



TO BUY OR NOT TO BUY A CARAVAN?

Once upon a time, a caravan was just a trailer that you could sleep in. Today, it's a way of life. A caravan helps you to explore new places and meet new people. Australia is one of the best countries in the world to go caravanning. It is by and large flat, beautiful, well serviced and full of welcoming local communities. It also has the largest road network relative to population size in the world.

But caravans are costly investments. These days it is very easy to spend \$100,000 or more on a new caravan or \$30,000 to \$50,000 on a second hand van. So before you make this level of investment you need to decide whether caravanning is likely to be the right lifestyle choice for you. The large number of caravans gathering rust and cobwebs in the backyards of Australian homes is evidence that caravanning has not worked out for some.

Caravan sales people will rarely question your decision to buy a caravan. It's their job to make sure you buy their caravan and no one else's. So it's up to you as a wise consumer to think carefully before you buy. This will be one of your most expensive purchases outside of buying a house. Modern caravans are also complex. Indeed, a house on wheels can be just as sophisticated as the one you leave behind.

This guide is designed to help you make the right lifestyle choices as well as good caravanning decisions. Below are some things to reflect upon in terms of your character and circumstances before you decide to go caravanning. The longer you plan to stay away, the longer you may wish to reflect.

CARAVAN HEAVEN

Caravan owners are reputed to be healthier and happier people than their housebound cousins. Why is this? It could be because they spend much of their life in the great outdoors. Or it could be because caravan owners have simply managed to escape some of the stresses of the rat race.

Whilst it's hard to generalise, the people who tend to enjoy caravanning are those who:

- enjoy travelling and exploring
- like the outdoors
- like some adventure
- enjoy socialising
- don't mind doing some cooking and DIY
- don't mind not knowing what's around the next corner

There are some risks involved in travelling to remote places in a caravan. Having a breakdown or a health crisis miles from anywhere can be a daunting experience. Getting lost or stuck on a dirt track that's not on the map can be frightening. But these risks can be managed with some careful planning.

Alongside the thrill of exploring the outback, it's important to know how to get help. If there's nobody at hand, how will you make contact by phone, UHF radio or internet connection? Smart caravan owners will anticipate problems before they happen and know what to do when problems arise.

Many risks can be mitigated by good communication. Talk to the locals, other road users and other travellers at the bowser, the local store, the local pub and in the caravan park. Australia is a friendly country and its recreational vehicle owners are some of the friendliest Aussies around. They look after each other and they will also look after you.

CARAVAN HELL

For some people, caravans could represent something of a nightmare. Claustrophobic boxes, misbehaving trailers, impenetrable technology. Or maybe it's those images of caravan parks with vans parked like sardine tins, generators chugging away and hoons outside doing their wheelies at night. Not to mention those unsavoury caravan park laundries. Or it could just be the loneliness caused by being away from home and the people you love.

Those who are unlikely to enjoy caravanning include people who:

- enjoy having an established social and family network at home and who would miss playing an important role within this network
- enjoy fixed routines or for a range of reasons are unable to commit to a different lifestyle

- have limited knowledge or interest in hobbies such as cooking and DIY
- feel discomfort at not having clear plans for the day, week or month
- feel no need to 'get away from it all'

It's worth keeping in mind that caravanning does not have to be an 'all or nothing' proposition. You may decide to go away in the caravan for just a couple of weeks each year. Many recreational vehicle owners spend the occasional night on the road in a hotel or motel just to rediscover the comforts of home, whilst eating out at a restaurant can be a pleasant change from cooking in the van. A number of home based hobbies can also be continued in a caravan.



One of the oldest ways to get away, but will it be heaven or hell?

One of the best things you can do before contemplating a significant change of lifestyle is to take a reality check combined with a healthy dose of self-awareness. Ask yourself the big questions *before* you go, not when you're behind the wheel.

