

**Updated: 4/2002**

## **BUYING RVs, TOW VEHICLES AND TOADS**

phred Tinseth © 1999–2002 Reproduction permitted

Web site: <http://www.phrannie.org>

**ONE RV? TWO OR MORE?** One can save or spend big \$. If a motor home, you'll probably get a toad and that automatically makes two. Consider a travel trailer, pulled by van camper or pickup camper. (Two Johns! Goodie!) 5W's are the most popular RVs (I can't imagine why) but their tow vehicles are losers at multi-purposes. And consider a TT (Travel Trailer), pulled by camper plus an economy car. Big \$ but convenient sometimes. The guy in the car can play scout and keep the big rig from getting into awful places. Get a big piece of paper. Jot down the above and all other considerations. Make lists of pros and cons. If you're honest with yourself/each other, you'll soon see what's right for you.

**MOTOR HOMES AND TOADS**--Almost everyone with a MH gets a toad so they can leave the big hulk parked and save fuel, but a toad can cost a bunch if you add up all that's involved. With MH and toad, you've got the problems of the trailer guy. Is it on a dolly? Poor you. You can't back it up more than a few feet and then, when you're done, you get to manhandle the dolly. Four-on-the-floor is the best way to tow a toad if possible. BUT, if that devil ever slips into gear, you've got massive destruction! Various wheel, gear and driveshaft disconnects are available. Consider the cost of dollies, gear disconnects, hitches, etc., on your spreadsheet. Depending on what you have and what you're going to tow with it (or tow it with), consider also wear and tear on the towing vehicle. Note that many RVers no longer tow, but drive both vehicles.

**LIFESTYLE** is the first thing people should consider when buying an RV--but it's usually the last. If you intend to stay at forest service/state parks with dinky 24' sites, you don't need a 40' 5W. If there are two of you who will spend 6 months at a destination park, you don't need an 18' micro-mini. Often, couples fail to communicate when buying. Durbert's thinking of his RV tucked into the trees at a fishing hole. Dora's thinking of entertaining or going square dancing and pictures endless closets for costumes. Neither talks about any of this until it's too late. I could go on at length (with hilarious anecdotes) but you should be able to figure it out.

(Just don't B.S. yourself.)

**TYPE OF RV--Trailer or motor home?** Your home town half a year and a destination park the other half might = trailer? Tour a lot might = motor home? **COMPETENCE** is another area where people often B.S. themselves. Can you back up a trailer? Do you want to? Are you strong enough to hitch/unhitch a trailer? What about security? If you're in a MH, you can drive away without stepping outside.

**The First Thing To Do**, then, is figure out what **type** of RV to buy. At this point, you don't consider cost, brand or anything else, just type. Now you can shop seriously, without being overwhelmed by variety, and further narrow your list down.

**The Next Thing To Do** is refine your shopping list by determining what is quality and what is not. Cost is an important measure, but don't rely on it totally. The best built RVs are going to cost more, but just because an RV is expensive, doesn't mean it's built very well. Don't be overly impressed by brand names. Some of the most popular brands are not very good RVs (but some are). Don't be impressed by flash-'n-dash! Most manufacturers know that RVs, like cars, are sold because of appearance, flashy interiors and accessories. An RV that looks like a doll house isn't going to do you one bit of good if it's as flimsily built. On the other hand, a well-built RV will also look good. (Function makes its own beauty.)

**Concentrate on things that must be right:** frame, floors, walls, insulation, roof are things you can't upgrade easily. Most appliances (stove, reefer) will be the same in the cheap and expensive RVs. Don't be swayed by extras like TV, microwave, trash masher or ice machine that you can buy better, cheaper, elsewhere. (One clue to quality is a separate, first-class, battery charger as opposed to combination converter. Hard to find in a ready-made RV.)

**Look around you!** On RV sales lots, in RV parks and at rallies. Which brands, with a bit of age on them, are sagging, have stress cracks, delaminated fiberglass and the like? Which have flapping trim pieces and caulking smeared all over the rig? Sagging steps and gaping awning mounts? Look for stains on the interior. Are they from leaks that indicate damage? Are they just cosmetic because a storm broke a ceiling vent and

splashed a bit of water about? Note also, which RVs still look good. Not just polished, but still sturdy and not bowed or out of line. Look at some of the newer RVs that are well built--Carriage, Rexhall, Xplorer, National RV, Horizons to name a few (there are more). I'm not trying to sell them, and you may not want to buy them, but they serve as good "measuring sticks" against which to compare other brands. Check which brands allow you to have custom work done, **but be very wary** of those huge, expensive RVs advertised as "custom built" in RV magazine ads. Some are terrible, very poorly made and designed, with plumbing lines running aimlessly through middle of cabinets, etc.

