

# RV TRIPPING 101

## THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO RVING



So, you made the decision.

You're ready to take on the open road in a new, exciting way. **Congratulations!** **Motorhome and RV camping offer some of the most fulfilling travel experiences out there**, and we know you're going to create life-long memories.

But if you've barely even stepped foot inside an RV, let alone actually driven and operated one, this unique travel lifestyle can be overwhelming at first. What's the difference between the "classes" of motorhomes, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of choosing a travel trailer versus a coach? The RV has how many holding tanks? What, exactly, is the auxiliary battery?



If you're just getting started in the wide world of RVing, you've probably got a whole lot more questions than those -- and you'll soon find you never run out of things to learn. But to get you started, we've compiled this quick-start beginner's guide to help you feel a little more confident as you prepare to set out on the adventure of a lifetime.

## TYPES OF MOTORHOMES

First things first: What are the different types of RVs and motorhomes available, and more importantly, which kind should you rent or buy?

RVs come in a broad range of sizes and types, and each have both advantages and disadvantages. Which kind is best suited for your needs will depend on a variety of factors including the size of your party, where you're planning to travel, and how much money you can afford to invest in the vehicle -- and, of course, its gas tank!

Here's a brief overview of the most common types of RVs you'll encounter in your search.

## MOTORHOMES AND COACHES

If you're looking for an all-inclusive camper, you're probably after one of these classic motorhomes, which feature a cockpit and a living space within the same vehicular body. If you'll need additional, flexible transportation at your destination, you can always haul a tow vehicle behind you -- but if not, these RVs will get you where you're going in comfort and style without an additional set of wheels.

### CLASS A MOTORHOMES



This is the body type that might first spring to mind when you think of RVs. These large, bus-shaped motorhomes offer campers lots of space to stretch their legs, and creature comforts ranging from comprehensive kitchens to separate master bedroom suites. Some even have extra perks like icemakers, washing machines, and space-increasing slide-outs.

Although Class A motorhomes allow you to adventure in the lap of luxury, they do have certain drawbacks. At up to 45 feet long, these vehicles are massive, especially if you're used to driving a small car or SUV. Not only does their size preclude certain narrow or steep roadways (and cause occasional anxiety attacks for drivers), but it also cramps these motorhomes' fuel-efficiency -- which means you'll pour a fair amount of your travel budget into the gas tank.

### **Pros of Class A Motorhomes:**

- Lots of living and storage space -- good for families
- Luxurious amenities for comfortable camping
- Self-contained and don't require a tow vehicle

### **Cons of Class A Motorhomes:**

- Expensive to buy, rent, and repair
- Low fuel efficiency (6-10 miles per gallon, slightly better with diesel)
- Maneuverability limited by size

## **CLASS C MOTORHOMES**



Although their name might imply mediocrity, these motorhomes are anything but second-class citizens.

While smaller than their Class A counterparts, these coaches still offer all the comforts of home in a smaller, more familiar vehicular body, including an over-cockpit space for sleeping or extra storage.

And due to their decreased size and weight, Class C RVs offer those perks at a more affordable price.

### **Pros of Class C Motorhomes:**

- Home-away-from-home amenities without the Class A price tag
- Better fuel efficiency (up to 14 miles per gallon)
- Familiar cockpit, similar to a large pick-up truck

### **Cons of Class C Motorhomes:**

- Can be cramped for big groups of campers
- Still fairly sizable, which can make wilderness camping difficult

## **TRAVEL TRAILERS**

If you're willing to give up your co-pilot's ability to get up and make a sandwich or use the bathroom on the road, travel trailers can offer the same destination functionality as motorhomes at a significantly lower price point.

They do, however, require a capable tow vehicle, whose purchase price, maintenance, and fuel economy will add another complicating factor to your budget.

## **POP-UP TRAILERS**



Proving the old saying that good things come in small packages, pop-up trailers are small, versatile RVs that offer supreme maneuverability. They're inexpensive and light enough to be towed by smaller vehicles, including station wagons and even certain sedans.

However, the flexibility of these RVs comes at some cost. They feature many fewer options and amenities than other types of campers, and often have canvas sides that leave you more or less vulnerable to the elements. Many lack toilet and kitchen facilities, as well.

## FIFTH WHEEL TRAILERS



A great middle ground, these trailers require a sturdy, but not excessive, tow vehicle, and offer most of the comforts of home at a fraction of the price.

If you really want to feel like you've brought your whole house with you, fifth-wheel trailers are the way to go. Some offer more than 500 square feet of living space -- that's than any other type of RV out there!

However, if you're going to tow one of these suckers, you need a serious truck: a long-bed, 1-ton diesel ought to do it. Of course, that kind of vehicle can do some serious damage to your bank account, especially with the decreased fuel efficiency created by towing -- though it probably won't be expensive enough to offset what you'll save by choosing a fifth wheel over a Class A motorhome in the first place.

