



Buying A Pre Owned Pennine Camper: A Basic Guide

Introduction

This guide is aimed at those people considering the purchase of a Pennine folding camper, possibly for the first time, although, of course, much of the advice, herein, is pretty generic, and could be applied to most makes of folding camper, trailer tent, or similar.

Of course, it can only be a basic guide, and there is no substitute for having a full professional review done, in the same way as there is for a car, however, forewarned is forearmed, and, hopefully, this guide will help the user spot some of the more common problems associated with the purchase of any second hand camper.

Unlike the average family car, there is no official document to give us comfort that the item we are buying is even fit for purpose. Campers are not required to obtain an MOT certificate, nor do they, legally, have to undergo any formal method of servicing.

The other problem with this type of purchase is that, unlike when buying a car, there is no official point of reference for what is a fair value for the item concerned. There is no Parker's or Glass's guide to prices, and we have to check out the market as best we can, in order to get a feel for what is a fair price. This can, however, work in the purchaser's favour. Often, we have been able to acquire a good, sound, 1996 – 1998 Pennine Aztec, in excellent condition, for between £500 - £600, when identical models are selling for £1,200 - £1,500, simply because the sellers had not researched the market properly.

The difficulty for the first time buyer is that, when they see a camper for an apparently very low price, they have no way of knowing if that camper has anything wrong with it, or if it is simply an exceptionally good deal, due to the vendors lack of knowledge or research.

The aim of this guide is to help you identify some of the key problems that can arise, to help you make an informed decision.

What To Look For

Certain problems will be more model specific, whilst others will depend more on the age of the camper concerned, but most will be fairly generic, and easy to spot, if you know what you're looking for.

(1) Canvas

With the best will in the world, it is not always possible to avoid the mildew and other staining issues that are an all too common problem with many older campers. Once a camper is folded away, it is very tightly compacted, with no way for moisture to escape, or air to circulate, and even the most conscientious of owners can easily miss that one patch of damp, whilst packing away, that can cause some pretty horrendous staining in the long term. The most common staining is caused by mildew, but long term dampness can lead to rust and other stains on the canvas as well. Make sure you check for these stains, particularly on the interior of the canvas, as they can easily be hidden by bed pods, curtains and roof linings.

As mentioned above, this is a very common problem, and you shouldn't dismiss a camper simply because of it, especially if it is covered by soft furnishings etc, as it is extremely unlikely to affect the performance of the canvas and may assist you in any subsequent pricing negotiations with the vendor. It is always best to be as informed as possible, though, when purchasing any such item.



Aside from the staining, it is worth checking if the canvas has any other physical defects, such as tears or repairs and unsound stitching on the seams. Aside from their cosmetic impact, they may well affect the waterproofing integrity of the canvas itself, and should be avoided, unless you are prepared to have them properly repaired yourself.

When looking at the canvas, as with most areas, it's easy to neglect the little things, but it is worth checking the toggles that hold the door open, the D rings that can be used to connect the guy ropes and the bungee cords / Velcro that are used to hold the canvas in place. Have a walk around the camper. Is it a tight seal on to the trailer body at all points? Have a look under each fold out bed, and make sure the canvas is properly attached. It should be held on mostly by bungee cords, but, in the centre, at each end, it should be held firmly in place by three screws. At all other points around the main trailer perimeter, it should be attached by means of Velcro strips. Ensure all of these are in good condition, and, again, check that the seal is good.

(2) Main Trailer Body

The Pennine trailers are built on the super tough Al-Ko chassis, and are, generally, pretty bullet proof PROVIDED they don't suffer from any water ingress. By way of example, we will occasionally buy a completely beyond repair camper, and strip it down for parts. We did this for one 1998 Sterling back in 2013, and stripped it down to the basic trailer, ready to sell on. This trailer was stored outside, over Christmas 2013, with its transit cover on, to keep the weather out, and, within 2 months, it had deteriorated so much, that, when we tried to move it, the sides completely collapsed. Such is the devastation that can be caused just by a little water ingress. This is fixable, in the early stages, either professionally, or using home de-lamination kits, but is best avoided if at all possible. The signs are fairly easy to spot. Check for a spongy feel to the main structure of the camper. Do the panels move more than you would expect? This is easier to spot on the interior, as the exterior metal cladding can mask this in the early stages. This is particularly prevalent anywhere that the water could gain access, and a particularly common example is when number plates have been screwed on and then removed. Even a small screw hole such as this can cause absolute devastation internally, if not properly sealed.

Another common site is the area around the door, or the door itself. As a result, many older Pennines will have had their door replaced at some point (not a problem, if it has been done well, but worth checking). Water will usually find its way in where the hinges marry up to the door surround, and, if water gets in here, the hinges will have a tendency to move around a bit, and, more importantly, the door will not shut properly. This can be a sign of bigger problems. Beware.

Be advised that, generally, the Pennines are extremely well built, and the damp issue is a lot less prevalent than the mildew problem, but apparently insignificant things like the number plate issues mentioned above can create additional problems. Perhaps it is worth noting, also, that, surprisingly, some of the newer Pennines can actually have more problems than many of the older ones. Fuelled by their ongoing success, Pennine expanded very rapidly in the noughties, and began to experience problems with quality control, many of which revolved around water ingress issues, and this was one of the many factors that lead to their Management Buy Out in early 2014.

