



MEET PHIL

Hello to all the readers of *Go Camping Australia*. I'm Phil Bianchi and I've had more than twenty years of four-wheel driving experience, mostly in Western Australia and the Central Deserts.

I'm also a keen historian and have published or co-edited numerous books on explorers, bushmen, the Canning Stock Route and the woodlines of Western Australia.

I'm fortunate to combine my passion for history and four-wheel-driving into what I call histo-tourism! My four-wheel-driving has taken me from coastal to remote areas following explorer routes and seeking features named by them.

Places I've visited include Steep Point, Quobba, south coast of Western Australia, Kimberley, Rudall River National Park, Tanami and Great Central roads, the Len Beadell bomb roads and numerous places in between. On countless occasions I have travelled cross country for days to reach remote features.

Over the years I've developed a wealth of four-wheel-driving capability that includes vehicle set ups; preparation and maintenance; camping with camper trailers, swag or tent; and bush cooking.

I'm really looking forward to sharing my experience with you and passing on some tips and ideas.



Choosing a 4WD will depend on what you want to do with it.

Buying A Four Wheel Drive

Words and images: Phil Bianchi

My wife, Mrs B, and I have a motto: 'buy cheap buy twice!' How many of you when wanting to buy a new tent, for example, and, after seeing the range, you decide that you *really* want the \$800 single-pole high quality canvas tent but you balk at the price and decide on a cheaper non-canvas tent with numerous poles and a bucket full of guy ropes and tent pegs? Then, after two weeks of putting it up and packing it away every day you become frustrated with the fiddling around so you buy the more expensive tent and the cheap tent is consigned to the corner of the shed! I'm sure some of you have been there – I know I have. Keep the 'cheap tent motto' in mind when buying anything; whether it's a four-wheel-drive, camping equipment or after-market

components and accessories. Anyway, enough of me telling you I'm an 'eye specialist', let's get down to business.

What four-wheel-drive should I buy?

I figure the best place to start my life as a *Go Camping* columnist is at the beginning – the purchase of your four-wheel-drive! After seeing photos and reading articles about four-wheel-driving to Cape York, the Simpson Desert or the Canning Stock Route you make that big decision – I'm going to buy a four-wheel-drive!

But what do you buy? Don't fall for the 'Uncle Bill always liked Land Rovers' or 'Fred at work has a Jeep so that's what I'll buy' caper. Or,



Clockwise from left:

An SUV will get you many places a 2WD can't, however they don't have the capability of a 4WD.
❖ Hanging Rock in Rudall River National Park.
❖ You can't fix this. Avoid exotic tyre sizes. ❖ You don't need to spend a fortune on a 4WD. This well maintained 1989 Landcruiser will go anywhere.

worse, be taken in by the flashy advertisements on television of a four-wheel-drive rooster-tailing mud and water out both sides as it races along a track. Each vehicle on the market has its place and not all will suit your needs or budget.

I strongly suggest developing some vehicle suitability selection criteria.

Type of trips and terrain to be travelled

Will you be using the vehicle mainly for day trips, weekend trips or longer off-road adventures?

People

Who will be driving the vehicle and who will be the passengers? Partners need to be considered. Will you be taking children in the back seats?

Style

A cab-chassis, style-side ute or station wagon? All are capable and useful vehicles depending on what you want to do with them and this decision is more a personal preference.

Auto or manual?

Modern automatic transmissions can match any manual gear box these days. In fact, many people say they are superior. Older automatics had a weakness when going down steep hills because they tended to run away.

Leaf or coil springs?

You may not have much choice depending on the vehicle chosen. Most modern four-wheel-drives typically used as tourers have coil springs however, vehicles such as the Landcruiser troop carrier or tray back ute have leaf springs on the rear. Be aware that leaf springs, although allowing you to carry more weight, have a harsher ride.

Towing capacity

The towing capacity of a vehicle is often overlooked. It's no good buying a vehicle that can't legally tow your 2500 kg off-road caravan or big boat.

