

Shopping for an RV



I RV Manufacturers, Brands, and Models

There are hundreds of brands of RVs out there. Most are made under the umbrella of one of three big parent companies, but that doesn't really affect the day-to-day operations or quality of an individual brand. Many manufacturers sell similar models, but the devil is in the details, as we'll get into in the upcoming "What to Look For" section.

When you look at RVs online or in person, it's easy to get overwhelmed by the options and they will often start to blur together. Hopefully, by this point, you have an idea of what you are interested in, so you can put all of your focus on that.

You may hear a bad thing about one brand or a good thing about another, but it's important to realize that all brands are going to have issues from time to time. Listen to those comments, but take them with a grain of salt. Some brands sell a wide range of products—from entry-level travel trailers to \$600,000 motorhomes—so not all their RVs are going to be the same.

RV manufacturers now have a unified model-year changeover that takes place during the summer months. But new floor plans are added or discontinued at any time. Motorhomes are often built on a van or truck chassis that's one model year older than the RV. For example, a 2022 Class B campervan could be built on a 2021 Mercedes-Benz chassis.

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I Where to Look

Now that you have the beginnings of an idea about the types of RVs that might suit you, it's time to start RV shopping. This phase can be a lot of fun, but it can also be a lot of work, especially if you're looking for something very specific. Let's run down the options of where you can look at RVs.

Manufacturer Websites

On manufacturer websites, you can dream and learn about the possibilities available, and get some info about what that manufacturer thinks sets them apart. It can be a bit overwhelming since there are so many different manufacturers, but it's the best place to start to get accurate information about every model.

Some brands have search tools that let you select the features you want and narrow things down a bit. They often offer 3D walkthroughs and videos to give you a feel for the unit and all of its features.

When you're scrolling through the different floor plans on a manufacturer's website, notice that some are labeled as "Dealer Stock Only," which means that they can only be found on a dealership's lot. Sometimes that means a dealer has an exclusive agreement with the brand, and you can't order them. Sometimes it means that the floor plan has been discontinued.

RV Dealerships

A visit to an RV dealership is a good next step. Most dealerships carry many different brands, but they often specialize in a certain type of unit. Some dealerships only sell trailers. Some focus on campervans or Class A motorhomes. Dealers in the same region usually won't sell the same brands, meaning it's not so easy to just select a reputable dealer and go from there.



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RV Dealerships (Continued)

When you visit a dealership lot, some will talk with you and ask you about your needs, then take you through models they think will be a good fit. Others let you tour at your own pace. A good dealer can help you hone in on your budget and needs and point you toward suitable units.

Before you head over to a dealership, check out its website to see what's available and compare pricing with other dealerships across the country.

Consider researching dealerships outside of your region. It's very common for people to travel long distances to get the unit they want, especially if it's a pricier model. You can make a road trip out of traveling to a few different dealerships in the region that you've scoped out online or even fly if it's farther away.

RV Shows

Dealerships often participate in RV Shows, usually at convention centers or fairgrounds, where you can see lots of RVs from competing brands in one large venue. You can even purchase rigs on-site, and often get show discounts on prices. Some shows are fairly small with just a few dealers, and some are massive with well over 1,000 RVs and manufacturer representatives to answer questions. America's Largest RV Show® in Hershey, Pennsylvania, takes place every September and features more than 1,200 RVs from 30 manufacturers. The Florida RV Supershow is another popular RV shopping event that takes place every January in Tampa at the Florida State Fairgrounds.

RV Shows are a way to quickly get an idea of what brands speak to you and which features you like, but make sure to take a look at the show's website in advance to see who is showing up. Sometimes there might be only trailers at an RV show, and you'll be disappointed if you planned on looking at motorhomes.

Plan on spending a full day at an RV show, and get there early before the crowds. Wear comfortable shoes, sunscreen (if it's outdoors), have a plan of what you want to look at, and take notes and pictures. After a long day of RV shopping, things can start to blend together.

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Online Sources

Blogs, YouTube, and social media platforms can be great places to see and hear reviews of different RVs through the eyes of experienced owners. Lots of dealerships do video walkthroughs of units on their lots, and RV owners will often share walkthrough videos of the unit they own.

Social forums and groups are full of owners of the brand or model you are interested in. Join and ask questions to get real feedback from owners. Maybe you'll hear that lots of people have a problem with a certain unit. Maybe that problem isn't a big deal to you. You'll also see how people use their RVs and organize their stuff inside.

Finding Used RVs

If you're looking for a used RV, you have several options. There are major RV listing websites where dealers and the general public list used RVs for sale, like RVTrader.com. Facebook Marketplace has become popular for listing RVs for sale, while Craigslist is used less, but is still worth looking at.

Dealers usually have a selection of used units, and some have consignment stores that only sell used RVs.

Be very wary of scams with online listings—if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. We'll talk more about spotting potential scams in Chapter 5.



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I What to Look For

Now that you have a grasp of where to look, you can start your search for a model that fits your needs.

Floor Plan

Let's start with the floor plan. This is probably the area that excites you the most, but it's far from the most important thing. Lots of manufacturers make similar floor plans—resist the temptation to just pick the cheapest one.

Every part of RV design is an exercise in trade-offs. More counter space in the kitchen will inevitably make the RV longer or sacrifice space in a living area. An outdoor kitchen usually means less interior storage.

