

## TOP TWENTY CARAVANNING QUESTIONS

This leaflet is prepared as a Caravan Club service. The contents are believed correct at date of publication, but please raise any queries with The Club's Information Department.

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The following is a selection of the questions most frequently asked of The Club's Information department. The answers cover some of the more basic points; however, all the subjects dealt with are discussed in greater detail in about 50 separate information leaflets. A list appears in the technical section of the current Sites Directory and Handbook, and these are available to members on request.

### 1 Starting out

**Q** *I am considering buying a caravan, but have never towed before. What is your advice to beginners?*

**A** Towing is not a difficult skill to acquire and can be picked up quite quickly through practice on your own. However, like many new activities, you will probably learn more quickly with some tuition, so book yourself onto one of The Club's Practical Caravanning Courses, which are held at various locations countrywide. They are designed for participants who are contemplating towing for the first time, or who have very little practical experience. Non-members are welcome. For further information, please call 01342 336808.

### 2 Outfit/weight ratio

**Q** *What does The Club recommend as a safe outfit weight ratio for towing a caravan?*

**A** The principle must be to have the heaviest possible towcar for a given caravan, otherwise the chances of a swaying trailer becoming uncontrollable and snaking are

very real. Aim for a towed load 85% of the car's kerb weight (KW), or the vehicle manufacturer's towing limit, if lower. The nearer the caravan laden weight approaches the one-to-one ratio, the more careful the driver must be. Remember that the towed weight is the actual laden weight (ALW) that the car is asked to pull (empty weight of caravan plus what you add), not the theoretical Maximum Authorised Weight (MAW) or (from 1999 production models) Maximum Technically Permissible Laden Mass (MTPLM).

### **3 Noseweight**

**Q** *What is noseweight, and how important is it?*

**A** Car manufacturers quote a maximum permitted noseweight for each car model, which is the maximum caravan hitch weight permitted on the car towball. It is important that this is not exceeded; however, it is equally important for stability that the caravan noseweight is heavy enough, and it is recommended that the optimum for stability of the outfit when towing is generally found to be approximately 7% of the caravan's ALW (generally between 50 and 90kg). You can appreciate that those car manufacturers quoting a maximum noseweight of 50kg or less will restrict the choice of caravan quite considerably. Caravan manufacturers often quote a noseweight limit too - check this is compatible with the 7% recommendation.

### **4 Caravan tyres**

**Q** *How often should the tyres on my caravan be changed?*

**A** Preferably replace any tyre more than five years old, but never exceed seven. They will have significantly deteriorated by then, whatever the tread depth. Tyres which require higher pressures (say 50psi and above) may be more susceptible to impact, cutting or penetration damage and it is recommended that such tyres are inspected more frequently. As higher pressure tyres carry higher loads, they are working harder and hence their life expectancy may also be shorter (say 3-4 years).

**Q** *What advice do you give for tyre care during the winter months when the caravan is not in use?*

**A** If the caravan is not used for a length of time, it is recommended that the wheels and tyres are removed and stored at normal inflation pressure in a cool, dry place and protected from direct sunlight, sources of heat, ozone concentrations and fuel/oil spillages. They can be covered with a natural material (eg hessian) for protection, but not plastic.

### **5 Choice of towbar**

**Q** *Buying the right towbar seems to be a minefield. Can you advise, please?*

**A** To find out whether a towbar is suitable, there are several questions to ask. First, has the towbar design for your car been tested to the appropriate British or European Standard? Next, does the towbar mount only to the car manufacturer's recommended

mounting points? Then, has the towbar been tested on a rig representing the car's mounting points? For cars registered before 1 August 1998, a bracket tested to British Standard BS AU 114b is acceptable. From 1 August 1998 all new cars registered from that date must, by law, only be fitted with a towbar that has been tested to the EU 94/20 Directive. Before fitting any towbar that is not the manufacturer's own, first read carefully the small print of the warranty.

## **6. Stabilisers**

**Q** *Do I need a stabiliser?*

**A** Under most road conditions, a well-matched vehicle and trailer will not encounter stability problems, even though the trailer is free to swing on its connecting ball. This assumes that there is a good outfit weight ratio, that the trailer when attached and loaded rides level or slightly nose down but *never* nose up, that the car also rides level and that tyres on both vehicle and trailer are in good condition and, most important, at the correct laden pressures. Nevertheless, some caravan and car designs are inherently more stable than others and some form of extra assistance from an add-on stabiliser device may be found to give an easier or more comfortable tow, particularly when an overtaking vehicle's 'bow wave' upsets the outfit.

