As you have seen in Chapter 1, the range of trailers is enormous so you must analyse your requirements to start narrowing down the choice to just a few models. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What do I need the trailer to do?
- Where am I going to keep it?
- What can my car pull?

These are just a few of the things to be determined before going out to buy a trailer.

## Vehicle towing capacity

A most important fact to determine is your vehicle's towing capacity. This can be found by looking at the VIN plate under the bonnet or in the owner's manual. If there are discrepancies between figures on the plate and the manual, either work to the lower figure or refer back to the car dealer or manufacturer for clarification. The information is usually given as the maximum permissible weight for unbraked trailers and then for trailers with brakes.

It is an offence under the Road Traffic Act 1988 to tow a trailer exceeding the car's maximum towing limit and should you be unfortunate enough to be involved in an accident while doing so you could find that your insurance policy is invalid. This could be a very expensive mistake to make.

Now that you know what you can pull you can start to look at trailers. These fall into two categories – braked and unbraked. Taking unbraked trailers first, many people think they can tow up to a maximum of 750kg, but unless you have a very large car you will find that you cannot take this weight as you can only tow up to half your car's unladen weight ('kerb weight').

To give an example, if you had a Ford Scorpio you could tow around 750kg (depending on the specific model), but a Ford Focus would only tow around 550kg. This is a sensible ruling, as your car's brakes have to take into account an extra 50% weight burden. In addition, you do not want the 'tail wagging the dog' scenario with the trailer trying to take over.

Don't forget that the weights shown are inclusive of the unladen weight of the trailer. All unbraked trailers have to have a manufacturer's plate mounted on the nearside of the drawbar giving the unladen and maximum permitted weights and – from 1 January 1997 – the year of manufacture. Look at these carefully before buying.


A typical VIN plate, normally found on the engine compartment bulkhead of the car or on the driver's door pillar. The weights show (from the top): maximum permitted mass, gross train weight, maximum front axle load, and maximum rear axle load.

## Unbraked trailers

If it is an unbraked trailer you want to buy some types are designed to stand on end, thus reducing their storage space requirement.

On the other hand, your trailer may have to be stored out of doors. If so, a galvanised trailer would be advisable. As regards the type, ask yourself:

- Do I just require a normal trailer with shallow sides?
- What is the largest item I will carry?
- Therefore, what size trailer do I need?
- Will I require a drop-down tailboard for easier loading and unloading? It makes it so much easier when carrying products such as sand or gravel.
- Will the load be damaged if I tow in the rain?
- If so, then I will need a cover.
- Should this be a canvas one or a rigid lid? All variations are available.

If you like the 'great outdoors' you may use the trailer for all your camping gear. Perhaps you are considering a trailer tent as these are usually built on unbraked chassis and are innovatively designed.

When buying an unbraked trailer it should be fitted with a secondary coupling – usually a chain or a cable. This is law on all trailers sold new from 1 January 1997, and this secondary coupling must be used when towing. It is designed to retain the trailer and keep it from hitting the ground if the trailer were to become detached from the towing vehicle. However, it is not recommended that the secondary coupling be looped around the ball. Some towbars have provision for attaching a secondary coupling to a 'pigtail' but many are not so equipped, but you can purchase a bolt-on pigtail which should be fitted to the reverse side of one of the towball bolts.

To make the attachment you simply put one of the links in the chain over the end of the pigtail and pass the chain along the spiral to its inner end. Select a link that allows sufficient articulation of the trailer but would prevent the trailer coupling hitting the road surface if it becomes detached from the car. If the remaining length of chain is hanging down simply put another of the links over the end of the pigtail, pass it along the spiral to take up the free length.

Alternatively, if the towbar has a bracket with a hole for a breakaway cable you can use a suitably robust 'D' shackle. Some owners even use a padlock for this but it must be of good quality.

Lightweight trailers do not normally come with a jockey wheel, they simply have a skid plate under the drawbar to keep the coupling head off the ground when the trailer is parked. You may prefer to have a jockey wheel fitted.


Above: An unbraked trailer like this Erdé can be stood on its end, thereby saving storage space.

Far left: A flexible PVC top and drop-down tailboard are handy items to have on a small trailer like this.

Left: A Conway trailer tent