When the Pilbara town of Port Hedland announced recently that it was to offer free overflow camping at its racecourse, it is fair to say that the initiative received a somewhat mixed response.

While some grey nomads hailed the move as a definite step in the right direction, others were disappointed that the overflow camping would only be available when other camping areas were at 75% capacity.

And many, many, many more still harboured resentment from what they perceived to be the distinctly chilly welcome offered to them back when the mining boom was in full swing.

Caravanners and motorhomers recalled being asked for ‘extortionate’ camping fees at a time when the grey dollar was not as needed or as valued as it is now ... and many vowed they would never return.

However, in response to the stinging criticism, Port Hedland’s mayor Camilo Blanco has appealed for grey nomads to forgive the mistakes of the past, and to give Port Hedland another chance.

“Most people who have lived in Hedland all their lives felt the same way as it affected our lives in much the same way,” he said. “Prices in all areas of life went to extraordinarily high levels ... rents were averaging $2,000-$3,000 a week and we could not get anyone to work within the small business sector as everyone was chasing the mining industry big paying jobs.”

And he says that, while things have now shifted to the other extreme, these shifts are not controllable by local government or by the people who call Hedland home.

“We are also at the mercy of these economic forces and victims of the rollercoaster in world supply and demand when it comes to Australia’s raw natural resources,” he said.

Councillor Blanco says that, as a keen ‘nomad’ himself, he understands the problems associated with caravanning. He and his wife, Sam, travelled around Australia in their Kedron caravan in 2009 and they now have a Kimberley Karavan for their off-road adventures.

“I cannot speak for previous councils but times have changed and we are encouraging travellers to stay in Hedland,” he said. “The amenities are very basic but, as we secure funding, we will improve the Hedland experience that will now focus around industrial tourism.”

* Do the mayor’s comments give you a better insight into what happened in Port Hedland? Will you give it another chance?

Click to comment
Hider and seeker

For some grey nomads, the Big Lap has an extra and very well hidden appeal

While he was working full-time at an alumina refinery and also looking after his elderly mother, it didn’t always look as though Mike Fitzgerald’s long-held dream of hitting the open road would come true.

However, when his mother moved into a nursing home and he retired from his job, Mike decided it was the perfect time to finally explore the wonders of this amazing country. He bought a Ford Ranger and a second-hand Coromal caravan and he was on his way.

While, like most grey nomads, Mike loves the scenery he sees, the history he discovers, and the people he meets, he also has a hobby which brings an exciting new dimension to his Big Lap experience.

Mike is a confirmed ‘geocacher’. For the uninitiated, geocaching involves using a GPS-enabled device to navigate to a specific set of coordinates and discover the geocache hidden at that location. The caches can be found in all sorts of weird and wonderful locations and can vary in size and appearance. They might be in a small tin or plastic container, or hidden inside a tree hollow or beneath a piece of bark. Often there are some small items that the finder may take, and he or she will then leave something of equal or greater value for the next person to find. Each geocache contains a ‘find log book’, and the geocacher will also post details online.

“Caches lead me to lots of places that are good to see,” said Mike. “Camping places, lookouts, parks and a host of locations that I would not normally know or even hear about.”

Some caches contain trackables which may be a coin or badge with their own personal serial number which can be registered.

“You put your coin in a cache hoping another cacher will move it to a cache in another location,” said Mike. “I had a badge that travelled from Eaton in Western Australia to Sweden and, as it travelled, I followed its journey.”

Geocaching can be an addictive hobby and Mike currently has 930 caches found ... and counting. It’s the challenge of the find and the excitement of discovering what lies within which brings the biggest thrill.

Do you have a hobby that helps enrich your Big Lap? 

Click to comment
Will Silo Stop be a siren for nomads?

