

Inspiring you to Travel



FIRST STEP STARTER KIT

For newbie motorhomies

By The Motoroamers, Karen and Myles Davies

First Step Starter Kit

For newbie motorhomies

They say that the world is getting smaller and that our wanderlust is growing, which can mean only one thing...travel we must.

Not only is our opportunity to travel exploding exponentially, so many more of us are choosing to feed our wanderlust with a motorhome or camper van. UK figures recorded by DLVA of registered motorhomes between June 2016-17 show an increase of 14% (as quoted by [National Caravan Council](#)) and in the region of 205,000 motorhomes being used for leisure purposes. Plus every day on Social Media forums we are reading about singles, couples and families taking the step to change their lives by setting out for a permanent life on the road. And it's these factors that have been the driver for this Guide.

Our story - The Motoroamers

In 2015, we made a monumental decision, triggered by a deep realisation that our lives needed to change and our insane dedication to our corporate careers had to stop if we were going to live life to the full. After too much stress and commitment to 'The System', we downsized and sought the Good Life in Somerset, UK, having upped-sticks from our 20 years on the Isle of Man.

Yet still something was missing and after a memorable six week tour around New Zealand in a motorhome for our 25th Wedding Anniversary, it happened; our big shift was conceived. We knew from that moment on that travel was what we needed in our lives....

By March 2016, after far too many 'shall we, shan't we' conversations and a whole heap of fear on Karen's part, we did it! Motorhome purchased, rental house left, jobs packed in and furniture stored; we were ready for a gap-year of travel around Europe. Yet what started as a year out, soon became a full-time commitment as within weeks of landing in Spain we realised how much this nomadic lifestyle suited us and it continues to form the basis of our lives for the foreseeable future. Now we travel, play and earn our living on the

Inspiring you to Travel

road, sharing our experiences with others in the pursuit of inspiring them to travel beyond their fears, just like we did.

***“Travel when we can, wherever we can, for as long as we can;
just travel.” The Motoroamers***

Whilst we still consider ourselves relative newbies with our full-time travelling life-style, we often reflect back to our early days before we made our leap to a nomadic life and wonder how on earth we took that step.

We had so many questions that we grappled with and plenty of challenges that we had to work through on our own. So it got us to thinking - what if there was something we could share about our experiences that could help others on the same journey and what would that look like?

So with our coaching and creative hats on, we have come up the following Guide that might help you work through this phase of change, which can be mind-blowing at times. It might help get yourselves off the starting block as you run one of the most exciting races of your life.

With love and hope

Karen and Myles

The Motoroamers



Disclaimer: The points raised here are offered in good faith and are based on our personal experiences at the time of writing. The Motoroamers, October 2017



Step 1
Clarify your
needs

Where do we start?



Something has triggered you to enter the exciting world of camping; whether it will be a motorhome, camper, caravan or self-build. The commitment has been made, in your mind at least and perhaps you've even bought your first vehicle. Congratulations! Making that decision can often be the hardest thing and there's so many 'what if's' and fears flying around. If you're

reading this and are still stuck in the fearful stage, and we so get that, then why not read our blog, [From Fear to Freedom](#) and download our free [Infographic](#) on handling fear.

So you've made the decision! Now what?

Step 1. Getting Clear - a process to clarify your needs

There's a whole overwhelming, thrilling, nerve-wracking and confusing world out there that you've just decided to step into. And you're probably part of some FB groups that have a huge source of knowledge, opinions and good advice, based on everyone's unique and personal experiences. All a great start.

What we found helpful when we were going through the process was to start with what we wanted and needed from our new van. Whilst canvassing other's thoughts and ideas can be a useful exercise, we all have our own preferences about van choices and actually it can create a whole heap of confusion and not the clarity you are looking for and need.

Inspiring you to Travel

1. Selecting your Key Criteria.

Whether you are taking this life-enhancing decision with a partner, with your family or on your own, then a great first exercise is to make a list of what you (both or all) want and need from your vehicle. Think about:

- **Vital** - non negotiable factors or features
- **Important** - factors you are willing to compromise on
- **Nice to haves** - if they were possible

Doing this exercise separately can be so much more helpful than diving in together, as often we really don't take the time out to think about our needs in this sort of detail. We get carried away by our excitement and forget the rational conversation that needs to be had if we are going to choose a van that is right for us. *If you are going solo, then the exercise becomes slightly easier, as you only have your own needs to meet.*

2. Comparing Notes

Having done your list(s), now it's time to see what features are similar and different.

