

Gearing Up for Life on the RV Road

More than 30 million Americans are RVing these days. But as romantic as it may appear, would-be buyers or renters of recreational vehicles need to do more than test drive a “home on wheels” before joining the avid community of those who live life on the road.

Would-be RVers should examine all aspects of RV living, including how to choose the right RV, how to negotiate with dealers, how to buy the right insurance, and how to drive an RV before chasing such an idyllic life.

Of course, would-be RVers should first examine whether to RV or not. An RV is defined as a vehicle that combines transportation and temporary living quarters for travel, recreation and camping. According to “The Complete Idiot’s Guide to RVing,” the typical RVer enjoys: the ability to travel where and when they want; the chance to spend time with loved ones; a way to travel relatively inexpensively; the ability to avoid the hassles of commercial travel; and the opportunity for those who have special needs to travel in comfort.

RVers, contrary to popular opinion, are not just retirees. They come from all walks of life, according to a University of Michigan study commissioned by the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association (RVIA). The typical RVer is 49 years old, married, with an annual household income of \$68,000. RV owners are likely to own their homes and spend their disposable income on traveling – an average of 4,500 miles and 26 days annually, according to RVIA. Would-be buyers and renters should note that many dealers, in light of rising fuel costs, are now offering discounts, including gas cards and loyalty programs.

Getting a handle on the various types of RVs for sale is another necessary step. RVs come in all shapes and sizes, the two major types being motor homes (motorized) and towable (towed behind the family car, van or pickup). According to RVIA, Type A motor homes are generally the largest; Type B motor homes or van campers are the smallest and Type C motor homes generally fall in between. Types of towable RVs are folding camping trailers, truck campers, conventional travel trailers and fifth-wheel travel trailers.

No matter which type you choose, your RV should have a place to sleep, a place to cook, and a place to live. After that, choosing an RV that’s right for you is a function of budget and preference. According to RVIA, prices for new RVs are typically \$4,000-\$13,000 for folding camping trailers; \$4,000-\$26,000 for truck campers; \$8,000-\$65,000 for conventional travel trailers; \$48,000-\$140,000 for Type C motor homes and \$58,000-\$400,000 for Type A motor homes.

Doing one’s homework before purchasing an RV is essential. RVIA and others suggests the following: Attend an RV show or visit an RV dealer to comparison shop; examine different models, vehicle types and floor plans; learn about RV financing and insurance options; and check out other resources and Web sites including those of www.rv.net, www.rv.org, Recreation Vehicle Dealer Association, Escapees, Family Motor Coach Association, and Trailer Life magazine. Renting an RV can be an ideal way to “try before you buy.”

Would-be RVers need also to examine driving or towing abilities, how many passengers will be in the RV, and how they plan to use the RV – for recreational use or as a place to live. At a minimum, would-be RVers should examine how livable the RV is. That means testing the beds, showers, and living spaces. What's more, those buying a used RV should inspect inside and out for signs of previous repairs, rusts and leaks. And would-be RVers should take the vehicle for a rigorous road test, listening for signs of engine trouble. If you plan on buying a towable RV, check its weight. Would-be RVers don't want to find out after the fact that they have to buy a new car or truck to tow their new RV.

Other homework is required. Lemon laws, which guarantee consumers replacement motor vehicles or refunds after a certain number of problems or days in the shop, vary by state and often don't apply to RVs, The Wall Street Journal recently reported. Thus, RV owners, stuck awaiting repairs, often have little legal recourse. RVs tend to have more problems than other vehicles because they are made in much smaller quantities than cars and without the same sophisticated manufacturing methods.

Buying an RV requires special skills and tactics, according to "The Complete Idiot's Guide to RVing" and other resources. Private sellers offer lower prices but no warranties or returns. If you buy from a dealer, be sure to "audition" them with respect to price, knowledge of staff, service facilities and reputation. If you learn the invoice price, you will likely reap the best deal. Also, negotiate slowly and don't sway from the price you want to pay. If you want peace of mind, buy an extended warranty. If not, choose the warranty that covers the full vehicle for the longest period of time.

Other tips to consider:

- Check whether the dealer and manufacturer you plan to work with have any complaints against them with the Better Business Bureau or regulators.
- Make sure your dealer has service department with RV-certified mechanics.
- If you are buying a used RV, get as much history as you can, especially repair records.
- Make sure the RV has a RVIA seal.

And no matter your final decision in the process, get out there and enjoy the open road!