

My favourite travel statement is “see ya when we get back”, but this time around we had more to consider! We’d bought a new van and in the process a few lessons were learnt, and some major decisions made.

We have loved our Tvan for 12 years, and it has never let us down. However, it was time for us to sell and make the change to something new.

The range of choice has certainly increased over those years. We asked our friends for advice and developed our top six priorities. This article is mostly geared to caravans/campers but can be applied regardless of what sort of setup best suits you.



We looked after our Tvan, and it fetched a good price when we sold it.

1. Budget

Like with any significant expense you need to lock down how much money you are prepared to spend. Van prices fluctuate from thousands to hundreds of thousands, depending on how luxurious you want to go. Even tents these days can start below one hundred dollars and climb into the thousands.

Do your sums before you start to look, adjust them if you need to, and then stick with your plan so the possibilities become realities. Without the right money you are stymied.

Unless you are certain about what you want, consider hiring before buying. Caravans are a long term investment. If you think you’ll still be travelling in five or ten years, then consider whether you will have the health, fitness, and strength to do what’s necessary to set up, and tailor your purchase accordingly.

Think resale value – quality sells quickly! Even 12 years on our Tvan fetched a good price which certainly helped the new purchase. You should also research any on-road costs that may apply in your state or territory, as well as rego – these also need to be factored into your budget.

Once you’re clear on how much you’ve got to spend you’ll know if you’re after a second-hand or new van. Bear in mind that your towing vehicle also needs consideration – and may also need to be upgraded.



Decide on the style of travel you want to do, and set a clear budget.

2. Vehicle

Is your current vehicle sufficient for the type of caravan you want, or the style of travel you wish to do i.e. off-road? Decide where you want to go.

This determines your tow vehicle, the maximum size and weight of your camper, and the type of suspension you require.

Most salesmen don’t care about your tow vehicle, they focus on van attributes, comfort, and ultimately, the sale.

Vehicle specifications are your responsibility and you may need to rethink your budget to factor the cost of a vehicle upgrade into the overall expense. If your car can’t get there, the van won’t get anywhere on its own. You definitely don’t need a van with better clearance than the tug!

It's important to know the Gross Combined Mass (GCM) of the vehicle and van. You'll need your vehicle's tow capacity and ball weight too. Check the owners' manual and if in doubt ask. If you don't understand, ask again. [This article](#) may also be helpful.

Does your current vehicle's towing capacity allow for the weight and size of what you want to tow? Image: Aaron Schubert

How much stuff will you need to pack in the car? Do you need your van to have built-in storage or fridge slides? All of these things can add weight and should be accounted for. If you can find a public weighbridge, pack the car for a holiday and get it weighed. That's a great starting point. A good rule of thumb is...

The van shouldn't weigh more loaded than the car towing it!

Don't forget to include everything you pack, the bull bar, snorkel, the fridge – loaded, even driver and passenger weight needs to be calculated.

If you're serious about off-road then *weight* is everything! It's easier on what you're towing, easier on the car doing the towing, and easier for the driver too.

At the very least you'll need a tow bar but when adding in extra wiring, a rear camera, towing [mirrors](#), possibly a weight-distribution hitch, or airbag suspension to help keep the van level, your original budget is taking a hit before you've left home!

Appropriate weight distribution is also important. Image: Aaron Schubert

3. Features

Once your car is sorted, you need to determine what sort of traveller you are? Ask yourself:

- How long will you be away?
- Do you prefer to go it slowly, or move on every couple of days?
- Do you like to free camp or stay in caravan parks?
- How do you plan to [shower](#)?
- Do you need [hot water](#)?
- What about a [toilet](#)?
- Will you mostly be driving on sealed roads, gravel roads, or [graded routes](#)?
- Will you be going into national parks or fully off-road and remote locations?

Consider the time spent setting up and taking down – this has to be done every time you establish camp – rain, hail, or shine. How fiddly is it? Does it take a few minutes, or more like an hour?

Do you want a [heater](#), air-conditioning, a [washing machine](#), room for the kids, [pet spaces](#), cooking inside or out, mains power, [solar](#), or a [generator](#), TV or radio, [BBQ or kitchen](#)? How about [water storage](#), [tank maintenance](#), and greywater? Do you need a [safe spot](#) for [gas cylinders](#) and/or [jerry cans](#)?

The list is endless, but these are all things that should be considered before you make your purchase. Only you know your priorities, and you may need to compromise, so make sure you're clear on what you *need* versus what you *want*.



Some caravans allow you to cook inside, others have pull-out kitchens, or you could create your own external setup. Image: Companion

4. New or second-hand?

Knowing what to look for is important when buying new, but even more so when buying second-hand.

Join camping social media groups, including owners' groups. Current owners know the product best – the good, the bad, the hacks, and the improvements.

If you are buying second-hand from a member of the group, search their name and see if they've raised any issues that would make you wary to buy their unit. Search for posts on items you are worried about, read comments, and check out the photos.

