

Towing, the law and you

Are you towing legal? Revised legislation regarding what you may or may not tow in terms of weight could put you on the wrong side of the law - even if you only tow a light luggage trailer!

According to the South African National Standards (SABS) authority, legislation is constantly amended without promulgation, which means that you and I could be legal one day and illegal the next - without being made aware of the fact. The onus, it appears, is on the individual to keep up to date with traffic ordinance, and through the medium of this publication we will do our best to keep readers abreast of the latest regulations encompassing towing.

Towing a caravan or trailer in the past used to be so simple and straightforward if you obeyed a simple set of regulations. For example, the caravan or trailer could not weigh more than the towing vehicle, the towing vehicle had to have rear-view mirrors (some provinces said one while others require one on each side of the towing vehicle), and naturally one could not exceed the national speed limit. Red tape regarding towing legislation was kept to a minimum and the national statistics of accidents involving towed caravans or trailers were so negligible that it didn't warrant recording the number of vehicles involved in towing-related accidents.

In the early days of towing - the 1960s and 70s - legislation stated that the caravan could not weigh more than 75% of the towing vehicle's kerb weight. Caravaning as a means of holidaying grew, with manufacturers recording sales of 11 000 new caravans a year.

Kerb weight, for those not used to this phrase, was perceived to be the vehicle's standing weight when parked at the kerbside with half a tank of fuel, a spare wheel and a battery. Those were the days when cars were manufactured from steel and more steel, and when they crashed into things, their over-engineered bodies did considerable damage!

Heavy, chromed bumpers soon gave way to lighter plastics, and the modern-day car shed kilos in kerb mass to achieve maximum fuel efficiency. At the same time stability improved and more effective braking systems were introduced, which allowed this regulation to be reviewed and relaxed.

Instead of a vehicle being able to tow up to 75% of its kerb mass, this was rewritten so that a tow vehicle could tow up to its Tare or Licence mass, a newer name for kerb weight. In both cases the kerb or tare mass limitations could be exceeded, providing that the caravan or trailer was equipped with an extra vacuum or hydraulic braking system. Both of these brake operating systems are an additional method of applying the trailer's brakes via an existing over-run or inertia braking mechanism.

For some reason electric-operated trailer brakes were not permitted in South Africa, but this is now a thing of the past as this braking system has proven to be the system of choice in the USA and Australia. It's a great system that allows the driver to apply the trailers brakes only in cases of sudden instability caused by side winds, passing vehicles, steep mountain pass descents etc., but more of this topic another time.

A fact that needs to be raised here is that a vehicle towing a well-maintained caravan can stop faster than one that is not towing a caravan, a fact born out by our monthly tow tests which show the average braking time from 100 km/h to zero to be a fast 3.7 seconds. The reason for this is that a caravan not only brakes itself but it adds a down force onto the rear of the towcar, which in turn provides better grip to the tow vehicle's tyres. Even in a wet and wintry Cape Town, the latest Volkswagen Tiguan and 1090 kg Sprite could stop in 3.37 seconds from travelling at 100 km/h, which is really impressive.

Previously caravans were defined in the ordinance as being what they are - caravans - but this has been revoked and today they are officially lumped back with trailers, with the terminology of a trailer being: includes all vehicles that are designed to be drawn by a motor vehicle and run on wheels. We at Caravan and Outdoor Life feel that this is wrong for the obvious reason that a caravan has predetermined packing space and is designed to tow well within these parameters. They are not goods-carrying trailers designed to transport heavy loads that can shift in transit, with cargo that can be placed anywhere and be nose or tail heavy - or carry livestock, for that matter. Unlike trailers (which are allowed to transport people at up to 30 km/h), caravans are certainly not designed to carry people at any speed.

Caravan-towing-related accidents are rare, a good indication that all is well with the traffic regulations, and perhaps this is not surprising as towing a caravan or trailer has a 'tranquilliser effect' on the towcar driver - they realise that they are driving a vehicle which is compromised with an additional burden and abnormal length, so they do not travel fast. Yes, towing does have a calming effect on boy racers, and because you are towing, you concentrate more on the traffic.