## **Pros of Travel Trailers:**

- All the perks of RV travel at a fraction of the price
- You'll be driving a tow vehicle, so smaller transportation for day trips is guaranteed
- Fifth wheels offer the largest possible living space of any kind of RV camper

## **Cons of Travel Trailers:**

- Less ability to take advantage of creature comforts while under way
- Backing up difficult or even impossible
- Can require large, expensive tow vehicles, depending on type and size

## **SLEEPER VANS AND CLASS B COACHES**



## **Pros of Sleeper Vans:**

- All the ease of driving a normal van with the added comfort of knowing where you'll sleep at night
- Backing up difficult or even impossible
- Can require large, expensive tow vehicles, depending on type and size

## **Cons of Sleeper Vans:**

- Sleeping quarters might be tight and uncomfortable, and the vehicle might not have temperature control
- Vehicle may or may not have a toilet or a refrigerator, so you'll need a plan for when nature comes calling

## **PROS OF SLEEPER VANS:**

Each individual RV has its own unique quirks, and specific questions about operation are best asked of your rental facility or dealer.

That said, here are a few general knowledge items that'll help you get started, no matter what kind of vehicle you choose.

## **DRIVING AN RV**

As you might imagine, driving a big vehicle like an RV is a little different than driving the car you use to commute to work. Even the smallest RVs are a lot bigger and heavier than most everyday vehicles, especially once they're filled with all your stuff.



While the best way to learn how to drive an RV is to sit down with an experienced driver and ask lots and lots of questions, following a couple of simple rules will go a long way toward keeping you safe and comfortable on the road.

## **1. SLOW DOWN**

The size and weight of an RV makes braking a much slower process, which means speeding is even more dangerous than it is in your normal car. Part of the fun of RV camping is the journey, so slow down and enjoy it!

## **2. BREAK EASY**

If you slam on the brakes, you have a better chance of skidding -- not to mention sending all your belongings flying around the camper.

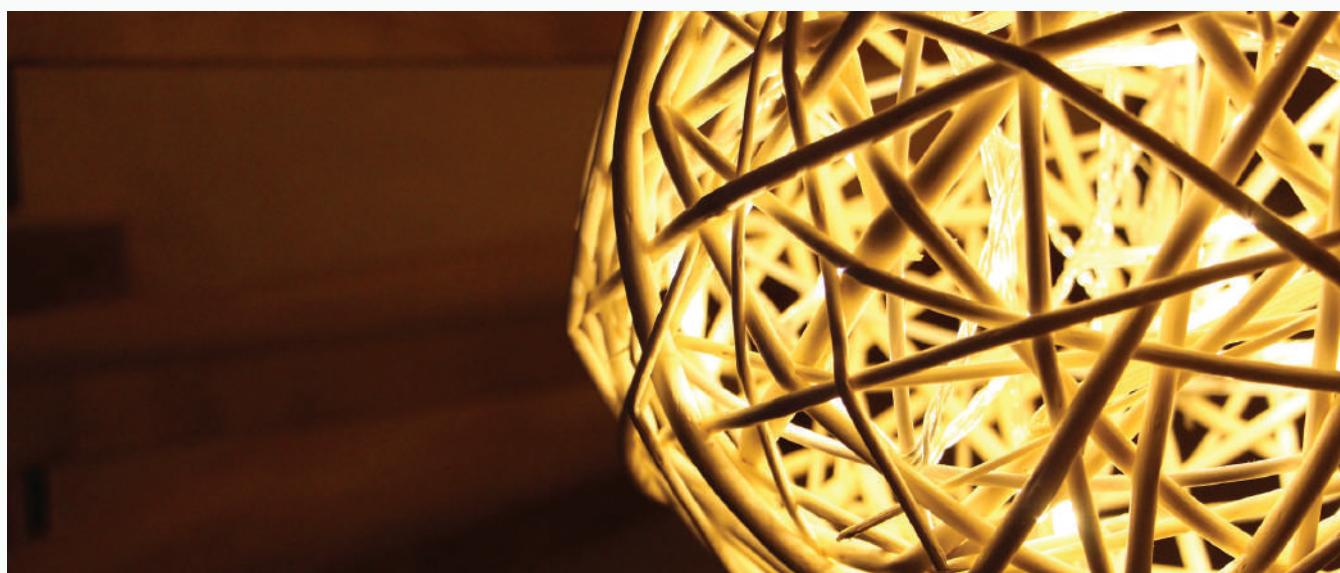
## **3. LEAVE LOTS OF EXTRA ROOM**

When you can't stop on a dime, tailgating is a serious no-no, especially if you're driving in hilly or mountainous terrain.

As you can see, these three rules work well together, and breaking any one of them will compromise your ability to follow the others. No matter what the road brings, **when in doubt, slow down** -- and don't be afraid to pull off and make an unplanned stop if conditions are bad or you're uncomfortable.

## **ELECTRICITY AND POWER**

All the fun of camping, but with air conditioning and refrigeration -- RVing sure does have its perks! But if you don't understand how your RV's electricity system works, you'll soon be back to roughing it.