**Read the "trouble" or "Action Line" columns in RV publications!** Some RVs reappear constantly, either with faults or manufacturers/dealers that treat customers like dirt. Talk to RVerS! Some will honestly admit to having a lemon. Listen to the gossip! "She's had that thing in the shop 15 times this year, etc." (See later for reference to publications from the RV Consumer Group. These are an absolute must if shopping.)

**Your goal** is to identify well-built RVs and eliminate the cheezy ones from your shopping list. The basic frame is critical. Once an RV sags, it starts flexing, then it falls apart. There's more: The floor must be plywood (better yet, marine plywood), not particle board, and the top layer of floor must be at least 3/8" (better yet, 1/2") thick. The "box" might be wood, steel or aluminum. If any water stays inside the skin, wood rots, steel rusts and aluminum corrodes. For every advantage there's a disadvantage. The new, aluminum "lite" RVs can be very nice IF they're properly built and not just a mass of skimpy, pop-riveted-together junk. The outer skin must be properly bonded to a backing, not just foam insulation. Insulation must have a respectable "R" value. The inner surface needs a vapor barrier and a good paneling, not cheap, thin stuff. Compare brands! You'll soon see the difference.

**"Cold bridges"** can be a problem with metal frames when walls, ceilings and floors aren't properly built. The "bridge" allows cold to penetrate and the moisture buildup (sweat) can be phenomenal. Proper vapor barriers and insulation can prevent this.

**Roofs** should have at least 1/4" (3/8" is better) thick plywood on top of the rafters. Most don't.

**Windows are a good clue to quality manufacture.** Simple, sliding windows are cheap--that's that. Jalousie windows are better--that's that (they can be partially opened when raining and they deter burglars). An exception, now, are the dual-pane windows, with jalousie portions at side and/or bottom, that **greatly** improve insulating characteristics.

**Solid wood cabinets** can be nice, if well built; but they can weigh a ton if not well designed (as when manufacturer went overboard with too much where not needed--guess who pays for it?). Composition/particle board cabinets will fall apart. There are some very nice, efficient drawers made from plastic with hardwood fronts (there's some junk too). Drawer supports should be just that, not a single runner of cheap plastic stapled to anything handy.

**THE BIG STUFF**--Axles, suspension, wheels, drums and tires are critical too, but can't be covered without some number crunching. Don't panic. It's simple:

**GVWR** = Gross Vehicle Weight Rating. The most a vehicle should weigh when fully loaded with everything, (including you if it's a motor home or tow vehicle).

**GAWR** = Gross Axle Weight Rating. The maximum allowable weight per axle.

**GCWR** = Gross Combined Weight Rating. The total weight of the towing and towed vehicles.

These ratings are dependent on each other and each is dependent on several other things. For example: **GAWR** is not only the axle, but springs, brakes, wheels and tires, etc. So if you have 3,500 lb axles, but only 2,000 lb brakes, then your GAWR is only 2,000. And if you have giant, 7,000 lb axles and put cheap, load range C tires on your trailer, again you're back to a GAWR of 2,000 (or less). I'm looking at specs on a new, \$100,000 40' 5W. It has three, 7,000 lb axles. That should come to a GAWR of 21,000 lbs. However, the tires, load range E (and the biggest the manufacturer could find--or cram underneath) are such that the GAWR is only something like 14,000+ lbs. Not too swell! This rig is huge, yet its actual payload (what you can load it up with) is only 1,620 lbs. That's absurd!

**So, here's why you need to learn how to do a little number crunching.**

There's no point in going to a lot of trouble to find an RV you like -- and can afford -- if it won't do the job.

**GVWR** is a key number because it dictates your payload. GVWR is the maximum the loaded RV can weigh. If the RV, itself, weighs 10,000lbs and the GVWR is 11,000 (not unusual in a small MH), then you can only add 1,000 pounds (including you) before being overweight!

Then, you've got to consider whether the RV weight is based on "**dry**" weight (RV without any fluids on board), or "**wet**" weight (water, LP and fuel tank--if motor home--filled). In neither case do these two basic weights include cargo or people. And dry weight usually does not include optional equipment (like a 400 lb generator) or accessories either.

