

ROAD TRAINING

PLANNING IS EVERYTHING WHEN YOU'RE ABOUT TO EMBARK ON YOUR FIRST TRIP

Four months into a two-year Australian camping odyssey Karen and Cameron Wheatley and their two children Zane, 8, and Maya, 7, know a thing or two about being beginners on the wide open road. And they have some tips for those keen to follow in their tyre marks. “The biggest tip we’d offer anyone who’s had a passing thought about packing up and getting out to see Australia is simple – just do it, you won’t be sorry,” says Karen.

Karen is blogging on their journey, offering insights into the best spots to stop, see the sights or for the kids to play. The young family from the NSW mid-north coast have grown to know their Toyota Prado and Jayco Starcraft caravan inside and out but are facing new and interesting surprises each day. Most of them bring great joy while others can be optimistically put down to learning experiences. “Let’s just say never travel with a caravan’s toilet full,” Karen laughs.

Here are her top 10 tips for beginner travellers.



The Wheatley family

1 Pack smart.

“Whether you’re camping or caravanning, it’s a great idea to have a couple of nights trial camping, that way you’ll discover exactly what you really need on the road,” Karen says. “You’ll be surprised by what you use and what you don’t and it’s better to find out before you leave.”

2 Know your gear.

The worst time to be learning how to operate your equipment is on the fly. Get to know your car, caravan or tent intimately before you leave. You don’t want to be learning how to change a tyre in the middle of the Nullarbor. “Cameron is really glad he learned how to do a full service on the car

himself so we don’t need a mechanic for little things,” Karen says. Practice makes perfect. Before you take the plunge and make a major purchase, it’s a good idea to try before you buy.

A company such as Apollo (apollocamper.com.au) offers a range of motorhome and caravan rentals for a test run.

3 Find heaven in the details.

Think outside the box when planning your trip. Is it school holidays? What sort of space are you going to need? Karen and Cameron didn’t realise how handy it would be when they bought a caravan that allowed them to fold their bed up during the day. “It means we have heaps of living space during the day when we don’t need

the bed,” Karen says. “It’s like a proper living room and when the kids are in bed, we can fold it back down. Any of those little things are really worth looking out for.”

4 Locals and other travellers are great.

You can explore all you like and read all the books, but nothing will give you a greater, more up-to-date insight than talking to locals and other travellers. “It’s not just the best way to find out where to go but to share tips,” Karen says. “Caravan/holiday park operators are also a font of knowledge that you’re crazy not to tap into.”

5 Get organised and keep it that way.

There are endless products and methods to



make life easier on the road but it really comes down to working out what works for you. Karen and Cameron find the plastic storage boxes that they bought to fit snugly on the floor of their caravan while on the move, are invaluable, as would be the case with luggage and storage items you keep in the vehicle.

"We've also got things like collapsible buckets, which always come in handy but don't take up much space," Karen says. Little things make a big difference.

6 Slow and steady is just better.

When towing a caravan, travellers have to concede that everything is going to happen slower than usual. But that's not necessarily a bad thing. "We were told to

stick to 90km/h to save on petrol, but we've found sitting on 80km/h has even greater benefits," says Karen. "We save even more on petrol and find it's more courteous to the trucks on the road." Plus, what's the point in seeing this great country if it flies past in the blink of an eye?

7 Research, research and research.

It's all well and good to be spontaneous but it's easier if you plan. "Little things such as finding out where you can refill your gas bottles," says Karen. Are you looking for a major event or trying to avoid it? You don't want to arrive in Tamworth the week of the Country Music Festival if you are trying to avoid the crowds. "Check out the deals you

can get with caravan/holiday park chain memberships (www.big4.com.au, www.familyparks.com.au, www.toptouristparks.com.au), it could make a big difference to your budget," Karen says. Check the forecast before going away for the weekend or if on a big trip, make sure you aren't planning to pitch a tent if the weather is expected to turn for the worse. If you're worried about weather in a certain place, remember most parks have luxury cabins that mean you don't always have to rough it.

8 Kids need to be entertained.

It's a matter of trial and error, but kids on the road will of course need something to avoid driving you mad with "are we there

yet?" and "I'm bored". Karen and Cameron have struck a few veins of gold. "It's one thing to have things to do when we're stopped but it's a whole other matter to keep the kids happy on the road," Karen says. "If they're not of reading age or can't read in the car, we've found talking books are brilliant. They get the stories they love and they're not missing out on the scenery, which is important to us."

9 Embrace technology.

Karen and Cameron swear by their smart phone. "We've got an iPhone. It's great for so many things but the most useful features for us are the inbuilt GPS and the modem, so we have access to the internet anywhere," Karen says.

"It can also be a spirit level, a compass, so many things all in one. When you're travelling, everything needs to pull its weight, so items which perform multiple functions are a godsend."

10 Relationship strain.

When travelling, it means you'll be spending much more time in your companion's pocket than you normally would. "It's a matter of knowing when you need some alone time and asking for it before you get to the end of your patience," Karen says.

*Read karen's blog at www.getaboutaustralia.com.au
For more tips see www.welovethiscountry.com.au*

