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Guide to... **TOWING**

Hitching up and heading out on the road is one of the many pleasures of caravanning – just follow our expert guide to towing to discover everything you need to know for confident, stress-free touring

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www.practicalcaravan.com/know-how/ to download yours!

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TOWING MIRRORS

Specialist towing mirrors are an absolute essential for safe, stress-free towing – here are some of the many models on the market



A



C



B



D

NO MATTER WHAT type of tow vehicle you drive, towing mirrors are an essential. This is because the law states that you must be able to see along the sides of the caravan and 4m either side, at a distance of 20m behind the driver.

In simple terms, from the driving seat, you must be able to see both rear corners of the caravan. In even more simple terms, if your caravan is wider than your tow car, you must use towing mirrors.

That is a legal requirement, and you could face a £1000 fine (per mirror) and three penalty points (per mirror) on your licence for failing to comply.

However, this is a question not just of legality, but also road safety. If you are unable to see the car following you (possibly a bit too closely) which pulls out to overtake, and you pull out at the same time, there could be serious consequences. Using towing mirrors, you should already be aware that it's there.

Words: Nigel Hutson/Sarah Wakely

Here are four towing mirrors that you might like to consider when you're ready to purchase your next set.

A Milenco Grand Aero Platinum

They're not the cheapest ones around, but Milenco's mirrors have a good reputation. They're designed to fit the tapered bezels that you often see on modern cars, and can help to improve your fuel economy by reducing drag on the road.

Price £119.95 (Twinpack)

➤ www.towsure.com

B Towsure Rock Steady Towing Mirrors

This cheaper alternative from Towsure is a universal fit and comes with its own carry bag, to help keep the mirrors safe from damage when you have completed your journey. They fit either your vehicle's nearside or offside mirrors.

Price £25 (pair)

➤ www.towsure.com

C Reich electric towing mirrors

Fed up with having to keep getting in and out of your tow car to adjust your towing mirrors? That's where the Reich electric set comes in. They're operated via remote control, so you can quickly and easily adjust them to your requirements, from the comfort of the driving seat.

Price £148.24 (one mirror)

➤ leisurehopdirect.com

D Maypole Towing Mirrors

Maypole Towing Mirrors from camping specialist Millets won't break the bank. Like the Towsure version, these are a universal fit and – like all of the sets here – they meet industry standards showing that they are safe to use.

Price £25 (pair)

➤ www.millets.co.uk



CHOOSING A TOW CAR

You've purchased your perfect caravan. Now you just need to find the ideal car to tow it! David Motton has expert advice

FINDING THE RIGHT tow car won't necessarily make your caravan holiday, but the wrong one could quite easily break it.

A vehicle that's stable, reliable and practical means every trip should start and finish without stress. But choose a car that's sluggish, unstable or unreliable, and every towing journey will be something to grin and bear with.

With that in mind, here are our expert tips to help you buy a tow car to be proud of.

1 Start with the caravan

Whatever the age of car you plan to buy, the first question to ask yourself is: "Will it safely and legally tow my caravan?" To find

the answer to that question, you need to begin by knowing the weight of your tourer.

Don't match by the Mass in Running Order (MiRO); instead, use the Maximum Technically Permissible Laden Mass (MTPLM). This is the heaviest the caravan is allowed to be when fully loaded.

Let's say your caravan has an MTPLM of 1350kg. To abide by the 85% guideline, which both of the major caravanning clubs recommend for safe and stable towing, means choosing a car with a kerbweight of 1588kg (1350 divided by 85, multiplied by 100). So you'll be looking for a vehicle with a kerbweight of 1588kg or more.

To stay the right side of the law, it will also need to have a legal towing limit of at least 1350kg (see p68 for details).

2 FWD, RWD or 4WD?

The majority of modern vehicles are front-wheel drive. Some cars, usually executive saloons and estates or high-performance models, are rear-wheel drive. SUVs are often, but not always, 4x4s. Some estates and MPVs have 4x4 versions, such as the Volkswagen Passat Alltrack.

Setting aside the question of value for a moment, 4WD vehicles generally make the best tow cars, especially if you plan to tour all year or often stay on farm campsites. They also weigh more than 2WD models, which helps with matching ratios.

However, a 4WD model isn't necessarily going to be the right choice for everyone.

'A vehicle that's stable, reliable and practical means every trip should start and finish without stress'



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A 2WD version will provide better fuel economy than 4WD, and will generally cost less on the used market.

3 Manual or auto?

There's no hard-and-fast rule as to whether manual or auto is better to tow with. This comes down to personal preference. That said, always carefully compare the towing limits of manual and automatic versions of the same model. You can't assume they will be the same.

4 The right fuel type

Values of diesel cars have weakened over the past few years, although they started from a position of strength, typically holding on to more of their original price than petrol counterparts.

That has now flipped around, and petrol values are usually a few percentage points stronger than diesel, but the price of used

diesels hasn't collapsed. What's more, this softening of diesel prices can play into the canny tow car buyer's hands.

You pay less than you would have done a few years back for a similar car, and still get the benefit of better fuel economy.

So for our money, with more pulling power and greater fuel economy, diesel is a better bet for regular towing.

You can also tow with a small handful of pure electric cars, and some self-charging and plug-in hybrid models.

5 Satisfaction and reliability surveys

Clearly, new car buyers don't want their vehicle to break down. But reliability has to be an even bigger factor when choosing a used car, especially one that will face the additional wear and strain of towing.

Look at reliability and owner satisfaction surveys to narrow down your shortlist of possible cars. Reliabilityindex.com is also

a good source of information, based on the claims made by owners of the thousands of cars with Warranty Direct cover.

6 Towball, or not?

One of the oldest clichés in used vehicle buying guides is to walk away if the car has a towball. While this is clearly nonsense, it really does pay to check what a used car has been towing.

