

We've had the time of our lives exploring this amazing country. From 5 weeks in the Kimberley to weekends camping and 4WDing in some of Australia's world-class destinations. It isn't all sunshine and roses though, there's been a number of times where we've had to navigate our way out of tricky situations. Some of those could even be described as darn-right dodgy, narrow escapes!

Three times in fact. The first two weren't overly dangerous, just inconvenient and required some creative strategy. But the last one could have ended very badly for us. Of course, you learn from each experience and do things differently to avoid being in the same situation again. Although we chuckle about them now, at the time it wasn't so funny!

*Moments before we sunk into the salt lake.*

## 1. Mud

March 2014, four of us in two 4WD's set off at 3 am, heading for the Southcoast away from Perth. After a quick breakfast at Ravensthorpe, we fuelled up in Esperance and grabbed some last-minute supplies before heading east. The destination was Israelite Bay, a remote fishing paradise in Cape Arid, some 200km east of Esperance.

After several hours of navigating around bog holes and shaking through bone-jarring corrugations, we came to the salt lakes. By now, it was getting late in the day and we were all pretty worn out. The adrenalin of finally being at our destination had us ticking along, and after about 13 hours of travel, we proceeded cautiously around the edge of the salt lakes, following in the tracks of others.

*We were in a stinky mess.*

We'd just about made it to the other side when I was distracted by what I thought was a snake. Returning my focus, I realised I'd missed a small turn and started to go across the edge of the salt lake. I looked down and could see that others had been across on this short section, so I kept putting along. We were nearly halfway across when I heard an almighty bang, and our Land Cruiser briefly dropped like a brick, before popping back up again. Phew, that was lucky, I thought, moments before the 4WD gave another almighty lurch down and we came to an abrupt halt.

I knew we were in trouble and looked across at my wife, who gave me a part death stare and part look of terror. A quick alert to our friends over the UHF and I hopped out of the vehicle to assess how much trouble we were in. My feet sunk immediately down in the stinkiest mud I'd ever experienced. To make it worse, the salt burnt your skin and was full of little bits that cut.

*Trying to get to our recovery gear.*

We were so stuck that I couldn't even open the wheel carriers on the rear of the vehicle to get to our recovery gear. The only saving grace was my friends had not followed and stayed safely on the hard ground 30 metres away.

We shovelled to gain access to the back of our 4WD, to retrieve the necessary recovery gear. The sun was getting low in the sky and after a whole lot more shovelling, we joined all of our snatch straps and extensions together and jammed two Maxtrax under the front wheels. With both lockers on in the Land Cruiser, some minor wheel spin, and a very heavy Nissan Patrol giving it everything to pull us out... it didn't budge!



*Sucked into a salt lake!*

We persevered, and on the third attempt, victory! The Cruiser popped out and I stayed on the throttle until we were safely off the salt lake.

About 30 minutes later we arrived at camp, exhausted and with our 4WD filthy. We still had an amazing trip, and our first stop once we got back into Esperance was the car wash!



*Getting stuck at Lake Jasper.*

## 2. Water

Again in 2014, we camped on private property near Lake Jasper about 4-hours south of Perth and were enjoying how spectacular everything looked after recent rain. Taking a day trip to the lake, we noticed the tracks were heavily used and quite badly chopped up. On our return to camp, I wanted to avoid making the tracks even worse, so I looked at the map and saw a direct route that seemed to take us back.

We headed around the lake, going through some smaller water crossings with no issues. Eventually, we got to a much larger one and despite Sarah's objections, I flicked on the lockers and carefully entered the crossing. All was going well until the front end dropped down and the bonnet went under the water. I became quite concerned so I gave it a heap of throttle and instead of picking up speed we came to a gentle stop.



*We were well and truly bogged with water coming in.*

I tried going backwards, turning the wheels and even rocking the vehicle, but we were wedged good and proper with half of the vehicle's door sills under the water. Of course, our convoy happened to be several minutes behind us, and after a frantic call over the radio they motored up. With the tracks too narrow to turn around, we had no choice but to attempt a recovery using another vehicle and reversing out.



