

So you think you want an RV?

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We have been RVing for many years. I bought my first RV, a small travel trailer, when I was 18 because I fondly remembered childhood family vacations in a rented 16' Shasta travel trailer. When I was in my mid 20s I convinced my not-yet wife that RVing is a great and inexpensive way to see the countryside. We have been at it ever since.

We started out back in 1978 in a 1963 Ford F250 and a similar vintage 10' slide-in truck camper. We are currently on our 7th RV, a 35' Class A Bouncer gasoline powered motorhome. In that time we have travelled from Alaska to the Mexico border and from the westernmost to the easternmost paved roads in North America. We've been to 10 Provinces, 2 Territories and 10 States with hopes to see more.

While we consider RVing to be a lifestyle choice, it could also be justified as simply the most economical method of extended travel. Over the years I have been keeping detailed records, from 1999 to date, we have spent over 900 nights on the road. That's almost 2 ½ years! During that time we covered 73,350 kms across Canada. (Our trips to the USA pre-date my detailed logs which begin in 1999.)

So, if you have decided to take the plunge, there are lots of things to think about. The first thing is budget, both capital cost and ongoing costs. Any RV is a depreciating asset, like a car. You will never get your money back out of it, although the longer you keep it, the less you lose per year. All RVs are thirsty and if 10 mpg (30 litres / 100kms) scares you then this lifestyle is not for you. Repairs and maintenance are ongoing but setting aside \$1,000 per year for that should cover most things. Insurance is surprisingly affordable. We pay about \$650 per year but of course you may pay more or less depending on coverage and vehicle. And don't forget storage costs – figure another \$600+ per year.

Overall, our total cost of camping has averaged \$83 per night including fuel, maintenance and repairs, and campground fees. It does not include capital cost of the RV itself, ferries or storage. When RVing, food costs are the same as when you are at home; you still shop at the grocery store which means you are not buying up to 6 restaurant meals per day for a couple. More if you like to snack.

Over the years I've been asked lots of questions about our motorhomes and RVing in general so I thought I'd take a stab at writing a short article to help potential RVers decide if the lifestyle suits them and their bank account, and what kind of RV is right for them. There's a lot of information here and if anything isn't clear or if you think I am just plain wrong, please let me know and I'll give it some more thought.

RV Lifestyle

This is the hardest section to write because there is no one RV lifestyle. There are lots of choices and every RVer we know has explored as many as it took to find their own RVing lifestyle. Over time, your RVing lifestyle will probably change; ours certainly did. Years ago we were a family with a young child (and often a playmate) and on a tight budget. Now we go out by ourselves and the budget isn't quite as tight.

Choices to make include:

- **How far to go from home.** Most of our trips are perhaps two or three hours from home. That gets us well away from major cities and out to decent fishing lakes. We like to take big trips every few years and as I mentioned above, these have taken us to every Canadian Province and to 10 American States.
- **How much planning to do.** If you are a control freak and like to have everything planned out in advance and stick to a timetable, RVing probably isn't for you. On the other hand, if you love to explore new places or familiar haunts in an unstructured and relaxed way, RVing will suit you to a T.

For shorter trips, we like to have a direction to start out and a return date. Say, north-east and 10 days. That's enough planning for unexplored areas. See something interesting? Stop and spend a day or two. If it takes us 9 days to travel 400 kms, that's fine; we only have a 4 hour drive to get home on day 10. Unless we decide to stay away a little longer.

- **Where to stay.** At one end of the spectrum is parking on a Wal-Mart, Costco or casino parking lot for free. The other end is a high end RV resort with your own waterfront hot tub, manicured lawn, and full hookups including wireless internet access and cable TV for \$350 per night or more.

Your decision will be based on the services you need or want such as electricity, water, sewer connection, internet access, resort facilities, privacy, campfire facilities, proximity to the ocean, a lake, or a golf course and so on.

