21 Ways to Improve Your Camping Lifestyle

Bill Revill

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INTRODUCTION

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.

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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.

CONTENTS

1

A CHEAPSKATE'S GUIDE TO BARE-BONES CAMPING

Talk 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?

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.

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

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"*. Hmmm.

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.)

4

HIGHWAY CAMPSITES

Given the vast distances involved in getting around this country of ours, it's almost inevitable that one day you'll be faced with the option of camping along the way to your destination. Indeed, for travellers on a touring vacation, roadside campsites provide a cost-free alternative to established forms of accommodation.

Not only will you save a bundle, camping "the long paddock" can be safe, comfortable and convenient. Here are a few pointers to get you started:

The ideal site

Believe it or not, right across the continent there are numerous campsites handy to the road that provide good access, privacy, and sufficient distance or natural screening from highway noise. In quite a few cases -- like established rest areas for instance -- you may also find rubbish bins, fireplaces, picnic furniture, even water and toilets. (Spots like these are worth marking on your map for future reference.)

In a nutshell, here's what I look for:

- Clear, solid, level ground
- Privacy (which increases security)
- Distance from the highway (less noise; better security)
- All weather access, in *and* out
- Space to maneuver and set up camp
- No restrictions (eg, signs, fences, private property)

Stop early

Try to leave yourself enough daylight to suss out likely campsites, and also to allow sufficient time to get camper/tent/beds organised and a meal prepared. If your travel plans are flexible enough, when you find a particularly good site, it's worth pulling over even earlier.

Choice of accommodation

As you'd expect, caravans and campervans are the most convenient of all roadside accommodation options, with full-size tents well down at the other end of the scale. That's not to say tents are out of the question, it's just that they can become a real pain to set up each night and repack every morning. If a caravan is not in your reckoning, best you consider a

tent-trailer, camper trailer or maybe even canvas swags. Mind you, if there are just the two of you, a station wagon makes a passable "bedroom on wheels".

Organise your gear

Since daily chores for the roadside camper include unloading and re-packing a fair bit of gear, it all needs to be carefully packed and well organised. Once you settle on a routine and layout that works -- with the most needed and emergency items easiest to get at -- stick doggedly to it so you always know where everything is. Unless you're reasonably methodical, after a week or two on the road all that gear becomes pretty chaotic.

Creature comforts

Also keep handy those items like folding chairs, torches, tea/coffee gear, raincoats, hats, and an easily erected tarp or canopy so that once you stop you can quickly get organised regardless of the weather. Within the limitations of your outfit, the more self-reliant you can become in terms of food, water, LPG, firewood and so on, the more of those serendipitous campsites you'll be ready to make use of.

Unfortunately, roadside freebies aren't always available these days. Thanks to a few inconsiderate polluters, many local authorities have now adopted strictly enforced by-laws regarding unofficial campsites. In populated regions and tourist areas, for example, they're impossible to find. But out where the skies are wide and nature comes right up to the roadside, you'll find some more of what touring freedom is all about.

ROADSIDE CAMPSITES: A FEW TO CONSIDER

* **Established rest areas**. Look for those that are well away from traffic, with a degree of privacy. Avoid truck parking areas.
* **Side-tracks**. Good sites are often found 50 metres off the highway. If in doubt, check on foot. (A 4WD can be a real asset here.)
* **Abandoned roads**. Disused sections of highway offer flat, robust sites often well back from the new section of highway.
* **Bridges**. Sometimes have supplementary (low-level) crossings or access. Watch for livestock and stock routes, and don't camp too close to the watercourse.
* **Railways**. Increasingly abandoned. Redundant track crossings, service roads, sidings and buildings are common throughout Australia.
* **Gravel dumps**. Provide a good, all-weather surface but may be too close to passing traffic for a good night's sleep.
* **Abandoned farms and huts**. Check or seek permission if possible. Try not to be too obtrusive. (Remember: Privacy = Security)
* **Others**. State forests, remote beaches, sports grounds, country schoolyards, car parks, racetracks, silos, halls, churches, cemeteries, quarries, etc, etc.

If all else fails, ask the locals. (After all, they know their area best!)

5

TLC FOR TENTS

Your big camping holiday has come to an end. Arriving home, weary but satisfied, the long process begins: hauling all that gear back into the garage. It's late and you're tired. Why not sort it out next weekend?

Although common, this simple scenario has shortened the life of many a good tent. When it again sees the light of day, just prior to your next trip, it may be too late. Problem is, the slightest presence of moisture in rolled up canvas quickly generates mildew. This deteriorates the fabric, which, before too long, becomes vulnerable to the slightest rough handling. Unfortunately, those common plastic storage bags aggravate the process by not allowing the tent to "breathe".

If you do nothing else, immediately you get home the tent should be taken out of the bag and spread out. Then, as soon as possible -- next day at the latest -- the tent should be put up in the backyard in preparation for a good clean out.

First up, using a soft brush, remove all dirt, sand, grass seeds and dead insects, then run the vacuum cleaner through the inside, particularly along the floor seams. Any stains, dried ice cream or other foreign substances should be cleaned off with a mild soap solution.

Have a good look over the walls, floor, windows and awnings for holes, burns, strained eyelets and seams, and any holes in the insect screening. Those loops or sleeves where poles fit through are common stress points and also need careful checking. Strained stitching, if not excessive, may only need the application of seam sealing wax, which can also be used to free up sticking zippers. However, any zipper that's beyond help needs to be replaced.

What you can't repair yourself with adhesive, or needle and heavy thread, should be taken to a canvas repair specialist. But do it now or chances are the damage will still be there when next you go camping.

Apart from minor repairs, older tents may need re-treating with a canvas sealant. Even the best treatment is effective for only five or six years of frequent use so it's a job that eventually needs doing. Spray or brush-on solutions are available at most camping stores.

After it's all done, leave the tent strung out or loosely erected for a couple of days in warm sunshine with windows and doors unzippered. When completely dry -- particularly along the seams -- fold it *loosely* and store in a dry place.

With a little thought, and a dash of TLC, you'll be unloading that same tent after camping trips 20 years from now.

6

LET'S HEAR IT FOR THE TENT PEG

It always seems odd to me. Many campers spend weeks deliberating over a vast range of new tents before finally settling on the one most likely to suit their needs. Yet when it comes to the lowly tent peg, little thought goes into the purchase. Although the tent may represent an outlay of hundreds of dollars, they happily spend a few cents on the cheapest pegs available, or persevere with those tiny, lightweight items supplied as standard.

This approach is unwise. No matter how well designed and manufactured your tent might be, in many situations all that stands between your family and campsite chaos is a handful of steel spikes. When the wind whips up and the weather turns lousy, a well-anchored shelter provides security and comfort. Even today's "free-standing" tents -- which under most circumstances require no guy ropes -- can be made infinitely more stable with appropriately placed ropes and suitable pegs.

Beyond that, there are many jobs around the campsite for which tarps, ropes and pegs, in various combinations, provide a solution.

How can a simple tent peg make such a difference?

Well, just as there are countless variations in the surface of the earth upon which we campers erect our canvas castles, so there needs to be a range of different tent pegs to ensure maximum grip for tautly strained guy ropes. We do, after all, ask a lot of the tent peg: a 25 knot breeze buffeting against several square metres of (temporarily!) unyielding canvas creates immense strain on that little spike in the ground.

And who hasn't experienced sandy conditions? Loose, seemingly formless grains of talcum, which defy all attempts to secure a guy rope and peg. Even the longest of our steel spikes slip back into daylight with the slightest tug.

But is that so surprising? Just as a sharp axe is best for cutting through firewood, a narrow-edged peg will slip straight through the earth that we hoped would restrain it. What this means is, the softer (or sandier) the soil, the wider and longer your tent pegs need to be. To hold fast, they must present a broad face to the soil in the direction of pull, usually towards the tent, awning or tarp.

Ideally, then, you should carry several types of pegs so that, as a minimum, your main guy ropes (anywhere between four and ten) can be well anchored against all eventualities. Keep in mind here that tent anchor points compliment each other in the work they do; no single point alone holds up the tent. Consequently, the collapse of just one may result in successive collapse of the others.

Around the base of your tent, where pegs are often required to fit through eyelets or sewn on loops, you may have limited choice. But here again, if you have sufficient variety in your peg bag you can at least place those most suitable for the soil conditions at the four corners of the tent, and perhaps at several intermediate points along the edges.

