Guides

/ How to buy a used camper van: VIN checks, title and an inspection checklist

HOW TO BUY A USED CAMPER VAN: VIN CHECKS, TITLE AND AN INSPECTION CHECKLIST

THE SHORT ANSWER

Get the VIN before you visit, decode it, and run the title, recall and theft checks. Read the title for its body type, brand and lien. Then inspect the conversion system by system, weigh the van against its door pillar ratings, collect the build paperwork, and close at the title office. Many camper vans sit above the 8,500 lb GVWR line of the FTC Used Car Rule, so get any warranty in writing. [1] [2] [8]

Last updated 25 November 2026

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Every 2027 Sprinter cargo van is rated above 8,500 lb GVWR, the limit of the FTC's Buyers Guide rule, so many camper vans fall outside it: get any warranty in writing.
- Run four VIN checks before you drive out: NHTSA's decoder, an NMVTIS report, NHTSA's recall data and NICB's theft and flood records.
- Read the title: the body type (van or motor home), any brand and any lien decide what you can register, insure and finance.

Inspect the conversion system by system with the checklist below, then weigh the van on a certified scale against its door pillar label.

Close at the title office with the seller, and file the transfer within your state's deadline: 30 days in Texas, 10 in California.

A used camper van is two purchases in one: a van, which a mechanic and a VIN report can judge, and a conversion, which only you and a technician can. This guide covers both, in the order you meet them.

WHERE ARE USED CAMPER VANS LISTED?

In five places: RV dealers, the conversion builders themselves, online classifieds and marketplaces, vehicle auctions, and private owners through clubs and forums. We do not rate sellers; the checks below apply to all of them.

RV dealers. Usually production Class B vans and trade-ins. A business that sold five or more used vehicles in the previous twelve months is a dealer under the FTC Used Car Rule. [1]

Conversion builders. Some resell or consign vans they built, which makes the build paperwork easier to get. Find builders on our builders directory.

Classifieds and marketplaces. Mostly private sellers and DIY builds. Expect the least paperwork and the most variation.

Auctions. Often sold as seen, with little time to inspect. Run the VIN checks before you bid.

Owners' clubs and forums. Private sales where the owner often knows the build well. Ask who did the gas and 120 V work.

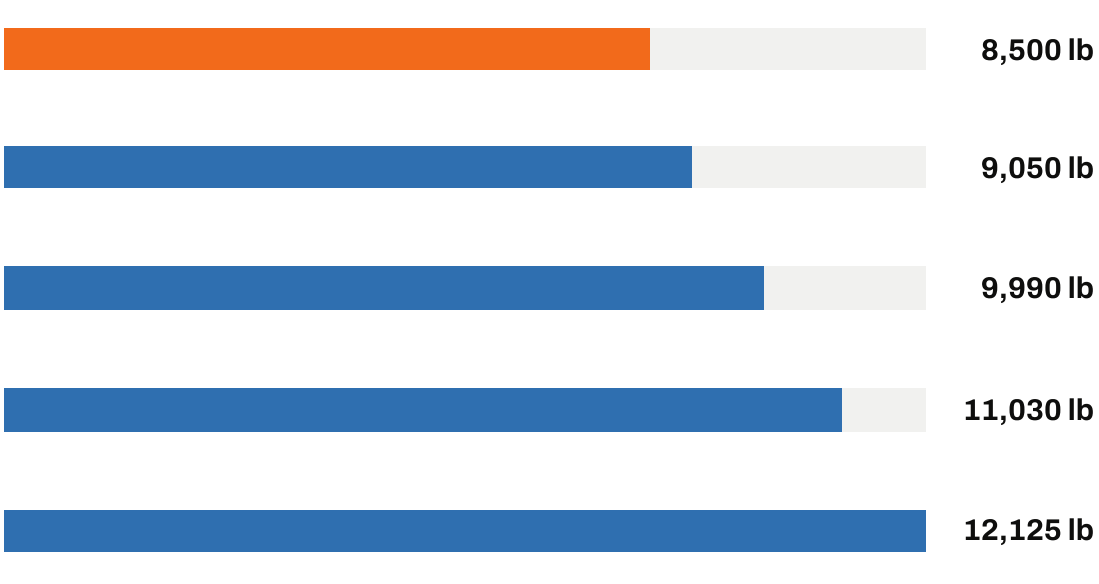
DOES THE FTC USED CAR RULE PROTECT CAMPER VAN BUYERS?

Often it does not apply. The rule, which makes dealers post a Buyers Guide with the warranty terms, covers vehicles under 8,500 lb GVWR, under 6,000 lb curb weight and under 46 square feet of frontal area. Many camper vans are heavier. [1]

Under 16 CFR 455, a dealer must display the Buyers Guide on a used vehicle before offering it to a consumer, and mark whether it is sold “as is” or with a warranty; where state law limits “as is” sales, state law wins.[1] But the rule's definition of a vehicle stops at 8,500 lb GVWR.[1] Mercedes-Benz lists every 2027 Sprinter cargo van configuration at 9,050 lb GVWR or more.[8] Read the GVWR on the door pillar label of the van you are looking at; if it is over the line, ask the dealer to write down what is and is not covered.

WEIGHT RATINGS

Sprinter cargo van GVWRs against the FTC Used Car Rule's limit, in pounds



Sources: 16 CFR 455.1(d)(1); Mercedes-Benz Vans USA, read 25 November 2026.[1][8]

WHICH VIN AND TITLE CHECKS SHOULD YOU RUN?