These weights vary from one manufacturer to another, with some being very precise; others quite casual. Typical manufacturer quotes: "RVers don't travel with full water tanks." or "GVWR is just a guideline; not important." (How's this for absolute crap? Yet, it's all too typical.) A good company will have a poop-sheet with weight ratings, actual weights, and state how they were determined. In the case of a trailer, the minimum should be GVWR and GAWR plus dry hitch weight, axle weight (that's not GAWR, but the measured weight) and payload.

**An example:** A typical, steel framed, 29' 5W with slide out. Per the brochure, Dry Hitch Wt = 1,800. Dry axle Wt = 6,500. Payload = 3,700. GVWR = 12,000. Dry hitch + dry axle should equal GVWR less payload. And it does. But "dry" means 42 gal of fresh water at about 8.2 lbs/gal and about 14 gal of propane at 4.25 lbs/gal must be deducted from payload, leaving 3,300 available for you. That's not bad.

**Another example:** Aluminum frame "lite" style, also 29' 5W with slide out. Hitch 1,750 + axle 6,190 + 60 gal water and 20 gal propane leaves 1,973 lbs of payload for a GVWR of 10,490. Still not bad--the trailer does weigh less.

These examples, and the earlier one of a 19,000 lb RV with only 1,620 lbs payload are real, major brand RVs. You should be able to see from these that if you don't know what you're doing, you can get terribly disappointed.

**GCWR** is the most important measurement, but seldom found as such. Instead, manufacturers list "towing capacity" which is just as good. Do not buy a truck or trailer without knowing this number! Too small a truck and/or too heavy a trailer will at least: wear out brakes, tires, engine and transmission prematurely and cause engine overheating and fuel starvation. At worst: result in blowouts, total brake failure and disaster.

**Calculating weights for motor homes** should be easy, but it's not. All have a GVWR, but few tell you what the RV itself weighs. A good manufacturer/dealer will provide dry and wet weights. (**Beware:** Some are fiction.) Also, there is a significant difference between front and rear axles on a motor home. You can't just add them together as with a trailer. Nor can you just add tag axle ratings. Brakes, again, are severely limiting. You can load a lot more on a motor home than you should, without breaking springs, but you won't be able to stop it when you step on the brakes! When you find a MH you like, weigh it! (You'll be going for a test drive anyway, so go to a scale.)

**Weights for tow vehicles** (trucks) will usually fall well within GVWR limits unless you buy a tiny truck or mount a camper or tool body on the back. A full-size 3/4 or 1-ton truck is OK for most RVers. However, two trucks, that look identical, can vary by thousands of pounds in towing capacity. **You cannot depend on a salesman's advice!** I'm looking at a list of towing capacities for Ford trucks and vans in 3/4 and 1-ton size. Based on the Ford variations in axles, etc., there are fifty (no kidding) combinations with towing weights from 6,000 lbs to 12,500lbs. (Anybody pulling one of the huge trailers so popular as "full-timer homes," should definitely consider the several "medium duty" trucks now available.) Escapees Magazine has had many articles and actual user reports on these. Read them.

**Wheelbase-to-Length Ratio for Motor homes:** Most RVers have never heard the term (or didn't until the RV Consumer Group began concentrating on the subject). The RV Consumer Group, referred to frequently by anybody who knows what they're doing, originated this concept. It refers to one of the most critical factors to be considered in selecting a motor home. I'll give you the basics. Say the overall length of the MH is 36 feet. That's 432". Say the wheel base is 228". The ratio is calculated as  $228 \div 432 = .528 = 52.8\%$  (call it 53%). Anything under 50%

is unsafe for highway travel. 50 to 53% is a bit dicey (will wear out the driver causing fatigue and stress). Only ratios of 54% or more are considered safe. Lower ratios will wear out your suspension as well as being unsafe. (Now you know why so many motor homes are a pain in the ass, literally, to drive.) People then write RV magazines and ask how to "beef up" the suspension. I've never seen one of the experts reply that the wheelbase-to-length ratio is screwed up and the thing is inherently dangerous; only recommendations for various add-on equipment. The add-on stuff does help the suspension (usually), but the RV is still dangerous.

## RESEARCH MATERIAL

**It's tragic!** See people spend \$30,000 on a truck and twice that on a trailer only to find that nothing is right. It's worse to see people trade RVs four times in less than two years, and take a financial beating each time, because they never bothered to do any research. We're talking big \$ when buying an RV. What's a few more?

