

Getting started

Buying your first motorhome

■ WORDS Mark Sutcliffe

You can afford more holidays and trips if you buy a motorhome. We're here to help with where to buy, what to buy, how to keep it safe, and how to drive it away!

A PLUMMETING POUND, paltry interest rates, exorbitant parking fees and hidden charges on so-called 'budget' flights – no wonder so many people are thinking about investing their hard-earned holiday budget in a motorhome.

Many people buy a motorhome with the intention of using it for just a few weeks a year, but new possibilities quickly open up and soon it becomes a way of life. Take the plunge and after a few dry runs, you'll almost certainly have the confidence to start planning your first big adventure.

Well, we're here to help. Over the next few pages, we'll give you all the essential information you'll need to choose and buy the right motorhome, plan your first trip and get the most out of one of the best investments you'll ever make!

Where can I buy one?

After checking new prices in *Motor Caravan's* Buying guide (page 93), the obvious choice is to visit your local dealer for new and used vans, but this won't give you the widest selection. There are advantages to 'shopping local' as you'll need to get your van serviced every year and driving halfway across the country isn't ideal – although many large dealerships offer camping facilities, so you can stay in your van overnight.

The internet is a fantastic resource for researching the vast array of new and used motorhomes out there, but we'd recommend that you inspect any motorhome before making an offer on it and if possible, take it for a test drive.

If you're fortunate enough to be able to buy new, you'll have a wider choice of vehicles open to you, but remember that if you want to take delivery in spring, you need to be ordering now – particularly if you opt for a European brand – as three-to-six-month lead times are normal.

If you're buying used, most dealers usually have a selection of secondhand motorhomes on their forecourts and it's also worth checking the classified adverts in this magazine, local papers and online.

Don't rush into it though – doing your homework will increase the likelihood of finding a motorhome with a layout that suits



Head for a show to see a wide range of vans

your needs without paying over the odds.

Perhaps the best way to gauge the market is to visit a show: at the NEC in February or October, or one of the outdoor shows that take place throughout the year. These offer an opportunity to compare lots of different makes and models – just beware of getting caught up in 'show fever' and signing up for a 'never to be repeated' deal without shopping around first.

What type of motorhome should I buy?

Motorhomes come in all shapes and sizes – ranging from compact van-based single-berth vehicles to massive American RVs.

Your choice of motorhome will be determined by your budget and you are

unlikely to get anything usable for less than a couple of thousand pounds.

Motorhomes broadly fall into two categories: van conversions – basically delivery vans with beds, furniture and habitation equipment slotted in, and coachbuilts – a van cab and chassis with an insulated caravan body built on top.

Van conversions come in three or four sizes, ranging from high-roof long wheelbase vans with accommodation to rival larger coachbuilts, down to one- or two-berth microvans that fit into a garage.

Coachbuilts come in a huge range of shapes and sizes and their big advantages are living space and extra insulation, which make them most practical for year-round use. The A-class is king, as it dispenses with the cab in favour of a seamless, integrated coachbuilt body.

However, the type of layout is more important than the style of vehicle and although the latest van conversions offer more choice than ever, on the used market you're more likely to find a coachbuilt with your perfect layout.

How can I keep my precious van safe?

Like car insurance, motorhome insurance is a legal requirement for driving on UK roads. Statistically, motorhomes are less likely to be involved in an accident than a car, so

TYPE OF MOTORHOMES



Microvan

Pros Cheap, fuel economy, car-like to drive, will fit in most garages and driveways

Cons Very basic accommodation, unsuitable for lengthy tours, cold in winter

Expect to pay £5000 to £25,000



Camper

Pros Cool, will double as a family car, easy to drive, good fuel economy, good resale values

Cons Cramped accommodation, limited touring ability, expensive to buy

Expect to pay £5000 to £45,000

Dealerships and motorhome shows are brilliant for some happy browsing



despite the high replacement value of a motorhome, insurance premiums should be on a par with a family car.

Motor caravans generally cover lower mileages than most cars and many insurers place a mileage ceiling on their policies. So if you are planning an extended tour of Europe – check on these restrictions.

In the event of an accident, motorhome repairs can be costly and time-consuming, so the best policies provide a replacement vehicle while yours is off the road.

Also do check whether the policy covers for your personal belongings, which could add up to several thousand pounds if your van is stolen on holiday.

You may get cheaper quotes from non-specialist insurers, but it's important to be satisfied that they are capable of meeting the motor caravanner's special needs, so check the small print very carefully.

When it comes to theft deterrents, the gold standard is a tracking device, which should guarantee you get your van back



Van conversion

Pros Fairly compact, easy to drive, reasonable fuel consumption

Cons Can be cold in winter, only a few layout options

Expect to pay From £15,000 to £55,000



Low profile

Pros Good looks and competitive prices, good ride and handling characteristics.

