How to Park Your Fifth Wheel

Top tips, tricks, and advice to help you park your fifth wheel like a pro.
Contents

INTRODUCTION
Hurray, you’ve arrived at your destination! Now what?..... 1

PARKING BASICS
Okay, let’s park this puppy....................................................4

PARKING TIPS AND TRICKS
7 parking tips and tricks......................................................12

CONCLUSION
A word of advice before you go. .........................................14
Hurray, you’ve arrived at your destination! Now what?

Oh, the joy of RV ownership. You pull up to your site ready to welcome the fresh air, the new faces, and something called relaxation. But first, you need to park the thing. And nothing can sap the joy of travel like trying to park your fifth wheel.

That’s doubly true if you’re trying to back up and squeeze into a spot while a few seasoned RVers watch. For them, this is must-see RV. This guide will help you prepare for the moment and lay the groundwork to make you a pro. We’ll begin with a few common terms and then cover the basics of parking, including backing up, spotter hand signals and more.
Get to know some of the common terms you will hear when parking your fifth wheel. They are universal, so you, your spotter, and any other help you get at the campground will understand and use these terms.

**Blind side:** Typically, your blind side is on the passenger side. Imagine your RV and tow vehicle are in a straight line. As you turn left, the passenger side (right side) disappears from view. It can happen on both sides. That's why a spotter is so important to successfully park your rig.

**Neutral position:** This is the position of your tow vehicle steering wheel when your vehicle and RV are in a straight line.

**Jacking:** When you jack the trailer, you are causing it to turn the opposite direction that the truck is turning. Such as in “jack-knife.”

**Chasing:** Chasing is when you are trying to straighten out the truck and trailer—you are “chasing” the trailer.
**Pivot point:** This is the space between the two back axles; it is where your fifth wheel will turn.

**Crank it all the way:** Something you will hear when you are being asked to turn the wheel all the way to one side so the trailer will turn sharply.

**Foul language:** Something you will hear (and maybe say) a lot of before you learn the ins and outs of parking a fifth wheel.
Okay, let’s park this puppy.

It’s been a long day on the road and you’ve just pulled into the campground. You’re ready to sit back and relax for the night, but when you get to the site you realize it’s not a drive-through site. Do you panic?

No. That’s because you took your time to do your homework (including reading this guide) and you’re excited to put your fifth-wheel parking skills to the test.
SPOTTER OR DRIVER? WHO’S RUNNING THIS SHOW?

You first need to determine who is going to drive and who is going to spot. Remember, the spotter will be the eyes and ears and is responsible for getting the RV positioned where you want it.

**PRO TIP** — If you don’t like taking directions, then maybe instead of driving the RV you’ll want to be the spotter, because the spotter is the key to getting the vehicle parked correctly. The driver simply acts as the spotter’s hands and feet.

HAND SIGNALS OR WALKIE-TALKIES?

Next, decide what works best for both of you: using hand signals or using walkie-talkies to communicate during parking. We lean toward hand signals. Why? Verbal instructions can often be vague. Showing the driver that he has three feet to go is clearer than telling him he has three feet left.
Before using hand signals, agree on what they mean. There are several widely accepted hand signals every RVer will recognize. Typically, your spotter will give you hand signals from the left rear of your trailer. Never move your trailer unless your spotter is in plain view.

Here are the five basic hand signals you should definitely know before you try to park:

**STOP:** Cross your forearms above your head to form an X.
**GO LEFT, GO RIGHT:** Hold your arm straight out to the side you want the driver to move. Bend your arm at the elbow with fingers pointing to the sky. Make a pumping motion to indicate the direction to go. Increase the intensity of the motion to signal a sharper turn.

![Diagram showing arm positions for GO LEFT, GO RIGHT](image)

**STRAIGHT BACK:** Place your arms straight out in front of you, bend them at the elbow, and turn palms inward. Use a back and forth motion to signal to the driver to move toward you slowly.

![Diagram showing arm positions for STRAIGHT BACK](image)
DISTANCE TO GO: Bend your arms at the elbow so your palms are facing each other. Arms can be shoulder-high or above your head for a clearer view. Close the distance between your palms to match the distance remaining.

GO SLOWER: Hold your arms straight in front of you with palms downward. Make a motion like you are patting a dog.
You’ll also want to be clear about verbal cues. When your spotter says to “turn right,” do they mean the vehicle or trailer?

