



Small RV Ninja Cheat Sheet

This is a convenient way to get acquainted with the basics of your RV's systems and components. It is by no means an exhaustive checklist but it will help put you on the path to becoming a Small-RV Ninja! You can find detailed information for most of the items on this list in your RV's documentation, from your manufacturer's website help section, or from your RV dealer's service department.

The engine:

What you need to know

- Gasoline or Diesel? (if diesel, keep an eye on the DEF level. You will need to add it occasionally)
- Change the oil filter every 5,000 miles on either gas or diesel (It's important to keep your engine oil clean, particularly with a diesel engine.)
- Keep the air filters clean
- Watch for rodents (they love quiet engine bays, so if yours is sitting for a while, always check!)
- Many newer RVs have safety features triggered by whether or not the engine is running. (*i.e.*, *awning or slide deployment, etc.*) Check your documentation for which systems may be affected.

The service bay:

What you need to know

- There is "city" water and "on board" water. You hook up to city water when you are at camp. You use your on-board water when "boondocking". (Fill the fresh water tank before boondocking!)
- If using city water, use a filter attached to your water hose at the source and a water pressure regulator to reduce potential pressure surges that can damage your RV.
- Empty the black holding tank first, then the gray (the gray rinses out the system)
- When the tanks are empty, rinse out your dump hose before putting it away.
- If you have a macerator with a cap, be sure to remove it before turning on the pump. Put the cap back on before you store the hose (you don't want any remaining fluid to leak!)
- Keep paper towels, latex gloves and hand sanitizer in the service bay and use them!
- Always keep a few gallons of water and a deodorizer packet in the black and gray tanks. That means putting water back in after you have emptied the tanks. Trust me on this one!

The levelers:

What you need to know

- If you have an auto-leveler system, make sure you use jack pads under the "feet".
- If you don't have an auto-leveling system, use the stackable-block-type of leveling blocks. They are inexpensive and easy to use. Buy two sets – some campsites are very uneven!

The automatic steps:

What you need to know

- In some units the automatic steps are linked to a magnet in the door frame. If the door or door lock is ajar or has become loose, the steps may not function. Try tightening up the door lock screws.
- When the engine starts, the steps automatically retract in most models.
- Lubricate the step mechanism every month – even when you are not camping.

The batteries:

What you need to know

- There are two sets of batteries. One in the engine compartment for the business side of the RV, and one in the “house” side for all the electronic needs of the “house”.
- Batteries need to be checked regularly for water (unless you have the sealed-type).
- Monitor the level of the batteries’ charge. It needs to stay at 50% or above.
- There is usually a battery disconnect switch for the ‘house’ batteries. When you are not using your RV it is a good idea to switch this to “disconnect” to preserve battery life. (The engine battery does not have such a switch.)

The inverter:

What you need to know

- The inverter allows designated outlets to work when not plugged into shore power. It converts battery power to usable power. The inverter switch is usually located with the systems monitoring panel.
- The inverter is also related to solar panels if you have them, charging the house batteries.

The plumbing system:

What you need to know

- RVs typically have simple plumbing systems. Toilets are basically a drop flush unless you have an electronic model, or composting toilet.
- Sinks and showers empty into the gray tanks. The toilet and sometimes the bathroom sink, empty into the black tank.
- Monitor the levels of fresh water, black and gray tanks on the systems monitoring panel.
- Hot water is provided in most units courtesy of a small propane fueled standard water heater. There are quite a few newer RVs with tankless water heaters. Sounds great but your gray tank capacity will still limit the length of your shower!

The generator:

What you need to know

- You may or may not have a generator. If you do, it may be diesel powered or propane powered.
- The generator will run most of the RV “house” electrical needs if you don’t have shore power. But it tends to be quite noisy. For safety, do not run the generator while sleeping.

The CO2 detector:

What you need to know

- This is a monitor located close to the floor in most units. It detects the presence of CO2 and the alarm is bone-rattlingly loud. They are also a bit buggy and can sound out when you use hairspray or any aerosol in the RV. Just don't.
- Although the CO2 monitor can be a lifesaver, they also have a shelf life. Check the date it was made (usually stamped on the unit) and plan on replacing it every two years, though most say 5. They may start giving false alarms as they age and no one gets any sleep.
- DO NOT DISABLE THE CO2 monitor! Because CO2 is odorless it is a silent killer. You need an alarm.

