

Our First Trip

By Jules Perrin

Well we did it! The two novices and a dog undertook our first trip with a caravan. Be it only from Werribee to Daylesford for one night but we did it. I am getting ahead of myself so first let's go back to the beginning to set the scene.

I've been keen to get a van for a number of years and finally we found one that suited our style and limited budget. It's a 1993 18ft Regal with tandem axle we now call "Roger" and the towing vehicle is a red Falcon wagon called "Jessica". As this is our second childhood we needed appropriate names.

The van's been parked at home for the past month, since we picked it up, as we gradually worked out what we need, or what we thought we needed, for a trip. We nearly got it right but that comes later.

The big day arrives and we are packing the final items and shock horror our first lesson in caravanning. Flatulence in a confined space is not a good thing. Yep it was me but my partner in adventure didn't appreciate it. She is now threatening me with charcoal pills. That is the closed bottle placed where the sun don't shine. Lesson 1 – Smells in caravans should be kept to pleasant ones only.

All packed and now we have to hook the van up by ourselves for the first time. I've done it mentally many times but as you do each step the brain, especially mine, tends to lose track. We took several goes to do some steps but what an achievement. Chains on, stabilisers up, lights connected and working, door shut and locked so already to go and one last walk around and there it was. I'd left the park brake on. Lesson 2 – Novice brains don't process steps well when concentrating so make a check list.

As we slowly pulled out of the driveway my little brain flashed a warning message from material read in days past. Test the brakes! I gave myself a mental pat on the back and pressed the brake pedals and all was good. Lesson 3 – Test brakes on leaving they come in handy at the most awkward times.

The last time I towed the van was from the dealer to home and it was empty. Now it's got water, clothes, food with other stuff and it seems to feel different. Every time we hit a bump or pothole you're conscious the van is there but after a while this apprehension tends to wane and all is well with the world. Lesson 4 – Get familiar with the way the van moves. If this movement stops when towing, you may have a problem.

Heading towards Ballarat there are some big hills you don't notice when driving but with the van on the back they look like sheer cliffs. Dropping speed, changing gears and sticking to the left soon becomes natural. Less than an hour in and we stop for a break and I am sure that if the dog could speak she would have thanked us. So this is it and as the song goes, "Caravaners are we". Lesson 5 – Slow down mentally, don't overwork the towing vehicle and take regular breaks.

Like intrepid adventures we reached the lovely Jubilee Park in Daylesford. We booked in and paid but now with apprehension in my heart I had to park the van on the site. After a couple of adjustments I realised this wasn't as bad as my tiny brain thought it would be. My practice with trailers in years gone by helped. Lesson 6 – Practice reverse parking with a trailer or van to increase your confidence.

Unhooking the car and connecting services was the reverse of hooking up the van so it went reasonably well but a check list would have helped. Lesson 7 – Add setting up to the check list.

We were all so proud of ourselves for making it safely, not getting frustrated and setting up that we decided to have a wine to celebrate. Lesson 8 – Pack a cork screw.

Only one stuff up when reconnecting the van. We reversed the car ball right under the caravan cup with the minimum number of attempts. Thinking we did a marvellous job, the hook up commenced only to have our elation dashed when I realised I left the plastic ball cover in place. So, back to Lesson 1.

We are back now and putting our well learnt lessons into practice while planning our next trip.

Have fun and stay safe.