The ultimate backpacker guide to buying a van for your Aussie road trip
Introduction

Backpacking around the driest inhabited country on Earth is a rite of passage for many international travellers, and something Aussies know all too well requires a reliable and versatile beast of a vehicle to go the distance. For this reason, the second hand van has become the backpackers’ transport of choice.

This guide is designed to prepare travellers for Australia’s precarious open roads. It covers the importance of mechanical checks, the legalities of licensing, registration and insurance, and some essential supplies for an outback adventure.

Discover the pros and cons of going it alone, some obscure attractions to write home about, and how to pimp your van to ensure it commands respect amongst rival vehicles on the road.

But first, commandeering the van of your dreams...
Finding the right car

Your four starting criteria are: reliable, functional, affordable and legal - anything else is a bonus. Don’t be bamboozled by fold-out spice racks and free hammocks before a qualified mechanic gets the chance to tell you the fuel tank is hissing and half the engine is missing. Here’s what you - or a qualified mechanic - should be turning your attention to first:

Mechanical checklist and how to avoid a lemon

Mechanics have no interest in whether you buy the car of not; they just want to be paid. This puts them in a neutral position to give you an objective, qualified and comprehensive review of the vehicle’s health before you invest in a lemon. If you know a thing or two about cars, or you’re happy to get down and dirty under the bonnet, here’s what to look for:

- **Radiator**: check the liquid level reaches the ‘full’ line and doesn’t have an oily surface or rusty appearance. Also feel the radiator hose to make sure it’s not squishy.

- **Brakes**: make sure the hand brake holds the van firmly on a hill, or you’re going to have to chock the tyres with phone books, which is fine - until you forget.
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Rust: is it an innocent little cosmetic patch on the paint surface, or something more sinister like frame rust, which can compromise the car’s crash resistance and allow dangerous fumes to creep into the cab?

Oil leaks: if you return to find an oil patch where the car was parked after a test drive, proceed with caution. Check the oil for a dark or milky consistency and a burnt smell, which can indicate serious engine issues.

Damage: walk the perimetre of the car looking for mismatched paint, dents, scratches and bent panels that could indicate the car has been in an accident.

Glass: check for tiny cracks, which easily turn into big cracks - windscreens are expensive to replace.

Warning lights: red lights, flashing lights and broken dashboard lights - double-check ALL lights! Remember to test brake lights, headlights and the inner console too.

Air-conditioning: check for cold air, hot air and variable fan speed. Four wheel driving with the windows down isn’t everybody’s idea of fun.

Tyres: uneven tyre tread can mean wheel misalignment, low pressure, poor suspension or worn absorbers. Bald tyres are not only dangerous, but illegal. Stick a match in the tread groove - if you can see the head, it’s bald.

Exhaust: when cars feel sick they leak white, black or blue smoke out the exhaust. Don’t sign up for a sick car.

Internal: check the condition of upholstery, floor mats, seat belts and rear view mirror.

ADVICE FROM THOSE WHO’VE GONE BEFORE

- DON’T RISK IT -

HAVE A QUALIFIED MECHANIC INSPECT THE VEHICLE!
Other essential items to check

When you’re confident the car is in good condition, make sure you’re not going to be dragged into a criminal investigation by failing to cross the ‘t’s and dot the ‘i’s.

- **Roadworthy certificate**: don’t buy a car without a roadworthy certificate. If the owner hasn’t bothered to have it road-worthied, it’s probably because it’s beyond affordable repair to do so.

- **Registration**: make sure the details of the person selling the car match the information on the registration certificate, including full name, number plate, VIN (vehicle identification number) and engine number.

- **Finance owing**: find the engine’s VIN (usually located inside the door frame or manual) and run a search on [www.revs.com.au](http://www.revs.com.au) to ensure there is no money owing on the car - or you might be buying more than you bargained for.

- **Market price**: are you getting ripped off? Is the price too good to be true? Refer to [www.redbook.com.au](http://www.redbook.com.au) for reliable Australian automotive pricing advice.

- **Suitability**: ensure the vehicle meets your needs. Are you going to be able to access hard to reach 4WD camping spots? And is there enough room for you and your partner to comfortably canoodle in the back?

