The Five-Minute Check Before We Tow Away



The most expensive part of a travel day can happen before you've even moved five metres.

It's a strange truth of caravanning: the bit that actually terrifies experienced tourers isn't the Snowy Mountain pass, the reversing bay full of onlookers, or the merge onto a busy highway. It's the driveway. Or more specifically, the last five minutes before you leave it — when the coffee's cold, the kids are already asking "are we there yet," and everyone's mental checklist has quietly switched off because, hey, the hard part's done.

Except it isn't. The hard part is right now. This is the moment a jockey wheel gets left down, a chain gets left uncrossed, or a step gets left out — and it's also the easiest moment to catch every single one of them, because nothing has moved yet. So before the tug and van roll a single centimetre, here's the walk-around we do every time. It takes about five minutes. It has saved us, more than once, from becoming a cautionary tale in someone else's blog post.

Start at the hitch

This is where the whole relationship between tug and tourer lives, so it gets first billing. Check that the coupling has dropped fully over the ball and the handle is locked down — not just resting there looking convincing. Most hitches have a visual indicator, but treat it as a second opinion rather than the final word; dirt, grease, or a sticky mechanism can make a bad connection look like a good one. The real test is physical: wind the jockey wheel down until it lifts the back of the tow vehicle slightly. If you feel genuine resistance and the rear of the car rises with it, you're coupled. If it doesn't lift, you're not — full stop, no matter what the little indicator says.

Follow the chains

Safety chains (or a breakaway cable, depending on where you're towing) are your seatbelt for the unthinkable — the "just in case the hitch lets go" plan. They should be crossed underneath the coupling, attached to a properly rated point on the tow vehicle, and have enough slack to allow full-lock turns without dragging on the ground, but not so much that they'd let the van hit the road if it separated. If there's a breakaway cable, make sure it's actually clipped to the vehicle and not just looped over something that looked tow-bar-shaped.

Plug it in, then check it works

The electrical connector isn't just a formality — it's the only thing telling the car behind you that you're slowing down, turning, or braking. Push the plug home properly (a half-connected plug is a classic cause of mystery light failures three hours down the road), and if you've got an electric brake controller, glance at it to confirm it's powered and responsive. A quick lights check — indicators, brakes, tail lights — is worth the thirty seconds it costs, ideally with someone standing behind the van rather than trusting the reflection in a shop window.

Wind up the jockey wheel

It sounds almost too obvious to mention, which is exactly why it’s the one people forget. A jockey wheel left down doesn’t fail quietly — it announces itself with sparks, noise, and a very short but memorable repair bill. Ask us how we know! Make sure it’s wound fully up, locked in its travel position, and not just resting on its own optimism. The same goes for any corner stabilisers or steadies — up, locked, out of the way and out of the conversation.

Kick away the chocks

If you’ve been parked on any kind of slope, chances are you’ve got wheel chocks doing the quiet, unglamorous work of stopping the van from making its own plans. Once you’re hitched, coupled, and ready to roll, these need to come out from under the wheels — and, just as importantly, come off the ground and into the van, rather than getting left behind as a small monument to your visit.

Give the tyres a proper look

Not a glance — a look. Both tug and tourer, all tyres including the spare. You’re checking pressure (loaded pressures differ from unloaded, so check what your van actually needs when full of gear and water), tread, and general condition: no bulges, no cuts, no cracking in the sidewalls that suggests age has caught up with them. Wheel nuts get a visual check too, and if you’re the type who carries a torque wrench, now’s the moment to use it.

The low, slow, final loop

Last of all — and this is the one that catches everything the checklist doesn’t — walk right around the van and get down low enough to see underneath it. This is where you’ll spot the things that don’t fit neatly into a category: the step still down, the power lead still coiled around a peg, the levelling block quietly wedged under a wheel, or the awning arm that

didn’t quite make it back into its bag. Anything left beneath the van when you pull away tends to end up either stuck to the underside of it or scattered across the campsite behind you, and neither is a great look.

Why bother, every single time

The honest answer is: because the fifth time is exactly like the first four, right up until it isn’t. Nobody plans to forget the jockey wheel. Nobody means to leave a chain uncrossed. It happens on the ordinary days, in the ordinary rush, from people who’ve hitched up a hundred times before. Five minutes of deliberate, slightly boring routine is a small price for not becoming the story someone else tells at the next campsite about the van they saw towing its own jockey wheel down the highway.

So next time you’re ready to roll — hitch, chains, plugs, jockey wheel, chocks, tyres, one last look underneath — and then, and only then, pull away.