

THE RV-INDUSTRY WATCHDOG

The CrappyRV Buyer's Guide

The five things to do before you buy an RV — so you don't end up with a crappy one.

RESEARCH · INSPECT · ASK THE DEALER · NEGOTIATE · PRE-DELIVERY

100% free · No manufacturer money · Print it & share it

How to use this guide

We started CrappyRV after four RVs and more than 135 documented defects — including a brand-new fifth wheel whose basement flooded the first night we owned it. We don't sell RVs, we're not paid by any manufacturer, and we don't want you to live what we lived.

There are five things to do before you buy any RV: **research** it, **inspect** it, **ask the dealer** the right questions, **negotiate** the real price, and run a proper **pre-delivery** before you ever take the keys. Do all five and you'll dodge the vast majority of lemons. Print this, bring it, and don't let anyone rush you through it.

1 RESEARCH

Win or lose the deal before you ever set foot on a lot.

9 ACTION ITEMS

Find out who actually builds it.

Most “brands” are owned by two or three giant holding companies. “Independent” often isn't. Find the parent company and when the brand last changed hands — ownership changes are when quality control quietly changes, usually for the worse.

Pull the recall and complaint history.

Check the brand and model on the NHTSA recall database ([nhtsa.gov/recalls](https://www.nhtsa.gov/recalls)), then cross-check our Recalls tracker and the Yikes owner-problem board. A pattern of the same failure across many owners tells you what will break on yours.

Read the owner forums and Facebook groups for your exact floorplan.

Not the glossy reviews — the owner groups. Search the specific floorplan number. The people who already own it will tell you the slide that binds, the wall that delaminates, the leak that shows up the first hard rain.

Do the weight math against your tow vehicle.

This is where people get hurt. Compare the RV's GVWR (loaded weight) and tongue/pin weight to your truck's payload, towing capacity, and GCWR — loaded, with water, gear, and people. Dealers routinely sell rigs that overload the buyer's truck. Verify it yourself.

Learn the brand's known weak points.

Every builder has them — lamination/delamination, slide mechanisms, frame flex, roof membrane, cheap appliances. Know the specific failure modes for the brand you're considering so you can hunt for them during the inspection.

Budget the TRUE cost of ownership.

The sticker is the smallest number you'll pay. Add insurance, registration, storage, tires, a surge protector/EMS (~\$300), maintenance, and the near-certain first-year warranty hassle. Budget for repairs even on a brand-new unit — especially on a brand-new unit.

Read the warranty BEFORE you fall in love.

Get the full manufacturer warranty and every component warranty in writing. Length, exclusions, who performs the work, and typical parts wait times. A warranty you have to drive 300 miles to use, or wait two months for parts on, is barely a warranty.

Set your needs-vs-wants list and a walk-away number.

Decide what you actually need before a salesperson decides for you. Write the must-haves, the nice-to-haves, and the absolute top dollar you'll pay out the door. Bring it. The number on paper is what keeps you honest in the F&I office.

Time the purchase.

Off-season (late fall/winter), end of the model year, and the last days of a sales quarter are when dealers deal. RV shows can be good for selection but are high-pressure — never sign at a show without running the rest of this guide first.

2 INSPECT

Go over the unit like you're suspicious — because you should be.

10 ACTION ITEMS

Get on the roof.

Roof leaks are the number-one RV killer. Photograph every penetration — vents, AC, antenna, skylights. Look for cracked or lifting sealant and press for soft spots. If the dealer won't let anyone up there, that's your answer.

Check every seam, sealant, and the walls for delamination.

Run a finger around every window, slide, and joint — soft means rot. Sight down the exterior walls in raking light: ripples, waves, or bubbles in the fiberglass are delamination, and it is expensive, progressive, and often not fully fixable.

Get under it.

On your back with a flashlight: look at the frame for rust or sag, the underbelly coroplast for rips and dangling wires, and the plumbing for anything exposed or zip-tied where it shouldn't be.

Operate every slide-out, fully, both directions.

Run each slide all the way out and all the way in. Listen for grinding, watch for binding, and confirm it sits flush and the seals are soft and continuous with no daylight showing.

Pressure-test the entire water system.

