

SPANNERMAN ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS

ARE HEAVY-DUTY SPRINGS NEEDED

I own a '98 American motorhome that was built on a Chevrolet P-chassis. We have been experiencing problems with our front levelling jacks, fitted as original equipment, hitting or dragging when going over speed bumps and sometimes when going into driveways, even though we take care and drive slowly. When this happens, the Power Gear levelling jacks are damaged.

We have measured the clearance of the retracted jacks to the roadway and it is 4.5 to 5.0 inches. The bottom of my wheel rim is approximately 5.5 inches from the pavement.

Will heavy-duty springs raise the front of the motorhome sufficiently to provide enough road clearance to stop further damage to the jacks. I'm also worried that lifting the front of the motorhome will lower the rear jacks nearer to the road with resultant rear end problems.

I have been told that the jacks fitted as original equipment should have been the kick-down type. Would it be practical to have the existing jacks removed and replaced with this type.

The Chevrolet Motorhome Chassis Service Guide specifically warns against installing so-called "heavy-duty" coil springs. They have been available for sometime in the aftermarket, but in extreme situations they can compress completely and create what is known as coil bind. When this happens, the spring becomes the same as a solid-steel pipe, and something can break or bend.

In order to qualify as "heavy-duty," these aftermarket springs are made from larger diameter spring wire or have an additional coil. If there were room for such springs, Chevrolet would have installed them.

Installing aftermarket coil springs will be cheaper than installing new jacks, but they may well create rear-end clearance problems.

Kick-down type jacks are usually fitted to this chassis but the cost of replacing your existing jacks with this type could prove to be quite expensive but may be well worth it in the long-term.

TYRE SIZE AND BLOWOUTS

I've had a problem with the tyres on my 1998 32ft fifth-wheel trailer. I purchased the trailer in March 1998 and have had two blowouts so far, running fully inflated and with no abnormal wear. I have a friend who has the same tyres on his new 32ft Jayco fifth-wheel, and he's had three blowouts in two years.

At the last RV show I attended, I spoke to a couple of dealers and they told me that many of the bigger fifth-wheels are now ordered with 16 inch wheels and tyres. Is there something that I wasn't told when I brought my trailer?

You didn't really miss anything except perhaps that your trailer tyres are overloaded. That's usually the case when a tyre is run at its proper inflation pressure, it displays no

excess wear patterns and yet, blows out prematurely.

Here's how to find out if your trailer tyres are overloaded. First, take your trailer (fully loaded and ready-to-go) to a public weighbridge and weigh just the axles with the trailer level on the scale. Next, check your weight sticker for the trailer's gross axle weight rating (gawr) and compare the two figures. If the actual weight is higher than the combined gawr of both axles, the tyres are probably overloaded.

If you find that the tyres are overloaded the first solution is to reduce the amount of weight carried in the trailer. If that's not possible, in regard to how much you want to take along versus the trailer's tyre ratings, you may need to replace the complete axle assemblies, including axle, hubs, tyres, wheels and springs, with those of a higher rating. That may seem like a drastic measure, but it's the best way to make sure all suspension parts are up to scratch and able to carry the load.

Today's higher road speeds can aggravate an overloaded-tyre blowout situation. Speed causes heat building in a tyre and excess heat plus excess weight (which helps cause the heat) leads to tyre casing failure.

Many larger trailers today are fitted with 16 inch wheels and tyres because they're typically rated to carry more weight than their 15-inch equivalents. Thus, along with a heavier-rated axle and suspension, the trailer can have a higher gawr to suit the trailer's larger size. It's a side benefit, but many 16-inch trailer wheels have hub bolt patterns and shapes that also fit the truck used to tow the trailer, in which case the owner needs to carry only one spare tyre.

Assuming your tyres were not overloaded or underinflated, it's possible that, by design, they have a pattern of failure even when used properly. Also, given the same loading and inflation parameters, a specific number of tyres like yours may have been defective.

'A'-FRAME OR TRAILER?

Can you give us some advice please? We have recently bought a 27ft American motorhome and would like to tow a small car behind it. We have noticed that some people use an 'A'-frame whilst others use a trailer. Is it a matter of choice or are there legal reasons? Your help would be appreciated.

The method you use to take your car behind your RV is largely a matter of choice. An 'A' frame usually consists of two parts, one is permanently fitted to the car and the other connects between this part and the tow bar of your RV. When you wish to tow the car it is usually a simple matter to assemble the removable part to the part that is already fixed to your car and hitch up. Once on site this part is then removed and can be easily stowed in or under the RV. A lighting board needs to be fixed to the rear of the car to show the RV registration and the necessary lights and indicators.

A word of warning! It is vital to ensure that the steering lock is disengaged, the car is not in gear, and the handbrake has been

released. Failure to do any of these could result in expensive damage. To disengage the steering lock it is usually necessary to leave the ignition key in and turned to the first position. I have had the lock re-engage but fortunately the wheels were pointing straight ahead and nothing was damaged. Points to remember are that it is almost impossible to reverse with a car being trailed on an 'A' frame and to allow greater distances for stopping as many frames either have no brakes or a cable connected to the brake pedal. If the car is fitted with a servo the brakes will not be as effective once the servo is discharged.

The advantages of using a trailer are as follows. Any car within the weight capacity of your trailer can be carried as no alterations have to be made to the car. There is no strain on the car as its steering is not being used to drag it round corners. The car is not recording any mileage (not applicable with electronic speedos) as its wheels are off the ground. It is still possible to reverse the outfit and a trailer is equipped with a proper braking system. There are, however, disadvantages. A trailer takes up a lot more space than an 'A' frame, not only at home but also on site. Though, usually, if there is room to park your car alongside your RV there is room for the trailer as well. A trailer can be quite difficult to manoeuvre when disconnected particularly if it has four wheels. I have even seen a car fitted with a tow bar for the express purpose of moving the trailer on site!

Next question, how large a car can I take behind the motorhome? If, for example your motorhome has a gross weight of 14,800lbs (6,710kg). This would mean that with an ordinary driving licence (C1+E) you can tow up to 1,530kg. If the car weighs over 750kg with an 'A' frame brakes will be required. If you were to tow, say, a 1,300kg gross trailer the load capacity of that trailer would be in the region of 1000kg. You could carry any car with a kerb weight of up to this weight. I have quoted kerb weight as this is usually the actual weight of a car without occupants. If you have any doubt regarding the weight of your car, take it to your local weighbridge.

Something to ponder on. When towing a trailer it is the gross weight shown on its plate that determines whether it can be legally towed behind your vehicle, irrespective of the load that is placed on it. When towing a car with an 'A' frame which weight should be considered, the kerb weight or the gross weight? This can make a big difference as in the case of a Fiat Panda, the kerb weight is 700kg whilst its plated gross weight is 1100kg.

TECHNICAL QUESTIONS

If you have a technical question that you would like answering please send it to: SPANNERMAN, ARVM, MONTROSE, CROWN HILL, GREAT DALBY, LE14 2ER. Fax. 01664 481400 Email: apleisure@btinternet.com

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