

Grey Nomads/Cotton Tops

Andrew Newman

Travelling around Australia in a caravan or motor home has great appeal for many retirees. You only have to look at the roads heading north at the beginning of winter as seemingly all retired people head for the warmer weather in Northern Australia or overseas.

Happy hour, a roaring fire, great conversations, spectacular settings and freedom to go where you please are just some of the enticing aspects of being a Grey Nomad/Cotton Top in a caravan.

Many retirees take the plunge and buy a caravan and think they can simply head off into the vast country that Australia is without doing some serious homework on what caravan and tow vehicle combination will work best for them. Alternatively, they do not take enough time to research in detail and end up with a compromise.

I am not an expert but have been involved with caravans since school days and we also now have over five years of recent caravanning experience all across Australia, with the exception of Tasmania (the cost of taking a large van on the ferry is rather prohibitive – motor homes are treated as cars, but caravans are a different proposition). We did a lot of research, went to lots of caravan and camping shows and read magazines and researched online before making the plunge.

So what caravan should you buy?

My first and best advice is to talk to lots of people who have caravans, extensively read about them and do your detailed research.

Most importantly, where do you intend to take your caravan? If it involves national parks and off the beaten track trips, you will need to look at off-road vans.

On the other hand if you are staying on the bitumen or well-surfaced dirt roads and only using caravan parks and free camps near the roads, then an on-road van will not only be cheaper but may better meet your needs.

Off-road vans are generally more expensive, higher off the ground and heavier than on-road vans. They generally have a different hitch (connection to the towing vehicle) as well, i.e. not always a conventional tow ball connection, as they need to be able to swivel on undulating country off road.

Irrespective of your type of van, you need to consider its layout, facilities and comfort. As an example, we did not see the need for a washing machine in our van, but one came with the van we decided on. We would now not buy another van without one. Another example would be the space around the bed. Many vans have a bolster that needs to be dropped in under the pillow end of the bed to extend it to full length. Check the bed with this in place as it may make movement around the bed very limited when extended. As we get older we need to have easier access to the bed and therefore slide-outs may be a better option for you (more on this later).

Do you want a full stove with an oven and griller or just a cooktop and griller? Air conditioning, diesel/gas heating, outside slide-out kitchen, large three-way fridge or a compressor fridge if you are in the heat continuously. The size of your gas bottles is important if you free camp, and so is the need for solar panels and a decent battery to run the 12 volt lights etc.

Do you want a full bathroom, and what is the capacity of the water tanks if you are free camping? Most vans have gas/electric hot water systems of around 20-25ltrs, but instantaneous systems are just coming on the market.

Check the quality of the doors and locks for securing your goods when travelling. We had a slide-out shelf not clip-in correctly when leaving Albany in WA and when we stopped at Esperance, we had a clean-up to perform as a bottle of Irish Mist had broken. The caravan however smelt fantastic!

Do you want a reversing camera on your van? YES, if you value safety and your partner. If you do not get a camera, then use your phones when backing into a site. Using hands-free in the car you can communicate with your partner who can guide and advise you from behind the back of the van. A reversing camera on your car makes hooking up the car and caravan so easy. If your car does not have one then they are relatively cheap to retro-fit and well worth the outlay. It also means it can be a one person process to connect to the tow ball.

Do you want ESC (Electronic Stability Control)? Many caravan accidents in past years have occurred when a caravan gets the death wobbles and jack-knives and rolls. ESC will ensure the death wobbles are eliminated and your safety and other road users' safety is much improved. It works seamlessly and is as important as seat belts and other safety items that have been added to cars. It gives much more peace of mind.

Do you need a weight distribution hitch? This depends on your vehicle and caravan. Your car (tow vehicle) should be level when hitched up. To have the vehicle down at the back affects safety and indicates you need a weight distribution hitch. Some vehicles with air suspension specifically say they do not allow weight distribution hitches, e.g. Range Rover Discovery. Others with regular suspension say no to weight distribution hitches, e.g. Hyundai and Kia. Some have a 50-50 approach such as Jeep Grand Cherokee which recommend one when towing more than 2,200kg but don't say it is essential.