Four, and three of them are free: decode the VIN with NHTSA's vPIC decoder, check recalls in NHTSA's data, search NICB's free database for theft and flood records, and buy an NMVTIS report for title, brand, odometer, total loss and salvage history.[5][6][2][3]

CHECK	WHAT IT TELLS YOU	COST
NHTSA vPIC decoder	Make, model, year, body class and GVWR class from the maker's VIN data, for model years 1981 on; a wrong check digit is flagged. [5]	Free
NMVTIS report	Current title state and date, brand history, odometer, total loss and salvage history. States, insurers, junk and salvage yards and recyclers must report to it under federal law. [3]	Up to $4 a report, per the NMVTIS tips page; buy from an approved provider. [2] [4]
NHTSA recalls	Vehicle safety recalls filed for the van. Run the VIN at nhtsa.gov/recalls; the same data is in NHTSA's public API. [6]	Free
NICB VINCheck	A free database from the National Insurance Crime Bureau that includes flood damage and other information, at nicb.org/vincheck. [2]	Free

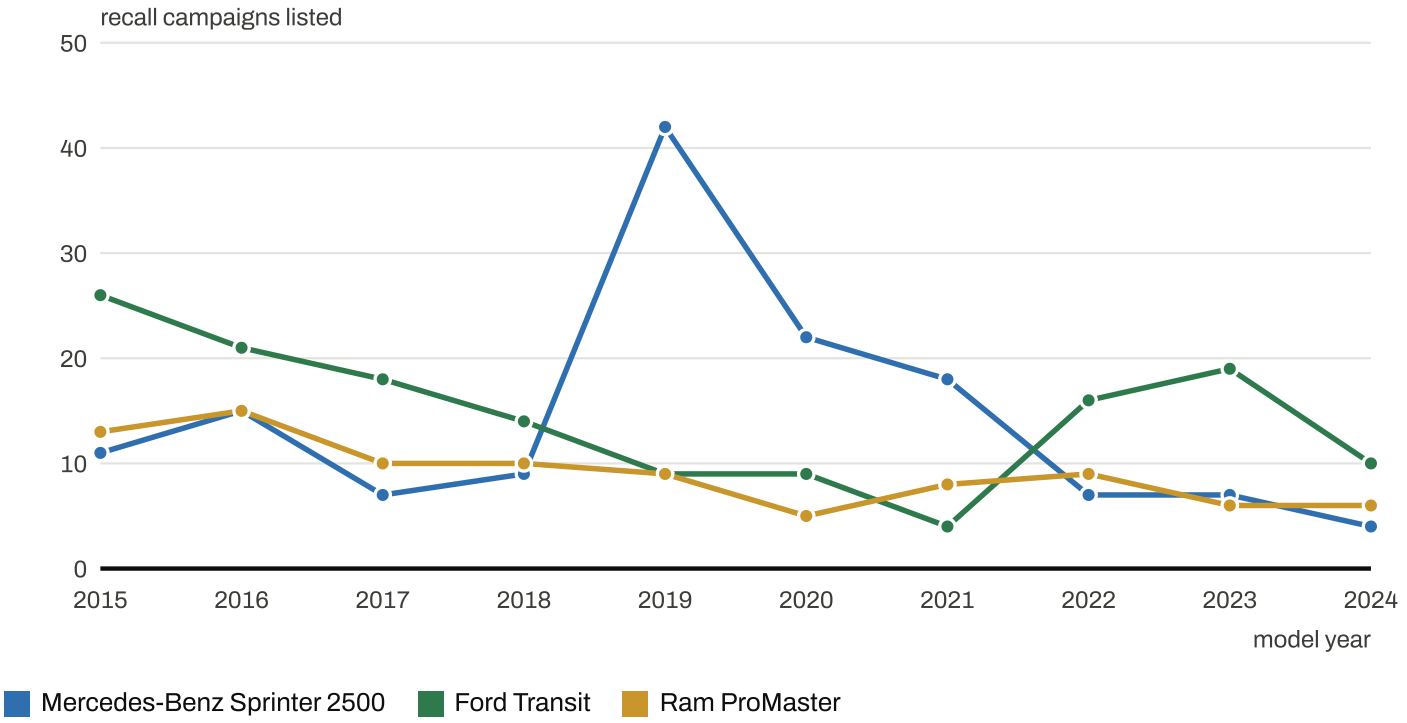
An NMVTIS report is short by design; a clean one is a good sign, and it leaves out repair, recall and maintenance history, which private reports may carry. [3] The NMVTIS site lists its approved providers in alphabetical order with no preference, and says consumers cannot get NMVTIS reports from Carfax, DMVDesk or Experian. [4] None of these checks looks inside the walls, which is why the inspection comes next.

HOW MANY RECALLS DO CAMPER VAN CHASSIS CARRY?

Enough that you should run every VIN. NHTSA's recall data lists 142 campaigns for the Sprinter 2500 name across model years 2015 to 2024, 146 for the Transit and 91 for the ProMaster. A campaign may cover only some vans of that year. [6]

NHTSA RECALL DATA

Recall campaigns listed per model year, three van chassis



Source: NHTSA recallsByVehicle API, model names SPRINTER 2500, TRANSIT and PROMASTER, queried 25 November 2026. Counts are campaigns listed for the model name and year; they are not a reliability ranking, and they say nothing about whether a given van's recalls were done. [6]

The count is a reason to check, not a verdict on a van: a recall may cover a narrow build range. What matters is whether the van in front of you has an open one. Parts added in a conversion are recalled by their own makers; our news post on the Maxxfan circuit board recall shows a fan recalled both as equipment and by the van makers that fitted it, and the ProMaster power steering recall is a chassis example.

HOW IS A CONVERTED VAN TITLED AND REGISTERED?

By the state, and the title tells you which way it went: still a van, or retitled as a motor home. Each state sets its own test. Virginia, for one, requires at least four of six permanently installed life support systems. [11]

Virginia's list is a cooking facility with an onboard fuel source, a potable water system with sink, faucet and tank, a toilet with exterior evacuation, a gas or electric refrigerator, heating or air conditioning separate from the engine, and 110 to 125 volt power.[11] Washington requires a State Patrol inspection when a motorhome is homemade or assembled from a conversion kit by someone other than a licensed maker, and says a motorhome with a Washington record needs no scale weight to change owners.[12] State by state detail is in how to register a converted van as an RV. Before you pay, ask two questions: what does the title say now, and what will your state need to register it the way you want?

WHAT SHOULD YOU INSPECT ON A USED CAMPER VAN?

Every system the builder added, plus the van underneath: shell and rust, roof penetrations, electrical, water, gas, heat and alarms, the chassis and the weight. Print this checklist and take it to the viewing.

Used camper van inspection checklist. Print this page; the last column is for your notes. On a phone, the table scrolls sideways.