If you are buying from a private seller, ask about what they tow and make sure that it's not more than the car could reasonably handle.

If the vehicle already has a towball fitted, be very sure that it has been maintained properly, especially in terms of the clutch and the gearbox.

If the car doesn't have towing gear, check the cost of having this fitted before you buy.

In addition, find out from the manufacturer whether vehicles with factory-fit towing gear have additional cooling, because this can be very expensive to retrofit.





TOWING WEIGHTS

Caravanners often ask about the key question of towing weights. Here, David Motton answers your most common queries

What do I need to know to safely match a car and caravan?

In terms of your tow car, you should check its kerbweight, the maximum download on the towball (which is sometimes also referred to as the maximum noseweight), and the car's legal towing limit.

Moving onto the caravan, you need its Mass in Running Order (MiRO) and Maximum Technically Permissible Laden Mass (MTPLM).

Some motor manufacturers refer to the kerbweight as the unladen weight or the MiRO. Whichever term is used, you're looking to find out what the vehicle weighs according to European Directive 95/48/EC, which includes all of the fluids necessary for the car to run and a 90%-full tank of fuel.

Sometimes the figure provided includes a nominal 75kg for the driver, sometimes it does not.

However, given that no vehicle is going to be travelling anywhere without someone behind the wheel, it seems quite reasonable to us to allow for the driver's weight when you are matching car and caravan – that's what we do here at *Practical Caravan* in both our first-drive reviews and in-depth tow car tests.

You should be able to find figures for how much a vehicle weighs in the sales brochures or its handbook. Alternatively, you can check the registration certificate (V5C).

If you are in any doubt, you could always take your car along to a public weighbridge, where you can confirm how much the vehicle weighs with no luggage or passengers on board.



The caravan weight plate will indicate its MiRO and MTPLM

'You also need to check that your driving licence allows you to tow the combined weight of the car and caravan'

The legal towing limit is also given in most brochures and handbooks. There are likely to be two figures provided, one for towing an unbraked trailer, and another for towing a braked trailer – a caravan has brakes, so it's the braked trailer figure that you need.

Now for the caravan itself. The MiRO and MTPLM should both be given in any brochure, or you'll find them on the weight plate on the side of the van.

The MiRO is the caravan equivalent of the kerbweight, while the MTPLM is the most the caravan can weigh when fully loaded.

Most caravanners tow at or close to the MTPLM, so it's best to use this figure when you are calculating outfit matching.

How can I make sure I am towing legally?

The short answer is that if your caravan weighs less than the vehicle's legal towing limit, then the car and caravan combination is likely to be legal.

However, you also need to check that your driving licence allows you to tow the combined weight of the car and caravan. To find out what you can and can't tow, visit www.gov.uk/towing-rules.

Even if your caravan has an MTPLM below the car's legal towing limit, it's worth checking the weights given on your car's VIN plate. There should be four, and it's the first two you'll need to pay close attention to.

The first is the Gross Vehicle Weight, the most that the car

is allowed to weigh when loaded. The second is the Gross Train Weight, which is the most the car and any caravan or trailer can weigh combined.

In most cases, the difference between the two should be equal to the legal towing limit given in the handbook and brochure. However, some manufacturers quote a legal towing limit with just the driver on board. So when you load up your car, the effective towing limit drops.

Make sure you don't exceed the Gross Train Weight to stay on the right side of the law.

Is a legal match also a safe match?

A vehicle's legal towing limit is determined by its ability to tow a trailer – or in our case, a caravan – uphill, repeatedly. So it's really a measure of the strength of the engine and the durability of the transmission.

It doesn't necessarily mean that a car will feel stable and secure towing that much weight at 60mph on the motorway with a gusty wind blowing.

The Camping and Caravanning Club and the Caravan and Motorhome Club recommend an 85% matching ratio for safe, stable towing.

In other words, if your car has a kerbweight of 1500kg, you should avoid towing a caravan weighing more than 1275kg (1500 multiplied by 0.85).

You'll often see this referred to as 'the 85% rule', but in fact, it's a guideline or rule of thumb, rather than a legal requirement.

Both of the clubs consider it acceptable for experienced tow car drivers to tow up to 100% of the tow car's kerbweight, but never more than this.

What about the noseweight?

The noseweight is the weight the towing hitch of the caravan applies to the towball on the car. Vehicles have maximum noseweights, just as they have maximum towing limits.

You should find this in the car's handbook or by checking a database like Towsafe.

For safe and stable towing, the noseweight should be as high as possible without exceeding the legal maximum. Noseweight gauges make it easy to check the noseweight a caravan applies.

Changing how a caravan is loaded will alter the noseweight, but if the car's limit is too low, it might not be possible to stay within the maximum download, in which case you'll need a tow car with a higher noseweight limit, or a lighter caravan.

In summary...

First, check your car can legally tow the caravan you plan to buy. Next, check the matching ratio to give yourself reassurance that the combination will be stable and safe, as well as legal.

And don't forget to measure the noseweight, to ensure the towball's limit is not exceeded.

What else do I need to know?

- If you get a towbar for your car, it needs to be 'type approved'. This means that it meets current regulations and is designed for your car.
- You must have an adequate view of the road behind you. Fit suitable towing mirrors if your trailer or van is wider than the rear of your car.
- Your trailer must have a working brake system if it weighs more than 750kg when it's loaded.
- Any brakes must be in good working order. You must use a breakaway cable or secondary coupling in case the trailer becomes detached from your car.
- You must display the same numberplate on your trailer as on your towing car.
- The maximum trailer width for any tow car is 2.55m. The maximum length for a trailer towed by a car weighing up to 3500kg is 7m. This length does not include the A-frame.

SPEED LIMITS WHEN TOWING

Speed limits when you're towing are different to those for driving without a caravan or trailer. Here's what you need to know to stay legal...



