

The Open Road: Building an App to Lighten the Load



Freedom to explore. That's what Australian locksmith Barrie Fox wanted when he bought a caravan (recreational vehicle) in 2017. His wife had grown up caravanning all over the country, and the couple thought traveling would be a great way to spend some quality time together.

But Fox soon found there was a learning curve. If you want to legally caravan in Australia, you have to closely keep track of your weight. And not just the weight of the caravan itself but everything you load in for a trip: food, beverages, and clothing.

"I got lost in all their acronyms—ATM, GCM, all these three-letter acronyms—and their weights, and all articles on Google varied so much; it was just a minefield," he says.

If you get into an accident and your insurance company discovers that your caravan was overweight, they may not pay out your claim, and you're liable for any and all associated costs.



Fox got tired of manually writing everything down and decided there had to be a better way.

"So I thought, you know what? I'll learn it all, and I'll put it on an app for myself, so it makes it easy," he says. "And some people saw what I did, and they said, 'You should put that on the app store.' And with that, I started Caravan Mate, and things just sort of grew from there. That's how it all started."

BUILDING CARAVAN MATE

Fox found building the Caravan Mate app wasn't too different from building a lock. "It's just logic, and I don't know if you know any locksmiths, but locksmiths are very logical people. I just found it quite simple putting the jigsaw puzzle together," he says. "It was quite easy. Great program, a credit to [Thunkable]."

Fox's app simplifies the process of towing your caravan legally. You log the weight of your caravan and add all the items you're packing. "We have checklists in there. 'Don't forget to take this.' And then at the end of it, there's a summary page that says, 'Well, you're overweight.' Or it goes red. And it says, 'You're overweight, and you're not traveling illegally.'"

FROM LOCKSMITH TO SMALL BUSINESS OWNER

Fox found his locksmith skills came in handy for other things, not just app building. "I've made an aftermarket lock because the locks on the front boot of the caravan fall apart in no time. I've made a quality lock," he says. "And you can't buy a certain plug for the sink. I 3D print them."

Though he still works as a locksmith, Fox now sells multiple caravan-related products. "Had I not bought a caravan, I wouldn't have started writing apps. Had I not gotten onto a good program like Thunkable—that made it quite simple—I wouldn't have a business, and I wouldn't be selling products. As I say, the app led to me starting a business, and then that business led to me making other products. It's funny how things evolve."



CARAVAN MATE

Built by Barrie Fox, the Caravan Mate app is designed to help you safely and legally tow your caravan. Towing legally reduces the risk of the caravan swaying and minimizes the risk of an accident. The custom calculator allows you to add a variety of items and alerts you if your caravan is overweight.