**Negotiating**

You wouldn’t buy a house at asking price, so don’t accept a van at ad price. Have a firm idea of what you’re prepared to spend, put your poker face on and play the game. Decide your ceiling and floor price before making an offer at least $500 lower than asking price. It’s unlikely they’ll accept your first offer, so be prepared with a counteroffer of a few hundred more than your original price. When you reach your ceiling figure, it's time to walk away.
Other important considerations

Good onya, you scored a van! Now before you race off into the sunset, there’s a few financial and legal considerations to deal with first:

**Fuel**: for a guide on fuel costs across Australia, visit [www.MotorMouth.com](http://www.MotorMouth.com), showing 7-day rolling price averages for cities listed.

**Camping**: even if you sleep in the van, you’re eventually going to need amenities, which generally means paying for a site. Consult Lonely Planet for fees, ratings and campsite locations before taking off into the wifi-less wilderness, or invest in a camping guidebook.

**Road rules**: the most important thing to remember is keep left! For more detailed rules in each state/territory visit the respective government websites. Heading to Melbourne? Learn the hook turn!

**Tolls**: you can pay highway tolls post-travel, but this could end up costing hundreds of dollars in late fees if you don’t. Order and pay for an automatic my-Etoll tag that sits neatly under your rear view mirror and charges directly to your credit card.
Registration & insurance requirements

Obviously you’re an awesome driver, but it’s not you we’re worried about; it’s the other crazies on the road. Before you hit the highway, make sure you’ve covered off on the following:

- **CTP**: Compulsory Third Party insurance is personal injury insurance and it’s mandatory to register a vehicle in Australia - including backpackers’ vans! In all states except NSW, QLD and the ACT, the government includes CTP with your registration fee.

- **Registration**: if you don’t register your van, you will pay for it in fines. Get it over and done with at www.australia.gov.au/topics/transport/registration-and-licences.

- **Third Party Insurance**: this can include cover or loss against someone else’s property, cover for damage caused by uninsured drivers to your vehicle, and fire and theft cover, in the event your van is stolen or catches fire.

- **Comprehensive Insurance**: this can include accidental damage, prangs, earthquakes, explosions, fires, floods, storms, thefts, tsunamis and vandalism. So just about anything except armageddon.

- **International Drivers License**: in most parts of Australia you can drive on your overseas licence as long as it’s valid and the conditions are transferable. I.e. You’re not attempting to manoeuvre a Winnebago with a motorbike licence. For more info visit [here](#).

- **Breakdown Insurance**: emergency roadside assist will help you with flat batteries, flat tyres, fuel emergencies, and retrieving keys from locked cars. You can take your chances, but signing up over the phone when you’ve blown a gasket can require a compulsory two-year membership.
Kitting out your vehicle

Having the most pimped out van in the campsite is the fastest way to make friends. Your van is going to be home for the duration of your trip, so kit it out to make sure it’s functional, fun and safe for the long journey ahead.

What are the special requirements for travel in the outback?

It’s easy to get swept up in the excitement of a road trip and take off before adequately preparing. It’s all fun and games until you break down 800km out of Woop Woop with no prospect of a rescue and a serious case of heat stroke. But that won’t happen - if you’re prepared!

**Water:** take 20 litres for emergencies and an additional 4 litres per person per day. Sounds like a lot. And it is. Until you get lost.

**GPS:** help rescue teams and roadside assist track you down without having to deploy that national air force. It might just save your life.

**Permits:** It is possible to drive into national parks without paying for a permit, but don’t be a crumb. Money collected from permits is used to provide clean, working amenities for campers, so pay your dues to the information centre on the way in.

**Tyres:** take at least one spare. And when you’ve used that spare, bee-line to the closest mechanic and have the damaged tyre repaired.
**Flares:** overkill? You won’t think so when you’re stranded in negative desert temperatures with 2 minute noodles to keep you warm.

**Music:** drop into an electrical store and pick up a smartphone adapter or auxiliary cord. Community radio stations are great for the 80s, but range is limited, so make sure you’re downloaded 100 Greatest Aussie Pub Rock Songs for in between towns.

**Games:** ‘Would you rather’ never gets old, but for something G-rated to play with strangers, a deck of cards is the ultimate ice breaker to accompany campsite tinnies.