Hook up city water and run every fixture — galley, bath sink, shower, toilet — for a solid minute each. Turn on the water heater and wait for hot at every tap. Then check under every sink, behind the toilet, and around the water heater with a flashlight for leaks.

Test all electrical — every outlet, both power sources.

Use a \$5 three-light outlet tester on every 110V outlet (reverse polarity is shockingly common). Test the 12V and USB outlets, the GFCIs, the battery voltage at rest, and confirm the converter is charging on shore power. Feel the shore cord and breaker panel for warm spots after 30 minutes.

Light every propane appliance and run the HVAC.

Light the stove (blue flame, not yellow), the oven, the furnace, and run the fridge on both gas and electric. Run the air conditioner 20 minutes and check for an 18–22°F drop at the vents. Note the propane tank date stamps — tanks expire.

Read the tire DOT date codes.

The last four digits on the sidewall are the week and year of manufacture. RV tires age out in about five years regardless of tread — old tires on a heavy trailer are a blowout waiting to happen. Check for sidewall cracking too.

Hunt for signs of water intrusion.

Stains on the ceiling or walls, soft floor spots (especially by the entry, under windows, and around the toilet), and any musty smell. Water damage is the defect that quietly ends RVs — if you smell or feel it, walk.

For anything over \$50K, hire a certified inspector — and test it like you'll use it.

An NRVIA-certified RV inspection runs \$400–\$800 and is the best money you'll spend. Either way, insist on seeing the unit with everything running — ideally at dusk and with the systems on for hours, not a 20-minute showroom glance under fluorescent lights.

3

ASK THE DEALER

The ten questions they don't volunteer. Ask each out loud and watch their face.

11 ACTION ITEMS

“Who actually built this RV, and on what date?”

Find the build sticker and get the exact build date and plant — not just the model year. A “2026” can be a unit built in late 2024 that sat on a lot for a year and a half.

“What’s the parent company, and has the brand changed hands recently?”

You want a truthful, specific answer. “All those companies are the same anyway” means the salesperson doesn’t know — and ownership changes in the last 12 months matter more than the brand’s reputation from five years ago.

“Are there any open recalls on this VIN?”

Get the VIN and verify it on [nhtsa.gov/recalls](https://www.nhtsa.gov/recalls) yourself. You want recalls completed before delivery, in writing. “We’ll handle those after you take delivery” means the parts aren’t in and you’ll be without your rig.

“What’s the PDI process, and can I be present for it?”

A real pre-delivery inspection is 4–6 hours of testing every system, with a signed checklist. A dealer who won’t let you watch is hiding something. This is one of the most predictive signals you’ll see all day.

“What’s the warranty, exactly — and who fixes things under it?”

Get the full document. Length, exclusions, who performs the work (selling dealer? mobile tech? back to the factory?), and typical parts wait times. “Don’t worry, we take care of our customers” is not a warranty.

“How long has this specific unit been on your lot?”

Lot units that sit develop tire age, seal degradation, and battery damage. Ask, watch their face, then verify with the tire date codes and the build sticker. Trust the rubber, not the salesperson.

“What does the out-the-door price include — and what’s extra?”

Get every fee in writing before you negotiate: prep, doc, freight, destination, and the bolt-on “protection” packages. Negotiate the single out-the-door number, not the sticker and never the monthly payment.

“If something breaks in the first 30 days, exactly what happens?”

Make them walk a real scenario: the slide won’t extend — who do I call, how long until it’s fixed, do I get a loaner, is it covered? You want a named service writer and a realistic timeline, not “we’ll take care of you.”

“Can I see it at night with everything running?”

Lighting and a quick walk-through hide defects. Run the AC, the furnace, the water heater, extend every slide, fold out every awning, test every outlet. “Most buyers don’t do that” — most buyers also have a list of complaints six months later.

“If you can’t resolve a problem, what’s the escalation path?”

Get it in writing before you need it: manufacturer customer-service contact, the dealer’s service manager, the GM, and the owner. Build the chain of command now — “just call us” is where warranty claims go to die.

Bonus: “Can I talk to three recent owners of this exact model?”

Not testimonials the dealer picks — three random buyers from the last 90 days. A confident dealer sets up the calls. A worried one deflects. Either answer tells you what you need to know.

