

Trailer Towing

by Taylor Wilson



Nothing could be simpler...you go, it follows, right? Well, if you've done your homework, that's what happens. Like many family campers, you will find that a time comes when your car, truck or van is full to bursting with people, pets and gear. Or perhaps you're just tired of sleeping on the ground, and you've been jealously eyeing those comfortable campers through the window of your aging nylon tent, wishing you could join them in their regally appointed pop-tops and travel trailers. Or maybe you've found that the fish are just too far from shore for you to cast to, and inflatable boats make you nervous, especially when there are fishing hooks around. It's time for a trailer. There are a lot of things to consider, but if you make sure you know the rules, have the right equipment and know your equipment, a trailer will make for more comfortable camping (and more elbow room inside your vehicle).

"Towables are where it's at," says Don Sneyd, manager at Ruston RV in Burlington, Ontario. Speaking of the recent rise in popularity of the light-weight camping trailers, he adds, "People are going to own a van or a sport utility vehicle, anyway. You don't have to do anything more than just buy a trailer. Then when you get where you're going, you have your vehicle. You have mobility after you park the RV."

In Ontario your trailer must be licensed by the Ministry of Transportation (MTO), just like your car. When you register your trailer, you receive a licence plate and a vehicle permit for it, as with a passenger vehicle. In addition, there are required safety devices, outlined by the ministry. All trailers must be equipped with lights and reflectors, the standards for which depend on the size of the unit. Standards may vary from province to province. The weight of the trailer (its total weight, not just the part transferred to the tow vehicle at the hitch, called the "tongue weight") determines what type of braking system (if any) is required, as well as what type of trailer hitch is needed to attach it to your vehicle. In Ontario brakes are required for trailers over

3,000 lb. (1,360 kg). There are varying classes of hitches, which are rated in categories for increasingly larger loads. All trailers require two means of connection between the unit and the tow vehicle. With gooseneck-type trailers with a ball-and-socket hitch (by far the most common), safety chains are required, each rated for the gross weight of the trailer. They criss-cross under the tongue so that they support the trailer if there is a disconnection of the hitch.

When shopping for a trailer, you must first consider the vehicle that you're going to use to tow it. Consult the manufacturer's specifications for the vehicle that you own, making sure that you're viewing the figures for the vehicle you own *as is*. Most vehicles have a variety of configurations, with widely differing towing capacities that are affected by engine and driveline components, suspension and tires. If you have questions, ask the vehicle dealer.

If you're choosing a new or used vehicle at the same time you're buying a trailer, you have the luxury of ensuring that all your needs are met. Make sure that it "first and foremost fits the family that you're going to have in it," says Sneyd. "This leads most people to a van, SUV or quad cab truck. Make sure it has the capacity to pull what you're going to buy." It's a good idea to consult your RV dealership to make sure that the vehicle is going to meet the needs of towing your selected RV. There are considerations beyond the manufacturer's statistics, and a reputable RV dealer can help you ensure a good match.

"Equipment wise, a tow package is certainly nice to get right from the factory," explains Sneyd. "It gives you extra cooling, and in most cases extra DC power—a larger battery and a larger alternator for running more lights and appliances and charging two batteries, one on the trailer and one in the vehicle. Usually it gives you a transmission and engine oil cooler, which increases the capacity to run cool since you're making the whole tow vehicle work harder."

The number-one piece of equipment in towing is the hitch. A reputable RV dealer is usually best qualified to help you purchase an appropriate hitch and set up your vehicle for towing. "We spend a lot of time analyzing what people are going to pull, how many people are going to be in the vehicle and what the gross combined towing capacity of the vehicle is," says Sneyd. "Is it front wheel drive? For instance, if you have a front-wheel drive and you put 250 lb. on a ball four feet behind the axle, you're taking a lot of weight off the front of the vehicle, effectively reducing not just steering but braking power. We'd put a load-levelling hitch on in that situation...we can generally get a vehicle to perform as well with a trailer on the back as it did before you ever hooked anything up to it."

No matter what you're pulling, if you pull it correctly, you'll enrich your camping experience, safely freeing up room in your vehicle for its intended purpose—carrying you and those you love. Note that it is illegal to tow a trailer with people in it. There are numerous sources for information about purchasing an RV, many of which are available at your local public library. Information about regulations and safety procedures for those who wish to tow trailers in Ontario is available from a number of sources. *The Official Driver's Handbook*, published by the Queen's printer for Ontario, contains a section on trailers. Information is available from the MTO Web site, with a special section on pulling a trailer at <http://www.mto.gov.on.ca/english/safety/quicknotes/trailer.htm>. If you have questions about equipment and the practice of towing, make sure you consult your local Ministry of Transportation Drivers and Vehicles centre, as many violations are offences under the Highway Traffic Act and carry fines in addition to endangering you and others on the road.

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