

TIPS & TRICKS: CHOOSING YOUR NEW VAN

Need some help to get you started? We hear all the problems so perhaps we can set you on the right track.

At Caravan World Magazine we receive many calls for help from people who have decided to buy a new caravan.

It may seem serious that having made this decision, many prospective caravanners find themselves completely unable to choose a van from the range on the market.

When we look at the size and extent of that range however, it's not so very surprising that people are confused and bewildered.

In this first section of our Caravan World Yearbook we'll answer some of the questions most commonly asked by would-be buyers. We'll also examine the multitude of choices that face the beginner, and try to suggest a few guidelines to help in the decision-making process.

Where to Start?

When you decide to buy a caravan you already know what exactly what you want it for. Is it for weekend escapes, leaving on the spur of the moment and disappearing to your favourite peaceful (or lively) getaway destination? Is it for family holidays with the kids, keeping down the costs while allowing them to discover the great Australian outdoors? Is it for the fulfillment of your lifetime dream – the around Australia tour that might takes months or even years to complete. Or have you perhaps decided to adopt an itinerant lifestyle for an indefinite period and make the caravan you only home.

The purpose will determine your van's size and configuration, its layout and the extent of its fittings. So too will your tow vehicle, unless you are in the happy position of being able to choose the van first and then select a towing vehicle that will suit it.

Size of Caravan

The most popular size for today's vans range between 11ft and 24ft (note the use of imperial measurements – the caravan industry continues to cater for those who have a built-in resistance to metric). Anything smaller is not particularly comfortable for more than one person, and anything larger becomes a towing challenge that will take much of the fun out of caravanning. Generally, the smaller the van the easier the towing.

Of course the shape, height and weight of the van will also influence towing performance. Today's slimline, lightweight and low profile models are a complete contrast to the lumbering wheeled pagodas of bygone years.

If you can afford the right type of towing vehicle and have no qualms about towing a larger van, it's a delight to own a luxury home on wheels complete with its own en-suite, flushing toilet, hot and cold running water, separate bedroom and full sized kitchen. If your ambition is to be as independent as possible, staying in national parks and free camping areas instead of caravan parks, in time you can recoup at least some of the cost of your big van by reducing overnight fees while living in almost total comfort.

On the other hand there are very many people enjoying long-distance touring in small caravans – it's just a matter of how few personal possessions you need to take along on the trip. Traveling light has its own rewards.

Pop-Tops and Bunk-bed Caravans

The development and subsequent improvements to the 'pop-top' caravan, with its fold-down reef section, have solved several problems which might once have discouraged people from buying a van. If you prefer – or are obliged – to store your van under a carport or in a low roofed garage when not in use, the pop-top with a height of less than 7ft when closed is the type you need.

It should be remembered that pop-tops are only available in small and medium sizes. A pop-top of 17ft or over is a rarity, since the larger the roof are the more unwieldy it is to raise and lower. The task of raising and lowering however is very much easier in modern pop-tops, usually aided by gas-filled struts and often the addition of retractable 'easy-lift' handles inside to provide grip and leverage.

Pop-top owners who spend much time in the tropics praise the superior ventilation afforded by the canvas/solid upper wall section with its zippered flaps/windows that open to let in cooling breezes. The low profile of the pop-top when closed also offers the advantage of less wind resistance when towing, giving not much better economy or better performance.

The assumption that a pop-top van is lighter than a hard-top model is incorrect.

The choice of a caper trailer, with a wind-up canvas upper section and extendable sleeping accommodation on each side, is often made for the wrong reasons. Older couples may buy a trailer for its easy towing characteristics, but forget that one of the greatest pleasures of the touring caravanner – the ability to pull up at any time of the day for a cup of tea and a cap nap – will be denied them unless they're prepared to go through the process every time.

For families with young children however, the bunk style caravan is one of the world's greatest inventions. The ability to fit numerous beds into a small towing package, affordable economy appeal to the younger buyers who make up a large percentage of the market for this product.

Frame and Axle Questions

The old argument about whether a wooden frame is better than an aluminium one still persists in some areas. Aluminium vs. Timber is now a personal choice, timber frame is still the most popular.

Prospective buyers can often be confused about the number of axles that it's best to have. This is not really a matter of choice. The provision of two axles instead of one applies when vans reach a certain size and it becomes imperative, for safety reasons, to share the weight between four wheels instead of two. You won't often find many tandem axles fitted to vans of less than 16ft, and only rarely will you come across a single axle model of 17ft or more.

