

Off-road chapter and verse

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JOHN PEEBLES tests the four-wheel-drive off the beaten track and through some of New Zealand's most spectacular scenery

Ever thought of taking your Remuera tractor for a run in the outback? Well don't dismiss it as a flight of fancy. Hop in the four-wheel-drive, slam it in low ratio and head off the seal for one of the best tours you will ever get.

A few times a year NZ Adventures provides a guided outback trip for a convoy of four-wheel-drive vehicles in the South Island with spectacular scenery, a great slice of early history and a rare glimpse of forest, wetland, mountains and high country stations.

It's a chance to find out for yourselves that taking a 4WD off-road doesn't just mean putting it in the garage.

In eight days you cover Blenheim to Queenstown driving mainly through streams, tracks and station access-ways that require concentration but no specific training.

It's an amazing experience.

As regular international travellers, my wife and I decided on this trip as a bit of a change, but were uncertain if it would stand up to scrutiny. Afterwards we voted it our best trip ever and would certainly go back.

You get a clean bed and good food each night - although I am not sure if some of the pubs and motels have ever heard of the five-star system - and you are guided over private land and Department of Conservation territory by knowledgeable and enthusiastic tour leaders who have a real interest in what they are doing and in protecting this valuable asset.

You only have to drive - sharing wheel time with a partner if you wish - and everything else, including all meals and accommodation, is organised for you and covered in the price (around \$2000 a person).

It took us just 15 minutes after the start of day one to get off the tarmac (my Remers comfort zone) and hit the first riverbed. Let's face it, on the school run up Victoria Ave in the tractor you just put it in automatic and steer.

The 4WD's main value in the city is probably to intimidate in the carpark, and you get to know very little of the vehicle's capability.

Witness the example of an acquaintance who took his truck back to the dealer because he couldn't get it to go above 30km/h and found he had accidentally engaged the diff lock ("The what?" he asked the dealer).

I got to use that switch for real during our trip (though only once, and I only found it after reading the manual).

This is not winch territory but it can get interesting at times.

You certainly come away with considerable respect for the capacity of these vehicles in rough going and a great deal more experience in how to handle the machine.

River crossings are frequent but straightforward. The rule is "don't go in above hubs" or, you are told, "get a captain's ticket and lifejacket".

Of course you do have to be flexible. A sudden downpour or change in the weather can wipe out the day's drive and cause the guides to re-route on the spot ... and they do it so well. We were kept off Molesworth Station by the dry weather and the consequent fire risk.

You need a comprehensive wardrobe. We went from the shorts and T-shirts of summer to the heavy weather gear for driving snow at Cardrona.

You also need a strong neck to prevent your head shaking off its mounts as you bounce over boulders and rough tracks.

Take plenty of film because this is picture postcard territory, from the beech forests and goldfields of the West Coast to the mountains and lakes in the south.

You come away overwhelmed at our vast country and the spectacular scenery, the beauty of our bush and the courage of our early settlers and miners who lived and worked in impossible conditions.

You meet and talk to the high country farmers and their wives and see the harsh conditions they combat day to day in a world so different to our own in the city.

The 11 four-wheel-drives on tour carried 23 people and were the most astonishing collection of vehicles. Probably the biggest surprise was the V6 Suzuki Vitara - "the shopping basket" - that went everywhere very well, even if it did alter the shape of its plastic running boards on a couple of rocks.

One of our party, Nigel Browning of Hamilton, fancied himself as a bit of poet and he recorded this tribute to the Vitara:

Now for those that like to be choosy
Don't scorn that neat little Suzi
For when it came to the test
It was up with the best
So don't call it a low-level floozie.

There was also a good mix of people, mostly from the North Island, some recently retired, one couple of Taranaki farmers, another farm contractors, and several who would probably describe themselves as company directors. I couldn't see any of them burning rubber on a Saturday night, but they were mostly pretty extroverted, got on well together and no one ate peas off a knife.

There was plenty of good humour over the radios - each vehicle had a two-way radio - and over the dinner table at night.

Following a little difficulty I ran into Nigel who produced this effort:

There was a Jafa named John
Whose accent was rather put on.
When he had to go back
He said, "Really Jack,
This is all going frightfully wrong."

There was no serious damage to any of the vehicles - in fact, no one even got a puncture - but they can get scratched, for example, in the tight tracks that are heavily overgrown by gorse. If that is a worry rent a vehicle from Overland Rentals - we hired a Toyota Landcruiser VX - and save the wear and tear on your own 4WD and the trek to and from the starting point at Blenheim (vehicle hire cost for eight days was about \$1200).

There are plenty of stops along the way to allow the tailenders to catch up, take in the sights, enjoy a brew-up and savour the mountain air.

The highlight was probably the long caves/tunnels we drove through that were carved by miners as water diversions on the West Coast.

Another special moment was the views of four different South Island lakes from high up on a mountain plateau. I even discovered diesel trucks have filters that need changing. My only previous exposure to filters was coffee machines. Still I guess the principle is the same.

And after that experience I'll have no trouble coping next time I have to take the tractor out in the rain to pick up a quiche.