We have occasionally stayed in a free parking lot or in an RV resort - although we never got our own hot tub. Our favourite places are Provincial or local park campgrounds. We are self-contained and don't need anything other than a reasonably level space long and wide enough to hold us. The campgrounds where we typically stay have only a fire pit and a picnic table at each site. We need to refill our fresh water and dump the holding tanks once a week or so and almost all parks offer this service.

- **What to do.** This one is the easiest - do whatever you like to do while on vacation. Fish, shop, hike, explore, research, gamble, golf, stay in and watch a movie, cook marshmallows over the campfire - the list is endless. It's not uncommon in May to see RVers watching the Stanley Cup playoffs on their satellite TV while enjoying a campfire and a hot toddy in a campground! The best part is that at the end of the day, you get to sleep in your own bed.
- **Meeting your fellow RVers.** If there is a more gregarious, helpful and friendly bunch of people than RVers, I haven't met them. About the only way you won't meet your fellow RVers is if you put up a big sign telling them to go away. Even then, someone would wander over and ask if they could help you out.
- **What about full timing?** The short answer here is don't even consider it if you are not an experienced camper. Full timing is not difficult but it is very different than part timing. Do you really like each other enough to live in and share perhaps 300 square feet? What do you do if your rig has to go into the shop for a few days? Can you travel south for the winter? (RVs are not suitable for -20C temperatures). There are lots of books out there for experienced RVers considering going full time. Us? I'd go in a heartbeat but Tess will not give up her house - she has to have a place for her roots to take a firm hold.

- **What is RVers etiquette?** No big secret here - the same as etiquette in your neighbourhood. Don't do anything that will upset your neighbours. That means observing quiet hours, keep your site tidy, keep pets on a leash and clean up after them, make sure children staying with you are well behaved, protect the environment, follow proper procedures at the dump station, and don't run your generator until you have talked to your neighbour and then only run it long enough to recharge your batteries or microwave your popcorn.
- **Mr. Fixit.** An RV has all the systems of a regular vehicle (engine, transmission, tires, lights, batteries and so on) plus all the systems of your home (appliances, lights, furnace, hot water heater and so on). If you are hopelessly inept at basic handyman type home repairs, you need to be willing to pay someone to do some or all of your regular maintenance including winterizing and de-winterizing. Summerizing? Not doing maintenance will destroy an RV in short order - just a few years. A well maintained rig will last for decades.

Why is there a lot of maintenance? You are driving a house on wheels down a bumpy highway at 100 kph. Eventually, everything that can shake loose, will. All RV driving is classed as "Severe Service" by vehicle manufacturers. Here's my approach - annual bumper to bumper inspections inside, outside, roof and chassis. Tighten, lubricate, adjust, clean and polish everything whether it needs it or not. Use only the best quality replacements parts and fluids - like synthetic oils for the engine, transmission and differentials. Something like a broken fan belt can mean a very expensive tow job and a ruined trip.

Money

For almost all of us, this is what determines firstly if an RV is do-able and secondly, what age and types of RV can be considered. You need to factor in purchase price, operating costs, maintenance, and of course, camping fees.









Unlimited money? Lucky you - a 45' Prevost bus conversion plus a matching enclosed trailer for your Ferrari is the way to go. A basic rig runs \$2.5 million and options and customization can easily push it to twice that or more. The Ferrari is extra. There are lots of ultra luxurious RV parks out there that will take a few hundred bucks a night from you for a place to park. At least, I've seen ads for them. They won't let commoners like us even go in and look around!

Back in the real world where most of us live – what does it actually cost to buy and operate an RV? Costs for a new RV depend on the type of rig, its size, and features. Used RVs are much less, of course. Out of our 7 RVs, 6 were purchased used. For us, about 10 years old is the sweet spot for value. A \$100,000 RV new will cost less than half that in 10 years and likely have less than 50,000 kms on the clock.

RVs depreciate like a car although probably not quite as quickly. I've heard it said a new car depreciates 30% as soon as you drive around the block. I don't think a typical RV is that bad; I'd guess that first drive around the block will cost you perhaps 15-20%. Then again, that 20% of a motorhome price would translate to a lot more \$ than on 30% on your last new car.

