

## CAR RACK CARRYING SYSTEMS

# THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

If you've got an active lifestyle but don't want to drive a van, help is at hand. Andy Enright reports...



I'm an outdoorsy gearhead. I don't mind admitting it. I ski, snowboard, ride a mountain bike, climb, fish and surf. The problem is, as much as I enjoy these rather equipment-heavy sports, I can't bring myself to buy the sort of vehicle these sports tend to demand. The prospect of a mini-MPV or a four-wheel drive is just depressing. Far more alluring is a car with a bit of zip that's not going to be mistaken for a kebab van. I'm sure you can see the problem.

Skiing is a particular issue. It's possible for me to load skis inside a car but then you are forced to give up a portion of the rear seat room. Most ski-drive holidays are based upon four people sharing an apartment and four sharing a car, so the only workable solution is a roofbox. Get a decently sized one and it'll easily swallow four pairs of skis and boots too. Things to look for include meaty struts, the option of dual side opening and the internal dimensions. A really high-end box, like the Thule Vision 850, will carry up to eight pairs of skis! Most modern boxes are a good deal more aerodynamic than you'd credit and are so quiet when mounted that it's easy to forget they're even there. Some can even be specified in different colours. The alternative for shorter jaunts is a simpler lockable ski carrier.

Thule has become the market leader in these sorts of products and offer a dizzying range of choices. Working hand in hand with many of the world's auto manufacturers they offer innovative solutions that make good common sense. Imagine you have, as I do, a ski box, a wider large capacity roofbox, a fishing rod carrier and a couple of bike carriers. All these items need to be locked to prevent the light fingered making off with your prized equipment and this will usually mean a whole fistful of rather similar looking keys. Thule's One Key System offers commonality between all of the lock barrels with just one key taking care of the whole lot. Simple.

I've been through a number of bike carriers in my time with one deciding it would be a great idea to dump a £2,000 Heckler mountain bike into the outside lane of the M40. Therefore quality has become a key issue when choosing a bike carrier. All are not alike. First you'll need to choose whether you plan to mount them on the roof or the rear. I prefer a roof mount as it means your rear view isn't obscured but the downside is that your bike is sitting bang in the airflow and tends to whistle a bit. My downhill mountain bike is also just too heavy to be humping up onto the roof of a car. Therefore I've got a pair of bike carriers that together do the business.

The Thule Pro Ride 591 gets a lot of use by my wife who needs a roof mounted system to transport her road bike when she goes time trialing. A self adjusting frame holder and aluminium wheel trays guarantee that the bike's going nowhere and you don't even need to remove the front wheel to get going. For a combination of speed and security it's tough to beat. Mount a bike carrier on the back of your car and you have a few more issues to deal with. Firstly, is the rear number plate visible? The police take a very dim view of cars sailing through GATSO cameras with resultant pictures of bicycles obscuring the plate. Drive any distance with your plate covered and you'll be a prime target for a roadside lecture. You'll also need to check the rack won't foul your tow bar when loaded.

It's also no good buying a rack that makes it impossible to access the rear tailgate. The higher the rack – and consequently the bikes – are mounted, the less effort is involved opening the tailgate. It's all down to leverage. The last issue to remember is that some bike carriers (especially if your car is narrow) will obscure the tail lights. This is also illegal and unless you strap a lightboard to your bikes, is very dangerous with other road users unable to see your brake lights and so on. When both bikes are travelling any distance, I opt for the Thule Clip On High rack. It sits the bikes up at a good height so that the rear plate is visible and your machinery isn't getting shotblasted with road grime from the rear tyres.

Of course, no roof mounted carrier works without the right combination of bars and the mounting kit to attach them. Many of today's estate cars are already fitted with aerodynamic rails onto which you can clip fitting kits and bars, the other two key systems being cars with or without rain gutters. Most

manufacturers have a web site upon which you can enter your vehicle's make and model to ascertain which fitting kit you'll need. and from there better vendors will allow you to choose square or aero bars. Once you've made your choice, you can attach all sorts of things to the roof of your car. Kayak carriers, fishing rod holders, surfboard carriers, canoe holders, traditional carrier baskets and stubby roofboxes that boost your carrying capacity. If, like me, you have an active lifestyle but can't give up your sports car, take a look at the latest carrying systems and rest easy.