

Living Decorously in the Desert by Judy, Lorraine, Margo and Merle

The drivers in your family, home from their desert adventures, are bound to wax lyrical about broken shockies, split fuel lines, staked tyres and cactus axles. But be warned ... there are other, more sinister threats in store for the unwary.

For example:

- screw top jars – the ones for jam and relish – they unscrew and pump their guts out to the beat of every thump and judder;
- labels become unreadable - the peaches you spoon onto the once-were-flakes corn dust could well turn out to be pumpkin soup;
- even if they don't shatter, eggs will scramble in their shells;
- fresh vegies and fruit sweat, bruise and disintegrate into an unpalatable mush;
- meat leaks, and the juices coat everything in the fridge - including that double brie you've been lusting after;
- the holes rubbed into your cans of beer will cause you to blubber like a baby.

For those prepared to sacrifice their creature comforts, deserts bring wonder and delight. But there's one thing you shouldn't need to sacrifice and that's clean knickers - and no, we don't subscribe to the theory that you can get 4 days out of a pair of jocks – inside, outside then swap with the wife! But how to keep those knickers sweet when water is in short supply?

Well, here are a couple of dozen hints, pooled from our collective desert adventures, on how to live decorously in the desert. As you'll see, we've focused on three key principles:

1. conserving water
 2. conserving space
 3. protecting you, your supplies, your vehicle and the environment.
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1. **Water** – in case of mishap, don't rely on just one container of drinking water. Also, keep an extra jerry on hand, clearly marked, for filling at wells and tanks – you may not be able to drink this water but it'll be OK for washing.
 2. **Non-perishables** - transfer everything from flour and cereals to jam and honey into tupperware-type containers. Try to find ones that are square or rectangular, so they pack firm and don't waste space.
 3. **Vegies and fruit** – wrap each and every piece in newspaper and write a code on the outside so you can easily distinguish, say, an onion from an orange.
 4. **Lettuce** - no need to put it in the fridge where it takes up too much room and freezes if the fridge gets too enthusiastic. Wrap it in an old pillowcase or newspaper and store out of the sun in a relatively cool place.
 5. **Eggs** – again individually wrap and return to their cardboard container, then close the lid firmly with a strong rubber band. They may still scramble but they're much less likely to break.
 6. **Meat** - make sure your meat is cryovaced from a reputable butcher. Ask around of other travellers and see who is recommended. Cryovac only boneless meat and eat chicken, mince and sausages first.
 7. **Pasta** is a pain – it takes up too much room and too much water to cook. When space and water are limited, go for rice (steamed, not boiled) and couscous.

8. **Cans and tins** and, if you're truly courageous, jars and bottles – separate from each other with dividers made of cardboard or, better still, rubber bands or bubble wrap. A must, of course, for your bottles of wine!
9. **Wine** – cask wine can taste pretty good on the track and, as the journey progresses, wine bladders can be used to fill empty spaces in fridge, vegie box and pantry. Be aware, however, that in some outback towns and cities, cask and flagon wine, particularly fortified wine, is unavailable, so if this is your poison, take adequate supplies from home.
10. **Wine glasses** – carry in stubby holders or, if the stems are too long, in lengths of rubber tubing, cut to fit.
11. **Cutlery** – keep it in a fabric pencil case. Different coloured handles help to identify knives from forks from spoons.
12. **The fridge** – insert a plastic frame into your fridge to hold your 2-litre plastic milk bottles – it will stop items falling into the milk bottle's space when you pull the milk out for your morning cuppa. Once a week, wipe the fridge out with vanilla to keep it smelling sweet.
13. **Sooty stuff** – old pillow cases are just the ticket for stopping billies, camp ovens and kettles spreading soot over everything else. If you carry cast iron gear, protect with towelling, bubble wrap etc to prevent cracking.
14. **Firewood** – Murphy's Law says there won't be any wood within cooee of your next campsite – start looking for it straight after lunch! But do carry a bag of heat beads, too, for when there's no wood at all or when weather conditions or environmental concerns rule out a conventional fire.
15. **Fires** - gas stove lighters are better than matches for lighting fires, and gel-type fire-starters beat the smelly solid white blocks any day.
16. **Rubbish disposal** – for things that are OK to burn, throw them in the fire *after* everyone's finished cooking and eating. For everything else, wash and carry until you're back in town. If possible, put cans and bottles back where they came from, to help keep the unused cans and bottles tightly packed.
17. **Cargo pants** – talking of fires, we can't emphasise too strongly how cold it can get in the desert, as well as how hot. Cargo pants are the way to go! They take little room, resist dirt and wash and dry well. Also, with long johns they're great when it's cold and they convert to shorts when it's hot. And no need to take off those long johns before bed ... they double as ski jammers!
18. **Packing clothes** – roll sets of underwear together – e.g. bra, knickers, socks and vest. This saves scrabbling through the clothes to find the one item that Murphy has hidden. Same with outerwear – roll a top and bottom together.
19. **Washing clothes** –socks, shirts and other light gear can easily be washed as you drive along – and the rougher the track, the better! All you need is a drum with a tight sealing lid, like the ones used in white water rafting, half a drum of water and a good dash of Woolmix (no need to rinse). That evening, simply squeeze out as much water as you can and hang out the clothes to dry overnight. Reuse the water till it doesn't smell so good (you should get at least 3 days out of it).
20. **Washing dishes** - pair with someone else to save water, and wipe plates and cutlery with paper towelling before washing up. A spray bottle filled with soapy water can be used to rinse plates, too.
21. **Washing hands** – in camp, use an anti-bacterial soap, a dash of dettol in the water and a separate washbowl to that used for dishes. On the move, use facial or baby wipes but make sure they're a good quality brand. Spray bottles are

good, too. For those who prefer, a face cloth soaked in dettol water and stored in a clip lock bag works well.

22. **Morning ablutions** - fill a thermos with boiling water last thing before bed. In the morning, you can have a nice warm wash even before the fire is lit. It's not as good as a shower but hey, you *are* in the desert!
23. **Gooey tasks** - you can avoid having to wash hands after doing gooey things like mixing damper by wearing a pair of surgical gloves. When the damper is mixed, peel gloves off (with the adhering dough), and dispose.
24. **Packing your vehicle** – this is a whole subject in itself, best left to another article. However, whatever system you use, organise things so there is a set order for packing and try to make things logically accessible. Then strap and tie-down securely – don't leave it *entirely* to the first cattle grid or bull-dust hole to settle the load!

There's clearly much we've overlooked – for example, desert cooking and first aid (not meaning, of course, that the one naturally leads to the other!). Still, we hope the above hints will help you enjoy your next desert adventure.