



The Camping and Caravanning Club
The Friendly Club

Trailer tents and folding campers. Advice from The Camping and Caravanning Club.

Choosing a trailer tent or folding camper

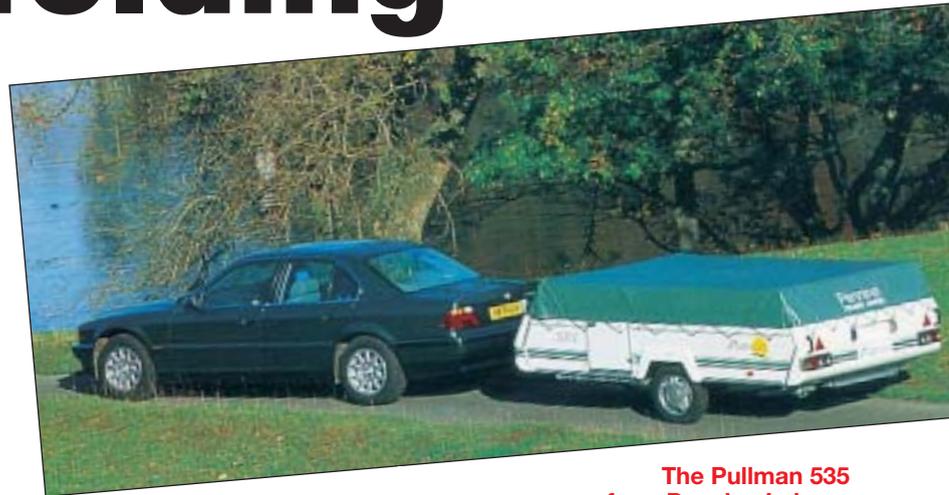
If you are looking to buy a trailer tent or folding camper there are a number of factors that you need to take into account.

Is your car big enough to tow it? Where will you store it? Will it be large enough to accommodate your family? Should you buy new or secondhand?

Trailer tents and folding campers can cost a lot of money – in some cases as much as a car or caravan.

These and many other questions will need to be answered before you part with your money.

Safety is of prime importance. Keeping your unit well maintained is essential to ensure that you tow safely when on the road and that you



The Pullman 535 from Pennine Leisure

are well protected from all types of weather when on site.

Here we offer some advice on what to look for when deciding on the most appropriate unit for your needs, to ensure its suitability for your car and how to look after it once you have made your choice.

People buy a trailer tent or folding camper for many reasons. Often they have been camping in a tent but their equipment has got bigger, bulkier and heavier and they are now looking for an alternative type of unit.

They may have been caravanners but now find it more difficult to tow, handle and store their 'van or they may just miss the uniqueness of camping under canvas.

What ever the reason it is important that they choose the right unit that suits both them and their families needs.

There are two main types of units – trailer tents and folding campers.

Each term is often used by manufacturers to distinguish between two different types of models.

So which is which?

A Montage trailer tent from Trigano before its awning is added.



Trailer tent

This term is applied to those models where the walls are unfolded from the trailer body and then pegged out to the ground.

As they have walls and a roof made from a fabric material, ie canvas or other man-made material, on site they usually resemble a large frame tent and often only the sight of the hitch protruding from one wall gives the game away.

These are considered to be the traditional trailer tent as at one time there were no folding campers.

They are usually cheaper when compared with a folding camper but can be more complicated and time consuming to set up/fold down.

This Data Sheet is one of a series produced by The Camping and Caravanning Club on key camping and caravanning topics.

These are available as downloadable Acrobat files, free to all campers and caravanners.

This Data Sheet originally appeared in *Camping and Caravanning*, the Club's monthly magazine.

It is just one of the many benefits of membership. Club members also benefit from access to over 90 UK Club Sites, Carefree, the Club's international travel service, and a wide range of other, exclusive Member Services.

You can join the Club on-line, or by calling 024 7685 6797, or at any of our UK Club Sites.

Folding camper



An optional awning or a sun canopy can be added to the Conway Cruiser folding camper.

Folding campers have fabric walls and a fabric roof over the bed areas and either a fabric roof or a solid hard top roof over the living area.

They are designed so that the bed area is supported by the trailer body eliminating the need for the canvas reaching the ground and the need to peg out. They usually cost more than a trailer tent and weigh heavier because of their stiffer structure.