Understanding the terminology

Below are a few terms you need to be aware of and understand so as to be legal on the road. If you have an accident and are non-compliant, the insurance company may not cover you.

Aggregate Trailer Mass (ATM) – This is the maximum legal total loaded mass of the caravan (for this info see the caravan compliance plate).

Gross Trailer Mass (GTM) – Specified by the chassis manufacturer. This is the maximum total weight that can be supported by the wheels.

Tare Mass (Tare) – The unladen weight of the caravan with gas and water tanks empty and no items stored in the van.

Tow Ball Mass (TBM) – This is the weight that the caravan puts on the tow ball of the tow vehicle.

Payload – This is worked out by subtracting the Tare Mass from the ATM. Single wheel caravans have nominally 300kg and dual axles 400kg but many caravan manufacturers are specifying more realistic higher figures. They do this to allow the van to be towed by vehicles with lower manufacturer's ratings such as the Toyota Prado which, prior to the latest model, had very low towing capacity for a four wheel drive. The new model has increased load ratings. Whatever is on your compliance plate is what you must adhere to if you want to stay legal.

Maximum Tow Rating – Your vehicle manufacturer specifies this. It is possible to tow a caravan rated higher than the vehicle's rating but only if the caravan is not loaded above the vehicle's rating, e.g. the caravan is rated to 3,200kg but the car is rated to only 3,000kg, then the weight of the caravan loaded must not exceed 3,000kg.

Maximum Tow Ball Mass – This is specified by the vehicle manufacturer. Some have sliding scales which take into account what else you put in the car. Most caravan retailers know the towing capacity of your vehicle and should make sure your van and car are legal. I have two friends who bought caravans that were not and the company took the van back and replaced them with one that was legal. Just because your vehicle can tow 3,500kg for example, does not mean it can take 350kg on the tow ball. On the other hand some can, e.g. Toyota Land Cruisers, Jeep Grand Cherokee, Land Rover Discovery and Range Rovers do, but the VW Tourag can tow 3,500kg but has a maximum ball weight of 270kg. CHECK!

Gross Combined Mass (GCM) – This is specified by the vehicle manufacturer and is the maximum laden mass of the tow vehicle and the caravan combined and must not be exceeded. You may be able to tow 3,500kg but the GCM may be 6,000kg and therefore you need to calculate the weight of the caravan and car together and take care to stay under 6,000kg when loading.

Motor homes

These are not an area I have a lot of experience with, the exception being many years ago when travelling around Europe. A motor home offers a more manageable way of life for many, especially when getting into tight caravan park spots. I went for a caravan because it allows us to have a base and not have to pack up to go to the tourist spots/supermarket each day and then set up all over again for the evening. Some motor homes tow a small car behind to alleviate this situation. It is up to you as to what is the best solution.

However, please look closely into the weight and licence requirements of bigger and heavier motor homes as some require higher grade licences for you to drive and be legal.

Some simple but important things to consider ...

(a) Getting into and out of your van – and the step

Make sure you have one attached to the van. Generally this means it will fold under the van when you travel. Do not use a movable step that is placed under the door access. This is an occupational hazard waiting to happen and it did to my wife in Broome WA and resulted in a trip to Emergency at the hospital for stitches to her head. Fixed stable steps mean this is far less likely to ruin your holiday or dinner (as this went for a spill as well).

(b) Power cords and water/sullage hoses

Carry extra 15 amp power cords because in some places you will be well away from the power connection. A waterproof connection for them is also recommended.

The same goes for water hoses. You need to have quality water hoses, not garden hoses, and you need to ensure you have inline filters for your safety, especially when you are a long way from medical assistance. I have a filter to take out any contaminants and then an additional one with carbon filters that handles most bacteria.

