



First-Time Travel Trailer Buyer Checklist

7 things to check before you fall in love with the wrong camper.

Use this before you tour, negotiate, or sign.

Buying your first travel trailer should be exciting, not confusing. Use this checklist before you shop, before you put money down, and before excitement makes the decision for you.

How to use it

- ☐ Fill in your tow vehicle numbers before shopping.
- ☐ Use the budget page to price the full first-year cost.
- ☐ Score each trailer honestly before emotion takes over.
- ☐ Bring the dealer question sheet to every walkthrough.
- ☐ Pause if any red flag shows up.

1. Check Your Tow Vehicle First

Do this before you fall in love with a floorplan. A trailer that looks perfect can still be the wrong match if the real loaded weight is too close to your limits.

☐	Year, make, and model	☐	Brake controller setup
☐	Engine size	☐	Passenger weight
☐	Tow rating	☐	Cargo weight
☐	Payload rating from the driver door sticker	☐	Trailer GVWR
☐	Hitch rating	☐	Estimated loaded tongue weight

Important note

Do not shop by dry weight alone. Dry weight does not include gear, propane, battery, water, food, clothes, tools, dishes, camping chairs, bikes, cargo, or the way your family actually packs. Better question: after verifying every rating, does the estimated loaded setup stay within all applicable vehicle, hitch, tire, and trailer limits?

Tow Vehicle Quick-Check Worksheet

Tow vehicle	
Tow rating	
Payload rating	
Hitch rating	
Passengers and cargo estimate	
Trailer GVWR	
Estimated loaded tongue weight	

2. Know the Real Budget

The monthly payment is only one part of the first-year cost. Build the trip-ready budget before you decide what feels affordable. If the camper only works when nothing goes wrong, pause before a deposit.

☐	Down payment	☐	Starter camping gear
☐	Monthly payment	☐	Storage
☐	Taxes	☐	Maintenance
☐	Registration	☐	Repairs
☐	Insurance	☐	Campground fees
☐	Dealer fees	☐	Fuel cost increase
☐	Hitch or weight distribution hitch	☐	Winterization
☐	Brake controller if needed	☐	Warranty or service plans

3. Pick the Right Floorplan

A great floorplan works on a rainy day, at bedtime, and during a roadside stop. Think through the small daily moments, not just the showroom feeling.

☐	Where will everyone sleep?	☐	Can you access the fridge at a road stop with the trailer safely parked?
☐	Is the bed easy to use?	☐	Can you access the bathroom with the slide closed?
☐	Do you need bunks?	☐	Is there enough storage?
☐	Does the dinette actually fit your family?	☐	Is there enough rainy-day space?
☐	Is the bathroom usable?	☐	Where will pets sleep?
☐	Is there enough kitchen space?	☐	Where will dirty shoes, towels, and bags go?

Floorplan rule

Picture everyone inside the camper at night, tired, hungry, and frustrated. If the layout still works, it may be a good fit.

4. Compare New vs Used

Neither path is automatically better. The right choice depends on your budget, risk tolerance, and how much support you want after the sale.

☐	New: warranty coverage	☐	Used red flag: soft floors
☐	New: dealer support	☐	Used red flag: roof damage
☐	New: current features	☐	Used red flag: cracked seals
☐	New: fewer unknowns	☐	Used red flag: old tires
☐	New: easier financing	☐	Used red flag: musty smell
☐	Used: lower price	☐	Used red flag: appliance issues
☐	Used: less depreciation	☐	Used red flag: slide problems
☐	Used: more value for the money	☐	Used red flag: poor maintenance records
☐	Used red flag: water stains	☐	Used red flag: signs of leaks around windows or roof edges

5. Ask the Dealer Better Questions

A good dealer should help you slow down, understand the numbers, and avoid a bad fit. Bring these questions with you.

