

Thinking of buying a motor caravan?



Your easy guide towards motor caravan ownership

- Choosing and buying a motor caravan
- What type of motor caravans are available
- What user payload, MTPLM and mass in running order are
- How to buy
- What else you need



Choosing and buying a motor caravan

If you're thinking of buying a motor caravan there'll be loads of questions you'd like answered. Well, we at The Caravan Club want to help you, so we've compiled here some of the basics such as what to look for ...and what to avoid.



Considering buying a motor caravan is quite a big step, with a commitment to invest a fair amount of money.

And, if you've no experience of motor caravans, things like "What type of motor caravan should I buy?" and "How much can I put in it?" may seem like almost unanswerable questions. This leaflet probably won't tell you absolutely everything you've ever wanted to know about motor caravans, but we are sure it will point you in the right direction.

You can also find more detailed help on The Caravan Club website www.caravanclub.co.uk.

So, let's get you started now on your first step to motor caravan purchase and an enjoyable future of trouble-free touring...

C O N T E N T S

What type should I buy?

- **Elevating roof or fixed, overcab or low profile** – we cut through the jargon to help you decide what's the best choice for you – see [pages 3-5](#).

Questions & Answers

- **How to narrow down your selection** – we've put together some questions and answers to help you make an informed choice, such as whether to choose petrol or diesel and how to work out how much load your vehicle can carry – see [pages 6-7](#).

How to buy a motor caravan

- **You'll need to decide what facilities you need and what you can do without** – plus we tell you where to buy and what to check when buying your leisure vehicle, it's on [pages 8-9](#).

How do I look after my vehicle?

- **Maintaining your motor caravan** – checks that must be made and who can do them – see [page 9](#).

What else do I need?

- **Items you should buy** – and some other things you'll find very handy indeed on your touring holidays. See [page 10](#).

Glossary

- **An explanation of caravanning terms** – what's the MTPLM and a VIN plate? Find out on [page 11](#).



What type of motor caravan should I buy?



There are various different types of motor caravan and you'll want to consider all the options carefully before you buy. There are three distinct types of motor caravan: **Conversion** which is either adapted from a small van or car. A **Coachbuilt** which is designed and built on a commercial vehicle chassis, and finally, a **Dismountable**, which as the name suggests, has a living section that can be removed from the vehicle. The choice can be bewildering and within the three categories are many variables.

Here are the main things to consider.

Conversion

Fixed roof



One of the many benefits of fixed roof motor caravans, is their low overall height, allowing most to enter multi-storey car parks and domestic garages easily. They're the cheapest type of conversion and a great option for first time buyers because you can add a fixed or elevating roof to them at a later date. However, there are a couple of things you may find irritating and are worth bearing in mind.

In some ways the fixed roof is the most limiting of motor caravans, because there's no standing room. Generally they are two berth at most (berth is the term used to describe a bed) so if you plan to take family and friends with you it isn't the best option. You could add extra space by attaching an awning to the side or rear of the vehicle, which might solve the problem.

A fixed roof is a comparatively basic type of motor caravan and as such, the facilities and insulation are usually minimal. However there are a few exceptions, such as conversions aimed at the away-from-home businessman, which can be incredibly luxurious. Unfortunately that also means expensive!

Elevating roof

An elevating roof motor caravan is a step up from the fixed roof, although the basic layout is the same. The most obvious benefit is the standing room, because once the vehicle is stationary the roof can be raised, as the name suggests.



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On the road, an elevating roof, like the fixed roof, can get under the height barriers that can pose problems for taller motor caravans, though it's worth being aware of your vehicle's height, just in case.

Some elevating roof models offer extra sleeping accommodation in the roof section, generally canvas bunks, which children will love but adults might find a little too snug.

The roof 'bellows' can be made in a variety of materials and it's worth investing in one made of insulated board or metal because plastic ones are prone to condensation.

High top



If you want a little more luxury and room (and your budget allows) the high top might be a good option for you. This has a permanently raised roof in place of the original base vehicle's. The standing room is generally around 2m (6'6") and some high tops have fitted shower rooms or a sectioned-off rear portion to provide a toilet/shower room.

The insulation in the roof section is usually better, although body insulation remains fairly basic. However, if you get a model with plastic double-glazed windows in the van body, it will be cosier.

