

SHIP SAFE

Shipping a classic/exotic vehicle, motorcycle, vintage automobile, collector car, race car, antique or collectible vehicle? There are several things to check into before you load your precious cargo. by Richard Newton

Most parents have anxieties watching their children go off to summer camp. We're sure you have very similar feelings about sending your car down the road in some stranger's truck. Will they take good care of it? What happens if there's an accident? I'm talking about your cars here. Not your children. Oh right, your cars are almost like your children if you're a collector or a gearhead.

Before you put your car into that big long box you need to do a lot of homework. The good thing is that every one of these companies leaves a paper trail—a paper trail required by the federal government. This means that you can find out much information about these shippers long before you put your car in their hauler

Does the Shipper Actually Own a Truck?

If you're selecting a transport company online you might only be dealing with a broker. If you use Google most of the auto shippers that come up on the screen will be a broker. That means they'll call around and find out who has a truck in your area and who needs the work. Bob Sellers at Reliable Transport says your very first question should be, "Do you actually own the trucks?"

When you begin e-mailing and calling the companies ask them for a USDOT or Federal Motor Carrier number. Brokers don't need a USDOT number. Transport companies who actually own trucks are required to have one. That's a good thing because once you have a USDOT number that company's safety record can be accessed online.

Will the Company Sell the Shipment?

One of the little industry secrets is that some companies will take the contract you sign and then sell it to another contractor. Tom Meunier at Exotic Car Transport says this means that the company you thought you were working with no longer has any responsibility for your car. Even more important is that the insurance policy you thought you had on the car is no longer in effect. The person who pulls up outside of your garage may or may not have insurance. You just don't know. Selling shipments is far more common than any of us realize. That means you always have to ask, "Will this shipment be sold?"

Are They Insured?

You should request written proof of a transporter's coverage. This is not too much to ask, and a reputable company won't hesitate. Most household policies won't cover your car while it's in transit so check with your specific insurance company beforehand.

When it comes to the company that is hauling your car make sure that they have cargo insurance and not just liability insurance. If there's an accident you want your car covered by cargo insurance. Liability insurance won't help you repair your car. You also need to find out if there is a deductible. If they have a \$20,000 deductible that means you're going to have to cover the first \$20,000 worth of damage to your car.

If a company is reluctant to show you their insurance policy then you probably want to find another company. Several of the big companies post their insurance policies online for customer viewing. Exotic Car Transport goes even further and says that you need to find out who the agent is that the shipper uses and then get a copy of the insurance directly from the

insurance agent. There shouldn't be anything to hide here. If you think they're hiding something, find another company.

Is the Trailer Really Enclosed?

Some shipping companies use canvas-sided trucks and they call them enclosed.

You might not consider these to be enclosed. Make sure you specifically ask if the trailers they use have hard metal

sides. Hard-sided trailers offer a lot more security. Keep in mind however, that even enclosed trailers are often left unlocked for inspections.

Many OEM manufacturers use the canvas-sided trailers so they're obviously not concerned about damage. You might not feel the same about your car as Porsche of North America feels about their cars. Actually you probably don't have the same insurance policy as Porsche. You definitely don't have as many cars as Porsche does. I won't even get into how emotionally attached you might be to your car—as compared to PCNA.

Do You Have a Deadline?

A deadline will impact your cost. If you're flexible you can usually negotiate for a lower rate. If you're shipping your car to the Pebble Beach Concours then you have a very rigid deadline. Expect to pay extra to meet that deadline.

Do You Want Your Car Top-Loaded?

The cars on the top level of a multi-car transporter run far less risk of damage from fluid drips. If you want your car top-loaded make sure you specify this. This is usually not negotiable once the truck is in front of your shop or home. It's also going to cost you extra so make sure that extra charge is clear as well.

How Do They Tie the Car Down?

This may be one of the most discussed topics when car people talk about shipping. Are they going to tie your car down by the chassis or by the tires? If the tie downs are attached to the frame of your car what does that do to the frame? Keep in mind that the driver of the truck ties more cars down in one week than you might do in your whole lifetime. The drivers actually are experts in this regard.

If the hauler ties down on the tires that means the chassis will move up and down as the car is being transported. This is an endless debate on any number of forums. The reality of it is that you're going to use the tie down system that the company you contracted with has on the truck. That's why it's important to ask a lot of questions before you sign the contract. You don't want to have a discussion about tie downs while the driver is trying to get your car on the trailer.

