

ON THE RIGHT RACK

Cycle carriers come in all sizes and fittings, as John Milne finds out. But, what's best?

No doubt about it, the provision to take bikes with you adds an extra dimension to the freedom of motorhoming. It's a pretty healthy way of getting about, too. But, how do you get those bikes of yours from A to B, before carrying on to C, D, E and beyond?

Well, park up right here, because a bit of extra research and you'll be far more likely to get the right rack to suit your needs and budget. But first, do you have a motorcaravan with a coachbuilt body or a van conversion? And, another consideration is do you go for the type of rack that attaches directly to a towball or towing bracket, rather than the bodywork of the vehicle? Let's take a closer look.

COACHBUILTS AND VAN CONVERSIONS

Racks from Fiamma and Omnistor dominate those for coachbuilt motorhomes, with models designed to bolt to coachbuilt bodywork. Some motorhomes come with an element of pre-fitting for a rack. Bailey's new models spring to mind. They have a couple of 'handles' fitted on the rear ready to accept a Fiamma rack.

Indeed, arranging to have a bike rack fitted when you purchase a motorhome, new or used, is an ideal scenario – a fitting of this sort is often seen as a deal clincher and can make an enticing 'free' offer. Any proper dealer (and/or manufacturer) will be able to tell you exactly where a rack can be attached to a coachbuilt body (it's not just a question of adding it where you feel like having it).

It's a slightly different matter when it comes to van conversions, but again you need to make sure you can source the right model to fit your vehicle (bearing in mind, also, any specific adaptations that may have been made as a result of the conversion process). As an example, Halfords' Advance Rear High Mount is probably the UK's best selling bike rack. With no straps, it's quick and easy to fit – to your car. You'll probably find it unsuitable for most van conversions though.

Similarly, don't assume because you have a towball on your vehicle it will immediately accept any towball-mounted bike rack design. Factors to consider include: whether any plate needs to be added (and where) and the towball's maximum weight limit, especially if you're towing a trailer as well as carrying bikes.

Some motorhome chassis are not designed for towing. However, there are occasional instances where a towball can still be fitted, specifically to accept an item such as a bike rack.

One other critical factor to take into account with towball-mounted racks is where the towball height ends up in relation to the ground. With your vehicle fully laden, before any other attachments are made, there should be a distance of between 350 and 420mm to meet UK and international legislation.

Of course, one other advantage of having a towbar fitted is it opens up your motorhome to various other towing possibilities. Plus, whilst a towbar/towball-mounted rack is undoubtedly the more expensive option, it does mean you're not drilling holes in any bodywork. Also, racks that fit to the towing bracket also tend to be lower – which makes mounting the bikes on an easier task. As I say, it certainly pays to do a bit of research...

MAYPOLE 3 CYCLE CARRIER

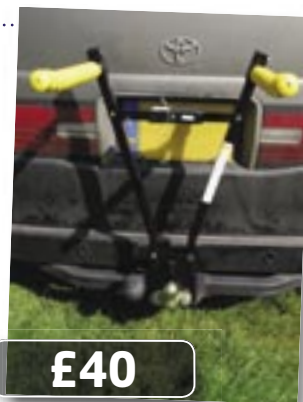
This type of carrier fits directly to the towbar (as opposed to the towball), hence can still be used whilst towing. It comes with a fixing plate for permanent fitting behind the towball, but you'll need to check it can be fitted to your vehicle – and Maypole advises that longer, high-tensile towball bolts may be needed. And it does indeed carry up to three bikes on its hanging rails without any additional fittings needed.

I have to admit my attempts to use this proved unsuccessful, for the following reasons: first, the mounting plate had to be attached between the towing bracket and towball (rather than behind the towing bracket itself). That meant there was very little space between the plate and the towball; there was the provision to drop the towball on my campervan, but that meant it would have been too low (see earlier comments).

In fairness, I was unlucky, and this is very much a worst case scenario. But, it backs up the earlier assertion: make sure what you buy is a proper fit to your vehicle.

Having said that, there's no issue with the quality of this product, and it is particularly attractively priced. Look out, also, for similar designs, under retailers' own names, although it's the operation of the quick release handle that is always worth checking.

- **Target price** £40 • **Key features** 40kg capacity, provision for anti-theft lock, fold-over bars
- **Weight** 5.6kg (including separate mounting plate) • **Information** www.maypole.ltd.uk



£40

WESTFALIA PORTILO

Motorcaravanners may well recognise the Westfalia name of course. And it already has associations with quality. Sure enough, this is a premium product aimed at vehicles equipped with a towball.

Arrives ready for use, no assembly required (but you will need an additional number plate). The only thing was that I had to take care sliding it onto the towball without knocking my camper's electrics socket immediately adjacent.

