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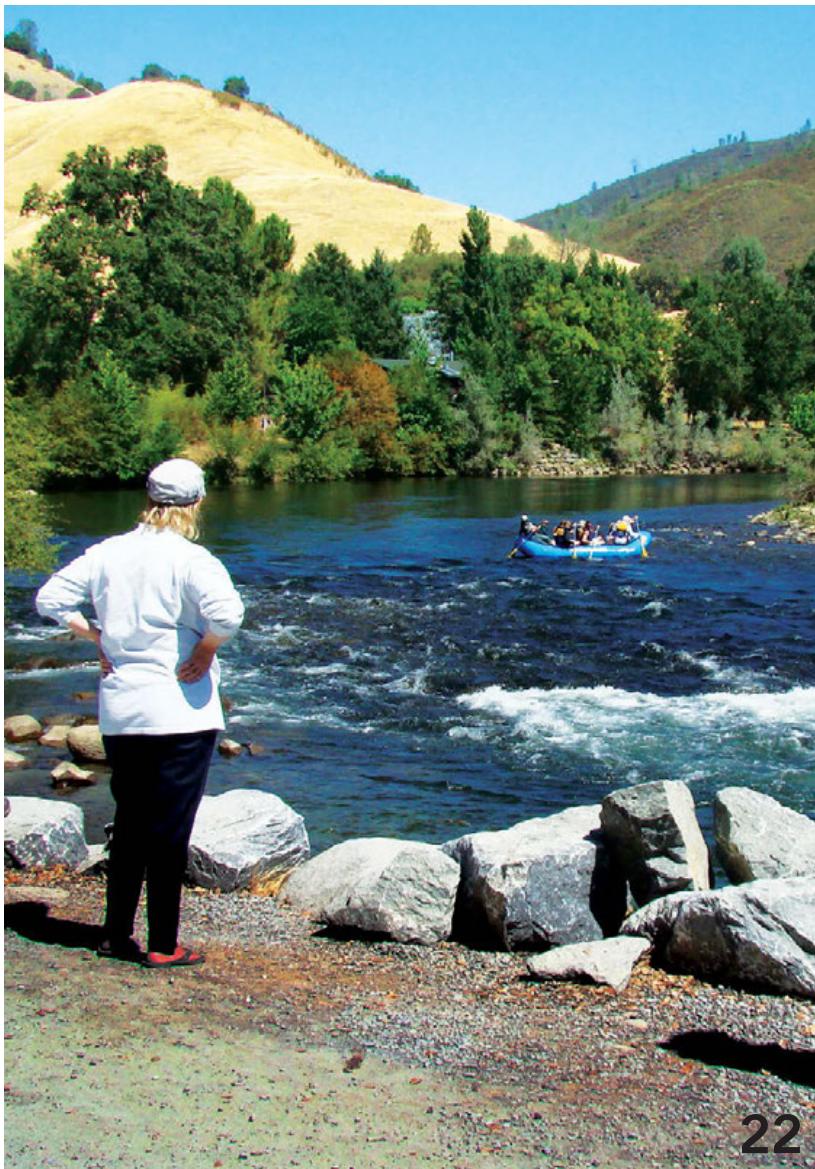
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On The Cover: Enjoying the Forest River Charleston 430FK at one of the luxurious golf-course RV sites at Outdoor Resort Palm Springs in Cathedral City, Calif. (see test on page 36.)
Photo by Chris Hemer.

CLASSING UP THE B'S

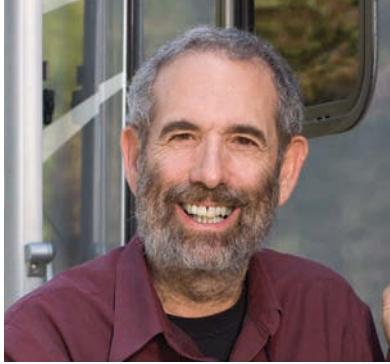
The Class B motorhome is an interesting segment of the RV market. What started life as a van fitted with basic components to get users off the ground — and maybe a pop or bubble top for extra headroom — has evolved into a sophisticated machine that appeals to discriminating buyers looking to downsize.