## **7 Automatic transmission**

**Q** *What are the advantages and disadvantages of towing with a vehicle with automatic transmission?*

**A** The advantages are greater reliability; less wear and tear on the driver, especially the left leg; less wear and tear on the car; easier mud/snow and hill restarts, and control of gears (no less than with a manual). Disadvantages include extra purchase cost; some performance lost in the automatic gearbox; usually top speed is about 5mph less than a manual; acceleration marginally slower than a manual driven expertly; may need an extra oil cooler for towing - check with vehicle manufacturer; possibly slightly higher fuel consumption, but note that the gap is closing between modern automatics and manuals.

## **8 Liquefied petroleum gas (LPG)**

**Q** *What is the difference between Butane and Propane?*

**A** Butane and Propane have slightly different properties, the most important to the caravanner being the boiling point at atmospheric pressure. In other words, the temperature at which it changes from being a liquid to being a gas. Butane will only readily change to a gas above 0°C, so is generally suitable for the spring to autumn caravanner. Propane, on the other hand, will become a gas down to -40°C and therefore can be used in winter, or all year round if desired. In UK Propane is generally sold in red cylinders, Butane in blue.

## **9 Fire prevention**

*Q What precautions should I take against the risk of fire?*

**A** If your caravan/motorcaravan does not have a smoke detector, consider installing one made to the appropriate British Standard (BS 5446 pt 1) or one that has American UL (Underwriters Laboratory) approval. A portable fire extinguisher, although not compulsory, should be carried. The Club has decided that Aqueous Film Forming Foam (AFFF) is the most effective for use on a caravan site and would recommend its use.

## **10 Lead acid batteries**

*Q What advantages does a leisure battery have over a car battery for use in a caravan?*

**A** The automotive type of battery is designed to supply a high current, sometimes 200 Amps or more, for a short time, frequently only a few seconds, in order to start the car engine. For the remaining time it is either at rest or being charged by the vehicle alternator. It is not designed to supply a few Amperes for a period of hours, which is the kind of duty which arises in a caravan. Unless means are provided for keeping the battery charged, eg if the caravan has a mains supply and an adequate charger which will be used for over 90% of the time that the caravan is in use, the purchase of an automotive battery will be false economy, despite the lower cost.

Leisure batteries are designed to supply currents of a few Amps for longer periods and to be discharged and recharged many times; they are generally to be preferred in a caravan. However, battery life is enhanced if it has little work to do so the use of a suitable charger is advisable if a mains hook-up is available.

## **11 Caravan refrigerators**

*Q How can I run my refrigerator on ferry journeys?*

**A** The short answer is, you cannot! For short crossings of an hour or two, the contents should remain adequately cool until you are able to re-connect, provided the refrigerator was pre-cooled sufficiently beforehand. For longer journeys this is not practicable, and it is best to purchase fresh produce on arrival at your holiday destination. However, when members were asked if they had any ideas for keeping the refrigerator cool on ferry crossing, quite a few tips were received and these are contained in the members' leaflet, 'refrigerators'.

## **12 Winter storage**

*Q Does The Club recommend the use of covers to protect the caravan from the weather during the winter?*

**A** Large polythene or tarpaulin sheets should not, in the opinion of most experts, be used to 'seal' the caravan against the elements. Condensation and mould growth may be encouraged and any flapping material or guy ropes could scratch acrylic windows. If you feel a cover is absolutely necessary because of where the caravan is parked, however, purchase one that is made of 'breathable' material.

## **13 Theftcheck**

*Q How do I know if the second-hand caravan I am purchasing from a private seller has been stolen?*

**A** The Club runs a computer list of known stolen caravans, and if you can let us have the caravan make, model, year and serial number, as well as the full name and address of the vendor, we can run the details through the list to see if one matches up. Not being on the list does not guarantee the caravan is not stolen, however, as the owner may not be aware of it at the time! Non-members and members are encouraged to use this free service, called 'Theftcheck', on telephone number 01342 336885.

