

wheel deals for a weekender

Holiday homes are a luxury few of us can afford. But **Helen Hawkes** discovers there is a cheaper alternative

Beyond the Great Australian Dream of owning your own suburban block is the greater Australian dream of owning a weekender by the beach.

But just as the property boom has jeopardised the aspirations of many to own their own home, the property boom in coastal areas has put the dream of a holiday house right out of reach.

One solution is to jettison the idea of a house and opt for **buying a caravan and renting a site in a caravan park**.

While a beachfront house will not leave you with much change from a couple of million dollars, renting a site in a caravan park by the ocean will leave you with enough money to buy the van.

Alternatively, you could seek out an on-site caravan and annexe which the owner wants to sell.

Chief executive officer of the Caravan and Camping Industry Association of NSW, Barry Baillie, says **caravans and caravan parks are the fastest growing tourist sector in Australia**.

the van plan

"Holiday vans, or weekenders, as they're called, are a very cheap way to have a beachside holiday," Baillie says.

Wendy and Harvey Ward, of Dundas, in NSW, have long hankered for a more relaxed, beachside existence away from their stressful city lives. Wendy, 45, is a public relations manager and Harvey, 50, a salesman.

Like many Sydneysiders, a

large mortgage left them with very little cash with which to pay off a holiday house.

"We'd talked about the need to get away somewhere regularly, but didn't see a way that we could afford it," Wendy says.

"Fortunately, our neighbours heard of a caravan for sale in the park at Toowoona Bay, on the Central Coast, where they've had a van for 12 years, and we leapt at the chance.

"It's little more than an hour's drive from our home and we can take our adored maltese terrier,

'We're up there just about every weekend'

Wally, as the park is pet-friendly.

"Now we're up there just about every weekend and it's heaven - except for the mobile phone."

Expect to pay between \$15,000 and \$25,000 for a caravan and annexe on-site. If you want to buy a really swish caravan and park it on site, you could spend twice that.

Baillie says site rentals cost between \$2000 and \$4000 per annum, which can be paid in advance or periodically.

The number of nights you can stay each year varies between 100 and 150. Whether you have to pay extra fees for these allocated nights, or whether they are included in the site fee, varies from park to park.

read the fine print

The cost of additional adults or children who stay in your caravan also varies from park to park but are usually minimal. Individual park policies also exist on whether your friends can use your van.

"Make sure you read your individual agreement before





picking a piece of paradise

- Read the agreement and, preferably, get legal advice before you sign
- Be absolutely certain what is and what isn't included in the agreement. For example, will the children be allowed to stay without you having to pay extra park fees?
- Have a good look at the facilities. **How many showers and toilets are there, what's the hot water flow like and how clean is the amenities block? Are there laundry facilities, a children's playground or even a swimming pool or tennis courts? How often is the garbage removed?**

you sign it," Baillie advises.

Baillie also warns against spending a large amount of money on a caravan that is so old it is immobile, (although, by law, it's not supposed to be) because you may not see any return for your money if the park owner decides to withdraw rental of the site.

"When you rent a site in a caravan park you have no land tenure," he says.

"What you have is an occu-

- Talk to the park owner about their plans for the park. How likely is it that the site you are renting for your caravan will still be available in five years?
- Check out the neighbours - maybe even drop in for a cup of tea. What is their experience of the park?
- Find out how unruly or nuisance tenants are dealt with
- If you are going to buy a caravan to put near the ocean, think about getting a galvanised exterior that won't be corroded by the sea air
- Don't over-capitalise. Treat your cheap holiday home as just that

pancy agreement or contract.

"And, mostly, the terms of that contract under The Holiday Parks (Long-term Casual Occupation) Act 2002 is 12 months, to be extended on agreement of both parties."

While, in all likelihood, your lease will be renewed, it is at the park owners' discretion.

"If they don't want to rent that site any more, you'll have to move your caravan."

Clearly, you will not be able to

move a fixed annexe so you will have to consider this a loss.

If the park owners decide to increase the site fee, or to vary the terms of the agreement for the following year, it is also their prerogative, subject to giving notice.

Caravan park regulations vary not only from park to park, but also from state to state.

a family affair

The Wards' neighbours. Therese and Reg Blunt, have watched their 13-year-old son, Mitchell, grow up at Toowoomb Bay.

"I took him there when he had his tonsils out so he could sit on the beach," Therese, 45, says.

"I have gone there when I have been so stressed out from our staircase building business that I needed to pack up for a couple of days.

"And my brother and his family, as well as my mum and dad, who originally bought the van and put it on site for the family to use, still go there too."

Therese says the van cost about \$11,000 and her husband Reg, 49, built the annexe at a cost of \$7000.

"We haven't spent a cent on it until now," she says. "We're renovating it so that instead of having triple bunks... it has rooms that are more suitable for adults.

"If we ever decide to get rid of it, we are allowed to sell it on-site - van and annexe together.

"But I don't know if we ever will. People hold on to them for years and, for ourselves, it has been a joy and a godsend."

Eastern suburbs real estate agent Joel Bloom advises prospective caravan owners to weigh up the cost and how much you will use the site before taking the plunge.

"In the long term, will it be cheaper to do this than to rent holiday accommodation in the area, for example?" he asks.

"What is the likely resale value? Will you see your money back? Even though it's a mobile piece of real estate, it's also important to consider the usual things like location, facilities and neighbours, and if you're allowed to sell the van on-site."