Let's take a time-machine ride and visit the 1970s. You would see how, early in that decade, camper vans took off in America. Before converters took notice, vans were popular in the '60s, spurred by brightly colored paint jobs symbolizing peace and love. Not exactly RVs, but lots of spirited people slept in them.

The most legitimate early camping van — and we're talking the '50s — was the VW Westfalia, which influenced the American van conversion revolution. Once Dodge redesigned its van in 1971, conversion companies really got on the bandwagon.

Even before that, I acquired a 1967 Dodge van after convincing my wife, Lynne, that we needed such a vehicle to haul stuff to fix up the yard at our house. What was supposed to be utilitarian (and, in fact, never did get used for my promised purpose) became a foundation for a camper van that I built from scratch. I was pretty green in those days, but managed to cut in windows, add a simple galley with a two-burner stove, a sink with hand pump, small freshwater tank, chassis-mounted propane tank and furnace, ice-box style refrigerator, a bed/dinette that converted from forward-facing seats and, of course, a "groovy" stereo system.

Building that van camper launched my career into the RV world, and after making continuous modifications and rolling up a lot of miles, I was asked by a major converter to design the "ultimate" Class B for a magazine. That project was fun, but the real story is how the Class B motorhome has evolved into a high-end product. As we hop off the time machine and enter 2014, we'll see a new breed of Class B motorhomes as Ford scraps



the venerable E-series van for the Transit, Dodge brings the Fiat-based ProMaster to the U.S. and Mercedes/Freightliner refreshes the Sprinter, the van that started the Class B transformation (see page 42).

Today's Class B's are wildly popular with boomers who want to move out of larger coaches without having to give up luxury or high-tech features. Brisk demand for Class B motorhomes is keeping all the builders working at maximum capacity and their designers working feverishly to continuously bring these coaches to higher levels of sophistication and comfort.

Europe has influenced the North American Class B market beyond the proliferation of vans. Space utilization is a science in Europe and that experience has paid off handsomely for builders in the U.S. and Canada. Multipurpose components that convert from seating to dining to sleeping have become key ingredients in making Class B motorhomes much more livable. Bathrooms are surprisingly large and efficient, galleys are fully equipped and there's no shortage of headroom. Did I mention that they are fun to drive, easy to maneuver and easy on fuel?

European style appliances and accessories have made it possible to outfit Class B's with all the amenities, albeit on a smaller scale. Roadtrek, for example, was one of the first adopters of the Alde hydronic heating system. As you'll learn from the article on page 60, the Alde convection and radiant heating/hot water system brings to the table efficient, space saving components that are easily integrated into RVs where space is at a premium.

Now that the Class B segment is fully energized, "Classy B" would be a more fitting category title. ♦

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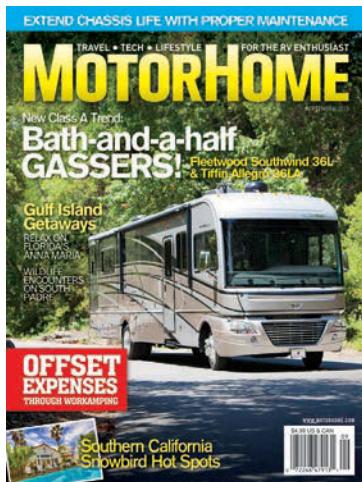
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DO YOU THINK RV MANUFACTURERS SHOULD HAVE TO FOLLOW THE GOVERNMENT FUEL-ECONOMY STANDARDS OR BE REQUIRED TO IMPROVE FUEL EFFICIENCY?

That's the question we asked in our September issue, and here are some of the replies we received.

DO THE MATH

Many would say no, as this is a recreational vehicle. But we all need the cleaner environment, and whatever it takes to achieve that should apply to all vehicles. That said, of course manufacturers should improve mileage.

