TIRES & WHEELS

How much air should I put in my RV tires? For your tow vehicle, there are a few answers depending on the number of passengers and how heavily the vehicle is loaded. Just check your manual. For the trailer or motorhome, however, there is no easy answer. Get it weighed when it is fully loaded with water, propane and equipment. This should be done for each wheel of the vehicle for a motor home and for each side for a trailer. Now use the manufacturers chart to determine the air pressure versus actual weight for the front single tires, the rear duals and the tag axle for your tire size and type. The air pressure should be the same on both sides for the front tires as well as the rears. Just use the highest air pressure required in any individual tire axle set. References (9) and (15) provide Michelin and Goodyear tire charts for determining the proper air pressures based upon the measured weight of your rig.

Check this at least once per week for proper inflation with a quality gauge. You can always be slightly over-inflated with no problems. As the tires heat up the pressure will increase, just be sure you check them when they are cold. Tire blowouts usually cause collateral damage, especially on trailers that is far more expensive than just tire replacement.

After de-winterizing your rig for the new camping season and before you leave for a Rally or start on a Caravan, you should torque your wheel nuts. I have seen too many vehicles lose wheels on a trip even after the Caravan Leader had continually recommended checking wheel nut torque. You should have a ½-inch socket set in your tool kit and a torque wrench. For your wheel nuts purchase the correct size, black 6-point socket, that was designed for an air driven wrench. Sears has a torque wrench for under $30, which is not the one a mechanic would purchase for his use, but is perfectly suited for our needs. The difference is usually in the accuracy, however, (just as for digital voltmeters) find someone with a quality wrench and calibrate your unit at the proper torque you will be measuring. Be sure you get your neighbors to check their vehicles as well, and before you know it, a crowd will form and maybe everyone will be doing it. The larger motorhomes require a torque wrench that goes into the 500 ft/lb range. This requires a special ¾" drive torque wrench that can cost in the $500 range. You can add a torque multiplier, which increases a standard ½" torque wrench by a factor of 3:1. This provides a ¾" drive output providing 450 ft/lbs for around $250 to $300. EBay is a reasonable source for these. I picked up a used Snap-On 200 ft/lb wrench for less than $110. Our unit (MAU) actually purchased the wrench, ball mount tightening tools and a professional gas tester. We bring these special tools to every Unit Rally.

On my first Viking Caravan, while driving to a new campsite, I passed several of our units parked beside the road. I stopped to see if I could help and found everyone in the bush looking for a missing tire. Yes, the entire wheel had come off and disappeared into the bush. It seems it was not torqued properly after a brake job and it had sheared off all of the wheel studs. I drove to the campsite with the wife driving the three-wheel rig and leaving the owner with several helpers searching for the wheel. I checked and found all of the other wheel nuts were under torqued and in fact had been set for aluminum wheels. The trailer had steel wheels with stainless steel covers. A bad mistake by the dealer who had done the brake job on all of the wheels. A much more severe mistake though by the RV owner who should have checked the wheels within 50 miles of the brake job and at least twice during the Caravan. The Caravan leader had reminded us on a regular basis to check wheel torque. They never found the wheel but fortunately, he had a spare. Not so fortunate, there were no wheel studs to be found in Newfoundland and we had to leave them at the campsite. They had to wait several days before the studs arrived in the mail.

RV tires die of old age helped along by ozone and temperature. They have a shelf life of about 5-6 years especially since they spend most of their life sitting in the driveway. The tire is protected when it is used and the waxes and emollients come to the surface. That means if the tire sits on the dealer shelf for two years before you have purchased it, you only get three years of safe life. A full set of tread with a new looking tire is meaningless. When I buy tires, my dealer knows I will not accept anything more than 6 months old. I call ahead and, if none is in stock, he orders me one-month old tires and sells the others to the truckers. A trucker usually runs the tires bald within a year and gets it retreaded. How old is the tire; look for DOT followed by numbers and letters. The last group of numbers, either 3 or 4, is the date of manufacture. If it has three numbers, it was made in 1999 or earlier

and should be rejected immediately. For a group of four numbers the first two numbers are the week it was made and the last two are the year. For example, 2305 would be the 23 week of 2005. If you are not sure how to read the date, ask the dealer to show it to you when you are buying the tire.

On my first Caravan to Alaska, one of the members had a flat tire on her B-van. I checked all of her tires and they were all 6 years or older. I recommended she purchase a complete new set and just keep the best of the old set for a spare. One of our other Caravan members, who had a motorhome, said this was a total waste of money and she should just buy one used tire to replace the blown one. He only ran used tires on his RV as long as they had good tread and sidewalls. Fortunately, the B-van owner purchased new tires and had no tire problems on the rest of the Caravan. Unfortunately, the motorhome owner became a believer as he had three separate tire blowouts on his way home.