How to Spot a Well-Built RV

By

The Editors at RVReviews.net

The information contained in this RV Report is a sample of the type of information you will find in our RV Comparison Guides:

- The Motorhome Comparison Comparison Guide
- The Travel Trailer & Fifth Wheel Comparison Guide
- The Lightweight Travel Trailer Comparison Guide
- The Truck Camper Comparison Guide

If you find the information in this report to be helpful, we are confident you’ll find our RV Comparison Guides to be a wealth of information. Remember, this is just a sampling of the information found in our books.

Who Are We?

Hello, my name is Randall Eaton, Senior Editor at RVReviews.net. I am a research analyst and best-selling author. My specialty is researching a particular industry and publishing the results. I originally published two best-selling buying guides about manufactured and modular homes. Both books were the first of their kind and over the years have helped thousands to rate individual housing manufacturers throughout the United States and Canada.

Interestingly, many of the readers who purchased those housing publications suggested I write a comparison guide on RVs. Some initial research on our end revealed an industry awash in slipshod manufacturing, warranties not worth the paper they were printed on, and predatory dealers adding overpriced and unnecessary “services” to the cost of their RVs. Two separate polls conducted over the course of several months showed that between 50 and 80% of RV owners felt they overpaid and/or bought the wrong RV for their needs. When compared to the auto industry (with only 22% of owners feeling they paid too much or bought the wrong car for them) something was obviously very wrong with the RV industry.

We started researching the RV industry heavily in 2004, attending dozens of RV shows, interviewing every dealer and RV mechanic we could find and touring RV manufacturing plants and meeting with their owners, designers, and assembly teams. Our goal then (and now) was to review the most popular RV manufacturers in the United States and Canada and rate them against each other. We learned every construction method currently in use, as well what materials were preferable and which to avoid. Since then we’ve seen the dawn of the “Slideout” and the implementation of space age materials, as well as the introduction of LED lighting and affordable solar panels. What started out as curiosity became a reality when we published our first RV Comparison Guide in 2006. Now, over ten years later,
we have become the gold standard in the industry for fair and balanced RV reviews and manufacturer insight. We currently rate over 100 different RV manufacturers in North America and have sold tens of thousands of our guides and packages.

Our original goal was to be an unbiased and independent source of information for all RV buyers, and we are proud to say that we have never deviated from that. RVReviews.net accepts no monies, kickbacks or financial consideration of any kind from any manufacturer, dealer or industry group. Our reviews and ratings are written with only the customer in mind and have evolved over the years to reflect the preferences of our readers. Today’s version of the Comparison Guides (as well as our other publications) are written in an easy-to-read style and include the type of information RV buyers have requested.

We are constantly updating our RV Guides to bring our readers relevant and timely information and provide what we feel to be fair and balanced reviews from an objective point of view. We are aware that some manufacturers and dealers aren’t thrilled with our reviews of their products and practices, but we know our readers appreciate a head’s up when a manufacturer is known for questionable build quality, poor customer service, or is staggering toward bankruptcy. Would you want to spend $35,000 on a fifth wheel and then find out the manufacturer had closed its’ doors? It happens.

Would you spend $150 on research if it saved you $3,000? Thousands of RV buyers already have. Don’t become one of the 50-80% of owners unhappy with their RV. Buy right the first time and you’ll save enough to pay for your first couple of trips. Equally important, the right RV for you will see more use. Makes sense, doesn’t it?

Buying an RV is a major expense, with many travel trailers now selling for the cost of a new car and some Class A diesels surpassing the million dollar mark. A little fun-to-read research before you buy can save you thousands of dollars and put you in an RV that works for you and your family while providing many years of reliable service.

Okay, enough with the sales spiel. You’ve been very patient, and we promised some discussion on spotting a well-built RV, so let’s get to it...
Today’s RV: Construction Methods

What matters most?

