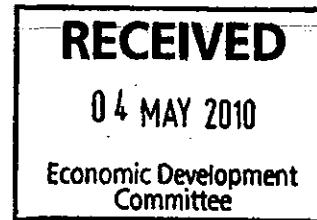


28 April 2010

The Research Director  
Economic Development Committee  
Parliament House  
George Street  
BRISBANE  
QUEENSLAND 4000



Dear Ms Bates,

Re: Your Ref. GT.10.02

**Inquiry into developing Queensland's rural and regional communities through grey nomad tourism**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a response to your request for information regarding the above inquiry by the Economic Development Committee.

While I am not able to offer information regarding all eight questions, I am able to submit answers to questions one, three and six, as I have researched these issues in regional Queensland.

If you have any other questions, or require any other information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Wendy Hillman".

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**Submission to the inquiry into developing Queensland's rural and regional communities through  
grey nomad tourism**

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**Synopsis**

The findings presented here are from research conducted in a coastal area of Central Queensland throughout the latter part of 2008. The focus of the research is on Grey Nomads visiting and living for a few months in a coastal Central Queensland community. Social and health issues for Grey Nomads during their journey to the coastal site were investigated. The Grey Nomads' attitudes' to their health needs and concerns whilst travelling also formed part of the research project. Further, social activities and types of accommodation used by the Grey Nomads were another focal point examined during the data gathering phase of this research.

Other articles on Grey Nomads and their habits (Horneman, Carter, Wei and Ruys 2002; Onyx and Leonard 2005; Onyx and Leonard 2007a, 2007b), confirm that there has been little research to date on this rapidly increasing tourist group within Australia. As Australia, by all accounts, has a rapidly ageing population (ABS 1996; ABS 2000; Onyx and Leonard 2005; Cassidy 2008; Obst, Brayley and King 2008), this group of retired, nomadic, aged over fifty, free spirits requires an in-depth examination of their health and social needs whilst travelling in Australia. Such research will serve to inform both health and social need service provision, and pinpoint the requirements of Grey Nomads while travelling long distances in and around the Australian continent.

**Key Words**

Grey Nomads, Australia, social needs, health needs, caravanning, tourism, ageing population

## Introduction

At any time of the year, and particularly in the colder months of the southern part of the Australian continent, many caravans and mobile homes can be seen on the roads of northern Australia, and Queensland, in particular. For at least four months of each year, Grey Nomads frequent the northern half of Australia, to escape the colder climate of southern Australia (Onyx and Leonard 2005). According to Onyx and Leonard (2006: 95)

While all respondents were travelling for at least 3 months, many were travelling for much longer periods. Approximately 15 % had already travelled for a year or more when approached, and 20% intended to continue travelling for at least two years, or indefinitely. For most, this was the second or third such trip. A common pattern was to travel all year, but return home briefly over the Christmas period to see family. Nearly half of those interviewed had sold their homes to finance the trip.

For the purposes of this research, the term Grey Nomad refers to a percentage of the ageing Australian population who after reaching retirement age or later years, embrace the travel ethic, and tour Australia as they please, usually for at least three or four months each year. The term Grey Nomad is applied to the section of the ageing Australian population who use their retirement years as a time to experience travel and holidaying activities once freed from the constraints of work and family commitments (Carter 2002; Higgs and Quirk 2007; Leonard, Onyx and Maher n.d.; Obst, Brayley and King 2008; Onyx and Leonard 2007a; Onyx and Leonard 2006; Onyx and Leonard, 2005; Prideaux and McClymont 2006).

Lago and Poffley (1993) have researched this travelling section of the ageing population and examined the different demographics that make up this cohort. They also investigated this group with respect to family structure, health status and income. Their findings revealed that tourism operators should thoroughly evaluate Grey Nomads concerning the needs and ages of their customers (see also Cassidy 2008). McGuire, Uysal and McDonald (1998), examined the methods utilised by the tourist trade to attract all seniors, and not just Grey Nomads, to tourism. They also looked at how elderly tourists gathered their information about travelling. Romsa and Blenman

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(1989) studied the travel patterns of older German people, and revealed that retirees had comparable requirements when compared to the population in general. Van Harssel and Rudd (1992) studied single senior travellers and their lifestyle profiles, and Schlagel and Tas (1992) explored the conventional distinctiveness and requirements of the senior tourist market (Cassidy 2008). Research undertaken by Wei and Ruys (1998) via the National Seniors Association of Australia, established that mature aged travellers needed security, ease, safekeeping, assistance and contentment to be of importance to this market whilst touring throughout Australia (Cassidy 2008). These authors have highlighted a set of interesting ideas connected to the elderly and travel. Seeking older individuals' thoughts regarding travel in later life is the focus of this paper, and connects well to notions of seniors' health while travelling, and their interactions through social and other support networks while travelling.