Rochester’s 24-hour free camp will encourage visitors to spend time and money

With so many rural towns across Australia looking at ways to bolster their local economies and ensure their ongoing viability, the debate surrounding the pros and cons of offering free and cut-price camping is reviving up. While it is only to be expected that many caravan parks will, at the very least, be wary of the potential impact on their businesses, there are plenty of communities where the ‘it is for the greater good’ argument has held sway.

One example is the scenic Victorian town of Rochester, some 15 minutes south of the Murray River town of Echuca, where a 24-hour RV area known as ‘the Silo Stop’ has just opened.

With the local dairy industry struggling and the farming community ‘doing it tough’, the Rochester Business Network has long argued that a free campsite would bring in the ‘grey dollar’ and put the town on the nomad map.

“I’ve been pushing this barrier for a couple of years to try to attract the endless stream of RVs that travel through our town,” said the organisation’s president, Glenda Nichol. “What we are hoping is that travellers will stop, enjoy our country hospitality, have a coffee, a meal, a shop or whatever with a short walk back to their vehicle.”

The Silo Stop is located in the centre of town, a couple of minutes stroll from four hotels, cafes, a supermarket, a chemist, a laundromat, a bakery, and clothing stores. Rochester has a population of just over 3,000, and is famed for a scenic walk along the Campaspe River and for being the birthplace of cycling legend, Sir Hubert Opperman.

Ms Nichol admits it was a struggle to get the Silo Stop approved by the local authorities, but she is confident travellers will respond positively to the initiative. While she says the local caravan park was not exactly ‘on board’ with the idea, she stresses the new RV stop is not in competition with it, and she urges grey nomads to also stop at the attractive riverside park.

Rochester is keen to put itself on ‘Big Lap’ itineraries

Rochester’s ‘Silo Stop’ is ready

“I’m trying to sell Rochester and district as a whole, and hopefully that will increase their patronage too,” said Ms Nichol. “The town has much to offer visitors and we welcome all to our friendly little town that is out of the hustle and bustle of Echuca, Bendigo and Shepparton … whilst still being close when required!”

The Silo Stop is for fully self-contained vehicles as there are no services there, although there are public toilets one block away.

- Will this put initiative Rochester on your Big Lap radar?

Click to comment

Nomads in Brief

Tourist killed
A German tourist has died and three others have been injured after their 4WD rolled on the Great East Central Road about 180 kilometres from Warburton. The 20-year-old male front seat passenger was killed after being thrown from the vehicle.

Car rolls
A woman has been left with serious neck injuries after she flipped her car in an attempt to avoid a vehicle travelling on the wrong side of the road near Kununurra. The crash occurred in the dark on the Victoria Highway.

Hammock horror
A 15-year-old girl has died during a camping trip in the US state of Georgia after the tree holding her hammock snapped and fell on top of her while she slept. Joelle Dalgleish suffered a fractured skull and injuries to her spine before dying in hospital.

Naive devils
Sydney University researchers have discovered that Tasmanian devils raised in captivity for several generations are far more likely to become roadkill once released into the wild. The study showed much higher mortality for captive-bred devils, particularly in the first six weeks after release.

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Follow Me Tours
To Birdsville and Back
Wodonga is closing its Visitor Information Centre ... and you're not happy!

I love the ‘bricks and mortar’ information centres. So much local info can be gained by visiting them. On the other hand, we visited one in Nebo, Queensland, which was quaint, but quite useless (see pic right).

Andy & Jackie

Surely the $300,000 per year to run a Visitor Information Centre is better tasked to operating a free camping area so that the ‘tight arse’ grey nomads can camp for free.

Stephen H

We use online information a great deal, but the first place we head for in a new town is the Information Centre. There is always a mountain of information about the town, its surrounds, its eateries, events, and general info – advised by interested and passionate-about-their-town people. Would hate to see that disappear.

Elizabeth & Alan M

I regret to say the Visitor Information Centre in Ferntree Gully, Victoria – entry to the Dandenong Ranges – is also closing. However, the location is poor for travellers, with limited parking space on a busy highway. It was been staffed completely by volunteers.

