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DataSheet

Choosing a used caravan

The Camping and Caravanning Club
The Friendly Club

A range of caravans on sale at a caravan dealer

Buying a used caravan

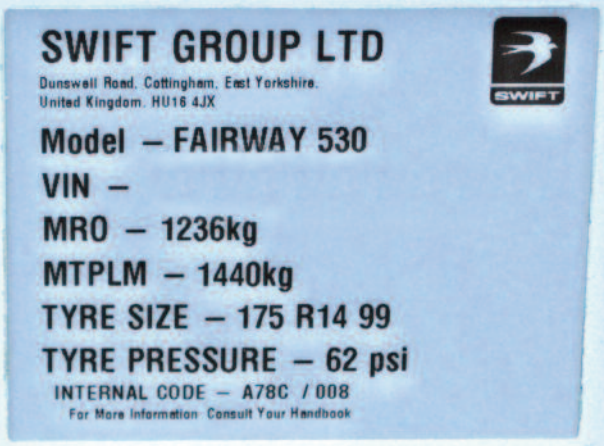
Most of us would like to be able to buy something brand new, but often our budget for a major purchase such as a caravan will not stretch that far. Sometimes it makes good sense to buy a used unit – you avoid the large depreciation in the early years and if you're new to caravanning it makes sense to try it out first at a reasonably low a cost. But don't buy too cheap a caravan if you can avoid it as an unreliable out-of-date one could give a poor experience and put you off caravanning for good.

Do your homework

Before you even start looking at used caravans you need to have a good idea of what you what you're looking for. If you are new to caravanning the Club's Data Sheet 1 – Choosing a Caravan is a good place to start. This will help you assess the size and layout of caravan best suited to your camping style.

The capability of your towcar is often the major factor in restricting your choice of caravan by weight and therefore size, so it is essential to obtain good advice. Again the Club has a Data Sheet, 20 – Matching Car and Caravan, to help, and if you are still uncertain the Club's Technical helpline is available whose staff can talk you through the details. Once you have an idea of what style and weight of caravan you require, you can start looking around to see what caravans are on offer and what sort of prices you can expect to pay.

Look for the caravan weight plate when matching to a towcar



What price to pay

■ Caravan dealers are a good place to start looking at potential caravans, as you will be able to view a good selection. You will also gain an idea of the prices being asked for caravans based on condition, age, size and specification level to help you decide on a budget. Private sellers' prices tend to be a little hit and miss with some sellers having an inflated opinion of what their pride and joy is worth, but dealers have been known to overprice their units to give room for negotiation, which is why you need to look around first.

■ There should be some sort of price uniformity at dealers because they all use the same book to value a secondhand caravan according to make, model and model year of caravan. However, this is only a guide and the prices assume the caravan is in good condition, so if it's in poor shape you can expect prices below the guide price. Equally, a barely-used caravan will fetch a premium. Unfortunately the pricing book is only for the trade but a less comprehensive guide is freely available to the consumer on the website caravanpriceguide.com with indications of private sale prices. Caravan magazines, such as Caravan Motorhome and Camping Mart, usually carry classified ads and reviews of secondhand caravans so they can be a useful source of information.

■ In general caravan prices are linked to year of manufacture – as with cars – so it is important to be able to identify this date to ensure the caravan really is, for example, a 2001 caravan and not an overpriced 2000 model. See the CRiS panel (page 4) for further information.

■ With a limited budget it is even more important to consider any extra expenditure. If you are new to caravanning there may be a whole host of essentials to buy such as gas cylinders, leisure battery, fresh and waste water carriers, plus security locks – unless they come bundled in with your new purchase.

■ Less obvious is the cost of hidden extras. Unless the seller can confirm the caravan has had a recent service, it would be wise to budget for a service before taking the family out on the road with your new caravan. Also, consider whether you need new tyres, even if they have more than the legal minimum of tread. Tyres deteriorate with age and lack of use and the recommendation is to replace caravan tyres after five years and certainly not use them after seven years. You can check the age of the tyres by checking the coding on the side of the tyre wall (see pic above right).

Remedial work for damp can be an expensive business

■ Once you have an idea of what you need to pay for your caravan you can consider the options of buying from a dealer or a private seller. Both have their pros and cons.

Above: Caravan tyres are susceptible to aging and may need replacing even though the tread is fine. Below: Inspect and try out as much of the equipment as possible, such as these bed slats.

Checking out the caravan

You need to check that the caravan is functioning correctly and is of a standard you expect before buying, particularly if it is a private sale as there will be no going back later. Go through all the motions of using the caravan to see if it suits you and it works.

