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Far from the concrete complexes of the metropolitan maze,

Kev from the Snowys warehouse recently hit the rough and tumble of Australia's outback on his off-road adventure along the Oodnadatta Track.

In this week's episode of the Snowys Camping Show, outdoor experts Ben and Lauren sit down with our accomplished caravanner to discuss his venture along the sunburnt, red-dirt roads between Adelaide and Alice Springs, bypassing the barren bitumen of the highways. Be it suspension hacks, unkempt tracks, or the cons of mud flaps – Kev tells all and leaves nothing in the dust.

Shortcuts

00:00 – Intro

00:46 – What and Where is the Oodnadatta Track?

02:27 – Best Time of Year to Travel the Oodnadatta Track?

04:45 – Caravanning on the Oodnadatta Track

06:43 – Considering Caravans

07:33 – Tyres and Suspension

15:12 – Stone Guards

17:11 – Mud Flaps

20:15 – Protecting Water Taps and Gas Fittings

21:33 – Off-Shoots and Side-Routes

23:23 – Track Conditions

27:15 – Vehicles

28:07 – Kev's Favourite Spots

Mentioned in this episode:

Episodes:

[Ep34 – Camping Terms Explained](#)

Other:

[The Government of South Australia: Outback Road Warnings](#)

What and Where is the Oodnadatta Track?

The Oodnadatta Track begins at Marree – a small town located in the north-east of South



Australia – and follows the old Ghan train line that runs between Adelaide and Alice Springs. After riding 617 kilometres of dirt road, adventurers will eventually hit the town of Marla on the Stuart Highway, south of the border between South Australia and the Northern Territory. On his recent venture, Kev explored the track from Maree to Oodnadatta, before heading north to Witjira National Park.

Best Time of Year to Travel the Oodnadatta Track?

Given summertime temperatures can reach between 47 and 48 degrees Celsius, it's recommended to travel the Oodnadatta Track in the cooler months of the year. In early June, the warmest days are around 20 degrees Celsius, suggesting the most temperate period to span between April and September. That said, ideal travelling conditions ultimately depend on the weather at the time. Rain on outback roads can create slippery, perilous mud tracks, while warmer, drier months call for additional water supplies.

Wet weather can sometimes have the Oodnadatta Track impassable, resulting in closures lasting up to three weeks. As a helpful guide, Kev recommends [Outback Road Warnings](#) on the Government of South Australia website. The site houses colour-coded maps indicating the roads that are both open and closed, as well as the routes best suited only to 4WDs or other vehicles. Another option is to simply call ahead at road houses, such as the Pink Road House in Oodnadatta.

Caravanning on the Oodnadatta Track

From Kev's experience, he recommends an off-road van, sitting higher and boasting both better suspension and tyres for the Oodnadatta Track and road conditions alike. On the other hand, a conventional road caravan rides lower, with a softer suspension system and inadequate tyres that bode better for smoother surfaces. While a conventional caravan lacks the features and functionality that an off-road van can deliver along the more unstable roads, travellers who take their conventional vans are recommended to drive no faster than 60 kilometres per hour.

Even in an off-road van, travelling too fast on dirt roads can be dangerous due to a lack of grip on the loose surfaces. That said, Kev confirms that a small, a retro-style van pulled by a low-slung car is the most strongly advised against on the Oodnadatta Track or routes alike. Nonetheless, the difference between a rough and even ride will depend on the road conditions at the time of travel, be it graded or corrugated.

Considering Caravans

Generally speaking, smaller vans are both easier to tow and less likely to bog in soft material. That said, a larger van still delivers – just better so in dry conditions.

Tyres and Suspension

On off-track adventures, Kev recommends heavy-duty, light truck-style, or all-terrain tyres for

both the car and the caravan. The latter are square in construction, and don't bulge as much as standard tyres. Once the tyre pressure has been reduced to 20psi the tyre sits on a larger platform and spreads further, thus softer on bumps, relieving the load off the suspension, and preventing bulging. Bulging often occurs when the tyres are thinner, leaving them more susceptible to puncturing by rocks or other sharp materials.

