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On the ROAD

THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN DREAM IS BEING REDEFINED AS MORE FAMILIES CHOOSE A NOMADIC EXISTENCE

TARON EGERTON
HIS RISE FROM FLEDGLING
ACTOR TO ROCKETMAN

BLUE JEAN BABY
ACCESSIBLE AND EDGY
DEMIN-ON-DENIM LOOKS

DONNA HAY
KICKSTART YOUR DAY WITH
GOLDEN OATS GOODNESS

cover story



Avalon, Darcy and Charlie Platt play at a rock pool near Redgate Beach, Margaret River.

cover story

Story Nikki Wilson-Smith

Going off GRID

We all fantasise about giving up the nine-to-five grind and hitting the road. Now, more families are taking their children out of school and making that dream a reality.

The dirt track ahead is obscured, it ducks around boulders until the stones become the path. A stream of tourists trace a wet snail's trail over the dust-covered spheres, rubber thongs flap against the slippery rock. The boulders open out into a small ocean pool, Injidup Natural Spa. Ten-year-old Avalon helps her two brothers, Darcy, 7, and Charlie, 4, onto the tall edges around the swimming spot and the three of them wait for the waves to come. First the roar, threatening, then the fizz and pour of salt water streaming through gaps in the rock. The swimming hole is filled with eager tourists, watching, waiting for one of the siblings to be flung from the slick surface. But the three Platt children are steadfast, practised.

"Trying to find the balance between having children with an adventurous spirit but with a minimal amount of broken bones is a daily struggle," their mother Angela Platt explains. "I'm not sure how many times I've said, 'Don't climb on wet rocks', during this trip, but watching them have this much fun is totally worth it."

The Platt family has recently begun life on the road. They rented out their house in Newcastle, NSW, and the five of them have packed their lives into a Jayco Expanda. Their plan is to spend a year doing the "round Australia" trip.

"(My husband) Trav was working long stressful hours, I had my hands pretty full with work and kids, and we both wanted to change things up," Angela says. "I guess we were trying to find more quality family time and less stress."

They're not the only ones. The Platts have joined a growing number of Australian families taking extended time out from the nine-to-five grind to travel the country.

Families with children make up the highest proportion of caravan and camping trippers, clocking 3.77 million journeys last year, according to the »

cover story

Caravan Industry Association of Australia's 2018 report. This figure has increased 27 per cent in the past decade, with a new generation keener than ever to show their children their own backyard.

And it is travellers between the ages of 30 and 54 who now take up the biggest number of caravan and camping sites, even more than the famed grey nomads. So, what is it about this new generation that has them packing up in droves, and sometimes selling up, to see Australia?

David and Carmen Allan-Petale left their home in Perth late last year and have been caravanning with their two-year-old daughter, Ruby, ever since. "I think it comes down to our generation being so lucky in that they have more opportunities to live the lives they want to live," Carmen says. "In our parents' generation they were expected to work in the same job for 40 years. These days, there's less judgment about how you live your life and there are many more doors open to you, allowing you to do the things you want to do."

David says the biggest hurdle they've faced has been letting go of their own definition of success. "Rewind a decade and I was chasing car, career, house, all the material stuff, and wondering why none of it was really satisfying. Now I have a tiny house on wheels, thrift store clothes and library books. And I'm deeply satisfied."

David and Carmen operate a successful copywriting business from the road, allowing them the freedom to travel and work at their own pace. The widespread availability of internet and social media has been a game-changer. "I love touching base with other families on social media," Carmen says. "It makes me feel like we're not so alone."

Sometimes travelling all the time can be lonely and we use social media to meet like-minded people."

At the Big Valley Campsite outside Margaret River, Angela Platt moves deftly around her kitchen where photographs of the family's travels are tacked up like a colourful splashback, each image postcard-perfect. Bronzed childhood limbs crouched on the white sands of Lucky Bay, fishing rods at sunset on the banks of the Murray River. She says the trip has been a point of fascination for friends, family and other travellers, with people quizzing them, almost daily, about how they manage life on the road.

"Generally there are two types of people. There are the ones who want to know how you manage everything and would really love to do it themselves, and the ones who want to quiz you on everything because they can't understand how you would want to be in a box with your three kids for a year," Angela laughs.

Sharing information online for those wanting an escape, or maybe just a mental escape, has become big business. Even at this unassuming campground on the edge of a farm, there are caravans plastered with social media stickers. Families inviting fellow travellers and rubberneckers to "Follow us on Instagram and Facebook".

The Lorrimer family has been travelling since 2015

This page, clockwise from above: "Trip In A Van" family Justin and Bec Lorrimer with their children Jack, Billy and Charli; Travis Platt crabbing with his children Charlie, Darcy and Avalon; David Allan-Petale and daughter Ruby



and has 43,000 followers on Instagram alone. Justin and Bec Lorrimer traded juggling shift work for hitting the road with their kids, Jack, Billy and Charli, living off the funds raised from their travel blog, "Trip In A Van". Bec says more parents are doing the same. "We have noticed a massive shift... caravanning around Australia with our kids, that's the bloody 'Aussie Dream' right there," she says.