Photograph the Vehicle

After thoroughly inspecting your vehicle and ensuring it is in good condition, photograph it—from all angles. Each photograph should be dated. Make sure you have some of the undercarriage and interior as well.

Make sure you have a way of accessing these photos at the other end of the journey. If the truck arrives at the destination and you notice some damage you want to be certain that you can display the photos then and there. It doesn't do much good to say you'll look at the photos when you get back home.

Using the CSA Website

CSA is the Compliance, Safety and Accountability program at the Department of Transportation. It combines current and historical safety performance information to measure the relative safety

of commercial motor carriers. This information includes federal and state data on crashes, roadside inspections, on-site compliance, review results and the carrier's enforcement history. Log on to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration website (<http://ai.fmcsa.dot.gov/sms/>) and look for SMS monthly results. The best way to do a search is to use the USDOT number. If you don't have that number you should be able to get from the carrier.

An example might be Exotic Car Transport Company. Using their USDOT number I can discover that they have 22 tractors that were driven just over 1,900,000 miles last year. They also employ 22 licensed drivers

If you scroll down the page you'll find out about any inspections that might have taken place in the last 24 months. There is also a section that details any crashes they might have been involved in over the past 24 months. This lists the number of roadside inspections conducted within the past two years on the company's trucks and drivers. They are conducted at random, typically by the state highway patrol, and involve vehicle, driver and Hazmat inspections. Driver inspections involve a review of the driver's logbook to ensure it is current and the driver is in compliance with DOT hours of operation regulations. Vehicle inspections focus on truck maintenance and safety. Hazmat inspections are conducted only if the trucking company hauls hazardous materials. That's why most companies won't let you put that drum of race fuel in their truck.

You can compare the individual trucking company's out of service percentages with the national averages. Be wary of any company that has higher percentages than the national average. Remember, when it comes to these scores, the higher the number, the worse the score. Scores higher than 75 are considered deficient. For instance, a carrier with a Driver Fitness score of 88 indicates that approximately 88% of the carriers had better driver performance than that carrier. Only 12% of the licensed carriers had a worse safety performance.

Let's look at three different companies here and see how they compare. This is exactly the same thing you should do before you decide on a transport company. Remember that these numbers are percentile ratings (see chart).

There are some rather dramatic differences between these three companies. Let's look here and see what's considered "unsafe driving." It includes things such as failing to use a seat belt, using a radar detector as well as improper lane changes and speeding. You can scroll down on this site and discover that Company C was cited for speeding August 3, 2010 in the state of Tennessee. It also gives you the license plate number of both the tractor and the trailer.

"Driver Fatigue" is also interesting. Drivers are usually cited for driving too long at one time or filing false reports. One driver in particular got caught in Georgia at an inspection station in May of 2012 and they found exhaust gases leaking into the cab.

The "Vehicle Maintenance" section is informative since it can include everything from a faulty mud flap to a missing steering component. My favorite here is the truck that got stopped in California and was found to be missing a leaf spring. At the same time they discovered there was a brake system failure as well. Uh, oh.

Keep in mind that none of the statistics are adjusted for mileage. A company that logs five million miles a year on their fleet will just naturally have more citations than a company that accumulates less than a million miles a year. Most of the larger companies are putting close to two million miles a year on their trucks. That gives you a good base of information. Just be careful when you are making comparisons.

Another problem with all of this data is that no matter how well a company performs, the system will always brand 50% of the carriers as deficient. That's just the nature of statistics. When you use a percentile rating system half of the numbers will be below average. Conversely, do I want to put my vintage vehicle in a truck that is in the bottom half of the rating system?

The real key here is that a wealth of important information is available about all of these companies. Make sure you use this information. If you can't get the relevant facts about a transport company, find a different one. This is just like any business. There's a group of very

reputable firms at the top of the pyramid. There are also a bunch of questionable firms that build their business on rates alone. Compliance to federal regulations costs money. Making sure that your car is insured while it is in their truck costs money. You should expect to pay for all of this.

Ask for Recommendations

The other thing you can do for peace of mind is to ask people at the show, or in the paddock, about their experiences with different haulers. Ask who they've used in the past and what was their experience. It's a variation on the old Packard slogan, "Ask the man who owns one." You'll still have anxieties when you see the truck go down the road but at least you'll know you've done everything possible to ensure that your vehicle comes back from summer camp in the same condition as when you sent it away.

SOURCES

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