MIGRATION PLAYBOOK · WEBSITES AND ECOMMERCE

How to move from shared hosting to a VPS

If the VPS runs cPanel and WHM, restore a full cPanel backup and most of the work is done. On a plain Linux VPS you rebuild the web server, copy files and databases yourself, add TLS with Certbot and decide where email will live. Test with a hosts file, then switch DNS.

Updated 4 Nov 2026 4 phases 7 detailed steps 5 official sources

START HERE

How do you move from shared hosting to a VPS?

SHORT ANSWER

This moves your websites from a shared hosting plan to a virtual private server (VPS) that is yours alone. You set up the new server, copy each site's files and database across, and check everything works using a test address on your own computer.

- **Recommended route:** VPS with cPanel and WHM: restore full backups. Plain VPS: rebuild and copy
- **Order:** Decide where email goes first, build and secure the server, copy sites, test, then switch DNS.
- **4 phases:** Inventory and decide, Build the server, Copy and test and Switch.
- **You're done when:** Every site loads from the VPS over HTTPS.

Then you point your domain at the new server. Because the VPS is yours to look after, you also set up security updates, certificates, backups and decide what happens to email.

RECOMMENDED ROUTE

VPS with cPanel and WHM: restore full backups. Plain VPS: rebuild and copy

A cPanel restore brings files, databases, email accounts and settings in one archive; a plain VPS gives full control at the cost of setup.

▼ Other options and when to use them

- **Managed VPS where the provider migrates for you**
  : You want the server looked after and do not have Linux skills in-house.
- **Managed WordPress or cloud hosting instead of a VPS**
  : You only run WordPress and do not need root access.

TOOLS FOR THIS PLAN

Are you ready?
22-question readiness check

Plan your dates
Dated countdown you can add to your calendar

Check your DNS
MX, SPF, DKIM and DMARC lookup

New to the jargon?
Plain-English migration glossary

ORDER TO MIGRATE IN, AND WHY

Decide where email goes first, build and secure the server, copy sites, test, then switch DNS.

1. **Inventory: sites, databases, email, cron jobs and DNS**
   Shared hosts bundle services that a VPS does not provide by default.
2. **Email decision**
   Running mail on a VPS takes ongoing work; moving it to a hosted service changes MX records.
3. **Server build and hardening**
   Updates, firewall and SSH keys before anything goes live.
4. **Copy sites and databases**
   Restore a cPanel backup, or copy files and import databases.
5. **Test with a hosts file**
   See the site on the new server before DNS changes.
6. **Lower TTL, switch DNS, issue certificates**
   Short TTL makes the switch quick to apply and to undo.

SETTINGS CHECKLIST: DECIDE THESE BEFORE YOU COPY

Built-in and third-party tools treat these differently. Tick each one off once you have decided.

Download this checklist (Excel)

- [ ] **Control panel or not**
  cPanel and WHM on the VPS, or a plain server.

  ▼ How each tool handles it

  Built-in method cPanel and WHM: Transfer or Restore a cPanel Account accepts cpmove archives from /home and other listed folders, or a direct transfer from a remote cPanel account. It needs free disk space of at least double the archive size, and does not transfer two-factor settings.

  Tip: If you have root on both servers, cPanel recommends the Transfer Tool instead.

  cPanel Docs: Transfer or Restore a cPanel Account

- [ ] **WordPress and PHP sites on a plain VPS**
  How files and databases are copied.

  ▼ How each tool handles it

  Built-in method WordPress: copy files and database; if the database name or user changes, edit wp-config.php. To test before switching, change siteurl and home in wp_options temporarily.

  Tip: Testing with a hosts file avoids editing siteurl at all.

  WordPress Developer Resources: Migrating WordPress

- [ ] **TLS certificates**
  How certificates are issued and renewed.

  ▼ How each tool handles it

  Built-in method Certbot: the snap package is recommended and has automated renewal preconfigured. It needs port 80 open and root access.

  Tip: Issue certificates after DNS points at the VPS, or use a DNS challenge to issue them first.

  Certbot documentation: Get Certbot

- [ ] **Security updates**
  Who patches the server and when it reboots.

  ▼ How each tool handles it

Built-in method	Ubuntu Server: unattended-upgrades is installed by default and applies security updates; automatic reboot is off by default.

Tip: Schedule a monthly reboot window for kernel updates.

Ubuntu Server docs: Automatic updates

THE PLAN, PHASE BY PHASE

1 Inventory and decide Week 1

List sites, databases, email accounts, cron jobs and DNS records.