Sullage hoses are important so you can connect your caravan grey water to outlets in caravan parks. Get longer hoses than you think you will ever need as in some places the outlets are remote to the van site. If free camping is your thing, you may need to ensure your van has a grey water tank as you cannot dispose of waste water onto the ground. In one caravan park on the South Coast of NSW we found a sullage outlet that was about 30cm higher than the floor of our van. Apart from questioning the engineer who designed this, it meant we could not connect to the sullage system.

(c) TV reception

There are many options for you with TV reception. You may want to spend up big and get a satellite dish for reception on the LAST network anywhere in Australia. Alternatively a collection of DVDs, or shows saved on your iPad or computer, may be an alternative in remote places. Whichever way you go, spend a couple of dollars on an app for your phone called Antenna Mate which shows you the local TV antenna and in which direction you should point your aerial.

(d) Spirit level

You need one to set up your van at each site. The device can be a normal spirit level or one with a 90° offset you can use on the A-frame as well as on the floor. You also need to have levelling devices to go under your wheels to ensure that the van is level, so that the shower and sink work as they are supposed to. However the main reason is to level the bed. Try sleeping in a bed with a major slope affecting it and you will understand what I am talking about. Some upmarket vans have air suspension which allows easy levelling side to side.

(e) Water tanks

Your water supply is critical and so is the cleanliness of the water. There are chemicals that can be added to water tanks to stop the growth of bacteria, especially when the caravan is not being used. When not using the caravan, fill the tanks and add an inhibitor (available for caravan shops). Empty it when preparing to go away and flush and refill it if you want the tanks full. Do not leave the tanks empty unless you are sure it is absolutely 100% empty and dry.

(f) Booking sites in busy times

If you want to visit areas where there is high demand, such as Hervey Bay/Fraser Island or Broome, book ahead. Otherwise you may be lining up at the visitors' information centre at Hervey Bay waiting for a vacant slot at a caravan park. When we were there last year there were about 15 vans lined up waiting for a site to become vacant. Plan ahead.

(g) Bike racks

Many of you may be interested in taking a bike or bikes with you for exercise. I ride for health and take a bike with me on the van doing about 150-200km a week if the weather is good. Bike racks on the rear of

the van are better as there is less dirt attracted to the bikes(s) and you can cover them for wet/bad weather. Rear bike racks can cope with covers. Those at the front – no way!

(h) Tow ball weight scales – water tanks full and empty

Check this before setting off. A tow ball weight scale is about \$30 and worth the peace of mind – or use a public weighbridge.

(i) Grey water tanks

Free camping is increasingly requiring that you are self-contained. No waste water into the environment, so you need a grey water tank. The alternative to this is to go to a caravan park or have room for a portable tank.

(j) Electric brakes

Depending on the weight of your caravan you may need to have an electric brake controller fitted in your car for the caravan brakes. They are mandatory for vans over 2,000kg. Vans under 2,000kg but above 750kg can have override brakes or electric brakes. Check with the regulations in the state in which you register the van.

(k) Caravan registration fees

While talking registration costs, NSW has the highest caravan registration cost of any state or territory, up to three times more than other states.

(l) Checklist for set-up and pack-down

You may think this is unnecessary, but it is amazing how things can be missed when packing up in a hurry. It always happens, for example, when it is wet or you have deadlines to meet. My wife Deirdre does the inside and I do the outside, then we cross-check like the airlines do with the doors. It gives peace of mind.

In addition each caravan is a little different so you need to develop your own checklist right from the day you first pick up your caravan. Develop an inside and an outside checklist for packing up and it will give you peace of mind. This is very important. For example, the outside fold-down table must be locked in place. I noticed this was not the case in my rear view mirror about ten minutes after starting out from Alice Springs and heading north. It could have been a major problem. I missed it in the checklist.

Some of the things on your checklist will include, e.g. aerial down, windows locked down, shower screen locked, cupboards secured, jockey wheel stowed, lights checked to see if they are working etc, etc, etc.