## **14 Caravan security**

*Q Where is the safest place to store my caravan, and what security devices are available to protect it from theft?*

**A** Nowhere is safe from the determined thief; however, the majority of caravans are stolen from storage compounds, closely followed by the home address. Thefts occur all year round and cover all ages of caravan, although newer ones seem most vulnerable. To avoid becoming another insurance statistic, and to meet most insurers' conditions of acceptance, certain precautions should be taken. Many caravan security devices are available on the market, from wheelclamps to hitchlocks, from alarms to sophisticated tracking systems. Prices vary from £30 to over £600, and it is very difficult to decide which would be the most effective. Leaflets are available to members giving details of the many security devices and measures which are available for both caravans and motor caravans/cars.

## **15 Television abroad**

*Q Will my television function abroad?*

**A** A television purchased for UK use will not function abroad, unless you are off to the Gambia or a few other countries using the same PAL 1 system! If you require a television that will receive foreign transmissions whilst on holiday, you need a multi-standard set. France, Luxembourg and Monaco use a different system to the rest of Western Europe, so make sure your set offers SECAM L if you wish to pick up

French transmissions. The most widely used system in Western Europe and other countries, however, is PAL B/G.

## 16 Television aerials

*Q What is the best type of aerial for my caravan?*

**A** If there may be a problem with reception, then an aerial with good directivity should be chosen. Properly aligned, this will give the best performance that can be achieved. If the signal is strong and not subject to interference, then an omnidirectional aerial might provide satisfactory reception. The latter is ideal if you are constantly on the move, particularly in boats or if the children watch the TV in the back of the motorcaravan. It is also more suited to those who want to arrive on site and forget about aerial positioning. However, you cannot expect to achieve the same picture quality as with a directional aerial.

## 17 Vehicle wiring - direction indicator system

*Q Do I need a warning device in the car indicating that the direction indicator system is functioning correctly when towing a caravan?*

**A** Yes. Lamps must flash at a rate of 60-120 flashes per minute, whilst a warning device in the car must inform the driver, by means of a visible or audible signal, that the system is functioning correctly. **This is a legal requirement.** Some new vehicles have a different system, which does not show that the indicators are working correctly but only that they are not. The Club, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) and the Club's legal helpline all share the belief that either is acceptable; however, only a court can give a final judgement on the interpretation.

## 18 Appliance power consumption

*Q How do I know what appliances I can use on a mains hook-up?*

**A** A useful calculation is Amps equals Watts divided by Volts. Therefore, if you have a 1000 Watt kettle, and a 230 Volt supply, you must allow for 4.3 Amps to be drawn when the kettle is in use.

## 19 Chemical fluids

*Q Does it matter what type of chemical fluid I use in my portable toilet?*

**A** It is important that members are aware that all types of chemical fluids particularly coal tar/phenol or caustic compounds affect the sewage purification process. For this reason chemical closet emptying points are increasingly being diverted to separate collection systems. However, regardless of final disposal arrangements **ONLY** Thetford Blue Aqua-Chem (originally formaldehyde based) or an equivalent 'green' product should be used on Club sites. Club rules will be amended in due course to reflect the range of products commercially available.

## **20 Towing mirrors**

**Q** *Do I need to use towing mirrors?*

**A** A car towing a caravan, if first used on or after 1 June 1978 and before 26 January 2010 (ie the majority of cars in use now) must have:

- a) at least one exterior mirror fitted on the offside of the vehicle: and
- b) at least one interior mirror, unless a mirror so fitted would give the driver no view to the rear of the vehicle; and
- c) at least one exterior mirror fitted on the nearside of the vehicle unless an interior mirror gives the driver an adequate view to the rear.

These mirrors must comply with the requirements in EC Directives 71/127, 79/795, 86/562 or 88/321 or ECE Regulation 46.01. That is, they must comply with the old/existing requirements for mirrors, unless they already comply with EC Directives 2003/97 or 2005/27 which are not yet obligatory for cars.

Future situations:

A car towing a caravan, first used on or after 26 January 2010, comes under item 9 of the table in The Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) (Amendment) (No 4) Regulations 2005 and as such must have mirrors complying with Directives 2003/97 and 2005/27; that is, the mirrors must show the new e-mark as set out in this new legislation. Members wishing to confirm the compliance of a specific mirror with this legislation are advised to seek advice from the mirror manufacturer, distributor or retailer.

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