Overall, an RV pays a lousy financial rate of return. But I think an RV pays great dividends in quality family time spent together and is the best way to travel near or far.

Here are some approximate price ranges new rigs in each style of RV:

| | | |
|---|-------------------------------|----------------------|
|  | tent trailer, or pop-up | \$5,000 - \$15,000 |
|  | travel trailer | \$7,500 - \$75,000 |
|  | 5 th wheel trailer | \$10,000 - \$150,000 |
|  | slide in truck camper | \$10,000 - \$45,000 |
|  | pickup truck / large SUV | \$35,000 - \$85,000 |
|  | class A motorhome | \$85,000 - \$400,000 |
|  | class B motorhome | \$75,000 - \$150,000 |
|  | class C motorhome | \$75,000 - \$150,000 |

| | | |
|---|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
|  | <p>Super C</p> | <p>\$150,000 - \$500,000</p> |
|  | <p>bus conversion</p> | <p>\$500,000 - \$3,000,000</p> |

Operating Costs

Over the past 17 years, we have spent an average of \$83 per night of RVing. That figure includes everything except depreciation, ferries and storage. Food costs the same on the road as it does at home and so does not enter into the calculations. I figure that's less than a third of the cost of driving the car or flying to our destination and staying in hotels and eating out every day.

Fuel is the biggest cost here. Whether you burn gasoline or diesel, this will be the single biggest expense you face. RVs are thirsty beasts. Fuel mileage depends on your rig – its size, shape, weight, type of fuel burned and the driver's speed and style of driving. Since my old brain only understands miles per imperial gallon, that's what I'll quote here.

The worst mileage is older gasoline powered motorhomes like the one we called Thirsty. We got about 6.5 mpg. Next is older big block gasoline powered ¾ and 1 ton pickups towing large 5th wheel trailers with perhaps 8 mpg. You can expect 10 mpg in smaller Class C motorhomes and pickups towing travel trailers.

Things start to look better with newer rigs. Modern electronically controlled and fuel injected gasoline or diesel engines with 5 and 6 speed overdrive automatic transmissions in motorhomes or pickups can reasonably expect to get 9 to 12 mpg while towing at reasonable speeds. Class B motorhomes are better still with 16 to 25 mpg.

Maintenance and repairs for an RV depend on its age, how often it is used, and how well it is maintained. You have to look after another drive train as well as all the residential type systems. Drive train maintenance should be done per the manufacturer's recommendations for severe service. I can't predict how any given rig will be, but you can see the actual costs for our rig below.

At a minimum, figure one oil & filter change per year for the engine and the generator, annual generator tune ups, trans and differential fluid changes every 3-5 years, tires every 7-10 years (regardless of tread left), batteries every 5 years, squeaks, rattles, things coming loose etc regularly.

Insurance & licence plate premiums are generally pretty reasonable. We pay about \$650 per calendar year for insurance and the usual private vehicle annual rate (currently about \$85) for plates. Check with your agent for actual numbers for your situation but most people pay a lot less for an RV than they would for a car of similar value.

Emergency Road Service is probably a good idea. Be sure you read and understand exactly what is covered. The regular policy from the Auto Club (AMA and the like) do not cover RVs except key lockout and fuel delivery. Even the so-called RV policies may not provide the coverage you want.

Did you know that most people cannot change a tire on a motorhome? The tires are simply too big and heavy. And the torque required to loosen and properly tighten the lug nuts is beyond the capabilities of a hand powered lug wrench or ½" drive impact gun. Many modern Class A motorhomes do not even have spare tires! If you get a flat, you call the ERS and tell them the brand and size of tire you have and they will bring you a new one and install it. You only pay for the tire. The flat tire will have been destroyed in the time it took you to stop safely, even if it looks OK.

If you need a tow, specialized equipment is needed for an RV. If you have a trailer, you will need two tow trucks. A motorhome must have the driveshaft disconnected or be put on a trailer. Regardless, it is going to be very, very expensive.

I recommend [Good Sam Emergency Road Service](#). Unlimited coverage anywhere in North America at a very reasonable price - probably cheaper than the auto Club. They cover your regular vehicles too.