#	SYSTEM	CHECK	WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE	PASS / NOTE
1	**Shell and rust**	Under the van: frame rails, rocker panels, wheel arches, floor seams.	Surface rust only; no flaking, holes or fresh undercoat hiding repairs.	
2	**Shell and rust**	Inside: every hole the builder cut (windows, vents, floor screws, seat bolts).	Painted or sealed metal edges; no rust stains on insulation or wall panels.	
3	**Roof penetrations**	Fan, vent, solar and rack mounts, from the roof and from inside.	A continuous bead around each flange and over screw heads, in a sealant the part maker allows. Maxxair says no solvent-based or polysulfide sealants on its fan flange. [15]	
4	**Roof penetrations**	Ceiling around each roof hole, and the headliner corners.	No stains, soft panels or musty smell.	
5	**Electrical**	Battery terminals, main fuse or breaker, and the battery mounting.	Terminals tight to the battery maker's torque (Battle Born: 9 to 11 ft-lb) and fuses or breakers fitted, which Battle Born calls highly recommended. [16]	
6	**Electrical**	Run every 12 V load and every outlet from the batteries alone, then on shore power.	Everything works; fuse sizes match the wiring diagram; no warm cables or melted lugs.	
7	**Water**	Fill the tank, run the pump, open every tap; look under the sink and at each fitting.	No drips; the pump stops when taps close; grey tank drains fully.	

#	SYSTEM	CHECK	WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE	PASS / NOTE
8	**Gas**	Cylinder date stamp, the locker or mount, and who installed the lines.	A DOT 4BA or 4BW LPG cylinder within 12 years of manufacture, or with a later requalification mark; installer named. [18]	
9	**Gas and heat**	CO and LP alarm: replacement date, mounting height, test button.	Inside its replacement date (Safe-T-Alert says within five years) and mounted where its manual says (4 to 20 in off the floor for that model). [17]	
10	**Heat**	Run the heater through a full cycle from cold.	Starts, heats and shuts down without faults; exhaust exits outside, away from doors and windows.	
11	**Chassis**	Independent mechanic: engine, transmission, brakes, suspension, tire dates, leaks.	A written report you can price repairs from.	
12	**Weight**	Certified scale ticket, loaded as you will travel.	Each axle under its GAWR and the total under the GVWR printed on the door pillar label. [7] [13]	

Two items deserve a professional: the propane system, which our propane guide leaves to a certified LP technician, and any 120 V wiring (see shore power). For how each system should have been built, use the build guides: electrical, water, diesel heaters, CO and propane alarms and roof fans.

HOW DO YOU CHECK WEIGHT AGAINST GVWR?

Weigh the van at a certified truck scale, loaded as you will travel, and compare the ticket with the GVWR and axle ratings on the door pillar label. CAT Scale weighs vehicles from 2,000 to 200,000 lb; a first weigh is $15.25. [7] [14]

Federal rules put the certification label on the hinge pillar, door-latch post or door edge next to the driver, and require the GVWR on it to be at least the unloaded weight plus rated cargo plus 150 lb for each seat.[7] On a CAT Scale, drive on with the steer axle on platform 1 and the drive axle on platform 2; a reweigh within 24 hours on the same scale is $5.25.[13][14] A heavy build eats the payload you need for water, people and gear; the arithmetic is in van weight and payload.

WHAT PAPERWORK SHOULD YOU ASK FOR?

The title and any lien release, then the paper behind the build: a build sheet, a wiring diagram, manuals and receipts. They tell you and the next technician what is behind the panels, and help with an insurer.

ASK FOR	WHY IT MATTERS
Title (both sides) and any lien release	Proves the seller can sell; shows the body type and any brand.
Registration	Shows how the state has the van classed today.
Build sheet or parts list	Tells you what is in the walls, and what to insure.
Wiring diagram	Lets a technician check fuse and wire sizes without opening every panel.
Appliance and component manuals	Service intervals, alarm replacement dates, recall contacts.
Receipts for parts and labor	Shows who did the gas and 120 V work, and supports an agreed value with an insurer.
Chassis service records	Oil, transmission and brake history for the van underneath.
Scale ticket, if the seller has one	A weight to compare with yours.

The NMVTIS tips page, summarizing the FTC's advice, also says to ask the owner, dealer or repair shop for the maintenance records and to talk to the previous owner.[2] A DIY seller who kept no wiring diagram can still sit with you while you draw one; our wiring diagram guide shows what one should hold.

HOW SHOULD YOU HANDLE INSPECTION AND FINANCING?

Pay for an independent inspection before you pay a deposit you cannot get back, and ask the lender and insurer how they classify a converted van before you commit. The title's body type and the build records answer most of their questions.[2]

The NMVTIS tips page asks buyers whether they hired a mechanic to inspect the vehicle and test drove it on hills, highways and in stop-and-go traffic.[2] For the conversion, a mobile RV technician can check the living systems the mechanic does not. Loans and policies for conversions are covered in how to finance a camper van and camper van insurance. Comparing a used van with a new one? See Class B vs custom van and what a camper van costs.