**Go shopping.** Not to buy, just to collect information. It doesn't cost money, just time. Take notes. Collect brochures. Inspect RV construction as above (and see information about "**RV Consumer Group**" below). Look at common-sense aspects inside the RV. Just a few examples: Make sure you can stand up/fit into the shower. Sit on the john without your knees hitting your chin. That there's enough counter space to cook dinner. Avoid micro-wave ovens near ceiling--where you will spill a hot dish on yourself. Avoid converters near ceiling--too heavy (so are some microwaves). Look for two decent batteries, not those tiny 84AH el-cheapos. Look for a "Sealand" brand china toilet rather than some hard-to-clean plastic junk. Look for separate AC and DC electric load centers with an independent battery charger. Get my "Batteries and ...." poop sheet for "why's" of electrical stuff.

**A few reminders of things NOT to do** during your initial shopping: Do **not** let anybody get ahold of the keys to your existing vehicle. Do **not** go for a "test" ride on these initial visits. Do **not** talk financing. Do **not** let anyone get you into an office and start filling out papers ("just in case" or "to see what we have here".) Do **not** let anyone sucker you into a supposedly "hypothetical" conversation about, "What price would I need to

quote to let you drive out of here with this RV today?"--this is one of the biggest dirty tricks going (and see many more later under RV Consumer Group materials). There are a lot more things you should and shouldn't do, but these are critical.

**MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL! OF ALL THE REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS AVAILABLE, READ AND FOLLOW THE NEXT ONE. I CAN'T OVEREMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS. WITHOUT IT, YOU WILL GET SCREWED. WITH IT, YOU WON'T (UNLESS YOU DO IT TO YOURSELF).**

► **Anyone buying an RV, new or used, is making a gigantic mistake if they don't subscribe to "The RV Consumer Group."** These people tell it like it is: the good, the bad and the ugly. Membership will educate you so you don't get screwed when buying an RV plus much, much more. Their RV Rating Book(s) will show you what are the good RVs and what are unsafe or just plain lousy. (Finding out that some of the biggest names in the business are really the worst RVs you can buy is a real eye opener.) RV Consumer Group, Box 520, Quilcene, WA 98376 (800) 405-3325 or (360) 765-3846. ([www.rv.org](http://www.rv.org)) Joining is an absolute must if shopping for or buying an RV! Their information will save you thousands of \$.

In addition to the rating Books and others, the RV Consumer Group (RVCG) recently introduced an new all-inclusive book that has an enormous amount of added material as well: **YOU NEED THIS BOOK! EVERY RVer NEEDS THIS BOOK!**

"**How to Select, Inspect, and Buy an RV**" is a magnificent effort by the RVCG staff. Buying an RV is serious business. There's no point in buying the wrong one or getting the shaft from the dealer. This book tells it all. How to select a decent RV in the first place (and weed out the known losers). Then it goes into great detail on (with photos) on how to thoroughly inspect an RV and identify the good stuff as well as the faults (that are all too common). Finally, it guides you through the entire buying process (and tells you *all* the tricks that will be played on you). It also tells you how to avoid getting screwed in the first place. \$28.95 for RVCG members, \$34.95 for non-members. Anybody who buys an RV without this book is making a serious mistake!

The RV Consumer Group "**Member Package**" includes a bunch of goodies (see the web site below). Consider that the majority of *serious* RVers spend over \$100,000 on an RV. Are you willing to gamble that without

knowing what you're doing? The RV Consumer Group is an active outfit, constantly updating. Call them or visit [www.rv.org](http://www.rv.org) for the latest in membership packages and publications. Armed with a Rating Book, the "How to...." book and constant updates on the web site, the only one who can screw you when you buy an RV is -- you.

### **OTHER GOOD REFERENCES:**

**"Trailer Life's TOWING GUIDE"** (from TL Pubs again.) Reference the enormous variety/combinations of vehicles, TL has gathered the figures for all of them and lists what all can tow depending on how equipped. If buying truck/trailer, you need this book. (Sometimes it sells for only \$7.95. Sometimes they don't sell it, but give it as a "gift" when you buy a more expensive book. Shabby?)

Check "Trailer Life" and "Motorhome" (both in most public libraries). Much of the content is insipid, (with references to attractive decorator fabrics--ho hum--etc.), but use your number-crunching skills to detect good and bad. "Motorhome" sometimes has excellent "roundups" on what toads can be towed the easy way.

If motor homing is your choice, you might want to look at **"FMCA"** (Family Motor Coach Assn.). Their magazine is also full of the insipid, but they constantly update what can and cannot be towed and have excellent articles on the equipment needed.

