



Buying a second-hand caravan

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Modern caravans have never been better built or specified

There is a vast range of used caravans on the market – from affordable second-hand lightweight family caravans costing just a few thousand pounds to nearly new luxury tourers with all mod cons fitted as standard.

Buying a second-hand caravan should be a pleasant experience when you have a clear idea of what you want and have all the facts and figures at your fingertips.

In order to buy with confidence, ask yourself some basic questions before heading for a caravan dealer or scouring the Internet.

Should I buy second hand?

For many people, especially young families on a budget or pensioners on a fixed income, buying a new caravan just is not practical but there are other reasons why buying second-hand makes good sense.

- ▣ The caravan will not depreciate as quickly
- ▣ Minor wear and tear is less significant on an older caravan - reassuring if you have children or pets
- ▣ There is a wide choice of style and specification to suit most tastes
- ▣ No delivery delays – tow it away on the day!

Where should I buy from?

Dealers

Dealers often have some tempting offers on nearly new caravans that are less than a year old in advance of the new model year in later summer. They will also usually carry a good selection of two- to five-year-old used caravans to choose from.

The law offers greater protection to an individual purchasing from a dealer. The caravan's condition must be as described accurately by the seller; it must be fit for its purpose and it must be of satisfactory quality. However, this latter stipulation does not apply to defects specifically brought to the purchaser's attention, or to defects that ought to have been revealed by any examination the purchaser or another may have made. Goods are of satisfactory quality if they meet the

standard that a reasonable person would regard as satisfactory, taking into account the description of the goods, the price, age and all other relevant circumstances. The distance selling regulations may also apply, giving the purchaser an opportunity to return the goods in certain circumstances.



Caravans purchased from a dealer may be offered with a warranty; but check how long it lasts.

Caravans purchased from a dealer may be offered with a warranty; but check how long it lasts. Read the small print carefully to make sure there are not too many exclusions or restrictions. The absence of a warranty may indicate that the dealer knows there is something wrong with the caravan.

The caravan should also be given a thorough check before it leaves the dealer's premises to ensure all brakes, road lights, appliances etc are working and safe. Once you tow it off the forecourt, its roadworthiness becomes your responsibility.

Consumer Legislation which came in during 2003 gives additional rights to purchasers, The 'Sale of Consumer Goods Regulations' allow purchasers to request repair or replacement of any item which is not of satisfactory quality. It also gives new powers to the courts to order the seller to replace or repair defective goods. Crucially, the regulations introduce an assumption that any defects found within six months of the sale must have been present at the time of sale, unless the seller can prove otherwise.

Private sale

When dealing with a private individual, the rights under the Sale of Goods Act in relation to the quality of the product do not apply. Although the caravan must be as described by the seller, it is for buyers to satisfy themselves they are buying what they think they are buying.

Make a thorough inspection of the caravan and associated documents before agreeing to buy. Prepare a checklist before you purchase a caravan (an example is given at the end of this guide). Be wary if the vendor suggests a viewing anywhere other than their home address or a reputable storage site.

If you buy privately and the seller has no service records, get the caravan serviced before you take it on the road. As this is likely to cost around £180 (and considerably more if any problems are found), these costs must be weighed up when comparing dealer and private sale prices.

Club Classifieds

This is a great place to find a bargain from the thousands of caravans on sale. Caravan and Motorhome Club members can advertise here for free and The Club takes no commission on these sales.

Online auctions

It is vital to see the caravan 'in the flesh' before purchasing, and most legitimate eBay sellers will normally be amenable to arranging a



viewing by a serious purchaser before they place a bid. Again, be wary if they suggest a viewing anywhere other than their home address or a reputable storage site.

Our legal helpline advises that the online eBay auction site is no more than a forum enabling sellers and buyers to make contact, in the same way as an advertisement placed in a newspaper. Any offers or transactions which may take place between a buyer and a seller are contracts for the sale or purchase in the same way as if dealing directly with the customer.