☐	What is the trailer's GVWR?	☐	What warranty applies?
☐	What is the dry weight?	☐	What does the delivery walkthrough include?
☐	What is the cargo capacity?	☐	What should I buy before my first trip?
☐	What is the estimated loaded tongue weight?	☐	What service support is available after purchase?
☐	What hitch setup do I need?	☐	Can I access the bathroom and fridge with the slide closed?
☐	Will I need a brake controller?	☐	What are the most common issues buyers have with this model?
☐	What fees are included?	☐	What would make this trailer a bad fit for someone?
☐	What fees are not included?		

Best question

Ask: What would make this trailer a bad fit for someone? It makes the salesperson explain the limits of the unit, not just the shiny parts.

Dealer Visit Notes

Trailer model	
Price and fees quoted	
Weight numbers to verify	
Hitch or brake controller recommendation	
Warranty and service notes	
What to verify before signing	

6. Inspect Before You Leave

Do not rush the delivery walkthrough. Ask questions, take notes, and record videos if allowed.

☐	Roof seals	☐	Toilet
☐	Exterior seams	☐	Shower
☐	Tires	☐	Sinks
☐	Tire date codes	☐	Fridge
☐	Lights	☐	Stove
☐	Brakes	☐	Microwave
☐	Slide operation	☐	Outlets
☐	Awning	☐	Battery
☐	Stabilizers	☐	Propane system
☐	Entry steps	☐	Smoke detector
☐	Door locks	☐	Carbon monoxide detector
☐	Windows	☐	Fire extinguisher
☐	AC	☐	Keys
☐	Furnace	☐	Manuals
☐	Water pump	☐	Warranty paperwork
☐	Water heater		

7. Watch for Red Flags

Pause before buying if the deal starts feeling confusing, rushed, or too dependent on hope.

☐	The trailer is too heavy for your tow vehicle	☐	The roof or seals look neglected
☐	Nobody can clearly explain the weight numbers	☐	You have not compared similar floorplans
☐	The payment feels stretched	☐	You are buying mostly based on emotion
☐	Fees are unclear	☐	You do not understand the warranty
☐	You feel rushed	☐	You do not know what gear you need for your first trip
☐	You notice water damage		

Final rule

Excitement is good. Rushing is expensive.

Fit Scorecard

Score each area from 1 to 5. Be honest. A lower score is not failure - it is useful information before you spend real money.

Fit Area	1	2	3	4	5
Tow vehicle fit					
Budget comfort					
Floorplan fit					
Storage					
Bathroom usability					
Sleeping setup					
Dealer confidence					
Delivery readiness					
Overall confidence					

Score guide

35-45 points: fewer unresolved fit concerns. 25-34 points: review weak areas carefully. Under 25 points: pause before a deposit. A total never overrides a failed towing, condition, budget, or safety check.

Final Pre-Purchase Checklist

☐	My tow vehicle numbers have been checked
☐	I know the trailer's GVWR
☐	I know the estimated loaded tongue weight
☐	I understand the full cost beyond the payment
☐	I know what fees are included
☐	I know what warranty applies
☐	I have compared at least 2-3 similar floorplans
☐	I understand the hitch setup I need
☐	I know what starter gear I need
☐	I have a delivery-day inspection plan
☐	I feel confident, not rushed

Have 1-3 Actual Listings?

Use the Trailer Shortlist Review before a deposit. Smart Trailer Buyer compares one tow vehicle and up to three public listings, then returns one written comparison with fit tradeoffs, missing facts, questions to verify, and your clearest next step.

Founding price: \$99. Educational decision support - not an inspection or towing approval.

See the review: smarttrailerbuyer.com/shortlist-review

Preview the sample: smarttrailerbuyer.com/shortlist-review#sample

Buyer Notes

Top trailer candidate

Backup trailer candidate

Tow or payload question to verify

Budget question to verify

Dealer follow-up question

Next walkthrough date

Disclaimer: This checklist is for educational purposes only. Always verify tow ratings, payload, trailer specifications, pricing, financing, warranty terms, safety requirements, and legal requirements with the appropriate vehicle manufacturer, trailer manufacturer, dealer, lender, insurer, and qualified professionals.