ONE THING YOU must bear in mind when towing is that the speed limits for those with a caravan or trailer on the back are different from those that apply for solo cars – on certain roads.

It's therefore crucial that you consider the speed limits you must abide by before you travel, no matter what kind of car and caravan you have – after all, there are no specific signs on the road to tell you what the towing limits are.

Towing on a motorway

If there are no temporary restrictions (such as from roadworks or alternative speed limits on smart motorways), then the speed limit for cars that aren't towing a caravan or trailer is 70mph.

But you will need to travel more slowly when you are towing your caravan; in this case, 60mph is your limit.

This is a sensible maximum, helping to keep both you and your outfit safe and stable. Of course, if a temporary lower limit is being applied to all traffic, this must be adhered to.

What's more, you're not allowed into the outside lane if the motorway has three lanes or more. If there are only two lanes, it's fine for you to use the outside lane for overtaking; as when driving solo, you should pull back into the left as soon as possible after your overtaking manoeuvre.

Towing on a dual carriageway

The maximum speed at which you're allowed to tow on a dual carriageway (assuming that no other temporary or permanent limits are in place) is 60mph.

Somewhat confusingly, though, if the posted limit is 60mph, you're also allowed to travel at that speed – you don't need to drop your speed by 10mph in line with the rest of the traffic.

You must stick to any temporary or posted speed limit below 60mph.

Towing on a single carriageway

If solo cars are allowed to travel at 60mph on a single-carriageway road, the limit when towing a caravan is 50mph.

You'll be travelling more slowly than some traffic, so it's advisable (where safe) to pull over and let the queue through. Rule 169 of the Highway Code states that you should "not hold up a long queue of traffic, especially if you are driving a large or slow-moving vehicle. Check your mirrors frequently, and if necessary, pull in where it is safe and let traffic pass."

Always consider current conditions – just because a speed limit is there, that doesn't mean it is a safe target.

For more information, see our guide at www.practicalcaravan.com/advice/towing-101-part-4-what-speed-limits-apply-when-towing-a-caravan.

KNOW YOUR LIMITS

A speed limit of 30mph (48km/h) applies to all single and dual carriageways with street lights, unless there are signs that indicate otherwise.

For cars, motorcycles, car-derived vans and

dual-purpose vehicles when towing caravans or trailers, the following limits apply:

Built-up areas

30mph (48km/h)

Single carriageways

50mph (80km/h)

Dual carriageways and motorways

60mph (96km/h)

Where posted speed limit is 50mph, 40mph, 30mph or 20mph, if a lower limit applies to 'normal' traffic, it does to a car towing a van.



TOW LIKE A PRO

To the casual observer, towing might look like a simple case of 'hitch it up and off you go' – but there are important things to remember. Here David Motton shares his top tips for safe and comfortable towing

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WE ALL LOVE caravanning, but not every caravanner loves towing. Here are some of our favourite tips to make towing safer and more enjoyable.

1 Play the percentages

The 85% guideline has been the caravanner's friend for decades. Both major caravanning clubs recommend towing no more than 85% of the kerbweight of your tow car, especially if you are new to towing. It's a strong recommendation rather than a legal requirement, but you'll find car and caravan more stable if the car weighs substantially more than the van.

Experienced caravanners may be happy towing up to 100% of the car's kerbweight, but we'd never recommend going above this weight, even if the car's legal towing limit is higher. Think of the car as a dog and the caravan as a tail. When the tail weighs more than the dog, if it starts to wag, you could soon be in all sorts of trouble»»



'You'll find car and caravan more stable if the car weighs substantially more than the van'

2 Load safely

It's easy to overload your caravan, especially if you're packing for a fortnight away with the family. Check that you are not exceeding the van's Maximum Technically Permissible Laden Mass (MTPLM), which is the most it is permitted to weigh when fully loaded. Weighing each bag individually is a bit of a faff, so investing in a set of scales such as the Reich Caravan Weight Control amounts to money well spent.

It's not just about how much weight is in the van, it's where you put it. In the car, load the heavy items first so they are on the boot floor and as close to the rear axle as possible. In the van, make sure heavy items are low down and above the axle or axles.

If you own a caravan with a fixed-bed layout, there will be lots of storage space underneath the bed. However, be cautious when loading under the bed as this is usually well behind the axle. Don't put anything heavy here. It's a very good spot for bulky but relatively light items such as an Aquaroll and Wastemaster.

3 Check, check and check again

Make sure your outfit is safe and roadworthy before every journey. Check that the car and caravan tyres are inflated to the right pressure, make sure all the lights are working, and be sure you have hitched up correctly. Winding the jockey wheel back down to make sure the hitch is securely gripping the towball will prove that car and caravan are safely connected.

It never hurts to double-check that the breakaway cable is secure, the stabiliser head is down and the handbrake is off before driving away. It might seem like overkill to some, but having a checklist that you tick off at the start of every journey will make sure nothing important is missed.

4 Always use towing mirrors

By law, you must be able to see four metres out from the side of the caravan at a distance 20 metres behind you. In practice, it's very unlikely that even a large 4x4 will be wide enough for you to see that far out and behind using the car's regular mirrors.

But it's not just about obeying the law for the law's sake. Having a clear view behind you is essential to stay safe while towing. You can't change lane safely if you can't be sure whether another vehicle is about to overtake you.

5 Plan ahead

What appears to be the most direct route isn't always the best way to travel when you have a caravan in tow. Many campsites will have recommended routes for the

last few miles which they outline on their website. If not, give the site a call and ask if there are any narrow lanes or awkward junctions to be avoided.

6 Smoothly does it

It's understandable that some drivers are nervous when towing, especially if they are new to caravanning. But being on edge doesn't make for an easy journey.