For us, one agreed feature was a fixed bed - so that became one of our **Key Criteria** for choosing the right van. One of our conflicting features was space. I wanted as much space as possible yet Myles said that space came at a price; length, weight and manoeuvrability. So this was a feature that we needed to compromise on, although we still managed to get both our needs met in the end.

3. Key Criteria List

Your comparison exercise will finally produce your **Key Criteria**, which gives you a really strong basis to work from when choosing the type of vehicle you want to buy. You're now ready for Step 2.



Step 2
Exploring the
Big Five

Step 2 - Exploring The Big Five

Now you have some clarity about your needs for a leisure vehicle, you are ready to delve deeper into the new lifestyle you dream of. Use these Big Five Questions as a guide.

1. **What purpose do you want your van to have at least in the medium term?**

It is for occasional use at weekends and holidays or is it for a possible full-time life on the road? This will determine a number of priorities that you may need such as fixed bed, fridge freezer, decent kitchen area and storage space. If it's for occasional use, then you may be willing to compromise on a few more issues.

2. **What budget do you have to fund your van?**

What margin of movement is there in that budget? This will help you look at whether you go for new, ex-demo, second-hand or perhaps even your own conversion or self-build. It's worth bearing in mind that in August/Sept there are some really good deals to be had, as the new models will soon be launched and old stock will need to be moved on. So get your haggling heads on.

3. **Who is the van for, primarily?**

You alone, with a partner, pets, children, family visitors? This will help you explore what size van you need, the layout in terms of space for pets, seat belted lounge seats and the number of births for occasional visitors.

4. **Are you looking to travel in UK predominantly or spend time abroad?**

This will determine whether you need a large lounge area for unpredictable weather or smaller kitchen and lounge because you are predominantly living outside.

When you compare the layouts of European vans like Hymer, Pilote or Dethleffs against Swift, Elddis or Autotrail, you will see how the designs differ.

Inspiring you to Travel

Europeans mostly eat out, so their cooking needs are less significant than for a UK culture. Weather in UK is more inclement so you will see more investment in the lounge area. Start comparing the vans and see how the different styles suit your **Key Criteria**

5. What type of touring do you want to do and where will you store your van?

The answer to this first question may well determine the engine size you go for. Some will say that their 130bhp is fine; others that 150bhp is essential. If you want to do some serious travelling and trekking up in the Alps or the Scottish Highlands, even Greece surprisingly, then a powerful engine could be invaluable. We have been glad of the extra power of our 150bhp, although it is a personal choice and possible a budgetary one.

And in terms of storing your van, if you are limited to short and medium term breaks, then storage is an important question, certainly when it comes to insurance. Whilst it may not be a definitive answer that will determine one van or another, it does need to be put on the table as for many of us, storage or parking may be a relevant issue on size.

And finally, just one more sneaky question.....



Do you envisage wintering abroad? If heading away to somewhere snowy is important to you, then you need to look at the technical specs of the vans and make sure that the insulation is good enough to meet your needs.

These thoughts all need to be built into your plan and research.

A scenic landscape featuring a range of rugged, light-colored mountains under a clear blue sky. In the foreground, a dense forest of green trees is visible. At the bottom of the image, a row of several white RVs is parked in a grassy field, suggesting a campsite or travel destination.

Step 3
Research

3. Research, research, research

Having sketched out something that feels right to you and talked it through with your family, partner or a friend, you are now ready to start your search. Your **Key Criteria** will support you through this exciting and mind-blowing process with a degree of ease.

We're not of course guaranteeing that it will be seamless or without frustration, as there are always unexpected issues flying in from left field. We changed our minds at the 11th hour, having decided to go for an Island Bed rather than the French style. Although it will make the process a lot smoother.

What this will give you is a structure and some clarity which saves on arguments, enabling you to have some sensible conversations with the sales folk out there who are intent on getting you to part with your hard earned cash.