The propane tank:

What you need to know

- You can fill this at most well-equipped hardware stores or an RV service dealer – and let them fill it.
- A full propane tank is only 80% full. Any more than that could be dangerous.
- The propane runs your stove, your heat, and maybe your hot water heater
- Many RVs have a propane access point for barbecue grills.

The automatic awning:

What you need to know

- Lubricate the mechanism frequently. The sun bakes these units.
- If it is windy, close the awning. A ripped awning is an expensive fix.
- Most awnings have legs. If yours does, use them. Either secured into brackets on the RV or standing on the ground they give support to the awning. Some newer awnings do not have legs.
- Brush debris from the awning before retracting.
- Clean the awning fabric with a gentle cleaner like Simple Green and maybe Oxyclean for serious stains.
- Many units will not deploy the awning while the engine is running. Retract the awning before starting the engine.

The refrigerator:

What you need to know

- Most RV refrigerators run on three types of power: electricity from shore power, electricity from the house batteries, and propane.
- RV refrigerators are not good at cooling down food, only keeping it cooled. If you put warm food or beverages in the refrigerator it will bring down the temperature of the whole unit. Only put cold foods in the fridge.
- Leave lots of air circulation room in your fridge. If the air doesn't circulate, the fridge doesn't cool.
- The freezer work pretty well if you pack it lightly and load only frozen food. Air circulation is a key.
- Consider taking a small cooler with ice for canned and bottled drinks. The easier access will keep you from opening the fridge too often!

The stove:

What you need to know

- Most RV stoves are propane powered and work much like a gas stove at home.
- Check the jets periodically for clogs.
- Always open a window when using the propane stove (remember that sensitive CO2 monitor?)

The furnace:

What you need to know

- Most RV furnaces are powered by propane and most work quite well. If you are camping in particularly cool weather and connected to shore power, a ceramic heater will help warm up the RV quicker. Use only according to the manufacturer's instructions.
- **DO NOT LEAVE A CERAMIC HEATER UNATTENDED!**
- Service your RV furnace at least once each year.

The air conditioner:

What you need to know

- Mounted on the roof of RVs the air conditioners are a bit noisy. They do cool reasonably well but do what you can to minimize the load by using curtains on the windshield to block the sun.
- They need to be serviced every year to stay in good running condition.

The ventilator fans:

What you need to know

- These little life-savers are workhorses. Keep them running smoothly by vacuuming the screens covering them.
- Check with the manufacturer on service frequency.
- If you have "Fantastic Fans" (that's not a judgment call it's a brand name), some have an auto-close feature that turn them off and close the lid automatically when it starts to rain. You can adjust the sensor a little, but they will still close when it rains.

The tires:

What you need to know

- Check your RV's tires regularly for wear. Have them rotated on a regular basis too to distribute the wear pattern.
- Check the tire pressure. Incorrect pressure can break down a tire quicker, so make sure you are using the correct tire pressure for your type of tire and your type of driving use.
- If you have dual tires on your coach, you also need to check the inside tire pressure, which may be a bit of a chore. Although convenient, valve extensions tend to leak so be vigilant about checking the tire pressure if you choose to install them.
- When your tires are nearing their life, don't wait – replace them. Nothing like sitting on the side of the road with a flat during vacation.

Driving:

What you need to know

- Always do a “360” walk and check around the exterior of your unit before driving. Close and secure all doors, compartments, and anything attached to the vehicle. (i.e., bike racks, etc.)
- Side mirrors. Learn to use them and trust them.
- This is a heavy vehicle. It does not stop on a dime. Stay well behind the car in front of you and be vigilant about traffic around you.
- An RV needs extra room for turns. You will probably take up a full lane to make a turn. Embrace it.
- An RV does not “scratch out”. Wait for a reasonable opening before pulling out. Remember, you are carrying a vacation cabin in the back seat.

Parking:

What you need to know

- How much space your RV requires depends on its length and width. Most small class B+ and some class C units are about 25 feet in length and about 8 feet in width. That is narrow enough for a parking space but longer than most parking spaces.
- Practice backing into a parking space. It will make parking easier in the long run.
- If you back into a parking space bordered by a sidewalk, you may be able to overhang the sidewalk and almost fit into the space if you bring the back tires right to the curb.
- It is easier to park broadside than to back out of a spot.