As any experienced caravanner knows, towing doesn't feel the same as regular driving. You will notice some pushing and shoving from the caravan, and you can see it moving slightly in your mirrors. If you chase every slight movement with agitated steering corrections, you'll only make things worse. Instead, keep your steering, braking, and accelerating smooth and relaxed. The car is always trying to pull the caravan straight, so let it do the hard work for you. If your car and caravan are well matched, sensibly loaded, and being driven at an appropriate speed, small corrections with the wheel should be all you need.

7 Never rush

You're on holiday! Why hurry? Give yourself plenty of time to complete your journey, and allow for regular breaks every couple of hours so you stay alert.

If you allow lots of time, there's less temptation to speed. You'll find that car and caravan will be more stable at 60mph than at higher, illegal speeds. In fact, in wet or windy weather you may find that dropping to 55mph or so makes for an easier journey. Remember that your braking distances will be longer when towing, so leave a long gap to the vehicle in front to allow plenty of time to react.

8 Be courteous

A well-driven outfit needn't hold up other traffic, but on a twisty single-carriageway road you might find a sensible pace is lower than that of other vehicles. If you notice a queue of cars building in your mirrors, pull over when it's safe to do so. Stopping in a layby for 30 seconds will make little difference to your journey, but you'll be doing your bit for the reputation of caravanners everywhere!

9 Get some training

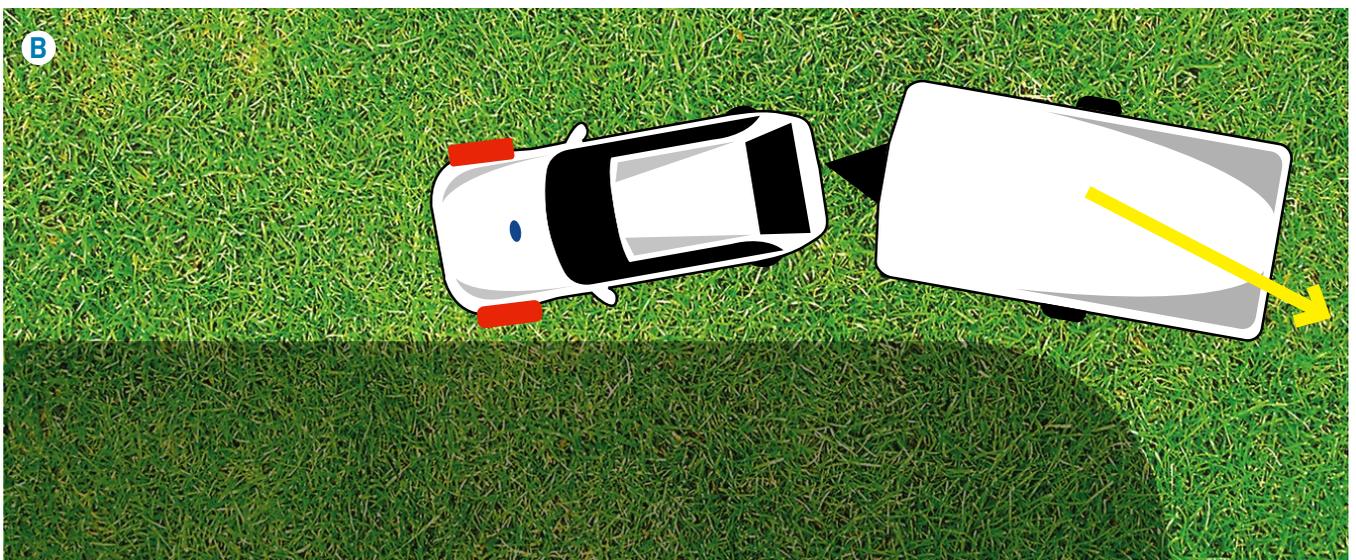
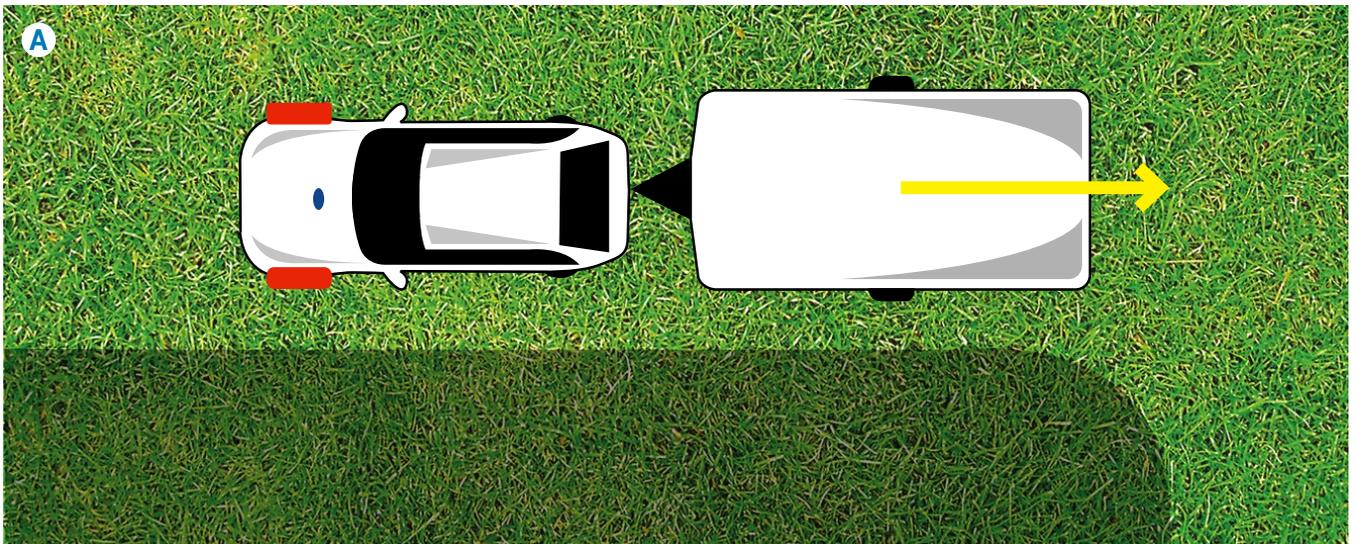
Towing a caravan is something any competent driver is capable of doing safely, but there are new skills to learn. For anyone starting out, or a driver who wants to brush up on their skills, a towing course is highly recommended. B-licence holders may need to upgrade to be able to tow heavier car and caravan combinations, but even those of us who have a B+E licence can benefit from instruction. The big two caravan clubs both run towing courses (p14).