(m) Clean out your caravan every so often

Weight is always a concern with a caravan. Every so often go through your van and remove any items you have not used or no longer intend to use. We purchased a small folding ironing board for our van and have never used it. Most caravan parks have ironing facilities if you need them when travelling. Additionally, don't take hard copy books and magazines. They are very heavy and can all be loaded onto an iPad or laptop.

(n) Be ready for the unexpected

On our most recent trip to Queensland we woke up in the morning in Kingaroy and had no water even though we were connected to the mains water. Opening the door revealed a white landscape of frost. We had a frozen water hose.

Whilst on the subject of water, get your dealer to show you how the water pipes on the van connect. Most manufacturers use poly pipe with slide-on connectors that are very easy to put on and take off. Get a couple of spare connectors and a couple of metres of caravan poly pipe to carry with you in case of a leak, crack etc.

(o) Site suitability

Check out your site before you try to put the van onsite. When we were in Hervey Bay last year we had booked months ahead and provided the dimensions for our van. The site allocated to us was not suitable as we would have had about a metre of the van hanging out on the road. We got a bigger corner site but still had to put the van on a diagonal as there was still overhang if we parked as they expected us to. This then caused problems for the awning as we could not roll it out.

A similar situation happened in Lakes Entrance where our roll-out blind and our neighbour's blind actually touched and these sites were supposedly drive-through ones.

So where to go?

We have joined the Big 4 network of caravan parks and also Top Tourist (now called Top Parks). These networks of caravan parks give discounts to members and it can add up quite quickly to a good saving.

There are a few caravan parks that stand out as being excellent:

- Riverglades Caravan Park in Tumut on the banks of the Tumut River is a stunning site.
- Fitzroy Crossing in WA is amazing as it is on the banks of the river and looks like a golf course in the middle of the desert. Their drive-through sites (all concrete) are a model for all other parks. (Not much in town however.)
- The Big 4 on the water in Adelaide just to the north of Glenelg is excellent as well. There is beachfront access and fabulous bike tracks, coffee shops etc all within walking distance.
- The Big 4 in Katherine in the NT was superb with lovely green grass, good facilities and spacious sites.
- The Daly Waters pub south of Katherine was memorable for its eccentricity and entertainment.
- Renmark Big 4 on the banks of the Murray is also very special.
- The Top Tourist Park in Gundagai next to the pool and just off the main street. It has undercover drive-through sites with or without an ensuite.

There are lots more but these ones have special memories.

So where to next?

After our recent trip to Queensland, we came home and decided to get a new van that may better meet our changing needs, i.e. we're getting older. Our van is a Supreme Spirit II Limited Edition and has a cabin length of 25 feet and overall length greater than 30 feet. It is a big van but is very comfortable and has been very reliable. We decided that we would downsize and get one with a slide-out that still gave us the room

but gave easier access to the bed. We were taking it in last Friday and had placed a tentative order for a new one to be delivered in January, as we will not need it before then. I picked up the old van from storage on Tuesday and we spent a couple of days taking all our gear out of it, washing it and preparing it to be handed over to the dealer.

It was parked out the front of our place in a wide street, under a street light in a 50km zone. At 6.15pm on Thursday night we heard a tremendous crash and raced out to find our van up the gutter and bits of it everywhere. On the other side of the van was a new Mazda 3 that only vaguely resembled what it had looked like a few minutes before. Luckily the P plate driver was the only occupant and the passenger side took the majority of the impact. I believe any passenger would have been killed or critically injured at least. I estimated the car was doing between 80 and 90 km.

We are waiting to see if the van is a write off, as one of the axles was snapped, an alloy wheel smashed, frame bent and the back and side opened up to more than half way down the van as well as lots of other damage.

Whoever thought caravanning was predictable and uneventful?

In conclusion

If you decide to take up caravanning like many of our colleagues and retired colleagues have done, you will experience the freedom and comfort of being a nomad and deciding on how you will spend your time in beautiful places.

I am not an expert on caravanning but would be happy to share with anyone who would like to look at becoming a Grey Nomad/Cotton Top. Good travels ☺

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