

As a manufacturer of roof racks and roof tents, we deal with roof load specifications on a daily basis as part of the job. When talking to many of our customers, though, we regularly notice that there is a lot of disinformation and confusion out there when it comes to roof loads. But since ignorance about legal and practical implications can cause serious problems from fines to roof damage to accidents even, we thought it prudent to provide some basic information on the topic.

The most important specification you need to know before you fix anything to your roof is your vehicle's maximum roof load. This can usually be found in your drivers' manual and is naturally part of the car's overall maximum weight. The weight is usually given in kg and is meant to ensure that even if the maximum roof load is reached, the vehicle can still be driven safely and that the physical forces of the additional weight can always be compensated by the cars structural engineering, the steering, brake system, drive assistance technologies as well as the chassis. Since this is a system in motion, the specification is often referred to as the dynamic roof load.

For roof tent campers and roof rack users, this means first and foremost that the limit mustn't be exceeded when driving. Otherwise you may risk losing both the manufacturer's warranty as well as insurance coverage in case of damage or accident – and that applies not only on public roads. In some countries, you might also be subject to fines when stopped. Even if roof loads can sometimes be a bit of a grey area in legal terms and enforcement, in Germany for example you can always be held liable under §22 StVO which regulates load security and transport safety.

Therefore: NEVER drive with excess roof loads on public roads and don't forget that the racks' and roof tents' own weight already counts towards the maximum roof load. So, if your roof rack weighs 15 kg already and your maximum roof load is 75 kg, you are left with an effective load of 60 kg that can be added. Moreover, many manufacturers of generic or non-specific roof racks often specify a maximum load for the racks that exceeds the specification for the car itself. In case of damage or accident, that is irrelevant, though, because the causal chain when establishing liability invariably starts with the maximum roof load of the vehicle.

So where does that leave roof tent campers, when the “dynamic roof load” is the only specified value and the weight for a tent with two sleepers obviously exceeds the weight by far, unless you’re driving big 4x4 like Defenders or G-Wagons? Does that mean you can fit a roof tent but you’re legally prohibited from sleeping in it? Of course not, because when you’re sleeping in your roof tent, your car is stationary and in a safe location to do so.

And that’s why you will often hear the term “static” roof load in roof tent contexts. In most cases, this is at best an unofficial specification, because car manufacturers most likely don’t want to get into liability issues for niche activities like roof tent camping. But that’s where good old virtues like common sense and personal responsibility come in. Naturally, a stationary, “static” car with a secure, certified rack or tent is structurally capable of taking a multiple of the specified weight in the manual.

If you are driving a compact car or your vehicle features a sunroof or similar and you are generally insecure whether you can fit a roof tent, you can always consult the professionals or the community on the internet about your specific combination of car and tent.

So, don’t get confused by the disinformation out there and don’t let it spoil your fun. The rule of thumb is very simple: Know your car’s maximum roof load and NEVER exceed it while driving. When you’re camping in a secure position and safe location, ask the roof tent community for advice or use your own brain.