There are no claims against eBay itself, although it is understood that it does try to mediate between buyers and sellers where disputes arise.

If using PayPal as a payment vehicle, there are certain protections provided. However, the purchaser would need to be very careful, as there are a number of terms and conditions applicable to the use of PayPal and often claims against PayPal fail because these have not been complied with. If the purchaser is able to use a credit card as opposed to a debit card or charge card, then rights would exist under Section 75 of the Consumer Credit Act, which would make the credit card liable in the same way as the supplier of the goods.

Auction

Caravans are not sold through auctions on a large scale, but check with local auction houses or the larger companies such as BCA for specialist sales. Details can be found in Yellow Pages under 'Car Auctioneers'. While some bargains can certainly be found, you would need to be confident of what you were looking for in order to reduce your risk of buying an unsuitable caravan.

Avoiding scams

The principle of *caveat emptor* ('let the buyer beware') should be your starting point.

Don't commit yourself until you know who you are dealing with (get hold of a name and address) and when you have to pay.

Overseas for private import

Make sure the caravan meets the legal requirements for use in the UK. Check that spares and servicing are available, and that insurance will not be a problem.

When is the best time to buy?

Spring is the most popular time for new caravans to be delivered for use at the start of the main season. During this period, the sales and aftercare staff at dealers will be working flat out and to make room for these new deliveries and the associated trade-ins resulting from new sales, dealers need to clear their existing stock. So check during the 'dead' period for sales around Christmas and the New Year. Once the rush of new caravan deliveries is over, dealers' forecourts will be full of traded-in caravans, many of which will have had only one owner. With fewer new sales to make, salesman will be keener to do a good deal on a used caravan.

Which make and model?

Sticking to the mass-market, mid-range makes and models from Swift, Bailey, Lunar, Coachman, Eddis and Compass is the safest option. Be aware too that spare parts may be harder to find for more obscure makes – or if the original caravan manufacturer has ceased trading, merged or been taken over. Avoid anything too unusual, unless you are prepared to accept some difficulty reselling at a later date. If the layout, style or finish is unconventional, it may be a bargain to buy, but will anyone else want it?

Continental

European-built caravans are scarcer on the used market but they offer a wider range of styles and usually extremely well-built, but check whether:

- Spares are readily available and you can insure it
- Features like mains wiring are to UK specifications, or whether a previous owner has done a DIY conversion
- If the door is on the 'wrong' side, this is not usually a major problem, but take care when exiting the caravan at the roadside.
- The seat cushions comply with UK fire safety regulations. This is a legal requirement if the caravan is sold to you in the UK
- It's under 2.55m wide – the maximum width of a touring caravan in the UK



Layout, layout, layout

Size matters, but don't assume that bigger is always better. The most important consideration is whether the caravan's layout works for you and if you have a large enough and sufficiently powerful car to tow it.

You have to tow, manoeuvre and store the caravan, so pick a size and layout that suits your needs. For example, two-berth caravans are a popular choice when bought new, but are not ideal for families. However, if your budget or car cannot stretch to a four-berth second-hand caravan, consider a spacious awning or separate sleeping tent for the children as a good alternative. If possible, try to borrow or hire a caravan for a weekend to establish what works and what doesn't work under real-life situations.

How old is the caravan?

Without DVLA registration plates to answer this seemingly obvious question, the age of a caravan can usually be identified from a serial number, most frequently found on the chassis or on a chassis plate. With this information, the caravan or chassis manufacturer can usually identify the year and model of the caravan.

If the plate is missing, or the manufacturer is no longer in business, the caravan's handbook may give a clue to the age, but make sure it is the correct booklet for the model. The Club may also be able to help with identification of some caravans.

In 1992, the National Caravan Council (NCC) set up the Caravan Registration and Identification Scheme (CRIS). All caravans made by manufacturers recognized by the NCC have a 17-digit Vehicle Identity Number (the 'CRIS' number) stamped directly onto the caravan's

chassis and also etched onto the caravan's windows. The owners are also supplied with a CRIS registration document (similar in style to car documents). The caravan's age can be verified by logging onto the CRIS enquiry service.

www.cris.co.uk

Has it been stolen?

