road. And when the road dries out, your wheel tracks become hard ruts baked into the road surface.

So while you might be having fun, you’re destroying the very road the locals rely on every day.

And if you appear in a town out of nowhere having driven along a wet road, you might discover you’re the feature act in a public lynching...

Now if that’s not enough to deter you, there’s also a financial reason. Driving on closed roads can incur big fines... as in, several thousand dollars. And with good reason. It costs the council thousands of dollars to fix the damage you’ve caused.

And if you think no one ever gets fined, think again. People will report you. We've seen it happen.

So what can you do? Well it depends.

Sometimes you'll be told to get out while you still can. This happened to us in the Kimberley. First we were told to get out of King Edward River campground and make our way to Drysdale Station. Then a day later, we were told to get out of Drysdale Station and make our way to Kununurra, or risk being stuck there for weeks.

So if you're told to go, then that's okay.

But in all other situations, sit it out. Nine times out of ten, the road will be fine to drive on after a couple of dry days.

## 11. Check Ahead

One way to avoid being stuck somewhere by a closed road is to check ahead. Have a look at the 7 day forecast before you go into a region... try to get a feel for whether rain's on the way.

And if there has been rain in the area you're going into, ring ahead. Call the police or local roadhouse to see if the road's open and whether they're expecting more rain.



Mind you, this doesn't always work.



We were heading up the Oodnadatta Track several years ago and they'd had quite a bit of rain. So we did the right thing. First we ran the Pink Roadhouse at Oodnadatta, "Yep, all good". Then we rang Marree police to double-check... same answer.

So off we went, only to be faced with Gregory Creek flowing strongly across the road and about 50 metres wide. I got out to check the depth. When the water reached my knees and I was getting pushed sideways, I kind of decided this wouldn't be a good plan.

We turned around and legged it back to Leigh Creek... fortunately for us. Because that night they had more rain and dozens of people were trapped in William Creek for over a week.

So use a bit of commonsense and listen to your gut. If it doesn't feel right, turn around, change plans.

## 12. If it's Flooded, Forget It... Seriously

Every time there's a flood in a large town or city, people get caught in floodwater. The vehicle usually drowns and fails to proceed. Sometimes the vehicle gets washed away and sadly people drown.

The outback's no different.

For some reason, people underestimate the power of water. Have you ever walked across a swiftly flowing creek or walked out against the incoming waves at a beach? It's difficult!

Now imagine you try to hold up a big flat sheet of steel, sideways against the current. It would be impossible.

This is what a vehicle's up against when someone tries to drive through floodwaters. It's trying to resist a wall of water.

Even worse, once water gets above the doors your vehicle turns into a boat... it tries to float. And at some point it **will** float. This is why vehicles get washed away.

And if you're still not convinced, then consider this.

How do you know if the road's still there? How do you know it hasn't been washed away? If you can't see the road under all that brown floodwater, then you have no idea whether it is still there!

This applies equally to dirt and tar roads. There's nothing special about tar roads. They can be washed away just as easily as dirt roads.

My advice? If you encounter a flooded road and absolutely have to get across, stop and walk it. If it's above your shins and/or flowing strongly, don't go across. And walk the whole way across if it's safe to do so. This way you at least know whether the road has been washed away or not.

## 13. Don't Disappear

Heat can kill quickly. People still die in the outback, mostly due to dehydration. [Carry spare water and food](#) in case of a breakdown.

Without wanting to sound melodramatic, [it could save your life](#).

And whatever you do, carry either a Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) or a satellite phone. We prefer a sat phone because you can actually speak to someone and explain your situation.

However, either will suffice.

Always tell someone where you're going, roughly how long you expect to be out of contact for and who to contact if you don't check in as scheduled.

For example, you might choose your brother as a contact person. "Hi Mike. We're at Marree and about to go up the Oodnadatta Track to Oodnadatta. We'll call you from there. If you don't hear from us in three days, call Marree Police".

Most of the time if you break down, someone will come past. But if you're travelling in summer, the roads can be all but deserted... you might not see anyone else for a week or more.

## Wrapping Up

So there you have it... our top 13 tips for travelling in the Outback.

And the most important tip of all? Enjoy it and leave it as you found it. The outback is absolutely extraordinary. Those vast open spaces, clear skies and blanket of stars at night will stay with you forever.

You'll be itching to go back!

For more [tips and ideas on how to travel safely in the outback, go here](#).