



Teach me towing

To improve on her limited towing experience, Caravan's new assistant editor **Victoria Heath** decided it was time to learn a few tips on how to make towing as easy as possible, and enrolled herself on a manoeuvring course

I took my driving test five times. I had four instructors, 75 lessons and crashed my clapped-out Peugeot 106 twice. It was no wonder when I told my friends and family I had a job which would require me to do some more towing, they not only thought I was mad, but had seriously inflated ideas about my own abilities.

I was determined to prove them all wrong. So I enrolled

on a one-day Camping and Caravanning Club caravan manoeuvring course, held at Warden Park School in Haywards Heath, West Sussex.

On arrival, the other 10 members of the course and I were taken up to a classroom for coffee and a chat. There was a real mixture of people, some experienced, some novices like me. The day was to be split into two hours of 'classroom' instruction, with

the rest of the time spent outside practising our manoeuvres. We were split into groups of three or four and assigned an instructor. Mine was Geoff Voice, a former driving instructor for the Post Office. Like all instructors, Geoff was a member of the Club and an experienced caravanner so I felt I was in safe hands.

Licensing Issue

The first issue that came up was my driving licence. Having passed my test after the 1st January, 1997, I can only drive a vehicle which weighs up to 3.5 tonnes, and tow a caravan weighing no more than 750kg. Worried that I was going to have to actually weigh my Ford Mondeo, Geoff assured me that it was under the limit,

although if I wanted to drive a car and caravan whose combined weight is more than 4.25 tonnes I would need to take a further test. Not very likely at this point.

Unit matching

Over coffee, we were given a general talk about factors affecting the stability of our unit. Probably the most important thing I picked up was to make sure my car matched my unit. So if your car weighs 1000kg, your caravan should weigh 850kg, 85 per cent of the car. If this ratio isn't right, your caravan may start 'snaking' whilst going along, not something you want as a novice caravanner.

Load it up

We also learned about how to





»»» The course provides vans for you to practise with

load a caravan properly. Some things, like making sure most of the weight was over the axle and low down seemed obvious, but Geoff assured me that people do get it wrong. He suggested we weigh the heavier things we might carry, like the awning, gas bottle and battery. Do it once, and you never need to do it again.

Slow it down

Geoff asked how fast we as caravanners could go on a motorway. I said 70mph, same as other cars, but the law actually says we can't exceed 60mph and 50mph on an ordinary road. Seems like I still

had a lot to learn before I could call myself a really competent caravanner.

On with the practical

Outside was where the real learning happened. Taking it in turns, we learned to hitch and unhitch the van properly, drive forward, reverse straight and reverse round corners. The trick when driving was to turn your wheel in the direction you see the van appearing, which then straightens the unit up. And going as slowly as you can makes the whole business much easier.

Watching other people practice and make mistakes

was just as helpful as doing it myself. Having an audience also made me want to 'do it right' because any good manoeuvres were met with praise. At the end of the day, I really felt I had gained the skills I need, and was itching to go out on the road.

Geoff summed up why these manoeuvring courses were so popular: 'Some participants have been towing for years, but still don't know how to reverse. Here, you can make a fool of yourself and it doesn't matter at all.'

For a relative novice like me, that sounds like a great reason to sign up. Ⓢ

Geoff's caravan tips

'Normally one tyre catches more sunlight than the other when parked. Cover the exposed tyre and it will last longer.'

'Put a sticker on your van, which says, 'If this van isn't being towed by (car's name), report it stolen'. Thieves are likely to be put off.'

'If your van continuously snakes, check the loading and weight matching.'

'Keep your distance, as you need an extra 25 per cent braking distance with a van.'

How do I sign up for a course?

Contact The Camping and Caravan Club, Greenfields House, Westwood Way, Coventry, CV4 8JH. Tel: 0845 130 7412
Web: www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk
(The Caravan Club also runs similar courses for its members)

What does it cost?

Full day costs £85
Non-members must also pay the Club's joining fee of £5
Every participant receives a certificate, video or DVD and handbook called 'Safe Towing for Life'

When do the courses run?

Courses run from March to September, at various locations around the UK (see the website)
A maximum of 12 people can attend each course. All participants must bring their driving license, certificate of insurance, portable towing mirrors and a packed lunch!