Read the columnists in RV magazines. But do not accept their (or my) words as "writ in stone." Opinions differ. Compare! In selecting vehicles (especially tow vehicles, tires and other running gear) read Bill Farlow's column (in many publications).

**COST**--The final frontier. Realistically examine your finances. There are plenty of reasonably priced RVs out there that have been well constructed. (Join the RV Consumer Group and find out). Look for well-cared-for used RVs. You can save enough on depreciation to do about all the upgrading you need.

### **BUYING USED RVs AND SUCH**

This is the way many of us prefer to go. A well cared for used RV can save you (literally) a fortune. Factory recalls will usually have been taken care

of. Leaks and other defects the same (sometimes). Make sure everything works! Get a book if you don't know how or get someone to help you. To check out an RV, it must be plugged in and there must be propane and fresh water in the appropriate tanks. Reference the [RV Consumer Group](#) material mentioned earlier. If you're buying new or used, you should call them when you narrow your list down and check on their "Data Deal" report for specific RVs.

You cannot check a refrigerator/freezer unless it's been running at least 12 hours (24 is better). If the propane detector with auto stop isn't working (few do), you won't be able to get anything burning. Turn on the pump and faucets. Look underneath the RV and under/in all cabinets for leaks. Run the air conditioner at least 15 minutes. Run the furnace. Open (try to) every window and vent. Operate every window shade. Turn on every light. In short, operate everything. If a fuse has been removed, demand it be replaced to see what works (or doesn't work). Obviously, you're only going to do this when you've narrowed your list down to serious contenders.

Write every defect down. Some are critical. If you turn on a reefer for the usual technician's 10 minutes, you will feel a bit of cold when placing your hand in freezer. This means nothing! A bad circuit board can still cost you \$200+. A bad cooling unit over \$600. A new reefer over \$1,400. Some things aren't critical. A monitor panel (idiot lights and 25¢ battery meter that doesn't work) shouldn't surprise you because few do work. However, it's a genuine defect. You might never bother to fix it, but it's worth a discount.

### **Which brings us to DOLLARS:**

**There are three prices for a used RV: Retail** is what Durbert Dumbutt pays. Retail is what some sharp buyers of used RVs might pay also IF the RV is in mint condition, has all needed extras and no damage. Anything less than mint, and you subtract from the price the cost of repairing/replacing every single thing that is the least bit wrong!

**Wholesale** is a bit tougher. It's not a realistic figure. Ignore it pretty much except as a rough guide. **Loan Value** is a critical figure! Many sharp buyers start with an RV price at about loan value then add on for extra features and like-new general conditions that increase basic value. Why

just loan value (the most a bank will loan)? Because the bank won't loan more than the thing is basically worth. If they won't loan (pay) more than it's worth, maybe you shouldn't either. If you don't know what you're doing, and even if you think you do, you must read the books mentioned earlier under RV Consumer Group. If you don't, you'll get the shaft. The "buy" method RVCG advocates for new RVs is to start from MSRP (Manufactuer's Suggested Retail Price) and work your way down. Might sound puzzling to some, but it really works. Main reason is that it gets away from all that phoney BS car dealers use when quoting from dealer's invoices -- that aren't dealer's invoices -- and faking buyers out in other ways as well. (The newer RVCG "ratings" books also include an average percent reduction figure from MSRP.)

### **DON'T BE INTIMIDATED OR IMPULSIVE!**

The right RV, at the right price, is out there. When people won't deal, either: they don't know what the score is or you don't have your figures in order. If your figures are in order, just walk away. There's no shortage of RVs.

Where do you get the true figures? News stand "buying guides" give you a clue (that are also on the internet), but it's not good enough. Your lending institution (whether you intend to get a loan or not) has the official Blue Book (that they use to estimate loans). A good bank/credit union/etc., will at least look up the figures for you and let you write them down (if they won't photocopy the pages for you). Copies of B'Book pages are best, because you can show them to a seller and, honestly, say, "My bank says this is all I should pay." (They didn't really say that, but would have if you asked them.)

### **Dealers or private individuals?**

Advantages/disadvantages to both. Dealers will be sharper bargainers than you will. Private Individuals might be sharp (or might not). Both can cheat you. Dealers are, though, restricted more by laws. A "good" dealer, in self defense, will insure that everything in the RV works before you drive away. Again, read the RV Consumer Group books. Simply put: We (you/me) are not sharp enough to go up against a professional without professional help.