HOW TO BUY A USED CAMPER VAN, STEP BY STEP

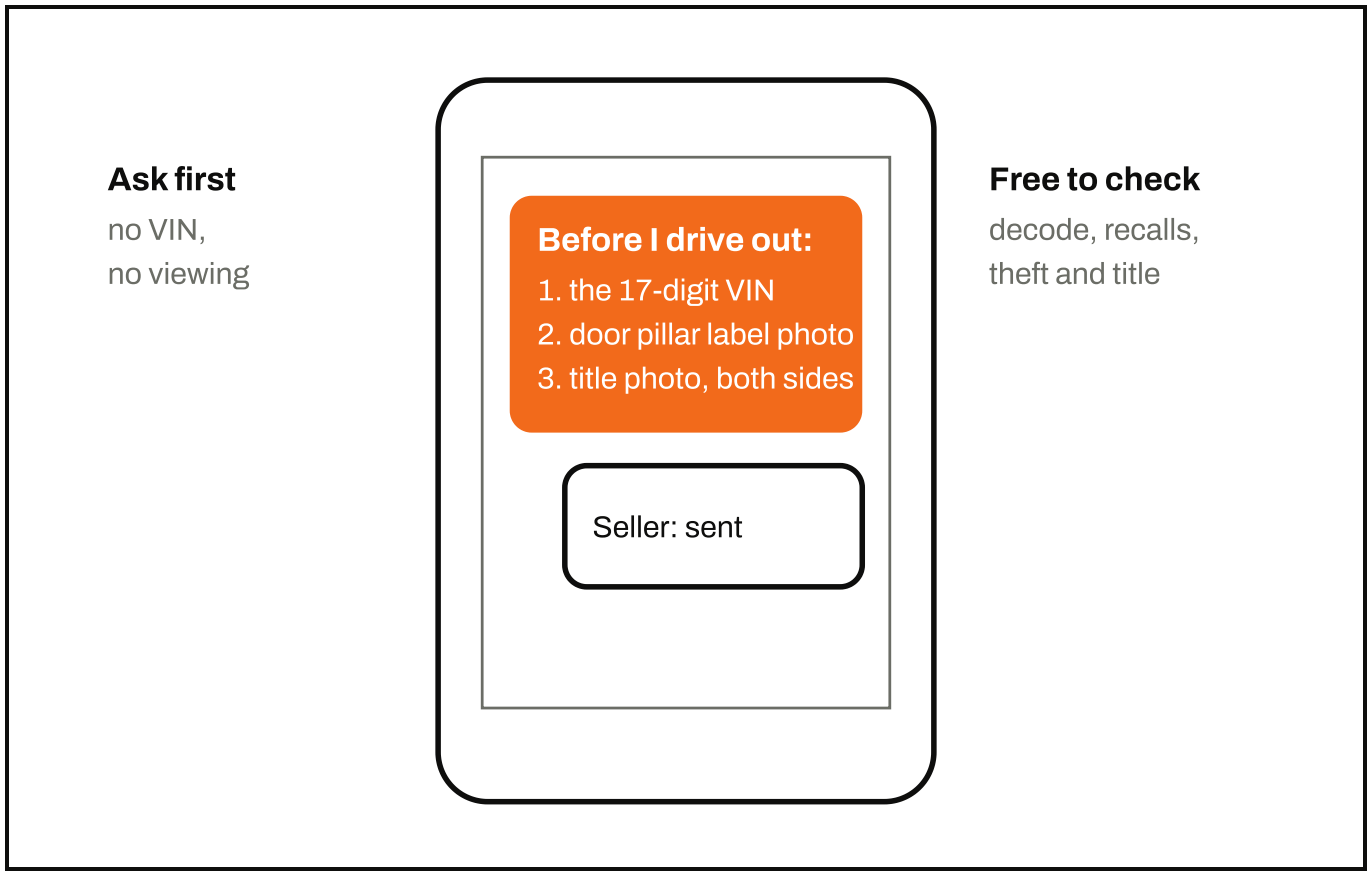
The order that saves the most wasted trips: paper checks first, the van second, money last. Each step names the source it rests on.

SKILL	STEPS	TOOLS
Beginner	**8**	Phone or laptop for the VIN checks Flashlight and a mirror for under the van This printed checklist Multimeter (optional)

Have a mechanic inspect the chassis, a certified LP technician check any propane system, and an electrician or trained RV technician check any 120 V wiring before you buy.

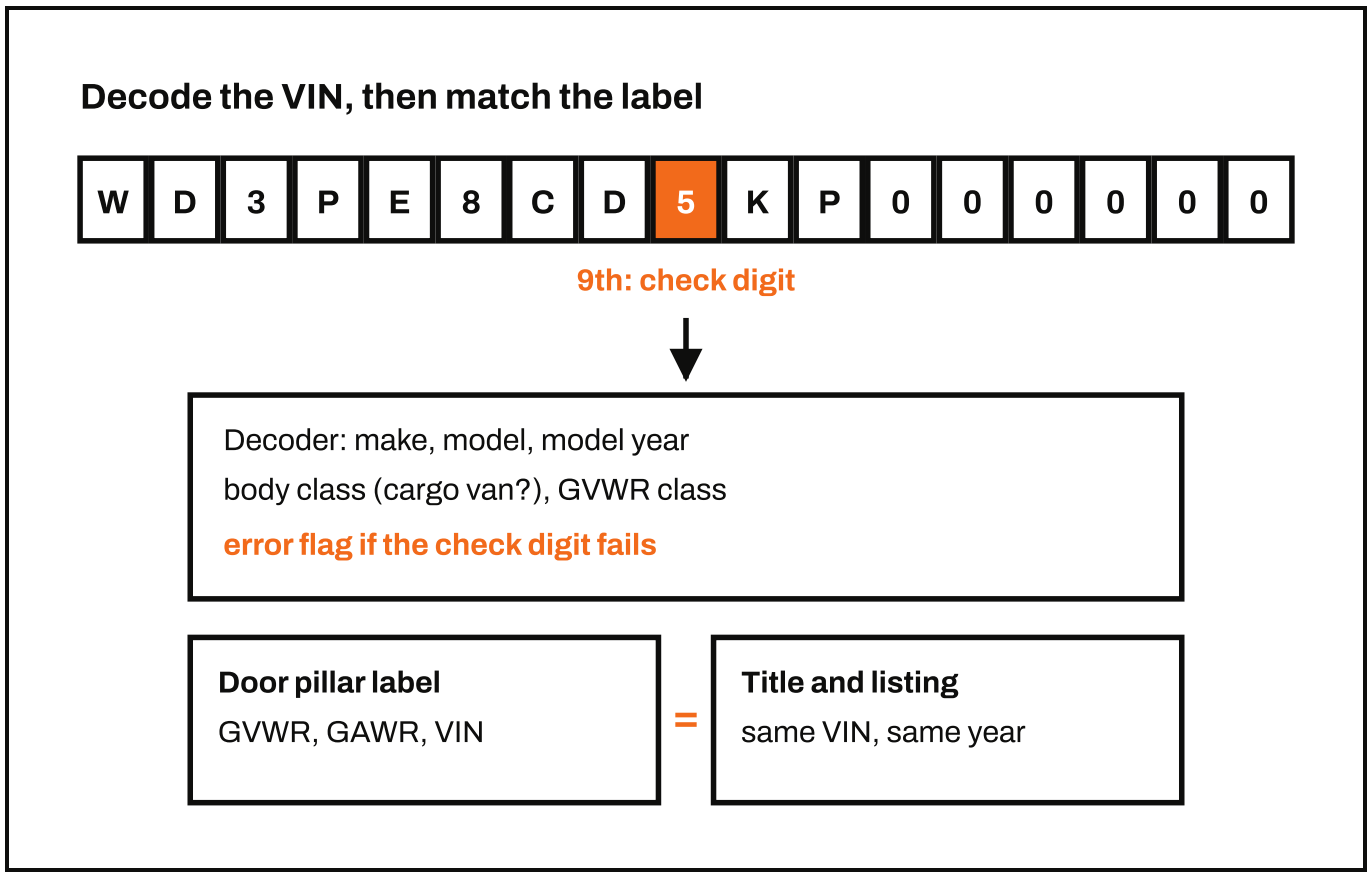
01 Ask for the VIN, label and title first