As mentioned earlier, the legislation governing the towing of trailers has recently become more complicated, which means that many people towing lightweight luggage trailers may be contravening the law.

You need a license to tow

Today, one needs to have a licence that qualifies you to tow a trailer with a GVM of over 750 kg and, simply put, you could be fined or worse (such as in the event of a towing accident - your insurance company may refuse to pay out if you are caught towing anything heavier than your licence allows). To tow anything that has a GVM exceeding 750 kg you require a driver's licence with an EB classification. An EB classified driver's licence allows the driver to tow up to 3 500 kg. If you don't have this classification you have to book your learner's licence at a nearby testing facility where you must be prepared to wait up to a year for a learner's licence test. Regardless of whether you have a valid driver's licence you have to pay your R60, submit two suitably sized pictures and sit for a learner's test. On test day you will have to provide the car and caravan and do the test; to save time, try to book this test when you book your learner's.

One would presume that an EB learner's licence would work along the same lines as a driver's licence in that you would have to find someone with an EB licence to go with you to practise towing! Luckily for all those 'old' drivers out there, you can apply for an exemption to get an EB licence; the criteria is that you must have been in the possession of a valid driver's licence prior to the new credit card licences being issued. The minimum motor vehicle (car) licence allows the driver to tow up to 750 kg.

An interesting topic where the SABS are perhaps right on the money is what happens when you buy a standard caravan or trailer and opt to add extras. When this is done, the Tare mass must be recalculated, because when all the optional extras are taken into account, an overloaded suspension may result - and you have not yet added your clothing!

An example here is when you've purchased an off-road trailer for which the manufacturer quoted a predetermined Tare and GVM. You then add a non-standard deepfreeze, a water tank, extra batteries, a rooftop tent, a porta potti, spare wheel and fuel cans, and you end up with a trailer that is exceeding its GVM just with accessories. Chances are that you will be stopped at a weigh bridge, made to pay a hefty fine and will only be allowed to proceed once you have offloaded all the excess weight in order to bring the GVM back within what is stated on the trailer's manufacturing plate.

KISS! "Keep it simple, stupid" is not a philosophy that will ever apply to traffic regulations. Local Authorities, in this writer's mind, are only too willing to follow overseas trends that don't always apply to South African conditions (two factors that come to mind are that we don't have snow and road ice), and one can't help but wonder how these regulations were arrived at.

Your car and 'trailer' is illegal if...

Did you know that by law, to tow any trailer with a GVM of up to 750 kg, the Tare of the drawing vehicle must be double the GVM of the trailer! In other words the drawing vehicle must have a Tare (licence weight) of 1 500 kg in the case of a trailer with a GVM of 750 kg, whereas a trailer of 300 kg requires a minimum towcar Tare mass of 600 kg. Let's put that into perspective: a six cylinder 2.5-litre BMW 325 Touring has a Tare of 1 425 kg, which means that it would be illegal if towing a 750 kg unbraked trailer! Many cars towing unbraked trailers are therefore street illegal.

However, should the trailer be equipped with its own braking system and fall into the category of 751 kg to 3 500 kg GVM, then the Tare of the drawing vehicle must be more than or equal to the GVM of the trailer! If you have brakes fitted to the trailer you can tow up to your vehicle's GVM providing that you do not exceed the 3500 kg trailer GVM. If you are going to tow a trailer that exceeds 3500 kg GVM, the

trailer must have a service brake in addition to over-run brakes.

In addition to this there are other parameters that define what your car may or may not tow. The GCM or Gross Combined Mass has to be displayed on a vehicle's identification plate. To determine what the vehicle may tow you have to subtract the GVM from the GCM, i.e. $GCM - GVM = 2925\text{ kg} - 1725\text{ kg} = 1200\text{ kg}$

Chevrons

A Chevron is a board with reflective yellow and red striping set at an angle that is fixed across the rear of a trailer or caravan. All new trailers as well as any vehicle with a GVM exceeding 3 500 kg require a Chevron board. A full chevron may be cut if the full chevron is wider than the trailer, and if a chevron does not fit at all, red reflectors may be used. In addition two red triangles are now required on trailers up to 3 500 kg.