Annual **license plates** cost the same here for any private motorized vehicle – about \$85 in Alberta. Trailers get a permanent plate that is not renewed. Slide in campers do not require plates because they are cargo and do not touch the road.

Depreciation is probably the biggest single expense on a new rig. If you make the commitment to an RV, you'll be keeping it a long time so depreciation is irrelevant.

Camping Fees range from free to outrageous. The average site in a nice private or public RV park will run \$30 - \$35 per night depending on location, amenities, and the time of year.

The best advice I can give you is to first rent the type of RV you are considering. Even a medium size Class A motorhome only costs a couple of thousand dollars to rent for a week during peak season. That's a lot less than you'll lose if you buy a rig only to find out that RVing is not for you and you sell it.

Which RV Type?

Now that you know much you are going to spend to buy and operate an RV, you need to decide what kind of RV suits you best. Already have a stout pickup truck or SUV? Then a trailer or slide in camper may be your best value. Don't want to drive a big pickup around town and already own a towable car? A motorhome may be the way to go. Own a light duty truck or family sedan and only want to go out occasionally? Think about a tent trailer.

Here's a table that covers some of the relative strengths of each RV type:

| | Tent Trailer | Travel Trailer | 5 th Wheel Trlr | Camper | Class A or Super C MHome | Class B MHome | Class C MHome |
|------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| New Price \$K | 5 -15 | 7.5-75 | 10-150 | 10-45 | 85-500 | 75-150 | 75-150 |
| Length (floor) | 6'-12' | 10'-40' | 8'-45' | 6'-11' | 26'-45' | 8'-14' | 20'-32' |
| Maintenance | Very Low | Low | Low | Low | Med | Med | Med |
| Operating Costs | Very Low | Med | Med | Low | High | Med | High |
| Easy to Drive | Very Easy | Easy | Easy | Easy | Easy | Easy | Easy |
| Easy to Back Up | Hard | Med | Med | Easy | Easy | Easy | Easy |
| Storage Cap | Med | Med | High | Very Low | High | Very Low | Med |
| Fr Water Cap | Very Low | Med | Med | Low | High | Low | Med |
| Holding Tank Cap | None to Very Low | Med | Med | None to Low | High | Low | Med |
| Built-in Genny? | No | No | Rare | No | Yes | Rare | Maybe |
| Levelling | crank & blocks | Manual Jacks | Manual Jacks | Manual Jacks | Power Jacks | blocks | Power Jacks |
| Slide Outs | 0-1 | 0-4 | 0-5 | 0-2 | 0-5 | 0-2 | 0-3 |

Design Considerations

Many experienced RVers will tell you to buy the engineering, not the floor plan, fabrics and features. That's all well and good but trust me, when the female half of a couple finds the floor plan, fabrics and features she wants, that's the rig you will buy! Be careful to only show her rigs based on the chassis you want and with good quality construction.

As far as pick up trucks are concerned, if you are a GM person, buy a Chevy or GMC. Ford and Dodge fans should buy their favourite brands too. Each manufacturer produces trucks that will suit most every trailerist's needs. You need to decide on gas or diesel, regular or extended cab, short or long box, and lots of other options. The truck is the limiting factor in what size trailer you can tow. See the "[can I tow that](#)" section below.

Trailers are different. There are only so many floor plans possible in a trailer so once you know the basic design features you want, decide on a manufacturer based on things like warranty, construction methods, frame size, brake and axle size, fit and finish of the interior, water and holding tank capacity, number and type of slide outs, gross vehicle weight, and net cargo carrying capacity.

Naturally, motorhomes are different too. You have all the trailer type things to consider plus all the truck type things to consider. If you are considering gasoline power, only Ford still produces their own chassis. GM gasoline powertrains with the engine in the front or the rear were available from Workhorse until a few years ago. Neither of these manufacturers produce complete motorhomes; they

only produce the bare chassis. Each manufacturer has its strengths and weaknesses. Either brand will serve you well.