This is an exciting step of the journey, although nothing will replace the getting in and out of vans, seeing how they feel to you and examining how well they meet your criteria. Here are some of our tips on research sources:

1. Buy magazines

Magazines like MMM and Practical Motorhome/Caravan will help you see what the industry are offering and reviews about the latest models. There is a wealth of other people's experiences and the magazines definitely have their place in your research.

2. Get up close and personal

That said, you really do need to step inside vans and feel them. Sometimes your intuition will tell you, other times it is purely a process of elimination.

Inspiring you to Travel

You need to touch, sense, test and generally imagine yourself in each van to see which one feels most like home. You'll know!

This is such an important part of the journey that cannot be rushed, otherwise you may well end up making a rash decision based on emotion that has you swapping your van in after a year. Take time to put the miles in and take a note book with you! Travel the length and breadth of the country if necessary to visit all of the different dealers. Go to shows like the NEC in October and February and start to produce your **List of Contenders**.

3. Delve deeper

Once you have your list, then your research will require you to delve deep into things like build quality, durability and issues that crop up with specific brands. Asking for advice on Forums can help tremendously, although everyone has their own slant on it and it's a very personal matter.

There's simply no short circuiting research. We drove the length and breadth of the country to find the van that was right for us and the layout that would meet at least 80% of our needs. There will always be some compromises, although if you have your **Key Criteria**, then you will have a far more constructive conversation with your partner and dealers, armed with this information.

4. The Dealer's Reputation

It may be an odd addition to this section, although be prepared to explore the dealer who you're thinking of buying from. Explore their Customer Service standards and what reputation they have amongst the motorhoming community. It's so important that you will be looked after, once you have parted with your cash. Believe us, After Sales Care is as critical as the sales process when it comes to dealing with issues post purchase.

Inspiring you to Travel

The sad thing is you never really know what service you are likely to get until you put it to the test. Although you can certainly gauge a reputation by asking around. So do your homework and gather other's views on who's good and who's not. We learnt the hard way with this one and have regretted our choice often!

5. Try before you buy

If you are sat on the fence in any way wondering whether it's for you, why not hire one and try it out for size. This is one of the best pieces of research advice we can offer you.



It's what we did, albeit inadvertently in NZ. Little did we know how radically our trip would change our lives and we're forever grateful.

It taught us about what we loved about travelling, about motorhoming in particular and gave us a really important reference point about what we liked and loathed about the van we hired. For example ours was an automatic and it drove us nuts, so that was one of our **Key Criteria**, our new home had to be manual.

Hiring is a priceless investment that you will reap so much from in your final choice of 'home'.

The background of the page is a photograph of a large, circular, light-colored structure, possibly a dome or a large well, with a wide staircase leading up to the top. A thick rope is stretched across the width of the structure, supported by two large, cylindrical, textured objects that look like concrete pillars or large spools. The sky is blue with some white clouds. The text is written in a black, cursive font over the image.

Step 4
The Technical
Bits

Step 4 - The Technical Bits!

If you are completely new to living in and on wheels, then there are some technical issues that you need to be armed with to ask the salesmen/dealers. This is undoubtedly not a definitive list, although these were the ones that we learnt to ask;

What's the payload? This is a bit of a minefield and you need to be clear with your dealer what payload you have with your chosen van so you can drive within the legal boundaries and be safe. Many items will impact on your pay load such as passengers, water, diesel, batteries, awnings and solar panels. So be clear to get this information right so that you are within your limits. For more information this [website](#) might help.

What's the engine size? You need to make sure that the size of engine is compatible with the size of van and believe us they aren't always a good match. The best way to tell is to ask the question and then do a test drive. Ensure it gives you the performance you need to fit your travel lifestyle.

What type of heating system is there? Heating is critical wherever you travel and we've been in some supposed 'hot' countries and had snow and freezing temperatures. So make sure that you have an adequate heating system. This is another possible minefield topic so once you know the type of system your van has, you can then do some research on the pros and cons. Make sure that you have the right system for your lifestyle.

What type of insulation does the van have? Double skin or single? Again with new vans you can often select the type of insulation you need, although in the second-hand market, you will need to find out what type of insulation it has.