Most RV buyers begin their search by going to a local dealership or RV show and walking through one RV after another. They mount the steps, look around, and in seconds decide if they like this one or not. Do you know what the biggest factor is in this hair trigger decision? Floorplan (how the interior is arranged) and finishes (fabrics, flooring, paint colors). If they like the look of a particular interior, they usually make a note of the make and model and their search is immediately narrowed down to some variation of that model. In fact, the majority (a vast majority, actually) of first time buyers claim that the floorplan was the #1 reason they purchased the RV they currently own. As we noted above, 50-80% of RV owners are not satisfied with their current RV. Is it possible these people are focusing on the wrong things to make their decision? Of course it is.

These buyers are focusing on aesthetics more than functionality. Aesthetics are superficial. A house with outdated carpeting and paint colors will languish on the market far longer (and sell for far less money) than a neighboring house with an updated interior, despite the fact that the outdated house is better built, has new windows, and an extra bedroom or bathroom. Aesthetics provide the “wow” factor when you walk in and that’s what people want. It’s what we all want. But the wow factor is fleeting and within a short period of time you won’t find yourself experiencing the wow factor when you step aboard your new RV. It fades with familiarity.

An uncomfortable mattress, however, won’t fade with familiarity. Either will leaking window frames or a ride like a lumber truck on a gravel road. A wonky slideout that doesn’t slide out? No fade there. The first time it happens you may find yourself a bit puzzled. The third or fourth time? You’ll find yourself experiencing another version of the “wow” factor. This one could be called the “wow, I can’t believe I paid for this piece of junk” factor, or, even worse: “wow, I can’t believe HOW MUCH I paid for this piece of junk”.

There’s an old saying about putting lipstick on a pig, implying a cheap attempt to dress up something unattractive and many RV manufacturers are experts at applying lipstick to their RVs. A walk through a brand new (but low quality) RV may not appear any different than a competitor’s well-built and substantially more durable offering, with both decked out in fashionable finishes and attractive LED lighting. So what’s the difference?

The difference is what the first time buyer will focus on versus an experienced or educated RV buyer. A savvy buyer will spend more time investigating the chassis or frame than the couch cushions. The drive train, engine, suspension, roof, windows, and component quality will all get their due diligence. The “wow” factor will be noted, but won’t carry much weight in the final decision. Bottom line, what’s beneath the surface (or lipstick) of your motorhome, trailer or fifth wheel is the most important aspect and should take top priority in your decision process. Focusing on these important features will determine how satisfied you are with your purchase and, ultimately, how much you use it.

But how are you going to focus on the chassis or type of roof if you don’t know what you’re looking at? That’s where we come in...
Learning how to assess today’s RV chassis

An RV, either towable (travel trailer, fifth wheel) or motorized (class A, B, or C motorhome), can be divided into two main components: the body and the chassis. The chassis basically includes the structural frame, engine, transmission, axles, wheels, suspension, steering system and brakes. Looking at a chassis is like looking at the foundation of a house. Those of you who have purchased a home may remember that the house inspector that you hired spent far more time checking out the underpinnings of the house (the foundation) than admiring the granite counter tops. Why? Because a solid foundation is far more important to the integrity of the home than the swanky countertops. Bad foundation = Bad home owning experience. Remember, after a week you won’t notice the counter tops anymore but a foundation with structural problems will keep you awake at night –for many, many nights.

You need to approach an RV purchase like a housing inspector instead of an interior decorator. And if a housing inspector spends a lot of time in the crawl space with a flashlight, then you should, as well (not literally, obviously, but you know what we mean).

The chassis under most RVs today is manufactured out-of-house by someone like Lippert or Freightliner, subcontractors that specialize in chassis design and construction. Lippert, for example, supplies many of the manufacturers with their foundation, but they usually build per supplied specifications. This means if a manufacturer wants a lightweight and economical frame, they will submit specs for that and Lippert will oblige. A beefy and heavy duty frame spec will also be provided if requested. Keep this in mind if a dealer tells you an RV has a Lippert frame. Name brand chassis are often touted as a selling feature but this is a tad misleading if a well-known brand like Lippert has provided a light duty and undersized chassis –as requested.

Lippert and Freightliner also have ready-made chassis designs available, and with these the RV manufacturer receives the specifications (instead of giving them) and they then build their RV around them. This option means many manufacturers can be using the exact same chassis framing. Keep this in mind because you may discover that a more economical RV is built on the same chassis as a higher priced and well-respected competitor. This would be akin to finding a low priced economy car built on a Mercedes frame with a highly reliable Mercedes engine under the hood. Obviously this would be unheard of in the auto industry, but is quite common in the RV world.