Tyres

Tyres should be closely investigated. Some current model top end of the market four-wheel-drives come with 255/55H R19 or 285/60 R18 tyres. Try buying a replacement tyre out in remote or regional Australia! To avoid the potential of being stranded for days or weeks, consider buying a vehicle with readily available and affordable tyre sizes.

Petrol or diesel?

If you're mainly city driving or doing short, local trips then a petrol motor is probably best. Even though fuel consumption will be higher, petrol vehicles are cheaper to buy and service.

Although more expensive to service, consider a diesel if planning remote touring or long-distance towing.

4WD or SUV?

Many people come unstuck here. Our four-wheel-drive club had a well-attended open day recently where a number of people, when told they had an SUV (sports utility vehicle) and not a four-wheel-drive with a low range gear box, were devastated and some were reduced to tears. 'But the salesman said it's a four-wheel-drive', was a common cry. An SUV might get into most places but there is always the risk of getting stuck; one will soon tire of being bogged or skull-dragged over sand dunes.

Accessories

Aftermarket four-wheel-drive accessory manufacturers concentrate their research and development on high-volume four-wheel-drive sellers. Don't expect to buy a Great Wall vehicle, for example, and have a choice of suppliers for long-range fuel tanks, side steps, bull bars, diff locks and the like. By staying with high-volume sellers you'll improve your chance of buying the accessories you want.

Budget - new or used?

Depending on your budget you may be forced to buy used and not new. There are many fantastic



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Make sure your vehicle has the capacity to tow your camping trailer or caravan.

used four-wheel-drives out there; many are one-owner or have been used just for school runs and the odd trip away at Easter or Christmas. Buying a quality used four-wheel-drive has the benefit of scoring a much cheaper vehicle often fitted with a few aftermarket accessories.

When buying used I strongly suggest having a qualified mechanic, preferably with four-wheel-drive experience, complete a thorough inspection to ensure you're not buying expensive trouble. Steer clear of used mining vehicles as they tend to have had a hard life with many components, such as clutch, shock absorbers, springs and other suspension components, being near the end of their useful life and requiring replacement.

I also encourage buyers of used vehicles to replace all engine, transmission and diff oils, change radiator and brake fluid and replace all belts and hoses regardless of what the logbook may say. Have the radiator pressure tested; radiator service centres usually do this free. Check the tyres closely to ensure they are in good condition.

Any suspect part should be replaced before you go travelling. It's cheaper to carry out repairs at home than be stranded by the side of the road in 40°C with no shade and an upset wife and kids!

Many years ago a vehicle broke down on the Gunbarrel Highway. Fortunately they had a HF radio and were able to organise parts, which were flown to Wiluna to a traveller going their way willing to take the parts out to them. Luckily the traveller had the expertise to fit the part or there would have been another wait.

On another occasion, north of Gary Junction Road, a vehicle broke down. Fortunately they had a satellite telephone. Parts were ordered but couldn't be delivered by plane as it's illegal to drop items from aeroplanes; so a helicopter was used! Imagine the horrendous expense, the frustration and feeling of helplessness while waiting it out.

You're the new owner of the vehicle so make sure it's in top condition; you need to be confident when you leave.

A capable four-wheel-drive should last at least ten years. Our first four-wheel-drive was a diesel

80 series Toyota Landcruiser purchased new in 1991. The 'Old Girl' served us well for nineteen years before she was put on well-earned light duties. Throughout those years she didn't miss a beat and the engine didn't use any oil.

It's important to keep up a regular maintenance schedule. Why do you think my old 80 series lasted so long and didn't use any oil? It was because of regular maintenance and changing the oil and oil filter every five-thousand kilometres.

Buying a four-wheel-drive that truly meets your needs the first time around will ensure you get value for money. If you make a mistake it could prove to be very expensive because you have to buy and set up another vehicle all over again. Remember the cheap tent motto!

Well, that's it for this issue. I hope this article has been of interest. If you've got questions or items you would like me to cover in future columns, drop a line to the *Go Camping* editor or post your question on the *Go Camping* Facebook page and I'll do my best to help you out. ❖