

Roughly 30 years ago, camper trailers were somewhat rare, while tents and the occasional caravan were all the rage. Now, things have changed considerably, and there are more camper trailers in Australia than you can poke a stick at. There are good reasons for this – they’ve become affordable, and more and more people are noticing how much fun they can be!

If you’ve decided to upgrade from the trusty tent or swag, this article will guide you through many of the considerations when buying your first camper trailer. There’s a reason so many camper trailers pop up on the market after only one or two uses! Sometimes circumstances change, but often the wrong camper trailer is purchased for the job... and that can be an expensive and painful mistake to learn.

So, what should you think about upon buying your first camper trailer?



A hard floor camper trailer. Image: Aaron Schubert

What Can You Tow?

If you have no intention of changing your tow vehicle, this is the best place to start. Find out what your maximum towing capacity is, as well as the maximum tow ball weight, GVM, and GCM. If you aren’t sure about all this, take a few minutes to read this [4WD towing guide](#).

There are a lot of people out there towing trailers that are not legal, and this puts the drivers (and others on the road) at considerable risk. Some camper trailers are light (around 500kg), and some are extremely heavy (around 3 tonnes!).

The tow ball weight is one to pay particular attention to, as heavy tow ball weights can make life difficult when attempting to remain underweight for most 4WDs on the market.

Where Do You Want to Take It?

The next step is to really think about where you’d like to travel with your camper trailer. There’s a reason so many types and duty levels exist on the market today. Some owners just want something comfortable to tow up bitumen road on the way to their regular caravan park a few times a year, and others want to hammer their trailer on the [roughest 4WD tracks](#) in Australia and pull up in comfort for months on end!

Where you want to take your camper trailer ultimately determines the strength and quality that you’ll need and, like anything, how much it’s going to cost!



Travelling the NT with a camper trailer. Image: Aaron Schubert

Budget

There are more camper trailers on the market than ever before; well over 100 different brands. Some are new, some have been around for a long time, and every couple of months a few close down. The prices of camper trailers vary anywhere from around \$5000 to \$200,000 and the industry is extremely competitive.


Often the pricing reflects what you get, but not always. The takeaway from this point is to set yourself a budget and don’t look at anything outside of this – it’s just too confusing. You can

get yourself a good quality, second-hand, Australian-made camper trailer for \$10,000–\$20,000 that ticks the boxes for a lot of people. What you spend is entirely up to you – but don't get ripped off!

Types of Camper Trailers

Once you start poking around camper trailers, you'll see there are a lot of different designs. Soft floor, hard floor, rear fold, forward fold, hybrid, and pop-top are about the most common arrangements. That said, there are a heap of very intuitive designs out there today that grey the lines between their specific camper trailer types. They all have their own pros and cons, and you must get what works for you.

 You'll notice there are many different designs of camper trailers. Image: Michael Page-Sharp

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Attend a 4WD/Camping Show

The easiest place to suss out a heap of camper trailers in a short period of time is the local Caravan/Camping/4WD shows. It makes things so much easier.

Setup Time

A soft-floor camper trailer is great, but the setup and pack away can be time-consuming, difficult, and can ultimately affect where and how long you can stay. Single-night stays are not always worth the effort. You can find camper trailers that set up in under a minute with zero effort – or, on the flip side, soft floor campers with extra rooms that will literally take two people an hour to set up!

Setup time might not matter if you only use your trailer a few times a year. If you are setting it up and packing it away every single day for weeks on end though, it will get old – really fast!

 4WD expert Aaron's soft floor camper trailer near Broome. Image: Aaron Schubert

Off-Grid Capacity

We live in the 'lucky' country. Not only do we have some fantastic caravan parks, but world-class national parks and some of the best free or low-cost camping in the world. Where you camp is entirely up to you, but one of the major factors to consider when buying a camper trailer is how long you can survive off the grid for.

This refers to your ability to live out of your camper trailer without plugging into water, power, and sewage, like many do in caravan parks. For camper trailers, your water tank size, electrical system (solar and batteries), fridge size, showering facilities, and toilets usually cover off-grid capacity.

If you have a large enough electrical system to run your appliances and charge them via solar or a generator each day, your limitation is usually water supply. Some camper trailers are only really set up for a night or two away from power and water, and others can last weeks. It can be expensive to modify this, so spend some time looking into it!



Camping at a caravan park. Image: Michael Page-Sharp



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How Often Will You Use the Camper Trailer?

If you've not done much camping before, and you aren't completely obsessed with it, think about how much use the camper trailer will get. You can hire them out from lots of different places these days, and sometimes it's a cheaper and easier alternative than buying your own and looking after it.