Mind you, there will come a time when even the most suitable peg has trouble staying upright. Short of using star-steel fence pickets, you might find that the main guy ropes need anchoring to large rocks, logs, spare wheel, tool boxes, whatever, to keep them taut. But as always, use of shock springs or rubber straps within the guy line allows the line to flex with wind and various weather changes, and help prevent pegs pulling free. Alternatively, wooden or plastic rope-runners allow easy slackening or tightening of ropes as necessary.

In extreme cases you might have to anchor the main pegs with two or three secondary pegs secured at 45 degree angles to each other and around 20 cm further out (usually away from the tent).

At the other end of the scale are those cantankerous pegs which, having been hammered securely into the earth -- using mallet, hatchet or hammer -- refuse to budge when time comes to pull them out. Patience is the answer. A few side-on blows, just above ground level, interspersed with 360 degree turns (using a spare peg through the hook), will eventually free them.

Like tarps, ropes and elastic straps, it's worth carrying extra pegs, but the good thing is they require very little maintenance. After each trip just hose off excess dirt, let them dry, then give them a light coat of oil, or a spray with WD40 or CRC.

If your pegs are carried in an upright bag, be sure to drop them in point *uppermost* otherwise the sharp tips gradually rip the bottom of the bag to shreds.

One final point: as you drop the tent, leave guy ropes attached to the pegs until you're ready to pull them out. Once the tent is down the whole site takes on a different appearance and those partly buried pegs are hard to find (until you trip over them!).

Camping confidence grows with the knowledge that your skills and equipment are up to task. Quality gear means fewer hassles. Even the oft-neglected tent peg can make the difference between an enjoyable camping trip, or one you'd prefer to forget.

7

CAMPSITE HANDYMAN

Here's my formula for a safe and hassle-free camping trip: quality equipment, meticulous preparation, the Aussie outdoors and perfect weather. All things being equal, that's all we ever need.

But let's not forget our old friend Murphy. If there's a way to cause trouble, he and his campsite gremlins will find it. And they're experts: collapsed or leaking tents, ripped canvas, separated eyelets, or busted zippers are just a few of their favourite pranks.

What this means, of course, is that we campers should prepare for equipment repairs miles from the nearest hardware store. Fortunately, with a little ingenuity and improvisation, inconvenience can be minimised.

Take tents, for example. If ripped, they can be stitched or patched using either a sewing awl (for heavier work) or large needle and thread. Afterwards, the repair job can be made completely waterproof by covering it with silicone sealant or waterproof adhesive tape.

On the other hand, if the problem is an over-stretched seam, seam sealing wax should do the trick if it's not too bad, otherwise it's back to your sewing kit.

That same wax (or a candle) can also be used to free up sticking door or window zippers by rubbing over the zipper teeth. But if the zipper has actually separated, more complex first aid is required.

If the zipper can be taken out of action, a few safety pins will do, but if it has to remain on duty, repairs are necessary. You may need to cut the free side of the zipper to get the teeth back through the runner, but once you have it together, check that the zipper closes securely along its length, then sew both sides together just below the furtherest point you want the runner to open.

Plastic tarps also need repairs from time to time and the quick-fix is waterproof adhesive tape, or a touch of silicone sealant for minor burn holes. (But clean any dust and dirt off the tarp material before you start.) If eyelets tear loose, make a temporary one by placing two or three layers of adhesive tape *both sides*, and protruding out from the edge about 30 mm. Cut a neat hole through the protruding tape to attach your guy line.

Insect screening can be quickly repaired using needle and thread, or if you feel the need, there are specialised kits sold in camping stores.

Moving across to those plastic-upholstered folding chairs, if they've spent a few nights close to the fire, the plastic is likely to be coming apart. Quality filament tape will keep it all together until you get them to a canvas repairer who can replace the seat with custom-made "upholstery" for less than you'd pay for a new chair.

If you love walking, having the sole separate from one of your favourite hike boots can be more than inconvenient. Nevertheless, heavily wrapped in adhesive tape, and sealed as best you can with silicone, it can be made to get you through. If it still leaks, place a plastic vegetable bag over your sock before putting the boot back on.

Most other items of clothing can be given the first aid treatment with safety pins or needle and thread.

Although most people throw away a broken elastic ("bungie") strap, it can be kept in service a while longer by simply tying the two ends together. If a hook has torn away, feed the strap back through the ring of the hook, then knot it to prevent it pulling through.

On one particularly rugged 4WD trip, I discovered our icebox had split, leaking water through the vehicle. I took everything out of the cooler, inserted a large plastic garbage bag, then placed ice, food and drinks inside the bag.

What all this means is, providing you carry a basic range of repair gear (particularly the items I've mentioned here), you'll be able to patch things sufficiently to make do until you get home. Other handy fix-it items can be nylon cord, plastic covered tie wire, Quick Grip, Araldite, heavy gauge wire and so on. Add a bit of outdoor ingenuity and campground repairs are out of the way in no time at all.

Sometimes the results are better than the original.

CAMPSITE REPAIR KIT

(Suggested contents)

- Waterproof adhesive tape (eg, "Gaffa")
- Silicone sealant
- Heavy needle and thread (or sewing awl)
- Duct tape
- Plastic coated tie wire
- Nylon sash cord (or "para" cord)
- String
- Length of wire (eg, coat hanger)
- Kwik Grip (or similar adhesive)
- Miscellaneous spares (eg, mantles, gas jet, lamp glass, torch bulb, misc. nuts, bolts, screws, washers)
- Seam sealing wax (or candle)
- Filament tape
- Airbed repair kit (eg, Coghlan's)
- Eyelet kit
- Nylon cable ties (several sizes)
- Safety pins (med-large)
- RP7 or WD40 (or similar)
- Garbage bags
- Stanley knife (or scissors)
- Canvas patches

8

THE LOST ART OF IMPROVISATION

One of the great lines to come out of Hollywood was yelled by a US Marine sergeant when he ordered his troops to "Improvise! Adapt! Overcome!" In many ways, there are times when campers, too, are called upon to do just that. After all, we can't possibly carry all the gear we *might* need to meet *all* situations.

The solution, for most of us, lies in the ancient art of improvisation: substituting the use of one item for another (or for several). It's making do; overcoming problems with unplanned or innovative solutions. And for first-time campers, it's a great way to stall off the extra expense of low-priority gear that may not get used.

There's certainly nothing new or mysterious about improvisation. Ancient Aboriginal tribesmen -- sharing today's need to travel light and therefore cut equipment down to the bare essentials -- intuitively knew that anything carried other than true necessities for survival, had to be multi-functional.

Kangaroo skins, for instance, might be used as ground sheets, blankets or overcoats, while the woomera -- used primarily to launch spears -- could also crack an enemy skull, or help with fire starting. Even simple mud became camouflage, insulation or protection from mosquitoes.

More recently, it's believed that the Mongol hordes of 12th Century Asia found that their shields, when inverted over a fire, became a very handy cooking utensil. Thus was born the ubiquitous wok!

And who hasn't seen at least one World War II movie in which an American G.I. uses his upturned helmet as a shaving basin.

The point is, when camping, we should try to avoid carrying too many items that serve one purpose only. The tricky part is, finding how or what to substitute.

Here's where I like to play the game of "What if?" It can be played solo, but is more effective if the whole family gets involved. Many of my own experiences with improvisation were first suggested by my wife or son. In fact it's likely that even young kids, not having developed our tunnel vision, prove to be a worthwhile source of ideas.

To play, you need to ask a series of questions like "What if we run out of tent pegs?" or "What if we need extra cooking utensils?" or "What if we have to light a fire in the rain?"

Having come up with possible solutions, whether you then decide to carry additional, "substitute" items is entirely up to you. The purpose of the exercise is to get you thinking about the endless possibilities of improvisation. It's more a matter of how you think than what you carry because it means developing the skill of adapting to -- and hopefully overcoming -- a whole range of unplanned scenarios *after* leaving the comfort of your living room (and your garage full of tools and things). In effect, you "make up" new camping techniques as you go along.

Of course there are a few things that assist greatly when we bump up against this need to improvise. And although these sorts of items, over time, tend to suit one's personal camping lifestyle, there are some that ought to be considered.

Elastic straps are a good example. These serve in their usual role of cargo tie-downs, but might also become guy rope strainers, clothes line tensioners, or bedroll straps. A roll of duct tape could be used to repair a collapsed chair, lash poles to form a tri-pod, or repair an eyelet in the tent or a tarpaulin.