An economical RV built with high-end components (and many of Lippert’s and Freightliner’s stock offerings are indeed high-end), is an indicator of a manufacturer committed to quality –even in areas most RV buyers don’t notice. The appeal of a ready made stock chassis for a manufacturer is lower cost, on-the-shelf availability, and, most importantly, no expensive design and engineering costs. These savings are often passed on to the consumer and there’s nothing wrong with that. You’ll usually find that higher end RV manufacturers incorporate their own in-house designed chassis while the lower end builders will start with a stock chassis. Expect any RV with a custom chassis to be more expensive than a stock offering and if a dealer tells you an RV has a Lippert chassis, ask him (or her) if the design is based on the manufacturer’s own specifications or if it’s a stock design. The answer will give you an idea of
the quality involved and will also inform the dealer that you’re not some rube who just fell off a passing turnip truck. Bonus points for you if he doesn’t know the answer and has to do some research. If you find out you’re looking at a stock chassis, ask him (or her) who else is using that chassis. Make a note of these manufacturers for some research of your own. If you find that the other RVs built on this chassis are low-end and poorly rated offerings, you’ll have a good idea what you’re dealing with.

Most of today’s motorhome chassis start out as a basic Frame Rail, as the picture to the left shows. Some manufacturers will build directly on the frame rail without modification while others will take the basic frame rail chassis and incorporate cross braces and bridge-like construction in the bottom half of the chassis to distribute the weight load for what is added on after. By doing this, the steel structure absorbs and resists the twist and turns of the road ahead without relying on non load-bearing components to do the work. This advanced design results in a safer, more reliable and high-performance chassis. This type of chassis is referred to as, “Semi-Monocoque”.

Semi-monocoque construction technique is like that of a steel bridge with support elements placed between vertical and horizontal elements. Today most manufacturers use a semi-monocoque type chassis on larger and heavier RVs. Many consider a full or semi-monocoque design superior to a standard frame rail design because the added elements (seen in blue and red in the image to the right) distribute the load and contribute to structural integrity. This type of design is becoming more commonplace in the industry and is considered to be the of the highest quality. You may come across terms like “raised-rail” or “lowered-rail”, but these are just variations on the frame rail that are necessary to accommodate what rides on top.

We’re starting to see more RV companies relying on subcontractors like Lippert for more than just a chassis frame. In fact, Lippert is now encouraging fifth-wheel and travel trailer builders to order chassis with all the suspension and foundation components included. “We are branding it as LCI ONE,” said Jason Lippert, chairman and CEO of Goshen, Ind.-based Lippert. “It’s one source for all your chassis and suspension needs. With us, if there’s a problem, it’s one point of contact and not all the finger pointing. That’s the largest benefit.”

We like this approach, having heard for years from owners who found a defective component to result in endless finger-pointing on the behalf of the manufacturer and its various subcontractors. With a single manufacturer supplying a basket of components, OEMs (RV manufacturers) only have to make one phone call instead of having to contact 10 or 12 suppliers. Besides dealing with service issues, LCI ONE also can be a money-saver for OEMs, Lippert claims. “The more components we package into somebody’s program, the more aggressively we’re able to price those components,” he said.
Chassis frames for towables like travel trailers and fifth wheels are a completely different animal from a motorhome chassis. With no heavy engine to accommodate and acting as a towable in lieu of a vehicle, the requirements are much less extreme. Many years ago the first travel trailers were homemade affairs and often began with a common utility trailer frame. Many of today’s lighter and smaller RVs are still built this way. In fact, a peek underneath today’s travel trailers reveals just how basic the platform is on which the body sits and that a travel trailer still is, just a glorified utility trailer.