Depending on your rig, you likely have three separate electrical systems: an automotive battery like the one in your car, an auxiliary battery for lights and other coach functions, and a higher-volt AC system for larger coach appliances like the rooftop air conditioner and microwave.

This latter AC system is the one you're powering when you plug into a campsite with "hookups," which are electrical sources supplying 30 or 50 amps of power. (Which grade you'll require depends on your specific RV.) You can also power this system by using your onboard generator, which might run on gas, diesel, or propane.

It's important to take proper care of all of your RV's batteries and power systems to ensure they have the longest lifespan possible. Learning about how your specific rig's electrical system works will also keep you from overloading your power source by using too many electric appliances at once.

## RV HOLDING TANKS

If you want to enjoy the conveniences of indoor plumbing while you're out in the wilderness, RV camping offers the perfect solution. But when you're not hooked up to a water supply, that faucet has to pull from somewhere.

Here's a basic rundown of the holding tanks under your RV. **In all cases, you'll want to keep an eye on the tanks' levels** -- to keep from running out, in the case of potable water, or overflowing (yikes!) in the case of waste.

### POTABLE WATER

Your RV's source of clean water is an underbody holding tank which you should always empty, clean, and sanitize before and after your trip.

When you connect to a city water source to fill the tank (or simply set up camp at a hookup site and let the running water flow), **be sure to use a certified potable water hose** to avoid strange odors and flavors. They're easy to spot, because they're always white in color!

### WASTEWATER

If your RV has a sink and a toilet, it has two different wastewater holding compartments.

**Black water** is the drainage from the toilet, which, obviously, includes human waste. **Gray water** is the drainage from the kitchen and bathroom sinks, and possibly the shower if you have one.

All wastewater should be eliminated into the sewer system at a campground or city dump station. When draining your RV's sewer lines, it's important to flush approved commercial chemicals into your black water holding tank to help alleviate odors and break down solid waste.

## CAMPGROUNDS

Commercial campgrounds specifically set up for RVs can be found in just about every populated area in this country, and most have a wide range of amenities, activities, and things to do, from swimming pools to ice cream socials. You'll pay a nightly fee to park and possibly hook up to electricity, running water, and cable television; the price is almost never more than \$60 per night, and usually far cheaper.



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## NATIONAL AND STATE PARKS



When landscapes are so beautiful our government sets them aside specifically for public use and recreation, chances are they're worthy of a visit. And in many cases, national and state parks offer campers super-low nightly rates, or even free camping -- although many don't offer hookups.

## PUBLIC LAND



If you're willing to dry camp -- or "boondock," as seasoned RVers call it -- be on the lookout for unincorporated public land owned and managed by the BLM (Bureau of Land Management) or the Forest Service. To make sure you're not accidentally trespassing on private property, give the local office a call before you settle in for the night... and then, get ready for some of the deepest peace and quiet you'll ever experience.

## IMPORTANT SAFETY TIPS

While this list of safety concerns is by no means exhaustive, here are a few important items to keep an eye on.



### CARBON MONOXIDE

Perhaps the most serious danger of your RV or any vehicle, carbon monoxide is a byproduct of the combustion process that occurs in your engine and generator. It's colorless, odorless, and deadly -- which is why it's imperative to have a working carbon monoxide detector in your rig.

### CLEARANCE

Yes, figuring out how tall your RV is before you head out on the road seems basic... but you'll thank yourself for looking into it ahead of time when you're speeding toward a tunnel with no escape route in sight.

## **TIRES AND MAINTENANCE**

Just like any other vehicle, you want to ensure your RV is roadworthy before you find yourself in trouble. Make sure to check your tire pressure, alignment, and other important systems every time you plan to get in the driver's seat, and keep up with maintenance and repair necessities as they arise. It'll only get worse and more expensive if you put it off!

## **AWNINGS AND PARAPHERNALIA**

Many large RVs come equipped with exterior awnings to help create a working patio and shade the windows, and you'll doubtless acquire other outdoor goodies like lights, lawn chairs, and mats. Make sure all these items are properly stowed before you leave camp. Don't forget about your satellite antenna or the automatic stairway into your main entrance -- you wouldn't believe how many campers have a story about driving down the highway with their stairs out!

## **EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS**

While you don't need to equip your RV like a bunker, it's a good idea to have some extra drinking water and nonperishable food on board. You'll also want basic tools for minor fixes, including flat tires, as well as a first aid kit -- and you might consider a satellite tracker if you're headed into the wild where cellphones don't work.

# READY TO GET GOING ON YOUR RV ADVENTURE?



This guide is just the start to the wonderful world of RV camping. There's always someplace new to see and something new to learn! And if you're ever feeling lost or overwhelmed, don't panic: There's a wealth of information available, straight from the RV camping community -- a diverse group of friendly, knowledgeable adventurers like you.

When you need a helping hand, don't be afraid knock on your neighbor's door. Say hello, and offer to share a beer, hot chocolate, or a tale over your campfire. After all, one of the best parts about exploring a new place is all the wonderful people you meet there.

Happy travels!