



Get Off Road with Phil

# It's Christmas Holiday Time

Words and images: Phil Bianchi

**W**ith Christmas around the corner many of us will be getting away for a break. My advice: get your vehicle checked and serviced now; don't leave it until the last minute. Ensure the tyres, wheel bearings, battery, radiator and airconditioner are checked and, if towing, don't forget to have the trailer tyres, wheel bearings and lights looked over too.

Don't be one of those people you see by the roadside with bonnet up or vehicle sitting on a jack while they're getting tyres or bearings fixed. It's cheaper to have vehicle repairs done at home than out in the bush; and you don't spoil the holiday chasing around for parts.

Where do you travel to at Christmas? For many of us Christmas gives us a long break and the opportunity to travel further than usual. Some will go to the beachside and relax with some fishing, swimming and local off-road driving, and others look forward to heading out to the back blocks.

Remember that the Christmas holidays isn't just about you. If you have kids, engage them as well. I'm a member of a four-wheel-drive club and have seen many kids travel with their parents or grandparents. In many cases, the kids' body language showed they didn't want to be there because they had iPods with plugs in their ears and just sat in the vehicle.

Bring bikes and toys for younger kids by all means, but that's leaving them to amuse themselves. If you can have a campfire, why not get them to help cook something simple, like a jaffle or damper. If you can't have a campfire, both can be cooked on a gas stove; in the case of a damper put the mix in a cake tin inside a camp oven.

Jaffles are very straight forward, butter the bread on the outside (I also use spray can olive

oil). The fillings can be almost anything from baked beans, stew to eggs. My favourite would have to be vegies left over from the night before mashed up with a raw egg stirred through it. This'll have 'em lining up for seconds.

Dampers sound difficult, but are very simple to make. I mix all of the ingredients dry at home, and pack them into plastic bags, and, on the chosen night, mix it with water and then cook. Here is a recipe my wife put together a few years ago. It's known as *Mrs B's Bung-in Damper*:

- 3 cups of self-raising flour
- 3 tablespoons of Sunshine milk powder
- 3 small handfuls of sultanas
- 2 tablespoons of sugar
- 1 teaspoon of salt

Mix all of the dry ingredients thoroughly, slowly add room-temperature water and keep stirring the mix until gluggy, make sure mix is not runny.

Preheat the camp oven. I prefer to use a cake tin inside the camp oven because it enables easier control of the heat and reduces the risk of burning. Spray the cake tin with cooking oil, add the mixture and place the cake tin in the camp oven and then put the lid on top.

If using coals, place a shovel full of coals in a depression in the ground away from the heat of the main fire and another shovel full on the camp oven lid. You then wait until the damper is cooked.

Inspect the damper to ensure its getting enough heat or not too much so it burns on the outside and is still gooey in the middle. It's better to slowly cook the damper than to rush it.

Pierce the damper with a knife, if the knife comes out dry its cooked. Ensure after you

remove the damper from the oven you place it on a trivet to cool, otherwise the bottom of the damper gets wet from condensation. If you don't have a trivet, place two or three knives on a bread board and sit the damper on top.

This damper could be a substitute for a Christmas pudding or eaten hot with butter, peanut butter, jam or just plain. We've served it whilst it's still hot with custard as sweets or toasted it in the morning for breakfast.

You can vary Mrs B's recipe by replacing the sultanas with: blueberries; cooked, chopped onion and bacon; dried apple; dried apricots; cheese; mixed herbs and so on. Packet scone mix can also be cooked in a camp oven as well as cake mixes.

By engaging your kids in bush camping activities you'll have them keen to attend future trips.

If travelling the back blocks, you'll find the country extra dry at this time of the year and the bushfire risk very high. If fires are permitted, really take care and keep them small, this not only saves wood, but reduces the risk.

Christmas is also time for presents. Don't go the usual socks and jocks routine, there are so many gift opportunities in camping, 4WD and book stores so you shouldn't have any trouble choosing a suitable gift. To my mind the best gift of all is a headlight torch, they are so useful when it comes to cooking, eating, and reading, fixing things or going to the toilet. Here are a few other gift ideas: jaffle irons, fly veils, 12-volt camping lights, tyre gauges, tyre deflators, 12-volt to 240-volt power inverters, travel and camping guide books or maps.

All the best for Christmas and a happy and prosperous 2015.

**See you in the bush. ❖**



Clockwise from top left: Christmas is a great time to plan a 4WD trip, but have everything checked before you go. ❖ Scones in the camp oven almost ready to come out. (Note, cake tin). ❖ Christmas is a great time for beach driving. ❖ Jaffles are easy to cook – even the kids can help. ❖ A double treat: fresh damper and scones!