Before you drive out, ask the seller for the 17 character VIN, a photo of the certification label on the driver's door pillar, and a photo of both sides of the title. The label carries the GVWR and axle ratings you will check later.[7]



02 Decode the VIN and match it to the label

Enter the VIN in NHTSA's vPIC decoder. Check that the make, model, year, body class and GVWR class match the listing and the label, and that no check digit error comes back.[5]



03 Run the history, recall and theft checks

Buy an NMVTIS report from an approved provider for title, brand, odometer, total loss and salvage history; run the VIN for open recalls with NHTSA; and search NICB's free database for theft and flood records. [3][4][6][2]

Three history checks, three different databases

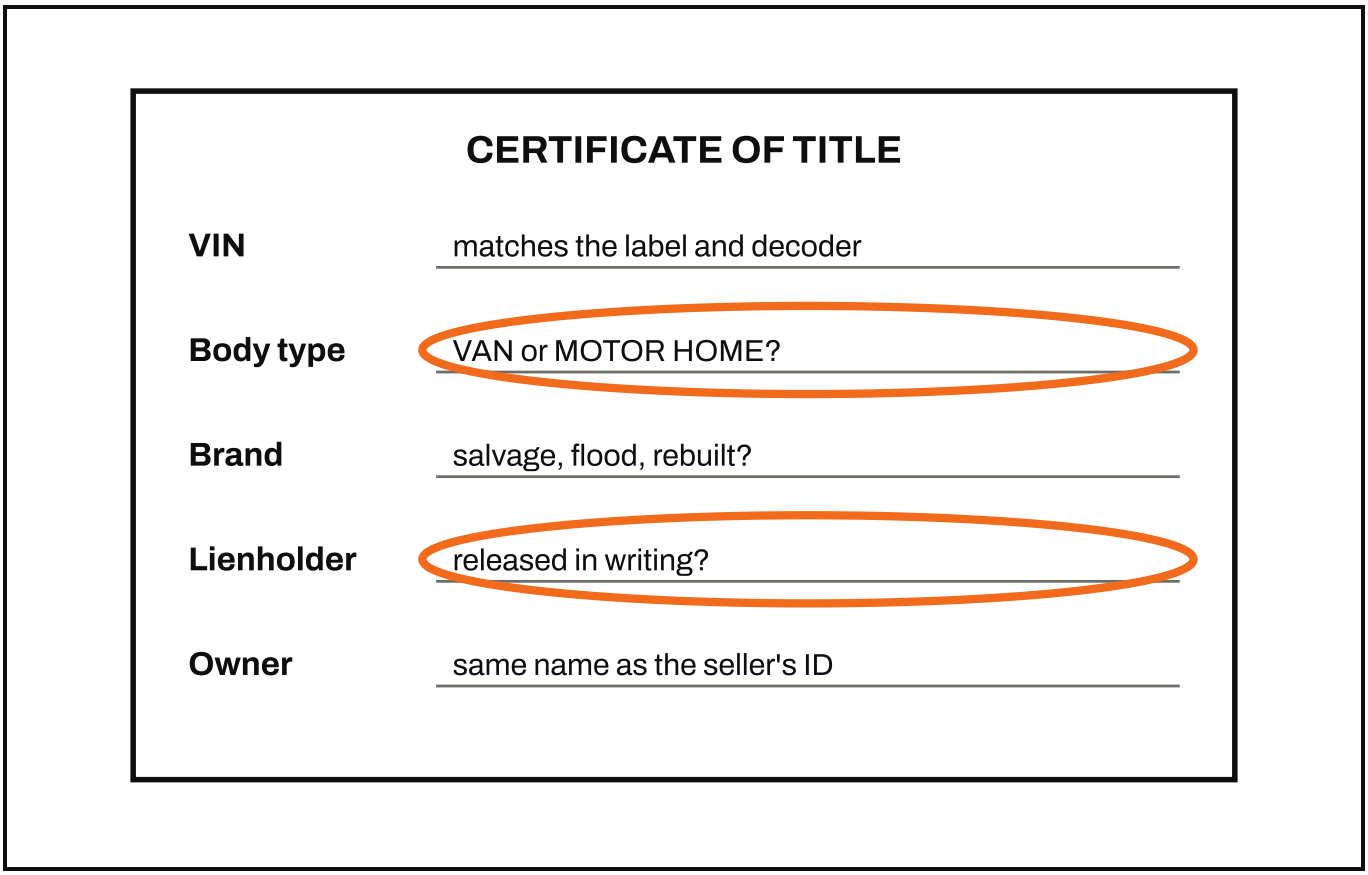
NMVTIS	NHTSA recalls	NICB
title state and date	open vehicle recalls	theft records
brand history	for this VIN	flood and loss
odometer	DIY parts: check	from member
total loss	each part maker	insurers
salvage		

A clean report is not an inspection.

04 Read the title for body type, brand and lien

Check that the owner's name matches the seller's ID, whether the body type reads van or motor home, and whether a brand or a lienholder is shown. In Texas, a tax office clerk can tell you if the title has salvage or legal issues before you file.[9]

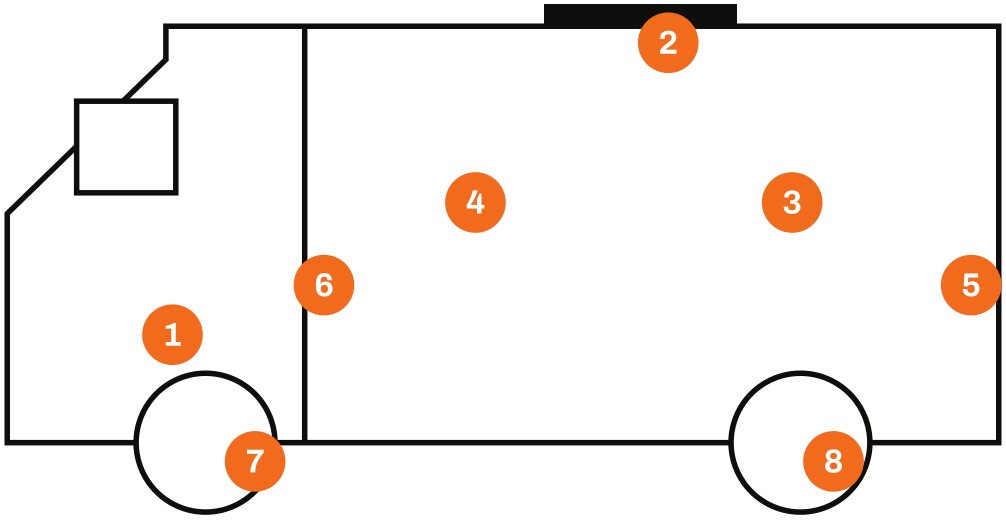
Caution. Do not hand over money for a title that shows a lienholder unless you have the lien release in writing.