Diesel powered motorhomes come on a variety of front (puller) engine, middle (yes, really) engine and rear (pusher) engine configurations from many manufacturers. Engines are usually manufactured by Cummins or up until a few years ago, Caterpillar. Transmissions are almost always Allison although Mercedes Benz engines and transmissions are gaining popularity. I'd be happy with any diesel pusher.

A word or two about cargo capacity. If you see a nice trailer or motorhome and the sticker says it has 1,000 lbs of net cargo carrying capacity, walk away. You might think a half a ton is a lot of stuff but it isn't. By the time you add up the weight of you, your spouse, your pets, food, clothes, beer, tools, spare parts, firewood, bbq, propane tank, and all the other junk we all carry around, you will be well over the 1,000 lb mark.

From completely empty (little fuel and no water) to completely full and ready for an extended trip, our rig's weight goes up by 3,100 lbs., plus the 3,500 lbs for the car we tow! Really - I weighed it. Look for at least 2,000 lbs of cargo carrying capacity in a motorhome and 2,500 lbs in a trailer. In a trailer you have to use up some of your cargo capacity for your fresh water and propane supplies; in a motorhome it is calculated using full tanks. No, I don't know why.

Slideouts make a huge difference to the livability of an RV. Without increasing the overall length of the RV, slideouts add 20% - 50% to the total living area. They are standard or optional on all types of RV. A word of advice - make sure you can get to the bathroom with the slideouts retracted (in). Better still if you can use the kitchen and open the fridge too. This way you won't have to extend the slide(s) just to stop for lunch or a pee break.

Equipment & Options

Just like in a car, RVs come with a minimal list of standard equipment in order to keep the price of the base model down. You can easily get carried away and add tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars in options. Here are some that I think are must-haves or offer the best value for the money.

- **Leveling system** - all RVs with slideouts include some sort of leveling/stabilizing system. This is to ensure trouble free slideout operation. In motorhomes levelers are usually hydraulic although there are electric ones on the market too. The manual control system is simple to operate and I don't think the extra money for a fully computerized one button system is worth it. Trailers generally have no side to side leveling capability; you need to drive up on boards for this. They do offer front to back leveling system and manual crank down stabilizers to keep things steady.
- **Generator** - The ability to generate your own 120 volt power is an important part of being self contained. If you plan to always stay in a full service RV park, you won't need one. If you plan to camp in unserviced sites such as Provincial or National Parks (or Walmart), you need a generator to run household appliances including the TV, microwave, coffee maker, blow dryer and so on. You also need it to recharge your house batteries if you are boondocking for more than a few days.

A few trailers are offered with optional generators. Since a trailer usually doesn't have a fuel tank (toy haulers sometimes do) you must use a generator with a built in gas tank. This means it is not safe to run the generator in an enclosed compartment. Trailerists often place their generators in the bed of their pickup or mount it on the hitch. Securely chained, of course.

Motorhomes have generators as standard or optional equipment. A minimum of 3,000 watts is needed if you want to run a roof air conditioner. 4,000 watts is really the practical minimum if you want to run the a/c and anything else at the same time. Two roof airs need 6,000 watts.

One important thing to consider in buying any generator but especially an external or portable one is the noise levels. An RV generator needs to be quiet or you will seriously annoy your neighbours and even get evicted from some places. Don't even think of buying one of those construction worksite units. A properly quiet inverter style generator is expensive - think thousands, not hundreds. Best bet in a portable 3,000 watt generator? Honda EU3000.