What Kind of Suspension

Whether you choose a van with independent suspension or a basic solid axle and leaf spring, once again there's no reason for anyone to challenge your decision. Smooth riding independent suspension (any of the numerous designs available inc. Simplicity) is great to have on most Australian roads, kind to you van, and these days problems with it are rare indeed. Those who go for a van with the traditional leaf spring design will probably pay a little less and can enjoy the reassuring thought that there isn't much that can go wrong.

When do you Need an Off-Road Caravan?

People are inclined to be confused by the term 'off-road', and no wonder. It's a term that shouldn't really be applied to a caravan, which is by nature a vehicle designed to be towed ON a road.

There are however vans designed and built to cope with the varying degrees of rough road to be found in this country. The most rugged of these could perhaps be described as 'off-road' – We've seen a number of custom built models designed by various manufacturers to customers' specifications.

More common are the models which can appropriately be described as 'out back' caravans. These are fairly conventional in design and are usually beefed up versions of a manufacturers normal range, with added strengthening to the chassis and items such as under van protection for water tanks, bumper bars that extend underneath for protection when emerging from washways, special dust-proofing and perhaps externally mounted jerry cans or other sensible additions.

Then there are the standard caravans that are recognised as being particularly durable. Both of these makes have been proving themselves for years on some of our most notorious inland tracks, but visually there is little that sets them apart from other brands. Among the remainder you'll find many makes that carry a warranty covering towing with a 4WD vehicle. This may not seem as important as it was a few years ago when 4WD suspension was rough enough to traumatize a van's chassis. Today's 4WDs are greatly improved in this regard, but you can be sure that the

caravan with such a warranty can take a moderate amount of punishment if necessary.

An entirely stock standard caravan can usually travel on rough corrugated roads for short distances without suffering damage, providing care is exercised.

Outback travel with a caravan is really a matter of using commonsense. Read the condition of the road, watch the van and if things appear to be getting too rough for it, go back. Check weather conditions before you go to ensure that you don't get stranded, and if you want to disappear into the real wilderness for a few days, leave your van on site in the nearest town and take a tent.

We'd also like to point out that Australia today is well served with bitumen roads and these are supplemented by many unsealed roads of reasonable standard in most weather conditions. Almost anywhere you are likely to want to visit on your own, the first time around at least, is accessible without the need to risk life, limb or property.

Layout

Where layout is concerned the most popular caravan today, as we are constantly told by retailers, is a 15–16ft pop-top with front kitchen, island double bed at the rear and an L-shaped dinette at one side with a small lounge seat opposite. Consequently this is the size and layout that is offered without fail at every caravan retail outlet around the country. Don't be rushed into buying this floorplan though if you think you would prefer a model with a side kitchen and a big club lounge under the front window. Custom-building is the norm these days, and it's usually worth waiting a month or two for the van you've set your heart on if it isn't available 'off the peg'.

The question of double or single beds makes many couples smile, but it's really a serious point to consider. Smaller than home-sized double beds (often only 4ft wide) may look cosy and appealing in a salesyard, but on-site in tropical Cairns they can turn cuddly couples into hostile insomniacs. Unless you are both sound sleepers and accustomed to tropical climes, it may be more practical to opt for a single bed layout. One consolation is that this will give you more usable living space in your van, including seats for visitors.

The standard of a caravan's finish is usually easy to determine by glancing inside cupboards and under seats. Most manufacturers have abandoned the heavy and less durable chipboard and returned to genuine timber for cupboard shelves and doors. Ill fitting joints and rough splintery surfaces too are mostly things of the past, but vigilance is still recommended.

Fittings

You'll be faced with an alluring array of internal features when you start to shop around the caravan retail outlets. Having decided on the size and style of van that's

right for you, the huge variety of choices that remain mean that the final decision is still by no means easy.

Space restrictions make it difficult for us to advise you but we can tell you that most modern features have been suggested by real caravanners and are genuinely worthwhile additions.

The Bottom Line

New buyers are sometimes astonished by what they consider to be the high price of today's caravans, but they have always kept in step with inflation. When you look carefully at the improvements in design and the excellent modern materials and accessories used in today's models you'll see that most of them represent real value for money.

Prices do vary of course. There are budget models, and makes that traditionally cater for the lower end of the market, and there are also some makes that are rather superior and might be regarded as status symbols in the same way as certain motor vehicles are more desirable than others.

On the whole what you get is what you pay for, but the caravan industry today is competitive enough for a little shopping around to be worthwhile if you have the time and inclination.

Whatever you pay, if the caravan brings you a pleasurable lifestyle it's money well spent.

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