CRIS checks

A CRIS check at www.cris.co.uk can not only identify a caravan reported as having been stolen, but can identify the age of the newer models of caravan and also whether there are any outstanding HP payments. Check that the details of the CRIS registration document tally with those of the caravan and be very sceptical of any UK caravan built after 1992 without an obvious CRIS identification. Be aware that without adequate identification, the Caravan and Motorhome Club will not insure a caravan.

Theftcheck

The Caravan and Motorhome Club also has a database of caravans known to have been stolen. Contact the Theftcheck Service on 01342 336885 with the caravan make, model, year and serial number. Even if your caravan is not on the list, this doesn't guarantee that it has not been stolen; the owner may simply not have reported the theft to us.

Look for signs of damage around the hitch or on the wheel rims/tyres which may indicate a security device has been forcibly removed. Ask to see any receipts or documents relating to ownership or servicing. Be especially cautious of large, twin-axled caravans sold cheaply - these are favourites with the caravan thieves.

Does it leak?

One of the worse things that can happen to a caravan is water penetration of the structure. This can cause extensive damage to the caravan walls, floor and roof and may not be noticeable to the casual observer, and it is very expensive to put right.

Arm yourself with a moisture meter or damp detector; these can be purchased from DIY stores and cost around £20. It will give a general indication of damp problems and improve your credibility as a serious purchaser with the vendor. You may be in a stronger bargaining position, should you suspect any problems. Most caravan dealers should be quite happy to run their professional damp meter over any caravan you are interested in buying (if there is nothing to hide!). If they object to you using a meter, look elsewhere.

Checking inside cupboards, bed lockers, and anywhere there is a corresponding outside seal on the caravan. Mis-matching veneer or paper, or any obvious attempt at re-covering the wall should be a clue. Lightly press any suspect areas, as softness may well indicate rot. Use your nose too - if it smells mouldy, it probably is!

Does everything work?

It is often not practical to check every system in a caravan prior to purchase, but wherever possible, check that all features are intact and functional. Problems with the 'mechanics' i.e. chassis, brakes, suspension and hitch are quite rare.

Items like doors and door locks frequently cause problems. Make sure you try these out several times. Cupboard doors cause an unreasonable amount of trouble for such simple items. Hinges and catches frequently fail.

Most areas of the water and waste system are prone to trouble. Check that the taps work, the pump runs, that the sinks and shower drain without leaking, and that the interconnecting pipes are clean and in good condition. Examine the awning rail for damage or signs of separation from the wall - this is not only a problem when fitting the awning, but also is a possible source of leaks.

Does it have a handbook?

A missing handbook can be a major inconvenience. Where are the fuses? How does the heating system work? What should the tyre pressures be? In addition, a pack containing the handbook, instructions for individual appliances, purchase details, CRIS registration details and service history is a sign of a conscientious previous owner.

Can someone check the caravan over for me?

Members of the Institute of Automotive Engineers and Assessors can sometimes look the caravan over and produce a written report. This is likely to cost at least £60 plus their travelling expenses but, if parting with several thousand pounds for a caravan, is a worthwhile investment. A list can be found on www.iaea-online.org or contact the Club for details.

How should I pay?

Most dealers may require a deposit if you are asking them to secure a caravan. Many dealers will also offer finance deals, but check the AER interest rate carefully - if you need to borrow to purchase the caravan - it may work out cheaper to get a loan from your bank or building society.

Most private sellers will require cash, and may accept a building society cheque or bankers' draft. If paying by cheque, expect the seller to hang onto the caravan until the cheque has cleared. If they will not accept a cheque under these conditions, ask yourself why. Paying by BACS from an Internet bank account will speed up this process significantly.

Whether buying privately or from a dealer, always ask for a receipt and make sure this gives the seller's name and address, date, make, model and year of caravan, the amount paid, and is signed by the seller.