For two years, the Akubra-clad "Blonde Nomads" – Tracy and Rob Morris, and their kids Marli and Ziggy – have lived by their motto "Living our Best Life", and based on the pictures of their travels it would be hard to argue otherwise. They have more people watching them on YouTube than some TV shows, as they explore the country and promote a range of products.

"We knew the fast-paced nine-to-five hamster wheel was not for us," Tracy says. "Rob was feeling the pressures, both physically and mentally, of keeping

our family afloat. We made the decision to strip it all back, sell everything, lose the mortgage and live a slower, simpler life."

The nomad life means new ways of thinking about work, such as digital or seasonal jobs for the grown-ups, while for the kids it's about finding alternatives to a school classroom.

WA Department of Education figures show the number of children being home-schooled has risen steadily in the past five years, from about 2500 in 2014 to nearly 4000 registered in March this year. Parents looking for flexible methods of learning while their travel is thought to be one of the reasons for the rise.

Christie Edwards' family of six call themselves "the slow-moving mob". The family has just finished riding on tractors and petting animals at the Northern Rivers Harvest Festival in Byron Bay. Christie taught primary school for seven years but says travelling with her four kids and "unschooling" them was the best decision they've made. "I didn't really like the system much and once I had children, I realised they are incredible learners on their own," Christie says. "Unschooling follows the kids' desire to learn... they are learning all about the different places we go and obviously get to experience a different lifestyle. They love it."

Under the unschooling approach, the primary-school-age children visit museums and the zoo, journaling their adventures and applying maths and

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TRACY MORRIS



science principles to their own interests. "Our boys adore dinosaurs, so we go to dinosaur museums, places where they have discovered fossils, we read about dinosaurs... the by-product is they learn so many other things without realising it," Christie says. But there are lots of options available to school-age travellers – the less conventional unschooling is just one of them.

Angela Platt works through distance education with her two school-age children, Darcy and Avalon, so they can transition back into school after the trip. She says some days it can be hard to get them to focus when there are adventures to be had, but the downsides are far outweighed by what they learn from their travels.

"The kids now know all about different types of wool and methods of farming," she says. "They've learnt all about tides, crabbing, solar energy, all sorts of things they wouldn't pick up at home. They can tell you all about Canberra, not just from a book but because they've been there. As parents we felt we needed to pop the bubble we were raising our kids in and show them different ways of living."

At the campground, another lesson is under way. It's guinea pig petting hour and the Platt children don't want to miss a moment. It's a little like happy hour – but it's caviar not cocktails – and there's a 15-minute maximum. Every child at the park is lined up by the cage. They take turns, observe the rules and chat with the other kids about the resident furry celebrities.

Angela and Travis Platt take a moment to walk, set-ups: shiny new gear worth more than some houses, gutted buses turned into homes that chew fuel like

gum, families packed into old four-wheel-drives, and caravans styled like something from the '60s.

And then we spot a final type, hanging on the fringes. While camping is the realm of the privileged – for those able to take time off to prioritise experiences with their families – it's also a last refuge for those without means.

"You can really end up living so much just inside your bubble when you're at home," Angela says. "Our kids don't see a lot of disadvantage in their day-to-day lives but travelling gives us the chance to have conversations with them about that as well."

David and Carmen Allan-Petale echo that sentiment from their caravan in Adelaide, where they plan to spend the week. They've enjoyed meeting people they'd never come across in Perth. Backpackers, those living in permanent caravans and campers, even the "grumpy grey nomads" they were warned about; all have offered new ideas and topics of conversation.

"I heard plenty of horror stories about grumpy old farts being

This page, clockwise from left: The Morris family, otherwise known as "The Blonde Nomads", set up camp at Venus Bay, South Australia; Marli and Ziggy Morris with their parents Rob and Tracy at Karijini National Park.



busybodies in caravan parks and clogging up the roads, but I've met so many wonderful people who've retired, cashed in their stocks and hit the road to live the life they always wanted to," David says. "They're generous, full of great tips and love to be surrogate grandparents to Ruby."

The great Australian dream has long been defined as home ownership, preferably a block of land, maybe a Hills Hoist. But that promise is slipping from the grip of average Australians. Homes in our capital cities remain out of reach for many. The retirement age is creeping closer and closer to the grave. But then there is this antidote: Aussie families, redefining what it is to live "the dream", and taking the kids along for the ride.

"Happiness from possessions is only short-lived, but happy memories made from experiencing adventures with your loved ones are something you'll cherish forever," David says. "We want to instil that in Ruby and show her what's possible. She may not remember any of it, but this trip and the time we spend with her will be a huge influence. And if she jets off as a young woman and leaves us crying at the airport, we'll have no one to blame but ourselves!"

Back at Injildup Natural Spa the three Platt children wait for the gurgles of salt water through stone. They let the waves wash them away in fits of giggles, taking turns. The swell produces surges of white water, bigger with each wave. They're being brave. Learning about the force of the ocean. Their parents watch from the rock pool as the sun starts to fade. Right at the time they'd usually be getting home, nagging the kids to turn off the TV and do their homework. For now, their lesson is that the daily grind can take a back seat.

PICTURES: COURTESY OF THE PLATT FAMILY; THE ALLAN-PETALE FAMILY; TRIP IN A VAN; THE BLONDE NOMADS