Micro-motor caravans and car-derived van conversions

For many, one of the stumbling blocks when considering touring is a lack of space or budget for an additional vehicle. The micro-motor caravans and car-derived van conversions are a perfect way to solve this problem. These are smaller motor caravans and can fulfil the dual purpose of a vehicle for day-to-day motoring and a home-from-home during weekend retreats.



Space is limited but you can always maximize it with an awning. The smaller engines can be far more economical when it comes to fuel consumption, although unfortunately this can result in reduced performance in some.

There are various models available including fixed or elevating roofs as well as small coachbuilts and car-derived van conversions. They are very pleasant and car-like to drive and if you go for a diesel engine option you'll also have remarkable fuel economy.

Coachbuilts

Over-cab



Over-cabs or Lutons (as they are sometimes referred to) are generally larger vehicles and therefore have much more interior space because the body extends over the driver area. You'll find they're kitted out with the sort of facilities you would expect from a trailer caravan, such as a permanent washroom/toilet compartment. They will sleep anything from two to six and generally provide a double berth in the over-cab area.

These are very sturdy vehicles with the complete body section built onto the chassis and cab. They also offer a higher level of insulation compared to van conversions.

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Low Profile

The low profile coachbuilt is very similar to the over-cab, but tends to have storage cupboards above the cab rather than a double berth. The handling and fuel consumption is slightly better in these motor caravans and they're increasingly popular with couples.



You might want to go for a continental low-profile coachbuilt, which can have an elevating roof section over the main body, making it easier to get under height barriers.

A-Class



As the name suggests this is a top-of-the-range type of motor caravan and they are practically custom-built from the chassis up. If you are a serious long distance motor caravanner these are built with you in mind and you can have any amount of equipment included. They are effectively American-style homes on wheels and the prices reflect this; they can cost anything upwards of £40,000 for a new model!

The main benefits to you are the space and comfort they provide. Space utilisation is brilliant, the wider cab

normally accommodates a drop-down roof bed which you can leave made up, ready for use, and you can usually swivel the cab seats to form part of the lounge area when on site.



Pilote City Van

A recent trend you might want to be aware of is the compact A-Class, which has an identical footprint to a large van conversion, but

has much more internal space and flexibility.

Dismountable



These motor caravans offer you considerable flexibility. The coachbuilt body fits on to the back of a pick-up truck and can then be detached once on site and left there, in much the same way as you would a trailer caravan. This in turn means you have the pick-up to use for the day-to-day motoring and you don't have to 'de-camp'. It is worth noting however that mounting and dismounting the living section is not a quick job and one you might not be too enthusiastic about if you've just come to the end of a long journey.

Space can also be a bit of a problem. The family can travel in the caravan section though, so the advantages of this system often outweigh the lack of living space, for those who want only one family vehicle. You'll find various pick-up trucks are available with 'crew cabs' that offer additional passenger seating, but this may be at the expense of the pick-up bed – and therefore caravan body-length.

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Questions and answers

So which one should you choose? Well, we've put together a few of the most important questions and answers in order to help you choose the right type of motor caravan.

Q. I'm going to use my motor caravan as a day-to-day driving vehicle too, which types of motor caravan should I look at?

A. If you'll be using it to do the shopping and take the kids to school you'll want a motor caravan that can easily fit under the height barriers. You'll also be looking for one that has good fuel economy, can manoeuvre in tight spots and doesn't take up too much parking space. Motor caravans that can fulfil your wish-list are the fixed or elevating roof models, dismantables, the micro-motor caravan and car-derived van conversions.



Consider on-site storage.

Q. Where should I store my motor caravan?

A. The height of your motor caravan will be a deciding factor if you are considering storing it in a garage. Coachbuilt conversions are upwards of 2.7m (9'0") in height, fixed roofs are around 2m (6'6") and micros are just under 2m (6'3"). If you have the space you could store your motor caravan on your driveway, however, it is worth checking your local bylaws, as there may be restrictions.

These are not the only options, many sites offer year-round or seasonal storage. If you plan to tour abroad a lot, you might want to find storage near a port, or maybe you have a favourite site you visit again and again and you can store it there. The Caravan Club website will give you all the details about on-site storage and storage abroad.

