

How to Buy Step 5: Who to Buy From

There are basically two ways to buy an RV: through a dealer or privately (from an individual). Both can be rewarding sources for finding an RV and occasionally, a real bargain. This next section may help you avoid some of the more common pitfalls. If you purchase privately you should pay less. You are giving up a great deal of service and support and taking much more risk. Before deciding, know what you will be missing.

Private Purchase

Many people choose to buy their first RV privately. Often they buy the “story” as much as the RV. These deals may sound like bargains but the buyer usually pays far too much—and will get far less than they were led to believe. It is not unusual for a dealer to spend thousands of dollars on repairs to bring a used RV up to safety and operational standards. When you buy privately, from an individual, you’re buying as-is and getting no warranty. You will have no one to go to for help with a problem. No one has checked out the RV. You will have to find your own service. This is almost certainly a recipe for disaster and no way to really get to know the fun of RVing

Pitfalls of a Private Purchase

It is certainly possible to find a good value when buying privately. Bargains can be found as long as you are willing to do your homework and put up with the hassles involved. The following are some of the problems inherent in buying an RV privately. Weigh each of these into your purchase decision.

No Support

There is no one to stand behind the product with service or support. The basic rule of law in business is “Buyer Beware.” The only thing that keeps a dealer accountable is his need to maintain the dealership’s reputation in order to secure future business and avoid bad “word of mouth.” A private seller has no motivation for fair and honest dealings, or for full disclosure of problems. Basically, if he can get you to sign the title, he is home free. Yes, you could sue, but it’s difficult to prove verbal promises and it is expensive. Plus, the success rate for this type of law suit is very low. Assume you will be completely on your own and avoid relying on verbal representations. Make the seller put all promises in writing!

No Warranty

The RV is being sold as-is with no warranty. You will be responsible for any expenses incurred to correct any defects, which currently exist or may occur in the future. It is not unusual for a dealer to spend two, three, even four thousand dollars or more to put a used RV into safe and proper operating condition. A reputable dealer cannot sell an RV in any less condition and expect to generate repeat business or referrals from a new owner. He can’t afford it.

No Fitness Check

There is no reliable way to be sure the RV is fit to be used for your intended purpose. The RV probably has not been checked or brought up to safe operating conditions. It may or may not be working properly. It may or may not be safe to use. Once you buy it and discover a problem, it’s usually extremely difficult to go back to the seller for help. You

are stuck! Owners often live with a problem and get used to it even though it may not be safe.

I was once appraising a customer's motorhome and discovered that the generator wouldn't start. The owner explained it away by saying: "That's no problem, you just stick this pry bar into the flywheel, give it a turn and she'll start right up!" I was amazed at how casual he was about an extremely dangerous practice. Later I found out he had been taught the procedure when he bought the RV from a private seller. Incredibly, he believed it was supposed to work that way!

No Financing Available

You will need to arrange for your own financing, usually at rates and terms less competitive than those available through top national RV financing sources. Most local banks are unwilling to do the long terms and low down payments that the big RV finance institutions will.

No Trades

Usually a private seller will not take a trade. You will probably have to sell your trade yourself. If you're in a position where you need to sell your trade before you buy, you may not be able to even consider buying the RV.

No Orientation

How do you know how to properly work all of the appliances and systems of your new RV? Generally, a private sale ends with a limited walk through and explanation of how things work, if any. Most just hand you the keys and you're on your own to figure it out. If you're lucky, the RV will still have all the original documentation and owner's manuals to work with. Unfortunately, many are poorly written and short on explanations and details. RVs are complicated, and a thorough explanation is essential. You should demand a complete and comprehensive orientation to the entire RV. The information should come from someone with experience and knowledge of safe and proper operation of all the components and the overall RV itself. An orientation can and often does pass on bad information such as the aforementioned generator example.

No Title / Licensing Service

Was the tax paid before you bought it? Can you get a good title in your name? Is the seller really the owner? Is this RV what it's supposed to be? Private sellers often try to shortcut licensing procedures and just hand you a title. Most states require both buyer and seller to sign the title in front of a Notary Public. All of these issues can be avoided by not dealing with a private seller. If you must deal privately, don't hand over your money until an authorized agent for the state prepares all the required paperwork. Don't try to avoid taxes or fees and put yourself in a position where you can't seek a good remedy to a broken contract without admitting that you broke the law. Don't allow the seller to skip this step.

I regularly run into cases where the "owner" has no title in his name. The seller "sold" him an RV with a bad title and now, years later, he wants to sell or trade and can't because he has a bad title. You can not sell an RV without a title in your name.

