

Chapter 1: The Mistake That Costs First Buyers the Most

The couple had already named the van before they signed. They loved the island bed, the lounge that seated four, and the kitchen with a proper oven. The salesman let them sit in it for twenty minutes with the air conditioning running. Nobody opened the bonnet. Nobody asked what the compliance plate said. Eight months later they were parked at a caravan park in a country town, waiting for a part, while their touring budget went on accommodation and phone calls.

I have heard that story, in one form or another, more times than I can count. The details change. The pattern does not. A first-time buyer falls for the room and forgets the machine that carries it.

Why buyers fall for the layout and ignore the vehicle underneath

A motorhome is really two things bolted together. There is a **habitation body**, the part you live in. Underneath it sits a **base vehicle**: a truck or van chassis with an engine, gearbox, brakes and a legal weight limit. Dealers sell the first. You have to live with both.

The layout wins because it is easy to judge. You can sit on the bed and picture morning tea on the lawn. A gearbox gives you nothing to imagine. Most of us also feel out of our depth with mechanical questions. Showrooms are built around that. The vans are open and lit. The bonnets are shut.

My wife and I nearly made this mistake ourselves. We stood in a showroom admiring a rear lounge. I was measuring whether our folding chairs would fit in the boot. I never looked at the tyres. A friend who had towed for thirty years asked me one question on the drive home: "What's it weigh loaded?" I had no idea.

That question matters for a reason. A standard car licence (Class C) covers vehicles up to **4.5 tonnes GVM**, meaning Gross Vehicle Mass, the most the vehicle may legally weigh fully loaded. From 4.5 to 8 tonnes you need a Light Rigid licence (Government of South Australia, mylicence.sa.gov.au). A beautiful layout on the wrong chassis can be a van you are not licensed to drive.

Three real-world buying stories and where each went wrong

These stories come from owners who posted publicly. I have kept them anonymous, as they were published.

Case 1: The gearbox bill. A Fiat Ducato motorhome owner reported losing gears and being quoted up to **\$23,000** for a gearbox repair. They later found a second-hand gearbox for about **\$2,700** (ProductReview.com.au, Fiat Ducato reviews).

Where it went wrong: the buyer had no picture of the chassis's known weak points before purchase. Owners of older Ducato-based motorhomes often report fifth gear failing to engage, sometimes as early as about 60,000 km (Motorhome Vagabond; CarsGuide). That is exactly what a buyer can test for on a drive. It is also why a repair quote should never be the only quote you get.

Case 2: The six-week wait. Another owner said the alternator failed with under **3,000 km** on the clock. The part was not stocked in Australia and took at least **six weeks** to arrive from Italy. The manufacturer only offered a goodwill gesture after the owner pushed for compensation (ProductReview.com.au, Fiat Ducato reviews).

Where it went wrong: this was a nearly new vehicle. Brand-new offers no protection from the parts question. Before you buy, ask where a common part comes from and how long it takes to arrive. In a caravan park 1,000 km from home, six weeks is your whole trip.

Case 3: The used van that kept giving. Grey Nomads readers shared a story titled "Our 2nd-hand motorhome had issues ... lots of them!" It describes a used motorhome that needed a string of repairs after purchase (The Grey Nomads, website feature).

Where it went wrong: the buyers skipped a proper independent inspection. Each fault on its own might have been small. Together they turned a sensible used purchase into an expensive one.

Notice what the three have in common. None of these problems was about the bed, the kitchen or the colour of the cushions. Every one sat in the base vehicle or in the checks nobody made.

The true cost of a bad first van: money, time and confidence

Money

The first cost is the one you cannot avoid, even with a good van.

A new motorhome in Australia typically loses about **15–25%** of its value in its first year. International data puts the first-year drop for RVs at **20–30%** (Apollo RV Super Centre; The Camping Nerd, 2026).

Typical first-year value loss, new RVs



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Now add a wrong choice on top. If you find within a year that the van is too heavy, too complicated or unsuited to your travel, you sell into that loss. Results vary widely. On one Grey Nomads forum thread, a member said they lost about \$13,000 on a two-year-old Jayco poptop, while another said an earlier Jayco lost only about \$5,000 over six years (The Grey Nomads Forum, "Caravan depreciation"). Those were caravans, not motorhomes, but the lesson carries over: the right choice at the right price softens the fall.

Time

For retirees, time is the real currency. A van off the road for six weeks means six weeks of a season you planned for years. Repairs also cluster in the places you least want them. They happen at the far end of the trip, in towns with one mechanic and no spare parts on the shelf.

Confidence

This cost is the one people rarely mention. A bad first van makes you nervous. Every new noise becomes a worry. Many couples who start this way stop touring early and sell up, convinced the lifestyle "wasn't for them". Usually the lifestyle was fine. The van was wrong.

