

PLANNING FOR THE CANNING

**An Interview with Jeremy Perks, Director, Global Gypsies Tours & Training
conducted in May 2013**



So you're going to tackle the Canning Stock Route, the '*Loneliest 4WD Track in the World*'. Well, good for you! But if I only give you one piece of advice... please - do your homework first!

Of all the 4WD self-drive expeditions you'll undertake in Australia, the Canning is the toughest. Stretching over 2000 kms, passing through three deserts and with over 900 sand dunes to traverse, it's not for the feint hearted or inexperienced.

At Global Gypsies, even though we've been running outback safaris for over 15 years, when we tackle the Canning, it still takes us months of planning and preparation.

But when you look at all the websites, see all the 'self-drive' ads, read the chat forums, check out the maps and fire up your GPS , you could be forgiven for thinking that it's going to be a walk in the park. Well, let me tell you that it's not.

You need to have your wits about you and know what you're doing to travel on the Canning and to get you and your vehicle home in one piece. The safest way is to go with a professional 'tag-along-tour' operator, or a 4WD club or a group of experienced friends. You need a robust vehicle and you need to be completely self-sufficient for a minimum of three weeks. There's only one road in and one road out and there are few or no facilities along the way. So for the safety of you and your family and fellow travellers - please plan and prepare properly! And if you don't do it for them, do it for me! I don't want to be the one rescuing you out there!

What To Do Before You Leave

Before you embark on your Canning adventure, you should be sure your vehicle is up to the challenge; you should also have a basic working knowledge of bush mechanics. For example, do you know how to change a wheel bearing or fan belt, especially on the modern 'single belt' type of 4WD? Can you repair a radiator if it gets damaged? And if you have a flat, can you get a tyre off and back onto a rim safely?

I'm a qualified mechanic and am pretty good with my hands so repairing things is second nature to me. If that's not your strong point then I encourage you to take a bush mechanics course or, at the very least, bone up on some manuals.

How are your 4WD skills? I'm sure you'll say, "Just fine, thanks!" But have you taken a 4WD course with a professional so you know exactly what to do and what NOT to do? Has anyone else in your party ever taken a 4WD course so that they can take over should you be incapacitated? There are several excellent 4WD training companies in WA and a course usually costs around \$300 or so. Small investment when you consider the possible expense of *not* taking one.

What about your gear? Have you got the appropriate 4WD recovery gear and emergency communications equipment? Will you be carrying a sat phone, EPIRB or HF radio? And does everyone in your party know how to use them? "Of course!" you say. But have a practice session with your fellow travellers - you'll be surprised how few of them know that you have to put the antenna up on a sat phone to make it work in an emergency!

How many spare tyres have you got? Yes, they take up space but you need a MINIMUM of two spares. Before you depart, make sure they are inflated and have good tread; check the jack while you're at it to make sure it's in good working order. It's also a good idea to carry a couple of inner tubes (the correct size!) that may be needed for tyre problems.

You also need to ensure you have sufficient fuel. You can only get it at Kunawarrtji, about 1200 kms from Wiluna, or by arranging a fuel drop with Capricorn Roadhouse in advance (a service which has not been available for awhile but is due to start up again later this year).

The Canning is a natural born killer for vehicles. If you're thinking of hiring a 4WD vehicle make sure that the hire company is insuring it while you're out there. Most hire companies won't even insure their 4WD's when they go off-road, let alone if they travel on this remote track!

And PLEASE don't take a trailer. Inconvenient I know, but they are usually the first item that needs repairing. Plus they churn up the track – apart from the environmental impact, the damage affects other travelers who come through later. You'll probably see plenty of other folks towing trailers, but please, consider the environment and tread lightly on the land.

And while we're on that subject, remember to get the appropriate permits (for details visit <http://permits.canningstockroute.net.au>) and to treat Aboriginal sites with respect – the Calvert and Carnarvon Ranges are off limits so please don't go there.

Be a Survivor

Remember Tom Hanks in *Castaway*? Ever wondered how you'd go in similar circumstances or in this case, in the desert? Once you get on the Canning you're literally in the middle of nowhere – no phones, fuel stations, hotels, caravan parks, shops - nothing. With the increased popularity of the Canning these days there could be some other travellers around, but it's not really fair (or 100% guaranteed!) to rely on them to get you out of trouble.

