

## TENT, SWAG or CAMPER-TRAILER

We're assuming at the outset that you're going seriously off road, so a camping trailer has replaced a caravan on your potential purchase list. That means your choice is between swags, tents and camping trailers.

### Swags

Swags are as fashionable as R M Williams boots, but that doesn't mean they're necessarily the right choice for you and yours on a long bush trip.

The modern swag is the descendant of the drover's canvas bed roll - horse-mounted 'accommodation' that could be stowed across a saddle cloth or thrown into a dray. The most popular type was a simple canvas bag with a fold-over top flap.



The rolled-up design of the swag kept dust and rain out of the bedding while in transit. Once laid out on the ground the swag offered some protection from wind and rain, but our ancestors knew the limitations of the swag and would seek a sheltered spot, where possible, for additional protection. The traditional simple swag is still available, but most modern swags have improved security against unwanted visitors, either of the flying or wriggling type. Mesh panels, a short pole and hoop to elevate the canvas 'roof' above the bedding, waterproof floor material and ground pegs have made most modern swags mini-tents, in effect.



There's nothing quite like snuggling with your partner in a double swag, with its top panel opened to the starlit desert night sky, gazing at the brightness that eludes city dwellers, but, conversely, there's nothing worse than hearing the first heavy raindrop thud onto the canvas.

Swags aren't much fun in heavy rain: when you unzip the top to get out the downpour soaks your pillow; and because you and your bedding are so close to the sides it's only a matter of time before the wet exterior becomes a damp interior.

I can remember one stormy night when I finally gave up trying to keep dry after the heavens opened and stepped out of the soggy swag for an impromptu bush shower!

Another problem with swags is a 'closeness' that makes them uncomfortable in the hot, humid conditions that prevail in the tropics.

Many people drop their swags close to their vehicles and stretch tarps from gutters or roof racks for rain protection. This arrangement works very well. Others lay swags in the back of unloaded utes. Years of experience have taught us that the best swag expeditions are winter desert ones, where the chances of rain are slight, or on shorter trips in fine, cool weather.

Swags are ideal for couples, because a double swag packs into a space that's not much bigger than the volume of a compact tent and bedding roll. However, swags for a family of four – two adults in a double swag and two kids in individual singles – take up a lot of vehicle space.

Stowing swags on a roof rack is OK, but don't expect them to stay completely dry if it's raining hard and they're uncovered – the speed of the vehicle forces rainwater into the fabric at an accelerated rate. Dust build up is another problem and, while it mightn't get inside the swags, makes handling them a dirty business. A roof rack cover is a handy way of keeping roof top loads clean and dry.

## Tents

It's difficult keeping up with the different tent designs these days, but this choice makes it possible to get exactly what you want. The days when everyone pitched in to raise the heavy family tent and then pile inside a floorless, canvas erection are fortunately behind us. Modern tents are easily erected, for the most part, and are much more weather resistant than their predecessors, so it's no longer important to tell the kids not to touch the fabric when it rains.



Tents are as old as mankind, but the invention of synthetic materials has made design changes that weren't possible in the days of plain cotton canvas.

Tent makers aren't intentional fibbers, but the accepted method of defining the size of a tent is deceptive. You wouldn't describe a normal suburban house as having the capacity to sleep 100 people, but tent makers size their tents by the number of people that can lie side by side inside them. It's a good idea to halve the claimed occupant numbers to get a realistic idea of the size of a tent – a four-person rating really means a two-person tent.

Tents can be separated into two basic types: standers and crouchers. A tent you can't stand up in is a pain in the neck – literally – so this type is best kept for kids, who love the cubby-house effect of a croucher.

An exception to the croucher rule is the roof-top tent with drop-sides, because there's ample private standing room on the ground beside the vehicle when the tent is erected. (Roof toppers are great for snake and croc haters, but immobilise your vehicle once they're erect.)

Another exception to the no-croucher rule is if you intend to do alpine camping in winter, where a low-profile mountain-climbing tent is the preferred type.

Modern tents pack down to small packages, so it's not unrealistic to have one for the adults and a separate tent for the kids.

The quickest to erect tents have their main framing attached to the fabric sides and roof, so that the whole assembly goes up together, before any ground pegs need to be hammered in.





Different tents suit different purposes. If your travel plans are for overnight stops you don't want a tent that takes ages to put up and take down. In contrast, a quick-erect tent may not make the ideal beachside holiday home for three weeks at a stretch.

Regardless of what tent you decide on you need plenty of practice in putting it up and taking it down – before you arrive at a bush campsite in a howling gale, in the dark, with rain clouds threatening. It's much kinder to the tents and the nerves if you know what you're doing.

Another important factor in tent selection is the available packing space in or on your vehicle and this brings us to camping trailers.

## Trailers

As many would-be bush travellers have discovered, by the time the family and the freight are lined up alongside the 4x4 it's obvious that the whole assembly ain't gonna fit. And it's not fair to ask father to decide between No 3 son and the beer fridge. Enter the trailer.

A trailer is less of a towing problem these days than it was a few years ago, because today's 4x4s have higher engine outputs, so towing a trailer needn't mean struggling up hills.



Another factor in favour of towing a trailer is the limited payload of most of today's 4x4 wagons. Because most of them have put on weight, in the form of larger power trains and more creature comforts, their payloads are limited and, even if you could put all your intended freight on board, you'd be overloaded.

It's the same situation with most crew cab utes, even though on paper they have enough payload capacity to swallow all your freight. The problem with crew cabs is that the cargo tray is mostly behind the rear axle, so if you put the rated payload in there it'll overload the rear end and take weight off the front.

Better to put the pudding on another axle.

It's important at this point to consider where you intend to go off-road, because there are some destinations where a trailer will prove to be a liability.



Trailers can be difficult to manoeuvre on tight mountain trails and through deep water crossings. Trailers are also a problem in soft sand, putting a lot of strain on the towing vehicle, which is why you see few camping trailers on Fraser Island.

If you can get around those hurdles then a camper trailer could be the go.

Camper designs are varied, but can be split into two basic types: those that are great for overnight camping and those that are more suitable for longer stays. Overnighters normally have flip-over lids

that pull out the tent as the lid folds down to become a floor. Longer-stay designs are generally roomier, but take longer to set up.

Get the type that you really need. If you go for a camper trailer make sure it's really an off-road design, otherwise you risk watching it fall to bits as you drive on rough tracks.

Don't buy a camper that's over-furnished: fridges, for example, don't belong in trailers that pound over corrugated roads.

If you're in doubt about the viability of a camper trailer, hire one and see if the concept works for you.



## Mix 'n' match

Swags, tents and camper trailers aren't necessarily mutually exclusive choices: we know people who have the lot and choose what they need for different trips.

A swag mattress doubles as a bed inside a tent.

Having a variety of camping options lets you choose the best bush 'house' for each destination.