**CLEAN PAPER is critical!** Don't put one penny down until you see clear title with no liens. If there's a lien, put not 10¢ down until you and seller go to lien holder and set the transfer up. **Don't mess up this step!** If you screw up the clean paper step, with private individual or crooked dealer, you can lose many thousands of \$. It's happened to many SKPs. Some will admit their stupidity so that you shouldn't do the same. As I noted earlier, "Listen to the gossip."

**Beware of the Gypsies!** They're out there seeking fools. There are thousands of them in criminal "families" that practice all the con games known to man. These are the same people that do the roofing, driveway surfacing and too many more scams to list. Their activities have been described in books, on TV, in many magazine and newspaper articles. Do your research! They'll steal RVs, get phoney papers and peddle them to the unwary. They'll buy horribly sub-standard RVs direct from factories and peddle them. No dealer will ever honor the warranty papers from these crooks. You'll find them in RV parks, malls, almost anywhere. They'll be charming (con artists usually are). They'll have wives and children (who are part of the con) and will always have a good story (usually sad) to tell you about why they're desperate to sell. These crooks have taken several SKPs to the cleaners. They love to prey on the elderly and the greedy. **BE CAREFUL!**

### **The Classics:**

RVs, like cars, depreciate enormously when driven off the lot. There are a few exceptions: Century, Boles, Ideal (from the '70s), among others, sometimes bring more now than new. Old Avions (before those made by Fleetwood) bring good value (and look better than many new RVs). There are some 50's era Spartans (and others) in this club that are better than new. Want some fun? Find, if you can, an old Cortez motor home. Old or new, you can't do better than a New Horizons, King of The Road (trailers) or Lazy Daze (motor home). There are a lot more good ones out there. You need to find them by belonging to the RV Consumer Group.

### **Junkers:**

Are best reserved for truly knowledgeable Do-It-Yourselfers who know exactly what they're doing. Try this if you like. Be prepared to: Strip out the entire interior. To buy new axles. To have extensive welding done. Combine ultra-upgrades with this and you'll have a grand rig (maybe).

One-of-a-kind. Your treasure. Maybe no one else's? This is not a lightly taken step if you intend to trade your rig off. I recommend it as enormous fun.

### **The Mechanic:**

One of your final steps, in buying a used car, tow vehicle or motor home, is to have it checked out by a good mechanic or diagnostic center. (Not your idiot brother-in-law.) Save this test for the finalists (it'll cost \$75 or more). But do it! Not doing it can end up with you getting screwed silly. (Incidentally, I try to take my RV to my [favorite mechanic](#) annually.)

### **Things to keep in mind:**

A dealer has to make a profit or he won't be a dealer very long. He doesn't expect the same percentage on every RV; going for a little more on popular rigs, less on slow movers. He probably never allowed any more than loan value on a trade in, so that, plus a percentage is a good place to start. A private individual doesn't have to make a profit, but if your offer is ridiculously low, will usually sit on the thing rather than be stuck (unless he's in a bind--so, again, beware the gypsy that'll have you in tears about his sick mother as he shafts you).

Know what it will cost to repair/replace everything wrong. Call a repair shop and ask. Tell them what you're doing; that you're considering them for the work. Don't take too much of their time with an actual written estimate, just get round numbers. Show the figures to the seller.

Don't neglect the mechanic's checkout. You'll spend thousands on an RV. What's another \$100? I saw a used RV with "new" transmission recently. That's good. However, the mechanic found that the torque converter had **not** been replaced, but was the original piece of junk. Too bad.

Keep in mind that no matter how careful you are, you'll have to make some repairs or replace some appliance. (So will the guy that buys a new RV--usually the day after the warranty runs out). A good dealer will help with this, even if he sold it to you "as is" or with a limited warranty, because he knows many RVers will trade frequently and he wants you back!

Don't try to save a few bucks by ignoring the **RV Consumer Group**. I've

talked to all-too-many RVers who bragged about how they really put one over on a dealer. That's absolute B.S. A really sharp dealer will stuff a noodle up your butt and you'll think he's doing you a favor. Read RVCG's "How to Select, etc." book and see just how uneducated you/we all really are.

