



STORY NICK SCOTT
PHOTOGRAPHY SAM TINSON

A WEEKEND TO REMEMBER

Take one RAV4 and tackle four extreme activities in just one weekend in Oz – that’s the challenge we pitched to Nick Scott, deputy editor of GQ Australia. He was only too happy to oblige...

AUSTRALIA IS a road-tripper’s Nirvana: as rich with cracking drives as it is with lethal wildlife and annoyingly talented sportsmen. There’s the 900-mile trip from Alice Springs to Darwin, which sees the desert of the Island Continent’s dead centre morph gradually into the tropical lushness the north shares with its Indonesian neighbours. Then there’s the Barossa Valley, where parched hills are punctuated by stunning architecture and rows of vines. Or what about the string of towns that span the Victoria gold mining trail, crystallised in a state of 19th-century charm by the National Trust?

If you want to unleash the spirit of the Toyota RAV4, though, you can’t beat the New South Wales coast – an activity trail where adrenaline and the landscape compete to take your breath away.

And what better way to start such an adventure than a staple for any adventurous traveller: a climb over the iconic centrepiece

of the state’s capital, Sydney Harbour Bridge? And so I find myself, one typically crisp Sydney afternoon, tackling the same 75-year-old catwalks and ladders that have been traversed by notables as varied as Sarah Ferguson, Cathy Freeman and Kylie Minogue, harnessed to a rail that runs the bridge’s length and sporting a desperately unflattering blue babygrow. (These are designed to blend in with the sky, so that motorists on the eight lanes’ worth of traffic below are not distracted by the ant-like figures scaling the structure.)

It’s difficult to fathom just what a feat of engineering Sydney’s showpiece attraction is. It took almost ten years and six million rivets to clasp its 39,000 tons of steel together to create the 400-foot-tall, 1650-foot-long arch known affectionately as ‘The Coathanger’.

Clambering over this latticework of steel bars and girders is something like being shrunk to pocket-size and let loose in a Meccano jungle. When you finally reach the top, the view is nothing short of staggering; behind us are the majestic silver shards of the city’s skyscrapers; all around us is the shimmering azure of Sydney Harbour; to our right, ▶▶





Top: our first activity – bridge climbing. There’s nothing quite like watching the sun come up over Sydney from the top of its iconic bridge

Right: our second activity – microlighting. Best not to think about how little is actually holding you up in the air...

Opposite: our final activity – kiteboarding, or flying a kite that’s actually attached to your waist

on the horizon, a series of yellow ellipses – Bondi Beach among them – marks out the journey north that I’ll be embarking upon the following morning. To our left, on the North Shore, a tiny silver spec against the gaudy backdrop of the amusements of Luna Park, is the RAV4 that will carry us on our way.

TRAVELLER’S FRIEND

On British motorways, opportunities for refreshment are marked by signs depicting a beaming, tray-toting chef. On the Australian freeway, you get pieces of cardboard taped to lamp posts, bearing a phrase much beloved of road-weary motorists: ‘Driver Reviver’.

Thanks to a community programme set up to reduce the effects of people being tired behind the wheel, about 220 of Australia’s lay-bys now have volunteers serving up endearingly bad but nevertheless free coffee to weary motorists from something resembling a converted ice-cream van.

It is outside one of these modest hostels that I ponder the next part of my adventure: a virgin flight by microlight. I’ve been assured several times that this is one of the safest so-called extreme sports that you can do, but somehow the idea of being suspended from



fabric wings by eight 0.2-inch thick lengths of twisted wire seems a potentially fatal way to spend an Easter morning. As I set off for the churned-up turf of Somersby Airfield, I’m suffering more than a little foreboding.

Microlight Adventures proprietor Len Birger clearly has the measure of my anxiety. ‘It’s safer than a 747 or a jumbo,’ he insists of a craft which compares to a passenger jet as a go-cart does to the RAV4. ‘Not only do they fly at a much lower speed, but microlights have a glide ratio of about six-to-one – so if ▶▶



ACTIVE INGREDIENTS

All you need for planning your own extreme OZ road trip

BRIDGE CLIMB

FEAR FACTOR: Not much, unless you suffer an abject fear of heights (or sartorial indignity).

★★★★☆

CONTACT: Call Bridge Climb Sydney on +61 (0)2 8274 7777 or visit their website at www.bridgeclimb.com.

MICROLIGHTING

FEAR FACTOR: Those for whom the holiday starts at Heathrow will find this a life-enriching experience; those who sweat at the sight of a model Boeing need not apply.

★★★★☆

CONTACT: You can call Microlight Adventures on +61 (0)404 808 853 or visit www.microlight.net.au.

SANDBOARDING

FEAR FACTOR: Surprisingly high. A well-waxed sandboard soon gathers rib-fracturing momentum on the fine sands of New South Wales.

★★★★☆

CONTACT: Call John Gilham of Port Stephens Adventure on +61 (0)425 213 096 or you could visit his website at www.portstephensadventure.com.au.