One thing that ticks me off is all of the blame that the big oil companies get, and vehicle manufacturers get little, if any. The percentage of increase in gasoline prices should be compared to the improvement in mileage figures from the vehicle manufacturers. The mileage figures have not kept up with the oil prices. A few years ago we were paying \$1 a gallon and getting about 8 MPG. Now we're paying \$3 per gallon and still getting 8 MPG. By rights, we should be getting 24 MPG. Manufacturers should be required to improve each year.

Many motorhome users are getting out of the lifestyle because they just cannot afford the high cost of fuel and the low mileage figures. Motorhome manufacturers are putting themselves out of business.

And, campgrounds charging \$50 per night for a parking space are going to put themselves out of business also. Figure it out; \$50 × 7 nights = \$350 per week, or about \$1,500 a month. This is ridiculous!

MIKE HUFFMAN | VIA EMAIL

GIVE CUSTOMERS WHAT THEY WANT

I vehemently oppose fuel mileage standards for the RV industry. The last thing we need is more government interference in our lives. The government doesn't know what the consumer wants, much less how to get it. We have a system, called capitalism, that ensures consumers get what they want. We vote with our wallets. If no one purchased the current crop of motorhomes, I assure you that the manufacturers would be scrambling to find out why, and what they needed to produce in order to satisfy the customer.

There is a definite trend toward offering smaller, more fuel-efficient motorhomes, and that's great for those who want them, but not everyone wants them. Some of us are quite satisfied with our larger units, and the benefits they offer. Rest assured, in the long run, simple economics will

be the deciding factor. Everyone has a budget tipping point, and when it is reached, that economic segment will downsize, or drop out of the motorhome hobby altogether. Although my tipping point may occur a lot sooner than some, I don't expect them to give up their hobby just because I had to. The last thing we want is a market full of cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all motorhomes. Just my humble opinion.

STEVE HILL | TAMPA, FLA.

MPG DOESN'T ADD UP

I am afraid Mr. Mills is in for a big disappointment if he thinks EPA fuel standards will solve his poor gas mileage. I have yet to have a vehicle come close to its MPG rating. As for an aftermarket product, Banks Power offers some relief, or so I have been told. I cannot get that relief, as Banks doesn't offer any help to those of us with Caterpillar engines. I get around 7 MPG, which is better than trucks with the same weight as my motorhome. I cruise at 55-60 MPH on cruise control, but it doesn't seem to help.

PAUL THORPE | GIG HARBOR, WASH.

NO MORE GOVERNMENT INTRUSION

Should the federal government mandate fuel economy standards for RVs? Absolutely not! I'm fed up with government intrusion into my life. Modern RV chassis already take advantage of the advances in automotive engine management technology and deliver optimum power with reasonable fuel economy. We all need to select an RV that will fit our needs, and fit into our traveling budget.

ED JACKLITCH | SAN JOSE, CALIF.

MILEAGE IS NOT THE PROBLEM

RV manufacturers only produce products that they can sell. The mileage is not the main problem; the problem is the doubling of gas prices in the past five years caused by the rules and regulations put forth by the current administration. I do not recall hearing about mileage woes when gas prices were less than \$1.80. In my opinion, the government should let the free enterprise system work. There is no need for

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PEGGY THOMAS | NUEVO, CALIF.

THE PRICE YOU PAY

I do not believe that applying fuel economy standards to RV manufacturers would result in anything more than greater frustration for everyone involved. I don't want the government involved in any more of my life. What would the loading be on the frame when testing — the dry weight? The maximum vehicle weight rating? There are so many variables in loading and usage that actual mileage may not compare well to pristine test condition standards.

I don't want manufacturers sacrificing quality and durability in order to lower weight and get small increases in MPG. If I want MPG, I'll trade my 36-foot Workhorse motorhome for a Sprinter version. Fuel economy is the price you pay for the lifestyle you choose.

**CHUCK MARSHALL
SACRAMENTO, CALIF.**

JUST SAY NO

No. We should keep our industry out of the hands of the federal government.

RICHARD BOONE | TULSA, OKLA.