Avoid Branded Titles

Many RVs involved in floods, accidents, or other insurance claims are “totaled” and then sold as salvage. The titles are branded with a code to note them as severely damaged. Some clean up amazingly well and look good. Totaled RVs are often hard to spot until the weather changes (or you tow it or drive it for a few hundred miles) and by then it’s too late. A Notary/License agent should spot the code and notify you. Again, don’t pay first!

If you’re going to buy privately, from an individual, be sure you know what you’re getting, and be sure you are getting a real bargain price.

Our interview sheet is a great way to identify problems during your shopping. It is available for download under the RV Guide section of our website. Don’t consider buying privately without completing it.

Dealer Purchase

Purchasing from a dealer doesn’t guarantee positive results. You could purchase the best-made RV in the world from a poor dealer and have a terrible experience and conversely you could buy the worst RV in the world from a great dealer and be very happy. The dealer is the key to your experience as an RV owner. You must determine what the dealer is doing for you. If the dealer sells you an as-is basis with no check or prep, you are getting very little benefit.

Identify a Quality Dealer

Consider all facets of the organization in choosing a dealer:

History

How long has the dealer been in business? How long under the current management? How long has the dealer carried the product you’re interested in?

History simply gives you a feel for the experience level and staying power of the dealership. It can also give you a clue about how it is to do business with them.

Reputation

How do the dealer’s current and past customers feel about them? Is the dealer involved in the community? How do the employees feel about the organization? Do they stand behind the products they sell and solve customer problems? Is it a good place to do business?

Any dealer with a reasonably long history should have lots of prior customers and therefore many sources for reputation verification.

Commitment

How committed to the RV business is the dealer? Is it a sideline or the main event? How committed to the product you want to buy? Is this the dealer’s main brand or a filler product? How likely is the dealer to continue carrying your chosen product line?

Many dealers have more than one business. With other income sources to rely on, it can be less important to take care of the RV business. Even dealers with a solid commitment to RVs may be carrying numerous brands; and may be spread very thin on training, RV inventory & availability, parts inventory & availability, service capability & know-how, and detailed product knowledge. Still, other dealers change brands often—just

to have their perception of the “hot” product. Some change so often it’s hard to tell what they’re selling this month.

Just as in health care, specialists have a higher level of expertise. You wouldn’t trust a heart condition to a general practice physician, would you? Of course not. You’d choose the best specialist you could find. Why not choose the best-qualified, most knowledgeable dealer “specialist” for your RV dealer?

Facilities

Does the dealership have the capability to service your chosen RV? Are there adequate service bays, tools, and parts on hand?

Sadly, most RV dealers view service as a loss or, at best, a necessary evil. Selling the RV is the easy part. Providing quality, timely service is the real challenge. It takes a serious financial commitment to facilities to come close to meeting the demand for RV service. To judge commitment to service, a dealer should have no less than one service bay for every forty RVs sold each and every year.

Philosophy

How does it feel to be there? Do you feel invited and welcome? What are the dealership goals with respect to its customers? What is most important to them?

Some dealerships believe they don’t have to worry about repeat business. Some believe service and ownership experience doesn’t matter. Despite a long list of unhappy RV buyers, they continue to sell more, all the while ignoring customer’s problems. As in any business, RV dealers are not all the same. Choose a dealer with goals and practices that are consistent with your own. Look for guiding principles or a mission statement for the company. Be sure the dealer you choose is consistent with your RV ownership goals.

Stability

Who runs the company and how long have they been doing it? Is there a major investment in facilities and inventories or could they be gone tomorrow? What are the chances they will be here in ten years selling the same brand you’re considering today?

If you’re banking on the benefits of buying from a dealer, be sure the dealer will be around to provide them. Many older RV dealerships are

facing succession issues as the primary management gets ready to retire. These issues can threaten the existence of even strong companies.

People

Are they well trained? Do they care about you as a customer? Are there on-going training programs? Are they friendly? Are technicians certified?

As in any endeavor, it’s the people who truly make the difference. Training is critical. All people make mistakes. Learning from them and continually improving prevents repeated problems. The effort of on-going training is a sign of concern for the well-being of the customers they serve.

Customer Care

What do they do for their customers? How does the dealer educate its customers about RVing? Are the hours convenient? Is service available? Can you call with a question and

get an answer? Do they stand behind their word and their work? What is their warranty policy?

Think about how you want to be treated in all situations and be sure you deal with an organization that measures up to your standards.

Measure

Use the Dealer Interview Sheet, available for download on our website, to help you choose the best dealer to work with. Don't buy from any dealer without completing the interview. Use the dealership index, also available on our website, as a measuring stick for comparison shopping between dealerships.