Sit and bounce on the lounge seats – do they give enough support or have they lost their resilience? Seating upholstery can be replaced but it can be expensive. Do the cupboard and door catches work? Pull out bed-making slats and check the functioning of any retractable bunk beds. Are there any areas of the floor that seem to be spongy? Such give in the floor could indicate delamination of the floor construction, which often occurs in older caravans especially in the doorway and by the kitchen. It can be repaired, but it's a job best left to a caravan workshop.

Ask for the water system to be demonstrated to show the pumping system and taps work. Similarly ask to see the gas appliances working. And don't forget the smallest room – cracked shower trays are not uncommon and can be a problem to replace.

Externally, check the grab handles are secure, look for signs of damage. Is the awning rail deformed? Are there any cracks in the GRP or ABS end panels of the caravan? End panels are susceptible to cracking and can be especially expensive to replace. The presence of external dents and scrapes on the

Above: Inspect all the equipment , not forgetting the toilet.
Below: Ask to see the habitation equipment working such as heating and kitchen items like taps and gas hob

bodywork can be expected to reduce the value of the caravan depending on their extent, but this should not necessarily deter you unless the damage is so severe as to cause a split in the body shell or enough damage to have caused structural damage. Whereas if you find small pin-prick holes in the aluminium bodywork or areas of crumbly white powder then this could be a sign of aluminium corrosion and you are best to steer clear of this caravan.

It's worth opening cupboards and bed lockers to get a good look for anything untoward. Evidence of regular servicing will give you some confidence for anticipating little or no water ingress damage, having a caravan fit for the road and with the habitation equipment (including gas and electrical equipment) being safe to use. If a caravan is suffering from water ingress and this has not been picked up the resulting damage may cost a great deal of money to put right.

Remember, you can't always smell damp, often only the most severe and neglected cases tend to show up with smells and black patches. With very old caravans you can almost expect there to be a problem of floor delamination or water ingress. This doesn't necessarily mean it is not fit for purpose, it can still be road worthy and useable, but it will have a limited life.

If there are no service records go elsewhere or get it checked out by a qualified caravan technician. But remember if the deal seems too good to be true it probably is.

Dealer or private seller?

Private sales advertisements can be found in local newspapers, specialist magazines (including Camping & Caravanning, the Club's monthly magazine) and the internet, including Club Classified on the Club's website and online auction sites such as eBay. You have to be vigilant about the seller because there's always a fair number of stolen caravans being offered for sale. Be especially wary of caravans sold on the internet and never commit to a caravan you have not seen.

Reputable dealers offer warranties, can carry large stock levels, provide gas and other safety checks before selling and need to pay the overheads of staff and premises. No wonder there is scope for a possible bargain with a private sale. Unfortunately it doesn't always work out like that.

In consumer law with a private sale all the goods have simply to be "as described" so you have very little come back if things go wrong. The legal principle of caveat emptor or "buyer beware" operates. So extra care needs to be taken to make sure the caravan is of the quality you require.

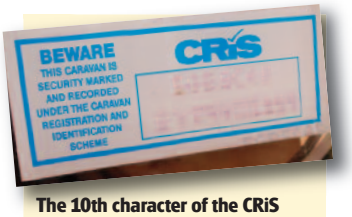
A purchase through a dealer will offer greater protection through consumer legislation, since you have a right to the goods to be of a "satisfactory quality", "fit for the purpose" and "as described". However, when you buy used goods the law says you must consider the price paid and be prepared to lower your expectations about the performance. And don't forget that though you have much consumer legislation to back you up in a dispute, most buyers don't want to the hassle of resorting to law to get remedial work undertaken or their money back if there's a serious problem.

Try to speak to other caravanners to find out the fair and reputable dealers in your locality and remember the lowest prices don't always work out the cheapest in the long term. You can look further afield for a dealer but with a used caravan the chances are something will go wrong – the older the caravan the greater chance something is nearing the end of its useful life. If you need to return the caravan to the dealer for remedial work it's no fun driving a 100-mile round trip. There is no obligation for the dealer to have the work undertaken by your local workshop at his expense.

Dealers are often willing to negotiate, but it depends on the circumstances. In a buoyant market and where you are expecting a good trade-in price for another caravan not much is going to give. If you are a first time buyer there is a good chance the dealer will be willing to negotiate – if not by offering a better price he may be willing to throw in extras such as a leisure battery, waste and fresh water containers or even an awning.

Dealers will nearly always be willing to offer some warranty (see warranty section on page 4) except on the oldest of caravans. You should also expect a dealer to give the caravan a full safety check before it leaves the premises as the law requires the caravan to be roadworthy, unless the buyer is made aware of it not being so.

