

There's lots of little skills to master in life, and if you travel a lot with a 4WD you'll know that packing it doesn't always happen as you'd like it to. There is an art to packing your 4WD well, and if you master it, you'll have access to what you need easily, reduce your fuel consumption and increase your comfort and safety.

Do it wrong though, and you'll end up with damaged gear, a huge fuel bill and if you have an accident, things can get nasty very quickly. If you never spent much time playing Tetris as a kid, every time you pack the 4WD you'll get an opportunity! In this post, we look at what's most important when packing your 4WD, and how to make life easier on the road.



Pack well, so you can get out of situations like this.

Pack what you actually need

The days of throwing an esky and swag in the back of your ute have passed, with most people choosing to take half of their house with them when they head away. Now, there's not necessarily anything wrong with this, but it's a good reminder to only pack what you really need. A lot of long term travellers will tell you if it can't be used for more than one purpose, leave it at home.

Taking limited items is important as you will have issues with space and weight. The more loaded up you are the more difficult it is to travel, the more fuel you'll use and the easier it is to get stuck!

On the flip side, don't leave important gear at home because you are trying to pack better, especially if it relates to safety. It's a fine balance that you get better at as you travel with a 4WD more.



Drawers and a cargo barrier on our old Land Cruiser.

Make it safe and carry the right gear

The most important thing to remember when you pack your 4WD is safety, for you, your passengers and others on the road. If you have a wagon, a cargo barrier is a must in my opinion. This guarantees that in the event of a nasty accident your gear will stay put, and not make its way forward through the vehicle and into you and your passengers. I've seen rollovers where bottles of tomato sauce have hurt people, let alone jerry cans of water, jaffle irons or other heavy items often carried inside of a vehicle.

Utes have it lucky as there is already some segregation, but regardless of what vehicle you are in it's important to make sure nothing dangerous can fling around the vehicle. Off-road, anything on the dash usually finds its way down around your feet, and in an accident things move a lot more.

Beyond this, it's imperative that you bring the right gear for your safety. First aid kits are an absolute must, and they need to be quick to get to. A PLB, or emergency beacon or satellite phone is a wise investment if you are going off the beaten track. Take the relevant recovery gear, clothing, and ample food and water. What you take should reflect where you are going, who you are going with and how long you are travelling for.



Some items like your first aid gear should be quickly accessible.

Keep the weight down

I've mentioned only packing what you need above, and this stems from one of the largest hurdles you have to overcome when packing your 4WD - weight!

Every 4WD has a maximum GVM, or Gross Vehicle Mass, which cannot be exceeded. This includes the weight of your vehicle, everything in and on it. There are a lot of illegal 4WDs out there, and often it's due to excess weight. You cannot keep loading your 4WD up and expect it to handle it, as the engineering only goes so far.

Do what you can to replace heavy items with lighter ones (like soft shackles instead of solid ones, or lightweight tents instead of the old-style canvas ones that weigh a tonne) and if you probably won't use it, don't bring it! Weighbridges are easily accessible, and many are free and easy to use.



Drawers and the fridge in our Dmax.

Make it accessible

The real art of packing a 4WD is having a place for everything, and everything in its place. Sunscreen, your camera, wallet, phone, first aid kit, water bottles, snacks and anything else you use on a regular basis should be accessible at the drop of a hat but also placed somewhere that it isn't going to move around as your 4WD bounces up rock steps.

If you are going really remote, a 'grab bag' is a super clever idea, which contains enough food and water to survive for a day or two, plus clothes, survival gear and a form of communication. If anything ever happens you can grab the bag and run.

Beyond this, everything you use regularly should be easy to get out. If you are stopping on the side of the road, making lunches should be simple. However, if you have to unload half the vehicle to find some plates and a knife, then you have a problem! Things that you need irregularly can be tucked away nicely. I promise you'll only pack badly once - you'll soon learn.



Rooftop tent and drawers for easy access.