A contemporary study by Backman, Backman and Silverberg (1999), established that more mature aged travellers (older than 65 years) were more likely to reside at their destination for extended periods of time, spend longer planning prior to their trip, and pay a visit to acquaintances and relations during their travel than less mature travellers (aged 55-64). These results are contrary to an analysis described by Norvell (1985), who found little difference between those aged younger than 50 years old, and a slightly older group, aged 50 to 64. Both age groups travelled for comparable intentions, and both groups had an intense need to travel for leisure (Horneman, Carter, Wei and Ruys 2002).

From the time of the early 1980s, several studies acknowledged the most significant desires and advantages sought by mature aged travellers (Guinn 1980; Romsa and Blenman 1989; Kersetter and Gitelson 1990; Thomas and Butts 1998; Backman, Backman and Silverberg 1999; Moisey and Bichis 1999). The most often talked about incentives or preferred advantages of the travel were learning and knowledge, relaxation and recreation, physical training and health, and visits to

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acquaintances and relations. Therefore, mature aged travellers, including the group known as 'Grey Nomads', construct their journeys to suit their particular needs and the envisaged outcomes of the travel itself. The altered mindset seems to be directed to more energetic leisure activities, with a clear emphasis on well-being and vigor. Even though such results are helpful for describing the mature aged traveller (as well as the Grey Nomad sector), their relevance is inadequate, as the multiplicity of travel choices cannot be completely established here (Horneman, Carter, Wei and Ruys 2002).

The trend of the self-drive market has become an enormous success, especially in North America, with mature aged travellers known as 'snowbirds' (McHugh and Mings 1992; Vincent and De Los Santos 1990; Onyx and Leonard 2005: 62). These 'snowbirds' are habitual nomads migrating from the snow belt in northern USA and Canada to sojourn for the winter in the southern states, especially Arizona, Florida and Texas. Even though approximations differ numbers are most likely in the millions. For instance, throughout the winter of 1993-1994, approximately 220,000 mature aged people moved to Phoenix, Arizona, and one third of these inhabited Recreational Vehicle resorts (Mings and Mc Hugh 1995). Likewise, the Rio Grande valley in Texas had approximately 66,000 Recreational Vehicle sites by the year 1990 (Vincent and De Los Santos 1990). Unmistakably, snowbirds make up a key sector of the subsequent mature aged recreational sector. They can stay in their chosen holiday location for timeframes of up to four months (Onyx and Leonard 2005).

In a study of retired self drive travellers in Cairns, North Queensland, Mings (1997), also suggests that Grey Nomads can be acknowledged as resembling their snowbird equivalents in the USA and Canada. Mings (1997) recognises that the Cairns Grey Nomads will travel longer distances than their comparable cohort in North America. The quantity of travel amounts to 323 kilometres per week for the Australians, compared to 217 kilometres per week for the North Americans. Mings (1997) also established that the Australian group are likely to develop less camaraderie among

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members of their travelling network. Furthermore, 76% of respondents in Cairns declared no association with co-inhabitants in the caravan park researched by Mings (1997). Moreover, Mings (1997) additionally implied that caravan parks in Australia may perhaps need to cater for a greater range of leisure activities aimed specifically at the Grey Nomad market (Onyx and Leonard 2005).

Limited ... recreational opportunities in their van parks force Queensland snowbirds [read Grey Nomads] to seek recreation elsewhere. Another effect of having relatively few in-park recreation opportunities is that close personal ties among snowbirds are not easily initiated or nurtured (Mings 1997: 176, cited in Onyx and Leonard 2005: 63).

An important point that needs to be highlighted here is that snowbirds are an American cultural phenomenon, quite different from Australian Grey Nomads. The snowbirds travel from home to a resort where they stay for the winter, and where they are entertained. Grey Nomads as the name implies, move around as part of the experience of discovering Australia (and themselves). The motivations are quite different.

