

# Fifth Wheels are Versatile and Cost-Efficient

But don't forget to ask the tough questions.

**F**ifth wheel trailers are one of today's most popular towables and there are several good reasons for this.

First, they tow the easiest. The hitch and pin box positioned directly over the rear axle of the truck makes this possible. Many claim they hardly feel they're towing at all.

Secondly, a fifth wheel provides more useable space per foot — and per dollar — than any other trailer and many motorhomes. This is because of the step-up design with the front portion of the trailer overhanging the truck box. Fifth wheels come in all sizes from the smallest 20-footer that can be towed by a small pickup, to humungous 40 to 45-footers hauled by Freightliner-type trucks. Many sport huge storage basements under the front bedroom floor with large access doors on either side.

Then there are the slides. Fifth wheels are the slideout champions with most having two or three slides and the larger ones boasting four or even five. It's little wonder fifth wheels have become the RV of choice for many fulltimers who can use the pickup as transportation when parked in a campground.

One of the most important but least known attributes of "Fivers" is that a truck-and-fifth-wheel combination is one of the safest RVs on the road. In an emergency situation, you have a sturdy

truck body surrounding you and a substantial front crumple zone. In many Class A motorhomes, all you have in front of you is a slab of glass surrounded by framing and fiberglass. Further proof of a fifth wheel's integrity is that they do not require safety chains like towables that hook up with a ball and receiver.

As with any type of RV, there are some drawbacks to fifth wheels. It's against the law for people to occupy a trailer while it's being towed so the navigator cannot be getting coffee while the driver is operating the RV. Setting up tends to be more involved than with a motorhome since you have to release the front jacks, unhook and level.

A motorhome can be more convenient, but when towing a small car (toad), I consider that any advantage a motorhome may offer is negated by having to deal with

the car. The single most troubling problem with fifth wheels, however, is that we, the RVers, can unknowingly and easily overload both the unit and/or the truck. This is not entirely our fault as some of the blame must be borne by RV and truck marketing efforts. We've all seen the TV ads touting half-ton pickups pulling box cars just as we've also tried to figure out the cargo carrying capacity (CCC) of a fifth wheel from many manufacturers' purposely confusing or misleading specifications.

There's one more consideration to take into account when evaluating fifth wheels: price. One dollar per foot used to be a fairly reliable price estimate for the average fifth wheel. Although a 30-foot fifth wheel can still be had for about \$30,000, it will tend to be pretty basic while many 30-footers on dealers' lots are priced well above that mark. This is due to the many in-factory add-ons that are now considered standard. This includes slides, slide toppers, awnings, all fiberglass exteriors, microwaves, one-piece hard surface counter tops — even fireplaces. The interior of many such units reminds me of the Taj Mahal. The décor is designed to give the greatest impression to

**There are many in-factory interior design add-ons to choose from.**



justify the higher price. The questions that remain are:

- Is the quality of construction any better?
- Is the chassis and frame beefed up to take the added stress of extra weight and/or wall integrity due to slides? and
- Did the manufacturer simply take the standard \$30K frame, add on the goodies and price the unit at \$60K?

These are pretty heady questions I cannot answer. The best you can do is research as much as possible (use the Internet and get advice from other RVers), ask probing questions, attend RV shows and take in something such as our annual spring Safe RVing Caravan.

But these are not the only questions you need to answer. You also must look at your own needs and

how you plan to use the rig. Are you going to be fulltiming, snowbirding or just using the rig on weekends or on the annual vacation? How many kilometres do you think you'll put on the trailer in a year? Do you have other interests, other than RVing, such as off-roading, motorcycling or fishing? The answer to each one of these queries will have a direct bearing on the features of fifth wheels to be considered.

For example, if you're looking to go fulltiming, space, storage, china plumbing fixtures, heavier frame and multi-slides found in a larger upscale fifth wheel could be more appropriate. If, on the other hand, you don't expect to put many kilometres on the unit and only use it a few weekends or a couple of weeks during the year, maybe an entry level unit would do just fine. Week-

## Fifth wheels are easy to tow due to the hitch and pin box positioning.



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end warriors need look no further than the many models of “toy box” units that have a ramp at the rear and a “garage” where an ATV or other gear can be transported and stored. I would caution that with these units, care should be taken to ensure the frame and suspension are sturdy enough to carry the extra load. I have seen several of these units on our travels with a definite sag to the rear end.