Nebo Tourist Information Centre

Let’s hope the trend of closing information centres does not continue. Parking is sometimes a problem but, invariably, I’ve found, the staff are wonderful.

Steve B

Information centres are great but sometimes in areas where caravans and motorhomes can’t pull up safely, or park easily. They should be located on the sides of townships with rest areas and a dump point. Travellers spend big money.

Don & Deb T

The Wodonga info centre was poorly located, difficult to get to and to find parking. We all know what it is like towing a van around unfamiliar streets! Wodonga Council should have relocated it to Junction Place, a highly visible, easy-to-get-to area with adequate parking and close to the shops. How many extra dollars would then have been spent in Wodonga?

Sarg

Not every grey nomad has – or wants – a computer as a travel companion.

DJ R

The excellent tourist centre on the outskirts of Canberra has been relocated to the city centre. How a traveller towing a 20’ plus van is supposed to park nearby is not clear! The best Visitor Information Centres also include displays for local artists, coffee shops, sale of local handicrafts and produce, souvenirs, rest facilities, a water filling tap, garbage disposal, and a dump point.

Adrian H

I can picture many wonderful visitor centres in my mind’s eye: the friendly gift shop in Buronga where we picked up some nice things for our daughters-in-law, the air-conditioned bliss of Katherine when we needed a place to sort out an insurance claim; the kind folk at Norseman who let us top up our water tanks with no more than a friendly reminder that the water was ‘piped all the way from Perth’; the town-proud people at Armidale and their excellent free city tour, to name just a few.

John & Lorraine H

Travellers spend big money. Information centres are great and rest areas and a dump point. We use online information a great deal, but the first place we head for in a new town is the Information Centre. There is always a mountain of information about the town, its surrounds, its eateries, events, and general info – advised by interested and passionate-about-their-town people. Would hate to see that disappear.

Bill

I love information centres but can only visit when there is parking for my van very close as I cannot walk far, and cannot get my mobility scooter out of the tug if it’s still hitched.

David

Our first stop is always the Visitor Information Centre. No amount of talking to a phone or tablet will be as helpful as a live person.

Teg & Shez

Today after a visit to the Visitors Centre on Cunnamulla we changed our route to explore off the beaten track. This would not have happened with all our wonderful digital apparatus.

Rosemary & Brian L

We usually have specific questions at the Visitor Centre about the steepness of the roads, the turns, and the ability to negotiate with our motorhome. Local knowledge that cannot be condensed down to a digital medium. Also, we nearly always but a gift of some type for folks at home.

Stephen H

Technology should not be allowed to replace our ability to connect and meet each other.

Alcopop.

Not everyone has all the newfangled gizmos and gadgets. I still refuse to go to a self-service checkout in a supermarket. Please keep the face-to-face service.

Judy B

Not everyone has internet on all the time, and are money conscious of the data they use. Give us real people any time.

Mary G

A smile and a greeting can do wonders ... you don’t get that from an app!

Beverley W
I have just spent five ‘too short’ days at the truly magnificent Flinders Ranges (see my pic right). We stayed at Rawnsley Station which was great but the sites were a bit tight but we had superb outlooks. It was also very quiet which is what you want when you’re away. We will definitely be back to do some more exploring soon!

Marty K

Re: Fitness on the road (GNT: 147). Thank you for the article on exercise and a healthy lifestyle. We may never know how much it may help some people. But I am sure that it will help some. We are starting now!

Steve & Liz

It’s so important to us both (66 & 70) to maintain our fitness and strength while we travel. We take some hand weights, a suspension trainer, yoga mat and stretch bands with us and try to continue our normal exercise routines as much as possible. We want to feel confident that we can handle the intensity of a long hike and have the ability to climb those hills for the fabulous views for as long as we can. Often it’s not easy to do a proper workout while on the move but even simple things like squats and push-ups on those days are easy to fit in. Getting that fresh air into your lungs feels so good!