In 1999, Pearce (1999) researched the self-drive tourist market and observed that this type of travel is perfect for retired Australians for effortless access, and as a significant, collective pursuit offering a reflective encounter. But even inside the self-drive travel market there are individually diverse configurations of impetus. Therefore, travel for the mature aged cohort (including Grey Nomads) is, for some in Queensland, more concentrated on touring and extensive travel, and for others more concentrated on nature based activities (for example, national parks and ecotours). Conversely, it has been noted that Grey Nomads stay for lengthier timeframes at a preferred destination linked to water sports and angling activities (Onyx and Leonard 2005).

As is evident in the literature, only a small amount of research has been carried out on the population of ageing Australians who choose to travel the country at their own pace, using their own means of transport and accommodation. Large numbers of Grey Nomads traverse the Australian continent every year. While this may be a seasonal lifestyle for some, for others it is a way of life, they just continue to travel. These salient issues suggest some important areas for research

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including the issues covered in this submission. These issues are important for an ageing population. In particular, an ageing, mobile cohort who need to feel secure in the knowledge that they can access both health and welfare services, and that they can call upon family members and friends, as necessary, through the use of digital and electronic technology when needed. Furthermore, social engagement of others with similar interests and lifestyles can only succeed in maintaining and retaining a happy and healthy approach to the senior years.

### **Background to research on Grey Nomads**

This submission draws on research conducted about the health and social needs of Grey Nomads travelling to, and holidaying in, a Central Queensland coastal location. The research that forms the basis of the work was undertaken over a two month period in 2008, at a caravan park frequented annually by large numbers of Grey Nomads, at a sea side location in Central Queensland.

Both verbal and written permission to conduct the research was sought and obtained from the owners of the caravan park. Ethics approval was sought and obtained from the author's university. All participants in the project were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity, and to comply with the ethical requirements of the author's university. Each participant was also provided with an information sheet, informing them of the parameters of the research, and inviting them to participate in the research itself. Further, they were also required, by university ethics, to sign an Informed Consent form. The form complied with the ethical requirements of the author's university, and served as a form of legal document that stated the signing participant was willing and able to take part in the research endeavour.

Open ended, in-depth interviews were undertaken with twenty-two participants. The respondent group was comprised of ten couples and two individuals all retired, and aged in their sixties or older. All interviewees identified themselves as Grey Nomads (see also Obst, Brayley and King 2008: 10), and all were retired. All participants came from outside Queensland. The data was

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collected through face-to-face interviews with each participant at the research site. The interviews lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. All interviews were recorded for transcription purposes.

The interview schedule, consisting of eighteen questions, was asked of each participant. Standard demographic questions pertaining to age, marital status, and current life and relationship status (for example, retired, or not retired; married, single, widowed, etc.) were asked initially. Other questions included inquiry about travelling times and duration, mode of transport, travelling companions, and accommodation used during travel. Further questions were associated with health concerns, community engagement and social activities involved in travelling within Australia, and also during the length of stay in coastal Central Queensland.

All participants approached to be a part of the research were eager and enthusiastic about their inclusion in the project. According to Dann (2001), even though senior tourists are excellent participants, not many researchers utilise such a rich source of data. Indeed, Van Harssel (1994: 375) encapsulates this well from an interview with one of his participants, 'You know you are getting older when you have all the answers, but nobody is asking the questions anymore'. All interviews were conducted within close proximity of the caravans. In one case, the interviewer was invited into the caravan, and the interview took place inside the mobile home. The data collected from the interviews forms the basis for the submission to this inquiry.

#### **Issues for comment**

I am not able to comment upon all issues asked for in the *Issues Paper No. 3* document, as my research about Grey Nomads did not cover all the issues you have asked to know about. However, I am able to comment on three of the issues: 1. What economic contribution do grey nomads make to rural and regional areas of Queensland?; 3. What are the public infrastructure requirements of grey nomads including health service, waste disposal sites and signage?; and, 6. What is the best method



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of marketing Queensland's rural and regional communities to grey nomad tourists? These are discussed in more detail below.

With Australia's ageing population, Grey Nomads are beginning to form a large sector of the internal tourism market in Australia. While there have been many instances of older retirees travelling to sojourn for the winter months in the northern climes of Australia, this activity now has become a 'must do' on the calendars of vast numbers of individuals belonging to the Grey Nomad cohort.

