

Having the Right Towing Vehicle for Your Caravan

By Ian Molloy

Ensure that your towing vehicle is capable of towing your caravan. Check the manufacturer's book on the maximum weight that is recommended and ensure you stay within this limit. It is an essential part of planning a caravan holiday to make sure your towing vehicle is safe, well maintained and well equipped.

Size and Towing Capacity

The majority of travellers do not have the luxury of choosing a special towing vehicle to suit their new van; in most cases it is a matter of finding a van that will suit your existing vehicle.

Car manufactures stipulate a safe towing weight for each vehicle and Australia's national regulations are built around these specifications. As a general rule, the most suitable towing vehicle is one that is heavier than the caravan it is towing. This will then allow for the fully loaded weight of the caravan that is to be towed. Small cars are usually limited to towing camper-trailers, folding caravans, and small caravans or pop-tops. Bigger cars can manage caravans and pop-tops at the larger end of the market. In addition to weight, it is important to take into account the overall measurements of the unit you intend to tow. If your caravan is very high or wide then extra power is needed to overcome wind resistance.

Off Road Vehicles

Four-wheel drives have become very popular towing vehicles and are extremely capable. They are able to tow large vans, and manage the boat and a few other items as well. Many travellers use off-road vehicles without ever venturing off the main road. Others travel extensively in the outback, unhitching the van when the terrain gets too rough and either taking a tent or swag with them, or sleeping in the back of the car.

Transmission

The choice between manual and automatic transmission is one of personal preference. In the past, manual transmission was always the preferred option by travellers, however modern improvements in automatic transmission has meant they perform equally as well now. In fact automatic four-wheel drives perform quite well off-road.

Tools and Spares

When setting out on an extended touring holiday it is important to carry a tool kit in order to undertake minor repairs to your vehicle and to carry out those household repair jobs around the caravan. A tool kit should include the following items:

- Blade screwdrivers
- Phillips head screwdrivers
- Set of spanners to suit your car and van
- Hammer
- Pliers

- Small adjustable shifter
- Larger shifter for gas bottles
- Scissors
- Wheel spanner
- Set of spike-resistant jumper leads
- Tyre-pressure gauge
- Tow rope or tow strap

Make sure that the jack and handle are fitted in the vehicle and that the jack is in good working order. Make sure that the same jack will fit both your vehicle and caravan. Before you leave home, make sure you know how to change your tyres and where the jacking points are for both your towing vehicle and your caravan.

Carry a jacking board, about 250 sq. mm, to place beneath the jack when the ground is soft, uneven or wet. A piece of checker-plate aluminium is okay.

The wheel brace that suits your car may not necessarily fit the wheel studs on your caravan. Check before leaving home.

Carry a good spare tyre for your vehicle and one for your caravan. If you plan to travel off the beaten track, you will need two spares for each unit. On some camper-trailers, the wheels are interchangeable with those of the towing vehicle. If this is the case, a total of two spares will be adequate in most circumstance.

TOWING EQUIPMENT AND MODIFICATIONS

Fitting towing equipment and modifying towing vehicles are specialist activities and should only be done by professionals. Dealers will often fit tow bars to new vehicles if requested. You will have to specify that you need one to match the vehicle's **maximum** towing capacity so that you do not end up with something only suitable for towing a small household trailer. If you already have a vehicle, contact a specialist tow-bar retailer and mechanic; check the Yellow Pages under "towing" or find one via the internet.

Towing Equipment

All commercially manufactured tow bars in Australia are built to a standard and should perform well. Different makes and models will have different features and different prices.

Most lightweight bars are suitable for towing trailers and vans with a gross mass of 1,000 kg or even less. Heavy-duty bars, such as those fitted to large four-wheel drives, have the capacity to tow a mass of up to 3,500 kg. Each tow bar has a specified maximum trailer mass and a maximum static ball weight. The latter, which is the difference in weight between the caravan on and off the vehicle, should be around 10 per cent of the total trailer weight. So, if the loaded trailer weight is 1,000kg, the ball weight should be around 100 kg. All tow bars are restricted to the maximum recommended capacity of the vehicle. To make absolutely sure you are not towing more than you should be, get your caravan weighed fully loaded. Exceeding towing weight limits can result in accidents, fines and non-payment of insurance claims.

Tow bars are fitted with a choice of towing hitches. Most standard caravans and trailers get by with a 50 mm ball, while off-road models may require a more complex off-road hitch.

Caravans and trailers must be fitted with safety chains; these must be securely attached to the towing vehicle.

Towing Limits

In 1999 the National Road Transport Commission (NRTC) introduced a set of recommended towing limits, which were adopted by all States and Territories. Until that point up to five different towing limits applied across Australia, which meant a lot of confusion for caravanners crossing State and Territory borders.

The national regulations, as laid out by the NRTC, state that the weight of the loaded caravan must not exceed the recommended limit as prescribed by the manufacturer of the towing vehicle, or the stated capacity of the towing apparatus fitted to the vehicle. If the manufacturer has not specified limits, which, surprisingly, is not that unusual, the weight of the loaded caravan should be no more than one and a half times the unloaded weight of the towing vehicle, provided the caravan is fitted with brakes. If the caravan is not fitted with brakes, then the loaded caravan should equal the weight of the unloaded car. If you have any difficulty establishing the parameters of these requirements, seek the advice of your dealer or an independent tow-bar manufacturer.

Weight Distribution

We have all seen the car and caravan combination with the hitch almost dragging on the road. Weight-distribution bars, widely available at caravan accessory shops, can be used to maintain a more level profile of the car and van. These tend to be standard equipment for larger vans, but should really be considered for all but the lightest of vans. The issue can also be addressed by correct loading. If the movable load within the caravan is all packed forward of the axle, this will greatly increase the ball weight. If the load is more evenly distributed throughout the van, then the ball weight is less likely to be adversely affected. Never load a caravan or trailer with more weight behind the axle than forward of the axle. (It is wise to secure items to prevent movement).

This is the fourth page of 23 with related information about making the most of your caravan holiday. Have a look here for the other pages www.crikey-adventure-tours.com/caravan-holiday.html