Inspiring you to Travel

What age is the van and what is the Habitation History? Every year it is recommended that a van has a Habitation Inspection to check out the electrics, gas safety and any damp issues. And although it's not necessary to do it, if something goes wrong with your van in the first three years, repairs may not be covered under the Warranty if it hasn't had the Habitation Inspection done. With a second-hand van, you have the right to ask for the Habitation History. Also make sure you get hold of a damp metre if you go for a second-hand van as you will want to do your own checks to make sure that no water ingress.

What is the electrical status of the van? Depending on whether you will be staying solely at campsites or mixing it with wild camping you will need to have the right electrical supply to meet your lifestyle needs. So check how many leisure batteries there are, whether there is a solar panel fitted and if there is an inverter (the facility to convert 12v into 220v for domestic appliance usage whilst not on electrical hook up.) We fitted an extra leisure battery and had both a 120W solar panel and inverter fitted so that we had sufficient power to charge up our devices and run our appliances, given we work digitally and wild camp. These are important issues to check out on the van you choose.

What is the gas status of the van? If you are planning on European travel, then you might need to consider having a refillable Gas system such as GASLOW or GASSIT, which allows you to fill up at a LPG station rather than relying on gas bottles. UK Gas Bottles are not refillable in other European countries, so having a refillable system is vital.

Do you need a solar panel? Solar as a way of boosting your leisure batteries is a great if wild camping is part of your lifestyle requirements. You may feel, that being new to motorhoming, that wild camping is not an option for you, although think about Aires, Stellplatz and Sostas; they are a great camping resource although not all of them have Electrical Hook Up (EHU). Having a solar panel can seriously flex your camping muscles.

Inspiring you to Travel

To awning or not to awning, that is the question? Lots of people ask for opinions on whether an awning is worthwhile and a good investment. Having made an impulsive purchase at the NEC Show of a Quest Aquila High-Top Drive-away awning, for us it simply doesn't live up to its hype. We've used it half-a-dozen times in our 20 months on the road and it really hasn't been a good value purchase. Sure it does a great job if you're away in on a campsite for longer than 4 days or the weather is particularly bad and you need some extra space.

We do more wild camping than campsites and so the extra space and weight it takes up really doesn't justify our investment. We have, on the other hand, used our Fiamma wind out sun canopy regularly and this has been a great. Awnings are such a personal choice and depends so much on what your travelling lifestyle will look like so our advice would be, get your van, travel in it for a season and see whether you really need one.

Outside gas point. If the idea of cooking outside on a gas barbecue or Cadac appeals then it would be worth asking for an outside gas point to be fitted. This means you don't need to carry an additional gas cylinder saving you precious weight on your pay load.

PILOTE

Step 5

SOLD
Call Today! 800-854-8888
Plymouth
Customer: Mr. & Mrs. Smith
Dealer: [unclear]

The Practicalities

Step 5 - The Practicalities

So you've got this far and hopefully it's been a reasonably smooth process, or at least the ideas we've shared seem like it could be a smooth process. Now for the all-important detail that makes your travel on wheels safe and secure.

This section deals with the things that you will need to navigate a smooth and, what we like to call, a 'noiseless' journey. I don't mean rattles, I mean a journey that is as issue-free as we can make it. No incidents, accidents or dramas. Of course we can't ever guarantee that these things won't happen - they do and have plenty for us in the last six months, although these steps will help you navigate your journey with a lot less stress.

1. Accessories

- **Levelling chocks** - these are a must whether you are wild camping or at an Aire or campsite. Not everywhere is flat and dry, so getting yourself some good levellers is imperative. There are a lot of different options you can buy, although buy a quality set that gives you at least three levels. We've got the Milenco Ramp Levellers
- **Grip Mats** - may sound like an odd accessory to have, although believe us, it's essential to have this piece of kit - just in case. Because when you really need them, just that one time, you will be eternally grateful that you have these little yellow wonders. Grip mats will help you get off any soggy pitches and with our own resident 'Rainman' on board, we've had plenty of chances to use them. See our [video log of Salzburg](#) and how they came in handy.