### **1. What economic contribution do grey nomads make to rural and regional areas of Queensland?**

Many of the Grey Nomads spoke about their experiences of friendship and sociability while travelling and in the caravan park. This also included social events where the group went out to socialise, and therefore contribute financially to the income of the local area.

Mark: Oh yes, you've got to be social you can't just sit on your... and talk to yourself all the time. But yeah you make friends when you are travelling, caravan parks...

Allison: Especially fishing friends of Mark, they'll come around to see what he's caught [fishing] that morning. Oh yes, we've been out to the Chinese dinner and they had Christmas dinner in July, yeah...

Further, another participant added that she found the caravan park very social, very welcoming and very inclusive of all those staying there. Each event was a drawcard for all inhabitants of the park. Further, these social events were also much anticipated and well attended. Nimrod (2008: 861) believes that '[m]ost evidence shows that leisure has a central role in explaining post retirement psychological well being'.

Interviewer: Did you go to the Christmas in July?

Natalie: Oh up here, oh did we ever, that was fantastic... fairly social sort of people... and a fiftieth wedding anniversary... So that was a surprise. So everyone came [laughs]. It's amazing what you can make do with when you're away like this and how, if there's a birthday we've got to do a happy hour... well there's plenty of time

for social activities for a park, but when you get home it's all quiet [laughs] for a few weeks.

Indeed, Prideaux and McClymont (2006) also found in their work on Australian caravanners that

In many parks, opportunities to meet other caravanners are formalised through park-sponsored events such as BBQs, afternoon tea, happy hours, campfires and other social events (Prideaux and McClymont 2006: 46-47).

Therefore, the grey nomads interviewed here are contributing financially to the local area through social events and activities undertaken while sojourning at the particular location.

### **3. What are the public infrastructure requirements of grey nomads including health service, waste disposal sites and signage?**

The research conducted did not address the last two components of this question. However, the first part of the question, 'what are the public infrastructure requirements of grey nomads including health services', was one of the two main areas of focus for the research that was undertaken.

When asked about their health concerns, many of the Grey Nomads responded about general health and well-being as a concern that each of them had. A number of them spoke about these issues during their interviews. Many of the Grey Nomads offered some relevant information about their general health and well being.

Mark: In 2001 I had major heart operation then I came pretty well [sic] and we travelled all around Australia, Northern Territory, Western Australia back across the Nullarbor for four and a half months. We've done a bit of travelling since then. My health is pretty good now.

Jack: We feel because of the life we're leading with very little stress, that we won't have ... We consider the idea of getting rid of the stress because stress is 90% of the illness.

Onyx and Leonard (2007a) also highlight this finding

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They say they have no responsibility while they are on the road and away, and because they have no responsibility they have no stress and so their health is much better ... (Onyx and Leonard 2007a: 389).

Stress relief and activities which are stress reducing, form a large part of the daily lives of the Grey Nomads interviewed. While some of the cohort did travel to warmer climates in order to improve their health status, many of them had friends who could not travel because of their poor health status.

Even though a number of Grey Nomads had experienced a 'health scare' in the past, this did not affect the travel plans of those participating in this research project.

Allison: Well, he's [referring to her husband] had all his health problems fixed up. He's had a quadruple bypass and he's had a back operation but he's been all fixed up so he's doing alright for now.

Mark: ...but other than soreness ..but it doesn't stop me much.

Allison: I survived meningitis nearly fourteen years ago but I was lucky to survive that because they flew me to Melbourne from home in a helicopter, I didn't know anything about it. He found me unconscious in the morning, and I've been through all that.

According to Higgs and Quirk (2007)

Grey Nomads have a health profile similar to the rest of the older population and this means that they have similar needs and conditions. In one study in which the most prevalent chronic disease was hypertension, it was not the fact of chronic disease that was preventing travel (Higgs and Quirk 2007: 255).

As an illustration of this point, Mary and Nathan relate an incident that happened while they were journeying across the Nullarbor Plain. It was obviously quite frightening for them at the time, but they can see the lighter side to this health emergency now.