Thereafter, it clamps and locks easily and solidly in place, with the upper arm locks also operating from the same key. Where appropriate, the whole piece can be tilted away to allow tailgate access.

It's designed for bikes with frames up to 80mm and tyre widths up to 50mm, and there's an optional adapter for third bike.

Because the tail light sections are hinged, when it's all folded-up it means it's an incredibly compact 580 x 220 x 690mm, making it something of a class leader in this respect. There is sufficient load capacity here to carry electric bikes. Here, you can also add a top quality storage box, the 20-litre PortiloBox, which really does increase the versatility of a unit like this. Overall, it's not the lightest, but the quality is there for all to see and feel.

- **Target price** £340 • **Key features** 60kg load capacity, one key locks all, five-year guarantee, patented towbar brace
- **Weight** 17.5kg • **Information** www.portilo.co.uk



£340

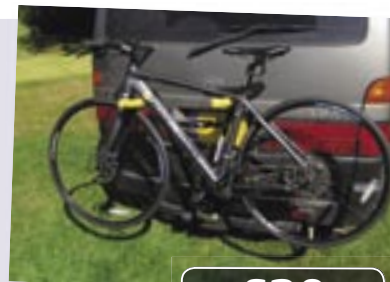


MAYPOLE 2 CYCLE CARRIER

One to compare and contrast with the Maypole 3. Firstly, it only takes two bikes, with a load capacity of 35kg. More importantly, this model actually clamps to the towball itself (make sure it is a standard 50mm diameter version). That actually makes it remarkably easy to use, as well as being light enough and small enough to store away pretty easily when not needed – thanks also to the fold-over hanging arms for the bikes themselves.

As with the three-bike variant, you'll probably want to add a lock for security, and the best bet here is some kind of chain and padlock that can also act to secure the carrier itself to the vehicle.

- **Target price** £30 • **Key features** 35kg capacity, provision for anti-theft lock, fold-over bars
- **Weight** 3.6kg • **Information** www.maypole.ltd.uk



£30

ESSENTIAL ADVICE

- Make sure any rack will fit your vehicle and not impede the opening of any windows, doors, etc
- It is illegal to obscure your vehicle's registration plate, even partially. You might need to invest in a lighting board plus another number plate
- Check for any specific legislation if you're travelling beyond the UK
- Remember, also, a rack will probably add to the overall length of your vehicle
- Don't overload. The rack itself might be capable of taking extra weight, but do consider the extra stress on tailgate and/or bodywork. In particular, the struts on older vehicles' tailgates may struggle with the weight of a rack plus any bikes
- Check also that your bikes will fit on the racks themselves. It's not always that easy – tyre widths and frame styles and sizes do play a part here. For example, some ladies' bikes have a dropped frame that can make them tricky to hang on a rack. And children's bikes aren't always easy to accommodate
- If you're carrying more than one or two bikes, load the smallest one on last. It's also a good idea to mount bikes facing different ways alternately
- Taking off any removable items – from lights to panniers – is also a good idea before mounting to a rack
- Consider security, too. Some racks come with locking devices – for rack to vehicle as well as the bikes they're carrying – with others you'll need to budget for separate locks. Do bear in mind, too, that although a bike may be locked to a rack it could be easy for a criminal to lift off a whole unlocked rack
- In severe circumstances, carrying extra items way beyond the back axle of the vehicle can have a detrimental effect on the vehicle's ability to grip the road (especially if it's front wheel drive) or handling generally
- If you're buying a motorhome, that's often the best time to arrange a deal on a bike rack, including fitting. But, bear in mind most dealers will offer the cheapest option, so you might want to insist on a specific make and model
- All racks have a designated load capacity. Make sure you know the actual weight of your bikes
- If you're having difficulty finding something that meets your exact requirements, you might have to consider the bespoke route, using a company such as Dave Cooper Bike Racks (www.davecooper.co.uk, 01732-820082)

FIAMMA PRO-C

By dint of its sheer popularity, this rates as a best buy. No doubt about it, Fiamma is the big name in bike racks, as far as motorhomes are concerned – coachbuilts as well as van conversions. The Pro-C is designed not to impede the opening of any rear window on a typical coachbuilt motorhome.

In standard format it carries two bikes, but can easily be adapted to take up to four, with prices starting from around £35. It's a real lightweight, yet has a 60kg carrying capacity.

