

MODIFICATIONS - Boat Carrying Options

We all love it when the boat slides into the water and we clamber on board for a day's fun. Trouble is, you have to get the boat to that idyllic spot first...



In a way it's easier for people who have larger boats than those with the car-length 'tinny' because they have no choice but to tow a boat trailer: the decision is made for them.

For those who are happy with a lightweight boat there are three transport options: on the roof rack, on top of a camper trailer, or on a small trailer. We'll look at the pros and cons of each arrangement.

Roof Topping

If your brief is touring in a solo vehicle and you want to take the tinny along, it needs to go up top. The obvious way to carry it is upside down, where its inverted shape offers some streamlining advantage and where it can't get filled up with rain water or debris.

The starting point is with the match of vehicle to boat. You need a tinny that won't exceed the rated roof load of your 4x4 and that rating includes the weight of the rack and any loading system you might want to fit.

Most 4x4 wagons have very little roof load capacity, so it's important to find out exactly how much load your vehicle can accept. Exceeding the roof load rating will void warranty and may cause a vehicle handling hazard. If you're involved in a prang that may have been caused by roof overload the insurance company may walk away from your claim.

An alternative to the 4x4 wagon is a 4x4 ute that has load racks to carry the boat. The supporting bars can be designed to distribute the weight through to the ute tray or the chassis.

Driving a 4x4 that has an upside-down tinny on its roof requires discipline. High speed is out, because airflow around and under the boat is unpredictable. A noticeable down-force can suddenly change into an uplift if you strike a crosswind.

Manually loading an upside-down tinny onto a tall roof rack is no easy task, but there are several loading and unloading systems in the market place. The grand or so investment is well worth it!

On Top of the Camper

Many people carry their boats on top of their camper trailers and some campers can be fitted with side-shift rails that allow the tent to be opened up without the need to lift the boat off. However, even if you do have to lift the boat off before heading for the sack it's not a big job for two people.

The problem with a trailer-mounted boat isn't the transportation angle: it's launching that can be a problem. You arrive at your chosen campsite, take off the boat and set up the trailer, but how do you get the boat to the water?

If the shore isn't far away a set of beach rollers or donut wheels will do the trick nicely, but if it's a hike to water you may need a vehicle roof-topping arrangement as well.



Boat Trailer

This is the inevitable choice of people who have larger boats. Crunch time comes when you realise that your boat of choice is too cumbersome or too heavy, or both, to be manhandled onto a 4x4 roof rack or on top of the trailer.

When you make the decision to trail the boat it's not all bad news, because you have some advantages over the 'topper crowd'. For a start, the boat can travel right way up, which means that most of the gear – even lighter outboard motors – can be stowed securely inside. If the boat is big enough it can double as a camper van, especially if it has a large bimini top and side curtains that can be erected over the cockpit.

Launching and retrieving is straightforward, if you've bought a quality trailer that's tailored to the boat. You have the freedom to set up camp and trail the boat as far as you need to, for easy launching.

One problem with lightweight boat trailers is just that: light weight. Most run tiny wheels and tyres and have spindly frames and axles. If you plan to tow any distance or venture off-road you definitely need to upgrade the trailer to one that has at least passenger-car-sized wheels and tyres.



The Inflatable Option

Modern inflatables are much more durable than their predecessors. The likelihood of sinking the boat by snagging a barra hook in one of the air chambers is remote.

An inflatable is much easier to stow than a hard-shell boat – a six-seater can easily be collapsed into the tray of a crew-cab ute and a smaller inflatable will fit into the back of a 4x4 wagon.

Inflatables are almost impossible to capsize and are much more stable as fishing platforms than small tinnies.

Cheaper inflatables have flat, wooden-slatted bottoms that don't get any 'grip' on the water. They're fine as bigger-boat tenders, to get a short distance from ship to shore, but they're not much chop for real boating. There are more expensive models with high-pressure, inflatable floors that are firm and flat to stand on and have a proper vee-shaped, underwater profile.

If rock damage is a concern it's possible to buy a RIB (rigid inflatable boat) that has a metal lower 'hull' with air chambers around its perimeter. The metal section is 'veed' like a power boat's bottom.

A RIB won't pack down as compactly as a full inflatable, but makes a light, streamlined roof rack or trailer-top package.

Tie Downs

It shouldn't need to be said, but we'll make the point anyway: tie the boat securely. Now that there are easy to use ratchet tie-down straps galore in the marketplace there's no excuse for unsecured boats flying off roof racks or trailers.

There's no need to torque the boat out of shape with strap tension, but the tie downs should be snug and visible from the towing vehicle if the boat is on a trailer. If a roof rack strap comes loose you'll usually hear it flapping from inside the car.

Straps need to be checked for tension after you've driven a few kilometres and every time you take a driving break.



If you're towing it's wise to put a hand on the wheel bearings, to check for heat, at the same time.