Mary: Coming back across the Nullarbor three years ago. It was about 45 degrees and there was a head wind, and we got to Coober Pedy and we decided to pull over for the day. My sister's caravan had started lifting, so they [the two husbands] got up to fix it and he [her husband] hadn't got a hat on. He said, "I've just got to go to the toilet", and he passed out in the toilet. So we thought it was his heart, so we raced over. A bloke came and got us luckily. A bloke there was a paramedic wasn't he?

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Nathan: Yeah

Mary: And they got the airstrip outside ready for the flying doctor, so that's the worst one we've had [laughs].

Nathan: [wryly] Yeah, but it's just one of those things, you know.

Obst, Brayley and King (2008) also highlight this issue in their research on Grey Nomads.

Five percent of the participants had experienced a medical emergency while travelling. Several of these involved minor falls, although three falls resulted in broken arms and one in a damaged knee. A further medical emergency reported, involved very painful kidney stones while in a remote area, and a one hour trip to reach help. A further 14% had experienced some kind of health scare while travelling. For example, severe chest pains, back injuries, deep vein thrombosis, severe arthritis, cervical cancer diagnosis, pneumonia, and fainting fits. These health problems were treated at local regional hospitals or by local GPs (2008: 8).

Moreover, Nimrod (2008: 862) implies that tourism presents a challenge, frequently shared with a partner, which necessitates planning, resolving unforeseen problems, dealing with new conditions, new individuals and so on. Dealing with these challenges successfully is borne out through the return home with travel stories and supporting photographs and memorabilia (see also Weiss 2005).

Therefore, although Grey Nomads are fit enough to travel, many of them leave their homes and social protective networks to undertake journeys that sometimes stretch their physical capacity beyond its limits. As Onyx and Leonard (2007a) suggest, these older Australians are leaving home and social support networks at a time of life where others are embracing the restrictions of old age more responsibly (2007a: 285). Further, Nimrod (2008: 861-862) also argues that

Retirees place tourism higher in their priorities (Statts and Pierfelice 2003). A central explanation for this tendency is that today's retirees are healthier, richer, more educated, more independent and more obligation-free than older people in the past (see also Martin and Preston 1994; Zimmer, Brayley and Searle 1995).

Of those Grey Nomads interviewed, many had supportive medical practitioners at home, who provided a number of services to accommodate their patients while they travelled. The Grey Nomads also had other plans in place, if they require medical assistance during their journeys. When asked, Ben spoke about the health situations he and his wife had anticipated when they were

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away from home. He spoke about the medications they carried with them and the other drugs they needed.

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Ben: Only just normal everyday medication but we've got doctors we go to up here for our scripts, for our little blood pressure tablets. You know, to calm me down and like that. There are no major medical problems. In town we've got access to the doctors there, we've been going to them... we're on file there, if you want anything, just a check up.

Similarly, when asked about forethought regarding their health while travelling, Mark reported that he had had the same experience as Ben with his general practitioner from his home base.

Mark: They [the doctors] have given me enough prescription medication to last me for three months.

Likewise, Nathan and Mary had a very supportive general practitioner, who was sympathetic about their wishes and travel plans.

Nathan: We are conscious of the fact that, you know, I have got some medical history and that, we try and plan our stays to be relatively close to civilisation, if you know what I mean, so that should anything occur then it's just a matter of just going to the hospital.

Mary: But both of us have six monthly check ups in October and April and then the rest of the year's our own, all being well [laughs]. Our doctor gave us a written thing for our health in case we need to, and we can take it to where we go, but we've never needed it.

Nathan: We always mention to the doctor that we are going to be away for two months or three months and she'll say, "Alright". She stocks us all up and off we go, and if she said, "No you can't go because...", we wouldn't...

Contingency plans concerning wellness, well-being and medical conditions all formed a part of the Grey Nomads' daily existence while travelling away from home. Gaining doctor's permissions, medical supplies and medication was a key objective before any travel was commenced.

All of the Grey Nomads interviewed willingly talked about their health status and health concerns if any, while travelling in Australia. The findings presented here show the needs of Grey Nomads for health services in their use of public infrastructure requirements in Central Queensland.

#### **6. What is the best method of marketing Queensland's rural and regional communities to grey nomad tourists?**

In my research project I did not specifically address this question with the participants. However, I did gain information about the Grey Nomads' use of email, the internet and mobile phones. Thus, the following is pertinent to gaining knowledge of the question here.