## ACCURATE WEIGHT

**WEIGHT** is one of the most critical considerations in RVing and one of the most neglected. I mentioned it earlier--mostly in regard to determining the capacity of an RV when shopping--but also because of the safety aspects. An overweight RV is dangerous! You may get it going--and keep it going--but only for a time. More importantly--you may not be able to stop it. Tires will blow, wheels will break, suspensions fail. Even if you don't experience a catastrophe, you'll prematurely wear out tires, brakes, engine and transmission. It will overheat and you'll be constantly bothered with fuel and electrical problems. At the least, an overweight RV (or one with poorly distributed weight) will wallow all over the road.

You can weigh your rig (and you're a fool if you don't). RV guides and magazines frequently have articles on how to weigh a rig and interpret the figures. The math is simple and you can come up with approximate weights at any truck scale. Read the articles in Trailer Life and Motor home. Most public libraries carry these. Ask the reference librarian to show you how to find articles on the subject in past issues by using the periodical index. It's easy and cheap. Unfortunately, these articles are going to give you figures that are only approximate, and they can be misleading. The commercial scales you'll use are only intended to measure gross weights of large trucks.

► **Fortunately, there's now a better way:** Escapee John Anderson obtained ultra-accurate sets of portable, digital scales that allows measuring the weight at every wheel or combination of wheels. Moreover, an elaborate computer program that allows taking that data, comparing it with the wheels, tires and capacities from the manufacturer of your RV and coming up with a detailed printout. Then, explained to you, in layman's terms, is just what it all means and what you need to do to correct things.

**This is one of the best services anyone has come up with! And it's**

cheap! At about \$10 an axle, you can't afford not to do it. (They ought to be charging more; it would still be cheap.) I weighed my rig (on a truck scale) when I bought it. It was overweight, so I had the rear end rebuilt. Safe, but I still had problems. After it was checked it out, I knew why: My rig was 2,000lbs overweight total, as I knew, but the improved suspension handled that. What I hadn't realized, was that I was over 1,000lbs light in the front. This explained the poor steering and tire wear. Also, I was 1,000lbs heavier on one side than the other (which hadn't shown up as that much on the truck scale). Now I know what I'm doing.

**A most highly recommended service, put this at the top of priority list.** A fulltime RVer, look for John Anderson or his reps at SKP and many other club rallies. Better yet, call or send a SASE to **RVSEF (Recreational Vehicle Safety Foundation)** (formerly A'Veigh We Go), 211 Mae McKee Rd., Chuckey, TN 37641-2008. (423) 257-7985. E-mail to [awwg@worldnet.att.net](mailto:awwg@worldnet.att.net). Tell them where you'll be and ask where they'll be. Ask for a copy of the information and definition sheets. They give seminars (and will usually be at Escapades)--don't miss it.

**The Good, Bad and Ugly--some more things to look for:**

**Axles, drums and wheels:** There are a lot of big, 5W trailers with undersized axles and running gear out there. Some due to simple mistakes; some because manufacturers could care less. Most people never demand proof of what's really underneath and never know it until things fall apart. Often, the wheel doesn't separate and tear the RV apart until after the warranty expires. Check it out. Some of the most famous brands have absolute crap in places most buyers never look.

**Matching drums, wheels and tires to tow vehicles:** Trailer tires often rot away before the tread is hardly worn. Wheels and tires often don't match the tow vehicle, so rotation is inconvenient. I took one of my trailer's Dexter hubs to an axle/wheel/etc., specialty house. (I'm not talking retail tire place with jazzy chrome wheels here. Check your yellow pages.) They put the specs into their computer and came up with drums that matched my Ford tow vehicle and also matched the Dexter hubs and trailer brakes. Ford wheels were found at a wrecking yard. I ended up with tow vehicle and trailer with identical wheels and tires. Efficient, cost effective and in some cases can increase weight carrying capacity.

**Trailer springs:** My originals were quite skimpy. Replacing them with those of double the capacity was cheap at about \$50 a set. Adding shock absorbers if not already there is intelligent.

**Things that hang underneath:** Many RVs have spare tires, propane, water and waste tanks hanging underneath. Nothing wrong with that, but when buying, crawl under and give them all a good shaking. Dealers almost never check this. I've seen some of the highest rated RVs, only a couple of months old, in the shop with this stuff falling off. "Plastic" water and waste tanks, if loose, will gradually rub against metal hangars. It can take years before they go. (Always after the warranty expires.) Check generator mounts carefully. At over 400lbs, many are so flimsily supported it's criminal. Check generator location also. One of the high-priced RVs has it mounted directly under the slide out room -- can be deadly. Some 5W have them in the front storage compartment -- also a deadly place.

