

BEFORE STOCKING YOUR esky and fuelling up to head into the great, blue yonder, there are a few essential things to consider to make sure you have a fun but safe adventure on your off-road trip.

1. Stock extra supplies

Be sure to have plenty of food, water and fuel—enough to sustain your group in the event of a breakdown or other mishap that leaves you without ready access to supplies. Map-out stops for fuel and water along your route so that you know exactly where you can access supplies and emergency services. Also be sure to note the longest distance between supply sources, even if your trip is not especially remote.

2. Know the risks of driving in remote places

Keep aware of weather conditions along your route several weeks before heading out. Many tracks can experience heavy flooding during the wet season, making them impassable. Bushfires are another environmental factor to be aware of, as is wildlife. Always be wary of bounding kangaroos and wandering cattle that may cross into your path. Call ahead to local visitor centres along your route to check current road conditions and ask about potential hazards.

3. Check for land permits

Many tracks pass through private and Aboriginal land holdings, so it's important to obtain all necessary permits before your trip to avoid legal complications along the way. You should also call local police stations at the beginning and end of your trek to make them aware of your intended travel itinerary. This helps them monitor thru-traffic and ensures your party is accounted for in the event that you require emergency assistance.

4. Enjoy the solitude—with a friend

Regardless of your level of experience, it's always good to travel with another vehicle. John Cantrell, a lifelong 4WD enthusiast and certified 4WD training instructor, says "Even if you're experienced, I'm not an advocate of attempting remote tracks on your own." Tracks are constantly changing, so even if you are familiar with a route, you never know when an unexpected obstacle may arise.

While driving in a convoy is safest, 3-4 vehicles should be the maximum. Tracks can become crowded, and large convoys can make it difficult for other vehicles to pass by, especially when there is only one lane.

5. Be realistic about your 4WD skills

It's important (especially for beginners) to fully understand the risks of off-roading and be realistic about your personal ability level. John says "It's good to assess your experience in your own mind before heading out and consider taking a training course first. Keep in mind, there's a big difference between driving a Commodore and a Land Rover." Off-road driving requires a particular skillset that driving on a road will not prepare you for. Taking a course will also ensure that you know how to lessen unnecessary wear and tear on your vehicle and avoid excess fuel consumption.

6. Consider your company

You may want to consider how busy the track may be for your intended trip, because chances are good that you won't be the only one out there who's investigated the best time of year to travel. For example, John says "If you travel through the Simpson Desert during school holidays, it can become really crowded, but sometimes, it just depends on the route. We once did Hay River and went four days without seeing a single vehicle," he

adds.

7. Mind the hills

Never drive over a hill before first checking to see exactly what's on the other side. You never know when a seemingly benign slope might have a sudden drop-off, dip or other obstacle just over the crest. Also be wary of oncoming vehicles, particularly if it's a single-lane track. Sound a warning horn, flick on your headlights, fly a flag on the front of your vehicle and remain alert when faced with a hill or dune, or whenever visibility might be limited.

8. Approach water courses with caution

River crossings are a favourite challenge for some, but even shallow streams should be approached with caution. While most 4WD vehicles can plough through water 60cm deep without special preparations, hidden depressions, sand or strong currents can create unforeseen complications. Hop out before crossing and see if you can get across yourself first. If you can't swim it, definitely don't attempt to drive through it. Spray your vehicle's electrical components with a water repellent and if you have manual windows, roll them down before crossing. Do not attempt river crossings at night and remember to allow your brakes to dry out afterwards.

9. Driving on sand is a special skill

Driving through sand poses a unique set of challenges. Adjusting your tyre pressure is essential throughout the duration of your trip—regardless of the terrain—and it is particularly crucial on sand. The recommended pressure is 140kPa to begin with, but this will change depending on the weight of your load as well as the firmness of the sand. Try to stay on existing tyre

tracks, as the sand is likely to be firmer here. When descending a dune, keep the nose of your vehicle pointed straight downhill while maintaining a controlled speed, and avoid braking.

10. Getting bumped on corrugated 4WD track

You're certain to encounter corrugated track, which can make your ride uncomfortable if not handled properly. If your tyres are over-inflated, this will accentuate the ruts, sending you bouncing off your seat while your vehicle endures unnecessary stress. While driving too fast can be dangerous, it's also important to not go too slowly (unless needed). The goal is to 'float' over the corrugations, which can usually be achieved at a speed of 80kmh in good conditions. Well-maintained shock absorbers will also keep the ride smooth.

Sourced from Australian Geographic