

What's On In Our Backyard

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Feature

**THE BLONDE
NOMADS**

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FAMILY GUIDE



The Blonde Nomads

AN UNFORGETTABLE JOURNEY

- BY CAROLYN PARFITT -

IT WAS A YEAR OF CONSTANT VIGILANCE, supervising their two children while travelling the circumference of Australia in a Ford Ranger towing a custom-built Jayco caravan. Now that it's behind them – until next time – Tracy and Rob Morris are relishing the peace of mind that comes with a house and a fence, where the kids “aren't going to end up on the road and there are no crocs or drop bears”.

Drop bears?

They use this term to cover all possible hitches and hazards, including “grumpy grey nomads or even friendly ones, fast cars, a snake”, anything that might require a parent's intervention.

This family that plays together has had some truly extraordinary adventures – mostly off the beaten track – around this wide brown land. They have heard dingoes howl in the distance while at a remote campsite in the bush, they have feasted on mudcrabs and crayfish cooked on hot coals, and they have slept under the stars and marvelled at the breathtaking

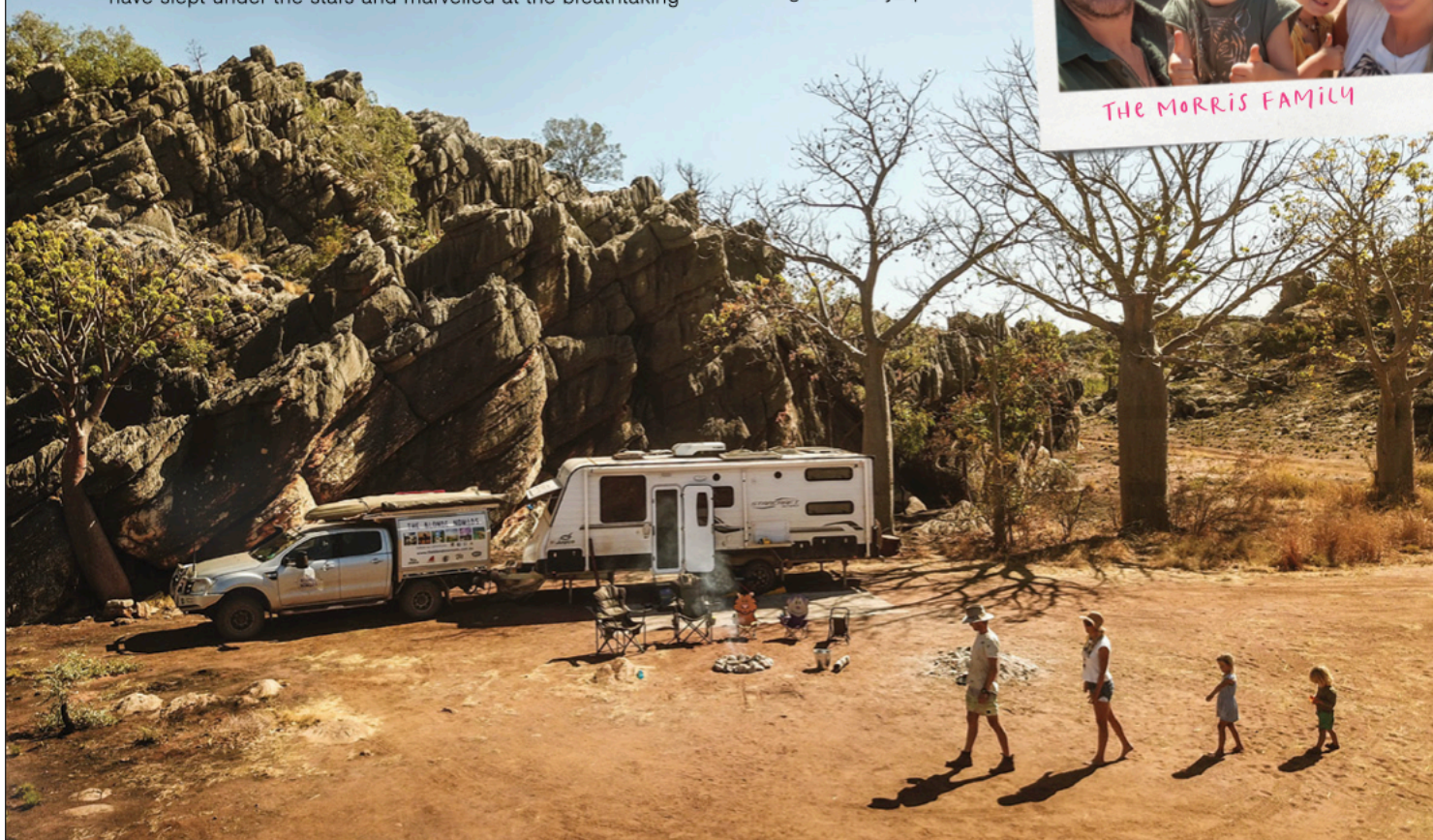
coastline of sheer limestone cliffs at the most western point of mainland Australia. They have seen all manner of wildlife up close – quokkas on Rottnest Island, WA, stingrays, wallabies, kangaroos and echidnas along the NSW South Coast, a baby crocodile hatching out of its egg at a crocodile farm near Rockhampton, Qld.