*Trying to hook up the snatch straps.*

To make it worse, the water was absolutely freezing and pitch black, with zero chance of being able to see anything below the surface. It was a huge struggle to hook up a snatch strap with your face nearly having to be under the water! We eventually set it up, but in the meantime, water had been pouring into the back of the 4WD and we were hurrying to lift our camera gear and other electronics out of the incoming tide.

On the second big pull, our 80-Series moved back enough to grab traction and we backed out in a hurry. We opened the doors and watched the torrent of water run out of the vehicle, along with various maps and other lightweight bits of gear. After cleaning up, we headed back to camp the way we knew and once home a few days later, I had to rip out a heap of the carpet so it could dry out properly. Not fun!



*Replacing broken vee belts on our Land Cruiser.*

## 3. Brakes

In 2017, we headed out to Steep Point – the westernmost point of mainland Australia. Our

convoy included 6 vehicles and 2 boats and once at our destination, our normally reliable 4WD ran into issues. The air conditioner drive pulley separated and the vee belts, which are essential for cooling the engine, broke and required urgent replacement. It was a precursor for worse to come!

After 9 amazing days at the Point, we headed back towards Denham and as we got to a section of the road where we'd normally stop to put air in the tyres, we kept on going instead. Our young son was sleeping in the car and we decided to continue slowly driving until he woke up. We came over a hill and I put my foot on the brakes to slow down. The pedal sunk to the floor. I pumped it back into action, but it seemed strange.

On the next hill, the same thing happened but the brakes didn't come back, so I knew we were in trouble. Using the trailer brakes to slow us, we pulled off the road at the bottom of the hill with smoke pouring out of the left-hand side front wheel.

I investigated and discovered that we'd shattered the freewheeling hub, with grease and muck everywhere. I was well equipped with parts and felt confident that we could fix it, so we set up shop and removed the damaged bearings. As we reassembled the new bearings, we realised the actual spigot was cracked, and the thread for the locking nuts to hold the bearings in place was damaged beyond repair.



*Bush mechanics! Trying to repair out Land Cruiser at Steep Point.*

Essentially this meant that aside from the brake callipers, nothing else was holding the front wheel on to the vehicle, and we were in a very dodgy situation. Even towing the 4WD with a strap was out of the question as we couldn't guarantee the wheel wouldn't fall off without the wheel bearings being properly locked into position.

Fortunately, we managed to get phone reception from a nearby hill and spoke to the local mechanic. He invited us to come and raid the required parts from the wrecking yard but advised that they might not have everything we needed.

It was getting late in the day and I wasn't keen on leaving the 4WD, or camping next to it whilst my friends sorted out parts. Instead, we took the offer of a tow truck and winched the 4WD on to the tilt tray. We arrived in Denham, approximately 3-hours away, late that night, absolutely shattered, but glad to have some sort of resolution.

We stayed in Denham until the parts we ordered arrived and use the driveway of our holiday home as a mechanics workshop. Finally, the Land Cruiser was ready to make the journey back to Perth.



*Sometimes, no matter how prepared you are, the best thing to do is to call a tow truck.*

## What can you learn?

These three experiences (and many others) have helped to shape the way we travel. Getting sucked into the salt lake could have been far worse than what it was. We didn't have enough recovery gear for the situation, so I've learned to have our recovery gear more accessible.

Although, the greatest lesson is to never drive on salt lakes!

The water incident at Lake Jasper could have been entirely avoided if I'd walked the hole and realised it wasn't doable – or listened to my wife! Beyond that, if we had committed, we could have had a snatch strap already hooked up properly and the recovery would have been much easier and faster.



The last experience proved to us that even with all the right gear and a well-maintained vehicle (I had recently done the wheel bearings recently), sometimes things just go wrong! Not everything can be repaired in the bush and in some situations, the best thing to do is call for help. Travelling in a convoy is always a good idea, and having some form of emergency communication device when you are way out bush is critical – we got lucky!

These events pale in significance when we think about all of the amazing times we've had, and with a bit more sense, experience and a more reliable 4WD, these days we tend to avoid stressful situations!

**When have you had a dodgy, narrow escape?**