

# **The Australian Motorhome Caravan and Tenting Guide**



Ten years of motorhoming and  
caravanning experience condensed into  
one handy guide.

THE  
AUSTRALIAN  
MOTORHOME  
CARAVAN  
& TENTING  
GUIDE

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[www.wanowandthen.com](http://www.wanowandthen.com)

## Introduction

After travelling Australia and living in various types of motorhomes and caravans for over twelve years, we have gained a great deal of experience in living 'on the road' and have decided that now is a good time to share our experiences and hopefully provide some useful and interesting information.

We are neither electricians or mechanics so the technical information we can give is limited. We can simply relate what we have tried and the things that have either worked for us or have proven to be failures. (We have a little too much experience with the latter).

We started off by jumping in the deep end and buying a 30' converted bus. It was a very old bus and that alone was to cause a number of headaches over the years. After 5 years in the bus we retired it to a farm in the wheat belt and it served as our home base until the unscrupulous caravan park owners stole it and the contents from us - but we won't go into all that here.

When we stopped using the bus we tried a campervan, we added a trailer to that and then decided to move to a Coaster. Initially we used the Coaster with the trailer and then bought a small caravan to tow behind. That worked well for a short time until we started to have clutch problems – related to the weight we were towing – and then bought a 4x4 to tow the caravan.

After a couple of years in the small van we upgraded to a 20' caravan and along the way we went tenting in various places that were not suitable for taking the vans.

Later we tried a wind-up style van (Jayco Swan) and then went back to a Toyota Coaster converted bus.

By trying all these different methods and by both working and relaxing during our travels we have a wide range of experiences to share and this book is packed with everything we can think of including basic things like packing lists leading all the way up to practical use of solar systems and generators.

Because we have tried so many different things (many of them not working out) we hope we can provide you with information that will save you both time and money when you are starting to look at what rig to choose and what to take with you when you head off.

## Contents

Introduction .....	3
What sort of traveller will you be? .....	8
The full timer. ....	9
Working and travelling full time. ....	9
Finding work.....	10
The retired full timer .....	11
The needs of the full time traveller .....	12
The part time traveller. ....	13
The tourist or short term traveller. ....	13
The Choice of a rig.....	16
Your Bed.....	16
Tents.....	17
Camper Trailers & Wind ups.....	19
Campervans. ....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Caravans. ....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Pop-up caravans Vs Full height vans.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Single axle Vs Tandem wheel vans.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Towing a caravan.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Motorhomes.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Small Motorhomes .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Medium Motorhomes (up to 26 feet long) .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Large Motorhomes .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Converted buses (large 30 feet and over).....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Converted buses (small – under 30 feet) .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Converted trucks.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Off Road.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Fifth wheelers.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Hybrids.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Towing a second vehicle.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Our choices .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Our Full-time choice.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Our Part-time choices. ....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The choice of fuel.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Water and fuel issues.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Water storage .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Water filtering.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Grey water .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Fuel capacity .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Tyres .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The choice of toilet .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Heating the water.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Solar, wind or generator power? .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
12 or 24 volt.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Working Out Solar .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
How many panels will you need? .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Types of Solar Panels .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
How many batteries will I need? .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
More about batteries .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Some basic rules about battery banks:.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>

Regulating the charge .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Non-Solar .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Clean power .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Wind power.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Power leads and wiring.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Inverters.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Modified square wave inverters.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Pure Sine wave inverters .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
The recharger .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Charging from your vehicle's engine .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Generators .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
240 volt chargers.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Petrol driven chargers.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Inverter / chargers .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
What do we use? .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Gas.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Refrigeration.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Three way fridges .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
12 volt compressor fridges.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
House fridges .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Radio .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Mail.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Internet .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Travelling with pets.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
National Parks .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Other Issues .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Television and satellite .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Problems .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Mechanical problems.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Pests.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Mice .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Ants.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Fishing and boats.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Folding boats.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Boat trailers .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Electronics .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Fishing gear .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Rigs we use .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Bait .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Photography.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Digital video cameras .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Reading.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Computers.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Cooking on the road.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Choice of cooker.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Gas Based cookers .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Tudor/Serada style 2 burner and grill. ....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
4 burner gas cook top with grill.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Standard gas cooker and oven. ....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Caravan gas cooker and oven. ....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>