FIVE ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU GO CARAVANNING

Even if you feel that caravanning is likely to be your idea of heaven, you should carefully consider your personal circumstances before taking the leap into your shiny new caravan. Ask yourself these questions:

DO I HAVE A STRONG RELATIONSHIP WITH THOSE I PLAN TO TRAVEL WITH?

You will be spending long periods of time together with your fellow traveller(s), either in the van or the tow vehicle. As well as adventures, there will be countless chores to complete, decisions to make, maps to read, clothes to wash and food items to buy and cook. There will also be problems to solve and the unexpected to deal with. And you will be doing most of this in a confined space that wouldn't accommodate a swinging cat. Small spaces tend to amplify the strong bonds in a relationship, but they can also magnify the cracks. So you will need to feel that you have a good relationship foundation before heading off on the road together and that you can rely on those around you to share the load. And if there are just two of you, both of you must want to undertake the adventure. If half of a partnership is a reluctant passenger, the adventure is unlikely to be enjoyable for either person.

IS MY HEALTH GOOD?

Caravanning these days can be very comfortable, with all manner of gadgets and appliances to make life easier. But some level of exertion will always be required to tow, set up, prepare and maintain a van for travel. You and your fellow traveller(s) will need to be in good physical condition to deal with life on the road.

If you take medication, will you be able to obtain new prescriptions whilst on the road? Will the stress of being potentially some distance away from medical facilities be a problem for you?



If in doubt about your fitness to travel, seek medical advice and be realistic about your limitations. Explore labour saving devices

WILL I MISS MY FAMILY?

In today's digitally connected Australia, there are any number of ways to stay in touch with family and friends whilst on the road, including phone, email and Skype. Oh yes, and letters. But as they say, you can't cuddle a computer. Only you can decide whether this form of communication will suffice whilst you're away from home.

Some travellers may be needed urgently at home due to a change in family circumstances, so be prepared for this possibility too.

CAN I AFFORD TO GO?

It's important to budget not just for the purchase of your van but also for your living expenses whilst away. Some of these expenses, such as utility charges, will typically be lower than living at home, whilst others, such as fuel and caravan park charges, will be new or higher. You will need to either have sufficient funds to cover these expenses or some form of income such as a pension or rental income. Some recreational vehicle owners top up their income by working whilst on the road. To do this you will need to have skills that others will pay for, as well as a degree of luck by being in the right place at the right time. Budgeting your time on the road is essential.

IF CARAVANNING DOESN'T WORK OUT, WHAT'S MY 'PLAN B'?

A surprising number of people sell their house to go caravanning full time. That's great if everything works out, but where will these people live if caravanning turns out not to be for them or if circumstances change? It's always hard to get back into the property market once you've left it, because property prices in Australia tend to increase, whilst your caravan will depreciate.

If you do decide that caravanning is for you, a 'Plan B' is always a good idea. Circumstances beyond your control, such as health or money, may force you to implement the alternative plan.

FIVE BAD REASONS TO GO CARAVANNING

There are a few really bad reasons to go caravanning. Here's five of them:

- to live the dream. With caravans or indeed most other things, the reality almost never lives up to the dream
- to run away. Get involved in caravanning because of the good things it offers, not because of the bad things that you might want to leave behind
- to mend a relationship. This might just work, but confined spaces and long periods together are more likely to amplify differences than resolve them
- to live cheaply. Going caravanning to save money may happen if you are both careful and lucky, but if you can't afford to see or do many of the things you discover along the way, it may also make you miserable
- to make money. By all means take your metal detector or gold panning dish with you, but don't expect to live off the proceeds

The first stop on your caravan journey should be the thinking stop. Talk to those around you and make sure that the decision to buy a caravan is supported by everyone involved, including those you may be leaving at home.

With the support of your nearest and dearest, you are now ready to deal with a few caravan buying challenges.