'Having a checklist that you tick off at the start of every towing journey will make sure nothing important is missed'



HOW TO REVERSE A CARAVAN

As any caravanner will tell you, reversing is one of the essential skills for stress-free touring. It might seem a bit daunting, but if you follow our simple step-by-step manoeuvres, you'll soon find it's plain sailing





EVEN THOSE WHO have been towing for some time can find reversing a caravan quite tricky – many people avoid the task whenever possible.

Motor movers make the job a lot easier, but this is a really important skill to learn – one day you might need to reverse some way up a narrow lane.

So it's a great idea to practise the moves as much as you can, until they become second nature to you. It's a cliché, but true: the more you do it, the better you will become at it, and the less nervous you'll be on the road.

Reversing along a straight line

No matter where you might be reversing, it's crucial to have a good view of your surroundings.

Ensure your towing mirrors are correctly set up, and if you're travelling with a passenger, it's a good idea to ask them to get out

and help – they might notice something that you haven't seen from the driver's seat.

1 For starters, ensure that your car and caravan are straight – if not, pull forward a small amount until the unit is in a straight line. Then, engage reverse and slowly start to move backwards.

2 Keep an eye on your mirrors – if the caravan starts to appear larger in one than it does in the other, gently move the steering wheel a small amount in that direction. The van will start to move the other way – return the wheel to its original position and continue.

3 If you find the caravan has moved too far in one direction, simply pull forward to straighten up and try again.

Reversing onto a pitch

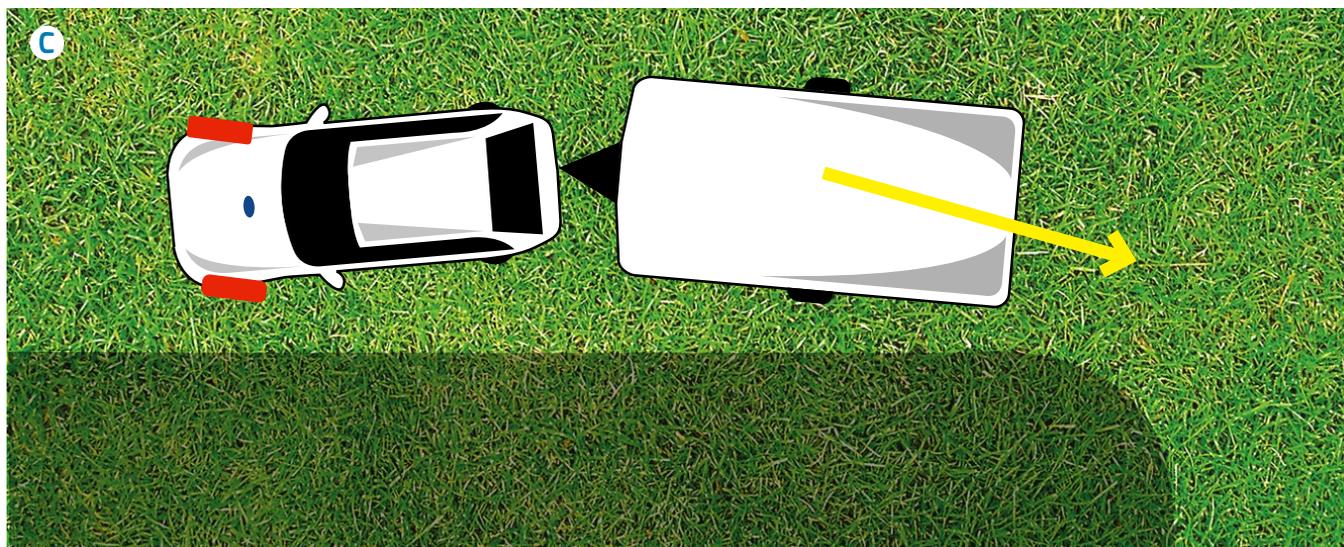
This also applies to any reversing manoeuvre around a corner.

1 Drive forward until the van wheels are a little past the edge of the pitch (A). Ensure your view down both sides of the caravan is clear, and adjust the mirrors if not.

2 Your next move depends on whether the angle into the pitch is tight. If it is, apply full lock to the steering wheel in the opposite direction to the way you want the van to go (B). So if you need to reverse to the left, you'll have to move the steering wheel to the right. It's counterintuitive to most manoeuvres, so needs concentration. If the angle is less acute (C), apply fewer turns to the wheel. In either case, you can then slowly start to reverse.

3 To avoid jackknifing the caravan, you'll need to gradually wind off the tow car's lock before the caravan is straight, allowing the car to 'follow' the caravan. At this point, the steering wheel should have gone through the straight position, and be in the same place as if you were reversing without a van on the back (D).

Whenever you are reversing, go slowly. It's much easier to correct small movements than large ones. If you have any problems, or the caravan comes too close to the car, simply pull forward and start again – there's no rush.



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STAY SAFE AND STAY COVERED WITH MB&G INSURANCE

The right caravan insurance is essential - and MB&G can have you covered for every eventuality

Your caravan is both your home-from-home and your pride and joy - so naturally you'll want to do whatever you can to keep it safe and sound, no matter whether it's on your drive, in storage or pitched up at your favourite campsite.