FOLLOW AUTO MANUFACTURERS

It amazes me that with the government mandates, the automotive manufacturers don't have any problem raising the fuel mileage. I don't like government mandates, but if that's what it takes to raise fuel mileage, then of course RV manufacturers should have to raise fuel mileage as well. We know they can, because the automotive manufacturers do it every time the government mandates it. Why do they have to wait on mandates from the government? Are the big oil companies involved in keeping fuel mileage low? Makes me wonder.

DERYL DAVIS | ROCKPORT, TEXAS

LEAVE RVs OUT OF THE MIX

Should RV manufacturers have to follow the government's fuel-economy standards?



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P.O. BOX

RVs in general, and motorhomes especially, are special vehicles and are designed to be lived in, not for extensive travel, as with a car. To force manufacturers to adhere to restrictive standards could adversely affect the original design of an RV.

We have enough restrictions with the DEF requirements and many of the other questionable requirements that have driven up the cost of vehicles and probably kept many people out of this wonderful lifestyle.

There are many other avenues to reduce the use of fossil fuels, such as electric cars, and I believe that RVs should be left out of the mixture.

KEN MARTIN | SURPRISE, ARIZ.

DISAPPEARING CLASS C'S?

As new, smaller fuel-efficient RVs are introduced, will the larger, 30- to 38-foot gas, Class A and Class C motorhomes disappear from the market? I think the answer is yes, for the Class C. In your July issue, you reported in "Chassis Choices for 2013" that Ford's E-series chassis will only be produced "through most of the decade." Translation: no more Class C's over 10,000 pounds. Will this also be the fate of the Class A units?

BOB CARPENTER | VIA EMAIL

WHAT'S THE BEST RV SHOW?

I have enjoyed reading *MotorHome* for a number of years now as my wife and I move closer to purchasing our first RV. I believe RV shows are a great way to easily see and compare what's available; unfortunately, I have found that the RV shows in the geographical area where we live (northeast Ohio) to be short on Class B and Class C options. Even though an RV show advertises itself as "Largest," "Biggest," or "Best," I find these are mostly gimmick messages.

I am hoping that fellow readers might be able to identify for me a few RV shows around the country that, in their experience, have proven themselves to display a wide selection of Class B and Class C motorhomes. My wife and I are willing to travel via car or airplane for a long weekend to attend just such an event.

Any suggestions or assistance would be greatly appreciated.

CRAIG SHOPNECK | VIA EMAIL

QUESTION:

Do you attend RV shows? If so, do you go to look, learn or buy, and which shows would you recommend to fellow RVers?

Send your comments to *MotorHome*, 2750 Park View Court, Suite 240, Oxnard, CA 93036; or email letters@motorhomemagazine.com. ♦

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escapes

edited by EILEEN HUBBARD

ROAD FOODIE | WHEELS & GEAR | NOTEWORTHY | CROSSROADS

North Alabama is full of surprises. One is Dismals Canyon near Russellville. Its attractions? American Indian legends and truths, and tales of famous outlaws hiding away in its remoteness. And Dismalites, which are rare “glow worms” that emit a blue-green light to attract food.

The canyon has a trail that can be slippery and uneven, but takes visitors through tall moss- and fern-covered rock formations, such as Witches Cavern and Outlaw's Hideout. There are also large hemlock trees and waterfalls.

Dismals Canyon is an 85-acre privately-owned National Natural Landmark with tent camping and cabins (RV camping is available nearby at Country Side RV Park, 205-486-9510, www.countrysidevrvpark.org). Parking at Dismals Canyon is limited, so call ahead with larger motorhomes. For more information, call 205-993-4559, or visit www.dismalscanyon.com
— James Richardson