If extras like an awning, service or warranty are included, these should also be detailed on the receipt.

Try it out!

Having purchased your second-hand caravan, try it out as soon as possible, ideally with a weekend away not too far from home. Any lingering problems should then show up, and can be quickly addressed without disrupting a major holiday.



Many dealers will have arrangements with local sites where customers can stay for a weekend to 'shake down' their new 'van and have the dealer rectify any issues that arise.

Don't forget to complete and return the change of ownership details if your caravan is CRiS registered. This will make it easier to sell on at a future date, and significantly increase the chances of the caravan being recovered, should it be stolen.

Check list

Item	Comments	✓
Identification	Caravan make, model and age suitable and as described	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ownership	Log onto CRIS and/or call Theftcheck to confirm ownership: CRIS www.cris.co.uk (or telephone: 0203 282 1000) Theftcheck: 01342 336885	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Documentation	Service history Handbook CRIS registrations details Other relevant paperwork	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Size & weight	Weight, length and width of caravan suitable for your car	<input type="checkbox"/>
Interior	Style, layout and condition of the interior acceptable	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chassis	Rust on galvanized chassis? - look for breaches in the galvanized process where rust may occur e.g. drilled holes. ('White rust' is unsightly but not harmful) Look for stress cracks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▣ where the coupling head bolts to the A-frame ▣ where the A-frame joins the main chassis members ▣ where the axle mounts to the chassis Look for bends or bulges - chassis may have been grounded e.g. on a ferry ramp Check corner steadies operate smoothly and are not bent Check jockey wheel winds smoothly up and down and the thread is not damaged	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Tyres & Wheels	Age of tyres - if over five years old they will need to be replaced Check spare-wheel tyre matches other tyres Look for stress cracks around wheel holes, or dents in wheel rim from kerb damage	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Brakes	Check service history for maintenance and adjustment; if not available, have a detailed inspection carried out before or immediately after purchase Check handbrake is effective Check overrun damper is sound by pushing the hitch back towards the caravan body. A firm push to compress indicates a healthy damper	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Coupling	Check the coupling action is smooth and parts are well lubricated	<input type="checkbox"/>
Road Lights	Check for water in the light covers and signs of green mould Check the 7 or 13 pin cables and plugs are clean and free from damage Connect up to your vehicle and test lights if possible	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

Item	Comments	✓
Bodywork	<p>Check for accident damage or new panels - may be more visible from a distance</p> <p>Check sides of caravan run straight and do not bow in or out</p> <p>Check seams for signs of the mastic drying out or cracking. If one section looks chalky or dry, chances are all the mastic has suffered a similar fate</p> <p>Look for signs of stress cracking or cracking on plastic panels. A degree of surface crazing is acceptable but cracks will need attention</p> <p>Give grab handles a tug to make sure they are secure</p> <p>Check the inside with a damp meter if available or rely on eyes, nose and touch to detect damp</p> <p>Walk up and down the whole floor. If it feels bouncy, floor delamination may be a problem</p> <p>Try to see the roof - standing water or staining around openings may lead to damp problems</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Electrics	<p>The 12V system can only be checked if a battery is installed, or if you connect to your car battery. A seller should not object if you are a genuine purchaser</p> <p>Mains installation - is there an inspection certificate? If not, the installation should be checked over by a qualified electrician. If buying from a dealer, ask for this as part of the deal</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
LPG System	<p>Look for signs of perishing of the LPG hose and if in doubt, replace before using the caravan. In any case, low pressure (i.e.those used with a cylinder top regulator) hoses should be replaced every three years</p> <p>Inspect copper piping for signs of damage</p> <p>Check the appliances are working if possible (requires the attachment of an LPG cylinder and appropriate regulator)</p> <p>Always have the caravan system checked over by a competent person before use</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Water System	<p>Check the function of taps, pump, shower etc.</p> <p>Is the pipework clean and undamaged?</p> <p>Look for leaks, and check drains work properly</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>