

FIRST PERSON

Grant Wilckens



With overseas off limits, more and more Australians are holidaying at home. Discovery Parks CEO Grant Wilckens tells Michael McGuire that caravan parks are increasingly becoming the place to go – for all ages.

On the road

One of my fondest childhood memories is road trips to the Yorke Peninsula, camping and fishing at Pondalowie Bay. Holidays like these were a right of passage for any young Aussie kid. With

borders closed, more families are having holidays like this again, which is a COVID silver lining. The great Aussie road trip is the holiday of 2020.

Secrets to success

A (multi) million-dollar location and top-class amenities. Many of our properties are on land that global resorts would only dream of owning – from the pristine coastline of Robe (SA) to Pambula Beach (NSW), and the famous Pinky Beach on Rottnest Island (WA). Throw in resort pools and water parks, glamping tents and picturesque camp sites, and you have something pretty special and authentically Australian.

It's not who you think

Millennials actually spend more money and more time caravanning and camping than baby boomers these days. No matter the age, Aussies are looking to experience the true Australia and want authentic experiences, not hotel room walls. Caravanning and camping is cool again. Road tripping is what the hipsters are doing while "gramming" from their vans and sipping on their soy chai lattes – haven't you heard?!

Might as well jump

You're NEVER too old for a bouncy pillow! There's no doubt kids love them but lots of adults do, too – I'm sometimes a big kid at heart. It's not unusual to see adults trying to outbounce their kids when they think nobody's looking.

It takes a lot of work

A lot. With 280+ properties across Australia, we have parks in A-Class Nature Reserves, on protected coastal lands, in the tropics, on the snow fields. Ensuring these special parts of Australia are showcased at their best, is at the heart of what we do.

Revenge on a noisy guest

By getting your kids to play loudly outside their tent early the next morning ... (jokes).

Caravans are bigger

Most definitely. It's not unusual to see a park manager or fellow camper jump behind the wheel to help someone out of a sticky spot. It's all part of the Aussie spirit! But seriously, the level of luxury in some of the motorhomes and caravans you can buy these days almost rivals the interiors of superyachts.

Basics are not enough

Absolutely, and neither should they be. Caravan parks are not what they were when I was growing up. In our network you can expect premium locations, top class cabins, pools and

water parks, and loads to keep the kids entertained – from pedal karts to bouncy pillows. In Robe we have an incredible heated pool and adventure playground with flying fox. In the Barossa we have an adultonly area with heated pool and luxe glamping tents. In Renmark you can watch the sunset over Lake Bonney from your lakeside cabin. The park isn't just the place to stay anymore, it's the destination.

Surviving disasters

Like all tourism businesses, we've been heavily impacted both by bushfires and COVID. However, we're lucky that unlike some tourism operators we don't rely on international guests. And, the Aussies that usually take 9.8 million overseas trips each year are instead holidaying at home. In most locations across Australia we're now seeing bookings at a higher rate than the same time last year. Aussies really are heeding the call to explore their own backyards, and it's fantastic to see our regions benefiting from the tourism recovery.

Exploring Australia

Road trip holidays are the holiday of the moment, and we have a huge opportunity ahead of us with Aussies exploring Australia like never before. In fact, of all states, South Aussies have been fastest to do this – our SA parks have never been busier.

Favourite getaway

We have 41 parks in SA, and I can't pick a favourite child. But when I'm not at a park, I'm down the river at our shack. My kids love to go wakeboarding and even barefoot waterski, and I love being on the water with the family.

Grant Wilckens is chief executive officer and co-founder at Discovery Parks, and a Tourism SA director.