05 Inspect the conversion system by system

Work through the printed checklist: shell and rust, roof penetrations, electrical, water, gas, heat and alarms, chassis. Run every system from the batteries and the tank, not from shore power and a hose. Note the CO and LP alarm's replacement date; Safe-T-Alert says within five years. [15] [16] [17]

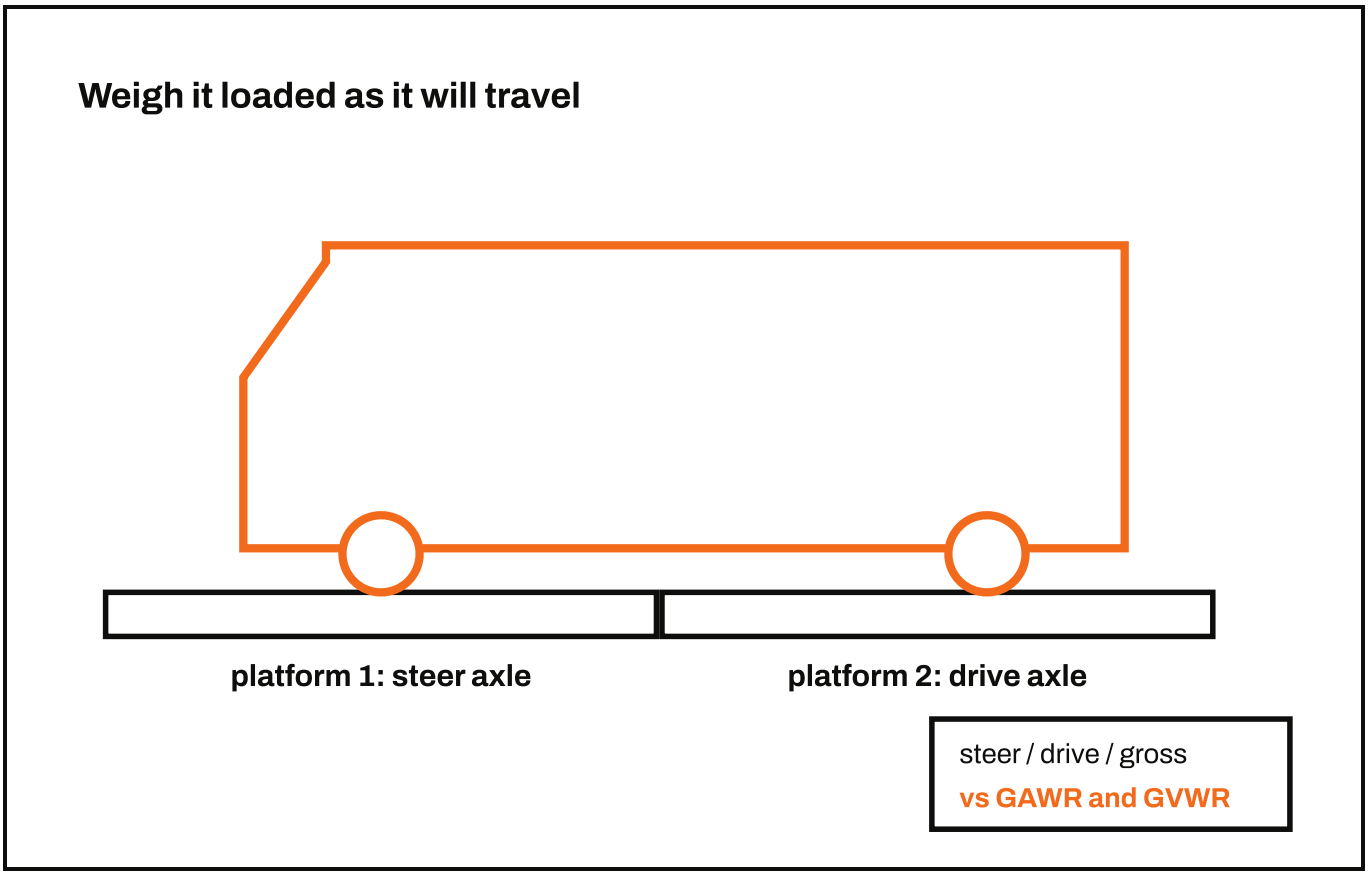
Walk it system by system



1 shell, rust 2 roof 3 electrical 4 water 5 gas 6 heat, alarms 7 chassis 8 weight