Distribute the weight properly

Aside from complying with the GVM, you must also comply with the axle weights, and not overload the roof. This means that when you pack your 4WD, you need to distribute the loads properly. Every 4WD has a maximum roof capacity, and you can't exceed this. Likewise, you can't put all of the weight in your 4WD behind the rear axles or you'll probably be overweight there.

It's good practice to keep anything heavy down low (like water, recovery gear and food) as this reduces your centre of gravity and helps keep your vehicle on all 4 wheels.



Distribute the weight well so the vehicle sits level.

Consider towing something

If you are travelling for longer periods of time with a family, you'll soon realise that it's almost impossible to fit what you want in a normal 4WD and even if you do, to still stay under the allowed weight. This is where towing something comes in, and it opens up a whole new world.

Of course, there are downsides to towing, and it's not the perfect solution, but it does allow you to comfortably take what you need and stay legal. There are a range of off-road box trailers, camper trailers, hybrids and caravans that make travelling very enjoyable.



Towing something gives you so many more options.

Make it modular

I love drawers in the back of a 4WD. They make accessing your gear so easy, and so simple. The problem though is they are almost always permanent, or semi-permanent and there will be a time when you want to move things around and you can't, and they are super heavy. This is where tubs, or milk crates, or storage boxes come into their own – you can keep them in while you do your trip, and then remove them when you get home. Not only does it give you a whole heap of space back, but you'll get better economy by not lugging excess weight around.



We keep the food we use for lunch in tubs so it's easy to access.

Stop things moving around

If you've done much 4WDing, you'll know that things move around in the back of your 4WD, a lot. Not only does this risk damaging your vehicle, but also the gear itself. Corrugations will make it very obvious whether you've packed well or not. Anything that isn't well secured will rub against something else and you will get holes and damage.

It is super important to wedge things in, tie them down and secure everything that you can, as you'll be up for some expensive damage if you don't. Things like fishing rods, jerry cans, oil containers and electronics will get damaged if you aren't very careful with where they go. This is critical for utes with gear out in the open, and all vehicles with gear on their roof racks. You are legally obliged to secure any items out in the open, and if you don't you can get some nasty fines. This is so that in the event of an accident, or a change of wind or whatever it might be your gear stays contained in, or on your vehicle and doesn't fly off and hit someone.



If you don't tie things in it will move off road.

Watch the roof racks carefully

Roof racks are a fantastic idea when used sensibly. If you use them to put heavy gear on, you'll exceed the roof rating and the chances of tipping your 4WD over increase considerably.



Likewise, if you put 5 big swags on the roof racks, you'll find your fuel consumption goes through the roof. Roof racks are great for lightweight gear that can be tucked away.



A giant roof rack with lots of gear on top.

Pack for the conditions

This might seem logical, but you need to really consider where you are going, who's going with you, what the weather is going to be like and what happens if it all goes wrong when packing. I mentioned above that you need to take the right gear with you, but you also have to pack correctly for the conditions. If you are doing a bitumen road trip then things need to be a lot less secure than they would if you were bouncing along a nasty 4WD track for days on end.



Fuel does not belong inside your vehicle.

Some items don't belong inside

There are some things you shouldn't pack inside your vehicle. Fuel, including petrol, diesel and LPG should always be kept outside the vehicle. Portable toilets are probably something you don't want in your vehicle either, along with rubbish bags and clothes you've been fishing in.



A well-packed vehicle makes days at the beach a dream.

Don't stress - you'll get better as time goes on

It doesn't take long to work out how to best pack a 4WD. Our mind works out the game of Tetris, and you soon get sick of unpacking half of the car for something you should have left accessible. By the end of the trip, you are usually an expert on where things go, and you've worked out what moves and what doesn't.

Packing a 4WD is a lot of fun, and can be learnt by trial and error, but if you try and meet the above points, life on the road becomes much easier!

What are your best packing hacks for your 4WD?