



Buying a 4WD gives you the ultimate accessibility boost for travelling in Australia. There are literally thousands of beautiful places you can only get to in a 4WD, and that brings a whole new world of entertainment. If you want to camp metres from the crystal clear turquoise water on the Coral Coast, a 4WD will give you that option.

However, 4WD's are not cheap to purchase or to own. It's in your own best interest to do everything that is practical to make your 4WD last for longer. I'm not suggesting you lock it away in your garage and never use it – I'm suggesting some simple tips that will help make your 4WD last longer, and save you a fortune along the way. Money saved can be used to travel and camp around more of this amazing country.

1. Service your vehicle correctly

Everyone knows their 4WD needs to be serviced. Most people get their vehicles serviced, but not all servicing is equal. When you get a 4WD, the first thing you should do is read the manual. This gives you the details you need to know in regards to a correct servicing schedule.

More importantly, it allows you to set a schedule that suits your requirements. The service interval for most 4WD's is 10,000 – 15,000 km. However, a lot of manuals suggest that you make this more frequent if you are towing or working your vehicle hard. You also may need to bring your next scheduled service forward if you've been on a short but very dusty trip. The mechanic you take your 4WD to should be competent. If you don't trust them, find someone else. There are some very average mechanics out there, and you want to know that your 4WD is in good hands. Ensure that the mechanic does what is listed in your manual at each service interval – many will just do a service and forget items like transmission oil flushes every 60 km.

If your vehicle is outside of its warranty period, I'd highly recommend you learn how to service it (the basics only) yourself.



Checking the air filter in the Kimberley. Image by Aaron Schubert.

Pre-start checks

When you are travelling, it's worth 5 minutes before you leave to do a pre-start check. In the morning, pop the bonnet and check your engine oil, brake fluid, clutch fluid, transmission oil, radiator overflow and power steering fluid. Also, check the V-belt tensions and hose condition.

Look for damaged wiring, loose parts and anything shiny, which indicates something has broken or worn. Look underneath the vehicle for any leaks, and if you've been on corrugated roads, it pays to run a spanner over some of the bolts. Wheel studs, for instance, without fail, will loosen after many hours of corrugated driving.



Look for oil leaks like this front diff on our Land Cruiser. Image by Aaron Schubert.



Get familiar with your 4WD

The more you know about your 4WD, the better equipped you are to maintain it and keep on top of any problems. Look into parts – sometimes aftermarket parts are suitable and in many cases, genuine is better. Look at the oil viscosity chart, and make sure the engine oil you are running suits the climate you are driving in.

2. Tyre pressures

The amount of air you run in your tyres is critical. On the bitumen, it affects traction and wear. If you run the wrong tyre pressures your tyres will wear quicker, or unevenly, and you will have poor traction.

When it comes to driving off-road though, the game changes dramatically. Corrugated gravel roads are probably the most taxing environment on a 4WD. It's only when you've seen your entire dashboard bounce around on really rough corrugations that you can appreciate how much of a flogging 4WD's take when off road.

If you don't air down to correct pressures, the wear on your 4WD is amplified exponentially. Likewise, sand driving with the wrong tyre pressures results in a vehicle that has to work extremely hard to drive, and your risk of overheating goes through the roof.

Pick the right tyre pressures for the terrain you are on and it will make a massive difference to fuel economy, wear and tear, and comfort. Your tyres help to absorb a substantial amount of vibration and bumps.



Deflate your tires as required. Image by Aaron Schubert.

3. Drive it with mechanical sympathy

When it comes to driving a 4WD, there are lots of different styles out there. Some people are happy to take it easy, and others just want to mash the accelerator to the floor and bounce their way over an obstacle.

The more care you have for your 4WD, the longer it will last. You'll get better fuel economy and less wear and damage in the process.

Mechanical sympathy is fairly straightforward – have some regard for how hard your 4WD is working in every situation. If you are towing a heavy trailer in 40-degree heat up a steep hill, it would pay to back off the throttle instead of working the engine to its absolute maximum. Instead of bouncing your way over a rock step, consider first gear in low range and gently idling up over it with minimal wheel spin.