For the owner who camps most weekends, folding campers are the most popular of the two types as the lack of pegging more than compensates for other disadvantages.

Folding campers should not be confused with

Why a trailer tent or folding camper?

Compared to other forms of camping, trailer tents offer some advantages.

- Off the ground sleeping area.
- Most offer a daytime lounge that is off the floor.
- Basic camping equipment, sleeping bags, cooker, crockery and cutlery need not be packed or unpacked for each trip.
- Ease of towing compared with a caravan, having less wind resistance, better rearward visibility and lower fuel costs.
- All models can be stored in a garage. Some can even be stored on their side so taking up less space.

There are some disadvantages.

- Speed when towing is limited to 50 mph on single carriageways and to 60 mph on dual carriageways and motorways, unless a lower limit is in place.
- When towing, the outside lane of a three or more lane motorway cannot be used.
- Crossing the Channel will be more expensive compared to taking a tent.
- A trailer tent can take longer to set up or fold down compared to a caravan or motor caravan. The time taken depends on the construction and design of the unit and whether you have to peg out the fabric or not.

folding caravans. Folding caravans have a similar on the road appearance to a folding camper but have walls and the roofs made from solid, rigid materials so when set up they look like the caravan they are.

Awnings

These can be used with both types of units. Many trailer tents are supplied with awnings as standard but are often an optional item with folding campers.

Awnings are useful to extend the available living area but carry the penalty of extra weight and bulk. They also have to be pegged out for stability.

When considering the merits of a basic unit to one with an awning you should find out how much longer it will take you to set up and fold down the awning. It will invariably be much longer than for the basic unit. If in doubt, ask for a demonstration.

If the unit comes with an awning as standard check that it can be detached from the main section. You may find it easier to carry it separately.



It looks like a family frame tent but this is the Pluma Iv trailer tent from Comanche.

Buying a new trailer tent or camper

What sort of trailer tent or folding camper you buy will depend upon many factors.

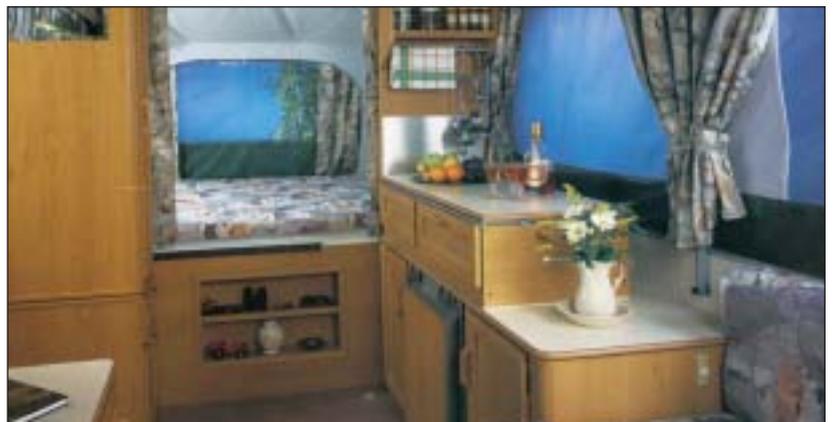
The most important one is price. Do you want to buy new or secondhand? Fix a budget and stick to it.

New units will cost anything from £1,600 for a small two-berth trailer tent to over £8,000 for a much larger eight-berth.

Do you have somewhere safe and convenient to store your unit? Some trailer tents can be stored on their side with the help of special side-storage brackets and wheels.

How many berths will you need? We suggest that you opt for a unit one size larger than you actually need. This will allow more space and may mean the difference between being cramped and having a relaxing holiday.

You will find plenty of room and luxury inside the modern trailer tent and folding camper.



Hire a trailer tent or folding camper before you buy

Before deciding to buy a trailer tent or folding camper you may wish to try one.

Trailer tents and folding campers can cost thousands of pounds so hiring one will help you decide whether a trailer tent or folding camper is for you.

You may only want to use the unit for your summer holidays or you may not have anywhere to store a model so hiring one may be the answer.

By hiring you will gain the benefit of the dealers' knowledge.

They are used to equipping all trailer tent/folding camper combinations and they will be able to supply you with a unit and other camping equipment to suit your needs.

Many hire companies also sell units both new and ex-hire.

To find your nearest hire specialist, try Yellow Pages or look in the classified adverts of the specialist press.

