

What type of RV to buy?

Comparing Types of RVs: Pros and Cons

by Alice Zyetz

The issue of assessing pros and cons is very individual. What is a bonus for one family is a definite liability for another. For example, a small family who wants to travel easily to many destinations for sightseeing will want a small easy-to-handle rig. A family with off-road vehicles who goes to the desert to spend time with other families in one spot to use their sand buggies will want a rig that provides sleeping and eating space but can also haul all their equipment. Or they will want a large trailer with the built-in "garage."

Another concern of course is cost and size. Are you just starting out and unsure of what will work for your family? Are you retired and planning to travel occasionally or will you sell your home and live in the RV full-time?

This column will give you some ideas of how to evaluate your options. Before you actually buy, talk to other RVers, rent an RV to get the feel of it, travel with a friend if possible, search out the new RVer Web sites, go to RV shows and dealers (BUT DON'T BUY YET-- EVEN IF THEY MAKE YOU AN OFFER YOU THINK YOU CAN'T REFUSE!). When you do buy, I urge you to start with a used vehicle if this is your first. No matter how careful you've been about assessing your needs, there are always nuances you don't realize until you start using your rig. A new rig loses thousands of dollars of value as soon as you drive it off the dealer's lot. A used rig depreciates very slowly.

Types of RVs

There are two basic types of RVs.

1. Motorized RVs have the driving compartment within the vehicle. They are constructed on a motor vehicle chassis.
2. Towable RVs rely on a separate vehicle with a driving compartment.

Motorized RVs

This is the rig most people think of when they hear the expression "RV." Generally, it's called a motorhome, ranging in length from under twenty to more than forty feet. The price can vary from a few thousand dollars for an old well-worn rig to a million plus for a luxurious, customized vehicle.

Motorhomes are easier to drive and park, plus they afford greater safety since if there is an emergency or anything suspicious in the middle of the night, the owner just turns the key in the ignition and leaves.

The trailer owner must go outside to get into the tow vehicle.

Generally solo women travelers choose motorhomes for these reasons, although one solo who lives in her fifth wheel trailer (see below for definition) says that she prefers to stay in RV parks, so she always feels safe and doesn't worry about leaving in the middle of the night.

Class A



The Class A motorhome is often rectangular in appearance. The driver and passenger seats can swivel around and become living room furniture when the rig is parked. The amenities are self-contained bathroom, kitchen, dining area, living room, and bedroom. Class As handle more like a car (a very large car for the 30-40 foot rigs) and when you remove the towed car, they back up like a car so the driver doesn't have to learn new skills.

The larger motorhomes usually tow a car behind, affectionately referred to as the "toad." Although the mileage is poor on the motorhome, the toad gets excellent mileage and is used for local transportation and sightseeing. (If you will tow a car or dinghy (car trailer) behind your motorhome, check at Motorhome.com for its **Dinghy Towing guide** on what cars are towable with all four wheels on the ground.

Although the motorhome has steps to mount from the outside, once inside there are no further steps, making it easier for a handicapped person to get around. In addition, it is easier for the handicapped person to get in and out of a passenger car than a large truck.

Many motorhome owners cite the advantage that the passenger can get up to prepare lunch or go to the bathroom while the vehicle is in motion. In fact, that is a great danger. While tootling down the highway at speeds up to 60 mph, every passenger should be securely seated.

One disadvantage to the larger Class A is having two engines to pay for and maintain. Another concern is that despite the number of stuffed bears they use, people who live in their motorhomes cannot disguise the fact that they have a steering wheel in their living room.

For those who are looking for luxurious accommodations on the road, it is generally more expensive to purchase a motorhome and toad than a large fifth-wheel and truck.

Another category of Class A is also known as **Bus**.



Most of these are actual old school or transportation buses converted to motorhome layouts. There are also very luxurious versions built on a bus frame that can run into the millions of dollars. This version always has the main entrance door across from the drivers cockpit.

Class B



The Class B

is built on a van chassis with a raised roof. Class Bs are smaller, compact, and very easy to drive. They contain the same lifestyle amenities, but usually on a smaller scale. New ones are expensive, particularly compared to a similar-sized Class C or Class A. The Class Bs have less sleeping space for a small family than other small rigs or trailers.

Class B+ RVs are similar to Class Bs but are larger and roomier.

Class C



The Class C

is a truck chassis with an RV unit built on it. The sleeping area is over the driver/passenger unit. Again, the rig contains all the lifestyle amenities but often on a more limited scale than the Class A. The Class C is often used to tow a boat or motorcycle, and can tow a car. This type is the least expensive of the motorhomes.

