

The Chinese paradox

Why saving money on a camper can cost you in the end.

You have been saving up for years for the big one, the big trip around Australia. You have everything ready to go, the oil in the 4WD is changed, everything is packed in the brand new camper trailer and life is good. The dream has become reality.

You hit the road. The horizon is wide open, the engine is purring like a kitten as the state borders roll past. Then, suddenly, you realise something is wrong. The trailer is making a strange noise. You pull over to investigate.

"Probably just one of the safety chains," you say as you get out, still smiling. Then you see it. Your dream has become a nightmare: the chassis is cracked. You aren't smiling any more.

According to Jenny [redacted] and her husband Peter, that's exactly what happened to them last November after they purchased an imported Chinese camper trailer on eBay from [redacted].

Limping home, the pair decided they would get the trailer fixed and continue on their great escape, once bitten, twice shy.

"We got a quote for \$1640," Jenny says, "to repair the chassis, dust-proof the camper (dust comes in through the ends of the corrugated iron flooring), replace the winch handle (which fell off on the road), fix the leaky water tank, secure the spare tyre (which was bending the bolts securing it), and replace the wheel bearing cover (which fell off on day one)."

And that's when their troubles really started. According to Mrs [redacted], [redacted] at [redacted] refused to cover the trailer's damage under warranty because, he claimed, they had used it on a dirt road and it was sold as an 'offroad trailer', not a '4WD trailer'.

Jenny pleaded with Mr [redacted] to cover the damage, as the original advertisement on eBay was worded: "Off Road 4WD". He asked her to get two quotes, then offered to pay half, then stopped returning her emails. Her insurance company wouldn't help because, they said, it was a warranty issue.

Jenny felt helpless, with no phone number, no address and little hope of getting her trailer fixed under warranty.



Above: Jenny [redacted] says that she and her husband had to use the gas bottle holder and jerry can holders to hold the trailer together to limp home.



Above: How's this for a bit of dodgy sealing? Dust city, here we come!



Above: Battery wiring should be neat, tidy and adequately protected – essentially the opposite to this...

Above and left: It's a camper's worst nightmare: a cracked, and in this case completely separated, chassis.



CAVEAT EMPTOR

A few months ago *Camper Trailer Australia* received a letter from Ken and Helen [redacted]. They were retracing their steps around Australia – steps they had first travelled 25 years earlier on dirt roads for their honeymoon.

Up in Cape Leveque, WA, they met a guy in a similar predicament who had purchased an imported Chinese trailer over the 'net. "The lights weren't working on his trailer," Ken wrote, "because the wiring loom had broken up internally. After fixing the wiring we pulled the spring off and the bolt through the leaf centres was also missing... I had a look around

the rest of the trailer and it was so badly under engineered I was shocked.

"While looking I found the gas bottle brackets were broken and the way the spare wheel was moving, that bracket would soon be broken too. Initially, I thought, well, he got what he paid for. But later I thought about the safety implications of having trailers like this travelling on our roads. A gas bottle or spare wheel bouncing down the road or the suspension collapsing can all lead to serious accidents involving me, you or any of your readers."

Indeed, I couldn't have put it better myself, Ken. Just because some customers are willing to trade quality for price, will they be able to

sleep when that gas bottle caroms through the windshield of a family car?

So the other day I rang up [redacted] to ask him what the score was. He was initially surprised that I had contacted him on his home phone number, as he had erected a meticulous wall of anonymity around his business dealings, which also included the importation of Chinese-made [redacted] equipment. His business phone number rang out, no matter when we called.

He would not say why he doesn't support his product or why he has chosen to ignore a paying customer when a warranty claim was pending, simply telling me that he was going to get his lawyer to contact me.

When I spoke to [redacted], who has assembled 30 of the flat pack hard floor trailers for [redacted], he told me [redacted] was notoriously "hard to get a hold of". "From what I understand," he says, "the market's been flooded with these things. You can see them on eBay, but you really have to read the fine print. One customer told me that any negative feedback voids the warranty."

[redacted] says that, for the money, what [redacted] imports isn't a bad trailer, it just needs a rebuilt suspension and chassis – another \$1000-worth of work and steel. "They're selling online for anywhere between \$6500 and \$10,500. There's a bloke in Adelaide selling them for \$12,000 unassembled. He just sends you the box. Without a hoist, I wouldn't even try to put one of these things together."

"THERE IS ONE THING WE CAN DO – SIMPLY AVOID THESE HUCKSTERS"

Many of these sellers are predators taking advantage of various importation loopholes to bring in illegal and unsafe camper trailers. Some are brought in as 'garden tubs' – which conveniently house axles and wheels, and will be assembled in a suburban warehouse and sold as 'Australian built'. Some of them will simply import the cheapest product available with no regard for Australian Design Rules, and sell it as an offroad camper.

At *Camper Trailer Australia*, we can't make [redacted] honour a legal warranty. We can't make the ACCC do anything about the amount of false advertising going on in this country, or force VicRoads or any other state transport body to refuse to register any of these dubious trailers. However, there is one thing we can do – simply avoid these hucksters. If it looks too good to be true, it probably is. Boycott businesses that don't stand up for their products; products that undermine good engineering practice in favour of a fast buck.

In closing, there isn't anything inherently wrong with Chinese campers, or any other imported product, provided the manufacturer and distributor are willing to stand up for their product, and support their customers.

No one else is going to solve this problem for us. No government agency is going to protect our children from dodgy trailers on our roads. The only way we're going to ensure that everything on the road is safe is to ensure we buy good products, and shun shoddy campers.

We should all be supporting the good Australian men and women who go the extra distance to make quality campers and stand behind their products. Otherwise, there might not be any. ■



Above: A roadside repair, designed to keep some of the dust out of Jenny's trailer.

BUYERS' CHECKLIST

Here are a few things to look out for when shopping for a camper trailer:

- Does the company have a showroom where you can see the product before you buy? I wouldn't buy a camper trailer without first seeing what I was getting. Plus, if there is a showroom and a shop, you're more likely to get something repaired than with a company merely unpacking boxes from a container.
- Is there a phone number you can ring to talk to someone about the product? I'm always surprised how many people are willing to buy a camper from eBay without ever talking to the seller. When something does go wrong, emails are easy to ignore. And what many of these sellers do is delay delivery of the product beyond eBay's feedback window of 90 days.
- Does the company have a recognised brand worth protecting by standing behind its products? Companies that have spent time and money to establish a reputation are far more likely to protect that reputation. If something goes wrong in the bush, most of the larger camper trailer manufacturers will do whatever it takes to get a spare part to you. Will the guy with a Hotmail account do that for you? Probably not.
- Have you checked out the brand by reading forums for other people's opinions? It should go without saying, but there are some great forums on the web where you can check out other people's tales of mirth or misery.
- Have you seen the company in *Camper Trailer Australia*? Any companies featured in this magazine make a product that should stand up to Australian conditions. Furthermore, most of these businesses are mature enough to provide great service and support, and continue to do so for years.
- Don't shop just on price. Your mother told you that you get what you pay for. Sure, that eBay trailer might look exactly the same on paper as the one at the dealer down the road, but which guy is going to ring you back if something breaks? Which guy is more likely to make sure the product he sells won't break – the one hidden behind a firewall, or the one you can go and visit tomorrow in person?