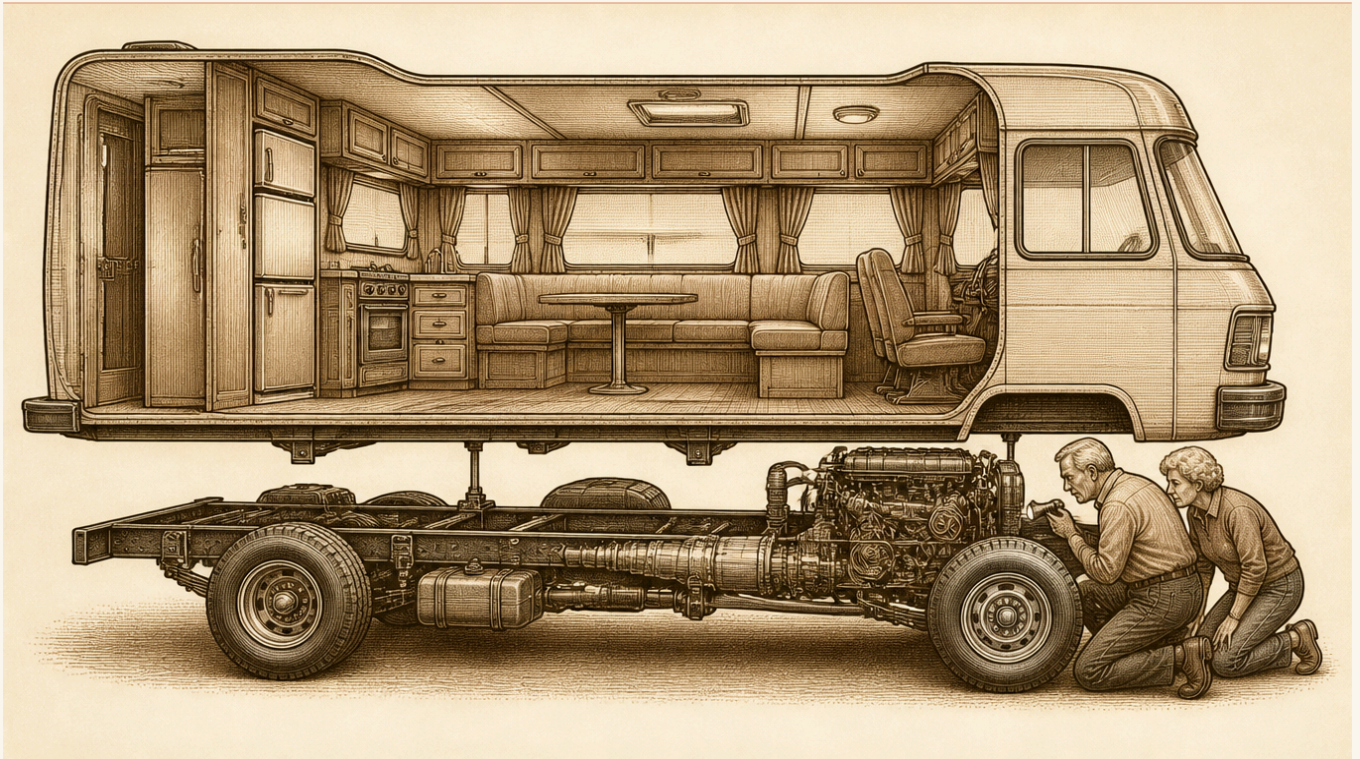
Weight shows how widespread one kind of mistake is. At targeted Queensland holiday checkpoints run by TMR and police, about nine in ten vehicles towing caravans that were weighed were over at least one weight limit (Drive; carsales.com.au). Those were towing rigs, but the mindset is the same one that fills a motorhome to the ceiling. Most of those owners had no idea.

What "reading the van" means and why it comes before the brochure

Reading the van means judging the vehicle before you judge the lifestyle it promises. You read it the way you would read a contract: the heavy clauses first, the pretty pictures last.

The Chassis-First Rule: you may not fall in love with a layout until the vehicle under it has passed. Licence, weight, mechanicals and paperwork come first. Cushions come last.

In practice, reading the van starts before you leave home. Once you are at the yard, it begins with the compliance plate, not the fridge.



CHECK FIRST

Before any inspection, check the builder behind the body. During 2026, several Australian RV makers went into administration or closed^{31, 35}. Chapter 3 covers what that does to a warranty. For now, know the names.

BUILDER / GROUP	WHAT WAS REPORTED	STATUS TODAY
Network RV, Network Engineering, Fair Dinkum Caravans	Voluntary administration, debts of about \$30 million (caravancampingsales.com.au, 2026)	Entered voluntary administration in 2026. Confirm present status with the administrator before relying on any warranty.
Sunland RV, X Series RV, Global RV	Voluntary administration on 25 June 2026, owing about \$17 million in total ³⁰	In administration from 25 June 2026. Confirm present status before you sign.
Phoenix RV	Went into administration or closed during 2026 ³¹	Treat any body warranty as uncertain until confirmed in writing.
Zone RV	Earlier collapse, fallout still affecting the industry in 2026 ³¹	Collapsed before 2026. Expect no builder support.

Then run your VIN. Compare the Vehicle Identification Number on the compliance plate against the registration papers and the seller's documents. If they do not match, stop there. Chapter 14 walks through the full paperwork check.

:::checklist

- ▶ Write down your licence class before you visit any yard.
- ▶ Photograph the compliance plate first and note the GVM.
- ▶ Ask the seller which parts have been replaced, and where they came from.
- ▶ Look at tyres and underbody **from the side with a torch only**. Never crawl under a van held up by a jack. Wear gloves and eye protection

Key Takeaways

- ▶ Judge the base vehicle first; the layout is the easy part to change and the hard part to regret.
- ▶ Treat every repair story as a checklist item you can test on your own inspection.
- ▶ Budget for first-year value loss even on a perfect van, then avoid adding a wrong-van loss on top.
- ▶ Protect your touring time by asking about parts supply before you buy. :::

Here is the encouraging part. For the first time in years, buyers have room to be this careful. Stock is sitting, sellers are waiting, and patience has become a tool. So why, after the frenzy of the boom years, does 2026 suddenly put the buyer in the stronger seat, and how far can you push it?