

HAPPY TRAILS

Don't come to grief – learn how to four-wheel drive before you conquer the country

Now is the time to right a terrible wrong. Two issues ago, we offered you the 10 best places in the country to go four-wheel driving, which is fine – if you're an experienced four-wheel driver. But most of you, we realised, probably aren't.

Recent research suggests that 98 per cent of vehicles with the ability to drive all of the wheels at once, never actually go off-road. This must change. There are people who can teach you, and one of the best is Vic Widman, who wrote that "10 Best" piece for us, and now wants to help you get out there. I took part in the two-day course at his property in southern NSW (but there are courses and schools nationwide), and after two days with Widman re-learning how to drive, I recommend you do it. I've concentrated on the driving bit here: there's also a heck of a lot on equipment, safety, and vehicle-rescue procedures that you should know, as well. But no *Alpha* reader would just jump in a car and head out back of Bourke with nothing but a bottle of Mount Franklin, a bag of pretzels and his half-charged Nokia. Would they?

KNOW YOUR VEHICLE

I'm in a Hyundai Santa Fe automatic, an AWD, which means it's a car that tries to operate as well on-road as off. Others on the course are more serious off-roader types, driving big Holden Colorados and the like. They all operate in different ways, which Widman illustrates by driving two



THE WHEEL DEAL

WHAT CAN YOUR CAR REALLY DO?

A car's ability to put driving torque through all four corners is just the start. Some are designed to give you better traction on the road, others are good for the occasional trip off a sealed road, while all-wheel drives like the Hyundai Santa Fe blur the line between these and the 4WD heavyweights, which are built to go over more varied terrain. The types of drive they produce to which wheels and under which conditions gets smarter and more varied every year, so make sure you know exactly what yours can do before you head off.



Enter Sandman: Ivan (expertly) navigates the soft terrain.

Urban driving makes you care about the outer edges of your car, but in the bush what matters is wheel placement. You need to gain a sense of exactly where your front wheels are all the time, and make sure that you drive dead straight over obstacles so the back wheels follow the front precisely.

With every new test, like all other outback drivers in a spot, I find myself craning my neck to see as much of the obstacle as far ahead as I can, mentally sorting out the right track and putting the whole car through it as carefully as I can. Think back to those ads where your favourite 4WD roars about at breakneck speed. Nonsense. I barely get above 25km/h all day.

of them onto a simple obstacle that lifts two wheels off the ground at each corner. It doesn't look too testing, but one is stuck straightaway and can barely manage to reverse out, while the other can feed all the power to the wheels left on the ground and gets through.

You should also know how big your car is. As the Santa Fe tips down hills, scrambles over humps, across river beds and through mudholes, every slight noise makes me more aware of every inch of overhang back and front, and clearance between the ground and the vehicle's guts.

ASSESS THE TERRAIN

First-up, we drive over small, brightly coloured rocks embedded in the track. All you have to do is hit them, front wheel, then back wheel. Sounds simple, no? No.

HILLS

I stand at the bottom of a rutted track. It's not as steep as some of the others Widman has built into his property, but it looks plenty steep to me. Running through my mind are his three golden rules: "Can my car do it? Can I do it? What if (it goes wrong)?" At the moment, my answers are, "I don't know" times three. I accelerate upwards, but stop halfway in a wheel-churning fury and begin to slither back down. As I've been taught, I throw the Santa Fe into reverse, and using my side mirrors (don't swing around to look back, as you'll lose more control), outpace the slide and drive back to the bottom.

If going up is daunting, coming down can be more scary. Widman shows me his prize steep hill: a 35-degree precipice you can just about walk; instead, I try something a lot gentler, in the lowest possible gear, feathering the brake like a human ABS. Most of the time I'm under control, when I'm not tobogganing down in a minor panic.

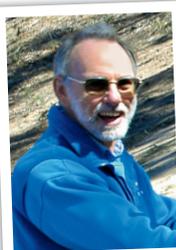
WATER

Widman takes me to his skidpan, which has turned into a shallow lake, handy for four-wheel driving. Then we do what you're supposed to do when confronted by an obstacle you're not sure about: get out and have a look. We poke it with a stick to test the depth at every point the car will encounter. If it was a river, we'd have to walk the river.

Only then do I drive slowly and steadily across; when I feel myself getting bogged, I vibrate the wheel left and right to shake it free. If I stop completely, the trick is to reverse back and try again, instead of grinding myself a deeper and deeper hole. It's not too deep, so none of the mud churns up into my engine bay and differentials. I make it to the other side.

SAND

To make up for all the crawling carefully through obstacles for two days, we are rewarded with a hoon around the dunes. The trick with the sand is to ditch everything you've learned and drive like you've got a pair. First up: lower the tyre pressure to between 15-20psi, so more rubber is in contact with the ground and you're less likely to sink into it. To help yourself along, don't turn too sharply, and drive more aggressively, accelerate into corners and power up dunes. And if you get to a hard corrugated bit? Accelerate, obviously. Go fast enough and you'll float across the bumps, instead of lurching around like a fishing boat on a bad day in Bass Strait. – *Ivan Smith*



RE-LEARN TO DRIVE

Vic Widman (left) brings 30 years of four-wheel driving to his company Great Divide Tours. As well as national 4WD tours, he and his instructors offer weekends of training both in the classroom and on his specially constructed property. You'll learn everything you need, from driving the right way, to trailer expertise, safety, rescues and communication. Go to www.4wd.net.au. Also try: www.globalgypsies.com.au/training/4WD in Perth, www.safetrek.com.au in Victoria, www.australian4wd.com.au in Queensland and elsewhere, www.adventure4wd.com.au in South Australia, www.tagalongbroome.com in the west and north-west, and www.smartdrivertraining.com/a4wdtn for a load of useful information nationwide.

PHOTOGRAPHY: VIC WIDMAN