CARAVAN BUYING CHALLENGES

When you visit a caravan show for the first time, the rows of shiny new caravans with their luxurious interiors and 'home from home' features are a tempting sight. Caravan magazines and manufacturers' websites will present you with the glowing prospect of journeys into the Australian outback to enjoy the beautiful scenery and the companionship of fellow travellers. It's easy to get excited. The bewildering choice of caravan brands is a result of an industry in good health and growing strongly.

The rapid growth of the caravan market in Australia does however present a number of challenges for the caravan buyer. There are a number of pitfalls for the unwary consumer to fall into, any one of which can turn a caravanning dream into disappointment. It's important for caravan consumers to enter the market with their eyes open to some caravan buying pitfalls. Here are some of the main challenges:

LOW BARRIERS TO MARKET ENTRY

The Australian caravan manufacturing market is virtually unregulated. There is little to stop someone with limited or no experience of caravan construction starting up a caravan manufacturing business in his or her own backyard.

Whilst greater supervision of the caravan manufacturing industry is now being undertaken by the peak industry body, the Recreational Vehicle Manufacturing Association of Australia ('RVM Australia'), not all manufacturers are members and new entrants are coming into the market all the time. Consumers therefore need to do their homework before buying.

OVERWHELMING CHOICE

One consequence of having low barriers to market entry is the number of caravan brands available for purchase in Australia. There are well over 100 recognised domestic brands, dozens of imported brands and many niche manufacturers and importers. Whilst tow vehicles are likely to carry the badge of one of 20 or so globally recognised vehicle manufacturers, the van being towed will more than likely be a brand the buyer had never heard of before setting out to buy a van.

INCREASING COSTS

A decade ago, a well kitted out new caravan could be purchased for \$30,000. These days the equivalent van is more likely to cost \$50,000. If you want to equip your van to spend some time in out of the way places, you can easily spend \$100,000 or more. Spiralling new van prices are forcing more people into buying used vans, which in turn is pushing up the prices of second hand vans. Whilst this is good news when the time comes to sell your van, it does mean higher entry costs for the first time buyer.

LACK OF SALES DATA BY BRAND

Sales volumes by brand are useful indicators to consumers of the market share and therefore popularity of a caravan brand. This information is readily available to car buyers, for example. However the Australian Bureau of Statistics does not currently collect data on caravans, and RVM Australia only publishes on its website total annual Australian caravan production volumes.

LACK OF INDEPENDENT PRODUCT REVIEWS

It is hard to find independent caravan reviews in Australia. When new caravans appear on the market, they are often 'profiled' in magazines or online (sometimes as part of an advertising contract) rather than reviewed. These 'profiles' are of little value to consumers because of their uncritical nature. A typical 'profile' might conclude that 'this caravan has everything you could possibly want', or words along these lines. This type of review is not helpful to the caravan consumer seeking meaningful comparisons with other caravans and a frank discussion of any shortcomings.

LACK OF AN INDUSTRY BODY TO REPRESENT CARAVAN CONSUMERS

There are a number of industry bodies representing various sections of the caravan industry. The main ones are:

RVM Australia (Recreational Vehicle Manufacturing Association of Australia)

Previously known as the Recreational Vehicle Manufacturers Association of Australia, this organisation represents the majority of Australian RV manufacturers. RVM Australia's stated objectives include developing and monitoring an industry code of practice and standards and to work closely with seven state associations representing manufacturers in each state.

Caravan RV and Accommodation Industry of Australia ('CRVA')

The CRVA's vision is: 'to be the national peak body representing the Caravanning and Holiday Parks industry in Australia and provide for growth, development and

professionalism of industry participants'.

The Caravan and Camping Industry Association NSW ('CCIA')

The CCIA promotes caravan and camping parks and products through publications and annual shows. Similar bodies exist in other states.

Caravan Clubs

A number of local, state and national clubs organise rallies and events and offer useful member services such as caravan insurance. Some of the larger clubs in Australia are the Australian Caravan Club, the Campervan and Motorhome Club of Australia and the RACV Caravan Club. None of these bodies however, carry the responsibility of representing caravan consumers.