Decide control panel or plain server.

Decide where email will live.

Watch out: Shared hosts often bundle email.

WAYS AROUND IT

- Move email to a hosted email service, or set up mail on the VPS.

Check your DNS records before and after the change

Show the detailed steps (2) →

2 Build the server Week 1

Install the OS and confirm automatic security updates.

Set up SSH keys, a firewall and backups.

Install the web server, PHP and database, or cPanel and WHM.

> **Watch out:** Ubuntu does not reboot automatically after updates.
>
> **WAYS AROUND IT**
>
> - Plan regular reboots.

Show the detailed steps (2) →

3 Copy and test Week 2

Restore cPanel backups, or copy

files and import databases.

Recreate cron jobs.

Test each site with a hosts file.

> **Watch out:** cPanel restores need double the archive size free.
>
> **WAYS AROUND IT**
>
> - Size the disk before restoring.

Show the detailed steps (3) →

4 Switch Cutover day

Lower DNS TTL a day before.

Copy the latest database changes, then switch A records.

Issue certificates

and
check
HTTPS.

> **Watch out:** Certbot HTTP validation needs DNS pointing at the VPS.
>
> **WAYS AROUND IT**
>
> - Issue right after the DNS switch, or use a DNS challenge.

Turn this phase into dated tasks with the cutover planner

Show the detailed steps (2) →

You are finished when

- Every site loads from the VPS over HTTPS.
- Email works where you decided it would live.
- Updates, backups and certificate renewal are running.
- The shared hosting plan is cancelled after a fallback period.

CLICK BY CLICK

What does each step involve?

Open a part when you reach it in the plan. Each step says where to go, what to do and what you should see.

About this migration

What it covers, limits at a glance –

A VPS gives you your own server resources and root access, but it also hands you jobs the shared host did for you: patching, TLS renewal, backups, firewalls and often email. The migration itself depends on whether the VPS has a control panel. With cPanel and WHM you restore an account backup. Without one, you rebuild the stack and copy each site across.
This playbook covers both paths. Moving between two cPanel hosts? See cPanel hosting migration. Just moving WordPress? See WordPress migration.

VPS WITH CPANEL AND WHM
Restore the cpmove full backup, or use the

PLAIN LINUX VPS
Copy files and databases, set up web

TLS CERTIFICATES
Certbot, with automatic renewal in the snap package

Transfer Tool

server, PHP and TLS yourself

EMAIL
Decide: run it on the VPS or move it to a hosted email service

SECURITY UPDATES
Ubuntu installs security updates automatically by default

CUTOVER
Lower DNS TTL, test with a hosts file, then switch

1 What do you need before you move from shared hosting to a VPS?

Need	Details	Where to get it
Full backup from the shared host	cPanel full backup, or files and database exports.	Shared host control panel
VPS with root access	Enough disk for sites, databases and backups.	Your VPS provider
DNS access	To lower TTL and change records.	Your DNS host
Inventory	Sites, databases, email, cron jobs and DNS records.	The DNS change worksheet

2 Build and secure the VPS

2 steps

1 Check automatic security updates

Where: VPS shell (Ubuntu)

Confirm unattended-upgrades is installed and running, then set up SSH keys and a firewall.

```
systemctl status unattended-upgrades
```

✓ **You should see:** The service shows active.

2

Install Certbot

Where: VPS shell

Install Certbot with snap, as recommended.

```
sudo snap install --classic certbot
```

✓ **You should see:** certbot --version prints a version.

3 Copy sites and databases

3 steps

1

With cPanel and WHM

Where: WHM > Transfers > Transfer or Restore a cPanel Account

Upload the cpmove file, or put it in /home and restore it, or use Transfer from Remote cPanel Account.

✓ **You should see:** The account, its sites and databases appear in WHM.

2

On a plain VPS

Where: VPS shell

Copy site files, import each database, and update wp-config.php or the app's config with the new database details. See export and import a MySQL database.

✓ **You should see:** Sites load from the VPS when tested with a hosts file.

3

Test before DNS

Where: Your computer

Point the domain at the VPS in your hosts file and test every site. See test a site with a hosts file.

✓ **You should see:** Pages, logins and forms work.

4 Switch DNS and issue certificates

2 steps

1

Switch DNS

Where: Your DNS host

After lowering TTL, copy the latest database changes and change the A records to the VPS.

✓ **You should see:** The domain resolves to the VPS.