Other than the water issues, there isn't too much that, generally, goes wrong with these units. Check for obvious signs of impact damage, on the corners, mud flaps, etc and take a look at the graphics to make sure they are reasonably intact, as something very minor like that can really impact on the overall look, feel and ultimate resale value of any given camper.

(3) Chassis Etc

The industry standard Al-Ko chassis is, as already suggested, pretty much bullet proof, and you are extremely unlikely to find and major issues there.

Like most trailers / caravans, these folding campers spend a lot of time sitting in one place, so it is not unknown for the brakes to begin to lock up. Check, if you can, that the trailer is easy to manouver and isn't stiff, as this will affect not only your ability to move it around, on site, and for storage, but, also, your towing vehicle's fuel economy.



Check the function of the towing mechanism thoroughly. Does the jockey wheel wind up and down easily? Does it have a breakaway cable fitted? Do the electrics work, when connected to a towing vehicle? Check all lights on both the front and rear of the trailer to ensure you are not only safe, but fully legal. Also, does the hand brake work? Can you push the trailer around with the hand brake engaged?

Take a look under the chassis, itself. All Pennines come with four wind down corner steadies. Are they all working? Ask for a demonstration. Are they all easy to wind down, and do they make an awful screeching noise when they do? (That could be an easy fix with a little grease or WD40).

Check the tyres (including the spare). Due to their low level of usage, many campers, even older ones, will often have an unused spare tyre, but just make sure all look OK and legal.

At this point, it is worth opening the front gas locker to check what is inside. Are there any gas bottles? Do they come with a regulator? Is there a leisure battery inside (certain models only)?

Finally, check the serial number plate on the A frame at the front of the trailer. This is usually located on the right hand side (looking from the front of the camper) in between the towing hitch and the gas locker. This plate will, usually, contain two numbers. The top number is the maximum gross weight of the trailer. The lower number is the serial number. The serial number is usually comprised of up to four digits, then a space, then two digits. The digits before the space represent the serial number, and the two digits after the space represent the year of manufacture. This will help you to verify the age of the camper, as specified by the vendor.

(4) Interior

Most interior issues are an easy DIY fix. Check all cushions, mattresses etc for signs of mildew and make sure there are no issues with the stitching on the edges. Check all handles, hinges, catches etc, but don't be overly concerned if there are issues, as these are all easily replaced. Make sure the original table is also included, as this may be integral in making up one of the beds.

Ideally, the following should be included. It is not an issue if they aren't, but they can be difficult to source, if not included:

- Bed pods; there should be one for each double bed in the camper.
- Roof liner; normally, there is just one, to cover the roof between the two bed pods.
- Curtains; ideally, there should be a pair of curtains for each window, and, in most models, to seal off the beds.

Check the general condition of the cabinet work. Is there any discolouring or signs of excessive wear? Look at the shelves inside the cupboards. Are they bowed at all?

Carpets, curtains, soft furnishings etc can all be replaced, but their general condition is often a good indicator as to how well the camper has been, generally, looked after during its lifetime.

(5) Gas / Electric / Water Systems

Wherever possible, ask for a demonstration of these. All mains sockets should work (you may wish to take a small lamp, phone charger or something similar to check them) as should all 12V sockets. Check all 12V lighting, to ensure it works properly. The water system should be easy to check, as long as the vendor has the water containers and pumps available. If they haven't, not only does this mean you can't be assured that the water system is working, but it will also involve extra cost in you sourcing them once you have acquired the camper.

The gas system should, also, be fully tested. The hob and grill should be lit and demonstrated, and the 3 way fridge should be shown as working. When selling a camper ourselves, we always ensure the fridge is turned on at least an hour before a viewing, if at all possible, to show that it does get down to the required temperature.



(6) General Points To Consider

Wherever possible, it is best to ask for a demonstration of setting up, and / or taking down the camper, as this will often expose issues that were hidden when it was dressed, ready for sale. Check that all of the poles seem to work OK, are not bent, and have the buttons in situ, to lock them in place.

Check whether the camper comes with the components for the Pen Vent system. This is the pole system that keeps the windows open to allow ventilation into the camper. Most owners have lost theirs, and many we speak to don't even know they exist (even those who have them in the camper but weren't aware as to their purpose).

Check the transit cover to make sure it fits tightly, and appears to be in sound condition, overall with no obvious rips, tears or leaks.

Check any extras that come with the camper, including awnings, bed skirts etc. Often, it will not be possible to check these thoroughly, but a quick check for obvious problems is always advisable.

It is always worth asking what paper work comes with the camper, as this can be over looked, Invoices, manuals etc are all useful, and will aid future resale potential.

These points are intended as a guide only. We hope you find them useful in your search for a new camper. They are no substitute for professional guidance when viewing any camper, but are designed to arm you with a little more knowledge than you might otherwise have been able to utilise. Good luck with your potential purchase.

