

JON'S RV DRIVING TIPS

By Jon Barton

Jon is a professional RV caravan tour operator in Oregon.

The Driver

The driver of an RV is its pilot, and like the captain of a ship, must take responsibility for the safety and security of the vehicle and its passengers. Driving an RV, while not much more difficult than a large car, does require quite a lot more concentration by the driver, and it is essential that the passenger(s) not cause unnecessary distractions, become overly upset about little things like making a wrong turn, be nervous in heavy traffic, or in a hurry to get somewhere.

The passenger is not a co-pilot. The passenger is a navigator, and should take responsibility for that job. However, the pilot/ driver makes final decisions on where to turn, stop, go, or not go! As long as everyone is safe and secure, wrong decisions can be corrected. In an RV, the travel should be fun, relaxing for everyone, and that includes the driver who should be much appreciated for his or her willingness to take on the responsibility.

A driver who is driving too fast, maneuvering too quickly, following too closely, or trying to please a navigator that wants to be co-pilot will be under too much stress. Having to concentrate so hard on driving, he or she will not enjoy the trip or see any of the beautiful scenery along the route.

Before driving your RV

Walk around your vehicle. Check to see that all doors and hatches are closed, hoses and power cords are stowed, and all gear is properly stowed. Refer to your "pre-departure checklist" from your RV rental company (if they have provided one).

Look up, see that you are going to clear tree branches, signs or other objects. Check the tires. Look for fluids (water, sewage, oil) leaking.

Enter your RV and have a look around. Check for objects left sitting out, cabinet doors unlatched, refrigerator especially.

Make certain that nothing has changed outside on your vehicle, like a car just parked too close, or a child who has walked near. Check for traffic from all directions. Pull out slowly, deliberately, and merge into traffic.

On the Road

By being constantly aware of your surroundings and the vehicles alongside and behind you in particular, you will have no problem with maneuvering in traffic.

Give yourself plenty of time for lane-changes and use your signals. Do not dally once you decide to make a lane change, and do not slow down to merge. It is vitally important to match your speed as closely as possible to the traffic around you.

Your vehicle is much wider and longer than even the biggest cars, and while you may begin to feel like you can park or maneuver it anywhere, watch out!

Take corners (sharp corners, like at intersections or into and out of parking lots) a little wider. Pull out straight, then turn, a little later than you would in a normal length car.

Check side and rearview mirrors every 30 seconds (no kidding), and be constantly aware of the cars around you, what they are doing, and whether they are keeping up with you, passing or falling back.

Keep a distance of at least one vehicle length per 10 mph of speed between you and the vehicle in front of you (24-ft. RV @ 50 mph = 120 ft.). My grandfather used to tailgate sometimes and as a joke would say, "Look at this idiot driving so close in front of me !" Let those idiots stay well out in front of you so you can stop for them in time.

Be prepared to be passed by large trucks (semis, lorries) going in both directions. They will rock your vehicle with their "wake", but it should not be necessary to correct your vehicle's direction by steering. When you see them coming, you should have both hands on the wheel and hold it firmly, steady and straight ahead.

If there is a strong cross wind in the area you are traveling, you will notice "wind shadows" when you go under overpasses or past trucks that block the wind. Remember to try to maintain the wheels in a straight line, even while the RV yaws or rocks back and forth. If you over-correct, you may lose control.

When merging into traffic or changing lanes, it is essential to match the speed of that traffic as closely as possible. This makes it possible to enter the traffic lane into a smaller opening and is far safer than expecting the traffic to slow down or speed up for you.

There are a lot of animals crossing roadways, especially in the morning and evening. If you find one in your path, do NOT swerve to miss it. Hold your steering wheel rock steady and use your brake. Better that the animal should die than your passengers or other motorists. When a large RV begins to swerve, it can be deadly, and nearly impossible to bring back into control.

Parking Tips

Remember that you have a lot of extra vehicle sticking out behind you, and do not let it hang out in the traffic lane! Do not begin pulling into a parking lot until you know that the vehicle in front of you has moved far enough to allow you to get ALL of your vehicle in.

Look for spaces to park where you can pull through to leave, avoiding backing out.

Look up! There will rarely be parking lots with overhead obstacles, but many campgrounds, driveways, and side streets may have them. (When you look up, remember that your RV may have an air conditioner out of your view on top that is even higher than the body of the vehicle itself.)

Be aware that your vehicle's rear end protrudes quite a long ways out beyond the rear wheels. This means that when you turn your vehicle to the RIGHT, the rear end is arcing out to the LEFT and may clip a mailbox, gate post, sign or person.

When it really seems necessary you may allow a passenger to get out of the vehicle to assist you in parking.

Backing and Maneuvering

This is where the most trouble occurs for drivers. In backing and other tight maneuvering, it is most important that the driver remember that HE (or she) ALONE is responsible for the safety and security of the vehicle and passengers. In many cases, he or she will want and ask for assistance. In some other cases, he or she will be offered assistance when it is not wanted. In all cases, the driver must know without a doubt that when he or she moves the vehicle, it is a safe move.

If you are not fully confident that there are no obstacles to moving into your desired position, get out and walk completely around it. Look up, look down, look around. Even if you are blocking traffic in a campground. Do not rush. Maneuver slowly, with as little acceleration as needed to move.

If you feel you need help, have a passenger you trust give directions. Have the helper stand where you can see them, and give very simple (non-verbal is best!) directions. Move forward, move backward, left, right and stop are all the directions you should need. (Left or right means the back of the vehicle needs to move left or right.) It is vitally important that the person helping you also knows to look up, look down, and look around. And keep in mind that just as you cannot see all you need to see, neither can they, and you must also continue to look where you are going while watching them.

Keep in mind these are only tips! You will find that every day brings new challenges, and only with time will you gain the confidence to take on big city traffic, tiny back roads and narrow parking spaces. Practice makes perfect. It's better to be a little late and safe than on time and sorry.