What to look for in a quality trailer frame

There is no question that what is underneath your trailer or fifth wheel will determine how it performs over time and the ability to withstand the rigors of use, enabling you to get the biggest bang for your buck. There are many different types of frames when it comes to towables but the most common are:

- Tubular frame, (steel or aluminum)
- I-beam, (steel)
- Stamped frame (steel)
- C-channel frame (steel)
- L-Channel (steel)

The structural integrity of any frame or chassis will vary depending on the size, length and floor plan of the unit and its classification. Lightweight trailers, for example, with a gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) of 5,500 lbs. or less, will probably use a 2”, 4” or 6” aluminum tubular frame.
When it comes to larger trailers or fifth wheels most manufacturers will use tubular steel, I-Beam, C-Channel or L-Channel construction for their frames. Tubular steel is the most rugged and is preferred for heavier units. I-beam construction is currently the most prevalent in the industry followed by C-Channel or L-Channel construction. I-Beam construction is great but can be heavier than tubular without added strength. The strengthening members or cross members that criss-cross the frame can be made out of steel or aluminum. A good question to ask your dealer is how far apart the cross members are set. The closer set they are, the more stable the frame. Cross members spaced far apart (more than 18”) are an economy move and will be a good indicator of what to expect from the RV in general.

Another important aspect of any frame is the quality of welds and technique used. Some manufacturers may tack weld portions of the frame while other factories will use a bead weld at all intersections and cross members to the frame.

For years a welded chassis frame was the preferred choice for towables but now we’re seeing a shift toward Huck-Bolt construction, a specially designed nut and bolt that grips the frame when tightened and does not loosen over time. Manufacturers like Huck-Bolts because they can be installed by unskilled workers as opposed to welding, which requires someone that knows what they’re doing. Ratcheting on nuts and bolts with the aid of an air tool is also a lot faster than traditional welding, and alleviates the logjam on the assembly line often caused by laborious and time intensive welding. It’s worth pointing out that many of today’s towables are built with unskilled labor, often moving very fast. While welding itself is very strong, mistakes do happen, and a subpar weld anywhere on a chassis or frame will inevitably fail, often without an owner’s knowledge. Take a look at the attached broken weld (circled in blue) and asked yourself how quickly you would notice this if it was somewhere on your chassis frame –underneath the RV, hidden by an axle, perhaps. With Huck-Bolts you don’t have to worry about this –and there’s certainly something to be said for that.

**Exterior Wall Construction - What to look for?**

**Aluminum or steel versus wood framing:** Wood has traditionally been the material of choice for entry-level RVs because it’s cheap and easy to work with using inexpensive tools and unskilled labor. Yet, wood framing can still be found in upper-end units, because it really is strong and provides a long lasting and durable frame –as long as a leak never presents itself. You can assume that any premium manufacturer still framing with wood has learned how to build a weatherproof shell.

Once water is introduced to wood framing, problems soon follow, but leaks (like broken welds) rarely present themselves immediately and by the time an owner is aware of a problem, the damage has been done. We know of many, many RV walls and roofs that have been opened up to find the source of a leak, only to reveal a thoroughly rotted and structurally unsound wood frame. At this point a project involving a little light caulking turns in to a major (and
majorly expensive) repair. The cost to replace wooden framing can quickly escalate past the value of the RV itself and many beloved wooden framed RVs have been relegated straight to the scrap yard after a grim diagnosis. Again, there is nothing wrong with wooden framing but plan on frequent inspections to ensure leaks don’t gain a foothold. When protected by a seamless roof and quality windows and frames, wood framing can provide decades of reliable service.

Aluminum or steel framing has long been associated with more expensive RVs because it generally costs more than wood and requires some specialized equipment and skilled labor—not skilled to the extent of a welder, but you do need someone reasonably competent. Aluminum and steel have gained a lot of ground in recent years, though, and we’re starting to see it in even the smallest RVs. There’s a uniformity with manufactured metals that you just can’t get from a natural product like wood. Steel doesn’t warp, have weak spots, and is impervious to water damage. A word of caution, though. While metal framing itself won’t be affected by leaking, the insulation material it holds might sag if saturated and lose its insulating properties and also create an environment for mold. Wires and electrical systems could also be compromised by long exposure to moisture, possibly leading to fire. Steel framing is almost always welded, but aluminum is often screwed or riveted together. Either option is fine and while the possibility of a failed weld is still possible, it rarely will result in a structurally unsound vehicle if confined to a wall, as opposed to a load bearing chassis.