And after considering all the options, they have chosen to settle at peaceful Fingal Bay in Port Stephens.

When I ask why, their enthusiasm bubbles over, each of them adding onto and finishing the other's sentences. Rob describes many aspects of Port Stephens as “beautiful” and often says he just “loves” this or that – the fishing, the school, nippers for the kids, having “so many options”.



THE MORRIS FAMILY





Tracy and Rob lived in Sydney before deciding to sell their house and most of their belongings and take to the road. This recent journey with their daughter Marli, now 7, and son Ziggy, now 4-1/2, was their second around Australia. They completed a previous circumference of Australia together in 2007 pre-children.

They earn their living blogging about their travels under the moniker 'The Blonde Nomads'. Tracy used her experience as a marketing manager to find sponsors for their story, to promote their brand and attract media coverage, and she is also a graphic designer. Rob, a builder by trade, has a complementary set of skills and, as Tracy says, they make a good team.

Tracy does the writing and they share the photography, with Rob flying the drone and doing most of the underwater GoPro shots. "I also like to think of myself as the trip engineer," he says. "I organise the car and the technical camping gear."

They also share presenting the commentary at times, for instance in one video that takes viewers on a tour of their very well-appointed caravan. (Caravan design has come a long way – there's a water filter in the kitchen and a little washing machine behind a door!)

Tracy shows us around the inside of the van then Rob takes over outside. This becomes amusing viewing when, with a peg on his nose, he removes the toilet canister. "It's usually my job to empty it," he says to camera, preparing to do just that. "When I say 'usually'... it's been every time so far."

The blogs are certainly engaging and the photography often stunning. The children look healthy and happy, the parents seem relaxed and having a wonderful time. Surely it can't have always been like that. I put this to Tracy and Rob and they both immediately cite the same horror story of two poor little kids with severe diarrhoea, vomiting and horrible stomach cramps – for seven days straight. Seven days of a cycle of "pain, nap, toilet", with their parents barely sleeping at all while caring for them.

"Thank God we didn't get sick," says Rob. "We were full-time zombies just looking after them."

It happened in Tasmania and the precise cause is unknown – something in the tank water, something they ate, playing on the ground and accidentally touching their mouths after contact with potaroo poo? Who knows? Eventually a doctor diagnosed an illness called campylobacter, which the World Health Organisation says is "considered to be the most common bacterial cause of human gastroenteritis in the world".

So how did the kids feel about continuing their journey after that? Their parents are full of praise.

"They handled it like troopers," says Rob. "When they get sick, they handle it really well. We like to think we handle it quite calmly, so maybe that rubs off on them."

But the good times far outweighed the bad, particularly the times when they met up with like-minded people.

"If you can find another set of parents you click with, and also

the kids get on, it's unreal," says Rob. "It's like a holiday."

Other highlights for the whole family included any places where they could harvest food from the sea – "to catch what we eat, to hunt and gather", says Tracy.

"The kids are all over that as well. They love to eat seafood and Ziggy will eat oysters freshly open off the rocks." Rob turns his nose up at that, not so keen.

Pictures on the blog show Rob coming out of the ocean after diving. On one occasion he is holding a couple of large rock lobsters and, on another, two abalone.

Tracy says the children won't have a bar of it if she offers them beans on toast because it's getting late and cooking the seafood might take a while.

"They insist on having the mudcrabs, crayfish or whatever," she says. "We've created these little..." Rob finishes the sentence: "Seafood snobs."

Tips for travelling with children plus other travel information can be found on the blog www.theblondenomads.com.au

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