

PRE-TRIP VEHICLE CHECKS

Some pre-trip checking could have prevented many breakdowns we've seen.

The obvious place to start your pre-trip check is with your **tyres**. Worn, low-tread-depth tyres are fine for dry bitumen and sand use, but nothing else.

Tyres also wear out around the sidewalls, through rubbing on kerbs, or from damage by stones or fallen branches, so it's important to check the inner and outer sidewalls as well as the treads.

The next logical wear check should be the **brakes**. You don't need to be a brake expert to look at the remaining pad thickness and judge whether there's enough 'meat' left.

Check the disc faces for deep scarring – mild scouring is normal, but deep hills and valleys in the disc face suggest urgent examination by an expert.

Suspension components come in for a hammering and there are a number of obvious wear points. Shock absorber bushes should be uniformly cylindrical, not twisted or crushed on one side. Some shocker bushes are easily replaced – particularly the two-piece, tapered types – but others are tricky and are best left to the pros.

Shock absorber tubes get peppered by flying stones and badly dented shockers should be replaced. Shock absorbers should be dry on the outside and their shafts should be polished and unpitted. Any sign of oil on the shocker body should be treated as an indication of imminent failure.

Leaf springs are hard on shackles and shackle rubbers, so look for misalignment in these components.

Scratches and dings on the bottom surfaces of chassis rails, cross members and protection plates are normal, but severe dents can point to concealed trouble. For instance, a deeply dented protection plate over an engine or automatic transmission sump may be pressing on the sump itself and distorting it. A dented sump may affect oil flow inside the engine or transmission.

A dinged **fuel tank** protection plate may hide damage underneath.

Exhaust systems are vulnerable and need careful examination. Deep scarring on mufflers and catalytic converters may result in leaks of poisonous exhaust gas. Pipes that are crushed out of round can restrict exhaust gas flow and create harmful backpressure inside the engine.

Spare tyres mounted under body can be damaged by rocks and sharp objects, so check the spare's sidewall for cuts.

A **propeller shaft** can be bent when the vehicle rests on it in rocky terrain, or when climbing over fallen trees. A bent propshaft causes vibration and also wears out transmission and axle components.

Tow bars are vulnerable; because they hang out at the back end of things, so check for any signs of distortion. Also make sure the mounting bolts are tight and in good condition.

Wiring and trailer connection plugs are frequently badly positioned and can be damaged as the tail end scrapes the ground. Replace and relocate plugs and wiring that show damage. When you get out from underneath, flick the bonnet catch and peer inside the **engine bay**. Look for signs of worn wires, pipes and hoses. Also check the condition of all rotating parts – particularly drive belts. When in doubt, chuck them out.

Radiators can work loose on their mounts, so check for security and any signs of contact with other components – particularly the fan blades.

Engine mounts take a hiding on rough roads, so look for damage or signs of engine movement.

Rear doors with spare wheels mounted on them are particularly prone to hinge and striker plate wear. Some are adjustable, so make sure the door is securely located and that the rubber dust seals aren't worn.

Finish off your pre-trip check with a look at your windscreen **wiper blades**. They'll need to be in good condition for a bush trip.

Once you're satisfied your vehicle has passed its check, take a look at your **tools** and **recovery equipment**.

Everything has a use-by date and there should be no place in your support gear for kinked winch cables, frayed snatch straps, screwdrivers with twisted blades, shackles with bent pins, gouged spanners and rattly pliers.