

# To tow or not to tow a caravan or trailer

We answer all your most frequently asked questions about everything you need to know about towing a caravan or camper trailer - including the pros and cons.

## ***What are the advantages of towing?***

- Trailers and caravans can be used to carry and store all the equipment that would usually travel in the vehicle.
- The extra space means chairs, a table and items like fold-up bunks for the children can be taken on holiday to make life more comfortable.
- Spare fuel and water containers can be carried safely in racks on the trailer frame or a caravan A-frame.
- Potentially dangerous items like LPG gas bottles can be carried away from the vehicle.
- Trailers and caravans are easier to access and pack than roof racks.
- A towed load places very little extra strain on a vehicle's suspension and drivetrain.
- Trailers and caravans are inherently more stable than heavily loaded vehicles and vehicles carrying loads on roof racks.

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## ***What are the disadvantages of towing?***

- Towing anything means restricting the places you can park (especially in business areas).
- Some areas (tight lookouts, winding mountain tracks) are inaccessible with a trailer or caravan in tow.
- Lightweight trailers and road going caravans are not suitable for extended use on corrugated dirt roads.
- Trailers and caravans require separate registration and insurance.
- They also require regular maintenance such as tyre pressure checks and replacements, wheel bearing and suspension servicing.
- A caravan or trailer must be stored when not in use, preferably out of the weather to protect the tyres and canvas.

## ***Is my vehicle suitable for towing?***

- Check the manufacturer's recommendations in the vehicle's handbook.
- Check to see whether tow equipment is in place, suitable for the weight you intend towing and in good working order.
- Some European vehicles have very low potential tow and ball weights.
- Tow vehicles need to be in better-than-average mechanical condition with good brakes and tyres.

## ***What are the legalities involved in towing?***

- A driver can tow on his ordinary car licence.
- A vehicle is limited in what it can legally tow by:
  - a) the capacity of the towbar (stamped with a weight figure) and
  - b) the ATM of the trailer/caravan and the ball weight limits specified by the tow vehicle manufacturer.

## ***What does ATM and ball weight mean?***

- ATM means aggregate trailer mass or the complete weight of the loaded trailer or caravan.
- Ball weight is that share of the ATM placed on the tow vehicle's towbar.

## ***Why is ball weight critical?***

- The ideal ball weight is usually about 10% of the caravan or trailer's ATM.
- If it's too light, there's not enough downward pressure to ensure safe towing. The combination will 'snake' under tow, especially down hills.
- If it's too heavy the tow vehicle's rear suspension will be forced down, affecting the vehicle's braking and steering.
- If it's not within the limits specified by the vehicle manufacturer, it's illegal.

## ***Do trailers, campers and caravans need brakes?***

- Up to 750 kg GTM (GTM is the ATM minus the ball weight) no brakes are required.
- From 750kg to 2,000kg GTM, efficient brakes are required on at least one axle. (The caravan industry has it's own 1600kg limit for 10" electric brakes on a single axle.)
- Above 2,000kg GTM brakes are required on all wheels, they must be capable of activation by the driver and a breakaway (brakes activate automatically should the trailer be disconnected) must be fitted.

## ***Is braking with a caravan or trailer in tow any different?***

- Yes, even though brakes are required on all trailers over 750kg, the extra weight must always be allowed for.
- Towing a caravan means allowing a safety margin of an extra 20 m or more over your normal stopping distance, more or less according to speed.
- Most modern caravans have electronically-activated brakes adjusted from the driver's seat through a controller. They should be adjusted to ensure the caravan's wheels won't lock.
- Braking performance changes completely when the road is wet or the surface broken.
- On steep downhill runs, save your brakes from overheating by selecting a low gear and using the engine's braking potential.
- Never ride the brakes for long stretches. Caravans have drum brakes - let the pedal up and give them a chance to cool.

## ***What's that device tow vehicles have fitted under the dashboard?***

- Most caravans have electric brakes. The strength of electric brakes can be regulated by a monitor fitted under the dashboard.
- Electric brakes are very simple to use. Turn them up for more braking, down for less.

## ***What is a 'load levelling device'?***

- Bars that when lifted into place transfer weight from the tow hitch to further down the chassis.

- Load levelling devices contribute to levelling out the rig, keeping the tow vehicle horizontal so steering and braking remains consistent.
- Load levellers are sometimes specified as mandatory by vehicle manufacturers. Check the handbook for verification.