Other valuable items are plastic coated tie wire, various ropes and string, aluminium foil, extra tarps, plastic (stackable) hobby crates, adjustable poles, or various sizes of drums, plastic bags, and containers. The only "rule" is to stick with multi-use items as much as possible.

Maybe improvisation isn't really an "art", but it's certainly a skill; a way of thinking that serious campers should strive to develop. Even if you don't need a particular "solution" this trip, keep it in mind for later.

REMEMBER HOUSEHOLD CANDLES?

Standard paraffin wax candles represent one of the oldest forms of technology available, yet modern campers rarely give them serious consideration. In fact candles have been used on domestic and industrial lighting tasks for over three hundred years! Even when stacked up alongside today's high-tech outdoor lighting options, candles still represent a cheap, reasonably efficient light.

Indeed, two or three 20 cm candles can provide most lighting needs around the average campsite for less than 30c a night. And as an emergency light source, they're ideal.

Candles serve other purposes also. A small (2 cm) stub, for instance, makes an effective fire starter in damp conditions, while dry candle wax is an excellent lubricant for zippers (and squeaking car fan belts). As well, bushwalkers over the years have been waterproofing their matches by dipping the heads in melted candle wax.

Of course, being an open-flame light source, candles do present a level of danger if used inside a tent or caravan. And because they consume oxygen, ventilation is essential. However, most potential problems can be overcome by utilising some sort of holder-cum-reflector, variations of which can be found in bushwalking stores, or you could make your own easily enough by cutting the side out of an aluminium drink can.

9

TARP CAMPING

The origins of the humble tarpaulin are somewhat obscure. Whether first used by wandering Bedouin tribesmen, or during Marco Polo's celebrated travels, it seems to me that tarps have been around forever.

Although today's most common tarpaulins are likely to be of blue polyethylene material, for heavy-duty use -- like interstate transports, or disaster emergencies -- high quality canvas remains the preferred material. Indeed, sizes, shapes, colours and quality are infinite, but so too are the problems for which tarps provide a solution.

This is particularly true with camping. There's an endless range of jobs for which tarps can be utilised to make outdoor living just that much more comfortable. And after using a variety of tarps for nigh on forty years, I never go bush without a few.

In fact when you get right down to it, tarps are almost all the casual camper needs. They are so versatile, the only limitation on their use is your own imagination.

Let me elaborate.

First essential when camping is shelter. Depending on the size of your group, excellent shelter can be provided by tarps. For instance, your main living/eating area may be under a large tarp (say 12' x 18') slung over a ridgepole, with the sides held out by guy ropes. With sufficient headroom, this provides a cool, dry common area in all but extreme weather conditions.

For additional comfort, a second tarp can be laid out as a floor, and maybe smaller ones suspended to form sidewalls for added weather protection. With this sort of arrangement, however, drainage trenches are usually required in the event of rain.

When the time comes to bed down for the night, a low slung lean-to or A-frame shelter (at least 4' x 7' for each person) provides adequate protection, particularly when sited with weather direction in mind. With another heavy-duty tarp as groundsheet, airbeds, lightweight mattresses or even camp stretches can be slipped beneath the shelter and, providing there's at least 30 cm of space between your body and the tarp, comfort is assured. If mozzies are on the rampage, individual insect netting (eg., headgear attachments) can be utilised. Otherwise, don't spare the repellent!

Of course, if you usually sleep in a long-wheel-base vehicle, a tarp slung rearwards from the roof, then held aloft by a couple of poles, provides undercover space for eating and overnight storage.

As for your ablution facilities, these can be screened using appropriately hung tarps, while an additional canopy provides a roof over the whole set-up if necessary.

Having organised your accommodation, let's examine a few other ways tarps can help out.

In the heat of the day, for example, it's a good idea to have a solid area of shade for the car-fridge or icebox. The ideal solution is a lean-to constructed from a "space blanket" (silver side out). Keep it low enough to block the sun, but of sufficient height to allow access to the fridges.

On the other hand, during wintry nights, a similar lean-to (but silver side *inwards*) with room enough to sit under, makes a cosy, heat-reflecting shelter in front of the campfire.

Even your firewood might reside under a lean-to, but it's easier to keep a loose tarp handy to throw over the wood at night.

Here's another idea: if you've forgotten your wash basin, dig a hole about 20 cm deep by 40 cm round, then throw a tarp across it, pressing the material down into the hole. This will hold your wash-up water, while the surrounding tarp becomes a clean area for dishes to drain.

This idea can be taken a step further. If you're camped by a river, make yourself a bathtub by throwing a tarp over a level, empty trailer and filling it with water. Similarly, an adequate bath is possible by spreading out a large tarp, roping the edges about three feet above the ground, then adding sufficient water.

Speaking of water, if it's scare, a tarp suspended between trees or poles, and at about 30 degrees to horizontal, provides a good, artificial catchment when it rains. By roping the middle of the lowest edge downwards into a shallow "V", run off can be collected in a bucket below.

Needless to say, to ensure a long, serviceable life, tarps require basic maintenance. The most important considerations are to dry them out thoroughly before storing, patch any rips or holes as they occur, and check eyelets occasionally for strain or damage.

In the bush, a roll of waterproof adhesive tape is handy for repairs and can also be used to form temporary eyelets by overlapping the tape across the edge of the tarp, and spiking or cutting a neat hole through the double thickness of the tape.

As you can see, the uses for tarps are endless. With enough rope, poles and pegs, all sorts of utilities can be constructed around the campsite. After all, tarp camping has developed over centuries, and it's likely to continue for centuries to come.

10

NO-SWEAT CAMPFIRES

Wouldn't it be nice if, just once, you could have your fire well established within the first ten minutes of setting up camp. Few popular campsites provide enough kindling let alone dry firewood. On arrival day, it's usually too late to go searching, and any you do find needs splitting or drying out.

So why not bring it with you? No, I don't mean enough for your entire stay, but that first fire -- definitely the most welcome -- can always do with a help-along.

Try this: find yourself a handy-sized, sturdy box that, filled with dry, split firewood, becomes a permanent item on your camping checklist. It doesn't need to be a huge supply, just sufficient to get your fire established and help get the campsite off to a pleasant start.

Well before each trip, I cut and split enough dry wood to fill a milk-crate-size container. If the weather looks doubtful, I'll carry twice that amount. In fact we've reached the stage where, most trips, we arrive home with enough firewood for the next.

Getting the fire started first go can be made easier too. Carry a compact fire-starting kit to avoid the need for scrambling about looking for matches, paper and kindling while you're trying to set up tents and stretchers.

Here's how I put mine together: In a large sheet of aluminium foil, (say, 40 cm square) I wrap a sheet of newspaper, 20-30 short lengths of kindling (1-2 cm thick), one firelighter (such as Little Lucifers), and a half-dozen matches taped to a matchbox striker.

Once it's all wrapped tightly, the bundle is placed in a plastic bag and carried in a permanent position in the rear of my vehicle. There's always one in the same spot, ready for use.

Why the aluminium foil? Well, when the ground is wet the foil makes a handy base to set the fire on. In fact if it's raining at the time, you can fold the foil to form a small "lean-to" under which to get the fire going. Once established, you can dispense with the "roof".

By the way, there's an old rule about getting a fire started: the thickness of your kindling, in order of burning, should be "matchstick - finger - wrist". Once the flames are up and running, throw on a few "arms and legs".

If you're a regular camper, no doubt you look forward to that first night's fire. With all those other chores to attend to, life's made easier by having everything ready bar the flames.

11

MAPS FOR CAMPERS

Travelling without maps is like cooking without a recipe: you get it right some of the time, but waste a lot of time sorting out the bloopers. Of course, if your outdoor activities invariably take place in established campgrounds maps may not be necessary. But if, like most campers, you enjoy exploring and searching for new campsites, maps are one of the handiest items to have along.

Despite the vast range of maps available these days, campers have just two requirements: a good road atlas, plus local maps of preferred areas.

Road Atlas

Sizeable bookstores or map shops commonly stock a range of different road atlases. To be most useful, however, a road atlas must be up to date, easy to read, and show detail down to the level of minor country back roads. While browsing, if you know a backcountry area reasonably well, check each atlas to ascertain which provides most detail.

For well over a decade now, I've used successive editions of Penguin's "Road Atlas of Australia". For around $30 you get 130 pages of high quality maps covering every corner of the country, plus extras like major city street maps, tourist regions and so on.

