

## Buying a caravan / motorhome? These tips may help you or your friends

Over a period of time you get to hear some heartbreaking stories from lemon RV owners. These are stories of substantial financial loss, emotional distress and even physical health issues. It is a life changing experience that most never recover from fully. The industry is not regulated and is self certifying. This means that anything goes and there is little to stop dodgy and shonky dealers and manufacturers from making you their next victim. There is no 100% guarantee that you won't get a lemon, but if you follow the tips below, you will reduce your chances significantly.

1. Research, research, research. And then research some more. This is not just online but go to caravan parks, talk to other owners, talk to caravan park owners. This is a good way to narrow down your list of possible brands.

2. Read everything on the **Caravan Council of Australia** web site. It is invaluable and expertly written. There are buying checklists and technical advice.

3. Don't always trust your friends and family's recommendations. They may have been lucky not to get a lemon. However listen carefully if they have had a lemon or bad experience with a dealer.

4. Be aware that most Facebook owners groups are not going to allow any negative reviews about their favourite brand. They are not good places for real research.

5. Look at reviews but be wary of multiple positive reviews made within a short period. There have been positive review campaigns by owners groups to try drown out the negative reviews. Take note of how serious the defects are in the negative reviews and whether they claim the company ignored them. This is what you could expect to encounter as well.

6. Never put down more than a very small deposit, for example \$2000. Some RV companies either go broke or 'phoenix' into another entity, which could leave you out of pocket. If they want more, walk away.

7. Beware of marketing that claims a manufacturer is 'accredited', implying a higher standard of product. The industry accredits itself and there are plenty of 'accredited' lemons.

8. Ignore the 'bling'. 'Bling boxes' are more likely to be inferior products. Focus on what really matters: the build quality; the chassis and suspension; the roof; and the electrical and plumbing work.

9. Make sure your tow vehicle can tow the RV and has a high enough tow ball weight rating. You need to take into account the Gross Combination Mass (GCM) as well as the ATM and ball weight of the RV. Don't take the word of a sales person, check with your vehicle manufacturer. Know your weights!

10. Know the difference between fully off road and semi off road. Many RVs claiming to be fully off road are not. Get the definition of off road in writing. It varies from manufacturer to manufacturer. There is no industry standard.

11. Read the warranty BEFORE you buy. You might be surprised at how little it covers and what it excludes, which can be just about everything. For example, some caravans marketed as 'off road' have warranty clauses that exclude off road use! You also have consumer guarantee

rights under the Australian Consumer Law AFTER any manufacturer's warranty expires. Look for a long warranty (three years or more) that includes all the appliances, as those companies are more likely to stand by their products.

12. Read the sales contract fully. Ask questions. Delete any clauses you are not happy with. Negotiate the contract so that it is fair. Ensure you put in essential clauses such as the maximum permissible ATM, payload and ball weights. That way if the RV comes in too heavy for your vehicle you can reject it. Put in writing any special requests or any purpose you have told the dealer, for example fully off road.

13. Know your consumer rights. Read the ACCC web site (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission)

14. Don't buy at a show. You are likely to be emotional and excited. You are unlikely to get the time to read contracts and warranties properly. You are likely to sign up for things in the heat of the moment that you don't want or need. You may be 'upsold' more easily by sales people hired just for the show who will tell you what you want to hear, even if it isn't true. There is no 'cooling off' period. Once you sign the contract, you are committed. By all means negotiate a deal, but make sure it is available for a period after the show. Get it in writing as a quote.

15. Be wary of buying an 'extended warranty'. They are usually not worth the money and try to restrict your consumer rights.

16. Ensure your RV will have enough payload. The industry recommendations are way too low. For free camping and off road use, you will need a minimum of 600kg if you want full water tanks, gas tanks, jerry cans, tools, annexe, two spare tyres, before you even start loading food and personal possessions.

17. On handover day, book in for the whole day. Take someone with mechanical knowledge with you, even if you have to pay an expert. Do not accept the RV if there is even one defect. If this means waiting, then wait. Don't let the excitement carry you away. Once they have your money it is too late and you may spend a lot of time fighting for rectification work.

18. Get the RV weighed completely empty on hand over day and check it against the compliance plate. The Tare must include all options that are in the contract but empty gas and water tanks. An RTA inspector told me that the ball weight should ideally be between 9 and 13% of the weight of the RV. There are varying opinions on this figure, however if it is too low or high you may have serious towing problems. The RV should tow properly both empty and loaded. If the ball weight is not right, don't accept the van. It could mean major engineering works to get it right.

19. Know the servicing schedule required and stick to it. That way you are less likely to be blamed for causing or ignoring defects.

20. If you are buying second hand, check for wood rot, other water damage and chassis integrity. Pay an expert to do a full inspection. If you buy from a dealer you have consumer guarantee rights under the Australian Consumer Law. If you buy privately or from an auction you are on your own.

21. If you have never owned an RV before, do a towing course. This may not only save your life but that of others on the road. Learning how to tow and load your RV properly is as important as getting the right RV.

22. Remember that this is likely to be one of the largest purchases in your life. Take your time, do it properly, don't rush. Good luck!