- **Awnings** - I think these are must-haves. Each slideout should have a topper awning to keep critters, rain, leaves and other crud off the top of the slideout. Remember, the top of the slideout comes inside the RV when you break camp. You should also add the longest awning you can to the curb side of your rig. It will give you shade and protect you and much of your stuff from the rain. Remember to leave one side lower than the other so rainwater will run off. Manual awnings are half the cost of fully automated ones and will suit most people just fine.
- **Sound & Media** - HDTV is now the standard in our homes and RVs. You'll have to decide if television and DVDs are important enough to spend the bucks to put them in your RV. HiDef TV, home theatre sound systems, BluRay/ DVD players and of course, fully automatic satellite TV receivers are all available. I have written a separate sheet about these options.
- **Driver's Door** - Surprisingly, a driver's door is rare on Class A motorhomes. Many diesel pushers have the main entry door in front of the passenger's seat so a driver's door is less important. If the main door is towards the middle of the coach, I recommend a driver's door if it is offered. It makes getting in and out much easier when dumping tanks, registering at a campground, connecting or dropping the toad, and so on. Class B and C motorhomes and all tow vehicles have driver's door, of course.
- **Air Conditioners** - Most every modern vehicle has air conditioning on the dash to keep you cool while driving. However, a dash air will not cool the rest of your rig, only a roof (or central) air conditioner will do that. In extreme heat, we start the generator and run both roof air conditioners and the dash air while traveling down the highway. A couple of litres extra gas per hour for the generator is money well spent.
- **Backup Monitor** - this is a closed circuit TV system for motorhomes. The camera is mounted near the roof at the back of the RV, pointing down and back. There is a small television receiver on the dash which lets the driver see immediately behind the rig where you cannot see with just the mirrors. You can check to see if your toad is still hooked up (you can't feel it back there), if there is a vehicle hiding behind you, and your navigator's signals when backing into a campsite. They are often equipped with a microphone too so you can hear your partner's screams of warning before you hit that tree.

Can I Tow That?

This is where many new RVers get into trouble. If a salesman tells you “sure, your pickup (or SUV) can handle this trailer” don’t believe him - he’s guessing. And he wants to make his commission. Do your homework and find out exactly what your pickup or SUV can legally and safely tow. If you tow too big a trailer not only are you risking an accident, but your insurance company may decide you are not using your vehicle “for its intended purpose” and deny some or all of your claim.

Most medium size V8 powered SUVs like an Explorer, Trailblazer, Durango, Yukon or Grand Cherokee are rated to tow about 5,000 – 7,000 lbs. This means you’ll be ok with a tent trailer or small travel trailer. You cannot safely and legally tow many 25 foot travel trailers with these vehicles. If you want to tow a real trailer, get a real truck.

Here’s a sampling of typical trailer weights I took from Fleetwood’s web site. Although they are the largest volume RV manufacturer, note that I am not necessarily endorsing any Fleetwood product, these numbers were just easy to find.

| Trailer Style | Model Length feet | GVW lbs | Cargo Capacity lbs | Hitch Weight lbs |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| | | Maximum Weight | the weight of water, propane, and your stuff | |
| Conventional (Fleetwood Terry) | 25 | 7,900 | 1,961 | 763 |
| | 28 | 9,200 | 2,633 | 805 |
| | 31 | 9,950 | 2,614 | 892 |
| | 33 | 10,700 | 2,649 | 1,215 |
| 5th Wheel (Fleetwood Quantum) | 31 | 12,500 | 2,327 | 2,424 |
| | 33 | 13,900 | 2,302 | 2,315 |
| | 35 | 14,500 | 2,780 | 2,467 |
| | 37 | 15,100 | 3,020 | 2,010 |

Just to make things more complicated, you need to consider the weight carrying capacity of your truck. Do the math. First fill the gas tank and install the complete hitch (or at least put it in the truck), add the stuff you normally carry such as the spouse and pets, tools, and the like and then weigh it. You can use a highway scale or check in the Yellow Pages for a public scale. Now you know what the truck weighs, ready to go.

Next, do some arithmetic:

Truck GVWR (that's gross vehicle weight rating from the sticker on the door)
subtract Truck ready-to-go weight (from the scale)
= remaining truck **carrying** capacity.

and

Truck GCVW (that's gross combined vehicle weight from the sticker on the door)
subtract Truck ready-to-go weight
= remaining truck **towing** capacity.

I'll bet you will be surprised how low this number is. Now look at your trailer's GVW and hitch weight numbers to see if you are legal (and safe). If either number is too small, you can't tow it with that truck.