Helen S

We find it no trouble to go for a 30-minute walk, that’s 15 minutes out and 15 minutes back at our pace in the morning or afternoon or both. Once you get the routine you will feel much better from the exercise. Less aches and pains.

Peter Q

I try to find time to do a five kilometre walk per day. It doesn’t always happen but we are aware of our lifestyle and realise that some form of exercise is needed to keep doing what we’re doing.

Chris N

Having just come back from the Big Lap, I personally didn’t do enough strength exercises and I’m now paying for it with my soldier’s hip not doing well. Have gone back into my Pilates classes three days a week to manage the pain.

Phillip R (Liloking)

Keep fit and well while travelling – eat good food, take a good Vitamin each day, have a few drinks/refreshments at Happy Hour – laugh and joke around! That will keep you fit and well.

Don & Deb T

Re: Loving grandparents (GNT: 146). What amazing people you are, Janet and David! Your little grandson is a very fortunate little man. Your story bought me to tears. I wish you all a beautiful, happy life.

Marguerita C

David and Janet, I so admire your dedication to your children and grandchildren, and especially your determination to ‘live the dream’. Charlie may have medical issues but he has unconditional love from you both, along with a lifetime of memories of the wonderful places he has seen and experiences he has had. We hope we will see you on the road sometime when you get out there.

Gary & Yvonne P

What a courageous couple. I salute you David and Janet and pray that you have a wonderful time on your adventures. You deserve it.

Harry Q

Why are people like this never ordained Australians of the Year?

John M

Re: Nervous ‘tower’ (GNT: 147). There are classes to teach you how to tow and drive bigger vehicles. It is easy when you know how … and you can never stop learning. I am in my 70s and drive a 31’ Avida Winnebago.

Margaret B

My husband and I both did a full-day caravan course at MTEC in Melbourne just in case anything happened on our travels. We had a 26’ van built for us but felt we should know all the safe and correct procedures associated with towing which we learnt during our course. So far, so good and we have been on the road for three months.

Gail

I can never understand when one half of a couple either won’t or can’t drive with the van. Crazy, given the distances in Australia.

Wendy S

Re: Happy Hour – laugh and joke (GNT: 146). There are classes to teach you how to tow and drive bigger vehicles. It is easy when you know how … and you can never stop learning. I am in my 70s and drive a 31’ Avida Winnebago.

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Wendy S
Explore Davy Jones’ locker from dry land

Many grey nomads are constantly looking for that next little something to bring an extra dimension to their Big Lap experience. There are tinnies and kayaks that get them out onto the waterways, drones that give them a virtual up-in-the-air experience, but nothing – other than travelling with scuba diving gear – that’s taken them into the depths. Until now that is.

The dawn of the underwater drone is here, and the fish-like Biki from ‘robosea’ looks like it might go straight to the top of the food chain. Although the 26-centimetre long device moves through the water courtesy of its wiggling tail fin, the designers insist its self-stabilising technology will ensure videos and pics will be of high (and unshaky) quality. Biki can apparently swim for two hours or so on a single charge, even at depths of around 60 metres! It can, of course, get a bit dark down there so the ‘fish’ carries two 114-lumen LEDs to light up its underwater world.

In terms of controlling your new fishy friend, while it will connect via WiFi to your phone or tablet while above the water, it’s a different story ‘beneath’ where connectivity is impossible. Users can either program in a patrol route, or use an included underwater remote control that can use an ‘acoustic communication technique’ for depths up to 10 metres or so.

Wow! But other than having a new expensive toy to play with, can the Biki bring any practical benefit to grey nomads? Well, it probably could act as a fish-finding ‘scout’ before you throw your line in; it could have a look around for sharks, stingers, or any other scary creatures before you take a swim; and it could just make for a cracking Happy Hour talking point!