**Rest:** don’t be a hero. Authorities recommend stopping 15 minutes every two hours. But under no circumstances whatsoever stop at Wolf Creek. You’ve been warned.

**How to make everything fit? Cool accessories for your vehicle.**

Innovation is the name of the game, space saving is the aim. You don’t have to spend half your holiday fund on gadgets and gizmos to pimp your van - DIY is way more fun, and you’re bound to find a bargain on Gumtree’s Automotive Parts & Accessories. Here are some tips on making the most of your space:

**Slide outs:** every horizontal surface presents an opportunity to add a sneaky slide out feature underneath such as trays, chopping boards and cards tables.

**Pockets:** every vertical surface - including seat backs - presents an opportunity to add pockets and hanging organisers to store everything from maps to kitchen utensils.

**Peg board:** these can be great for hanging anything from jewellery to cooking pans - add some hooks and Bob’s your uncle!

**Hanging baskets:** great for clothes, food and other frequently used items requiring easy access.

**Hideaway hooks:** pull them out when you need to hang your wet Budgy Smugglers, tuck them away when they’re dry. Great for tea towels too!

**Suction cups:** not ready to drill holes in your van? Use suction cups for hanging all manner of stuff.
Finding a travel buddy or going solo

To go it alone, or take a pal - a decision that could multiply the fun factor, or devastate the relationship. Here’s a breakdown to help you decide whether to take a mate:

- **PROS** -
  - You have someone to take photos of you - selfies should never exceed 25% of your overall travel pics.
  - Fuel expenses halve, so you only have to eat baked beans twice a week.
  - There is less food wastage - buying single portion perishables can sometimes be a challenge.
  - Companionship - it can get lonely on the road without a friend to share the ups and downs.
  - Shared driving means you’ll safely cover more ground and have time to enjoy the scenery from the passenger seat.
  - Safety in numbers makes you less vulnerable to thieves and other unsavoury characters.

- **CONS** -
  - Making friends in twos is harder - you’re not as approachable and less inclined to venture outside your comfort zone.
  - Travelling with someone can detract from your personal reflection, contemplation, and your motivation to travel in the first place.
  - Shared decision making can mean doing things you don’t want to do, and the occasional compromise can begin to feel like it’s infringing on your freedom.

Why not pick and choose who you travel with on different legs of the trip? Check out Gumtree’s Rideshare & Travel Partners to find your ultimate backpacking buddy for when you want a friend to join your journey.
Awesome and unexpected things to look out for on a roadtrip in Australia

If you like surprises, you’re in for a treat. Just when you think you’ve seen it all and experienced everything Australia has to offer, you’re likely to be confronted by one of these:

**Oversized inanimate objects:** bananas, sheep, rocking horses, bulls, beer cans, crabs and boxing crocodiles. Don’t miss The Big Potato, whatever you do.

**Kangaroos:** the national icon has become a national pest control issue, but they can still be seen hopping around on dusk and can cause serious road accidents, so go slow!

**Spiders:** there are around 10,000 spider species in Australia. But don’t panic, some are the size of your hand, so you’ll see them coming.

**Termite mounds:** two-metre high piles with elaborate caste systems. Some of them like to play dress ups. Keep an eye out roadside.

**UFOs:** Wycliffe Well in the Northern Territory is the UFO capital of Australia. Don’t blink or you’ll miss it. The town, that is.

**World’s largest cattle station:** at 24,000 km² the South Australian station is slightly larger than Israel. Our beef is kind of a big deal.

**Camels:** Australia has the world’s largest population of wild camels. Go figure.

**Koalas:** visit the world’s only blue-eyed koala at Dreamworld on the Gold Coast.

**Races:** not just horses; cockroaches, toads, chickens and anything else you can bet on.
Road tripping around Australia in a second hand van is a life-changing experience; from burnt red sunsets and rich indigenous culture, to multicultural capitals boasting four of the world’s top 10 most livable cities. Investing in a reliable, functional, affordable and legally certified van will ensure your road trip is memorable for all the right reasons. If in doubt about the mechanical integrity of a van, hire the services of a qualified mechanic for peace of mind to enjoy uninterrupted backpacking adventures from country to coast.