KITEBOARDING

FEAR FACTOR: Water is the key here: the only thing you’re likely to bruise while trying to master this tricky art is your ego.

★★★★☆

CONTACT: Glen Hooper of Cross Shore Kiteboarding can be reached on +61 (0)2 6557 5133 and the website is www.xshore.com.au.

Please note, all prices subject to change.

Nick nervously assesses the gradient of the slope for his execution of the third activity on the list – sandboarding



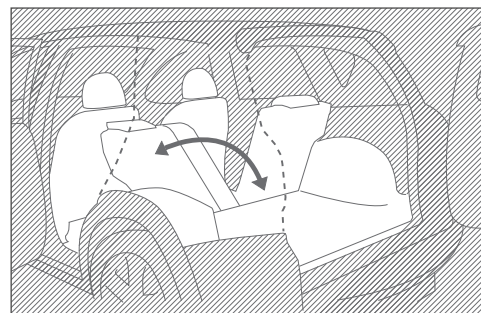
SPACE TOURISM

Why the RAV4 finds an activity trip easy to swallow

An active lifestyle can be a heavily laden one, and of all the comfort and convenience features that the RAV4 boasts, none are more invaluable to the adventure-sportsperson than the Easy Flat folding rear seat system.

Thanks to space provided by these easy-folding seats, the RAV4 swallows up sails, kites and sandboards with Tardis-like ease – and the benefits don't end there.

Sports that involve canvas and twine can be a fiddly, labour intensive business without also wasting hours of valuable driving and leisure time wrestling with headrests and catches, but the RAV4 seat system is fully automated. Fiddly-phobes will delight in pressing a simple lever and watching the back-rest fold down, the seat slide forward and the whole assembly tumble forward with a satisfying thud.



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The Integrated Active Drive System on the RAV4 makes for ridiculously confident handling in challenging conditions.

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you are at a height of 1,000 feet, you can glide for about 6,000 feet.'

For Len, microlighting is an all-consuming addiction. 'Skimming past the clouds, getting up high, swooping down, watching the ground slide by – the sense of freedom is complete,' he says. 'Without a cockpit and complicated control systems, you become part of the machine – it's like it's you flying.'

Ten minutes later, I know exactly what he means. We soar over the prosperous communities of New South Wales' Central Coast and the lush, sweeping contours of the countryside that surrounds them, looking from this height like an endless bed of broccoli, sprinkled with toy-sized mansions.

With the ground passing by so slowly beneath us, it's difficult to fathom that we're actually cruising at 70mph; it's only when I gamely try to return the waves of a cluster of children on the rocks by the sea, and my forearm slams back into the rear wing of the craft, that I get a full impression of our speed.

TEARING IT UP

The following morning, it's back on the road to make my way north up the Pacific Highway. I've barely taken the car off the tarmac so far, but have I somewhere in mind where I can both test the terrain-tearing credentials of the RAV4 and get involved with another activity: the awesome 20-mile stretch of sand dunes that lies next to the surf-kissed beach at Stockton, near Newcastle.

The Integrated Active Drive System of the RAV4 ensures that the car's traction, stability, steering and torque are working in tandem, making for ridiculously confident handling in challenging conditions. And Stockton's dunes are challenging. Think Tatooine in Star Wars, but with steeper hills. Yet you can almost hear

the delight in the engine tone as we tackle the first dunes, the clever torque control of the RAV4 distributing power between the front and rear wheels for a perfect off-road ride. Our vehicle seems so content swallowing up the dunes that it seems a shame to switch it off to tackle the landscape using another, slightly more primitive, mode of transport.

Given Australia's obsession with adrenaline sports and distinct lack of snow, it was only a matter of time before a local picked up a discarded 4x4 bonnet and went hurtling down a sandy gradient on it. Now, sandboarding is one of the country's fastest-growing sports. Stockton itself offers dunes up to 160 feet high, with slopes of 60 degrees – a more hair-raising enterprise than it might sound.

If that's not evident while we're all standing sheepishly at the top, it's pretty obvious once each person has gone down emitting an involuntary, petrified whoop. While most in today's group – which includes some Japanese students, a pair of English sisters with their mother and a group of middle-aged Europeans – sensibly stick to making a couple of runs sitting down on the board to get the feel of its movement, in a regrettable act of sporting hubris I decide to stand up on my first go, and it isn't long before I'm nursing a painful rib and a mouth full of sand. It's an addictive business, though, and each run is quickly followed by another despite the breathless strain of getting back to the top in searing heat, on difficult terrain, and sporting a handful of minor injuries.

THE WINDS OF CHANGE

On our way further north the following day, with time to spare, I take a detour: a 60-mile inland 'tourist drive', which passes through various National Parks. The car is more than ▶▶



THE ROUTE

Fancy going on a similar journey? Just follow this guide

From climbing Sydney Harbour Bridge to microlighting in Somersby Drive north to the Pacific Highway and continue through the leafy suburbs of Sydney's North Shore. At Wahroonga join the F3 freeway, following signs north to Newcastle. Admire as you cross it the Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. After crossing the Mooney Mooney bridge take the Gosford exit, then turn onto Wiseman Ferry Road. Find Lackersteens Road; the Microlight airfield is on the left.