That's why caravan-specific insurance is so important, covering you for the many eventualities that could take the shine off your caravanning experience.

COVER YOU CAN COUNT ON

Choosing an insurance provider that you can rely on is crucial, allowing you to rest easy knowing that you're covered - and that's exactly why MB&G Insurance is so trusted among caravanners.

MB&G is one of the leisure warranty market leaders, and it now offers caravan insurance - plus, you'll benefit from the company's exceptional customer service and claims-management solutions.

Key to MB&G's insurance is the fact that it's built trusted relationships with skilled repairers across the UK, so no matter where you are when you need help, MB&G Insurance will know what to do, and who to send to assist you.

What's more, MB&G Insurance works closely with the National Caravan Council's Approved Workshop Scheme, so you can rest assured that your caravan will be repaired to the highest of standards. And there's no need to worry about having to manage the repair - MB&G Insurance can oversee the process, from start to finish, saving you time and effort.

Even if you have an unusual van, MB&G Insurance will be able to help get the job done quickly and efficiently.

GET BACK ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Of course, whether you're away on tour or at home when you make a claim, you'll want the process to be swift, so you can

get on with fully enjoying your caravan. MB&G Insurance offers an impressive online claim platform, where you simply enter your claim information without having to make a single phone call! What's more, if needed MB&G will cover your accommodation cost, so you can continue to enjoy holiday bliss.

With all those benefits, you might think that your cover is limited to certain events - but with MB&G Insurance, you're safely covered against fire, theft, flood and more. And you're not limited to travel within the UK: European cover can also be included. So, as the world starts to open up again, you can rest easy knowing that, with MB&G Insurance, you're in very safe hands.

Plus, you can get a fantastic 10% discount on your insurance through MB&G Insurance - simply quote the code 'caravan10' when taking out your policy.

For more information on MB&G Insurance, visit the company's website at

WWW.MBGCARAVAN.CO.UK
OR CALL 0191 258 8157

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TOWING COURSES

If you are new to caravanning, the idea of towing can seem a bit daunting. But help is at hand, with specialist training to show how it's done. Nigel Hutson reports



THERE WILL BE many keen caravanners who are in the same situation as my wife and me. We have been touring for years, yet the only thing that Kay has ever towed is the Aquaroll, to and from the campsite taps.

That's not for any bad reason, because she is a very competent driver, but I always end up in the driving seat. Possibly, the fact that I'm not the most relaxed of passengers doesn't help?

However, there's always the chance that for some reason, I might be unable to drive, and Kay would find herself behind the wheel. We've often spoken about it, and I've seen the fear in her eyes when we have.

I'm sure there are plenty of people who really love the idea of caravanning, but are anxious about hitching the caravan to the car and actually towing it.

I am the first to admit that me being in the passenger seat while Kay has her first tow with

our caravan would not be a good idea. But this is where our great friends at The Camping and Caravanning Club come to the rescue, as they run a Confidence Builder Course, which guides you through the basic principles of towing a caravan.

Following on from that is the more road-orientated Pitch and Progress Course, intended for those who have completed the initial training and have some experience under their belt.

The Caravan and Motorhome Club also runs similar events.

Kay attended the C&CC's Confidence Builder Course in Coventry, and I tagged along to see what was involved.

Behind the wheel

We arrived at the car park and were greeted by an instructor, Dave Hage. All of the C&CC instructors are qualified driving instructors, who spend much of their time providing B+E training (for outfits that exceed the 3.5-tonne post-1997 limit on new licence-holders), so they know what they're doing.

He asked us to fit our towing mirrors (you're asked to bring these, with a rear numberplate for your vehicle). This was the first test – Kay had never done it before – but a few minutes later, our mirrors were attached.

That done, we were shown into the 'Bistro' (the C&CC

canteen), where we met other participants and instructors.

Looking around the room, I could see some very nervous people here. After registering with Lead Instructor Maureen Richardson, we had coffee, and hesitant chat arose among the course attendees.

We were with newbie Rebecca Margieson. She and her partner had recently bought a caravan, which they had yet to use, and like Kay, she'd never towed.

On her own admission, she was very nervous and worried about every aspect of towing.

A quiz to start

The participants (four women, eight men) and five instructors moved into a conference room, where Maureen gave a brief introduction to the course.

The attendees introduced themselves and outlined their towing experience. This ranged from none at all (the majority)

'The course that Kay went on guides you through the basic principles of getting on the road and towing a caravan'

to James, who had been towing for about 18 months.

A quiz followed. This covered things such as speed limits, recommended maximum tyre ages on caravans, the meaning of terms such as MTPLM, MiRO and noseweight, what to do if a snake develops and what the usual causes of a snake are (speed being top of the list!). Stabilisers and devices such as Al-Ko's ATC were also discussed.

All in all, a good icebreaker, which got the group talking, and I could see some of the apprehension had disappeared by the end of the session.

We then went outside, and the group was divided up. Kay was assigned to Dave, who asked her to reverse our car towards a waiting Bailey Pursuit in preparation for hitching.

He expertly guided her back so that the caravan hitch was directly over the car's towball (credit to Kay, too, for following the instructions implicitly!).

Dave then went through each stage of hitching, starting with attaching the breakaway cable (the rule is, first thing on, last thing off, because it's a safety device) to an appropriate point on the car/towbar.

The next stage was raising the hitch handle (the caravans aren't fitted with stabilisers) but not holding it (it might accidentally be pushed down, misleading someone into thinking it was properly hitched).

This is followed by lowering the hitch onto the towball, before winding the jockey wheel to raise the rear of the car, so you can ensure that the hitch has engaged properly.

Now for the electrics

Next up was raising the jockey wheel and securing it ready for the road. Then, attaching the electrics, and how and where it should pass under the hitch, twisting the cable (not the plug) if it is a little too long, so that you end up with a pigtail.