To summarize, chances are if you are looking at a new RV these days you will find aluminum or steel framing. While this is a great product, make sure the manufacturer hasn’t cut corners on the roofing shell or the windows. A leak can still do lots of damage. In fact, if you do end up with a metal framed RV, still plan on frequent inspections and address any signs of water infiltration immediately.

If you encounter a traditional stick-built RV, do some investigating and find out why the company is still working with wood. If they have a 50 year track record of success with wood, great. If you sense they are sticking with wood to cut costs or because their construction methods are just dated, you might want to steer clear.

RV Exteriors: Aluminum versus Fiberglass

RVs use different types of siding on their exteriors to protect the unit from weather and provide some insulation to keep the interiors at livable temperatures. The two most common siding materials are aluminum and fiberglass. In fact, you probably won’t find an RV sheathed in anything else.

**Aluminum Siding:** Aluminum trailer siding is either corrugated or smooth. Corrugated panels attach to the exterior of the trailer in interlocking sections and are typically found on inexpensive or low-end trailers even though they’re extremely durable and long lasting. Corrugated exteriors are beginning to look a bit dated, though, as more buyers gravitate toward the clean, streamlined look of a smooth
surface. Premium trailers with higher price tags usually have smooth aluminum siding attached by rivets or other metal fasteners. Airstream is one manufacturer that famously uses smooth aluminum siding on all their units. Their shiny unpainted finish is as iconic as it is functional, and it lasts virtually forever—which helps explain the high resale value for even the oldest Airstream trailers.

**Pros and Cons of Aluminum:** Corrugated aluminum siding panels are easy to replace, but smooth or polished aluminum replacement usually requires the skills of an automotive technician. Aluminum siding is lighter than fiberglass, so trailers can be pulled behind vehicles with lighter tow capacities. The light weight of aluminum may enable the purchase of a bigger trailer compared to a heavier laminated fiberglass trailer. Aluminum siding is generally less costly than fiberglass but is also prone to denting and this can be an issue if stuck in a hail storm. Another potential problem with aluminum is the rivets used to secure the panels can become loose over time and allow water to enter the unit which may cause water damage—this is the type of issue one can expect after many years. Loose rivets are not common in newer RVs and if a few do work themselves loose over the years, replacing rivets can usually be done by even the most unskilled owner with a hand riveter purchased from Lowe’s or Home Depot for $15.00. If you can put toothpaste on a toothbrush, you can change a rivet. Seriously. You can also have your dealer do it for you but expect to pay a hundred or so dollars for this convenience. We propose checking out a how-to video on YouTube before seeking professional assistance. Once you see how simple it is, you’ll probably want to do perform this task yourself.

**Fiberglass Siding Types:** Although fiberglass is available in many styles, the most popular one used today is laminated fiberglass, which is a thin fiberglass sheet saturated with epoxy and then adhered to a substrate to form a very strong and durable surface. Most factories now offer a gel-coat finish on top of that either as a standard feature or for an additional charge. Gel-coat provides a shiny, almost wet-look finish and prevents fading—to some degree. Fiberglass without a gel-coat finish is not as smooth and a bit rougher to the touch but is still just as durable. Expect some fading of colors without gel-coat after a few years. To some owners this is a problem while others could care less. Fading due to sun or elements has no detrimental effects on the sheathing of an RV.

On top of the gel-coat, many dealers offer a paint protectant finish for an additional charge. If presented with this option, save your money. A paint protectant “system” is one of the handful of things a dealer will try and add on to the cost of the RV—either without explanation or with a hard-sell approach. Make sure you read the itemized invoice line by line before signing anything, and if there’s something on there you don’t want or need (like a paint protectant system—or PPS), have it removed. Today’s factory finishes are almost universally stellar and long lasting and the dealer applied paint protectant is a bit of a gimmick—and not a cheap one. Not only does it often cost close to $1,000 but some versions have to be re-applied every 3 or 4 years, at $300-$400 a pop (a pretty important point not always explained at the time of purchase—and not a fun thing to find out several years down the road when you’re finish is
delaminating). Anything applied to the factory finish may very well null and void your factory warranty, too. If you find yourself in a situation with a finish issue and the manufacturer is refusing to honor your warranty due to an aftermarket application and the PPS provider is refusing to honor their claim because you haven’t kept up with your PPS re-applications (and are you ever going to remember to do that?), you’ll kick yourself for spending a thousand bucks on something that you didn’t really want in the first place and is now only causing headaches. Again, skip the PPS. You’ll never notice the difference but you will notice the extra money in your pocket.