From microlighting in Somersby to sandboarding in Stockton Continue north on the F3 freeway and follow signs to Stockton beach. For a real Australian snack, do as the local surfers do and grab a meat pie or at one of the beach shops.

From sandboarding in Stockton to kitesurfing in Old Bar Follow the Pacific Highway towards Taree then follow signs to Old Bar. Turn left at the airfield and follow the dirt road until you see the lagoon on the right. Make sure you take your sunnies with you as the glare off the white sand and blue still water can be blinding.

From Old Bar back to Sydney Return to the Pacific Highway and continue south all the way back to Sydney.



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I take a 60-mile inland detour...the RAV4 is comfortable with every terrain we throw at it.

comfortable with every type of terrain we throw at it, but there's more to the affinity with the land itself here. You can't spend time in Australia with a RAV4 without noticing its affinity to the national character – egalitarian, safe, no-nonsense, comfortable, reliable and easy-going being just some of the adjectives which apply nicely to both.

Cruising down winding dirt tracks and mountain passes, natural spectacles such as Ellenborough Falls and the sweeping vistas spreading from the bases of sheer cliffs stun me into a reflective state, broken only by the ring of a mobile phone. On the line is Glen Hooper, proprietor of Crossshore Kiteboarding. Each day, Glen decides he and his buddies are going to spend the day kiteboarding based on where the best winds are. Today they're off to a lagoon next to Old Bar beach.

From a distance, kiteboarding looks like a serene pursuit. The 40-foot-long kites dotting the blue sky with blazing colour appear virtually motionless, while the figures attached to them make graceful curves as they leap around, sometimes up to 30 feet above water.

When it's you roped to an airborne bulge of harnessed wind-power, though, kiteboarding is a very different business. Here's how it works

for the experienced: you place a board by the edge of the water. You then launch a huge kite attached to your waist into the air above the water, bring it under control, skid into the water and tear off while maintaining full, dignified control of the paraphernalia that's propelling you along the water's surface.

Here's how it works for me: the sheer force that courses through my shoulders as the kite catches the wind calls to mind trying to stop a motor vehicle by clutching its back bumper, and I'm soon tumbling through the water like a tin-can strung to a wedding-car.

Yes, kiteboarding takes a little getting the hang of, but very quickly it becomes apparent that this sport pays big dividends to those who invest in it. 'It attracts energetic people who are fascinated by the wind,' says Glen, who reckons he can get most novices standing up on a board after about three hours' tuition.

It's a tiring pursuit, but I'm already making plans to give it another stab by the time the RAV4 thunders through the dusk to my resting place for the night. I've got a long drive back to Sydney in the morning but I'll be in the perfect vehicle for it, so I won't be in any hurry. It's all, as the old adage goes, about the journey. ●

24 HOURS WITH RAV4

Fancy a day of RAV4 XT-R adventure for yourself? Book yourself a 24-hour test drive today

If you fancy your own RAV4 adventure (albeit within the confines of the UK) we have just the thing to help: a free 24-hour test drive for the all-new RAV4 XT-R.

The RAV4 XT-R, on sale since January, is a great new special edition with the looks of the range-topping T₁₈₀ grade at a fraction of the cost. Its specification list features the innovative Toyota Easy Flat-7 seating system, 17-inch alloys, dual-zone climate control air conditioning, a six-disc CD player, cooled glove box, front fog lamps, electric/tilt sunroof and a leather steering wheel with integrated audio controls.

But on top of all that, you'll also enjoy privacy glass, scuff plates and a choice of three colours; Astral Black, metallic Carbon Quartz or metallic Tyrol Silver.

*Visit www.toyota.co.uk/24terms for full terms and conditions.

Best of all, with the ingenious new tyre repair kit featured on the XT-R, there's no need to fiddle around fitting a spare wheel in the event of a puncture. You can have the tyre re-inflated in minutes, allowing you to drive to the nearest garage, where they can fully fix the puncture. Not only does it save you time by the roadside, it also means there's no need for a heavy spare wheel on the tailgate, making it easy to open the door when loading or unloading.

Of course, the RAV4 XT-R has a full complement of active safety features, too, all closely monitored by the Integrated Active Drive System. There's also the Active Torque Control 4WD system – which continuously monitors the amount of available grip and switches engine torque between the front and rear axles accordingly – Vehicle Stability Control, Traction Control and integrated Electric Power Steering. And even if you do end up in a shunt, you're well protected with nine airbags (including a first-in-class driver's knee airbag) and Whiplash Impact Lessening front seats.

So, with this level of specification, perhaps it's no surprise that Toyota is now offering you the opportunity to test drive the new RAV4 XT-R for a full 24 hours. All those toys won't play with themselves, after all.

24 HOUR TEST DRIVE

To request a 24 hour RAV4 XT-R test drive*, use the reply form at the back of the magazine, call 0845 275 5555 (quote TT31) or go to www.toyota.co.uk/rav4

