

I'm glad I booked before I left, but I didn't like having to do it.

It was only after talking to a colleague in the shop a few weeks ago about an upcoming Coorong family camping trip that he insisted:

"Make sure you pay online before you go, I recommend Avocet campground #3."

Then I recalled pulling into a campground near Mount Remarkable in South Australia's Mid North once, cash in hand ready pay for a spot to park my car and pitch a tent, only to find out sites had to be booked online.



This is the online booking page for the Coorong National Park in South Australia.

I had no phone reception, it was getting dark, kids in the car, and I needed to set up camp. So we found an empty site and settled in for the night.

I felt a little edgy. What if someone turned up who had paid for that site, I would have to move. Or if they were kind enough they might choose another site – only to be faced with the same problem. Thankfully we didn't have any issues. We stayed the night, left only footprints, and got a free night of camping.



Camping at the Avocet campground at Parnka Point, Coorong National Park, South Australia.

Booking online before you go

Back to my Coorong trip. I wondered if I would be greeted by other campers using our site when we arrived. Campers that didn't know they had to book online so thought they'd 'risk it'. I didn't want to make them pull down camp and move. They were there first after all, and if this happened in the past you would just choose another site.

Remember, this is the Aussie bush I'm talking about. The mobile reception is flaky in most places. The new online booking system is designed to book your site before you even leave the house. Thankfully I had no issues.

Is the new system common knowledge?

But there were a number of tourists and road trippers calling by and asking how to pay for a site. It doesn't seem like common knowledge that this system is in full swing. My colleague camped at the Coorong over Christmas '14 and said you could pay with cash back then.

I managed to grab the attention of a park ranger during our stay and he indicated that there have been minimal issues with the new online booking system to date. He did admit that feedback was mixed, with many people saying it takes the magic out of pulling into camp wherever your journey ends for the day.

I wonder if the Lonely Planet guide favoured by many tourists has been updated to reflect the new system?



Walking the sand flat between Bluff Island and the 'mainland' at Parnka Point, Coorong National Park, South Australia



So how do I feel about the new system?

The new system seems like a good idea and if it was a completely transparent system and you could be sure of some way to check availability at the campsite it might operate more smoothly.

Also, a way in which to transfer or cancel a booked site if you don't make your destination so others can move on in rather than leave the site empty for the night would be handy.

So I'm interested in your thoughts...

I'm all for an easy campsite booking system that ensures national parks get the dollars they need for upkeep of these wonderful assets. And I'm all for moving with the digital age. But how do we do this while keeping with the spirit of what it is to roll into a park after a long day on the road looking for a space to set up your swag or tent?

It looks like this system is being rolled out across most of the eastern states and South Australia. There seems to be mixed reviews on many discussion forums. The benefits of an online booking system, according to the authorities, is reducing instances of people 'staking claims' on campsites before long weekends.

It also mitigates the vandalism of money collection boxes. Funnily enough, the collection boxes are still on site down at the Coorong.

Where do you stand on online booking systems for campgrounds in national parks?