



If you've been lucky enough to explore some of Australia by 4WD, you'd know that the improved access is truly phenomenal. Instead of being locked to the bitumen roads, you can explore the roads less travelled.

However, the roads less travelled require a little preparation. In this post, I'd like to cover 5 things that you should do, understand or have with you to make your travels as safe as possible. You may not need to do all of this – a trip to the local [4WD beach](#) is vastly different to crossing the Simpson Desert!

Safety is not always obvious, and things can go horribly wrong if you aren't aware and prepared. We want you to come home with memories that you'll smile and laugh about for years to come. It's the simple things that make a big difference.



Water crossings on the Holland track.

1. Communications

Being able to communicate with others while you are away is imperative. The most basic communication is to leave a plan with someone who isn't coming on the trip. That way, if something does go wrong they can alert the appropriate people. Everyone should do this.

UHF Radio

Beyond that, mobile phones are fantastic for the more populated areas, and then you need to look at other methods. A UHF radio is an absolute must – with a cheap handheld sufficing for local trips and a hardwired and mounted radio and antenna being the ideal setup for bigger trips.



A quality UHF radio is a must for communicating.

Satellite phones, messengers, and EPIRBs

If you are heading really remote, a satellite phone is worth its weight in gold. You can hire them, or get cases to turn your mobile phone's capabilities up, or buy one on a plan (or outright). There are some other very nifty items on the market, like the [SPOT3 Messenger](#), which allows people to track your location via GPS, and for you to send pre-programmed messages saying things are fine, or that you need assistance.

An [EPIRB](#) is another very viable option. HF radios are still very popular, but extremely expensive and bulky so many people are moving over to satellite phones instead.



If you get bogged, you need to know how to get out safely.

2. Knowledge and training

Heading away on a 4WD trip without basic knowledge is a recipe for disaster. People who end up in trouble often do so through a lack of basic understanding. When you see those in trouble on the news, it's often tourists who don't know what to do when things go wrong.



If you break down, stay with your vehicle. As much as it may be tempting to walk away and seek help, you will reduce your chance of survival drastically.

Know how to engage 4WD in both high range and low range. This includes locking the hubs, and what speeds it can be done at. Check your vehicle's manual for more detail.

Having an understanding of 4WD recoveries with hands-on practice is not optional. Tyre pressures, snatch straps, winches, traction boards and rated recovery points are extremely important areas of knowledge.

If you are unsure, do a 4WD training course. There have been more than a few people killed in Australia from 4WD recoveries gone wrong. I'll cover this in more detail further on.



You should know the limits of your vehicle, for example, the speed to drive on gravel roads.

Know the limits of your vehicle

It's important to know your vehicle – what it can carry, its limitations and fuel range. The more you know about your vehicle the better equipped you are. You should know how to do basic mechanical checks on your 4WD. For example, things like checking the engine oil, transmission oil, coolant level, air filter, brake fluid, power steering fluid, looking for leaks and examining bolts, hoses, belts and electrical connections. These simple checks can be explained to you by your local mechanic in just a few minutes.

Having first aid training is extremely important too. Would you be comfortable in managing the situation if you got bitten by a snake or had a broken bone?

Knowing how to drive to the conditions is imperative too. Don't drive too quickly, adjust your tyre pressures to suit the terrain and enjoy the views – it's not a race!



A 12V compressor is a must.

3. Invaluable gear on board

Having the right gear on board will make a huge difference if things go wrong.

Fire extinguisher

A fire extinguisher is a worthy addition to any 4WD, secured correctly in a place that is easily accessible. These will not put out huge fires, but they might just save your vehicle if you have an electrical fire, or if grass catches fire under the vehicle.

Cargo barrier

If you have a wagon, a cargo barrier should be an absolute must for 4WD trips. These stop gear coming forward onto occupants in the event of an accident. Even lightweight gear can do serious damage to occupants, let alone what most of us carry in our 4WD's!



Keep spare fluids and repair gear in the back of your 4WD.



Tyre repair kit

A tyre repair kit is a fantastic tool to have in the back of your 4WD. You can get them from most auto shops for under \$50, and they might just save your bacon. A lot of punctures are just small holes from sticks, screws or rocks. A plug or two can easily allow you to get home, instead of being stuck on the side of the road.

Water

Take plenty of water. This is one thing you cannot live without. The warmer it is, the more water you'll need. You'll want at least 2 litres of drinking water per person, per day, with a bit extra should something go wrong.

Sand flags

Sand flags are hugely important (and a legal requirement for some tracks). Accidents happen regularly on sandy tracks and in dunes because by the time you see another vehicle it's too late. A sand flag allows for early notification and gives both parties much more time to react.



Having tools and spare parts mean you can get yourself out of a pickle.

Basics to have

Some basic tools are extremely important, along with basic fix-it items like duct tape, cable ties, electrical wire, glue, fencing wire and spare nuts/bolts. If you're going remote, it's a great idea to take a spare set of drive belts and radiator hoses!

4. Is your 4WD in good condition?

Before you head away, you should be confident that your 4WD is in good condition. If you aren't able to determine that for yourself, get your vehicle looked at by a mechanic. Make sure the servicing is up to date, and that any niggly problems are fixed before you head off. 4WD's are subject to hard work when driven off-road. If you don't maintain your vehicle then you'll have problems. Whether it's your tyres, cooling system, electrical setup or suspension, a 4WD has a lot of things that work together.

When off-road, a lot of the components get worked harder than they would on the bitumen, and as a result are more likely to cause issues if things are not well cared for. Your cooling system, for example, gets pushed extremely hard when on a soft beach. Any imperfections will quickly be identified via your temperature gauge!



Get a mechanic to check your vehicle before your trip.



5. Stay safe with 4WD recoveries

One of the most dangerous parts of 4WDing is recoveries. I want to dedicate a portion of this article to ensure that 4WD recoveries are done safely. As I mentioned earlier, there have been a number of people killed in Australia from 4WD recoveries that have gone horribly wrong.

4WD's get bogged all the time – it's a part of the game. I want to stress the utmost importance in considering how you get them moving again. There is no mandate for training in 4WD recoveries, which results in people taking huge risks without understanding the potential consequences.

When a 4WD gets bogged, it can take several tonnes of force to pull it out. If something breaks during this process, the results can be terrifying. Think pieces of metal flying at over 300km/h.



Recoveries are extremely dangerous. Take all the safety precautions necessary.

What to use for recoveries

Always use a winch dampener (or a towel, or jumper) over snatch strap and winch recoveries. This way, if something does break, the dampener will slow it down quickly. Never pull a vehicle out using a hook, loop or shackle that does not have a WLL stamped on it.

4WD recoveries should not be allowed to happen with bystanders inside the exclusion zone. This is a circle of at least 1.5 x the length of your snatch strap or winch rope. If people are standing close to the action, ask them to move out the way!

Towballs are not for recovering off, ever! Equipment used in 4WD recoveries should be clean and in good condition. Snatch straps should not be used with huge run-ups. If a vehicle is bogged, use a shovel for a couple of minutes to dig around the tyres, and under the chassis. You should never use shackles to join straps together. If you have access to two recovery points, use a bridal strap between the two to spread the load. Don't join straps to a chain.



Some of the recovery gear that you'll need to bring on your trip.

Stay safe out there!

More and more people are purchasing 4WD's, and loving the amazing change in lifestyle – nothing compares. Australia is one of the best places in the world to explore by 4WD. Next time you head out, take the time to think about what you'll need, get prepared and stay safe out there!