On the other hand, if you want the ultimate, the Penguin/BP touring guide "Explore Australia" has the same excellent maps, supported by a wealth of useful articles on subjects like first aid, outback travel, mechanical problems, and so on. It's also chock-full of colour photographs and extra information on 800 cities and towns across Australia.

As an alternative to the atlas, many travellers prefer to use separate State road maps. This spreads the cost of updating and, depending on the map, provides extra detail also. There are the ubiquitous oil company maps, but worth looking at are the Gregory's range, or those published by State governments and motoring organisations.

One thing to watch with sheet maps, though, is the more you use them -- folding and unfolding as you go -- the quicker they show signs of wear and tear, with consequent loss of detail. To counter this, either cover them with clear adhesive Contact or, once folded to show your desired area, carry them in clear plastic envelopes.

On a more technical note, for long-distance road travel, a map scale of 1:500,000 is a good minimum. That means that one centimeter on the map represents 500,000 cm (ie, five kilometres) on the ground. Smaller scales than that (say, 1:1,000,000) can certainly be used in some areas but for my money they rarely have enough detail.

Local Maps

Having reached your campsite, if planning to stay a while, activities like fishing, four-wheel driving, bushwalking or fossicking require large scale maps of the local area. For example, maps in 1:50,000 scale (one centimeter represents 500 metres on the ground) usually record detail such as 4WD tracks, huts, river crossings and mine workings, while topographical maps, (eg, those produced by NATMAP or the military) also show contour lines to indicate height above sea level, steepness of slopes, etc.

No doubt you have a few favourite camping spots so it's worth getting along to a map shop to find out what's available. Check under "Maps" in the Yellow Pages or search the Internet. Visits to local forest officers, rangers or tourist authorities are also worthwhile.

CAMPING IN THE "LONG PADDOCK"

As an acknowledgement to drovers and stockmen who still, on occasion, move livestock "on the hoof" along roadsides in rural and outback areas, the strip of grassed land bordering most highways and backroads across Australia is often referred to as "the long paddock". In times of drought in particular, travellers might come across large herds of sheep or cattle being moved parallel to the highway, under the control of two or three drovers on horseback or motorbike, assisted in most cases by the ubiquitous working dogs. (Obviously, drivers should slow down and exercise caution as livestock close to the roadside are easily "spooked", sometimes rushing headlong into traffic.)

The most interesting feature of the "long paddock" is that, quite frequently, campers and travellers will find extensive, cleared areas set back from the highway, suitable for overnight camps. Indeed, these are often located beside a river, or surrounding a government bore to allow stock to be rested and watered overnight.

In many cases these "stock camps" are available to travellers providing these basic rules are followed:

1. Although the majority of "long paddock" campsites are on government owned land, some are private property. The only clues may be fence lines, signs and stock grids.
2. If the camp is in use (or a herd is not far off) it is unavailable to the public.
3. Always set up camp some distance from watering points as stock may arrive during the night.
4. As usual, your rubbish must be taken away with you when you leave.
5. No soaps or detergents should be used directly in rivers or watering troughs. Take the water some distance away before using it for showering, laundry, whatever.
6. Take extreme care with campfires.

12

MEALS ON THE MOVE

The best thing about a mobile camping holiday is the different country you get to see, and the many new campsites discovered along the way. Worst part is trying to find bits and pieces of gear as you need them while travelling.

Stopping for lunch or a smoko break becomes a major chore if daily routines and pack-up sequences are not established. There's nothing worse than having to unload half your gear every time you want a cup of coffee on the road. It's easier to go without, or wait until the next roadhouse.

The solution, although simple, is not necessarily easy. What you need to do each morning before loading up is decide the breaks you will have that day, then keep sufficient food, equipment and other items aside. These are then carried in a handy, easily accessible spot.

Take my own "Lunch Stop Kit" for example. In a milk-crate-style container, we carry a two litre water bottle, single burner stove (with LPG), kettle, frying pan, cutlery, mugs, plastic plates, jaffle iron, folding toaster, matches, about a half metre of hand towel and a couple of plastic bags. Each morning all this gets put back into the same box to be loaded onto the vehicle last of all.

As for our food, most of that is contained in either the 12 volt refrigerator or a sturdy plastic container. Both of these reside at the rear of our Landcruiser where they're easy to get at.

With this arrangement we can stop whenever we like, and decide at the time what we want to eat. We choose from sandwiches, jaffles, hot dogs, toast, cracker biscuits, soup, fruit or maybe even a "mini-barbecue" (in the frying pan) of sausages and onions. Occasionally, while travelling, we might purchase fresh bread rolls or deli goods for lunch knowing that, whatever kitchen gear we may need will be readily available in the kit.

After the break, items used get a quick rinse and a wipe down before being repacked into the box in a plastic bag. We catch up with the dish washing later after making camp for the night. Scraps and rubbish are carried in the other plastic bag.

We also like to keep the folding chairs handy. When stopping for a meal or coffee, if there are no picnic facilities nearby, it's nice to set up the chairs and make a "proper" break of it.

As with most things in camping, developing routines makes life easier. It doesn't much matter whether your routines are the same as ours; what does matter is that they work, and you stick with them until they become habitual.

13

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM AN ICEBOX

With the price of portable 12 volt refrigerators climbing through the roof, it's not surprising that many campers still rely on the good old icebox. In fact the ubiquitous "Esky" has become such a part of our language (and culture!) we tend to forget it's actually a brand name: popular and efficient to be sure, but nevertheless only one of many makes.

Regardless of manufacturer and relative efficiencies, though, the real test is in getting the most from the ice. Depending on how careful you are, that ice may last for less than a day, or near on a week.

Here are a few tips that make the difference.

First point: all ice is not the same. For example, next time you lean into the party-ice freezer at your local service station, you're likely to see some bags frozen solid, others loose. Go for the solid ones -- and don't break them up any more than you need to. The bigger the chunks the longer it lasts. In fact if you can find it, use block ice instead.

Not forgetting, of course, that a couple of days in the freezer at home improves the lasting quality of your ice considerably. Better yet, make your own. A few plastic containers or large milk cartons *almost* filled with water make useful block-ice after a week or two in the freezer. And re-sealable plastic drink bottles not only prevent the melted ice from slopping through food in your car fridge, they also become a cold water supply later.

That food spoilage problem can also be eliminated if you can locate a supplier of dry ice: no water in your icebox, plus it's a more efficient cooling medium. But don't expect it to last much longer than normal ice.

Most often, we just have to put up with the water. But if you keep a layer of waterproof containers (drink cans?) across the bottom, food is less likely to get wet. It's best to drain the water at least daily, which also helps preserve remaining ice.

Another point to consider is keeping the car fridge *loosely* packed, but full. This might mean packing empty space with crumpled newspaper (or adding extra cans!) to prevent the build up of warm air pockets. Also, try to limit the number of times the lid is opened.

If possible, plan your meals so that meat required two or three days ahead is frozen when it goes into the icebox. But once thawed, it keeps better in foil rather than plastic bags.

In camp, when choosing a site for the icebox or car fridge, select a spot well away from the fire, and one that remains shaded all day, while open to any breeze. This could mean

constructing a lean-to using a reflective tarp or "space blanket" -- but the inside of your tent is rarely a good location. Those $2 windscreen sun-reflectors that many of us slip into position when leaving the car parked on a hot day also make excellent insulated shade. And I have also used one as a liner for the *inside* of my icebox, extending the life of my ice even further.

On hot days, damp towels draped over the icebox helps keep the outer walls cool, while standing it on a few rocks or firewood off-cuts prevents ground heat rising through the bottom.

Once last idea: beyond a week, you might find that a second icebox, completely packed with ice when you leave home, still has sufficient to keep you going a few more days. Keep it sealed and shaded until you really need it.

After all, it would be a real disaster if those cans got warm!

PREFER TRUE REFRIGERATION?

For motorised campers, the options become a little easier to live with. Certainly, for short trips, an icebox remains a possibility, but beyond that, "real" fridges ought to be considered. And here's where outdoor lifestyle plays a part.

For continuous, day-after-day travelling, 12 volt compressor-style fridges are best, while for static camps, lean toward a LPG/propane operated model. Here's why:

- **Compressor fridges:** Although generally around twice the price of equivalent "absorption" types, compressor fridges operate more effectively while travelling. Being a "true" fridge they don't have to be perfectly level for best performance (as absorption fridges do). The usual power source is 12 volt, though most have an AC/240 volt feature also. The downside with compressor fridges when running off the vehicle's 12 volt system is that they use lots of power, particularly in hot weather. In fact, if operating on "freeze", or on a very cold setting, your battery could be flat after only six or seven hours at the campsite. For this reason, serious campers often fit a second, high-capacity accessory battery in their vehicle, or (where permitted) use a 240 volt generator.