One final tip: While we’re talking about things your dealer may attempt to add to your final bill, the Extended RV Warranty is certainly worth mentioning. One of our top complaints about the RV industry as a whole is the miserable and subpar warranty provided by almost all manufacturers. As you begin your research for the perfect RV for you you’ll discover that a one or two year warranty is the norm—and this applies to even six-figure Class A motorhomes. When you consider that even the cheapest and most underpowered subcompact automobile now frequently carries a three year bumper-to-bumper warranty (and up to six years/100,000 miles on the drivetrain), the industry disparity may give you pause. Especially when you consider that a find that a $55,000 fifth wheel comes with a one year warranty.

Not only is one year nearly criminal in its lack of length, but consider that this fifth wheel will probably only see 3-4 weeks of actual service that first year (based on industry averages for first year RV use). Put another way, the new fifth wheel warranty will only cover one month of actual service versus the subcompact with the the three-year warranty that will probably see daily use and abuse. Odd, huh?

But here comes your dealer to the rescue. He’s got something called an Extended RV Warranty for you. It’s not cheap, but he assures you everyone gets it. You’d be crazy to take home a new RV with only one year (actually one month of service, remember) of warranty coverage.

We’ll agree he has a point but strongly suggest you don’t purchase an Extended Warranty from a dealer. Why? Well, for starters, numerous states have now passed legislation limiting RV dealers to no more than 100% mark-up on extended warranties. Passing legislation is no small feat and should give you a good idea of the prevalence of unhappy RV owners that found out after the fact that they’d paid a premium price for a really rotten deal. The fact that the dealers in these states had to be limited to 100% makes you wonder how much they were adding before this. If that isn’t enough to sour you on the dealer supplied Extended Warranty, consider that these dealers were often simply purchasing these warranties from wholesalers like WholesaleWarranties.com, slapping on a ton of profit, and re-selling it to you. And here’s the rub: You, the RV owner, can contact a wholesaler directly and purchase the exact same coverage without the dealer’s assistance (and profit).

We propose getting a wholesale quote before closing on your RV. It costs you nothing and gives you some real firepower when your dealer presents his proposal. In fact, mention “RVReviews.net” when you get a quote from WholesaleWarranties.com and they’ll give you an additional discount. Doing this beforehand will protect you if your dealer says his offer won’t be available after the sale. Why? Because he really doesn’t want you to research and compare his offer to anyone else. This small bit of preemptive free research before the fact could save you thousands of dollars—while giving you a much better warranty.
CONCLUSION

We hope you enjoyed this FREE report and if you employ just one or two items discussed here, we’re confident that you’ll save money (possibly a significant amount) and end up with an RV that works for you and your family. Obviously there’s a limited amount of ground we can cover in only ten pages or so but we’ve really tried to pack in as much as possible. Our newly updated Comparison Guides and other products go in to much more detail about specific manufacturers and provide many more money-saving tips and tricks that you can use to buy right the first time.

Over the past ten years we’ve honed our products to provide all the info that today’s RV buyers want and need to know and strongly feel that a small investment in our research material will save you thousands of dollars off your RV purchase price and help you avoid the poorly built and problematic RVs hidden among the good ones on today’s market. Remember, there’s a lot of pigs with lipstick out there.

We’ve included some info and links to our more in-depth products on the following pages.

Happy Travels,

Randall Eaton
Senior Editor
RVReviews.net
Factory Ratings – Not Sure Where to Start?

Find the best manufacturers and avoid the rest. Our RV guides rate all the major manufacturers that build: (Click on links below to learn more).

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- Class B/B+
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- Know common problem areas (even on new units) that need special attention.
- Identify hidden issues before you buy and get the best service from your dealer.
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