The final stage at the front was to release the handbrake. Kay did struggle with this – she has a weak wrist after a fracture a few years ago – but Dave had a good solution for that.

With legs straight and back against the front of the caravan, it was simply a case of pressing the button on the lever and then leaning forwards.

Moving to the rear of the van, Dave attached our numberplate (I also noticed that an L-plate was attached, letting following drivers know a novice tower was in front), and then checked the caravan lights.

Once again, this was done methodically and using hand signals, rather than shouting back to the driver. It's suggested you start with the obligatory lights, then the stop, indicators (then hazard), rear fog and finally reversing lights, gradually building them up until they're all on. That way, if there is an electrical fault, it will develop before you hit the road.

Thankfully, everything was fine on our vehicle.

We still weren't ready for the road, though, as the mirrors had to be adjusted. Dave explained to Kay what she should ideally be able to see in them (basically, along each side of the caravan and 4m out at 20m behind the mirrors, which our Milenco Grand Aeros do perfectly).

Out on the road

It was now the time for the drive – the thing Kay was feeling most apprehensive about.

I was ordered (very politely) to sit in the back and not say a word by Dave, who threatened me with an application of gaffer tape if I broke the silence!

Dave's very gentle and calm manner was perfect for Kay. He showed her the Driver Assessment Sheet that he would complete, a copy of which she would receive at the end of the session, but emphasised it was not a test. Then we were off.

Kay's first task was exiting the C&CC premises, because there's a centre island on a sharp left turn, with a kerb sticking out and straight onto a traffic island, but with Dave's expert guidance, the 'test' was passed.

The drive covered all kinds of roads, from dual carriageways to busy urban streets, junctions controlled by traffic lights (turning right) and roundabouts.



CUT OUT AND KEEP GUIDE!



MAIN A few tips from Instructor Dave before Kay takes to the road FROM TOP Lead Instructor Maureen introduces the course; first attach your towing mirrors; helpful advice about the process of hitching; Dave guides Kay as she reverses back to the van, then offers a workaround if you struggle to release the handbrake



On a particularly narrow, busy urban road – with vehicles parked on both sides – after pausing for oncoming traffic, Kay doubted that she could get the outfit through the gap as traffic continued to oppose her.

However, Dave likened the towing mirrors to cat's whiskers. "If the towing mirrors will get through, the caravan will," he said, encouragingly.

Obviously, that only applies if the outfit is straight, and is no excuse for barging through narrow gaps in a cavalier manner; but in general terms, the analogy is a good one.

Towing tips

With that part of the drive over, a relieved Kay continued, and I could sense her confidence building as we progressed.

Dave made some very sensible suggestions here and there, such as leaving a little bit more room between our vehicle and the one in front in a queue.

Kay knows about 'tyres and Tarmac' – in this situation, stay far enough back from the vehicle so you can see the bottom of the tyres and a bit of Tarmac behind the rear wheels.

That would give enough room to manoeuvre around it if there was a problem, without having to reverse (which would be impossible if something was close behind).

Dave suggested leaving a bit more room when towing. He also suggested longer indications when towing, too.

We arrived back at the C&CC, where Kay was obviously more relaxed. Dave gave her a debrief on the drive, and the written assessment, which was excellent and very encouraging. But the driving wasn't over yet.

With the outfit parked straight, Kay then had a few attempts at reversing in a straight line and using her mirrors.

Dave explained that if she could see one side of the caravan more than the other, she should simply turn the steering wheel a quarter-turn in that direction, to bring the outfit back into line.

It couldn't have been easy for Kay with me standing outside watching every move and taking photographs, but she certainly mastered it quickly. After that, Dave guided her through the



unhitching process – basically the reverse order for hitching.

A couple of points here were, first of all, try to unhitch with an extended hitch. This means that if you've reversed onto your pitch, you should pull forward a little. That way, when the van is uncoupled from the car, the hitch won't extend and damage what might be a very costly rear bumper on the car.

In addition, when lowering the jockey wheel, clamp it a few inches above the ground and then unwind it. That gives you leeway for levelling the caravan front to rear. And don't forget the golden rule: handbrake first

and breakaway cable last when you are unhitching!

We then joined attendees James and Les with Instructor Chris Wood, for the next lesson. Chris ran through a recap on hitching, and then explained about using hand signals for direction and distance when hitching, rather than what could be confusing verbal instructions.

He guided James to the van, which was duly hitched to his car. The next part of the course was to manoeuvre at walking pace through a slalom. "The idea of this is to get people to look, see and understand what they are doing," said Chris.

The slalom might sound quite simple, but it wasn't. It entailed using full steering lock and at times, almost getting the outfit perpendicular to the route.

Slalom moves

Once James had successfully carried out this manoeuvre a couple of times, it was Kay's turn. This time, James gave the directional guidance, under the watchful eye of Chris. Again, Kay managed it with aplomb.

After a very welcome break for lunch (during which, the atmosphere was much lighter than at the beginning of the day), six of the course attendees (including Kay, James, Les and Rebecca) joined Lead Instructor Maureen, who again covered hitching and unhitching – where most caravan 'incidents' occur.

Maureen then moved on to providing an understanding of weights (MTPLM, MiRO and noseweight), using a noseweight gauge to demonstrate how moving the caravan's load just a little bit can have an effect.

'The next part of the course was to manoeuvre at walking pace through a slalom. Not as simple as it might sound!'



CLOCKWISE FROM INSET **Kay on the road with Dave; Chris offers advice about hitching and unhitching; now to try out the slalom; aligning car and caravan; Rebecca, Kay and James after the course; Kay learns about using hand signals to guide the driver**



CUT OUT AND KEEP GUIDE!
✂



Levelling up

Things such as levelling a caravan side to side, and using ramps and chocks, were demonstrated, as was realigning a 13-pin plug using the special green tool.