- **Absorption fridges:** Also called "heat exchange" refrigeration, these most often have a third operating mode: LPG. Indeed, for camping, this is the most efficient refrigeration available; a four or five kilogram LPG bottle provides ten or more days of operation. But keep in mind that an absorption fridge must be level so get it set up as soon as possible in a shaded spot, using a bubble level (or glass of water) to check the level. They can be used while driving but only on 12 volt, *never* on LPG. Even so, operation on the move is often less than satisfactory (although a bag of ice helps significantly). Most standard RV fridges are absorption types, either two-way (LPG, 240 volt) or three-way (with 12 volt also).

My personal solution? I have the RV fridge (3-way operation), a portable camp fridge of the absorption type (for LPG operation when camping), a compressor fridge for efficient operation while on the road, and of course the good old icebox serves as back up when required.

14

POTS AND PANS

What's heavy, puts black gunk over everything, and is extremely awkward to pack? If your collection of camping pots and pans comes to mind you're obviously well acquainted with the downside of bush cooking. But as difficult as it is to live with, that kitchen hardware is impossible to live without.

Is there a way around it all? Not really. But maybe I can offer a few suggestions to make the bush cook's life a little easier.

The best start point is to consider the "style" of your camping. Bushwalkers, for instance, need to be ultra-selective in their choice of cooking hardware, being generally limited to purpose-built, lightweight aluminium or plastic gear. Very few household items can be recycled into outdoor service here due mainly to their weight and bulk. This restriction, of course, presents an extra cost when getting into bushwalking.

On the other hand, the family camper -- let's call this group the "middle-weights" -- have a much wider selection of cookware to sort through, be it specifically designed for outdoor use (eg. camp ovens), or stuff that's usually found at home in the kitchen. The big advantage is obvious: surplus items from home (or low-cost, charity shop equivalents) can be added to your camping gear for very little outlay.

Then there are the "heavy-weights": family groups, clubs or tourist operations. Without doubt, every-day domestic gear may do part of the job (if you carry enough of it), but most often this is supplemented by huge stock-pots, camp ovens, half-acre frying pans, and barbecue plates the size of bulldozer blades. Lightweight kitchen equipment simply isn't up to the task.

Your camping lifestyle, then, pretty much determines the amount of cooking gear you need, the type best suited, and ultimately, the cost involved.

Let's spend a moment looking at the bits and pieces likely to be most useful to readers of immediate concern: the family camper.

First choice for most is a kettle (or billycan). Personally, I prefer the stability and convenience of the kettle, but the traditional billycan is fine provided it's (a) taller than it is wide (for better balance when full), (b) made of aluminium or stainless steel (others rust), (c) has a handle and a lid, and (d) holds sufficient to suit the size of your group.

In fact some campers carry two (one inside the other): a large 8-10 litre size for shower and wash-up water, plus a smaller 3-5 litre capacity for tea, coffee, etc.

Next most useful item is a frying pan. Here again, it's handy to have two or even three different sizes to suit a variety of meals, but better still if one is cast iron. Sure, these are heavy, but for fried, barbecued or stir-fry meals, cast iron provides efficient, evenly distributed heat. And for lunch stops on the road, they make an excellent barbecue on a single-burner, propane stove.

Beyond these two essentials, you'll also find use for a couple of ordinary saucepans, with perhaps an additional small size (say, one litre) for heating single cans of beans, tomatoes, sauces or whatever.

Of course, there's also a range of more specialised cookware, like a camp oven (in traditional or Bedourie styles), wok, pressure cooker, jaffle iron ("toastie"), and a steel fire grate. All are capable of adding variety to your bush cuisine, but unless you're sure they'll get used, best leave them at home.

One design feature in which pots and pans differ is the handle. Metal handles often need a heat cloth or mitten for safe handling on the campfire, while wooden or bakelite handles require covering with foil to prevent excessive burning. Cookware without built-on handles can be moved about using a clamp-on pot-handle available at camping stores, or once again, that heat glove can be pressed into service.

When it comes to cleaning fire-blackened pots and pans, many campers don't bother, preferring to simply pat dry the outside (or dry by the fire), then store and carry in plastic bags. If you feel the need, however, lots of elbow grease, plus a brass scourer, steel wool or sand eventually removes the worst of it. A good smear of soap over the outside of the pot before it goes on the fire apparently makes that scouring job easier, but I've never bothered.

Finally, to pack these things, it's hard to beat the humble cardboard carton. If your pots and pans don't nest together, after placing them in plastic bags, pack smaller items (like mugs, bowls, utensils, etc.) inside to use up available space. If they rattle and drive you mad, tea towels, newspaper or foam in and around them should make rough roads more bearable.

Quite frankly, pots and pans will always be the grubby part of camping gear. But when it comes to turning out another culinary masterpiece, we just couldn't do without them.

MY PERSONAL LUNCH-STOP KIT

(For 'on-the-move camping trips without RV)

Single burner LPG stove (with cylinder)
Cast-iron frying pan
Folding toaster (for LPG stove)
Plastic plates and mugs
Jaffle iron ("Toastie")
Water container (at least 1L)
Plastic bags (for rubbish)
One each: dessertspoon, teaspoon
knife & fork

Kettle
Small saucepan
Food tongs
Paring knife
Can opener
Egg flipper
Tissues (or hand towel)
Matches

All items fit snugly in a plastic "hobby crate".

15

BUSH CATERING: THE EXPERT'S KIT

I don't mind admitting I'm pretty good on the tooth. Not surprisingly then, some of my best times in the bush involve food or its preparation. For me, bush cooking not only satisfies the basic need for nourishment, I also find it a lot of fun.

Yet many campers look on cooking as another camp chore: necessary, but to be got out of the way with minimum effort. Perhaps that's why the good ol' gas barbecue is usually first thing unpacked and last to be loaded for home.

Sure, a good barbecue once in a while can be an enjoyable nosh-up, but there are so many alternatives. And as for all that fat and grease . . .

My family and I prefer to stay on the look out for different meals and tantalising recipes that might be suitable for the bush. In fact we collect them. Whenever we come across a new recipe we consider its bush adaptability: Can it be prepared on basic camp appliances, or perhaps on the campfire? Having confirmed the ingredients aren't too extensive or exotic, we paste the recipe into a loose-leaf binder.

Later, when we're planning a trip, we browse through our collection and select a couple of new (or favourite) recipes, then plan our camp catering to suit.

There is a slight catch, however: many of these meals require a range of spices, herbs and condiments not found in the average tucker box. So we've put together our own spices kit containing most of our favourites, plus others that frequently crop up during our bush cooking forays. If we notice any new spices in a recipe we want to try next trip, we add them to the kit.

In setting up your personal "Expert's Kit" of herbs and spices, it's a good idea to save any small plastic containers like jars, Tupperware-style boxes, even those (now old-fashioned) 35 mm film canisters. Before each trip it's a simple matter of checking if any of the contents need topping up.

The other advantage of having a reasonable selection of culinary additives on hand is that, for longer trips, whatever meals you decide on, chances are you'll have the miscellaneous condiments required.

Some examples of items in our kit are: garlic powder, chilli powder, onion flakes, curry powder, paprika, dried mint, dried parsley, tomato puree, stock cubes (beef, chicken, bacon), mixed herbs, Italian herbs, dried coriander, instant gravy mix, soy sauce, Worcestershire sauce, mustard powder, etc.

So, no matter how limited the range of fresh food a country store might have on sale, we can always knock up another gastronomic masterpiece from the most basic ingredients. And whenever we need to resort to packaged meals -- canned, bottled or packet -- we can give them a shot in the tastebuds if the outcome is less than exciting.

There is life after the barbie. In fact there's a whole world of fun and taste experiences out there in the bush. All it takes is an Expert's Kit.

THE VERSATILE BARBECUE GRILL

To gain the best possible camping experience, campfire cooking is almost obligatory, providing a campfire is permitted. And for total flexibility, a barbecue grill (or a steel plate) is an extremely useful accessory.

The advantage of an open grill on the campfire is that it can be used as both a general cooking surface for pots and pans, or as a barbecue grill once the fire has burned down to a bed of hot coals (or barbecue briquettes). A fire-to-food distance of somewhere between 15 and 25 centimeters -- depending on heat output -- usually works best. For most families, a grill size of 50 cm x 40 cm is sufficient, but note here that discarded refrigerator shelves should be strictly avoided as their various coatings can be toxic when heated.