Do You Know
2. The New South Wales town of Orange was so named because:
   a) Sir Thomas Mitchell named it after the Prince of Orange with whom he had served in the Peninsular War under the command of the Duke of Wellington.
   b) Explorers Burke and Wills mistakenly imagined it would be a perfect location for growing citrus fruit. They also named a valley 20km away ‘Lemon’.
   c) On his first night after arriving in the area in 1822 to establish a convict settlement, Captain Percy Simpson described in his log book a ‘stunning orange sunset’.
3. There’s definitely no dragons living in this small Queensland town … but it sounds like there should be a bank!
4. Shortest road distance between opal mining towns of Coober Pedy and Lightning Ridge?
   a) 1,879km  b) 2,010km c) 2,423km
5. Which town is further north … Broome or Townsville?
The rural charm of the towns and villages of the New South Wales Upper Hunter Valley area a natural drawcard for relaxed grey nomads ... and none more so than Muswellbrook.

Located some 250 kilometres north of Sydney and perched on the banks of the beautiful Hunter River, the town ticks pretty much all of the Big Lap boxes. As well as a genuinely warm country welcome, it boasts numerous historic buildings, attractive tree-lined streets, a wide array of services ... and it sits squarely in God’s Country. The area is famed for its horse studs, its packed calendar of events and festivals, and its flourishing reputation for superb wines and local produce.

It is, of course, also famed for its coal mining, which began in the 1890s but didn’t spawn large-scale operations until much more recently. With the recent boom now drawing to a close, much of the land around Muswellbrook is being retired from mining, and companies like BHP are planting pastures on it for grazing cattle.

Situated on the New England Highway, Muswellbrook boasts a permanent population of 13,000 or so. It was first gazetted in 1833 as Musclebrook, and over the years its spelling morphed into Muswellbrook. While it was built on wheat, wool, agriculture and mining, tourism has become an increasingly important part of the local economy and character.

Events like the recent Scone Horse Festival, Upper Hunter Wine & Food Affair, and the St Heliers Heavy Horse Field Day draw visitors to the area from far and wide. And, for those lucky enough to be in the vicinity soon, the Merriwa Festival of the Fleeces takes place from June 9-11, and the Aberdeen Highland Games on July 1.

The best way to get to grips with Muswellbrook is to enjoy the Heritage Walk, which stretches for 4.5 kilometres but allows visitors to stop at any point and pick up again at another time. Historic highlights include the ornate two-storey Eatons Hotel, the former hospital (1864), the old telegraph office (1861), the old School of Arts (1871), the Royal Hotel (1893), and the brick railway station (1869). There are also some truly impressive old homesteads on the edge of town, including Birrakee, Skellatar House, Balmoral, and Edinglassie. About 15 kilometres south of Muswellbrook, visitors can find the 1133-hectare Lake Liddell which was built to supply cooling water to nearby power stations, but has become something of a playground. As well as being a great place for fishing, birdwatching, canoeing, or walking, there are some great camping options here.

Most grey nomads also like to meander around the Upper Hunter as a whole, taking the opportunity to visit horse studs and wineries, as well as sampling local produce like handmade cheeses and olive oil at source.

So much to see and taste and, if you’re travelling as slowly as grey nomads should be, so much time to do it in!

Click to comment
Dear Jaclyn and Heidi,

After six glorious months on the road, I’ve literally been hit for six by my husband’s unexpected Big Lap plan ‘amendment’. With minimum of consultation, he has announced he wants to go to every day of every test when Australia plays cricket against England in the Ashes series later this year and early next year. There are five separate five-day tests in Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, Melbourne and Sydney ... and that means towing the van across the country and back again at breakneck speed. Alan is a cricket nut and I always suspected he would try to sneak in one of the tests ... but all five! He acknowledges it’s a ‘big ask’, but says this is the perfect opportunity to realise his long-held dream. I feel a bit conned. And what am I supposed to do while he is enjoying himself at the cricket?