If you already have a truck and know what its towing capacity is from weighing it, reading the owner's manual and interpreting the sticker on the door, then you know how much trailer you can buy. It may well be a smaller trailer than you want.

One last thing – cars and CUVs usually have a limit to the frontal area of a trailer. If it is say, 40 sq feet, then you cannot tow an 8' wide trailer that is taller than 5' regardless of its weight.

You'll almost always be better off with a 3500 series (one ton) truck than a 1500 series (half ton) one. This is true of pickups and full size vans. A diesel engine makes sense if you plan to keep it for a long time; the \$10,000 higher initial cost is offset by lower operating costs (better mileage) and higher resale value. And there's something inherently macho about a diesel truck even if they no longer sound like the clattering diesels of a few years ago. And they'll pull your trailer up any hill without breaking a sweat. We are passed by them regularly.

If you are planning to travel quite a bit, you'll want to set up camp and use your truck or car to explore the area or just go into town for groceries. You should consider a truck with an extended cab rather than a full crew cab, and one with a shorter 6' box instead of an 8' one. That 4' of extra truck length can be a real hassle around town. Do you really want to parallel park a 20' long pickup truck? Especially one with dual rear wheels? Me either. A 16' long extended cab short box is long enough for around town. Remember to buy a sliding hitch with a short box; you don't want to hit the corner of the trailer with the back window of the truck when making a sharp turn backing into your campsite.

With a travel or 5th wheel trailer, you need a good hitch, anti-sway setup and brake controller. These can easily run \$600 - \$2,000.

Most motorhomes are rated to tow at least 4,000 lbs. This means pretty much any compact to mid size car, CUV or light SUV you own will be within its safe limits. However, most cars cannot be towed 4 wheels down and need a dolly to keep the driven wheels off the ground. These will run you \$2,500 new. If your car can be towed 4 down like our 4x4, you need a tow bar, base plate for the toad (the vehicle towed behind the motorhome), and a braking system which will run \$1,500 - \$3,000.

Here is a sampling of 2006 truck towing capacities which I took from each manufacturer's web site. Newer trucks generally have higher capacities.

| Truck | Engine | Max trailer | Max 5 th wheel |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|-------------|---------------------------|
| Chev 1500 Ext Cab SWB 4WD | 5.3 V8 gas, auto | 7,700 lbs | 6,900 lbs |
| Chev 2500 Ext Cab SWB 4WD | 6.0 V8 gas, auto | 10,000 lbs | 10,000 lbs |
| Chev 2500 Ext Cab SWB 4WD | 6.6 V8 diesel, auto | 12,000 lbs | 15,400 lbs |
| Chev 3500 Ext Cab LWB SRW 4WD | 8.1 V8 gas, auto | 12,000 lbs | 15,200 lbs |
| Chev 3500 Ext Cab LWB DRW 4WD | 6.6 V8 diesel, auto | 12,000 lbs | 16,300 lbs |
| Ford F150 Sup Cab SWB 4WD | 5.4 V8 gas, auto | 7,900 lbs | 7,900 lbs |
| Ford F250 Sup Cab SWB 4WD | 6.8 V10 gas, auto | 12,500 lbs | 14,200 lbs |
| Ford F250 Sup Cab SWB 4WD | 6.0 V8 diesel, auto | 12,500 | 15,700 |
| Ford F350 Sup Cab LWB DRW 4WD | 6.8 V10 gas, auto | 12,500 lbs | 15,800 lbs |
| Ford F350 Sup Cab LWB DRW 4WD | 6.0 V8 diesel, auto | 12,500 | 18,100 lbs |
| Dodge 1500 Quad Cab SWB 4WD | 5.7 V8 gas, auto | 8,500 lbs | 8,500 lbs |
| Dodge 2500 Quad Cab SWB 4WD | 5.7 V8 gas, auto | 10,850 lbs | 10,850 lbs |
| Dodge 2500 Quad Cab SWB 4WD | 5.9 I6 Diesel, auto | 13,100 lbs | 13,100 lbs |
| Dodge 3500 Quad Cab LWB DRW 4WD | 5.9 I6 Diesel, auto | 15,500 lbs | 15,500 lbs |

Buying An RV

It's just like buying a car or truck, just probably more expensive. Once you have decided on the type of RV, start researching prices. Auto Trader, Kijiji, and Craigs List are the most commonly used on-line listings. Visit your local RV dealer and let them know what you are interested in and they may be able to find it.