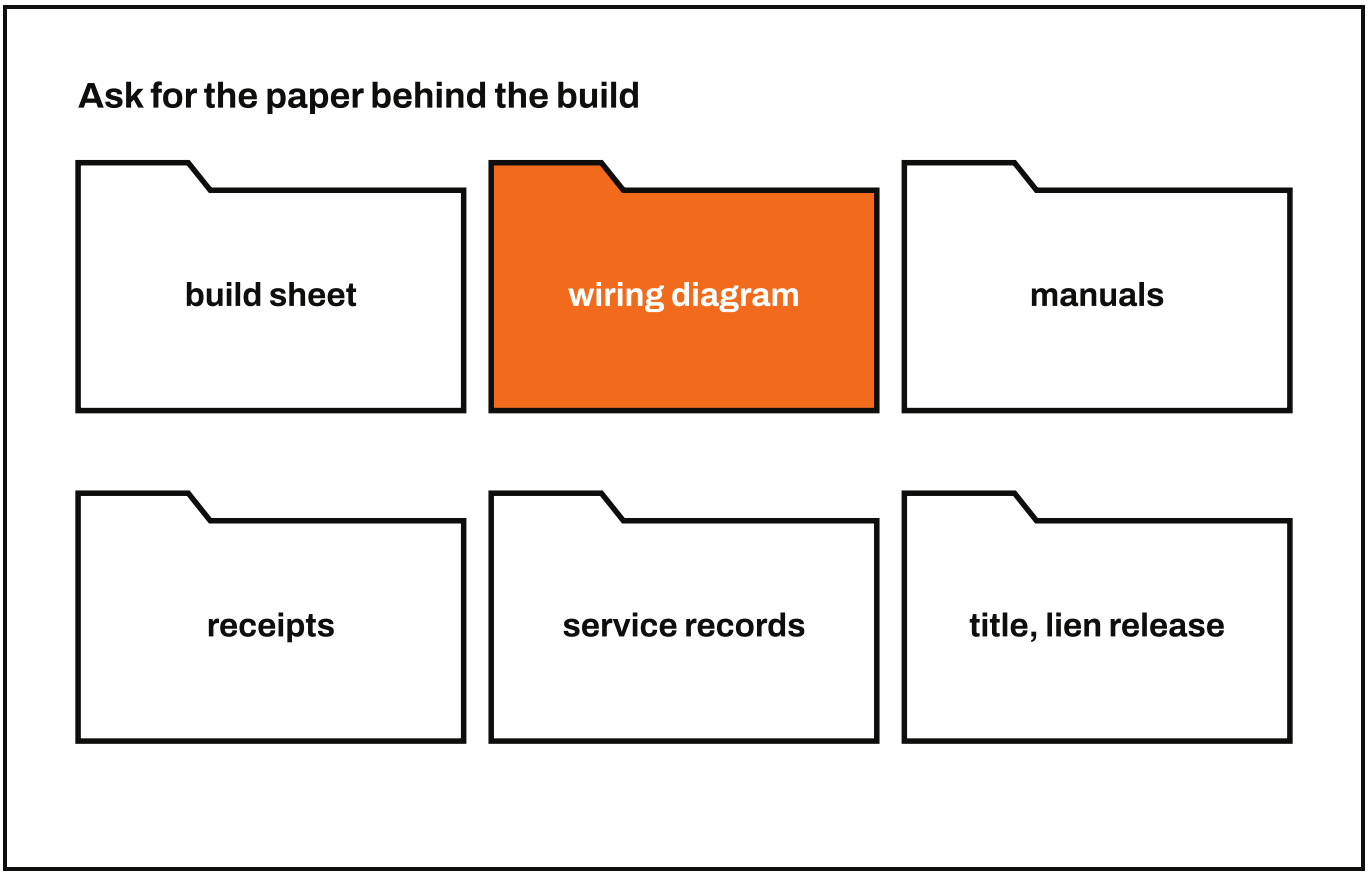
06 Weigh it on a certified scale

Ask the seller to meet you at a CAT Scale or other certified scale. Put the steer axle on platform 1 and the drive axle on platform 2, then compare each axle and the total with the label. A first CAT weigh is $15.25. [13] [14] [7]



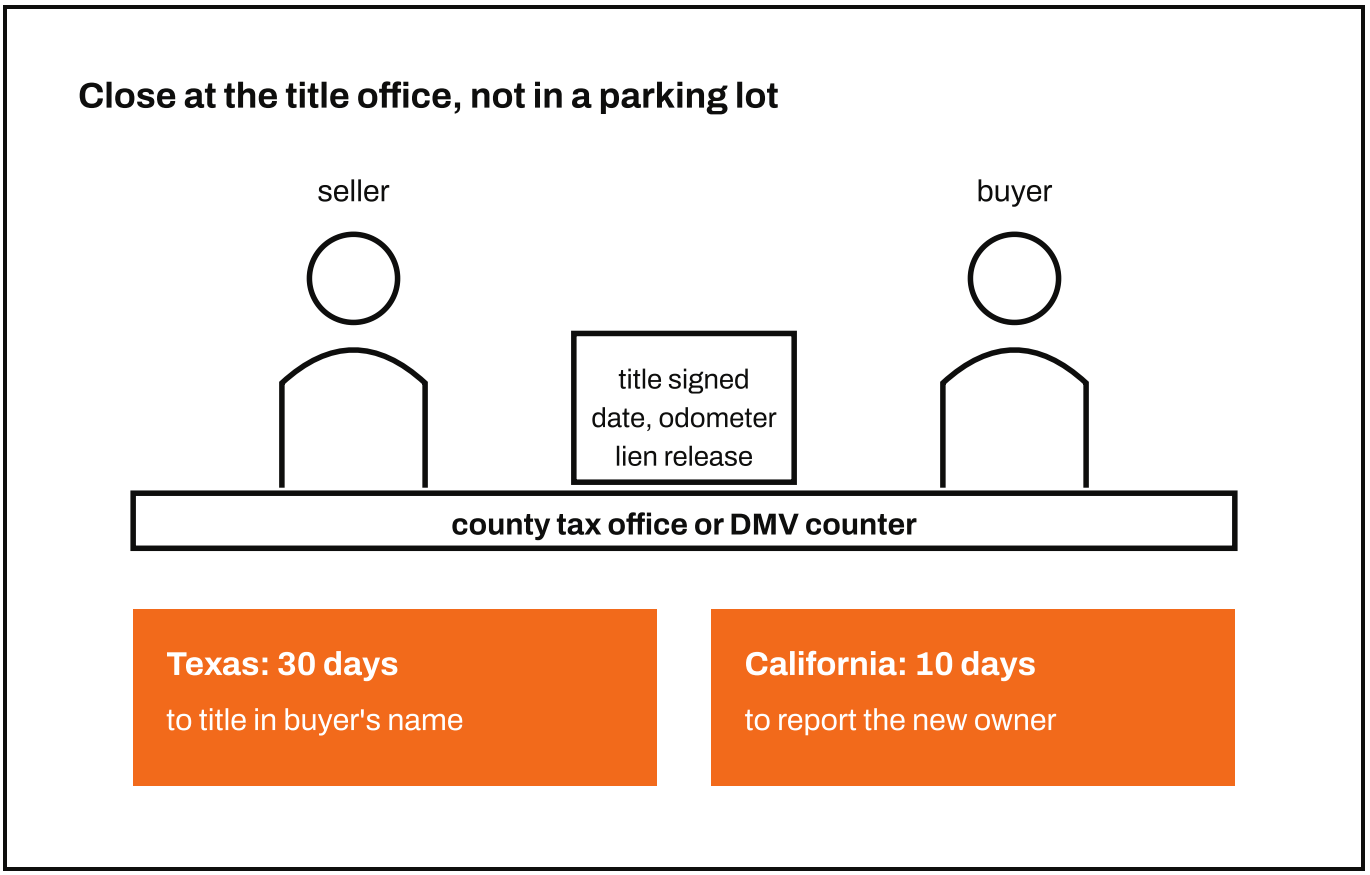
07 Get the inspection and the paperwork

Book an independent mechanic for the chassis and a technician for the living systems, and collect the build sheet, wiring diagram, manuals, receipts and service records. The NMVTIS tips page also advises a test drive on hills, highways and in stop-and-go traffic.[2]



08 Close at the title office and file on time

Meet the seller at the county tax office or DMV, have them sign the title with the date and odometer reading, and file the transfer. Texas requires the van titled in the buyer's name within 30 days; California requires the change reported within 10 days.[9][10]



WHAT NEXT?