Cons Few multi-berth layouts, less storage than full-size coachbuilts

Expect to pay £20,000 to £50,000



Classic coachbuilt

Pros Space, plenty of layout options, loads of storage, flexibility, affordability

Cons Pedestrian looks, poor performance, can feel unwieldy to drive

Expect to pay £12,000 to £45,000

EXPERIENCE TAUGHT ME...

'Be organised with your packing, so that you can relax when you get to your destination. Make a list of all the items you need to take – from food to flat bedsheets. Type it up and keep it so that every trip you can tick things off, add new things and delete things you never really needed.'

Tim Cowhig, Hymer



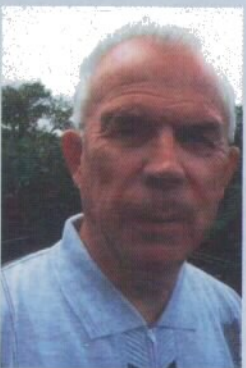
'Practise filling your van with water, hooking up the electric and connecting the gas, in daylight. Don't be afraid to ask other motorhomers for advice; someday someone will ask you!'

Gary Sykes, Chausson



'The old maxim "The rest of your days depends upon the rest of your nights" is never more true than when you're motorhoming. Take time to measure the bed/bunk widths being offered and think whether or not you would be comfortable. Lie on the bed to check that it is long enough.'

Dave Bourton, Auto-Sleepers



'Before going away in your lovely new motorhome for the first time, spend a night in it on your own driveway, or somewhere very close to home, making sure you try everything to make sure it works properly and that you understand how things work!'

Richard Knisely Marpole, Dethleffs



When getting to know a new van the best safety tip is: slow down!

after it's been stolen, but anything that makes your motorhome harder to steal should be considered.

Some insurers insist on immobilisers and alarms – especially for more expensive models – and if you invest in a tracking system, you should get significant premium discounts. You might also get a discount for fitting a reversing camera, as low-speed shunts while manoeuvring at close quarters are the most common accidents.

Various extras, such as breakdown cover, may also be included in your policy, but check the terms and conditions. If you intend to use the motorhome abroad, does the breakdown cover extend to the Continent? Does it cover repatriation so you could get home in the event of accident or illness? For example, if the primary driver sprained an ankle in Spain and couldn't drive, would the secondary driver be happy to drive the van back home? As with all insurance products, shop around, get plenty of quotes and compare like with like.

Driving your motorhome

If you're completely new to motorhoming, then a motorhome manoeuvring course is a good idea. Both the Caravan Club and the Camping and Caravanning Club run regular courses at locations nationwide, so novices can learn in a relaxed and friendly place.

Participants use their own vehicles to learn the basics in small, informal groups and the courses include sessions in a private car park off the highway as well as practical road work.

The latest van-derived motorhomes are easy to drive. The driving position is elevated, but the steering wheel, gearshift and clutch are all very car-like. The main difference between a van and a car is the size and once you're used to the dimensions, most modern motorhomes are actually very pleasant and relaxing to drive.

Speed limits are the same for cars except on unrestricted single carriageways, where motorhomes over 3050kg are limited to

50mph. For the first few hundred miles, there's a simple rule to becoming safely acquainted with your new van: slow down.

Light commercial vehicles aren't designed to be thrown about like a sports car in a race. Treat it as if you're learning to drive all over again and you shouldn't develop any bad habits. It will also pay dividends at the pumps because while modern vans will return quite respectable fuel consumption if driven carefully, if you accelerate too hard – especially when fully laden – your fuel consumption will go up dramatically.

SPEED LIMITS FOR MOTORHOMES OVER 3050KG

Road	Speed
Motorways	70mph
Dual carriageways	60mph
Single carriageways	50mph
Built-up areas	30mph

Learn to love your wing mirrors and rely on them to tell you what's going on alongside and immediately behind you.

The best exercise to build confidence in the mirrors for low speed manoeuvring is to find a quiet car park, and place a traffic cone (or another obstacle) 15 yards behind the van and practise reversing either side of it. Start with the cone visible in the mirror on one side of the van and then slowly reverse and steer until it appears in the other mirror. If still in doubt, buy a reversing camera!

Pitching the right way

Britain is blessed with more than five thousand campsites so wherever you roam, you're never far away from somewhere to park up and bed down for the night.

Many new motorhomers spend the first night in their van next to the dealership where they bought it or on a campsite down the road, so if anything doesn't work, help is near. This option gives extra peace of mind and many dealers encourage you to