DISMALS CANYON, NORTH ALABAMA

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CRAVING GREAT CHOCOLATE



1

1. **QUEEN BEE GARDENS**, Lovell, Wyo. Chocolates sweetened with honey for a really different taste. www.queenbeegardens.com
2. **FRAN'S CHOCOLATES**, Seattle Wash. Fran's makes elegant chocolates and earned the title "Best Chocolatier in the Northwest" in *The Chocolate Lover's Guide*. www.franschocolates.com.
3. **HAGENSBORG CHOCOLATES**, Vancouver, B.C., Canada. Single-origin chocolate bars with a fun, "piggy" theme. www.hagensborg.com.
4. **COASTAL MIST**, Bandon, Ore. An artisan chocolatier that makes uber-fresh chocolates. www.coastalmist.com
5. **TCHO**, San Francisco, Calif. Varietal, single-source chocolate, made from beans grown in a specific location for particular flavors. www.tcho.com

With the holidays fast approaching,

my thoughts turn to sweets, especially chocolate. It makes a terrific gift. I mean, really, who doesn't love receiving a box of wonderful chocolate?

A dozen years ago or so, I spent a year researching and then writing two books on chocolate: *The Chocolate Lover's Guide to the Pacific Northwest* and *The Chocolate Lover's Guide Cookbook*. My journey through Oregon, Washington and British Columbia introduced me to bakers, ice cream makers, pastry chefs and chocolatiers who make some of the finest chocolate goodies in the Northwest. They taught me about chocolate, including how to work with it (it's fussy) and how to taste and evaluate great chocolate.

After writing those books and appearing in bookstores and on radio and TV as a "chocolate expert," people often ask, "What's the best chocolate?" I asked the same question to hundreds of real chocolate experts — people who work with chocolate every day. The best answer I got came from Iva Elmer, co-owner of JaCiva's Chocolates and Pastries in Portland, Ore. She said, "I know a woman who loves the chocolate in Almond Joy. For her, that's the best. The best chocolate for you is what you like."

Some love smooth, creamy chocolate like Belgian. Others prefer sharper tastes like those found in Valrhona, El Rey, or Scharffen Berger. You may be a milk chocolate lover or you may prefer dark chocolate, including ultra-dark chocolate (70 percent-plus cocoa or darker). Chances are good that you love the chocolate of your childhood. I grew up in California with See's Candies, and, for me, they're still wonderful.

When it comes to chocolate, you get what you pay for. High quality chocolates cost a bit more. Premium chocolate often contains more expensive varieties of cocoa beans. It's conched or blended longer, making it smoother. It also has a higher cocoa butter content. That's what gives chocolate a smooth mouth feel. Less expensive chocolate substitutes some of the cocoa butter with vegetable shortening, additional sugar, paraffin and vanilla. Look for chocolate that has a velvety smoothness (never gritty or grainy), a quick melt, intense flavor, shiny look and that snaps cleanly when broken.

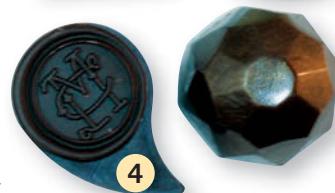
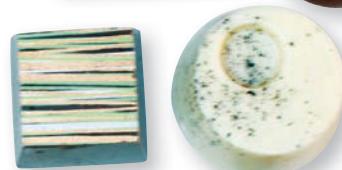
This year, I'm buying rather than making chocolates for gifts for friends and family. Here are a few artisan chocolate producers to visit — or just have them ship.



2

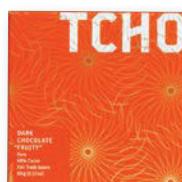
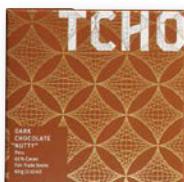


3



4

Got a favorite chocolate? Email Bobbie@realfoodtraveler.com with "chocolates" in the subject line.



5

KEEP ON TREKIN'

Marking its 40th year in business, Canadian Class B motorhome builder Roadtrek has introduced its Anniversary Edition model. Highlighted by a Mocha Steel paint scheme enhanced with a “crushed glass” finish and stainless steel trim, this Chevy Express 3500-based conversion isn't likely to be mistaken for anything else on the road. Inside, tan leather captain's seats and sofa, bamboo cabinetry and increased headroom add up to luxury living. Other features in this special edition model include 205 watts of solar panels, a 3,000-watt inverter, 3,500-watt engine generator, four coach batteries, all season capability and an Alde hydronic heat and hot water system.