Shock absorbers are used in most suspensions, controlling how it rebounds from a compressed to expanded state. In doing so, shock absorbers work fast and thus generate heat, which can result in them coming loose and falling away. Such issues are usually faced by rally drivers, so it's often recommended to drive slowly along dirt roads. Shock absorbers in 4WDs are larger and require more oil to move, disperse more heat, and better handle movement.

Not all caravans have shock absorbers, but are leaf-sprung instead (in the case of most road caravans). While these caravans are still safe to drive on dirt roads, drivers need to be wary in keeping the vehicle under control to prevent it from skipping sideways along corrugation when rounding corners. Kev's off-road caravan has shock absorbers, with a single-axle beam. This is because if an independent suspension arm breaks, replacing it is more of an ordeal than finding another axle beam. Kev's vehicle still maintains movement on the tracks, but at only 3.6 metres long doesn't pose too much of an issue.

So what are the benefits of independent suspension? This allows for one wheel to move up and down independently of every other axle on the van – in other words, each wheel is detached from an axle reaching from one end to the other. However, in the case of an axle beam, if the van is knocked on one side the spring compresses and lengthens, moving the wheel slightly backwards. As this happens, it changes the direction of the connected wheel on the other side. So, after a bump in the road sends the van briefly into mid-air, the other wheel will shift slightly as though responding to the steering wheel, sometimes resulting in an out-of-control swaying.

While it depends on the size of the van, axle beams generally aren't as sufficient as independent suspension on rougher roads. Shock absorbers also, without a doubt, enhance the performance of any suspension system. Removing a suspension system and installing a new one is doable simply by cutting off the spring hangers, and rewelding the steel or fittings. That said, when installing shock absorbers onto an existing caravan one needs to be aware of space and where they can realistically be fitted. This includes consideration for both the compression and expansion length of the shock absorbers, best determined by a caravan repairer, engineer, or a suspension specialist with the facilities and know-how to weld an appropriate suspension. Put simply – re-installing or incorporating a suspension beneath a caravan is not a cheap or straightforward exercise!

Stone Guards

Kev doesn't have stone guards, as he finds he doesn't require them for general use. That said, hindsight is a bugger, as he comments that – after journeying the Oodnadatta Track six times – they may have been beneficial to look into ahead of his most recent trip.

Instead of stone guards, Kev currently has aluminium panels on the bottom of his caravan – though admits that the gas bottle, drawbar, and electrical fitting each need better protection. Even with large mud flaps, stones can still bounce about – and while the van is unscathed,



the water tanks and other vital units fitted underneath require more defence. Kev's car has mud flaps, but even with a checker plate at the base and padding towards the top of the frontal part of the van, stones can still ricochet in all directions. Considering this, he aims to look into something more permanent.

Mud Flaps

On a previous trip away, Kev fixed mud flaps underneath the front of his van to prevent stones and mud from invading unwanted areas. That said, this was thought to have altered the airflow going up and under the van, as Kev discovered dust throughout the inside of his van that had entered through the gaps. After taking the mud flaps off, however, he found the interior of his van to be cleaner. When the airflow is altered, dirt and dust come up and off the road from different directions and sucked straight into the open gaps of the van. A result of a disrupted airflow can also be overheating, even if the mud flaps have been positioned on the car instead.



When the airflow is altered, dirt and dust come up and off the road from different directions and sucked straight into the open gaps of the van. Credit: Kevin

As beneficial as mud flaps seem to be, they're not always practical. For example, driving through a dip simply has them dragging and collecting stones. Another protective accessory is the V-shaped stone shield positioned above the caravan's drawbar – described by Ben as a bulbar that's been strung with a fish net. Kev warns that these should be fitted relatively loose to reduce the velocity of any stones that make contact with it. Without doing so, the net acts as a spring or trampoline, capable of sending a stone straight through the back window!

Protecting Water Taps and Gas Fittings

Caravan water tanks and gas units should be installed right up under van, with their taps and fittings protected by rubber caps and covers. Essentially, everything beneath the caravan should be guarded or protected in some way.