If you know someone who already camps, they may know of a local hire specialist.

Understanding weights

Kerb weight = weight of an empty car plus fuel and lubricants but with no people or luggage.

Unladen weight = weight of an empty car with no fuel, water, accumulators or tools.

Noseweight is the downward force on the tow ball.

The car's maximum is usually more critical than the trailers.

Ideally it should be no more than seven per cent of the trailer's maximum gross weight.

Maximum gross weight = the unladen weight plus the payload.

Unladen weight = the weight of the trailer as it leaves the factory with no optional equipment.

Payload = the weight of all personal items allowed to be carried in the trailer.

Some trailer tents offer extra berths using an underbed tent that lies underneath the main bedroom extensions.

When you view a trailer tent or folding camper erect and dismantle it yourself to make sure that you will cope with it once out on site. Reputable dealers will only be too pleased to show you how to go about it and to let you have a go.

A trailer tent with lots of canvas may need as much pegging out as a large frame tent.

Whether buying new or secondhand make sure that you obtain an instruction manual and that you understand it.

Another factor to consider is how far you will need to travel to visit your nearest dealer of the model or marque you are interested in.

Do they carry a good range of spares and are they authorised to undertake routine servicing and repairs?

Buying secondhand

Each year numerous trailer tents come on to the secondhand market via dealers or private sellers.

Units may be advertised in the Club's *Camping and Caravanning* magazine, the Trailer Tent and Folding Camper Group's own magazine, *The Silhouette*, or in local papers and other journals.

Before parting with your money they should be checked out to ensure that there are no problems.

What the Camping and Caravanning Club can do for you.

The Trailer Tent and Folding Camper Group (TTFCG) is a special section of the Camping and Caravanning Club. If you want to buy a trailer tent or folding camper the TTFCG can give you the independent advice you seek.

They can supply you with information on most trailer tents and folding campers that you are likely to see and also on some that are no longer made.

More details about the TTFCG are available from the Camping and Caravanning Club, Greenfields House, Westwood Way, Coventry CV4 8JH, tel: 024 7685 6797.

If you doubt your own expertise then take along a more qualified colleague to assist you to appraise the unit you are interested in.

Inspect the bodywork carefully for rust, water penetration, or damage. Examine for wear and tear on body panels, storage compartment lids, doors and catches. Check the main body hinges and frame poles and especially their attachments.

Have a look at the tyres for wear and make sure that the walls have no bulges, splits or show signs of cracking. It is best to take each wheel off to do this job and while they are off check that the wheel bearings are also in good condition.

Examine the canvas for signs of mildew or wear, particularly where it comes into contact with the frame or bodywork. Check corners and seams for fraying and water stains etc.

Operate the zips for free and full running. If mudwalls are fitted ensure that they are in good condition and free from splits or tears.

The windows should not be crazed, split or badly discoloured.

If the unit has a cooker connect the gas bottles and light the burners. Check that the flame is a healthy blue colour. If not the cooker may need a service.

Connect your car to the trailer and check the road lamps for condition and correct operation.

At the same time check the operation of the 12 volt electrical items, such as the water pump and lights, that may be fitted inside the trailer.

If mains electrics are included, ensure that the installation has been checked by a qualified electrician, and that the unit has a current certificate of electrical safety.

Folding campers with rigid wind-up roofs should be checked very carefully. The roof is raised using a set of pulley systems and repairs and replacements can be very expensive. Make sure you have the appropriate winding handle.

Wheel sizes

It is preferable to have wheels of at least 10ins diameter fitted with tyres suitable for prolonged road use at the speed that the trailer can be legally towed.

The rating of the tyres should be a minimum of four-ply. Some trailer tents in the past were fitted with 8ins wheels and these often had tyres of only two-ply rating. Those tyres are not designed

Keeping your unit maintained

When you take your trailer tent or folding camper on to the road it becomes a road vehicle.

To comply with legislation your unit must be in such a condition that it causes no danger to other road users.

Every time you go out check that the road brake and indicator lights are working.

Have your trailer tent or folding camper serviced at least every 12 months by a recognised service engineer.

The service should include at least an inspection of the trailers brakes, towing hitch, wheel bearings, tyres and suspension as well as the canvas and hoisting pulleys in the case of a folding camper.

If you find signs of mildew, a rash of small black dots, on the canvas then treat it immediately with a propriety product from your local dealer.

