

mild at heart

As thousands of stout-hearted Australians hit the road for their holidays, Sally Feldman throws caution to the wind and insect repellent in the glove box to join the summer exodus

Summertime, and the living is... well, at a standstill. The Pacific Highway melts under the midday sun, lines of cars pulse in the heat haze. There's the ominous hum of thousands of nuclear families cracking under the pressure, and the distant roar of early-arrivals laughing at them from their ocean-view verandahs. We're all going on a summer holiday, just not very fast – not those of us who have hit the road, anyway.

So why the bloody hell are we here, peering down surreptitiously at the couple in the va-va-voom convertible beside us – he in his baseball cap protecting a doubtless thinning pate; she, all spaghetti-strapped sun dress, pink shoulders and sunglasses the size of a multiplex cinema screen? Because we are road warriors and take no prisoners. Apart, that is, from the moths that flatten themselves with abandon against our windscreen.

I love the sound of road maps rustling in the morning – always have, ever since Dad would take us on tours of the UK in his lemon of the moment. My favourite was his wallowing, boat-like Citroën DS, for which you had to wait to rise, stately as a galleon, on its hydraulics, before you could set off – when it started, that is. They were peaceful interludes, those family road trips. Dad and Mum grimly silent in the front because she'd rather have been getting a tan in Italy; my sister and I bound and gagged in the back, devising new ways to torment each other without moving. Our only diversion on those journeys, apart from the bloody eye-to-eye combat of 'I Spy', and bags of crisps with those little blue-paper twists of salt, was the Automobile Association motorcycle officers who would salute with a gauntleted flourish any car they passed with that prestigious AA badge on the grille. My sister and I didn't know that at the time – we thought they actually knew us. Ah, the 1960s, when a driving holiday was about being someone and going places, with only three other cars on the road at any one time – usually going in the other direction because they knew something my father didn't.

barricade – complete with watchtower – that he'd knock up in the shed. We would rekindle the fires of wanderlust and eschew home comforts such as, well, everything, including our barista-strength espresso machine (usually we take it with us) and bedroom slippers.

We could barely contain our excitement as we scoured Camping R Us for such necessities as 1000-thread Egyptian cotton camping bed linen, camping soufflé dish, camping daywear, camping plasma TV and camping espresso machine that plugs into the van's lighter. Most of all, we were just loving the anticipation of joining everyone else in that exodus to anywhere but here.

So here we are, heading north to Byron Bay – of course, what's the point of a summer holiday that doesn't feature at least one major roadwork diversion? – to stay with friends in their garden. They love roughing it so much, they've built a fully equipped bush camp around an old 'snail' caravan extension from their ute on a rainforest property, where most would have built a Balinese-style beach resort and spa. Hopefully, they'll let us use their rainwater shower. And their camping hair conditioner – we forgot ours. **VE+T**



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My little clan – husband, me and Lucy the labrador – has always stayed in Sydney during the summer holidays: “Sydney’s so faaabolous when everyone’s away – so much to do, so few people around, the Festival’s on, it’s great...” Yeah, yeah and yeah – except it’s not actually any fun at all, because all our friends are away having a fabulous time somewhere else. We’re just too busy (or is it lazy?) to organise anything during the slog to the end of the year.

So, said husband – road warrior and carpenter – threw caution to the wind to plan a pre-emptive Christmas strike. We would take to the tarmac in his chariot of fire – a turbo-charged beast of a VW Transporter van. We would rough it in the back on a super-sprung mattress (with room for Lucy’s doggy doona at its foot) and brave the elements from behind his hand-turned mosquito