### ***Do I have to buy anything extra to tow a trailer or caravan?***

- A hitch lock is good anti-theft protection should you want to leave the trailer or caravan parked while making a day trip.
- Some camper trailers and caravans run 12-volt lights and ancillaries from the vehicle's battery. If so, it's worth fitting a dual battery system and battery isolator to ensure the starter battery remains charged overnight.

### ***Do trailers and caravans have any special packing requirements?***

- The bulk of the load in a caravan or trailer should be packed as close to the axles as possible.
- Heavy items (spare wheels, jerry cans, generators) should never be mounted on the rear bumper bar unless the vehicle was designed to accommodate them.
- Any weight should be kept as low as possible (to keep the centre of gravity low) and distributed so as to maintain the correct ball weight.

### ***Do I need to include any extra precautions in my daily maintenance schedules when towing?***

- Check the hitch for tightness, the chains for security and that the trailer lights and indicators are functioning properly every day.
- Get in the habit of monitoring the trailer or caravan's bearings by feeling them for heat-build regularly. This will also act as a check for dragging brakes.
- Use a checklist to ensure LPG bottles are switched off, steps are up and hatches, windows and doors are closed and locked before travelling.

## ***Is my caravan and tow vehicle a legal combination?***

- The size of the caravan or camper trailer you can legally tow with a particular vehicle is dictated by two things:
  - a) the vehicle manufacturer's recommendations on towing mass and conditions (such as speed limits and load distribution hitches).
  - b) the vehicle's towbar rating. Towbars are stamped with a maximum rated weight capacity which can vary dramatically from light to heavy duty applications.

## ***What else should I know about towing laws?***

- Have your caravan weighed after you have loaded it to ensure the ATM (total loaded mass) doesn't exceed the vehicle, towbar or caravan manufacturer's recommendations.
- The speed limit for all vehicles towing trailers is the signposted maximum speed limit except in Western Australia where there is a 100 km/h maximum.
- Some vehicle manufacturers (eg: Holden and Ford) place speed restrictions on their vehicles when towing trailers in excess of 1600 kg. Manufacturer's recommendations are legally binding.

## ***Should I fit and use mirror extensions?***

- Unless you're towing a very compact pop-top, you will need mirror extensions or special towing mirrors.
- Caravanning means travelling at slower speeds so any potential troubles are more likely to come from behind. Being aware of all the traffic sharing your road is the key to safe towing.

## ***How do I reverse with a caravan?***

- Spend some time practising in a deserted shopping centre car park to get the knack of turning left to point the van right and right to point the van left.
- Always walk the site first, checking for potholes, overhanging branches and the position of the power pole so you can plan your intended course.
- Wherever possible, have someone guide you. Make sure you can see them and hear their instructions at all times.

- Begin each reversing operation with the vehicle and caravan in a straight line if possible, pointing the rig where you want to go.

### ***Do caravans follow in the same tracks as the towing vehicle?***

- Many caravans run a slightly wider track than their towing vehicles to maximise internal space.
- Caravans behave like articulated vehicles on roundabouts and tighter corners, turning through a smaller radius corner than their tow vehicle - always take a wider line in tight situations.

### ***Are there any tricks to overtaking other vehicles when towing a caravan?***

- Towing a caravan or trailer means a vehicle is going to accelerate a lot slower than usual.
- Allow plenty of room or wait until the next overtaking lane.
- When passing trucks, expect to be buffeted when you leave their slip stream.
- Be wary of overtaking down hills. This can reduce the tension on the hitch which in turn can make the caravan unstable.

### ***How does wind affect towing a caravan?***

- The large flat surface on the side of a caravan is very susceptible to catching wind blasts. Take care when leaving a sheltered section of road, especially when crossing bridges or running along the crest of a hill.
- Be aware. Watching the way trees and long grass are being bent by the wind is a good indication of wind strength and direction.
- Expect to travel a lot slower when running into a head wind. Select a lower gear rather than labouring the vehicle's motor.
- Pop tops and camper trailers reduce both the frontal and side areas of a conventional caravan, making them more suitable for smaller tow vehicles and allowing better economy figures.

***What can I do if the caravan starts to wander from side to side in a snaking motion?***

- Most snaking takes place because the caravan or trailer is improperly loaded. Make sure you load as much weight as possible over the axle and check that the ball weight is adequate.
- Avoid carrying anything heavy close to the rear of the caravan
- If a caravan starts snaking back off the throttle and gently apply the brakes. Allow the steering wheel to move a little bit to reduce the pendulum effect.