The common alternative to the grill is the steel barbecue plate that, although heavier, does make for excellent barbecuing of a wide variety of foods. The problem of leaping flames searing the food is eliminated, but a solid plate is not as versatile as a grill for general cooking with pots and pans. A 40 cm x 25 cm plate of at least 4 – 5 mm thickness is a good size for small groups.

For the best of both worlds, a good approach to campfire cooking is the dual-purpose barbecue -- half plate, half grill -- available in a range of sizes from camping stores. Most are fitted with sturdy folding legs that position the cooking surfaces at the appropriate height above the fire. If the grill or plate is not fitted with legs, bricks or rocks will do, or you could support it on cans filled with sand. But check for stability before you commence cooking!

16

FREQUENT SHOWERS

Some people I've met in the bush hardly give a thought to showering, even after several days. I find it incredible. Quite apart from the hygiene aspects, to my mind a nice hot shower is hard to beat. Perhaps that's why I've put so much time into trying different types.

For instance, in the days before the black plastic solar shower, we relied on our faithful old ex-army canvas number. Bought at an army disposal sale in the late 60's, it's still doing a superb job.

Simplicity itself, it has an adjustable rose so that, once filled and suspended from a convenient branch, the rose can be set at a trickle while soaping up all over, then opened up fully for the wash off. It's surprising how long a bucket or two of water lasts!

There's one trap though: until completely wet through, the thick canvas and heavy stitching leaks badly. It needs a good soaking to "prime it" prior to the first shower.

You might still find these gems if you rummage about in genuine military surplus outlets. Failing that, there are look-alike models available in some camping goods stores, which, although of lighter construction, would no doubt provide the same pleasing results.

More recently, it was the low-energy feature of the 20 litre solar showers that first caught my attention. Because our camping is often an adjunct to a touring holiday, I figured that by filling one of these in the morning, then leaving it all day in a plastic tray on the roof rack, we'd have a hot shower when we stopped for the night. The idea works fine, except of course on days when the sun is uncooperative.

Having added a pullout frame (with nylon "curtain" attached) to the roof rack, we can be under the shower within minutes.

Finally, even more recently, we went hi-tech. Our latest shower is activated by compressed air from a small 12 volt compressor. The tank -- a 15 litre plastic drum -- has a tyre valve stem built into the filler cap, and an outlet to which a three metre hose connects. This hose feeds pressurised water to a 50 mm shower rose, which can be positioned virtually anywhere, or left attached to an adjustable, self-supporting stem.

With this arrangement we use either our pullout shower frame or, for base camp set-ups, erect a privacy screen. Total flexibility.

Sound like I'm a shower addict? Maybe so. But for me, the simple pleasures of a hot shower and a change of clothes is something I really look forward to after a couple of days in the bush.

17

BASINS, BUCKETS, AND BATHTUBS

Loading the vehicle for an extended trip, it's not unusual to find there's just not enough space. (How I ever survived with a Suzuki 4WD back in the Seventies remains a mystery -- nowadays we fill a Toyota Troop Carrier!) How easy it is to lose perspective of what's important in the bush and what's merely ballast.

In fact on that score, we could learn a lot from the early Aborigines. Anyone with even a passing interest in their traditional way of life knows that, being essentially nomadic, they had to carry all their possessions when the time came to move on to a more benevolent hunting locale. Yet if all their worldly goods could be carried by a warrior, with a couple of wives and maybe three or four kids, how come my Troopie bulks out on a two-week trip?

Ducking around the philosophical implications of all this, it's interesting to note that, despite the Aboriginal family's meager chattels, in a majority of tribal lifestyles one common domestic necessity was the "coolamon" -- essentially a carved, shallow wooden bowl.

That's hardly surprising. After all, even something as simple as the coolamon could be put to use in several ways: water carrying, food preparation, as a drinking utensil, even a baby carrier. Being multi-purpose, it was an ideal piece of kit for an outdoor lifestyle.

Admittedly, you're unlikely to come across a selection of coolamons at your local camping gear shop, but what you will see is a variety of metal and plastic substitutes. Question is, which do you need?

Bushwalkers and lightweight (small car/large family) campers, for instance, might find that water transportation is best achieved using either individual water bottles (for the walkers), or one or two plastic containers, up to 10 litres a piece. Keep in mind that, at around a kilo a litre, water is heavy stuff to cart about. Top-ups along the way, or in camp, should be factored in to your route plans, or when deciding possible campsites.

Carrying water in camp -- perhaps from creek to tent site -- could also be in those same containers, or you might take along a folding camp bucket (canvas or plastic), a normal household plastic bucket, or at a pinch, a heavy-duty plastic bag or two. What you're looking for here is some type of leak-proof, lightweight container to boost on-hand water supplies thus saving a few trips to the water supply.

Moreover, when it's time to do the dishes, most bushwalkers make do with a little sudsy water in their largest pot, while heavier-weight campers might utilise their water-carrying device (bucket, bags, billycan) as the kitchen sink. In fact the ubiquitous nine litre plastic bucket makes a reasonable washbasin, and quite a bit of kitchen gear can be packed inside it

when loading the car. And if you get one with a lid, it makes a fair washing machine, with clothes, water and suds sloshing about as you drive.

For anyone needing to cut down weight or bulk (don't we all!), here's another idea: a piece of heavy-duty plastic (or canvas) a metre or so square, laid over a hole about 20 cm deep, makes a passable basin when pushed down to line the hole before filling it with water. If the ground is hard enough to bend a crow bar, a circle of rocks or lengths of firewood (even a cardboard carton) produces the same result.

Mind you, if really pushed -- having forgotten your sheet of plastic -- try using a raincoat, groundsheet or anything else that's waterproof. Similarly, if holes, rocks and firewood are unavailable, turn up the edges of your square of waterproof material (10 to 15 cm all round), peg the corners to hold the sides up, and what you have is an instant wash basin.

Then there are campers for whom space is of less concern. Most often they'll take along a plastic washbasin, perhaps even with its own folding stand. Additionally, they might pack a bucket or two, or maybe a large billy to both collect and heat the water.

On the subject of personal hygiene, if a "bird bath" in the plastic basin holds no appeal, a heavy-duty tarp propped up around the sides (by tying to trees, poles, bumper bar or fences) holds enough water for a relaxing bath. So does an unloaded trailer, jacked up level with a tarp liner thrown over. Of course, whatever bathtub you try, it's best to set it up down by the water source or it takes all day to fill!

Well, maybe basins, and buckets and bathtubs aren't the sort of gear that gets our outdoor blood pumping, or the mind drifting off to distant, tranquil campsites. And perhaps they don't rate top billing on your camping checklist. But considering they've been field tested over 60,000 years or more -- by the oldest race of outdoor folk on earth -- they certainly qualify as bush essentials!

CAMPERS' LAUNDRY

In addition to commercial laundromats and caravan parks, campers and travellers have three practical laundry options:

- **Plastic tub or bucket:** If you carry a container large enough, washing (and rinsing) can most often be completed during lunch stops or overnight camps, with clothes then hung on makeshift clotheslines strung out nearby.
- **Sealed container**: A "nappy bucket" or suitable container with a leak-proof lid can be used in the same way as the plastic tub or, better still, left to "agitate" while you travel, water, clothes and detergent sloshing about with the motion of the vehicle or caravan. (But be sure to anchor it firmly in place!) Rinsing can also be done as you drive, or at your next stop.
- **Portable clothes washer:** There are a couple of types made for campers and caravanners (both of similar capacity), but the slightly more sophisticated *Wonderwash* is a tad easier to operate. Either can be used in "wash-as-you-drive" mode as above, or hand operated as you relax with a drink at your next campsite.

18

FEET: AN OWNER'S GUIDE TO OPERATION & MAINTENANCE

Any delicate instrument with over 300 integral components, and unceasingly subjected to pressure, heat, moisture, dirt and shock is likely to require a fair amount of care and maintenance, right? Well, that being the case, quite a few of us are guilty of neglect.

The delicate instruments I'm referring to here are those funny looking flat things at the lower end of the legs: the feet. When fully operational and functioning as intended we rarely give them a thought, but a split second of carelessness, or plain bad luck, could seriously restrict mobility for quite some time. And out in the bush, our poor old tootsies often come in for a battering.