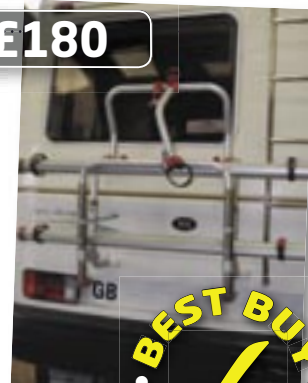
Look around the campsites – you'll see no end of Fiammas, so feel free to ask the owners what they think. Indeed, MMM technical consultant Barry Norris is a typical example, making sure a Fiamma rack was fitted as part of the deal when he purchased his Elddis Autoquest.

He reckons: "One thing about racks is weight limit. Mine is 35kg, just enough for two ordinary bikes, but not if I decided on electric bikes." Barry is also concerned about the height it is fitted. "Will I be able to lift the bikes that high in another five years?" he asks.

Note Fiamma offers racks for specific campervans, including Volkswagen-based vehicles (T2, T3, T4, T5, single and double-rear door versions, etc), as well as other 'vans, all under the Carry-Bike name and all around the £200 mark. Plus, the Fiamma range extends to models that can be fitted inside motorhomes with rear garage storage. Unipart Leisure and Nova Leisure are wholesalers only. However, their respective websites list retailers/fitters.

● **Target price** £180 ● **Key features** TUV approved, anodised aluminium frame ● **Weight** 7.9kg ● **Information** www.unipartleisure.com 02476-466461 or www.novaleisure.com

£180



THULE OMNI-BIKE ELITE

You may recognise this and know the company by its Omnistor name, but Thule took over the company some three years ago, hence the current title.

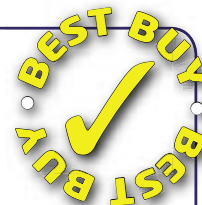
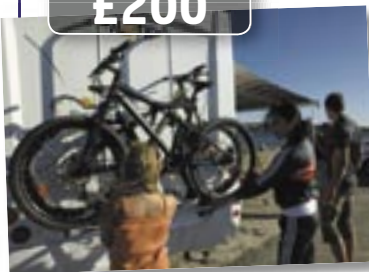
Many consider these a premium version of Fiamma's offerings, with features such as oval, rather than circular, aluminium framing, for extra strength – although there's a similar 60kg carry capacity. Also, you may have noticed on older Fiamma racks a tendency for the red plastic to fade and get a bit brittle. That's down to the sun's UV rays, but the feeling is Omnistor's products may cost a bit more but seem to cope better with the weather in this respect.

Designed to cope with pretty much any style and size of bike, there are also the options to carry third and fourth bikes here.

Again, there is a considerable range of Omnistor racks, including some with a lift facility and some designed specifically to cope with the rear-mounted spare wheel found on Auto-Trail coachbuilts.

● **Target price** £200 ● **Key features** 60kg capacity, movable wheel holders ● **Weight** 9kg (regular), 8.2kg (short) ● **Information** www.omnistorawnings.co.uk, 01202-620427

£200



WITTER ZX400

Potentially, the most expensive rack here as well as the heftiest. But, great value for a towball-mounted unit, if you're working on a bike-per-rack ratio. Witter is the UK's leading towing bracket manufacturer, so it makes sense it also offers bike racks of this ilk. This is its flagship model, with a load capacity of up to 65kg.

It comes with a permanent mounting plate for use with a normal towbar (flange-type, not swan neck), fitting easily enough thanks to quick-pin locators. Once set up, it's easy to put bikes on, thanks to its low height.

It can also be tilted away for access to any rear door, whilst the holding straps for each bike's wheels are easy to adjust and there are moulded feet for good all-round stability. A seven-pin connector for the electrics and a lighting board complete the impressive package here, and the whole lot folds fairly flat when not in use.

£350



● **Target price** £350 ● **Key features** Four-bike capacity, quick release ratchet straps, low platform height, seven-pin electrics adaptor, tested to EU standards ● **Weight** 23kg ● **Information** www.witter-towbars.co.uk

THULE G6 LED

You've probably noticed there's a bit of a thing for LED lights on vehicles these days. Swedish company Thule (it's pronounced 'too-lay') is better known in the automotive world for its roof boxes and racks, but that hasn't stopped it venturing into the world of bike racks, offering a generous range of premium products.

The G6 LED is the latest range-topper. It carries two bikes as standard, at a recommended maximum of 25kg per bike, which allows for some of the lighter electric bikes to be carried.

There's a tilt facility, with bikes on, which can allow access to any tailgate (but do check for your particular make and model of motorcaravan). It has a single key for locking to the vehicle, and locks for the bikes. And it all folds flat for fairly easy storage. Among the accessories are a third bike adaptor, third brakelight and a useful loading ramp to keep lifting to a minimum.

● **Target price** £350 ● **Key features** TUV approved, for bike frames 22-80mm, aluminium framework ● **Weight** 16.4kg ● **Information** www.thule.com

£350

