

Choosing a Safe Horse Trailer

Choosing a horse trailer is one of the most important decisions a horse owner can make. Because it's very easy to be overwhelmed by fancy options and shiny construction materials, it is extremely important to keep in mind that the number one priority when shopping for a trailer is safety. Buying a safe trailer will go along way toward ensuring that you arrive at your destination with a healthy, happy horse. And, as we all know, healthy, happy horses perform the best.

When shopping for a trailer, you'll want to look for one that has ample room for your horse(s), good lighting, adequate ventilation, and a safe design. An average sized horse (15.1h – 16.3h) needs about 10 feet of usable length to be comfortable. A horse needs to be able to spread his legs for steadiness. He also needs to be able to move his neck and head freely to maintain balance.

A trailer with a light colored interior will be less claustrophobic for your horse. Walking into small-enclosed spaces goes against a horse's natural instincts. A lighter interior will make the trailer appear more open and thus more inviting to your horse. In the same vein, lots of windows or slats will decrease your horse's trailer wariness.

Numerous windows and slats will also help with ventilation. Hay dust and noxious gasses from manure and urine compromise a horse's respiratory system and predispose him to diseases such as shipping fever. Windows, slats, roof vents and spaces between floor boards will remove contaminated air from the trailer and keep it cooler. A light colored exterior, especially the roof, will also help keep the temperature down inside the trailer.

When examining the trailer for safety, the first thing you'll want to do is look for the National Association of Trailer Manufacturers (NATM) sticker. This sticker indicates that the trailer has been manufactured in compliance with all federal safety regulations. Next, examine the trailer's exterior for signs of wear and faulty construction. Then, move on to the interior and make sure that there is nothing sticking out to harm the horse in anyway. Tie rings and latches should fold flat against the walls. Corners should be rounded and interior padding should be ample.

You'll also want to make sure that, in the event of an emergency, your horse(s) won't be trapped in the trailer. It should be possible to reach every horse individually in the event of an emergency. All center posts, butt and chest bars, and dividers should quick release. However, they should be strong enough to hold together until you can make the decision to release them. The one exception to this rule is the dividers; they should come up and out if a horse gets caught under them.

Trailer mats should be heavy enough to stay down even when a horse paws. They should also provide a bit of shock absorption and tread so that the horse doesn't slip.

If you are considering a trailer with a ramp, be sure that the ramp is sturdy, low to the ground, and not slippery. Trailer doors should be designed to stay open until you decide to close them. Being hit with a door, in addition to potentially causing an injury, will discourage a horse from loading.

Finally, the trailer must be in good mechanical repair. All brakes and lights should be in perfect working order and the breakaway brake battery should be charged. Safety chains are a must for both tag-along and gooseneck trailers. Tires should be inflated to the recommended capacity and the spare should be the proper size and easy to get to. Last, but certainly not least, make sure you have a properly rated vehicle to tow the trailer and that you have a compatible hitch. Tag-along trailers should only be hitched to frame mounted Class III or Class IV hitches.

– SARAH GEE