Make sure the floor plan solves your camping needs. If you travel extensively, you might want room to hang out when it rains for days, or you might want extra storage for your wardrobe and seasonal needs. Pay attention to what it's like to sit down and watch TV. Imagine what it's like to sleep in the bed. Consider whether it's truly important to have room for guests. Can they just stay in a cabin at the campground? Can you entertain outside? Do you need a workspace for remote work? Will it be annoying to pull out a sofa every night for the kids to sleep on, or should you be considering a bunkhouse?

If you're seeing the RV in person, sit in the seats, lie in the beds, and imagine camping in that space. Lots of RV beds are shorter than normal. Do you fit? Open up the storage and decide whether that particular storage space is practical to get into every day.

Ask the dealer to show you the unit with the slides closed, so you can see what's accessible when you make a short stop at a rest area or fuel station. Often the bedroom, bathroom, or kitchen will be entirely inaccessible. But again, that's a trade-off to make certain layouts feasible.



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Cargo Carrying Capacity

Another important consideration is cargo carrying capacity. This should be listed on a sticker somewhere on the RV or on the manufacturer's website. It can vary greatly from unit to unit, even within the same class and size. If you don't need to take a lot of stuff with you on the road, this might not matter as much, but for extensive travel, you'll want the ability to carry more stuff. This includes your food, water, outdoor furniture, bikes—anything that will go into the RV.

It can be disappointing to find a model that has the perfect layout for you, but little room to carry the things you wish to bring along. But you want to make sure you have space for everything you need. Where will the bikes go? Is the fridge big enough for your family's food needs?

Tank Sizes and Boondocking

If you plan to camp mostly in RV parks with full hookups, you might not care so much about tank size—but if you plan to visit a lot of state and national parks, you'll often be camping with water and electricity but no sewer. Larger holding tanks really come in handy in those situations. If you plan to camp with no services often, you'll want to have a decent-sized fresh water tank as well. And you might want to consider solar panels, more battery capacity, and larger propane tanks.

Electrical Service

RVs come with either 30-amp or 50-amp electrical service. Thirty-amp service can generally run two “big draw” devices at a time, like an A/C unit and a microwave. Fifty-amp service is really two legs of 50-amp power, meaning you have 100 amps, which is enough to run virtually anything in the RV at the same time.

Both can be plugged into either service with adapters, but a 50-amp RV will be limited on 30-amp service to running just a few things. Most RVs that are big enough to have two A/C units will have 50-amp service.



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Refrigeration

Refrigerators are an important consideration for your power needs. RVs usually come with one of three types of fridges.

- A **“residential” refrigerator** is exactly what it sounds like—it’s the type you’d find in a stationary home. These use the most power and require a generator or lots of battery capacity with an inverter to run. They’ll drain a standard 100-amp-hour deep cycle battery in just a few hours.
- A **two-way fridge** can be run off of campsite power or propane. It can run for a very long time on just a little propane, so it’s a great option for off-grid camping. Unfortunately, it’s much smaller inside than a residential fridge, and it takes up to 24 hours to get down to cool temps.
- More and more RVs are coming with **direct current (DC) compressor fridges**. These look a lot like a standard residential fridge but are built to run off your batteries. They sip power and can run continuously with a couple of solar panels and a battery upgrade, so they’re a great option that gives you the best of both worlds.

Build Quality

Probably the most important consideration is build quality, which is also one of the hardest things to assess. Generally, corrugated aluminum-sided trailers are more “entry-level,” meaning they’re going to be more affordable, but are built mostly out of wood. Flat-sided RVs are usually built with aluminum-framed walls and more durable laminated fiberglass skins. Those walls can be of varying thicknesses, offering better insulation in colder climates, but adding more weight. Enclosed and heated underbellies help keep your tanks and water lines from freezing in colder weather.

Most RVs at the same price point are built with similar methods, and many of the components are the same in the vast majority of RVs, so it’s important that your manufacturer stands by its warranty. Understand what the warranty covers, and realize that many warranties do not cover full-time living, which doesn’t necessarily mean every day of the year. Some manufacturers consider 180 days or even less as “full-time.” Find out from other owners what their experience has been with a brand’s warranty service.

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I Shopping Used

If you're shopping used, some RV warranties are not transferable, so you'll likely be buying "as-is." This comes with its own set of challenges. You'll want to make sure that the RV has been properly maintained.



Ask to see any records of service, like oil changes and re-sealing the roof. Just the fact that someone keeps records is often a good sign.

- Look carefully for soft spots in the floor and the roof.
- Make sure the slides come in and out evenly.
- Look under sinks and behind sofas for signs of leaks.
- Look at the bases of walls and under mattresses for mold.
- Make sure the tires are in good condition with no cracks, plenty of tread, and are less than 5 years old.
- Insist on seeing the unit connected to power and water in order to make sure everything works and there are no leaks.
- You can also have any RV inspected by a mechanic, an RV technician, or a certified RV inspector, who will pore over the unit for hours to make sure everything is in tip-top shape, just like a home inspector.
- If you're considering a used motorhome, it's beneficial to get an oil sample.



There are several mail-in services that will take the sample and get back you in very short order with info about any contamination and overall condition of your engine. The engine in a diesel motorhome can cost over \$20,000 to replace or rebuild if it wasn't maintained properly, and oil analysis is the best way to know if things aren't running right.

In the end, remember that there's no perfect RV, just the best one for your needs. And your needs may change over time, so finding that "forever" RV can be a challenge. It's often best to not worry about the future and figure out what's best for you right now. Finally, if you're looking at trailers, an essential consideration is whether your tow vehicle can handle it. That's in our next chapter. If you've decided on a motorhome, you can skip ahead to Chapter 5.

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I Related Reading

[How to Research Buying an RV](#)

[Everything You Need to Know About RV Tires](#)

