

DIRTY

THE UNSEALED **GUID**



Y FUN

E TO MUD DRIVING

There's not much precision about mud driving. When the track turns to slop, you and your two-tonne four-wheel drive are often at the mercy of the track. But I can't remember ever having as much fun as I've had in the mud.

Yet over the past few decades, we've garnered a new respect for the environment that often means we have to be a little selective about where we have our fun, and on what sort of tracks. Mud often means that the track might be subject to erosion and degradation. If that's the case, after rain the run-off water might silt up our rivers and streams.

And of course, we don't just go charging off tracks in search of the biggest mud hole anymore. The four-wheel driver's doctrine is to never leave a track in worse shape than when we arrived. This is especially the case for outback roads, where the tracks aren't just there for our fun, they're there for the locals who rely on them. If we drive through ripping up these roads, we're harming the good name of four-wheel drivers everywhere. Not to mention if you drive on roads that are closed, you could be up for hefty fines.

Often enough, though, mud is just part of the journey of going from A to B. You can't always predict it, and you can't always avoid it or turn back. So, you might as well know how to drive it!

THE PREPARATION

One of the best forms of preparation you can do is to invest in a set of all-terrain or mud-terrain tyres. These tyres feature a more open, blocky tread that is designed to self-clean in the mud.

Your mud-terrain tread is traditionally the more aggressive tread, which is also considerably noisier on-road, while the all-terrain tread is quieter and has a more closed tread. If you're an occasional weekend warrior, the all-terrain tread is the best option, as it offers a good balance of on- and off-road ability.

Whereas the mud terrain offers buckets more grip off-road, its noise and handling characteristics on-road suffer as a result. And while manufacturers are doing a great job of making mud-terrain tyres quieter, you still can't have it both ways.

One other side benefit of all-terrain and mud-terrain tyres over your standard highway tyres is that they are generally of a more robust construction. Hence, they're also more puncture resistant, and will be far better suited to those long outback sojourns.





MUD DRIVING BASICS

- Engage traction aids
- Keep up momentum
- Stick to wheel tracks/wheel ruts
- Abide by road closure signs
- Adhere to low-impact driving techniques

Now that you know what tyres you want, you'll want to know what pressures to run. Like most other serious low-range conditions, deflation is the way to go. Around 20psi is a good place to start, but again, it's up to you to calculate the best tyre pressure based on your vehicle weight and tyre size.

If there's one thing that always seems to be lacking in the mud, it's traction. So, before you go wading into the slippery stuff, engage every traction aid you can get your hands on. For those with selectable diff locks, reserve your front diff lock until you really need it as your steering will be affected.

THE DRIVE

The trick to successful mud driving all comes down to good throttle control. Accelerate too hard, and you'll go nowhere – simply spitting plumes of mud into the air. Go too easy, and you will stop wherever the traction stops. As they say, practice makes perfect, and you'll soon work out which technique gets you the furthest.

Momentum is also your friend in the mud, but it does need to be measured. You want enough momentum to drag you through boggy bits of track, but not too much so that you slide off the track. Particularly on outback dirt roads, if you carry too much momentum your vehicle can quite easily spin 180 degrees or more. If you're going too fast and this happens, you could end up in the weeds by the side of the road.

If you start to head in the wrong direction, keep your wheels pointed in the correct direction all the time. Experienced drivers might like to try and give a few blips on the accelerator to get the 4X4 back in line, and while this can work, it doesn't always. It really depends on the road surface at the time.

On bush tracks, staying on the track is usually the rule of thumb. If there are wheel ruts, stick in them and you'll never stray off the track.The ruts work like rail lines to keep your 4X4 in check. Sure, the road might be (and often is) a lot bumpier in the ruts, but it's invariably where the best traction lies.

The moment you decide to head off the track is the moment you're in trouble. Usually the track surface is the best in the middle, so while it might look like it's filled with sloppy puddles, there is usually some kind of road base under there to firm up the track and make it drivable. Off the track often looks better, but rarely is. On many occasions, I've come across vehicles stranded off the side of tracks "because it looked better over there". It never is!

It's important in mud that as soon as you lose forward momentum, you must immediately stop spinning your wheels. Many a minor bogging has turned into a major recovery because the driver tried to rev their way out of trouble. This not only chews up the track, but it also digs your 4X4 deeper into the bog.



Okay, so what do you do if you succumb to the almighty bog? After you've tried the obvious (backing up and trying again), the best bet is usually a gentle tug with a snatch strap. This will free most light-duty boggings. I should emphasise here that a 'gentle tug' means just that. Often if a 4X4 'bellies out' in mud, it can turn into a massive suction cup. Hence, the vehicle might be two tonnes, but if the suction takes effect on flat surfaces like fuel tanks, it can turn your 4X4 into a four to six-tonne load. So you see why I caution against pulling like buggery with a snatch strap!

If you do look stuck hard, it's time to grab the long-handled shovel and start to dig out underneath your vehicle. Your other option is to jack the vehicle up with an airbag jack (great for mud) or a high-lift jack. Once your vehicle is elevated, you can simply pack underneath the tyres with fallen timber and drive on out. A winch is another good option, but if the load looks very heavy, still clear out underneath your rig to lessen the load. And a snatch block will also help you along by halving the load on the winch.

MUDS AIN'T MUDS

There are lots of different surfaces around Australia, plenty of which constitute mud when a little water is added. There is clay, which is not unlike driving on grease. It's usually quite firm, so you're unlikely to get completely bogged, but your control will be minimal. A good example of clay is on the CREB track out the back of the Daintree Rainforest.

Then there is black soil. When this stuff gets wet, it often seems like a bottomless pit of despair. It's a seriously low traction surface, but worse than that, it's a surface that seems to often have no base, so your 4X4 can bog down very easily. If you're in a high-clearance 4X4 you'll have fewer problems 'bellying out' on the crown of the track, but low-clearance 4X4s should get out while they can.

Another seemingly unlikely place for mud to form is underneath crusty salty lakes in the interior of Australia. While they look like a dry and perfectly solid surface, drive onto some of these and you'll rapidly sink into a black, tar-like substance that's almost impossible to get out of. If you intend on crossing salt pans, only do this on well-used tracks – never go and make your own.

AFTER THE STORM

After you've been doing a heap of mud plugging, it's not unusual to jump back on the highway and feel some major shudders and vibrations go through your 4X4. Often it's simply caused by a heap of mud getting caught up in your wheel rims and throwing your tyres out of balance. Once you've cleaned the offending mud away, you'll be back to smooth sailing.

Incidentally, if your mud plugging has been quite vigorous, you could find your engine overheating. If this is the case, mud has probably blocked the fins in your radiator, blocking the airflow. Once you've cleaned out your radiator, you'll be all set to roll.

It's easy to forget that dirt and mud naturally contain traces of salt. So, after you've had your fun, give your 4X4 a good bath – preferably with a detergent that features anti-rust agents.



ECOTIPS

In years gone by, if you were heading for the mud, you would throw in the tyre chains for some extra traction. Now it's acknowledged that there are better, lower-impact ways of getting out of trouble.

Differential locks and winches both serve much the same purpose, but their impact on the environment is far less. So, leave the chains at home, or only use them if it's a serious emergency and you can't get out any other way.