Portable BBQ.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Single burner gas ring.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Gasmate 3 burner camp stove.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Propane one burner stove.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Cadac Safari Chef.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
240 Volt cookers.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Rotisserie.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Kambrook multi electric oven.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Microwave oven.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Other types of cooker.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Smoker.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Charcoal grill.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Other considerations.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Clothes washing.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Awnings and Annexes.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Fixed awning / annexe.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Roll out awnings.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Lighting.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Safety.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Personal Safety.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Property.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Fire.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Animal threats.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Caravan parks and campsites.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Selecting a campsite.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Destinations.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Camping etiquette.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Road conditions.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Driver fatigue.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
When?.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Where?.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Who?.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Before you go.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Mechanical checks.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Other external checks.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Inside the vehicle.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Miscellaneous tips.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Product reviews.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Making your own Porta Potty chemicals.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Making your own washing powder.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>



The rig we travelled Australia in. It wasn't always 'smooth sailing'.



## What sort of traveller will you be?

There are so many people travelling Australia these days that it is impossible to encompass all the different sorts of traveller that exist. The majority are of course the 'grey nomads' who are mostly retired couples or singles moving around the place at their own pace.

There are really three major types of traveller and under each main classification there are myriad sub-types that can apply. We define travellers as:

- 1) Full timers – Those who have no home to return to and who live full time on the road.
- 2) Part timers – Those who have a home but travel for extended periods of more than just a few weeks.
- 3) Tourists – Those who rarely venture from home for periods exceeding a few weeks.

The basic needs of all these types of traveller are the same:

- 1) A way to get from point A to point B.
- 2) Something to live in while they do it.
- 3) Some sort of power system to run appliances and refrigeration.
- 4) Storage to carry the items needed to live.

Travellers' needs vary greatly within these categories and that is why you need to decide at the outset what kind of traveller you are going to be.

If you have no, or little experience in either travelling or camping then the best idea is to 'try before you buy'.

Most types of motor home and even caravans can be rented and doing this will certainly help stop you from making a big mistake when the time comes to buy your own motor home or caravan.

Another very important consideration (for couples and families) is the relationship you have with your spouse and children – if taking your children on the trip is a consideration.

People who are used to living in a house with the extra space it offers may find that living with their partner in very close proximity on a 24/7 basis a bit of a trial. Everyone going on the trip really needs to think carefully about this aspect as we have seen more than one couple separate when faced with this kind of life style.



You don't need to be a mechanic or an electrician to take up a travelling lifestyle but if you are thinking about doing it on a long term basis then you and your partner need to be fully committed to the idea and just in case you should have a back-up plan that allows you to stop travelling and return to a more mundane existence if the need arises.

### **The full timer.**

There are basically two types of full time traveller, those who need to work their way around and those who don't. We have experienced both lifestyles and they both have a number of advantages and disadvantages.

### **Working and travelling full time.**

Working and travelling will almost certainly bring you into contact with Centrelink. Even those with the most useful skills may find themselves without employment at one time or another and if you have to apply for assistance from Centrelink then you need to know that they will try and make your life as difficult as possible.

Centrelink will not allow you to move from an area of (what they regard as) high employment to an area of low employment unless you have a very good reason. This appears to be sensible on the surface but it is often the case that work is harder to find in a major city than it is in some country towns that are unpopular (like Halls Creek in W.A. for instance.)

Our best advice is never sign on with Centrelink in a major centre unless you have no other choice. Signing on in a small town will allow you more options on where you can move next to find work.

If you have to sign on in a major centre and Centrelink will not let you move to an area that you are confident you can find work in then remember that you have the option to lodge your forms twice in an area that is out of the one you signed on at.

For example: If you signed on in a major town like Mandurah in W.A. you can move out to a different area for a period of up to 4 weeks and lodge forms there while you look for work. At the end of that time you have to lodge again at the original office.

This is a very silly system for those who are genuinely looking for work and makes life difficult but it is a system you can work around if you are smart. Living on the road can cost a lot of money and Centrelink seem to fail to realise that most people who travel and need to find work, do not go on the 'dole' to have a good time and bludge.

If you don't own a house then you can at least get rent assistance from Centrelink which cuts in at around \$75 a week and cuts out again around \$140 a week. It can make living in caravan parks a LOT cheaper and means that if you choose parks that charge less than \$140 a week your actual payment to the park will be more like \$90. (this is a rough guide on 2007 figures and does not include singles – and families –

who actually get more.)

If you are living north of the 26<sup>th</sup> parallel in your rig and don't own a home then you are also entitled to remote area allowance which isn't much but works out to around \$15 a week for couples.

The last hint about Centrelink payments is an emergency interest free payment (that you have to pay back) of \$500. This is a cash advance on your assistance that you can apply for if you get into serious financial difficulty. It is then automatically deducted from your allowance for the following 6 months and you can't apply for it again for at least 12 months. (This was due to change so check the Centrelink website for up-to-date information.)

### **Finding work.**

How easily you find work will depend on what your skills are, what area you are in and most importantly what you are prepared to do.

If (like us) your skills are mostly office based – what we refer to as city jobs – you may find it a little difficult at first to accept that you are going to need to do jobs that you might have balked at in a city.

If you want to succeed at the work and travel lifestyle, you need to put aside any pride and take whatever comes along.

We were employed in what are regarded as professional jobs in the city. I was a Computer Programmer and Belle was a Medical Scientist. The skills we had were not the skills needed to find work in the bush so we took whatever we could find and never turned down the chance of work even if we subsequently found out that we didn't last all that long. (We got fired from one job after just 3 hours! That has to be some sort of record.)

Work we took on our travels included canteen assistant in a school, shop assistant, servant to a rich eccentric, prawn peeler and packer, floor cleaner, room attendant in a motel, driveway attendant in a garage, oyster shell cleaner, fruit packer, grape vine pruning and basically what ever we could find to keep us going.

We were also lucky enough to find work in our own fields in larger towns but we always had to keep in mind that if work was offered we had to take it no matter what it was.

Our experience in finding work proved beyond a doubt that job agencies are a waste of time. All but one of the jobs we found were ones we found on our own. While it may be useful (even required) to register with a job agency, you are probably going to wait a long time for them to find you anything.

The most obvious way to look for work is in the job adverts in local papers and on

various internet sites but this is not always the best way to get work.

My experience has taught me that you tend to get the jobs that no one else has applied for and this means cold canvassing. Everyone hates doing this but it does work.

The local watering hole (pub) in any small town is a good place to find out if there is any work going in the area but just walking around to various businesses and introducing yourself can sometimes work wonders as well.

It is a good idea to have a general resume printed and to hand out copies to any business you visit. This way they will probably remember you if they decide that they need someone at a later stage. It should go without saying that you need to be neatly dressed and well groomed when you go looking for work but don't overdo things in small country towns. Wearing a suit and tie is almost as bad as shorts and thongs in some places. It is also a good idea to have different types of resume, one for more qualified jobs and one that we called the 'dumbed down resume' for jobs that don't require the same levels of skills. Believe it or not, being well educated and well qualified is a hindrance in getting some jobs.

Working and travelling usually means that you have more money to spend but you have less time to enjoy the places you visit. It may also mean lining up work in the next area before you leave the place you are in. We have done this ourselves but it can mean missing a lot of interesting places as you hurry from one job to the next.

If you are physically fit, you will have little trouble finding work in one of the major agricultural areas if you arrive at the right time of the year. Fruit and vegetable growers are always on the look out for workers when picking season arrives but take a little time to ask around about wages and conditions as they can vary considerably between growers.

If you need to work while travelling you will probably spend more time in caravan parks than free camping. Life is simpler when you have 24 hour power, easily accessible water and a proper toilet.

If you are going to work and travel in a motor home or bus you will almost certainly need a second vehicle so that your campsite can be left set up and you can get backwards and forwards to work with ease. We will discuss this further under the 'Choice of rig' heading below.

### **The retired full timer**

At the other end of the full time traveller scale are those who have retired, sold up their home and taken off for a carefree life on the road.

The retired full timer is actually in danger of having too much time on their hands and possibly too little money.

Travelling gets more and more expensive every year and fuel, grocery and caravan park prices all seem to rocket. The good news for the retired full-timer is that if they find a good cheap spot they can just stop there until they decide it is time to move on.

The question is, what do you do to keep you occupied?

