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The Big Road Trip Preparation

Vehicle & Trailer Service Checklist
Words & Images: Phil Bianchi

Main Photo: To get to places like this you need a well-serviced and reliable vehicle.
Inset Photo: CV joints are crucial, inspect for wear and keep them well lubricated.

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So – you've decided to do a major four-wheel-drive trip to the Cape or Central Australia or perhaps the Canning Stock Route this winter?

No doubt you'll be planning and gathering gear for months as the day of departure draws closer. There'll be a long list of food, clothing, maps and guides, and camping gear. Most importantly of all though, is the vehicle and trailer – is it really up to the task of tackling a big road trip?

Over the years I've developed a checklist of things to do and equipment, tools, camping gear, food and so forth to take away. Having this list ensures, hopefully, that I don't forget something critical, like the time I was going away on a two-week trip and forgot my air mattress! I certainly didn't enjoy sleeping on the ground early explorer style.

In terms of vehicle preparation, depending on the distance intending to be travelled, you may need to do a complete oil change and lube, including checking oils in the diffs, gear box and transfer case. Also check the air filter, radiator, tyres, alternator and batteries.

Checking the radiator doesn't just mean unscrewing the cap and looking to see it's full. Go to a reputable radiator service centre and ask them to pressure test the radiator. The test is usually free and will quickly uncover any potential disasters like leaks, cracked radiators and split hoses.

It's easier to remedy these problems at home than be stuck by the side of the road, usually in searing heat, waiting for the engine to cool down so you can do the repair. Even then, if you haven't got the required spare part you're in real trouble; your holiday plans are starting to go west and the agitated 'boss' is not amused.

When was that last time you checked your tyres? No, not just the air pressure, but had a good look all around them for signs of wear like splits or cracks that may cause trouble under a load or stress due to the heat build-up caused by long distance travel. I strongly recommend replacing any suspect tyres before departure. If you're unsure about the tyres, go to a tyre dealer and have the tyres inspected. Tyre prices are cheaper and choices are far greater in town than in remote areas.

If the vehicle has a non-sealed battery, when was the last time the fluid levels were checked? Many four-wheel-drive owners have dual battery systems these days to run a 12 volt fridge and make life more comfortable. Sadly, many people don't think about the batteries when they go away and their failure means the fridge won't work, the food is spoilt and you'll be drinking hot shandies.

Go to any battery centre or auto electrician and ask for a battery load test. No, not just a multimeter across the terminals, but a full load test that puts the battery under heavy stress. This test, which is generally free, will quickly reveal any potential battery faults, such as collapsed cells. I religiously go to a battery centre before any long trip and have my vehicle's batteries checked out because it's cheap insurance and great piece of mind. On more than one occasion this test has uncovered a failing battery.

When at the auto electrician, have the alternator and starter motor checked also as if these fail you will have major problems. There is no fun in the vehicle having a flat battery due to alternator failure and being continually started with jumper leads. You will pack a set of jumper leads won't you?

Wheel bearings are often overlooked from a service point of view yet they are a critical vehicle component. Don't forget the trailer bearings especially. When was the last time they were serviced? Do you have spare bearings and cups for both the vehicle and trailer? Do you have suitable grease to do an out-of-town repair? My tip: learn to change a wheel bearing as it is a worthwhile skill to have.

Trailer bearing failure is common. How many times have you seen a trailer parked by the side of the road with the wheel missing and the driver gone to get parts? The usual cause is poor maintenance and preparation. If you're taking a trailer make sure it's up to the job and that it won't fall to bits or fail; ensure the suspension is in good order, the wiring isn't faulty and the battery charging system from vehicle to trailer is in good working order.

Repairing trailer bearings by the side of the road isn't much fun and can take hours with the proper tools and spares so it makes good sense to have the bearings checked before leaving home.



Clockwise from left:

Load testing batteries is quick and easy. ❖ Radiator pressure tests are usually free. ❖ Bearings aren't difficult to service, but better done at home. ❖ To get to places like this one at Mt Ragged you need a well serviced and reliable vehicle.



Dirty air cleaners cause a loss of power, poor fuel consumption and accelerate engine wear. A quick check and clean will, on most occasions, be all that's needed.

Fan belts and radiator hoses are another area often over looked. If it's been a while since they were changed, do it at home and take the old ones along as back up. There has been many a time when my old belts and hoses have been used to get others out of trouble.

Fuel filters are another area of concern. It's best to have a new one or at least have a spare in case of dirty fuel. When travelling in remote areas the chance of striking dirty fuel is greater because of slow fuel turnover or old dirty fuel storage tanks.

Another often overlooked item is the vehicle airconditioner; perhaps it's not as cool as it used to be? When was the last time it was checked? Go to an auto electrician or vehicle airconditioning service centre for a check-up and advice on what repairs, if any, are needed. Again, it's usually a free test so why not do it? It's no fun travelling in hot conditions with the windows down being covered in dust and flies day after day.

Resist the temptation to take everything including the kitchen sink with you on a trip. Overweight vehicles and trailers usually succumb to faults and breakdowns. Our old mates the early explorers travelled with what they could put on a horse or camel – no kitchen sink for them.

Take some spares such as: hoses, belts, wheel bearings, radiator cap, oils, grease, brake and clutch fluid and so forth. Also take an assortment of tools and repair items including: spanners to suit the vehicle, screwdrivers, hammer, cold chisel, pliers, multi-grips, twitching wire, a can of WD 40-type lubricant, and a multi-meter for fault detection just to name a few. Even if you don't know how to fix the problem, with some appropriate tools and gear someone that stops to assist may be able to do the job for you.

Proper vehicle servicing is commonsense and keeping a regular vehicle maintenance schedule will not only ensure piece of mind, but will save dollars in the long run. The old 'stitch in time saves nine' routine.

You have spent a large sum of money buying the vehicle so why not service it properly? I'm constantly amazed by people that scrimp on a few hundred dollars worth of maintenance by not replacing items such as filters, hoses or using quality oils. Yet they have spent \$60,000 plus on a vehicle.

Outback Australia is a great place and you want to enjoy your holiday, not waste part of it stranded and waiting for parts or repairs to be carried out. Therefore, with good planning and preparation it will be a trip to remember for all the right reasons.

Next issue I'll cover what to pack, menu ideas and such.

See you in the bush. ❖