Erecting a folding camper



This one from Pennine is typical of a folding camper in its travelling position.



First job is to unfold the beds. On some campers the beds slide out on runners.



As the second bed is unfolded the canvas rises into position.



The canvas now covers the camper. Fix it with velcro or elastic cords. Some campers have solid roofs which wind into position.



Its up and ready to provide a comfortable place for an overnight stop, a weekend retreat or a long holiday.

for motorway style of driving and are restricted to a 40 mph maximum or less.

Should you purchase a secondhand unit fitted with two-ply tyres, it is advised that you change those tyres for four-ply rated ones as soon as possible.

When you buy a trailer tent make sure that it has a spare wheel, if not, buy one at the time of purchase, you may not be able to find one later when you need one.

Remember your car spare will not fit the trailer and the rescue services may not be able to find one easily.

Jockey wheel and corner steadies

Check if jockey wheels and corner steadies are provided as part of the basic specification of the unit. A steady prop is not a suitable alternative to a jockey wheel as this does not enable you to move the trailer around easily.

If corner steadies are an option on a new unit then order them and have them fitted at the manufacturers.

When considering a secondhand unit check that the jockey wheel, support tube and associated clamps and the corner steadies are in good condition.

Brakes

Whether your trailer should have brakes or not depends upon the size of your car. If your car is on the small side you may have to have brakes fitted from the start.

Legally a trailer tent must be fitted with brakes if its loaded weight exceeds 750kgs or the kerbweight of the car is less than twice the weight of the trailer.

On heavier models brakes will be fitted as standard. On many smaller models they are available as an optional extra.

If you have a choice between a braked or unbraked trailer tent always choose the braked one. Where brakes are fitted you will be able to tow a heavier trailer but for safety it is best not to load it to more than 85 per cent of the kerb weight of the car.

Cover

Before buying the trailer tent have it erected and see if you can reach to the highest point.

This is important if you intend to use an awning or need to reach the storm lashings.

When folded check that the canvas folds inside the unit in such a way that the mattress and contents are protected from the elements during the setting up or folding down operations.

Where storm lashings are provided it is better if they are attached to the structure rather than the canvas.

Kitchens

Some trailer tents have a kitchen as standard. With others it is an optional extra.

If you like to stop for a break during your journey then look for a kitchen that has an easy access opening door unit. This will enable you to make use of the kitchen without having to unpack or assemble the rest of the unit.



A typical kitchen unit from Conway.

Kitchens are normally carried on the drawbar. Some are carried at the rear of the unit. In folding campers they are carried inside the unit.

If you buy a kitchen as an optional extra be aware that the extra load will have an effect on the allowable weight of the unit.

If carried on the front or rear of the unit it will also effect the noseweight of the trailer.

Once you have erected your trailer tent the kitchen is then manhandled into the appropriate area under the canvas.

Kitchens often contain storage space for gas bottles underneath the sink. Removing the bottles before moving the kitchen will lessen the load.

Gas bottles can also be permanently fixed on the A-frame of the trailer but be aware that they can alter the weight ratio of the unit, which in turn could affect towing characteristics.

Your car

Before deciding on which trailer tent or folding camper to buy you will need to determine if your car will be suitable to tow it.

There are two factors to consider – the car's noseweight and its towing capacity.

The noseweight is the force exerted by the hitch on the towball of the tow vehicle. For towing stability the trailer tent or folding camper should be nose heavy up to but not exceeding the noseweight limit of the towing vehicle.

Do not rely on the towing capacity given in the car makers' literature, they quote a figure that is based on different criteria and it is usually too high for safe towing.

The optimum towing capacity for your car should not exceed 85 per cent of the vehicle's kerbweight.

When towing an unbraked trailer the loaded trailer should also not be more than 750kgs or half the kerbweight of the towing vehicle.

Accessories

When you use your trailer tent or folding camper you will need to take with you a number of essential items. Crockery, water and waste carriers, pegs and mallet, sleeping bags, wellies, ground sheet, gas bottles etc.

Your unit should therefore have plenty of storage lockers and cupboards. Check also that the unit offers extra internal space when folded for other items of equipment such as chairs or barbecues etc.

One of the more essential options is a spare wheel. Either carry it in the car or on a special carrier under the trailer.

However, do not exceed the maximum payload stated by the makers. Take your loaded unit to a public weighbridge and have it checked.