So it's not just the bottom line price you need to consider but the worth of the whole package – including dealer support – before committing yourself.



The 10th character of the CRiS marker indicates the model year of the caravan

CRiS

Every UK-manufactured caravan since 1992 has been recorded on the CRiS (Central Registration and Identification Scheme) database by its unique 17-character Vehicle Identification Number (VIN). Unlike with cars, registration is not compulsory so after being sold new it is possible that subsequent owners have not re-registered the caravan in their names. However, CRiS works closely with the police and any caravan reported stolen or involved in a major accident is recorded by CRiS.

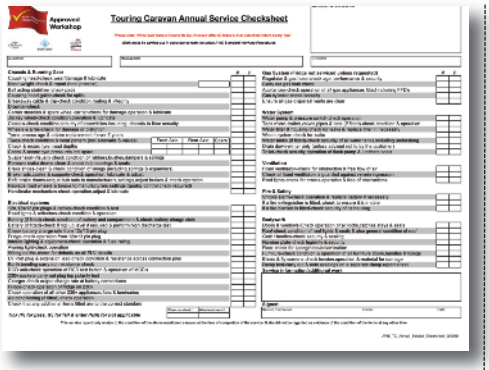
The CRiS number is etched on to the caravan windows and on the caravan chassis. The 10th character (counting from left) indicates the caravan model year, with a model year running from the previous September. A 2010 model year, therefore, runs from 1 September 2009 to 31 August 2010. For 1992 model year the tenth character is N, P= 1993 and so on (O, Q & U excluded) up to Y= 2000. Model years 2001 to 2009 are represented by a 1 to 9 respectively and model year. 2010 and 2011 are represented by A and B and so on.

To find out more about CRiS visit: cris.co.uk or call 0203 282 1000.

Warranties

Warranties will vary from perhaps three months for older units up to a year for younger caravans, but do check the small print to find out what a specific warranty covers. Some warranties are offered through an insurance company warranty scheme so there may be a lot of small print. Nevertheless, you should expect a dealer to give the caravan a full safety check before it leaves the premises and ask for a full service if it is due.

A late model caravan may have some of the original manufacturer's warranty outstanding, but seek proof that this warranty is still valid (which normally means its servicing schedule should be up-to-date) and if it is transferable to a new owner. Sometimes a transferable manufacturer's warranty requires notification to the manufacturer and payment of a fee to authorise the transfer.


Approved Workshop

Touring Caravan Annual Service Checksheet

Make sure you ask to see service records, such as an Approved Workshop Scheme service sheet (left)

Documents and proof of ownership

The physical condition and price of the caravan may be right, but how do you know if the person selling it is the rightful owner? In a private sale you should never buy a caravan that is presented to you other than at the seller's home or bona fide storage place. Ask for ID from the seller and proof of ownership.

Your best protection against buying a stolen caravan, an insurance write off or one with an outstanding finance agreement is to check with CRiS – the Central Registration and Identification Scheme (see panel, left). For only £14.95 you can ring up CRiS and give it the caravan's CRiS number to carry out a search for you.

Finally, check if a handbook is available, it may not be essential for experienced caravanners but for the beginner it is rather bewildering to start caravanning without one.

Test it sooner than later

Once purchased, try out your caravan as soon as possible at a local campsite as it's best to find any faults sooner rather than spoil your holiday later and definitely try it before any dealer warranty runs out. It's claimed some unscrupulous dealers have been known to sell damp and faulty caravans with very short warranty periods on the basis that a good number of their customers will not find the problems before the warranty expires.

Concluding the deal

Caravan salesmen may encourage you to use a particular organisation to finance your purchase, but proceed cautiously as while it may be the best deal for the salesman, better terms may be available from your bank or another credit provider. Using some form of credit can be beneficial and provide extra protection if problems and disputes later arise concerning the caravan.

Be cautious before committing yourself with a deposit, make sure a written contract is available with any extras or offers clearly stated. If you sign a contract and provide a deposit you are likely to lose the deposit if you subsequently change your mind about the purchase.

Before collecting and taking away your caravan, ask for a handover from the dealer or previous owner to explain the workings of the various items of equipment. And don't forget to arrange insurance and a suitable storage site.

The Club can offer insurance through Club Care and some Club sites have storage facilities. Alternatively contact the Caravan Storage Site Association (CaSSOA). Its members offer a range of sites graded in terms of the level of security they offer.

Contact

The Camping and Caravanning Club,
Greenfields House,
Westwood Way,
Coventry CV4 8JH
0845 130 7632 or 024 7647 5442
campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk