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The Grey Nomad Spend Pattern, by Season

How Australia’s most valuable self drive visitors move — and spend — through the calendar year.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive Summary

> Seasonality is the strategy hidden in plain sight.

For many regional councils, tourism planning still revolves around school holidays and the summer peak. Yet one of Australia’s most valuable visitor segments follows a very different calendar.

Grey nomads and long distance caravan travellers are not constrained by school terms or annual leave. They travel when the weather is comfortable, roads are accessible and destinations are less crowded. As a result, they deliver economic activity precisely when many regional businesses need it most.

This makes the RV market more than a tourism opportunity. It is an economic resilience strategy.

Understanding where and when these travellers spend is essential for councils seeking to increase visitation, support local businesses and reduce seasonal fluctuations.

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A Different Type of Visitor

The modern grey nomad is typically:

- Aged 55 or older, but increasingly joined by younger retirees and semi retired couples.
- Travelling in a well equipped caravan, campervan or motorhome.
- On the road for weeks or months at a time, rather than a short holiday.
- Financially comfortable, with time and discretionary spending capacity.
- Flexible about routes and length of stay.
- Motivated by climate, comfort and authentic regional experiences.

Unlike traditional holidaymakers, they are not rushing to a destination. The journey itself is the experience.

This flexibility creates significant opportunities for regional communities that provide a welcoming environment.

Understanding the Seasonal Flow

Australia’s caravan movement generally follows predictable climate patterns.

Summer

Northern Australia experiences reduced visitation due to heat, humidity and the wet season. Southern coastal destinations experience strong demand from families and holidaymakers. Grey nomads often remain in southern regions or pause travel.

Autumn

One of Australia’s strongest RV travel periods. Comfortable temperatures encourage movement across South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and inland Queensland. Wine regions, food destinations and coastal towns benefit from extended stays.

Winter

The great northern migration begins. Travellers move towards:

- Far North Queensland, Cairns and the Atherton Tableland.
- The Northern Territory, particularly Darwin, Katherine and the Top End.
- The Kimberley and Broome in Western Australia.
- Central Australia, including Alice Springs and Uluru.
- Inland routes through outback New South Wales and Queensland.

Communities positioned along these routes experience significant increases in visitor spending.

Spring

Movement gradually shifts south again. Travellers begin returning through inland Australia before spending summer closer to home. Many regional towns experience another strong shoulder season as visitors travel more slowly.

What Councils Get Wrong

Many regional tourism strategies continue to prioritise peak season events. This approach overlooks the economic value of shoulder season visitors.

Grey nomads often:

- Travel outside school holidays.
- Stay several nights rather than a single overnight.
- Spend generously in local businesses.
- Prefer weekdays over weekends.
- Return regularly to towns that treat them well.

Regions that shift focus toward shoulder season travellers can meaningfully lift year round economic activity.

How to Encourage Longer Stays

Councils can encourage visitors to stay an extra night by giving them clear reasons to remain in town. Practical options include:

- A weekly farmers or produce market that visitors can plan around.
- Free or low cost heritage walks, guided tours and self drive trails.
- Live music nights at the local pub or club.
- Cellar door and brewery experiences within walking distance of overnight stays.
- Regular community events that welcome travellers.
- Reliable amenities such as laundries, showers, water and dump points.

Every extra day increases local economic activity.

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Understanding the Spend Pattern

A typical travelling couple might spend:

CATEGORY	TYPICAL DAILY SPEND
Fuel	$80 to $180
Groceries	$40 to $80
Café or Bakery	$20 to $40
Restaurant or Pub	$40 to $100
Attractions	$20 to $80
Wine or Local Produce	$30 to $150
Miscellaneous Retail	$20 to $60

Daily expenditure commonly ranges between $250 and $500, depending on location and activities.

Importantly, this spending is spread across numerous local businesses rather than concentrated in a single attraction.

The Importance of Longer Stays

A visitor who stays for two nights contributes far more than one who simply drives through.

Longer stays typically lead to:

- Higher spending across cafés, restaurants and retail.
- Greater engagement with attractions and paid experiences.
- More positive online reviews and referrals to other travellers.
- Stronger relationships between visitors and local businesses.
- Higher likelihood of return visits in future seasons.

Councils should therefore focus on increasing length of stay, not simply visitor numbers.

Lessons from Regional Australia

Langhorne Creek

Walkable cellar doors, practical RV facilities and a welcoming atmosphere encourage travellers to stay overnight and support local wineries and hospitality businesses.

Warrnambool

Acts as both a destination and a gateway, encouraging visitors to explore the wider Great Ocean Road region while supporting local accommodation, retail and food businesses.

William Creek

Demonstrates how even a very small community can attract significant visitor expenditure through strategic positioning, essential infrastructure and memorable experiences.

Daly Waters

Shows that authentic experiences create powerful word of mouth marketing and repeat visitation.

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Five Actions Councils Can Take

1. Treat shoulder season as a primary tourism season rather than an off season.
2. Develop events specifically for autumn and spring travellers.
3. Ensure visitor infrastructure remains operational throughout the year.
4. Promote local experiences that encourage overnight stays.
5. Measure success using visitor spending and length of stay rather than visitor numbers alone.

Measuring Success

Councils should monitor:

- Average visitor spend per party per day.
- Average length of stay in the town.
- Seasonal distribution of visitor nights across the year.
- Business turnover in the retail and hospitality precinct.
- Repeat visitation and traveller referrals.

These measures provide a more meaningful picture of economic performance than raw visitation figures.

Looking Ahead

Australia’s RV market continues to evolve. Travellers are staying on the road longer, working remotely, travelling more frequently outside peak periods and seeking authentic regional experiences.

Communities that understand these changing patterns will be better positioned to attract sustainable visitor expenditure.

The greatest opportunity is not necessarily attracting more visitors. It is encouraging existing visitors to stay longer, spend locally and leave as enthusiastic ambassadors for the community.

Conclusion

The grey nomad economy does not arrive in one concentrated wave. It moves with the seasons, following comfortable weather, memorable experiences and welcoming communities.

Regional councils that recognise these patterns can transform shoulder seasons into periods of strong economic activity.

By aligning infrastructure, marketing and visitor experiences with the way RV travellers actually move around Australia, communities can create more resilient local economies and support businesses throughout the year.

The question is no longer whether grey nomads matter. The question is whether your community is ready to capture a greater share of their journey.

WHERE THIS LEADS NEXT

Turning insight into action.

Every regional community has the potential to strengthen its visitor economy. The difference lies in leadership, planning and a willingness to think beyond individual assets and towards the whole visitor experience.

If you would like to discuss how these principles apply to your council, tourism organisation or region, Argo Advisory & Consulting works with regional leaders across Australia to translate insight into practical, measurable outcomes.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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About the Author

Founder and Principal Consultant, Argo Advisory & Consulting. David advises regional councils, tourism organisations and economic development agencies on visitor economy strategy, RV tourism and regional growth. Drawing on deep marketing expertise, Australian authenticity and extensive travel throughout regional Australia, he helps communities develop practical, evidence based strategies that increase visitation, strengthen local businesses and create more resilient regional economies.