2

Issue certificates

Where: VPS shell

Run Certbot for your web server, then test renewal.

```
sudo certbot renew --dry-run
```

✓ **You should see:** The dry run succeeds.

WORTH KNOWING

What can go wrong, and how do you avoid it?

The detail behind the plan: options compared, and what experienced engineers check first. Tap any item.

Compare all the ways to do this

3 options –

VPS with cPanel and WHM

LOW EFFORT

Best for: Many sites and email accounts from a cPanel host

- \+ Restore whole accounts
- \+ Familiar panel
- – Panel licence
- – Still your server to maintain

Plain Linux VPS

HIGH EFFORT

Best for: A few sites and Linux skills in-house

- \+ Full control
- \+ Lean
- – Manual setup
- – Email is extra work

Managed VPS

LOW EFFORT

Best for: No in-house Linux skills

- \+ Provider patches and often migrates
- – Less control

OUR ADVICE

Choose cPanel and WHM on the VPS if you are moving many accounts from a cPanel host. Choose a plain VPS only if someone can look after it every month.

You now patch the server

REDUCES RISK –

Ubuntu applies security updates automatically by default but does not reboot automatically.

WHAT TO DO

Plan reboots and check updates monthly.

Ubuntu Server docs: Automatic updates

Restores skip two-factor settings

USER IMPACT

Transfer or Restore a cPanel Account does not transfer two-factor authentication settings.

WHAT TO DO

Ask users to set up two-factor again after the move.

cPanel Docs: Transfer or Restore a cPanel Account

Disk space for restores

COST LEVER

The server needs at least double the archive size free.

WHAT TO DO

Size the disk for the largest account plus growth.

cPanel Docs: Transfer or Restore a cPanel Account

Certificates need port 80

REDUCES RISK

Certbot requires port 80 open for HTTP validation.

WHAT TO DO

Allow port 80 in the firewall, even if you redirect to HTTPS.

Certbot documentation: Get Certbot

Use the Transfer Tool where you can

SAVES TIME

cPanel calls account restore a last resort when you have root on both servers.

WHAT TO DO

Use WHM Transfer Tool for server-to-server moves.

cPanel Docs: Transfer Tool

FINISH SAFELY

How do you check it worked, or roll back?

Full validation checklist

4 checks

Run these before you declare the migration complete. Record the results in the data validation report.

Check	How to check	What good looks like
Sites	Test each site over HTTPS after DNS switch.	All load.
Forms and email sending	Submit contact forms.	Messages arrive.
Cron jobs	Check logs after the first scheduled run.	Jobs ran.
Renewal	Run certbot renew --dry-run.	Succeeds.

Rollback plan

If it goes wrong

ROLL BACK IF

- Sites fail on the VPS after DNS switch
- Performance is worse than shared hosting

POINT OF NO RETURN

Keep the shared plan active until stable. Until it is cancelled, rollback is pointing DNS back.

1

Point DNS back

Where: DNS host

Restore the old A records.

✓ **You should see:** Sites load from shared hosting.

2

Copy back new data

Where: Both servers

Copy database changes made on the VPS back to the shared host.

✓ **You should see:** No orders or posts lost.

Agree the triggers and who decides before the go / no-go meeting. Use the rollback plan template.

Common problems and fixes

4 errors

`Restore fails with not enough space`

Cause: Less than double the archive size free.

Fix: Free space or grow the disk.

`Certbot challenge failed`

Cause: Port 80 blocked or DNS not yet pointing at the VPS.

Fix: Open port 80 and wait for DNS.

`Error establishing a database connection`

Cause: Wrong details in wp-config.php.

Fix: Update database name, user and password.

`Scheduled tasks stopped`

Cause: Cron jobs not recreated.

Fix: Recreate them on the VPS.

Search the full error library →

FAQ

Frequently asked questions

Do I need cPanel on the VPS?

No, but restoring cPanel backups is simplest if you have it.

What happens to email?

Decide before the move: run it on the VPS or move it to a hosted email service.

Will there be downtime?

Little, if you test with a hosts file and lower DNS TTL first.

How do certificates renew?

The Certbot snap package has automatic renewal preconfigured.

SOURCES

Official sources

5 official pages this guide is based on

Vendors change limits and features, so confirm details on the source before you rely on them. Last checked 4 Nov 2026.

- cPanel Docs: Transfer or Restore a cPanel Account
- cPanel Docs: Transfer Tool
- WordPress Developer Resources: Migrating WordPress
- Certbot documentation: Get Certbot
- Ubuntu Server docs: Automatic updates