The Caravan Council of Australia ('CCA') is the body that comes closest to representing Australian caravan consumers. It has the objective: 'To enhance the image and improve the professionalism of the RV Industry. To best ensure 100%-compliance and high quality of all marketed RVs.' It produces a range of written material to help consumers make good buying decisions, some of which is included in this guide.

All consumers, whether buying a caravan or anything else, are protected by Australian consumer legislation. More information on consumer rights are included in Chapter 10.

CONFUSING VAN WEIGHTS

Another challenge is the confusing application of van weights. The weight of caravans on delivery sometimes differ from those anticipated at the time of placing the order. Occasionally, new van buyers will weigh their vans on a public weighbridge shortly after purchase to find that they have already reached the maximum allowable weight of the caravan or the maximum permitted towing weight of their vehicle without any spare capacity for water or personal items.

Whilst campervans and motorhomes are governed by a legally enforceable set of regulations (the Department of Infrastructure and Transport's Circular 0-4-12 'Certification of Campervans and Motorhomes'), the Australian caravan industry is less well regulated in the area of on-road weights.

LACK OF STANDARD CARAVAN CLASSIFICATIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

The single biggest change in caravan manufacturing over the last decade has been the growth in 'off road' vans. These are commonly understood to be stronger, heavier vans designed to withstand greater shocks than normal vans. But there is no standard industry definition of an 'off road' caravan.



Encouraged by some caravan sales brochures and websites to cross rivers, travel along corrugated roads, dry creek beds and deserts, and further encouraged by the 'off road' sticker on their van, consumers run the risk of getting into trouble in the outback and damaging their vans.

Other commonly used terms, such as 'fully insulated' and 'queen bed' similarly have no standard definitions in the Australian caravan industry. Without clear standards, there is scope for broad and potentially misleading application of these terms. It is not unknown, for example, for caravan 'insulation' to be bits of thin, discarded packing tacked onto body panels in a few places.

A lack of standard caravan classifications and terminology potentially causes consumer confusion and unnecessarily holds back the growth of the caravan market.

VARIABLE QUALITY CONTROL

Let's look at the next challenge through the eyes of a former caravan manufacturer.

Barry Davidson has been in the caravan manufacturing and repair business for 40 years. He designed and manufactured one of Australia's best known caravan brands of the 90's (the original 'Phoenix') and, having sold this business, now runs his own caravan repair business.

Barry has been a passionate advocate of improvements in caravan quality. He fully documents the problems of just about every caravan that comes into his workshop for repair, including some recently built ones.

Caravan quality control problems occasionally witnessed by Barry include:

- Substantial chassis/A-frame failure or suspension coming adrift
- Vans being substantially overweight and with an incorrect weight stated on the compliance plate (see page 66)
- Unsafe gas plumbing
- Inadequate or non-existent insulation

- Multiple sealing failures and subsequent leaks
- Buckling of aluminum sheeting when the van is in the sun
- Leaking or improperly installed plumbing and tanks
- Drawers that fall out, dumping the contents when in transit
- Unloaded vans that are unstable above 80 km/h



What the eye doesn't see sometimes doesn't get properly installed

i To see some examples of poor caravan workmanship documented by Barry, visit his 'Rogue's Gallery or Horror Story' in the Technical Section of caravanersforum.com

LACK OF STANDARD WARRANTY WORDING

Caravan warranties can represent something of a minefield for the new caravan buyer. Most warranties are clearly worded and explained, but some can be inconsistent with the claims made in advertising material. There is often a gap (and sometimes a chasm) between where consumers think their vans can go and what the van is built to withstand. This can potentially lead to caravan damage and warranty claims. This topic is covered in more detail in Chapter 10.

Most of these challenges can be overcome with the application of some common standards by the industry and common sense by the consumer. Some proposals on the standardisation of caravan terminology and weights are included in this guide.

In the next chapter we'll take a look at the different types of RV on the market.