Healthy feet are so fundamentally vital to camping and most other outdoor activities, it's worth pondering a while on how to ensure their maximum serviceability.

The obvious start point is protection: sturdy, well-fitting footwear should be a key item in any camper's inventory. Style and appearance are less critical than fit and comfort, but I would certainly recommend leather elastic-sided, slip-on varieties for general outdoor use. (Being easier to get on, we're less tempted to get about barefoot.)

I've always found all-leather, slip-on work boots (eg, Blundstone) to be the most practical, general-purpose camping footwear. For long-distance bushwalks, however, high-ankle lace-ups grip the feet and ankle more snugly, and help minimise blisters and other damage.

Apart from loafing about in cleared campsites, thongs and sandals offer little protection against sharp sticks and rocks, while most running shoes get soaked through in damp grass. I do, however, find that an old pair of runners is useful for canoeing, or swimming and walking in rocky-bottomed creeks.

Getting back to those blisters, one preventative measure favoured by many bushwalkers is to wear two pairs of socks: a thin pair nearest the feet, with a thicker outer pair to "fill up" the boot. But if "hot spots" develop while walking, don't press on bravely. Stop, apply Vaseline and a Band-Aid before blisters develop and the skin breaks.

Whenever the opportunity arises while hiking, slip off your boots and socks to give the feet an airing and a rubdown, or perhaps a good soaking in a nearby creek. Unless the weather is extra cold, sleep in bare feet to allow feet and socks to air and dry out overnight.

In any sort of prolonged outdoor activity it's a good idea to wash the feet daily, drying them thoroughly (particularly between the toes) before dusting over with talcum or foot powder. A change of socks -- at least dry if not clean -- is also worthwhile. You'll find, too, that clean, clipped toe nails (straight across, not too far down the grooves) also play a big part in foot hygiene and comfort.

If troubled by bunions or corns it's a good idea to get medical advice before your trip, but in the field, provide for extra maintenance like padding between affected toes, or cotton wool and plaster over the trouble spots.

Campers unlucky enough to suffer a sprain or strain of the ankle or foot are best advised to apply ice packs if possible, then bandage firmly and stay off it until a doctor gets to look at it. It doesn't mean the end of the holiday necessarily, just severe restrictions on what you can and can't do.

Other minor damage, such as scratches, bites and splinters should be attended to immediately to avoid infections and swelling which can lead, once again, to a big reduction in campsite enjoyment. A well-stocked first-aid kit (with comprehensive manual) is, understandably, high priority equipment.

Maybe it's not always possible to prevent our feet copping a fair amount of abuse in the bush, but with care and regular maintenance they'll provide many years of trouble-free service.

GETTING THE BEST FROM CAMPING BOOTS

1. When buying new boots, wear your "bush socks". Try on ***both*** boots.

2. Be sure to buy boots that fit properly, with room for toes to move, but without slipping at the heels.

3. Don't allow dirt and mud to remain caked on for long periods. Brush or wash off as soon as possible, then allow boots to dry.

4. Boots are best dried in a warm, shaded spot, not beside the campfire.

4. Cleaning preserves your boots. A good quality polish (or leather treatment like Nikwax or Dubbin) keeps leather moist and supple, particularly if boots are stored for long periods.

5. Synthetic materials and suede can be brushed with warm, soapy water, rinsed off, then allowed to dry. Never use solvents.

7. Lace-ups should be snug rather than tight. Replace worn laces.

19

SURVIVING A FOREST FIRE

Every so often Mother Nature reminds us that she's still the boss. On Ash Wednesday, 1983, in the hills northeast of Melbourne, I witnessed first hand one of her more spectacular demonstrations.

If nothing else, the unbelievable speed and savagery of a forest wildfire leaves you with an indelible respect for its destructiveness, along with simmering paranoia about campfire safety. And every summer those images come back on the boil.

How would you cope if your peaceful forest campsite were threatened by wildfire? That ominous cloud of smoke and ash on the horizon could reach your tents within the hour. What can you do?

Well firstly, you need to be aware that in forest areas, wildfire moves at an incredible pace, particularly uphill. During the critical summer months, it pays to stay constantly informed about any threat within, say, 100 kilometres of your camp. Radio news reports, passing travellers or personal observation from nearby vantage points should all be utilised. As always, you must instil in every member of your group the on-going need for strict control over campfires and cooking appliances. Of course, on days declared as "total fire ban", fires and outdoor LPG cookers must not be lit.

At the very first warning of a bushfire in the general area you should take positive action. If the fire is within 50 kilometers, cutting short your holiday is definitely the wisest course, but even if much further off, get your group together to discuss basic emergency procedures.

For example, prepare now to fight possible spot fires by filling containers with water, and keeping shovels and axes handy. Non-essential gear should be packed and loaded, with vehicles parked for ease of departure (without blocking access for others) and with keys in the ignition. Place a blanket and a water bottle on board for each member of your group.

Ensure, too, that everybody remains suitably dressed, with as much skin covered as possible. Cotton or woollen clothing is preferable, along with broad-brimmed hats and leather boots.

Determine if areas around the camp might provide some degree of safety -- like open paddocks, large carparks, creeks, pools or ditches (but not overhead tanks). Also, stress on everyone that, if caught in the open, lying flat or below ground level, covered by blankets, dirt or sand, and using a wet towel to breathe through, will protect them from the main dangers, ie, radiated heat and smoke inhalation. Above all, they must not panic or try to outrun the fire front. The worst of it normally passes in three or four minutes.

In fact, if surrounded by blazing forest, the safest place is in the car with all windows, doors and vents closed. If everyone gets down low on the floor, covers up with blankets, and resists the urge to run when the fire passes through, danger is minimised. Despite popular belief, the chances of the fuel tank rupturing are extremely low.

If driving out through smoke, turn headlights on and leave windows closed. Stay alert for burning trees or branches that may come crashing down without notice.

However, if your only alternative is to evacuate on foot, take your blanket and wet towel and, staying low, try to move downhill or towards already burnt ground. But don't be tempted to sprint through a wall of flame if it's higher or deeper than a couple of metres.

It's pretty scary stuff. But despite their force and their terrible toll over the years, with knowledge, clear thinking and decisive action, you can survive a major bushfire. Even so, the experience will change forever the way you view our magnificent Australian bush.

PORTABLE FIREPLACE

Digging a fire pit for each campfire is not the friendliest thing we can do for the environment. Not to mention the hard work! And in some places -- like national parks and commercial campgrounds -- only established fireplaces can be used (if there happens to be one available).

An alternative approach -- particularly for campers who travel about the country quite a bit -- is to carry your own fireplace. No digging, increased safety, and ready in seconds. In many tightly supervised camping areas and roadside stopovers, an appropriate portable fireplace often gets the official nod of approval.

The handiest and toughest of all is the oil drum off-cut: A 15 – 20 cm section cut from the bottom of a 205 litre steel oil drum (what used to be known as a 44 gallon drum). If raised off the ground slightly using rocks, bricks or steel tent pegs (to allow the bottom to stay cooler), and with a few centimeters of soil spread across the bottom for insulation, this type of fireplace lasts several years of heavy use.

Next in usefulness is the "half-20 litre" fireplace, which consists of a metal 20 litre drum cut length-wise in half, with perhaps a steel grate inserted to keep the fire from sitting directly on the metal (which shortens its life). Here again, a layer of dirt beneath the fire helps extend the serviceability of the fireplace. Also, some form of steel legs are recommended to stop the drum tilting once your fire is alight, or chock it with bricks or tent pegs.

Other possibilities are steel containers of various kinds, steel wheelbarrows, or Webber-style barbecues. Provided they are made of sufficiently thick steel, have breather holes punched around the outside for airflow, and before lighting the fire the bottom is protected with soil (or aluminium foil), most can be turned into useful portable fireplaces.

20

COFFEE TIN SURVIVAL KIT

I'm going to stick my neck out here: nearly all the deaths that have occurred in Australian wilderness areas -- as a result of thirst, exposure or starvation -- could have been prevented. OK, there are exceptions, but by and large people don't die because of bad luck; they die because of carelessness, ignorance or complacency.

Let's be honest: if you plan to take on Nature on her home ground, you'd better be well prepared. Most importantly, never underestimate her skills in lulling us poor humans into a false sense of superiority and control. Where Nature's involved, we rarely have either.

But there is a way to keep the odds in your favour regardless of where you travel, and that's by (1) taking time to consider the likely dangers, then (2) preparing yourself and your gear accordingly. And the greatest piece of all-purpose kit you can put together is a well-thought-out survival kit.