Q. Does my choice of motor caravan depend upon the type of sites I go to?

A. It's worth noting that on-site facilities can vary greatly. Caravan parks often have fantastic toilet and shower facilities and sometimes even crèches, night-clubs and restaurants. With so much on offer a fairly basic motor caravan will suffice. You'll find that most of The Caravan Club sites are very well equipped too, so a lack of luxurious fittings and space in your motor caravan will prove no problem at all.

If you plan to visit the more secluded and rural sites, particularly Certificated Locations (CLs), your motor caravan facilities may become more important. Not every site has a conveniently placed manhole suitable for discharging waste tanks, so you may need to transfer waste using a conventional waste receptacle or bucket (preferably lidded). Many CLs do not have site hook-ups so, if you are very dependent on mains electricity, you'll need a generator, which can be a bit noisy. There might not be any on-site shower facilities so the coachbuilt or A-class conversions should be considered because you'll have everything in the motor caravan.



Q. Can I tour in my motor caravan all year?

A. Of course you can, but you might want to buy a motor caravan with excellent insulation!

The simple conversions can be a bit thin on the insulation front, so body construction and the way it's heated becomes very important. European standards in thermal insulation are classified in three grades with 3 being the highest. To give you an idea how well insulated a grade 3 motor caravan is, the water system will still operate when

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the outside temperature is -15°C! The best insulation and heating is found in the larger coachbuilt or A-class motor caravans.

Q. I plan to drive off-road. Should I consider a four-wheel drive vehicle?

A. With all the wheels being driven you'll have extra grip and security on the road, and it might help you get out of trouble in a muddy field, but it is an expensive option and will increase fuel consumption.

Q. What is user payload and MTPLM and mass in running order?

A. The technical terms used in caravanning can be a bit bewildering when you're starting out, but understanding them in relation to your own motor caravan will result in a smooth and stable drive. More detailed information can be found on The Caravan Club website but here are the things you really need to know:

Maximum Technical Permissible Laden Mass or MTPLM

This is the motor caravan's maximum total weight allowable, when full of people, equipment and pets, while still being safe and stable. Most motor caravans will have a weight plate on them and this is usually the first figure in the list. This can also be called the 'gross vehicle weight'.

Mass in Running Order (MiRO or MRO)

This is the weight of the motor caravan (in its standard version before options) usually with an allowance for the driver (75k), fuel tank (90% full), fresh water tank (90% full), 2 gas bottles, electric hook-up cable and toolkit. So it's basically the weight of your motor caravan before you add your family, pets, surfboard, food and crockery etc. It is useful to know that this can also be called the 'kerb weight'.

User Payload

User payload is the crucial figure when packing and kitting-out your motor caravan. You can work out the maximum possible by subtracting the MRO from the MTPLM. The user payload is the maximum weight you can add to your motor caravan. It's a good rule of thumb to allow 100kg for clothes and food for two people and remember that if you've had 'extras' fitted, like oven, refrigerator, TV or microwave etc, you'll need to take those into account too. For every additional person add a minimum of 25kg. You'll find a more detailed breakdown of weights at The Caravan Club's website. www.caravanclub.co.uk

Q. So which engine should I go for, petrol, diesel or turbo diesel?

A. A diesel engine is probably going to be the best option if you're planning to tour quite a bit. They have a longer life and tend to hold their value better. If you think you might want to upgrade to a larger or more luxurious motor caravan in the future they can be easier to re-sell. The down side is that diesel and turbo diesel engines initially cost more than petrol. If however, you plan to cover considerable mileage you could soon recover the initial extra expenditure. You'll generally only have the option of a petrol engine in small car-derived new motor caravans. Coachbuilt vehicles can sometimes be converted to operate using LPG (liquefied petroleum gas), which is half the price of petrol, because the extra tank can usually be located under the floor.

Q. Will I be affected by the London Low-Emission Zone charge (LEZ)?

A. At the time of writing this leaflet there was talk of the suspension of the October 2010 LEZ charge, but you'll almost certainly be exempt from this anyway. Provided your motor caravan was first registered, as new, on or after 1st October 2006, it will meet the Euro IV emission standards. If you are in any doubt however, it is worth checking www.tfl.gov.uk/lezlondon for the latest news on this charge.



