

Why Not to go Camping

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Its funny how, once you've learned a lesson the hard way, you assume everyone else has also learned the same lesson.

For example, you expect, however illogically, most people to know, more or less instinctively, that installing a water bed is a bad idea when there are a pair of Burmese cats in the household.

So it was with disbelief that I listened to the plans of two very intelligent friends to go camping on the south coast of New South Wales. The countryside there is unquestionably beautiful and most of the beaches genuinely unspoilt. But one reason for their being so unspoiled is a persistent and disagreeable wind that discourages most creatures not endowed with protective fur or a tortoise-like shell. The exception, apart from some humans, is sand-flies that stick to you and sting like hell, even when you swipe them away.

I tried to warn them about the wind and sand-flies and told them where they could see photos of the beautiful landscape that inspired James Cook to name the place New South Wales, without actually going there. But they were undaunted.

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Most horrifying of all, they were heading to the municipal camping ground at Ulladulla! Ulladulla is a small town, in those days about four hours' drive south of Sydney on a windy dual carriage road with gravel shoulders and chronic, monumental traffic jams. Marje and Jim were not early risers, so would be unlikely to arrive at their destination before about five in the afternoon.

I patiently described to them what it would be like:

You'll get caught in a monstrous traffic jam and be two hours late. You will then remember the essentials you left back in the house, and in any case, will need to stop in Ulladulla to buy perishables like milk, bread and some meat for your dinner. That will take longer than you thought, so it will be dark by the time you get to the camping area. It will probably rain, and it will be windy.

I knew the camping ground they were headed to. It sat on a promontory about two kilometres from the town, overlooking a port with a breakwater and with steep cliffs descending beyond it to the ocean. It was probably two and a half kilometres square, with several hundred camping spaces packed tightly in a grid-like formation that you accessed on unpaved driveways between tents.

I continued: the camp spaces are small and close together, and it will take a while to find a vacant spot. In the dark, you will find you are short at least three tent pegs. You won't be able to get your sleeping bags from the car to the tent without their getting wet, but you should be able to get the air mattresses inflated.

You'll wake in the morning to find that, while it has stopped raining, the reason that spot was free is because it's on an ants' nest. Ants don't like being flooded out and will be in a very cross, stinging mood. You will be inches from your neighbours, but nearly a kilometre from the amenities block. When you get there, you'll find an infernal queue for the showers and anyway, you don't have enough of the right coins to feed the hot water.

They all laughed heartily, thinking that, surely, I was exaggerating...

On the day, they were even later starting than I had anticipated and traffic was even worse than I had warned, so it was nearly ten at night by the time they stopped in at Ulladulla for last minute provisions, checked in to the camping area and found what seemed a suitable site. Well, anyway, it was not already occupied, which made it suitable. It was raining quite heavily, and of course it was windy. The south coast always is. neither had ever pitched a tent before, let alone in darkness and rain

Both gifted city lawyers, neither had ever pitched a tent before, let alone in darkness and rain. Nevertheless, and despite being short six tent pegs - having lost three more in the dark - they got it to a state they could crawl into and collapse for the night, dinner-less.

By the morning it had stopped raining, but there was the ants' nest and the ants. Most of their gear was sodden. They were more than a kilometre from the amenities block and when they got there, there was a cue for the showers, but no hot water.

They stayed long enough to get most things more or less dry, then headed back to town to book into a motel before driving back to Sydney the following day. What I had omitted, they added, was the large German shepherd

Marje and Jim may not have known how to pitch a tent in darkness and rain, but they were very good at seeing the funny side of things as they recounted to us their first and last camping experience.

What I had omitted, they added, was the large German shepherd they had taken with them. Merv sat in the car while they struggled with the tent and other camping gear. Thrilled at the novelty of being allowed in the driver's seat, but impatient for his dinner, he helped by pressing the horn repeatedly, endearing the three of them to the, very near, neighbours.

Back in the comfort of their living room, they were looking forward to the holiday they'd now booked in a five-star island resort on the Great Barrier Reef, and hoped they would be over their colds in time to enjoy it. The dog was not invited, they said.