It's legal in most jurisdictions to tow a boat trailer or box trailer behind the fifth wheel. Check with your provincial authority to make sure. In the event you want to do this, make sure the receiver hitch on the fifth wheel is of the proper classification for the load and that it's well attached to the frame. Of greater concern here, however, is whether or not your tow vehicle is up to the task. Four-wheel drive won't help here — you'll need a high-ratio rear axle (4.10:1 or higher) and lots of torque, which a diesel can provide. Fuel mileage will suffer, although it's better than replacing the transmission.

As I've said many times before, there's no “ideal” fifth wheel. Each rig represents a series of compromises you may have to consider to fit your particular needs. The biggest of these, of course, is your budget. You should be able to find an appropriate fifth wheel in most sizes and price ranges to meet your requirements. The important thing is to simply define what your needs are, prioritize them and work from there. **RV**

*For more information visit [www.explore-canadacaravans.com](http://www.explore-canadacaravans.com). Dan can also be contacted by e-mail at [dromanko@storm.ca](mailto:dromanko@storm.ca) or by telephone at (613)489-2132. See *From The Navigator's Seat* for his mailing address.*

# RV Hot Water Systems

By Les Doll

**T**he RV hot water system begins at the water heater, obviously, and then becomes, essentially, a totally separate system. Hot and cold water lines run to every sink and shower so adding hot water to the RV water system basically doubles the plumbing.

Most manufacturers mark the hot and cold lines - some use a simple red ribbon to indicate the hot water lines, while others actually use a red colored tube to identify the hot lines and a blue one to indicate the cold lines. Older RVs had no indications of any sort.

## **Water Heater Maintenance**

Your water heater allows the luxury of hot water in your home-away-from-home! Although it is not a high maintenance item, it does need some regular maintenance to operate at its best. Follow these simple instructions and enjoy!

**Drain the Tank:** To drain the hot water tank, open the exterior access door and remove the drain plug (or open the drain valve on some models) and then open the pressure relief valve located on the upper portion of the tank (or open a hot water faucet at any sink).

Allow the tank to drain fully and replace the drain plug.

**Flushing the Tank:** RV water heater tanks accumulate deposits on the bottom of the tank from various impurities, minerals and other debris that may be present in the water supply. The water heater should be flushed at the beginning of every season or more often, depending on the quality of the water source.

After draining the tank, direct a stream of water from a garden hose nozzle into the drain opening for several seconds - this stirs up the sediments and suspends them in the water flow. Allow this water to drain out.

Repeat this procedure until the drain water is clear of any sediments.

**Inspect the Anode Rod:** If your water heater drain plug is a simple plastic (nylon) plug, you do not have an anode rod. If your drain plug has a long metal protrusion attached to it, you do have an anode rod.

What is an anode rod? An anode rod, when used in a water heater, attracts corrosion-causing products in the water. These products attack the anode rod instead of the metal tank itself. The anode rod should be inspected yearly and changed when it is reduced to about 1/4 of its original size. The rods are used in steel water heater tanks - an aluminium tank has an inner layer of anode metal to accomplish the same thing. Anode rods should not be installed in an aluminium tank! Suburban brand water heaters use a steel tank and require an anode rod - Atwood brand water heaters use an aluminium tank and do not require an anode rod.

**Check the Burner:** Many insects are attracted to the smell of propane and will build nests inside the burner tube. Visually inspect the burner tube for insect nests or other obstructions. Even an almost invisible spider web will deflect the propane flame enough to cause a problem.

What's that smell? Sometimes you may smell a rotten egg odour from the hot water taps. The odour is caused by a small build-up of hydrogen sulfide gas and this is an indication that the water heater needs to be flushed. If flushing does not correct the problem, you should have the water system inspected for other problems.

Don't forget to check your water heater at the beginning of the camping season!