Towable RVS

The advantage of the towable RV is that when you arrive at your site, you can unhitch the tow vehicle and use it as your mode of local transportation.

Fifth-wheel



The fifth wheel

is a trailer that hitches in the bed of the truck. Depending on the size and construction of the rig, it may be too heavy to tow with a big pick-up truck. Check the weight rating carefully. An overweight vehicle can cause great problems to the tow vehicle, the trailer, and ultimately to your personal safety. You might damage the transmission, axles, tires, and so on. (Check out RVSafety.org.) People who live in a big fifth-wheel the majority of the time, need to purchase a medium duty truck (MDT) to compensate for the heavy weight of their trailer.

The inside of the rig has all the amenities of the motorhome, including more varied living room layouts. Financially, a luxurious newer fifth-wheel and MDT combined is still less expensive than a luxurious motorhome and toad. When it comes time to upgrade, you may only have to replace the fifth-wheel or truck, again saving money. The disadvantage is that it usually takes longer to park than the big motorhome.

One motorhomer told me that after she parks, she sits down with her glass of wine and waits patiently while her friends in their fifth wheels are still getting it together. Another problem is that it is not as convenient and cost effective to sightsee or do errands in a truck or MDT.

In the process of preparing this article, I queried a representative sample of "Boomers" (50- to 70-year-olds who live on the road full-time and belong to the RV club Escap-ees.com). What I discovered was that the results are evenly matched between owners of large motorhomes and large fifth wheels. The pros and cons seem to balance each other.

For the occasional RVer who would buy a smaller and probably an older fifth-wheel, the price and inside space are very appealing IF the family already has a big truck or would use it in their daily work. A larger family would need a truck with an extended cab since it is not safe to have the children inside the trailer as they travel. A motorhome may be more effective.

Travel Trailer



The travel trailer, more familiar to most people, hitches to the back of the tow vehicle, which can be a truck, van, or even a heavy car, depending on the weight and size of the trailer. The trailer length varies from 10 feet to 40 feet.

The longer trailers tend to sway and don't complete turns as easily as the fifth wheel. They are also more difficult to back in to a campsite. Less underneath storage is available than in a fifth wheel. Full amenities are in the longer trailers. For the family, there can be more space in the van or heavy car, which makes pulling a travel trailer a more attractive option than a fifth-wheel. The travel trailer is generally less expensive than the fifth-wheel.

Pop-up Trailer



When closed, a pop-up trailer looks like a box. When opened, the front and back open and occasionally the sides. The pop-up trailer is a great starter trailer for a family. Towed easily by a car or van, it is less expensive than other trailers and can accommodate a larger family. If you don't already use a truck, you won't have to go out and buy one. Set-up and tear-down time is longer and can be frustrating if you are traveling to a new location each day rather than going to a single destination and staying there for the whole vacation. Since the sides are usually canvas, the pop-up can be very uncomfortable in the rain.

Slide-In Camper Shell



The slide-in camper is a camper shell that can be removed from the body of a flat bed pickup truck. A "slide-out" side provides more space, but overall space is limited compared to most travel and fifth wheel trailers. This is an excellent rig for one or two people, or it can be used as the tow vehicle for a travel or pop-up trailer for a larger family.

Slide-outs: Pros and Cons

When the newer rig (motorhome or trailer) is parked, part of the room can "slide out" providing additional living space, a great advantage to counter the living-in-a-submarine feeling. The newest models have three and even four slide-outs. One other advantage is that since most rigs have slideouts and are desired, the resale value of an RV without slideouts will be less.

The disadvantages are fourfold:

- one more mechanical part that can be a problem
- older campgrounds may not be able to accommodate the additional space you need
- more weight to your axles, chassis, and tow vehicle
- often give up some basement storage room

Making a Choice

Think about your own lifestyle. Are you a weekend traveler? How many people will be traveling together? What do you plan to use the rig for? Will you be traveling full-time? Do you have any physical restrictions that need to be accommodated? Do you already have a truck? Are you an experienced RVer? What is your budget range?

Online Resources

RVs Rated by RV Consumer Group

Trailer Life Magazine RV Buyer's Guide

Jeff Ostroff's Tips for Negotiating an RV purchase

Choosing the RV of Your Dreams -- A Canadian Perspective

Ten Tips for Choosing an RV by Joe and Vicki Kieva