Have some thought for how hard your 4WD is working. Image by Aaron Schubert.

Listen for noises

I'm always on the lookout for noises. The longer you have your 4WD, the easier it is to pick noises up that are not normal. The sooner you pick them up, the cheaper the repairs. Clicking, vibrations, knocking and whining are all noises you should be listening out for.



Know where your limits are

There are more 4WD's on the market than ever before, and they are all built differently. Some are perfectly suited to crawling over big rocks all day, and others are only really good for light duty beach driving. If you push your 4WD beyond what it's designed to do, you will break something and chances are it will be expensive.

Monitor temperatures

It's worthwhile fitting at least one external gauge to monitor coolant level/temperature or exhaust gas temperatures. The factory gauges tend to be far too inaccurate, and engine temperature is critical to longevity.



Aftermarket exhaust gas temperature gauge for your 4WD. Image by Aaron Schubert.

Driver training

Never underestimate the importance of the person behind the wheel. Understanding how your vehicle works, and what you should be doing when off road will make a world of difference to how your 4WD copes over time.

4. Watch your weight

If you pick up a 20kg bag of pool salt, you'll notice it's pretty hard to walk around with it. The same principle applies to your 4WD – the more weight you have to move, the harder it works. Obviously you can't avoid some weight in your 4WD – after all, you need to fit that camping gear somewhere, but it's all about a reasonable balance. You shouldn't have to take everything including the kitchen sink!

Adding weight results in higher wear, more fuel consumption and ultimately your vehicle's lifespan is reduced. Take a minute to find out what your payload is, and ensure you are not overweight. Look at the trailer too – is it overweight? Can your 4WD legally tow it? How is the load packed? Is it evenly distributed, or is your rear differential screaming out in pain?



How much weight are you hauling around by towing? Image by Aaron Schubert.

5. Know what's bad for your 4WD


There are some things that are just plain and simply bad for your 4WD. Many people know these, but there are plenty that don't.

Driving through salt water

I cringe every time I see a 4WD drive through salt water. No matter how well you wash it afterwards, that salt is going to cause substantial damage to your 4WD over the years. Rust



is a prevalent problem in 4WD's, and once it starts there isn't a whole lot you can do about it. Don't drive through salt water unless you absolutely have no choice.

 Salt water can really do some damage to your beloved vehicle in the long term. Image by Aaron Schubert.

Mud

There's something hugely attractive when it comes to driving a 4WD through a mud run, or a big bog hole. It's slippery, challenging and a whole lot of fun. The thing is, driving your 4WD through mud is one of the worst things you can do for it. Mud gets in everything, and it's abrasive, corrosive and extremely hard to get rid of.

It blocks radiators and gets stuck in everything from bearings to swivel hubs and alternators. There's nothing mechanical (or electrical) that likes mud – it will do damage to your 4WD, and you will have to pay for it.

Over winter, look at how many people have to replace their alternators, because mud and silty water has taken them out. I'm not for a minute suggesting you give mud a miss, just think about it before you plunge in! Sometimes it's worth skipping a big mud hole for the 'chicken track' on the side!



Mud might be fun but it's terrible for your 4WD! Image by Aaron Schubert.

The wrong line

When you are 4WDing, picking a smart line will go a long way – you'll avoid damage and allow your vehicle to work within its capacity. Pick the wrong line though, and you risk substantially more damage. For example, I'd recommend that you avoid crossing water unless you have a snorkel and believe it's 100% safe!



Picking the right line makes all the difference. Image by Aaron Schubert.

Labouring the engine

If you have an automatic, this is taken care of. However, for those of you with manual 4WD's, they like to be driven in a certain RPM range. Driving around your local streets in 5th gear is going to make your gearbox, clutch and engine work very hard. Don't labour the engine, and bear in mind any additional load put on the vehicle when towing.

4WD's are fantastic tools that can take you to some truly amazing places. You can save a bucket load of money by looking after them correctly so that it can accompany you on many years of adventures to come.

What do you do to keep your 4WD in tip-top shape?