Off-Shoots and Side-Routes

In Kev's experience – some are manageable, while others are far worse. For example, the route to Lake Eyre passes through private property and was both seriously rough and ill-maintained – with corrugations measuring a metre apart and 200 millimetres deep!

Considering this, drivers who aren't confident on uneven terrain have the option to leave their caravan at William Creek and head out in their 4WD.

Track Conditions

In Ben's experience riding the off-tracks of rural SA and the NT, it's common to go from a beautifully smooth road – as quiet as a highway, with only the hum of the engine to be heard – to a route so rough that the tyres chip and the fastest speed manageable is 40 kilometres

per hour. This time around, Kev found the road conditions manageable (bar several corrugated segments past William Creek). After rain, the vehicles that travel along the tracks compact the surface over time, producing a smoother surface. Generally though, the Oodnadatta Track is well-maintained. Trucks require the roads to be regularly graded and in good condition, in order to maintain a reasonable speed in their frequent travels to and from cattle stations.

It's all well and good to discover that the Oodnadatta Track is closed before your journey has begun – but what if you're already on the track when the rain comes?! Luckily Kev wasn't, at the time of his slippery situation. On their way to Dalhousie Springs, Kev turned off just out of Oodnadatta to camp, after learning that the forecast would be 0.2 millimetres of rainfall. The weather bureau was right – Oodnadatta certainly saw 0.2 millimetres... plus another 9.8, which had the road messy, muddy, and slippery the following day! Kev was notified by passing cars of the track's condition further on, making frequent stops to dig clay and mud out from the crannies and crevices of the wheels! Nonetheless, within two days at Dalhousie Springs, everything had dried out.

Vehicles

As mentioned earlier, appropriate vehicles for travelling the Oodnadatta Track can be determined by their tyre construction, the weather conditions, and the nature of the road itself at the time. While the track is doable with a sprinter van, this would require substantial consideration and planning in the lead-up. Kev and Ben also recommend establishing a buffer, like preparing to stay put a little longer to ensure departure is safe and manageable in unideal conditions.

Kev's Favourite Spots

From the south to north, Kev's trip began at Marree in SA, passing through Leigh Creek, Farina (home of the outback backyard bakery, operating in the winter months), and the Prairie Hotel in Parachilna (serving the "Feral Platter": emu, camel, and crocodile)!

The journey through mid-north SA is wonderful, with another potential route via the Clare Valley wine regions and into the Flinders Ranges. In that, bypassing the latter follows a road that curves around Leigh Creek and sees the all-too majestic Flinders Ranges visible on the right-hand side. In Farina, the private camping ground (requiring payment on arrival) offers toilet facilities and a donkey shower that operates by lighting a boiler. For more on how a donkey shower operates, check out [Ep34 – Camping Terms Explained](#).

In Marree, visitors can explore the original Ghan railway line, as well as the old railway engines, bridges, and tracks that ran through to the early 1980s before closing to the public. With the Flinders Ranges and Lake Eyre South, Coward Springs is a special place to sightsee, home to hot springs and a museum showcasing the history of the original Ghan railway line. The SA outback is home to some cool, quirky characters too – like Talc Alf, who carves artwork from talc stone, displays them in his home, and welcomes visitors to admire and explore on their way through. The William Creek pub is a hot, happening, and iconic establishment, while the nearby airstrip is open for tourists to take flight on a scenic tour over Lake Eyre (an experience also offered in Maree).



For those who like the fast track over the off-track, the Stuart Highway is the most direct route to Alice Springs. That said, the Oodnadatta Track delivers a more scenic road trip experience, and Kev recommends allowing three days to navigate every nook and cranny – especially when factoring in detours and side-routes.

Take it easy, take it slow, and take it in. Oh... and take two spare wheels (one for the car and another for the caravan)!

Thanks for listening, tune in again for next week's episode!

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If you have any questions for Ben and Lauren, make sure you head over to our [Facebook group](#) and let us know as we'd love to hear from you.

Catch you out there!