Grace

Oh dear, Grace. It seems like the two of you have well and truly got your wires crossed, but surely, there is room for compromise here. Perhaps Alan can go to one, or maybe two, of his beloved Test matches. See what games and locations you can make work the best with your current itinerary. Or perhaps, rather than driving across the Nullarbor and back, Alan could fly to Perth while you stayed elsewhere and spoil yourself by realising one of your ‘dreams’. Clearly, Alan’s cricket is important to him ... but the sheer logistics, the expense, and the strain it put on you really make it pretty impractical. However, you don’t want Alan to resent you for stopping him living his dream, so try to let him down gently and focus on the impracticalities. Good luck, Grace.

Click to comment

Hmmm! Of course, Alan is way out of order! It is totally unreasonable for him to expect you to whizz around the country in six weeks! It’s insanely selfish of him to expect you to twiddle your thumbs while he laps up 25 days of sporting action! It’s so obviously ludicrous that I have no doubt that he is confidently waiting for you to play the role of the ‘wicked witch of the west’ and torpedo his dreams. And then it will be a case of ‘poor Alan’, ‘poor downtrodden Alan’! Don’t fall for it, Grace. Cricket is a game of strategy so it’s time you beat him at his own game. Be enthusiastic about his dream, be supportive ... and then watch him suddenly work out for himself that it’s just plain dumb and can’t really be done. Hold your nerve, Grace, and let him call it off, not you.

Heidi
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CLASSIFIEDS

LAKES ENTRANCE, VIC
On-going position available in a caravan park in Lakes Entrance Victoria. We have a unique situation for the right couple. We require two people that are retired but happy to stay active during their retirement. We offer a house to live in exchange for assistance in running the campsite. We require a couple that is retired and assist in maintenance and park management. There is opportunity for extra paid work also certain times of the year plus a small retainer. Click here.

PILBARA CATTLE STATION, WA
Pilbara Cattle Station looking for Station Camp Hosts to meet and greet campers, look after campground and clean ablutions. Volunteer position only. Own caravan needed. Amenities and food supplied. Start date immediately through end of August. Click here.

CARNARVON, WA
The Carnarvon Space and Technology Museum is seeking a caretaker couple to assist at the museum to start mid July. Initially this will be a 6 month position with the possibility of extension to 12 months. Free onsite power & water for your van plus a small retainer. Must be friendly, outgoing and honest. Working hours will be rostered on a rosters basis, cleaning etc. Click here.

Housesitting

Moss Vale, NSW
Looking for house sitter any time before 19th July until 4th Sept. Property in the Southern Highlands Moss Vale area NSW. 100 acre bush property with good access on sealed road. Engages 2 Border Colies, 2 pigs, chickens and a cat. Click here.

Northern N.T.
Seeking a couple to farm sit while we take a break in August 2017 for 4 weeks (with a view to further farmsits in the future). We have 100 acres in northern NSW. Click here.

Darby, Qld
Power site available for a couple with self contained van on lovely 100 acre property near Dalby Queensland in return for helping with animal feeding and an occasional odd job. Must be an animal lover. Animals include horses, goats, sheep, dogs & cats. Clean tidy property. Must be available for helping with animal feeding and an occasional odd job. Click here.

Hervey Bay, Qld
House sitters with own caravan or motor home wanted from approx late July till start sept. Close to Hervey Bay, Qld overlooking Fraser Island on 1acre. Toilet/ shower and laundry available. We are on tank water and have solar panels (as well as mains power) so need to be water and energy conscious. Click here.

Mt Isa, Qld
House sitters needed Mount Isa for 2 weeks from 28 June. House on acreage with lots of room for caravan use of dongo with shower/toilet and kitchen facilities. Would need veggie garden and other plants watered. Click here.

Various Locations
Check our housesitting section on the Grey Nomads website for more housesitting opportunities.

HELP WANTED

Santas Wanted
Attention all Grandfathers, retiree’s, Grey Nomads! Christmas is just around the corner and we are looking for Santa. Could you assist in spreading the festive cheer as a Santa and make the day bright for many kids and families around the area? If you have a Santa costume, please contact us today to get on the list. Click here.