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How to buy

Do you need a 'top spec' new motor caravan?

If you're buying new, ask yourself whether you need every single item in the top of the range specification. Will the cook want an oven when away on holiday? You can make great meals with a simple hob and grill or microwave oven (ask for The Caravan Club's information leaflet on the subject). You may prefer to eat out and indulge in take-aways when holidaying. You don't have to cook at all! Do you really need a shower, hot water, extra batteries etc., all items that require lifting, filling and charging? You might, but it's all extra weight and cost, and may not be needed if you'll be using full-facility sites with electric hook-ups.



Where to buy

Buy from a local dealer if you can. Think how many miles you'll clock up if you have to return a motor caravan for attention then go back to collect it if it's miles away. More trips may be necessary if it's not ready, or the work not done to your satisfaction. Importers of motor caravans from the Continent, unless a well-established UK official importer, tend to come and go. You could be left with a foreign make and no after-sales support. Incidentally, foreign motor caravans, like cars, can be more expensive to insure. It's best to make sure such a motor caravan has been adapted to UK Construction and Use Regulations, and also to UK electrical, LPG and road lighting requirements.

What to check if you're buying used?

Are you going to go to a dealer or a private seller? In law you have more redress with a dealer, but in both cases 'buyer beware' applies. Try and take a motor caravanning friend with you if you've not been touring before.

The Caravan Club website has loads of useful information about buying second hand, but here are a few pointers to get you started:

- Don't buy a used motor caravan without having it checked with a moisture meter, which will warn of any problems.
- Check the registration documents for continuity particularly if you are looking at a conversion motor caravan, the DVLA should be informed about conversions.
- There should be a detailed history of all the services and MoTs etc. so if there isn't think twice before buying.
- Look under the sink and by any pump to ensure no joints have leaked onto shelving.
- Inspect the mattresses and cushions, particularly underneath, for damp and staining.
- Ensure the bed locker lids support weight, and that the tables stand firm when in position.
- Check the operation of all gas equipment, even if you have to take an LPG cylinder with you.
- If mains electricity is installed, ask to see the latest inspection certificate by a qualified electrical engineer.
- It should be inspected at regular intervals – annually if the motor caravan covers high mileages.
- The tyre treads may look fine, but do the tyres look old? Five years is the maximum safe life, whatever the mileage.
- The tyres should be the right size for the wheel rims and matching, suitable for the maximum weight and speed of the motor caravan.
- Ask to take the motor caravan for a trial run and note its behaviour on the road.



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Is the price negotiable?

If you can afford a new motor caravan, and especially if you're not trading one in, the price may be negotiable. This may be more so in times of recession when the dealer wants money in his till, rather than tied up in motor caravans on display.

For secondhand motor caravans you might decide to offer less than the vendor suggests. However, it can be difficult to establish the going rate for a particular motor caravan, as so many variables are involved, such as condition, extras fitted etc. As you are unlikely to be able to consult the trade's used price guide, the best advice is to look at classified ads in motor caravan magazines for typical prices for the model you have in mind.



Looking after your motor caravan

It's hard to estimate how long your motor caravan will last, because of the pounding it receives from travelling. A motor caravan is inevitably shorter lived than other more permanent dwellings but one can expect it to last at least 10 years, if it's well cared for and regularly checked.

Your motor caravan must have an annual habitation service – The National Caravan Council (NCC) provide detailed information about the checklist involved. It is worth shopping around too, just as you would when you get your MoT, because prices can vary quite a lot.

The checks do not however cover most parts of the base vehicle, and you should service your motor caravan in accordance with the chassis manufacturer's instructions.

Reference should also be made to:

1. Any owner's manual or equivalent supplied with the vehicle by the motor caravan manufacturer.
2. Appliance manufacturers' leaflets.
3. Driver's handbook or equivalent supplied by the chassis manufacturer.

It's worth keeping an eye on your motor caravan yourself. Check the body regularly to ensure that it remains waterproof. If damp gets into the structure you will soon have a useless wreck on your hands that's not economic to repair.



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What else should I take touring?

Not much else is essential, really. You'll probably want an Aquaroll, so that you can collect water supplies easily when you're on site. This is simply a plastic barrel with a central axle and a handle to pull it along.