Once you find it, negotiate the price, extras, warranty and you are set. If you need to finance some of the purchase price, the dealer may offer low interest financing. Check your own bank and pre-arrange things so you can negotiate the final price knowing you can write the cheque on the spot. Money talks!

Of course, get your insurance in order before taking delivery, even if it remains on the seller's lot. Once you take delivery, it is yours.

I like to look at the manufacturer's brochures because salesmen don't know it all and the manufacturer does. Non-current rigs, whether used or just old stock, don't usually have the brochures. Google is your friend for this kind of stuff. They are out there, often in the archives of the RV manufacturer's website.

Driving An RV

If you are considering buying or renting an RV, this may help you with your confidence. Actually driving an RV takes some practice, and of course you can't drive it like a car, but it isn't hard. Except parallel parking - that's hard. The big differences are:

- **Handling** - an RV is not a sports car, or even an SUV. Obey suggested speeds in corners and plan ahead. You don't want the contents of your refrigerator and cupboards dumped on the floor. In a hurry? Take an airplane, not an RV.
- **Braking** - it takes a long time to stop a motorhome because they are heavy. Fortunately you sit high enough to see a good distance ahead and can often brake earlier than the vehicles in front of you. Properly set up, a truck towing a trailer will stop in the same distance as the truck without the trailer. With the optional auxiliary braking system in the towed car (toad), a motorhome towing a car will also stop in nearly the same distance as it will without the toad.
- **Maneuvering** - around tight corners you must steer late and turn sharply. While the rear tires will arc to the inside of the turn, the back end swings out in tight turns and can smack something, like a tree or a rock. Don't do that.
- **Reversing** - backing up with a trailer behind you isn't all that hard. It just takes practice. I recommend a large (empty) parking lot. Put one hand at the 6 o'clock position of the steering wheel and move your hand no more than 1/3 of a turn in the direction you want the back of the trailer to go. Longer trailers are easier to turn because they react slowly to steering inputs. A small tent trailer is very challenging to back up because the distance from the hitch ball (pivot point) to the axle is very short.

A motorhome towing a car either 4 down or on a dolly cannot backup more than a few feet - and that has to be in a straight line. I have been in a situation more than once where I had to disconnect the car, maneuver the motorhome then reconnect the car. The worst one was inside a ferry with lots of cars piled up behind us! A little planning avoids most situations where we might have to back up.

- **Visibility** - there is no rear view mirror on the windshield of most motorhomes because you can't see out the back window, if you even have a back window. Towing a trailer makes the windshield mirror useless on tow vehicles. You must use both outside mirrors to see behind you. We have a small closed circuit television on the dash that shows me what is immediately behind us plus large convex sections on the outside mirrors which reduce blind spots.

On the other hand, visibility out the sides and front is usually excellent. Large windows and sitting high up off the road compared to cars means you can really enjoy the scenery.

- **Lane Position** - the lanes on many highways are 14' wide. Almost all RVs are at least 8' wide and most modern motorhomes are 8' 6" wide plus up to 2' for the mirrors for a total of 10' 6". This is the same as a semi or a bus. It gives you just over 2' of space on each side so pay attention to where you are in your lane. Note that some lanes away from truck routes in cities are only 10' wide so you need to be careful.
- **Clearance** - RVs are tall. Overpasses, bridges and gas station canopies sometimes are not. Many travel trailers are only 8' tall but motorhomes are often over 12' tall and 5th wheel trailers can

be 13' tall. An aluminum or fibreglass RV always loses a fight with a steel or concrete bridge or overpass. Measure your rig to the top of the air conditioners or satellite dish and put a sign on your dash to remind you exactly how high it is.

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