Inspiring you to Travel

- **Outdoor carpet** - it wasn't until we were a month into our trip that we realised how important it is to 'set up home' when you arrive at a campsite. The Dutch particularly are really good at making their pitch feel homely; so the carpet came out, table, chairs, table cloth and a vase of flowers. It always looked so pretty. And they taught us a lot about making your van feel home from home - however long you are away from your actual home. So from that point on we decided to get some carpet and our original choice didn't last long, so we invested in a Fiamma, which folds up into a concertina and fits in the garage beautifully. For any campsite 'home' a carpet is a must if you're there for more than a couple of days. Using it for wild camping would not be appropriate though, we must add, as this would be deemed 'camping behaviour'.
- **Toolkit essentials** - Myles has taken care of all our toolkit needs, making sure that there is a well stocked bag of essential items and there hasn't been much that we've not made use of at some point on our journey. See our blog [here](#) for his take on what not to leave at home.
- **Cycle carrier plate** - if you intend taking bikes with you and want to store them on the back of your van, then you will need an official Warning Sign and this is a legal requirement - so don't leave home without one.
- **Door Safety Lock** - if safety is on your mind and why wouldn't it be, then why not get a safety lock that fits on the outside of your door. On our travels we have seen a whole range of different strategies that people have used to feel safe, from a toy Colley dog that sits on the front seat, a dog barking warning alarm and these fellas. Whilst we don't have one at the moment it is something that we're considering.

Inspiring you to Travel

- **Water fetching!** Now whilst a water hose is an essential piece of kit, we also recommend that you get collapsable water carrier too. There will be many occasions where you need to collect water because the hose won't reach or there's no connector or perhaps you need to fill up from a mountain stream. Either way one of these is a no-brainer and takes up no space.
- **Packing Cubes** - one of our essential, inside items has been the Packing Cubes - they've been a god-send. After six weeks in NZ, we knew that clothes in the cupboards would move around, get quickly disorganised and end up being incredibly messy. So we bought these cubes and Hey-Presto, clothes are now organised, easy to access and put away after washing. They've been such an important part of a noise-less journey.
- **Hand-held vacuum cleaner** - this has been such a great tool to keep the van clean. It's plugged in for charging and then you have hand-held usage for up to twenty minutes, it's been brilliant. There are lots on the market, although we've been really pleased with our Dyson.
- **Vacuum Storage Bags** - we use these to pack away summer or winter clothes for storage under the bed. They keep everything clean, dust-free and flat so when storage is such an important consideration, these storage bags do the trick very nicely.
- **Kitchen cupboard storage containers** - keeping the cupboards organised is so important not just to minimise rattles whilst driving although just for ease of access. Again this is something we learnt in NZ. We had one cupboard that was particularly difficult to reach at the back without a stool to stand on. So we often ended up standing on the corner of the bed trying to reach it. So these Storage Trays are brilliant and allow you to store so much more and get quick and easy access to them too.

2. Insurances and Memberships

Of course no camper purchase is complete without insurance and breakdown cover. This is such a minefield and there is one blog out there, that is particularly amazing by Joanne and Craig from Our Bumble. They have summarised all of the insurance routes, which is based on when they went to press in July 2017. It's such a comprehensive list that to guide you to their site is a must. Access their blog by clicking here: <http://ourbumble.com/list-motorhome-insurance-providers/>

There's also great debate about what memberships to buy and their value to the motorhome owner and traveller. It can be pretty contentious so our advice is; decide what sort of travelling you are going to do. If you are going to predominantly stay in UK or enjoy rallies, then joining [the Caravan and Motorhome Club](#), will give you access to a range of large and CL sites and a large camping community. If you are predominantly Europe and prefer solo travel, then your annual fee investment could potentially be wasted. We didn't use ours once during our first year and so have cancelled our membership, although it's a very personal choice.

Instead we invested in the ACSI discount card, which purchased each year in December gives you significant discounts for a huge number of sites across UK and Europe. For under £18 you have access to discounts on campsites from September to June and within just a couple of nights you will have had a return on your investment. We will also be investing in France Passion next year.

If you haven't already, we highly recommend registering for [Search for Sites](#) which offers a comprehensive list of places to go with reviews from visiting campers. We use it all the time and we're excited to see the new App version coming out soon.

Inspiring you to Travel

There are others that people recommend such as Park4Night and CamperStops, which are all incredibly helpful and come in App form for your device.

There are so many different books you can buy to give you campsite reference points, although they all need storage and contribute to your payload. For a really good review, check out Andrea and Paul from FollowourMotorhome, who have done a write up of how they find places to stay. Check it out [here](#).