If the van passes, budget for the fixes the inspection found, insure it before you drive away, and plan the registration. If it does not, the money you spent on checks is the cheapest part of van shopping.

Thinking of building instead? Start with the DIY build guide, compare Sprinter, Transit and ProMaster, browse kits and parts makers, or get matched with a builder. Looking for something rougher? Read the overland vehicle buyer's guide or see expedition vehicle builders.

The live version of this guide, with every source linked: vanlife.co/guides/buying-a-used-camper-van. Builders, kits and parts makers we checked: vanlife.co/builders.

QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

Where can you find used camper vans for sale?

Five kinds of seller: RV dealers, conversion builders that resell or consign vans they built, online classifieds and marketplaces, vehicle auctions, and private owners through clubs and forums. A dealer that sold five or more used vehicles in the last year is a dealer under the FTC Used Car Rule.

Does a used camper van come with an FTC Buyers Guide?

Often not. The FTC rule covers vehicles under 8,500 lb GVWR and 6,000 lb curb weight. Mercedes-Benz lists every 2027 Sprinter cargo van at 9,050 lb GVWR or more, so many camper vans fall outside it. Ask for warranty terms in writing.

What VIN checks should you run on a used camper van?

Decode the VIN with NHTSA's free vPIC decoder, buy an NMVTIS report from an approved provider for title, brand, odometer, total loss and salvage history, check open recalls with NHTSA, and search NICB's free database for theft and flood records.

How much does an NMVTIS report cost?

The Justice Department's NMVTIS tips page says to expect to pay up to $4 per report. Reports are sold only through approved providers listed on the NMVTIS site; consumers cannot get NMVTIS reports from Carfax, DMVDesk or Experian, the page says.

Should a converted van be titled as a motor home?

It depends on the state. Virginia requires at least four of six permanently installed life support systems, and Washington requires a State Patrol inspection for a homemade motorhome. Check how the title reads now and what your state needs before you pay.

How do you check a used camper van's weight?

Weigh it at a certified truck scale with the steer axle on platform 1 and the drive axle on platform 2, as CAT Scale instructs, then compare each axle and the total with the GAWR and GVWR on the door pillar label. A first CAT weigh is $15.25.

What paperwork should come with a used camper van?

The title and any lien release, the registration, a build sheet, a wiring diagram, the appliance manuals, receipts for parts and labor, chassis service records and, if it exists, a scale ticket. Missing paperwork is a reason to inspect harder, not a reason to walk away.

How long do you have to transfer the title?

It is set by the state. Texas requires the van to be titled in the buyer's name within 30 days of sale. California requires a change of ownership to be reported to the DMV within 10 days, and the seller to file a release of liability within 5 days.

SOURCES

Rules are quoted from the eCFR (16 CFR 455, 49 CFR 567 and 180.209) and from state agency pages. Recall counts come from NHTSA's recallsByVehicle API, queried 25 November 2026 by model name and year; they count campaigns listed for that model name, not recalls open on any one van. NHTSA's recall page, the FTC's consumer pages and NICB's VINCheck page refused our reader, so we describe those tools from the NMVTIS pages and the API instead and quote no limits from them. Component rules are from the makers' manuals. This page is general information, not legal or financial advice.

16 CFR Part 455, Used Motor Vehicle Trade Regulation Rule (the FTC Used Car Rule and Buyers Guide), eCFR (https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-16/chapter-I/subchapter-D/part-455). Read 25 November 2026

U.S. Department of Justice, NMVTIS, Used Car Buying Tips (a summary of the FTC's used car tips) (https://vehiclehistory.bja.ojp.gov/nmvtis_buyingtips). Read 25 November 2026

U.S. Department of Justice, NMVTIS, Understanding an NMVTIS Vehicle History Report (https://vehiclehistory.bja.ojp.gov/nmvtis_understandingvhr). Read 25 November 2026

U.S. Department of Justice, NMVTIS, Research Vehicle History (approved data providers) (https://vehiclehistory.bja.ojp.gov/nmvtis_vehiclehistory). Read 25 November 2026

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NHTSA recalls API, recallsByVehicle, queried for Mercedes-Benz Sprinter 2500, Ford Transit and Ram ProMaster, model years 2015 to 2024 (example query linked) (https://api.nhtsa.gov/recalls/recallsByVehicle?make=MERCEDES-BENZ&model=SPRINTER%202500&modelYear=2019). Read 25 November 2026

49 CFR Part 567, Certification (where the label goes and what GVWR and GAWR mean on it), eCFR (https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-49/subtitle-B/chapter-V/part-567). Read 25 November 2026

Mercedes-Benz Vans USA, 2027 Sprinter Cargo Van (lineup and specification panels) (https://www.mbvans.com/en/sprinter/cargo-van). Read 25 November 2026

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CAT Scale Company, FAQ (weight range and ticket prices) (https://catscale.com/contact-us/faq/). Read 25 November 2026

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Battle Born Batteries, BB10012 and BB10012H 100Ah 12V LiFePO4 battery manual (PDF) (https://battlebornbatteries.com/cdn/shop/files/BB10012_BB1002H_Manual.pdf). Read 25 November 2026

Safe-T-Alert, 70 Series CO and LP gas alarm user's manual (PDF, as hosted by Forest River) (https://forestriverinc.com/files/Component-Manuals/Safety/Safe%20T%20Alert%20-%20LPCO%20Alarm%20Model%2070%20Series%20User's%20Manual.pdf). Read 25 November 2026

49 CFR 180.209, Requirements for requalification of specification cylinders, eCFR (https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-49/subtitle-B/chapter-I/subchapter-C/part-180/subpart-C/section-180.209). Read 25 November 2026