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MAINE'S USED CAR BUYING GUIDE

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The basics of driving with trailers in tow



PHOTO COURTESY METRO NEWS SERVICE

Safely and successfully driving with a trailer takes practice and patience.

BY METRO NEWS SERVICE

Active adults and busy families understand that one perk to owning a pickup truck or an SUV is the ability to tow items behind the vehicle. Many of these trucks already come equipped with trailer hitches that make it possible to tow boats, RVs, snowmobiles and more.

But safe and successful towing requires knowledge of the basics of hitching a trailer and some special rules of the road. The following are a few safety tips for drivers unaccustomed to towing.

Know your vehicle's tow weight capacity. The own-

er's manual will list the maximum weight a vehicle can tow safely, but this is just a simplified estimation of data. To tow successfully, it's important to know your vehicle's gross combined weight rating, or GCWR.

This includes the vehicle itself, its passengers and cargo, as well as the trailer and the trailer's cargo. More passengers on board reduces the amount of weight you can pull. Another weight factor is the tongue weight, or how much of the trailer's weight rests on the hitch, which should be around 10 percent of the trailer's weight. This helps reduce

trailer sway and can improve steering.

Practice proper weight distribution. Distribute the weight of the item being towed to make towing smoother and safer. The cargo's center of gravity should be low, and most of the weight should be toward the front. Weight on either side also should be even. These steps will help prevent the trailer from fishtailing or flipping over.

Use the right hitch equipment. Adjust the hitch so that the trailer being towed is relatively level to your vehicle when attached. Connect lights to your trailer through the hitch system so that brake

lights and other indicators work properly. Make sure the hitch ball is the right size for your trailer, otherwise the trailer might disconnect during towing. Use a pin and safety chains to keep the trailer secure.

Check if extra brakes are required. Many states require a separate braking system on towed vehicles with a loaded weight in excess of 1,000 pounds. Newer trucks may have a built-in controller for brakes or you may need to have a system installed. Experts from Popular

Mechanics advise using a trailer brake output system

that matches the trailer brake output to the tow vehicle's deceleration.

Slow down and drive more cautiously. A vehicle towing a trailer will not maneuver the same way as a vehicle without a trailer attached. Give yourself a greater cushion of space between other vehicles. It may take longer for you to brake because of the added weight. Get used to using side-view mirrors because the trailer may block your rearview. Larger, extended side-view mirrors may help you feel more comfortable and safe. Make wide turns so that the

trailer will clear curbs and not tip over.

Avoid backing up. Unless you're experienced with driving large rigs, you may find reversing with a trailer very challenging. Limit situations that require backing up. Park in pull-through parking spots when possible. If you need to back up, move slowly and with your hand on the bottom of the steering wheel, turning it in the direction you want the trailer to go.

Practice, practice, practice. Get acclimated with towing in a parking lot or on empty streets before taking your trailer out on the open road.

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