4 NEGOTIATE

The price is not the price. Where the margin really lives.

9 ACTION ITEMS

Negotiate the out-the-door total — never the monthly payment.

“What can you afford a month?” is the oldest trap in the building. A lower payment can hide a higher price, a longer loan, and a pile of add-ons. Negotiate one number: total cash out the door, everything included.

Know what these actually sell for.

MSRP on RVs is fiction. Towables frequently transact 25–35% below MSRP, and motorized units have deep margin too. Research real transaction prices for the model before you talk numbers so you know what a good deal looks like.

Separate the three deals.

The unit price, your trade-in, and the financing are three independent negotiations. Dealers blend them to hide where they’re making money. Settle the out-the-door price first, in writing, before you discuss a trade or a loan.

Get every fee itemized in writing before F&I.

Prep fee, doc fee, freight, destination — all of it on paper before you walk into the Finance & Insurance office. Combined “mandatory” junk fees over about \$1,500 are a negotiating item or a walk-away, not a law of nature.

Scrutinize or decline the F&I upsells.

Paint/fabric protection, anti-theft etching, and similar add-ons are nearly pure margin. You can decline them. The F&I office is where a good price quietly turns into a bad one — slow down and read every line.

Treat extended service contracts with suspicion.

They're heavily marked up, very negotiable, and full of exclusions. If you consider one, read exactly what's covered and what voids it, and never accept the first price. Often you can buy the same coverage later for far less.

Bring your own financing as a benchmark.

Get pre-approved at your bank or credit union first. Let the dealer try to beat it — sometimes they will — but you'll instantly spot a padded rate when you already hold a real one.

Put every promise in writing.

"We'll fix the slide seal before delivery." "We'll throw in the surge protector." If it's not on the buyer's order, it doesn't exist. A verbal promise from a salesperson is worth exactly nothing the day after you sign.

Be willing to walk away.

This is your only real leverage, and it works. There is always another unit and another dealer. The buyer who can stand up and leave gets the better deal every single time — the one who has already fallen in love does not.

5 PRE-DELIVERY

Don't take the keys until it's right. No money until it's right.

9 ACTION ITEMS

Demand a full PDI — and be there for it.

Insist on a complete pre-delivery inspection and schedule it so you can attend. Watch them test every system. The PDI is supposed to catch the defects before you do; a skipped one just hands them to you.

Get the signed PDI checklist.

A real, itemized checklist with the technician's name and date, in your hand. If there isn't a signed checklist, the inspection didn't really happen.

"No money until it's right."

Do not take delivery with open defects on a promise to fix them later. Your leverage evaporates the moment you sign and tow it away. Make them correct anything found, then re-inspect, then close.

Do your own full walk-through and operate everything yourself.

Don't just watch — put your own hands on every system: slides, awning, water, electrical, propane, appliances, jacks. Make them show you how each one works and confirm it works while you're standing there.

Photograph and video everything at delivery.

Walk the whole rig, inside and out, on camera, the day you take it. Timestamped proof of condition at delivery is gold if a warranty or damage dispute comes up later.

Confirm all recalls are completed — in writing.

Get printed, signed confirmation that every open recall on the VIN has been performed. Don't accept "it's all current" without the paper.

Collect everything that comes with it.

Every owner's manual (RV plus each component), all keys and remotes, the warranty documents, and your itemized final paperwork. Confirm the warranty start date and register the unit and major components yourself — don't assume the dealer did.

Take a shakedown trip close to home first.

Before any big trip, camp a night or two within an easy tow of home with full hookups. Run everything hard. The defects that didn't show in the lot will surface here — while you're still near the selling dealer and inside the honeymoon window.

Start a defect log on day one and know your escalation tree.

Log every issue with dates, photos, and who you spoke to from the first day. A clean paper trail is what gets things fixed — and, if it ever comes to it, what a lemon-law attorney will ask for first.

About this guide: Written by the CrappyRV team from four RVs of ownership and 135+ documented defects. It's educational, not legal or financial advice. Recall checks, warranty terms, weight ratings, and dealer policies vary — verify everything in writing for your specific unit. Free to read, free to print, free to share. crappyrv.com — Good Luck Out There.