

# Roof-Top Tents

Roof-top units can be ideal for 4WD tourers who don't want to tow anything. A typical roof-top camper weighs around 50kg, plus the weight of the rack, so is suitable to clamp to the roof of a large 4WD.

The assembly weighs around the same as a rack that's loaded with a ground sheet, tent and bedding.

A roof-top camper can be a tent or a hard-roof design and some have a fold-out top that draws the tent with it and others have a hard top roof that hinges from one end or lifts up. Sizes vary to accommodate two to four people, but a couple is ideal.

Some models attach to an existing roof rack and others are self-contained and mount to the

vehicle's rain gutters or roof-rack tracks. It's also possible to mount some roof-top designs on the top of trailers such as camper-trailers without beds and boat or jet-ski and bike trailers. Alternatively, a roof-top unit allows the 4WD to pull a horse float, a boat trailer or other special purpose trailers.

Erection time for the basic roof-top unit is about the same as for a quick-erect tent and there's no need to haul a tent and ground sheet off a roof rack. As with a tent, adding side panels and awnings adds to the erection time. Most roof-top units models don't need ground support poles, because internal struts support the opened tent. Roof-top units that fold open provide shade to the side or the rear of the vehicle and the folded-out section forms a roof for attachable side panels.

A roof-top tent is an ideal sleeping place for people who are wary of ground-based creepy-crawlies and perfect for those who visit Estuarine Crocodile areas. Most roof-toppers allow bedding and pillows to remain inside when closed for travel.

Setting up on rough ground is easier than with a tent, because you don't have to clear twigs, stones or worse, spinifex, before you can lay the ground sheet.

Roof-top campers start around the \$3000 mark, plus the rack price, which is much cheaper than a camper trailer, let alone a caravan or motorhome. As well, there's no additional vehicle registration charge.

A roof-top camper is easier to stow at home than a camper trailer. People with high garage roofs can rig up a pulley system that raises and lowers the unit, so it's stored above the vehicle, out of the weather. If that's not possible the unit can be removed and stacked vertically against a garage or shed wall

## Downsides

Our testing has shown that a roof-top camper adds around 10-15 percent to a turbo-diesel wagon's fuel consumption under legal-speed highway conditions, but petrol wagons may use up to 30 percent more.



Also, you have to find somewhere inside the vehicle or in a trailer to stow the stuff you may normally carry in a roof rack, such as empty jerry cans, gas bottles, a shovel, an additional spare tyre and camping chairs.

When camping, you must be able to park your vehicle on a level spot and you don't have the luxury of parking the 4x4 under a shady tree and setting up the tent elsewhere. Camping under trees has hazards that range from green ants in your bedding to being crushed by falling branches.

You need a certain amount of agility to open and close roof-toppers and access to the sleeping area is by ladder, which won't suit everyone. Incidentally, if you're looking at a roof-top unit, check that its ladder treads are bare-feet compatible, because you don't want to be clambering up and down in muddy boots.

Probably the biggest disadvantage is that your vehicle is immobilised once you're camped unless you pack up the whole thing and then redo it when you return.



In high-popularity areas like El Questro in the East Kimberley your precious camping spot won't be there when you get back from a drive unless you reserve your site with a lightweight tent, table and chairs.

Some roof-toppers can be lifted off their racks and used as ground tents, but we doubt that many people would go to the considerable trouble of doing that. It's similar to the situation with slide-on ute campers that can be stood on self-supporting legs while the ute drives off to do other things: a great theory, but not usually practical while on a trip.

## Try Before You Buy

Camping shows are ideal venues to research the roof-top tent market. You need to test the roof-top units you're considering, so you can see which ones are best suited to your needs. Anything that's irritating during a trial is going to become a complete pain halfway through your trip. It's also possible to hire roof-toppers.



Ventilation isn't a problem with most roof-top campers, but make sure the design incorporates rain shields above the windows. If you have to zip everything shut to keep out the rain it gets very stuffy inside a small tent. Synthetic canvas breathes better than nylon, but is heavier and takes longer to dry. The fabric sections should be easily removable for repair and the best types don't need tools for fabric removal.

A comfy bed is critical and so is mozzie and fly exclusion from the sleeping area. Mesh needs to be of good quality, with easily used zippers.