This is also a good consideration in terms of how much you might spend, and what level of comfort you need. If it's just for the annual holiday, you might be okay doing without some creature comforts. If you want to live in it for a year though, that's a different kettle of fish!

Are You Prepared to Pay to Keep It?

Camper trailers need space to live and require rego, maintenance, and insurance. This can vary a lot, depending on what state you are in and the value/age of your trailer, but they aren't free to own. While not nearly as expensive as a boat (in general), they can cost a chunk of money when replacing worn components and keeping them insured.



Think about how often you're going to use your camper trailer. Image: Aaron Schubert

Storage and Payload

A key reason for buying a camper trailer is for the extra storage. For families with a new baby in tow, the amount of extra gear you need to take along for a comfortable camping trip is ridiculous!

Some camper trailers have very limited storage options for your gear and a fridge. Think about where you will put your clothes, fridge, solar panels, toiletries, kitchen gear, food, kids' gear, and whatever else.

Next, have a good look at the payload. This refers to the amount of weight you can legally add onto/into the trailer, and is the difference between the ATM and the tare. Some camper trailers have a tiny payload, with only 300kg to play with. After you fill your LPG bottles and water tanks, you are already close to the limit – and that's before any extras!

What's the Build Quality Like?

Like anything, take the time to look at the build quality. Chassis construction, suspension, canvas thickness, door and hatch seals, wiring and plumbing, and overall finish are all aspects you want to look carefully into. There are a lot of imported trailers on the market now, which are either entirely or partially made overseas, then shipped in and sold off to the local market.

Some of these are good quality, some are terrible. The build quality needs to reflect how much you are going to use it and where you intend to take it. Buy the cheapest international import camper trailer and abuse it on the worst tracks in Australia, and it will fall apart! If you're not into rock-hopping, chassis-twisting activities, maybe settle for a trailer with sound construction that can be easily improved - like raising its height, strengthening the springs, installing stone guards, leading power cables inside the frame, or replacing the ball coupling with a TREG hitch.

Whether you buy an all-in-one camper trailer or the tent and trailer separately, keep in mind you can do a lot of the relevant alternations yourself. This will save a lot of money, rather than buying a more expensive rig.



A camper trailer provides you with plenty of space. Image: Aaron Schubert



Lucky for stone guards! Image: Michael Page-Sharp

Space

A floor area of roughly 2×2.6m isn't huge, but a decent size for two people, with a small table, and two chairs. A 2.5×3.1m awning space is adequate and usable too. Many camper trailers allow you to add on rooms too. If your family is growing, check whether the camper you have your eye on will accommodate this.

Kitchen

A lot of camper trailers feature kitchens as their major selling point, and some have brilliant configurations. That said, you might want to opt for a trailer without the proverbial kitchen sink! Some people have a permanent kitchen set up in the back of their vehicle instead, so they can off at short notice with either a tent or the camper trailer.



If your family is growing, check whether the camper you have your eye on will accommodate this. Image: Michael Page-Sharp



Take into consideration how functional your camper trailer will be. Image: Aaron Schubert



Do Your Own Research - And Lots Of It!

Jump on Google and look around for reviews on the model you're chasing. There are often a lot of Facebook camper trailer groups too, which are a gold mine for common problems and their solutions, modifications, or upgrades. Don't rely on the salespeople - they often leave out half of the truth to make a sale!

Nothing is Perfect

If it makes you feel any better, there is no perfect camper trailer! Everything you look at will result in one or more forms of compromise. It might be too heavy, too big, too expensive, too slow to set up, lacking some functionality... whatever it may be, our advice is simple: make a list of the things you must have, can do without, and would simply like to have, then find whatever ticks the most boxes.

Not every camper trailer is going to be liked by every prospective buyer, and that's what makes them unique.

There's Nothing Wrong with Second-Hand!

There are a huge number of second-hand camper trailers on the market, ranging from single-use through to years of enjoyment. There is absolutely nothing wrong with a second-hand buy, providing you know what you are getting.

Hire Before Buying

If you are looking at new trailers, often you can hire the unit prior to putting cash down. This will be deducted from the purchase price. It's a clever idea, as you'll soon know whether or not it suits you.



An Ultimate Off-Road Campers camper trailer. Image: Aaron Schubert

Enjoy It!

When you eventually settle on a camper trailer, enjoy it! Take your time to do things slowly; it's an adjustment, and it's easy to forget everything that needs to be done. Enjoy the extra luxury that you have behind your tow vehicle, and create amazing memories!

See you out there!

Are you thinking of upgrading your current shelter to a camper trailer?