This is where a good hobby can be very useful but what sort of hobbies are suitable for a life on the road?

This is a very individual choice but some of the areas that keep us busy include the more obvious ones like reading, photography, fishing, bird watching and walking but there are all sorts of things you can do to occupy your time without carting round huge amounts of equipment.

Puzzle books are cheap and easy to carry and help keep the mind active. Libraries around Australia now hold collections of DVD movies and documentaries and W.A. has an especially good system where you can borrow books from one library and return them to another on your travels.

Getting some field guides for flowers, birds, reptiles, insects etc. can also be a rewarding way of spending time as you find and identify different species as you travel.

One of the most rewarding experiences of travelling (apart from seeing new places) is meeting new people. After living most of our lives in the city and not even knowing our neighbours names, we went on the road and very quickly made good friends from all over the country.

The places you see on your travels will be great but the friends you make will be even better.

Something older full timers have to factor in is the need for medical care on their travels. Anyone with chronic or acute medical conditions needs to know well in advance where they can get regular medical appointments and emergency assistance if required.

### **The needs of the full time traveller**

Both the working and retired full time traveller will have different needs to the part-timer or the tourist. When you have no home to go back to you tend to carry everything you own with you. This means either having a big rig and trailer to carry lots of gear or going for a smaller rig and doing without all the nice things you would like to take.

Apart from the decision to go travelling full time, the most difficult thing you will be faced with is what to take with you.

As a rule of thumb, the younger you are the more discomfort you will be prepared to put up with. In general older travellers want a certain level of comfort which can be as simple as a TV and a fridge but can go all the way up to big generators and air-conditioning in the bush. (We are most definitely in the latter category these days).

Before you think about what sort of rig you want to buy you need to think about the level of comfort you want while you travel. This will help to determine the size of the vehicle you select. Simply put, the bigger the vehicle, the greater the level of comfort.

What you want to take will also depend on where you intend to camp. Anyone staying in caravan parks as they travel doesn't need to be so concerned with power generation, toilet and shower facilities, the availability of drinking water or changes in the weather.

Those who want to spend lots of time free camping have to take all these things into account and end up having to carry a great deal more with them.

Of course we can't make the decision of what sort of traveller you want to be for you but we are trying to point out some of the differences between the modes of travel and hopefully you will be able to decide what sort of travelling you most want to do.

### **The part time traveller.**

The old adage 'whether you go away for a weekend or a month you still need to take the same amount of gear' applies here.

If you want to go away for a long term trip then a lot of what we have written about full time travellers will apply to you.

Because you have a home base, you have the luxury of keeping all the things you normally own when you own at home but you will still have to seriously consider what you want to take and what level of comfort you want to have as you travel.

Part time travellers are usually either retired or on long service leave so finding work on the road isn't a consideration.

### **The tourist or short term traveller.**

Those who travel only a few weeks of the year are able to travel far more lightly than either full time or long term travellers. Most of us can put up with a bit of discomfort for a few weeks but would not consider doing so for much longer.

The great majority of short term travellers are still working and living in a house and the greatest number of them go away in caravans, tents or campervans.

The main difference between short term travellers is the type of camp they prefer to stay at. The great majority will stay in either caravan parks or in managed campgrounds and for those people this guide will be of only limited benefit.

For the short term traveller who wants to get away from it all, this book will be far more valuable.

By now you should have some idea about how you want to travel. If you are going to purchase a motor home or caravan, now would be a good time to plan a trip in a rental vehicle.

This won't be cheap but it is far cheaper than spending a lot of money on a rig that you aren't happy with.



The bigger the rig the more comfort you have.

## **The Choice of a rig.**

Before thinking about what rig you are going to buy, have a think about the comfort level you want to live in while travelling.

At one end of the scale are those who want to travel on a shoe string and will take little more than a large tent. We have seen large families doing this and once everyone has been organised and is used to the routine, they seem to do quite well in good weather. When the weather turns nasty, however, living in a tent is not very comfortable and neither is a camper trailer.

Again we can't make a decision for you but we can give a run down of the different types of rig and offer a list of pros and cons for each one.

## **Your Bed**

We spend about 1/3 of our lives in bed (well some of us do anyway) and so it is important to think about what sort of bed you will be sleeping in while you are on the road.

