

TOWING A CAR USING AN A-FRAME

Please note the following is only intended for reference and to give a brief insight to the complexities around the law. It would always be a recommendation that outside of the UK that the A-frame is not used.

The legal landscape surrounding the towing of vehicles using traditional trailers is relatively clear and well-defined in both the United Kingdom and Europe. However, when it comes to towing a car behind a motorhome using an A-frame, the situation becomes more complex and less standardized.

There has been considerable debate regarding the applicability of Directive 71/320/EEC and UNECE Regulation 13, particularly in relation to type-approval of braking systems. It's worth noting that these discussions primarily pertain to newly manufactured vehicles. Motor vehicles and trailers fall under the purview of these technical regulations, but A-frame devices are not explicitly covered.

The Department for Transport (DfT) has stated that there is no harmonized EU legislation specifically addressing the type-approval of A-frames. From a legal standpoint, A-frames are not considered vehicles; instead, they are seen as connectors facilitating the linkage between two vehicles. Historically, the DfT emphasized that such devices, including A-frames, spectacle lifts, and dollies, were intended solely for the recovery of disabled vehicles.

However, the current DfT information suggests a different perspective: it views the A-frame and the towed car as constituting a single unit, classifying them under legislation as a trailer.

In the UK, it is generally understood that using A-frames to tow cars behind other vehicles is permissible, provided that the requisite braking and lighting requirements are met. Nonetheless, on the European continent, many countries still regard this practice primarily as a means of vehicle recovery. The DfT contends that the Vienna Convention of 1968 on Road Traffic cannot be invoked as a defence in disputes because A-frames were not anticipated at the time the Convention was drafted.

Consequently, it is strongly recommended by relevant authorities that travellers adhere to the specific laws and regulations of each country they traverse. In practical terms, this often necessitates placing the car on a trailer.

In some instances, individuals employing A-frames in continental Europe have encountered scrutiny from local law enforcement. In Spain, for example, police officers have insisted on the separation of the A-frame from the towed car, requiring a companion to operate the car independently if requested.

Addressing lighting concerns can be facilitated by connecting the towed vehicle's lighting system to the motorhome's electrics, ensuring that all road lights function correctly. Additionally, regulations mandate the display of two red triangular reflectors on trailers, which are occasionally overlooked, as well as the presentation of the towing vehicle's number plate.

Meeting braking requirements poses a more challenging task, as many A-frame systems employ a relatively simple overrun (or inertia) braking mechanism, akin to those used in caravans, to activate the car's brakes. The DfT notes that if the trailer braking system possesses power assistance, this assistance may be required while in motion to meet the necessary braking standards.

Concerns also arise regarding the ability to reverse a car on an A-frame when equipped with an inertia braking system. Unlike traditional braked trailers, which feature auto-reversing systems in the wheel hubs enabling brake disengagement during reverse motion, cars lack such mechanisms. According to the DfT's information sheet, since October 1, 1988, inertia braking systems have been required to allow trailer reversal without exerting sustained drag, and devices for this purpose must engage and disengage automatically. Achieving this on an A-frame using an inertia (overrun) device is deemed challenging.

Certain suppliers of inertia-braked A-frames assert that testing has verified their systems' compliance with the requisite braking force regulations, contending that cars on such A-frames can be reversed without the need for manual intervention. While this may require some skill, careful and gentle reversing can, in their view, be successfully accomplished.

In recent years, some A-frame suppliers have introduced designs that engage the car's braking systems, including power assistance, utilizing electrical power sourced from the towing motorhome. These electrical systems are said to deliver the necessary braking efficiency and enable trouble-free reversing, as the car's braking operation depends on the motorhome's brakes.

To circumvent the technical challenges associated with braking requirements, some campers have proposed that using a lightweight micro car with a gross vehicle weight (GVW) not exceeding 750kg can exempt them from the necessity of a braking system. This argument hinges on the notion that a unit with a GVW (including A-frame) below 750kg can be categorized as an unbraked trailer. However, if a braking system is installed, all brakes must function correctly, even on micro cars.

It is important to note that while the DfT has articulated its interpretation of the regulations, it has stated that definitive legal interpretation rests with the courts. To the best of our knowledge, there have been no reported legal cases in the UK related to towing a car with a braked A-frame. Given the absence of mandatory testing protocols, individual manufacturers are responsible for ensuring their products comply with statutory requirements. Therefore, if you decide to purchase an A-frame, it is prudent to seek written assurance from your supplier regarding compliance with DfT regulations.

If you choose the A-frame method, assess whether your car is suitable for towing in this manner, as certain vehicles, especially automatic transmissions, may risk transmission damage during towing. Additionally, inform both your car and

motorhome insurance providers of your towing arrangements, particularly if you plan to use them outside the UK. Lastly, remember that reversing with a small, towed trailer can be challenging, especially when it is not visible from the driver's seat. The use of a rear-view camera can be a valuable aid, and such cameras are readily available as aftermarket accessories.