All of the Grey Nomads interviewed had some form of contact with their home base. Many telephoned on a weekly basis to catch up on the latest news from home. While others who also contacted home each week just wanted reassurance that their houses and gardens were still intact. Many used the opportunity to speak to their grandchildren. Yet others used the internet and emailed home. Some others used the current electronic technology as an ongoing communication portal to keep in contact with their grandchildren by email. This form of communication also aided in keeping the Grey Nomads abreast of current technology social networking devices. Many used the internet to research places of interest, look for allied health professionals and as a conduit to the outside world. Three groups of the interviewees respond

Jack: But then home's not far. It's three hours and a phone call or otherwise the internet. Or, mobile phone... Yep, I've got the laptop. It's wireless and that's another story...

Mark: At least once a week we always ring up generally on a Sunday evening, the son-in-law and daughter are looking after our affairs while we are away so we've got no problems there. We've got a mobile. The only time we use it is when we are travelling, we don't ever use it at home.

Liam: All we need in Melbourne, our son does.

Mia: Yeah, he does everything there is there.

Liam: He's only five minutes away from where we live.

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Mia: So, we sort of feel comfortable leaving our home.

Liam: And we've got some very good neighbours, very good neighbours...

Prideaux and McClymont (2006) have also made a connection to the fact that Grey Nomads are currently *au fait* with latest technologies. They suggest that

Caravan parks are also beginning to realise that the provision of... internet facilities are becoming the new requirements to remain competitive (Prideaux and McClymont 2006: 57).

As is evident from the responses of the research cohort, many of the Grey Nomads interviewed feel the need to keep in contact with home, even though they have willingly chosen to leave it, and to be 'away'. This is consistent with the notion of security, both personal and property, and also speaks to the levels of familial and social support in place at the Grey Nomad's home bases. Just as the Grey Nomad cohort have concerns and solutions about their health and related issues, so too, they have concerns for social networks and family connectedness while travelling in Australia.

The findings from this section indicate that Grey Nomads are served best when marketing about areas in Queensland they are likely to visit are presented to them through specific website and via the internet. Likewise, marketing of other rural and regional sites in Queensland wishing to attract Grey Nomads would find benefit in advertising their regions and activities via the internet and through specific Grey Nomad websites.

## **Conclusion**

This research has been concerned with that mature aged group of Australians commonly referred to as Grey Nomads. Research undertaken regarding this group has examined health and other issues pertinent to them. The Grey Nomads' attitudes to health, well-being, medical conditions, medication and strategies to deal with emergencies have been examined.

Specifically, the Grey Nomads reported that even though many of them had pre-existing and ongoing medical conditions, this did not prevent them travelling in Australia, and to Queensland.

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Most had precautions in place, in the event that an unseen emergency developed. Others had bi-annual medical checkups and the blessing of their medical practitioners before commencing their journeys. Others carried lists of prescribed medications they used, and some also carried letters from their doctors outlining medical conditions and other relevant information. These measures acted both as a stop gap in times of trouble and also as a reassuring fallback position for the Grey Nomads travelling away from home and families.

Contact with home, as both a social activity and support mechanism, and a means of checking on valued possessions and loved ones also provided the Grey Nomads with current experience in the use of technology and social networking sites and devices, while allaying any fears about home and relatives.

It can be understood from the research that many older Australians embrace their retirement and begin the long journey of 'seeing Australia'. Many only travel for the southern winter months, when they 'go north' to experience the more hospitable weather in northern Australia and Queensland in particular. These older Australian are still traveling even though their health may be deteriorating. The participants did not believe it to be a problem, as they have many safeguards and networks to accommodate for ill health eventualities. Family, friends at home and properties are all only a mobile phone call or internet connection away, as all the Grey Nomads in the research project used modern technology to remain in at least weekly contact, with friends and family, and to check on gardens and other prized possessions.

The research is significant because it explains many ideas and issues connected to the Grey Nomads as a travelling, ageing cohort of elderly Australians. The group finds fulfillment and adventure in their activities of journeying around Australia, or to the warmer northern states. They do not perceive their lives as dull, boring and over. They engage in the use of modern technology to stay informed and in touch. As Australia has an ageing population, the expectation that there will be



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many more Grey Nomads out on the roads between June and September every year is not just a possibility, it will be an eventuality.

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