An Aquaroll makes carrying water a doddle.

You'll need a gas cylinder for cooking. If you plan to tour all year round, choose propane, as it works more efficiently at low temperatures than butane gas.

For extra accommodation it's good to buy an awning. Adding an awning can make all the difference to touring. It gives you extra space without having to buy a larger motor caravan. Think of it as a 'conservatory' for your motor caravan. Constructed like a tent, it is attached to the motor caravan's awning channel to give you extra space for the children to sleep in, more dining room, or somewhere to put boots and wet weather clothing. You may need a groundsheet, too. Buy one that allows the grass to breathe – see separate Caravan Club information leaflet 'All About Awnings'.

Don't forget a folding table and chairs to use outside.

You will also need a motor caravan 'leisure' battery, which is similar in size and weight to the one in your car.



Plastic levelling ramps

Home Comforts

You'll probably want to stock the kitchen with non-perishable foods such as soup, tinned vegetables, tea bags and so on. Of course, you'll no doubt want to buy fresh local produce when you're on your touring holidays. If you're planning on using your motor caravan at every opportunity and want to make 'getting away' as easy as possible, consider stocking up on a second set of cleaning materials, toiletries and even clothes, so you can make last-minute breaks a reality without undue hassle. For bedding, you can take along your comfy duvet and pillows from home, or alternatively kit out the motor caravan with sleeping bags, a second duvet set or one of the increasingly popular roll-out combination duvet sleeping bags.



That's about it. Check your driving licence covers you for the size and weight of your chosen motor caravan, and you're ready to go touring!



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Glossary

Ex Works Weight (Unladen Weight)

The weight of the motor caravan as new with standard fixtures and fittings as stated by the motor caravan manufacturer.

(NB: Because of the differences in the weight of materials supplied for construction of motor caravans, and moisture retention, variations of $\pm 5\%$ of the manufacturer's figure can be expected, usually '+').

Actual Laden Weight

The total weight of the motor caravan and its contents.

Maximum Authorised Weight (Maximum Gross Weight)

The maximum weight for which the motor caravan is designed for normal use when being towed on a road laden and this must never be exceeded.

Maximum Technically Permissible Laden Mass

As stated by the vehicle manufacturer. This mass takes into account specific operating conditions including factors such as the strength of materials, loading capacity of the tyres etc.

Mass in Running Order

Mass of the motor caravan equipped to the manufacturer's standard specification.

User Payload

The difference between the Maximum Technically Permissible Laden Mass and the Mass in Running Order. Payload includes essential habitation equipment, personal effects and optional equipment.

Essential Habitation Equipment

Those items and fluids required for the safe and proper functioning of the equipment for habitation as defined by the manufacturer of the motor caravan.

Personal Effects

Those items which a user can choose to carry in a motor caravan and which are not included as essential habitation equipment or optional equipment.

Optional Equipment

Items made available by the manufacturer over and above the standard specification for the motor caravan.

Kerb Weight

There are two definitions for vehicle kerbweight. These are:

1. As defined in the Vehicle (Construction and Use Regulations 1986:

The weight of the vehicle as it leaves the manufacturer with a full tank of fuel, adequate fluids for normal operation (lubricants, oils, water etc) and its standard set of tools and equipment. It does not include the weight of the driver, occupants or load.

2. As defined by EU Directive 95/48/EC (issued in September 1995):

The weight of the vehicle as it leaves the manufacturer with its fuel tank 90% full, all the necessary fluids for normal operation (lubricants, oils, water etc), a nominal driver weight of 68kg and 7kg of luggage.

Vehicle manufacturers will tend to use the second definition in official documentation, since this is the one required by the regulations they have to meet to sell the vehicle Europe-wide. In publicity material and handbook, however, either definition may be found, although the first one is expected to gradually disappear.

Gross Vehicle Weight

The weight of the vehicle laden to its maximum, as defined by the vehicle manufacturer.

VIN plate

Vehicle Identification Number Plate.

Outfit Weight Ratio

The Actual Laden Weight expressed as a percentage of the Kerb Weight, ie: $\frac{ALW}{KW} \times 100$

Conversion

Kilograms divided by 50.8 = cwt

Kilograms multiplied by 2.2046 = lbs