Caravan/camping expos are great for seeing displays of new models. They provide the opportunity to be exposed to a lot of businesses in one place, and it's much easier to remember what you liked when you can compare models close together. Get inside the caravan, sit down, try the bed, and stand in the kitchen – is it a good height for you/the cook? Take a notebook and your own photos. Listen to the company rep, and their answers to questions others are asking, not just yours.

Research the caravan manufacturer – what is their reputation like? Are they known for excellent build quality, after-sales support, and warranty? Even if the second-hand van you are looking at is out of warranty, it is still a valuable representation of a company's level of integrity.

Are there parts that have a history of breaking down? Do they matter to you and if so, do you have the skills to fix them?



Make sure you do your research before committing to any purchase!

Inside and out, different things suit different people.

Less fancy, less to go wrong! But a few bells and whistles mean you can enjoy a certain level of comfort, so don't be too tight with your list.

Buy fit for YOUR purpose and you can't go wrong.

When you find a van you think might be 'the one', check your notes, and go inspect it.

Ask a knowledgeable friend to join you and look underneath before you are beguiled by the features inside. It's easy to be distracted by the bling and shiny stuff!

If second-hand, make sure you check for signs of weakness:

- Climb underneath to look for cracks and rust in the chassis/underside of the base – take a torch or headlamp to light your way
- Is the axle in good condition?
- Check for plumbing leaks and issues, including electrical connections/routing for worn cabling. You'd be surprised how many 'off-road' campers have little protection, even leaving exposed pipes and dangling wires!
- Are there any signs of rot? Check for leaks and mould – don't forget under the sink, inside the cupboards, and underneath the mattress
- Inside and out, look for kinks in hoses

- Wear on door seals
- Test latches and dust in hatches

Don't get hung up on upholstery wear and tear, sit down to see how comfortable it is. Is there room for your legs under the table?

Consider the level of storage, are you a minimalist or pack your whole house and wardrobe? Is there enough solar/battery to suit your needs if camping off-grid or during wet weather? Is the inverter able to run a power-hungry toaster, or safely charge the laptop? Will you need another battery, a generator, or more solar panels?



If you want a self-sufficient setup, you'll need to factor in additional sources of power. Image: Hard Korr

5. Aftersales service and warranty

A reliable van with decent after-sales support can save you hours and keep you on the road where you really want to be!

Look into 'Build Quality Assurance' – the industry is booming right now and with most van/camper orders going through the roof, control can slip – even with the highly respected brands.

If thousands of build complaints actually made it to the ACCC last year, then you can bet many more made it to manufacturers.

Check out industry forums and Google reviews. If the build and service departments are good, some buyers write about it. However, if it's bad, you can bet everyone comes out of the woodwork to share. If you want to be sure ask the question upfront and be discerning over the response.



In addition to aftersales service, make sure you have suitable insurance. Image: Aaron Schubert

It may seem obvious but you won't always be at home when you need something replaced or repaired. Get to know the staff you will be dealing with, ask their advice, be courteous, and build a relationship. It's not how it should be, but it's so much easier to follow up with a friendly client than a disgruntled stranger.

An emergency response phone number is invaluable. With limited internet across the outback, having access to a direct line is paramount for 'real' off-road users.

Equally important is the confidence of a timely callback, and that knowledgeable staff are available to directly answer your enquiry and some resolution to the issue. There's nothing more frustrating than waiting for someone to call when your battery has died, or the water won't heat, or worse!



Some repairs and maintenance you will be able to do yourself. Image: Aaron Schubert

6. Courses and storage

Do you know how to tow? Can your partner or travel buddy tow as well? There are courses available and before taking off on your first trip you should have acquired some confidence

behind the wheel. The same applies to 4WDing – do you need any training?

Your experience in this area may not directly affect how to buy a caravan, but it should be considered so you can have a safe and enjoyable trip.

My husband tore the ligaments in his ankle on the Gibb River Road and I had to take on all the driving and setting up of our van. My story is not unique.

Tow courses are a good budget list item. Long straight access or large turning spots are few and far between. Courses include what to look out for, vehicle setup, towing, and reversing.



Have you got a suitable space in your garage or driveway to store your van between trips?

Image: Xan Holyoak

Before you commit to any purchase, you should think about where you'll store your caravan or camper between trips. These things are an investment and should be protected from the elements to prevent wear, tear, and damage.

Do you intend to store it in your garage or under a carport? Is the van too long or high? Do you have enough space and clearance in the shed? Or, do you need to purchase a cover and create a designated area offset from the driveway? Is there enough room to maneuver into the tight spot up the back corner?

Some caravan owners pay for a third party storage facility. If this is your only viable option, then the cost of such should be factored into your budget.

All of these points need to be considered before you shell out your hard-earned cash! Take your time before committing and you will appreciate a smart purchase much more than a rushed one.

WARNING: We found an amazing deal but it seemed too good to be true. Manufacturers with pride in their product will often help answer questions, even on a second-hand purchase. We were advised to steer clear of the 'amazing deal' as the van had previously been written off!

Are you buying a caravan?