**Hub caps and wheel covers:** See if the dealer won't give you a credit for them and don't use them. They're nothing but cosmetic crap and all they accomplish is keeping you from properly checking brakes and wheel bearings for heat. (In some cases you can't even check tire pressure easily with them on.) RVing is serious business, you don't need juvenile chrome.

**Why don't I list the bad RVs?** Because the RV Consumer Group does it annually and publishes a book of well over 500 pages that covers virtually every RV made with all the faults clearly shown (as well as the good stuff). Buying an RV without first checking with [RV Consumer Group](http://www.rv.org) (www.rv.org) is a dreadful mistake!

## **MORE ON BUYING AN RV:**

**A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF HOW TO DO THE JOB RIGHT!** The letter below is here to show how people who are: organized, do their research, shop carefully and are patient really can get a superior RV. One that's done right the first time and one that will last. A Computer Assisted Design program (as this buyer used) is helpful, but manual sketches, followed by consultations with the builder work fine. Note particularly, how this couple: Did their homework, didn't get impatient and do impulsive things, selected a manufacturer who really cares about his reputation and his customer's satisfaction.

**SELECTION OF THE BUILDER/MANUFACTURER IS CRITICAL!** In this case, the RVer used what is considered by experts as one of the best (probably *the* best) in the country. "Horizons" RVs consistently rank highest in RV Consumer Group ratings with four and five stars and always receive outstanding grades for value, durability and highway safety. Workmanship is superb. "Customizing"--a little bit or a lot--is normal. These RVs are not cheap, but are reasonably priced. They often cost less than the junk sold by some other manufacturers. "Horizons, Inc." 2618 Mid America Dr. Junction City, KS 66441 (800) 235-3140. (785) 238-7575. FAX (785) 238-4992.

web site = [www.horizonsrv.com](http://www.horizonsrv.com) e-mail = [horizons@horizonsrv.com](mailto:horizons@horizonsrv.com)

Here's the text of the letter:

"...I [used an Auto CAD program to design my own 5th wheel]. Everything I designed, including computer desk, dinette, shower, bathroom, etc., had measurements that fit wife and me. We are both on the large size so this was a smart move on my part. I took my design and all my newly gained knowledge from your poop sheets to "Horizons Inc." and had them build me a 36' 5th wheel to my exact specifications. What a home!!! Everything fits and was built exactly the way I requested. What a great way to have every thing you recommend, implemented in a new trailer. We have lived in it, full time, for nine months thus far and have NO serious complaints. Your ideas on a solar-electrical system are right on the mark and it all works perfectly.

Horizons Inc. should be put on the map. The owner, Herald Johnson, and his sons build a wonderful trailer and they build it the way you want it built. It takes a few months for them to build one but the wait is worth it. I visited their plant on four different occasions. They only have three or four trailers being manufactured at any one time. All at different stages. I have no ulterior motive for saying all this. I researched all types of 5th wheels, for over two years, before I settled on Horizons. Full timers need to seriously consider them so I thought telling you would be the best way of getting out the word. They don't have a sales force. All their business is word of mouth and they are highly thought of by RV Consumer Group."

**ASK BEFORE YOU BUY -- A different case than the one above.**

Here are some questions you might ask the dealer before you buy an RV.

Some of these may seem a bit bizarre, but they all describe *what actually happened* to one RVer recently. I thought the RVer who sent me this was just kidding, but I checked back -- and he wasn't. You've got to hand it to him -- he maintained his sense of humor through a nightmare. Here's his text:

"...If, in the first 30 days, there are gross manufacturing defects and equipment failures, will you: A. Refund my money? B. Replace my coach? C. Tell me you are only responsible to make repairs?

Is that wood paneling or is it wood-grain paper wrap?

Is that clothes rod attached to anything substantial?

Is that spring-loaded bed support going to pull out of the paneling it's screwed to and pin someone [his wife] to the wall?

Will the water heater last more than three weeks?

Could it really take 30 minutes to drain a gray-water tank?

How many times does the refrigerator have to fail before the manufacturer reimburses me for the cost of spoiled food?

Will I fall through the dinette seat because the wafer board support is too short?

If the sidewalls buckle and seams open due to unfastened supports [that were] unglued, am I told to get somewhere I want to be for a while because while the gross defects are being repaired the coach is not usable, and if you move it the warranty is void?

If I retain a lawyer, does all work stop?

If, due to gross defects, the three- to four-day repair takes 16 or more days, are we simply stranded and left without the facilities we purchased with non-defective dollars?

---

Return to list of [Poop Sheets](#)