3. Things to remember

Although learning from peers is great, it's not until you hit the road, that your lessons really begin and you realise how much you really don't know. Here's a round up of our Classroom on the Road.

* **Brake pads** will need replacing anytime around 18,000 - 20,000 miles so keep your eye on the mileometer. Obviously it depends on the type of roads you travel and how you drive, although keep this figure in mind if you're going off-



piste, so to speak. Ours went around 19,000 when we were in Transylvania and we had to find ourselves a Fiat garage in the heart of Bucharest - which with limited Romanian was no mean feat. You can read about our adventures with this [here](#).

* **Stay local to test out your van.** Your van will have teething problems, even if it's brand new - in fact especially if it's brand new. So always a good idea to have your first few adventures local to your dealer so that you can sort our problems before you hit the road.

Inspiring you to Travel

We had three months before our 'D-Day' although because we had Christmas and New Year in the way, the problem we unearthed with having the wrong configuration of carpets couldn't be sorted out until mid-January and it was finally resolved by mid April. So it's worth trialling your van to get to know how everything works.

- * **Habitation Sliding Screen** - will get salted up if you're by the sea with winds, causing it to stick. Washing gently with warm, soapy water will ease up the threads and making sliding easier.

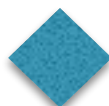
- * **Water connector adapters** will be needed for European travel as one size does not fit all. Buy a selection from a Garden Centre.

- * **Toilet smelling like roses?** Don't waste money on the Thetford toilet fluid as it's expensive and can be hard to get in some regions of Europe. Instead buy cheap washing tablets from a supermarket like Lidl and place one tablet in when you empty. Without chemicals you then have more options for disposing of your black waste in a public toilet, if you are desperate.

- * **Electric bike battery faults.** If you decide to buy or take with you electric bikes and you have a problem with your battery - do not, under any circumstances return it by post to UK as your UK cycle shop will not be able to return it or a new one to you whilst you're in Europe. If you have a problem, wait until you're back in UK to sort it out. Bike batteries can not be flown because of the danger of Lithium so either have to come via a slow boat to China which costs the earth or get shipped from a European hub and come by road. So please learn from our mistake and do not pay over £200 for a warranty issue!

Inspiring you to Travel

- * **Waste Tank smelling like roses?** If your waste tank starts to smell, then once you have emptied it, close up the pipe, buy 2-3 cheap Coca Cola bottles and empty these down the sink. Then go for a drive and let it slosh about and empty at the next convenient dumping station. This is a cheap and efficient way of ridding your tank of nasty smells.
- * **European travel in the winter.** Many people talk about saving money by going via Dover/Calais and then driving down to Spain for the winter. We would encourage you to do the paper exercise first. Depending on which part of the UK you live, it might end up being cheaper and easier to take the ferry from Portsmouth to Santander. By the time you've calculated price by mile for diesel, wear and tear on tyres, availability of water, and the time it will take you to get there, lack of open campsites (do not under any circumstances stop in a Motorway Service station in any European Country as they are notorious places for theft), it can be easier and cheaper to take the ferry - at least one way. Do the math before assuming it will be cheaper.
- * **Aires in France in winter.** Whilst aires are widely open in France, they almost always turn off their water supply to prevent frozen pipes. So if you are travelling any time from November through to Jan/Feb, be aware of this and instead fill up at any Lavage. For €6 you can fill your tank - although you'll obviously need fresh water bottles from a supermarket for drinking and vegetable cooking.



Inspiring you to Travel

And so, our First Step Starter Kit ends here. Whilst a document like this can never be completely up to date or totally comprehensive as new toys and technicalities are getting to market all the time and we don't profess to be experts at anything, we do hope that it gives you some food for thought.

We genuinely hope that sharing our experiences might answer some questions, although if it raises more than it answers, then please do get in touch with us either at themotoroamers@gmail.com or contact us via our Facebook community page www.facebook.com/motoroaming

This new lifestyle you have or are about to choose is incredible and will take you a journey of more than the miles you cover. We both wish you happy and safe adventures and hope that one of these days our paths may cross and we'll share a beer!

With love and anticipation

Karen and Myles

The Motoroamers