Next on the list were tyre pressures and making sure the towball is clean (no paint or grease) if using a stabiliser, as were the important things to check (windows, TV antenna, rooflights and underneath the caravan) before moving off.

Finally, everybody had a go at the ‘wobble’. With the caravan hitched, they were stopped with the van at a tight angle behind the car (steering on full lock), and shown how to straighten up the caravan within the length of the car, by initially turning into the angle on full lock and

then turning against the angle on full opposite lock. The key to this is to do it very slowly.

From experience, this is very useful when you are pulling into a gap in a lay-by, or manoeuvring on-site, for example.

At the end of the day, I caught up with Rebecca and James.

Rebecca told me: “I’m really glad I came. I’ve picked up lots of handy tips. We’ve also got a booklet to remind us – there’s so much to know. The instructors have been so friendly, and I’ve not felt stupid at all.”

James added, “My objectives in taking the course were to feel confident in what I have already been doing and to pick up more tips. I have totally achieved this, and overall, it’s been a really good and informative day.”



CONTACT

■ **Camping and Caravanning Club**
 > www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk
 > 024 7647 5448

■ **Caravan and Motorhome Club**
 > www.caravanclub.co.uk
 > 01342 326 944



DRIVING APPS

You can even find one that will help with your towing!
Here's our pick of the best driver assistance apps



Reverse My Trailer

This driver simulator program should help you get to grips with those tricky caravan reversing manoeuvres.

You'll receive an animated tutorial before taking the controls of a 3D simulator with multiple views, to give you as realistic an experience as possible.

The driving mirror views give you a clear sight of what you would see from your driving position, and you can toggle between left and right mirrors and select from a range of towing vehicles and trailers.

Set autopilot mode for a demonstration of how to complete a manoeuvre.

➤ www.reversemytrailer.co.uk

➤ iOS and Android

Price Free for lite version, or 99p



CoPilot Caravan Navigation

Built with caravanners in mind, this app is perfect for those who want a sat nav that works a bit harder.

It has caravan-specific routing, offline maps and information on useful places, such as rest areas and fuel stations. Features include ActiveTraffic, which points out where potential delays might occur and gives accurate ETAs, so you can plan accordingly; maps for 150 countries; and up-to-date speed limit information and safety camera warnings.

➤ copilotgps.com/en-gb/caravan-navigation
➤ iOS

Price 14-day free trial; £25.99 for 12 months of voice-guided offline navigation, route planning and traffic



Motorway Services GB

Ideal for those who regularly tour around the UK, this app offers comprehensive details on motorway services.

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➤ apps.apple.com/gb/app/motorway-services-gb/id835376317

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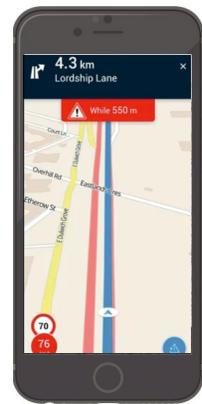
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➤ viamichelin.co.uk

➤ iOS and Android

Price Free



TOWING ACCESSORIES

There's a wealth of kit that can help you tow better and more safely – here's a selection of a few essential items to add to your list



Noseweight gauge
This vital piece of kit helps ensure that your caravan's noseweight is correct for your tow car, helping to keep you safe on the road.

Milenco Precision Calibrated Noseweight Gauge
Price Around £35
➤ www.amazon.co.uk



Tyre pressure gauge
You should always check your caravan tyres before every trip, particularly if the van has been standing still for any length of time. Digital pressure gauges can be easier to read than analogue versions.

Digital Tyre Pressure Gauge
Price £5.99
➤ www.towsure.com



Steady winder
A solid steady winder is a must when you need to drop your caravan's legs. You can use a drill-powered unit, but it's handy to have a manual version in the caravan as a back-up.
Kampa Corner Steady Winder
Price £6.99
➤ www.awnings.co.uk



Towing cover
Invest in a caravan towing cover and it will help protect the front of your van from dirt, road muck and damage from stones and other debris.
Quest Breathable Caravan Towing Cover Pro
Price £76.95
➤ www.towsure.com



Towing mirrors
There are various types of towing mirror available, which can be mounted by clamps, suction or straps. Quality does vary, so it's a good idea to go with the best that you can afford.

Milenco Aero Platinum Towing Mirrors
Price £79.96
➤ shop.caravanclub.co.uk



Spare bulbs
They are essential if you are travelling in some Continental countries, but wherever you tour, it's always useful to carry spare bulbs in your tow car, in case of any unexpected failures while you're on the road.

Trailer/Caravan Replacement Bulb Kit - 12V
Price £4.75
➤ www.towsure.com



Breakaway cable
It's a good idea to carry a spare breakaway cable, in case yours becomes damaged while you're away – towing a van without a working fitted breakaway cable is illegal. Check which type is fitted to your caravan's particular chassis.
Indespension Trailer Breakaway Cable
Price £4.59
➤ www.westerntowing.co.uk



Stabiliser
After-market stabilisers can be fitted to your caravan to help prevent snaking and other unwanted movement of your tourer when you're out on the road. Before purchasing, it's important to double-check which type of stabiliser will suit your caravan.
Bulldog 100Q stabiliser
Price £142.95
➤ www.towsure.com

OTHER USEFUL TOWING LINKS

Towing weights
➤ towcar.info/GB/towing.php
➤ www.rac.co.uk/drive/advice/driving-advice/towing-capacity-how-to-work-it-out

Speed limits
➤ www.gov.uk/speed-limits

Reversing your caravan
➤ www.practicalcaravan.com/advice/towing-101-part-3-how-to-reverse-a-caravan
➤ www.practicalcaravan.com/advice/top-reversing-tips

What you can tow
➤ www.gov.uk/towing-with-car

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