Of course survival kits can range from pocket size to a truckload depending on how many different scenarios you feel you should be raddy for. Logically, though, a small kit that fits neatly into your glove box, or one corner of your knapsack, will help you through most life-threatening dramas.

Even so, to be effective, a survival kit must provide for six basic needs for staying alive: PROTECTION, WATER, SHELTER, FIRE, FOOD and LOCATION. Not all will be required in every situation, but to keep the balance of probability your way, make sure your kit covers all six. And believe it or not, even a pocket size kit can hold sufficient to meet each of those needs, albeit partially.

As an example, I've put together a compact survival kit that is neatly contained in a recycled, 100 gram coffee tin. Sure, it's small, but the 17 or so different items packed into it could be absolutely priceless if the time ever comes when I really need them. It weighs about 300 grams and takes up less space than a can of beer. And the tin serves as a small but effective billycan in which to collect or boil water.

If you take a look at the accompanying chart, you'll find various survival kit items suggested as "must haves" (ie, essential in all kits), another list of "should haves" (if there's room in your container), and finally a few "could haves" (for back up). If they all fit in, fine, but first pack the "must haves", then whatever "should haves" you can squeeze in, and so on. (In the case of the 100 gram coffee tin, all but the "could haves" fit.)

Apart from six-monthly rotation of the food items, Puritabs and Aspirin (depending on their use-by dates), virtually no maintenance is required. Just stash and forget.

Take the trouble to assemble a personal survival kit, and perhaps one for each of your group. Then always be sure to have it with you.

Maybe Mother Nature usually has the upper hand, but at least you'll be better prepared to have a go.

MY SURVIVAL KIT CONTENTS

Survival Need	"Must Have"	"Should Have"	"Could Have"
1. **Protection**	Sharp pocket knife Bandaids (4)	Aspirin (6) Butterfly closures (4)	Soap Wound dressing
2. **Water**	Ziplock plastic bags (2) Puritabs (6)	Extra Puritabs (6)	Condom* Plastic sheet (1m x 1m)
3. **Shelter**	Large garbage bag** Nylon cord (5m)	Safety pins (3)	Survival Blanket
4. **Fire**	Matches (50/50 wind and waterproof)	Candle stub***	Sheet of newspaper
5. **Food**	Muesli bar	Beef cubes Fishing kit	Cup-a-Soup Coffee/tea/sugar
6. **Location**	Compass	Whistle	Notebook & pencil Pocket torch (or Cyalume stick)

* For water collection ** Becomes raincoat or shelter *** For fire starting or light

21

BUSH ETIQUETTE

Back before European settlement, the Australian Aborigines had no word for "etiquette". They didn't need one. Respect and consideration for their fellow man, the earth and all that lived upon it was, of necessity, intricately woven into their complex pattern of customs, religion and mythology. Bush etiquette, in other words, was a way of life.

To a degree, modern man has lost that intuitive co-existence with fellow humans -- not to mention the natural environment.

Anyone who has spent a lot of time in the bush will know what I'm on about here, but let me provide an illustration:

Early last year, my family and I were camped near Noojee, a tiny, sub-alpine village in Victoria, with a big through traffic of four-wheel drives and trail bikes. Despite a beautiful early-autumn Saturday afternoon when we arrived, the grassy campground beside the river north of town was deserted.

Around 1.30 am all that changed. Revving engines, over-loud voices and mega-decibel music woke us to the arrival of a party of idiots. Amidst drunken laughter -- and endless repositioning of vehicles -- they set up a camp of sorts before proceeding to chemically destroy their few remaining brain cells. Next morning we moved on.

As it happened, we passed that site again late Sunday. Noticing the ferals had gone, we pulled in out of curiosity. There it was: beer cans and food scraps strewn about, flattened saplings, and deep figure-eight wheel tracks through delicate mountain grasses across the clearing. To cap it off, beside the creek was the uncovered stench of their toilet waste. Obviously, they had no intention of passing this way again.

Fortunately, extremes such as this are rare. Point is, though, why should it happen at all?

Perhaps there's a solution embodied in that word "etiquette". It's more than some sort of act we adopt in big-ticket city restaurants. Etiquette embraces wider issues like social behaviour and acceptable conduct. It relates very closely to CONSIDERATION and RESPECT.

How does all this apply to camping? Well, getting back to our close encounter with the sleezoids, my interpretation is this:

1. When camping near others, respect their space, their privacy and their right to enjoy the outdoors without having to suffer your personal distractions and dependencies.

2. Anything that won't burn completely MUST be brought home. (Don't kid yourself that bush critters eat the scraps; most will still be there when the next group arrives.)

3. Toilet waste (including paper) MUST be buried at least 20 cm deep, well away from creeks and rivers.

4. In popular areas, vegetation -- be it grass shoots or forest giants -- cops enough of a hiding through "fair" wear and tear. Don't reduce it further by carelessness or vandalism.

There are other points we could mention, but when it all boils down, one simple word -- **etiquette** -- sums them up. The oldest race on earth knew all about that, even if they never said it.

GARBAGE DISPOSAL

Pollution of campsites and rest areas with garbage (and even worse forms of human waste!) is one of the real problems and frustrations campers and travellers have to contend with, sometimes on a daily basis. There may, in fact, be occasions when, to make use of an otherwise excellent site, you first need to spend a half-hour with plastic bags, shovel and gloves cleaning the place up.

At the personal level, the most we can do day-to-day is (1) ensure we don't add to the problem, and (2) wherever practical, do our bit by clearing some of the rubbish from campsites and rest areas.

Always travel with either full-size, plastic disposal bags ("garbags") or a good supply of plastic supermarket bags. The latter tend to be easier to handle and dispose of at roadside collection points (and they have myriad other uses also).

Where garbage is concerned, campers and travellers have, essentially, three choices (or any combination):

1. Progressively burn food scraps and paper waste on the campfire (but make certain that it burns away completely). Don't be fooled into believing that a few scraps thrown into the grass are soon eaten by "bush critters". Generally, that doesn't work; it simply attracts hordes of insect pests. Also, do a final check for rubbish around the fireplace **and the entire campsite** before moving on.

2. Bag all non-burnables, plastics, bottles, cans etc. (storing it out of reach of ants, flies and wildlife). Some campers prefer to blacken empty cans on the fire to burn off food scraps, then crush them to reduce bulk.

3. As frequently as possible, deposit all rubbish in an approved bin or roadside collection point. This could be a combination of campsite rubbish that you have previously "burned, bashed, bagged and brought out", along with any additional garbage arising during your travels.

EPILOGUE

When it comes to outdoor skills -- even a seemingly simple activity such as camping -- enthusiastic followers should never stop searching for new ideas.

As you would expect, the primary motivator is, most often, their need to "slip the chains" of suburbia, and relax for a while in clean air and fresh surrounds. However, over the years I've noticed another, more subtle attraction: their desire to try new techniques, and to extend their skills --perhaps spurred on by some primitive urge to "adapt to the wilderness", and so be ready to tackle whatever trials and testing nature may throw their way.

Without doubt, much of this experience occurs in the "controlled" environments of campgrounds or national parks. No matter, the challenges are real and the satisfaction tangible.

Even after almost 40 years of experience (sometimes uncontrolled!), I still derive pleasure from the trialling, and the experimenting, and ultimately, the decision that, "Yes, this is a worthwhile idea. I'll add this to my outdoor trilogy of Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes."

In fact KSA forms the framework of a long but satisfying learning curve, stretching across a lifetime. Which makes it all the more disappointing when we come across that most boring of campers: He Who Knows It All! You know the sort: "been there, done that, did it better".

Contrast this with the more open, relaxed approach of the camper who feels sufficiently secure in his outdoors environment to at least consider that there may be different -- even better -- ways of doing things. (And I believe readers of this guide would fall into this second category, since the "outdoor know-it-all" tends to thumb his nose at published information.)

That's the "attitude" part of KSA.

I'm not suggesting for one moment that my methods and ideas are "the best". But in all cases, the information presented here has evolved from countless ideas and techniques that I find useful and workable in the bush, on the road, or around the campsite.

Opinions, of course, should never be set in concrete. So my electronic door remains open -- I welcome your comments, viewpoints, and ideas. Yes, even your arguments!

Better yet, catch me by the campfire. After all, nothing compares with a "late night beverage" to facilitate a robust exchange of opinion and ideas!

Enjoy the outdoors.

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