FOCUS ON THE TASK AT HAND

Before you begin, turn the radio off and roll the windows down so you can see and hear during the backing maneuver. Remove as many distractions from the area as possible. If you’ve got kids in the tow vehicle, either tell them it’s quiet time until the maneuver is done or get them out of the vehicle altogether to observe from a safe space.

GET OUT AND LOOK

When you arrive at your site, do what truck drivers do: GOAL. Not the soccer kind, but the Get Out and Look kind in which you stop, walk around the site and vehicle, and familiarize yourself with the situation—especially before backing up.

GIVE YOURSELF AN EASY VISUAL REFERENCE

If you find it helps, you can place bright cones along the path to help with visibility and determining when and where to start making turns. It’s better to run over a rubber cone than your neighbor’s grill.
KNOW THE PIVOT POINT

The spotter needs to remember that the pivot point is the **center** of the axles on the trailer, and that this is the point where the trailer will turn when backing into the site. Not the back axle or the front axle, but the midpoint between the two.

NO, YOUR OTHER LEFT!

If the spotter wants the rear of the trailer to go to their right, they need to tell the driver to turn the wheel to the right (which makes the front of the tow vehicle go left). If the spotter wants the rear of the trailer to go to their left, they need to tell the driver to turn the wheel to the left (which makes the front of the tow vehicle go right). Confusing? Yep. It’s going to take a few times to get the hang of this.
EASY DOES IT

The two most common mistakes people make when parking a fifth wheel are:

1. Turning the steering wheel too much.

2. Holding it in the turn position for too long.

So, don't rush things. Go slow and give yourself time to make corrections.

THIS ISN'T A BEAUTY CONTEST

Not going the right way? Don’t be overly concerned about having to pull up and start the backing maneuver over again. The idea here is to end up with your trailer in the same condition it was in when you started the procedure. Which is to say, without any new dents or scrapes.

PATIENCE AND PRACTICE ARE THE KEYS

Be patient, communicate with each other, and practice, practice, practice.
7 parking tips and tricks.

TIP #1 — Check your hand position. Keep your hands on the lower part of the steering wheel. This way when you’re told to go left, you simply turn the wheel to the left. If your hands are on top and you’re told to go left, you’ll have to move your hands to the right. If putting your hands on the bottom of the steering wheel feels too unnatural to you, then you may want to avoid using the terms right and left altogether and instead substitute “passenger side” and “driver side.”

Tip #2 — Practice in a parking lot. Your local Sam’s Club or Costco is the perfect place to learn. Probably not during prime shopping time, but they’ve got big parking lots. Practice for 30 minutes a day for one week and we promise you’ll be ten times better at the end of the week than when you began.
Tip #3 — Remember the delay. With fifth wheels there's a bit of delay from when you turn the wheel to when the RV will actually start to turn. Expect this delay, and take it slow. If you go too fast, you will oversteer the RV and put it off the desired path.

Tip #4 — Look up! When surveying the campsite and looking for possible obstacles before parking the RV, be sure to also look up. Tree branches can do a number on your RV just as well as a tree’s trunk can.

Tip #5 — Watch your front. Keeping an eye on the back end and where it's going is all fine and dandy, but that’s also your spotter's job. Don’t forget about the front of your tow vehicle.

Tip #6 — Remember GOAL from earlier in the guide? It’s a tip professional truck drivers use, called GOAL, or Get Out and Look. Never keep backing up if you’re unsure. It’s not unusual for you to have to get out three or four times to put your own eyes on your trailer’s position. Especially if it’s a tight spot or a blind side back-in.

Tip #7 — Don’t rely only on your rearview camera. Rearview cameras are wonderful, but they don’t give you the full picture. There could be some type of overhead obstacle you don’t see, like tree branches, building extensions or overhangs, or an occasional sagging power or phone line. This is why your spotter is so important!
CONCLUSION

A word of advice before you go.

Keep in mind that every RV owner has had to learn how to park and back up at some point, or they wouldn’t be at the campground watching you. Don’t worry about what they think.

One fine day, you’ll whip that rig right into your spot like a pro, then watch a newbie make the same mistakes you once did. Please be kind when it happens and maybe offer a few words of encouragement. Or better yet, offer them this guide.
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