People seem to opt for either foam or inner spring mattresses but there is more to it than just the type. The placement of a bed in the motorhome is also very important as getting in and out of bed in the middle of the night is a concern for most of us older travellers.

You should also consider ventilation as having a nice breeze flowing over you in the middle of a long hot night is much better than sweltering.

Cab over beds (where the bed is placed over the driving compartment in a motorhome) are much less popular with older travellers as access is difficult.

If room is sufficient then an island bed (one where you can walk round all but the bed head) is most popular. This allows easy access and means you don't have to wake your partner up every time you get up at night.

Moisture build up can be a problem in many mattresses and this can be solved by allowing some ventilation underneath. There are rather expensive solutions to this but a cheap alternative is to fix in place a series of wooden battens spaced about an inch or so apart, under the whole length of the mattress.

Beds take up lots of room in any motorhome or caravan but it is far better to have a bed that stays in position during the day rather than having one you have to make up at night. It is also nice to be able to have a lie down during the day without having to remove the table to set a bed up.

If you have storage space under the bed then consider having some sort of



pneumatic arms that hold the mattress up while you access the space beneath. Struggling with the mattress while holding open flip up covers and trying to get something out that has rolled to the furthest recess under the bed will eventually make you lose your cool.

Many people snore and as we get older we tend to do so more than we did in our early years. It is sometimes so bad that couples end up sleeping in separate beds and this may be something you need to think about when buying a motorhome. Having two beds one at each end of the vehicle can help a lot. Ear plugs can help a lot if one, or both of you snore.

## **Tents.**

There are so many types and sizes of tents available that it is impossible to give a clear run down of all the different styles. They vary in price from as little as \$40 to over \$1000!

The type we favour is a large 4 or 8 man tent with a steel frame. They are large and bulky to carry but they are very strong and will stand up to all but the very worst winds. They also give a lot of living space which is very important if the weather turns wet and rainy.

We have seen some rather large families travelling around in tents but tents are certainly not the most comfortable way to do it.

For

1. Tents can be set up just about anywhere.
2. Tenting puts you closer to nature (but this could just as easily be a bad thing)
3. New tents usually come with micro mesh.
4. Slightly less gear can be taken.
5. Tenting is a much cheaper form of accommodation.
6. Tenting has a unique atmosphere not available in ANY vehicle. Waking up under 'canvas' is a really unique experience.

Against

1. You are subject to whatever weather is around.
2. Tent walls don't keep noise out.
3. Some tents are too flimsy if the wind comes up.
4. Setup and pack up times are longer.
5. Comfort levels are quite low.
6. Tents do not offer much (any?) security.

Tents can be an excellent 'shed' to put all sorts of bits and pieces in when you are camped in one area for an extended period. We do this ourselves and we have seen many other travellers adopt the same practice.



Tents come in all shapes and sizes. This is our favourite style.



The tent-cot. About as small as you can get.

## **Camper Trailers & Wind ups**

Purchase price varies from as little as \$5000 for an older second hand model to around \$55,000 for the latest new models.

These are either versions of a 6x4 trailer with a fold down canvas top or a half caravan, half tent style like the Jayco Swan, Eagle etc. series.. They vary in quality and complexity and some of the top end off road models are quite amazing.

There are models available that can carry a boat that does not need to be unloaded when the canvas top is unfolded and this is very important if you are carrying a boat and are regularly stopping overnight at different places.

The true camper trailer is really a tent fitted into a 6x4 style trailer while the wind up caravan style is half caravan with a solid roof and canvas sides. These offer a higher level of comfort than the traditional camper-trailer and are much more like a caravan in design and features.

For

1. This can be a good way to get to more remote areas.
2. More light weight than a conventional caravan.
3. Easier to set up than a conventional tent.
4. Built in fixtures mean less to carry in the car.
5. Easy to tow.
6. Low wind resistance.
7. Can be left set up in camp while you tour in the tow vehicle.

Against

1. Like a tent they may be uncomfortable in bad weather.
2. No escape from other people's noise.
3. Limited carrying capacity.
4. Fridge usually limited in size to around 60 litres.
5. Almost impossible to pack up in wet weather.
6. Very hot or cold depending on the weather.



A Jayco Swan Outback. Half Caravan, half tent.



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