And just in case you do end up on your own, how good are your bush survival skills? For example, did you know that you can survive a maximum of three days without water? In outback conditions, especially the desert, most people die from dehydration well before then – some in a matter of hours.

Would you know what to do if someone gets lost or wanders off? How to build a shelter? Or source water supplies? A basic bush survival course could literally be a life-saver, but if that's not an option, then at least hit the books.

You also need to know what to do in case of injuries or accidents. I've taken both Senior First Aid and Remote Area First Aid Courses at St John's that teach you how to cope with few or no resources. As a commercial tour operator, it's imperative that I have these skills, carry a first aid box and know how to use it, but I'd recommend a first aid course to anyone – particularly if you're doing this particular expedition.

I've utilised the knowledge I've gained from these courses time and time again, and yes, I have had to use it several times on the Canning. You owe it to yourself and those in your party to take at least a basic first aid course. No discussion...just do it.

What to Take

Now here's a subject as long as your arm! Before our tours we hold a Pre-Departure Workshop and issue a comprehensive Pre-Departure Kit. We make and give our clients lists and more lists about what to take in the way of vehicle spares, food, equipment and more. If you're going with mates I suggest you do something similar. But you've got to be sensible with what you carry - a mistake most people make is overloading their vehicle, it's a case of 'too much gear, no idea'.

For instance, think about weight. One litre of water weighs one kilo. You'll need at least 4-5 litres per person every single day. Traveling at a reasonable pace so you don't damage your vehicle from Halls Creek to Wiluna takes about 20 days so with two of you in the vehicle, that's about 200 litres of water just for starters. Ok, so you can usually refill your water supplies along the way, but with more travellers on the Canning each year, there's no guarantee that there will be enough water in the wells to replenish your supplies (or that it will be potable), so it's best to be self-sufficient.

Add to water the weight of your fuel, food, fridge, genny, pots and pans, plates, cutlery, chairs, table, tent, sleeping bags, recovery and communications gear, vehicle spares, first aid kit, washing basin and clothes and so on. Do the sums for yourself – it soon adds up!

What to Eat

With the magic of 'cryovacking', depending on who you talk to, meat can last between two and four weeks in the fridge. We don't take a freezer because it takes up too much space and is heavy, so a little creative thinking is required on the cook's part to vary the meals using cans, packets and jars supplemented by a small amount of refrigerated and fresh food. We use our gas cooker and, if fuel supplies are available, a small open fire. There are some wonderful outback and camp oven cookbooks available now – visit www.exploroz.com/shop for ideas.

Many of our safaris are fully-catered, but as we can't tow our catering trailer on the Canning, it's DIY for us and for the clients. We usually eat pretty healthily at home so like to maintain a reasonable content of veggies and fibre and keep meals interesting when we're on the road. And yes, we plan our day-to-day menus ahead of time and record them on yet another list! We also take some extra supplies just in case we get stranded unexpectedly.

In addition to meat which we serve up every three days or so (usually in casseroles to stretch it), we enjoy risottos (arborio rice, tinned mushrooms, peas, salmon, stock cubes, dried parmesan and a dash of wine – voila!), pastas with interesting packaged sauces and vegetable stir fries or curries (tinned or root veggies can become almost gourmet fare with a touch of curry paste and tinned coconut milk!). We like spicy foods so use those wonderful (and inexpensive) sachet Indian meals maybe adding some chick peas, tinned corn or other high-protein ingredients served with rice.

For treats, along with the mandatory damper, we also bake yummy cakes in the camp oven with mixes using powdered eggs (or buy cake mix that requires no eggs - just in case they break along the way); and there's always instant pancake mix (just add water!) for the occasional leisurely breakfast.

We'll be running two self-drive Canning tag-along-tours in 2013 - one in May and one in July – and we started gearing up for these challenging expeditions months beforehand. If you're intending to conquer the Canning, then hopefully you'll put in the hard yards, too. Happy travels and maybe we'll see you along the track!

For more details contact Global Gypsies on 9341 6727.

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