Contour markings

Contour markings refer to the yellow reflective tape, which only applies to caravans in South Africa. According to Regulation 1192A this tape must be applied to all trailers after January 2006 and all new motorhomes from July 1, 2007.

Towing in tandem

There are some caravaners who like to tow an additional trailer or perhaps even a boat behind their caravan and do so quite successfully. While there is no immediate restriction to prevent this practise – other than the warranty of the caravan becoming null and void – there are certain restrictions. The first restriction is that you may not have two vehicles (a vehicle is classified as having an engine driving wheels) pulling a trailer; rather you are allowed one towing vehicle pulling two trailers (a caravan and a luggage trailer or boat) providing the maximum length does not exceed 22 metres.

One regulation has been relaxed: you may now have passengers in a caravan providing you do not exceed 30 km/h! This is daft.

What you will be required to do

We apologise for the negativity in this article; we just think that the infrastructure of having someone teaching you how to tow a caravan does not exist and, most importantly, that facilities for such testing do not exist. And finally, what is the purpose of needing a special licence to tow? In America one doesn't need a towing licence! Over-regulating may even prevent someone from considering going caravanning, and an industry stands to lose.

We telephoned the Cape Town Traffic department – Driver's licence section – to find out how one goes about getting an EB licence. It turns out that all those lucky drivers who had a valid driver's licence not marked as B can apply for an exemption for an EB classification.

We have approached the SABS for comment on this article, but have not received a reply.

Terminology and other requirements

Terminology

- Motor vehicle – includes trailer.
- Trailer – includes all vehicles designed to be drawn by a motor vehicle and that run on wheels.
- Semi trailers – trailer with no front axle and at least 15% of the mass is carried by the drawing vehicle.

Manufacturer's responsibilities

- Must register with the province
- Must comply with requirements of MIB Inspectorate – SABS
- Must have all relevant legislation and SANS specifications
- Must build trailers in terms of specifications and homologation requirements.

Driving licences

- B – Can drive a vehicle up to 3 500 kg Tare and GVM
- C1 – Can drive a vehicle of 3501 kg to 16 000 kg Tare and GVM
- EB – Can drive a vehicle up to 3 500 kg Tare, GVM and GCM

Brakes: Roadworthy requirements

- Any trailer up to 750 kg GVM requires a parking brake.
 - Trailers weighing between 751 kg and 3 500 kg require a parking brake and overrun brake/service brake.
 - Trailers weighing in excess of 3 500 g require a parking brake and service brake.
- It is interesting to note that a parking brake can be a brick behind a wheel.

Manufacturer specifications: Reg 239 and Reg 245

- GA – Gross axle mass
- GAU – Gross axle unit mass
- GVM – Gross vehicle mass
- GCM – Gross combination mass
- GKM – Gross kingpin mass
- T – Tare
- P/D – power of engine – kilowatts

Tare

In relation to a motor vehicle this means the mass of such a vehicle ready to travel on a road and includes the mass of:

- A) Any spare wheel and all other accessories and equipment supplied by the manufacturer as standard for the particular model of motor vehicle.
- B) Anything that is a permanent part of the structure of the vehicle.
- C) Anything attached to such a vehicle so as to form a structural alteration of a permanent nature.

It does not include:

- The mass of fuel
- Anything attached to such a vehicle which is not part of the nature referred to in paragraph (B) or (C).

Gross combination mass

In relation to a motor vehicle which is used to draw any other motor vehicle, this means the maximum mass of any combination of motor vehicles (including the drawing vehicle) and load as specified by the manufacturer thereof or, in the absence of such specification, as determined by the registering authority.

“Gross vehicle mass”, in relation to a motor vehicle, means the maximum mass of such vehicle and its load as specified by the manufacturer thereof or, in the absence of such specification, as determined by the registering authority.

Copyright notice

This article is copyright to Caravan & Outdoor Life magazine (published by Caravan Publications (Pty) Ltd.) and is intended for private use only. Permission to republish any part of it or use the information for commercial purposes (in order to re-sell it and/or make a profit from it and/or any such means) must be obtained from Caravan Publications. For more information in this regard please email wendy@caravansa.co.za