Roadtrek Motorhomes Inc.,
888-ROADTREK, www.roadtrek.com



FLASH FREEZE

This time of year, better air conditioning probably isn't at the top of your list — but a new season of hot days and sticky nights will be here before you know it. ASA Electronics has introduced its Advent Air ACRG14 ducted ceiling assembly, featuring what the company calls flash freeze. By allowing the direct airflow from the upper unit to flow in a downward motion into the living area, RVers will experience a “shower of refreshing, crisp air that will swiftly radiate down to cool the RV,” according to the company. This unit is compatible with all of the Advent Air air-conditioners, can be used with the Advent Air analog or digital thermostats, and integrates seamlessly into the décor of any RV.

ASA Electronics,
800-688-3135, www.asaelectronics.com

AIR APPARENT

Maintaining proper tire inflation pressure is one of the most important steps toward safe RV travel. Unfortunately, many RVers don't check/inflate their dual rear tires as often as they should, simply because the process is cumbersome — even when using a specially designed air chuck to gain access to the valve stem. The Duallyvalve extends the length of the inner tire valve to reach the outer dual, while the outer valve is oriented toward you for easy inflation/pressure checks. The kit includes two Inner Dual Stems, two Outer Dual stems, one packet of Loctite and two Rubber Stabilizers (unless the kit specifies no stabilizers).

Duallyvalve,
800-300-2674.





A MOUTH-WATERING SELECTION FOR RVERS

Ever had the itch to explore Route 66

outside of Albuquerque or munch on succulent lobster along Maine's coast? The 2014 Good Sam RV Travel Guide and Campground Directory explores these routes and more than 50 others in its new RV Trips of a Lifetime section, road trips (along with maps) that every RVer should take at least once in their life.

You'll find even more in the 2014 edition:

- A NASCAR feature with tips on attending stock car events along with a roundup of RV parks located near racing venues.
- A special snowbird section that profiles destinations for sun-chasers from low-lying tropics to the high desert.
- A Beginner's Guide that tackles shopping for a new RV, taking a shakedown cruise, winterizing and storage for your vehicle.
- Camping World coupons worth hundreds of dollars.
- Detailed listings of North America's 2,200 Good Sam Parks. The Guide also lists details nearly 14,500 RV parks and campgrounds, including maps of all North American states and provinces with the locations of RV parks. Each private park listed has been inspected and rated for its facilities, restrooms/showers and appearance.

For more information, call 877-209-6655 or visit www.goodsamcamping.com/2014

CREAN FOUNDATION DONATES 4 HISTORIC FLEETWOODS

In memory of Fleetwood founder John Crean, the Crean Foundation recently donated a collection of historic Fleetwood RVs to the RV/MH Hall of Fame Museum in Elkhart, Ind. The RVs hail from the early days of now out-of-business Fleetwood Enterprises, which was located in Riverside, Calif. On display at the museum are a 1969 Pace Arrow, which was the first motorhome produced by Fleetwood, and John Crean's 1985 working prototype for the iconic 1986-87 Bounder that introduced the basement-model concept to RVs.

Accompanying the early RVs is an extensive collection of Fleetwood memorabilia from the company's early days which will be added to RV/MH Hall of Fame Library collections.

RV/MH Hall of Fame Museum, 800-378-8694, www.rvmhhalloffame.org



Above: John Crean's 1985 prototype for the 1986-87 Bounder.



Left: Fleetwood's first motorhome — the 1969 Pace Arrow.

News Briefs

In September, **Roadtrek Motorhomes Inc.** of Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, launched a Five-Year No-Mileage RV limited warranty. "We want Roadtrek owners to focus on Roadtreking, not on the mileage on the dashboard," said Jim Hammill, Roadtrek president. The warranty covers the manufacture of the RV no matter how far the user drives it within the five year term. It does not, however, cover the chassis as that warranty is covered by the vehicle manufacturer (GM or Mercedes-Benz). The new warranty coverage went into effect at the beginning of September.

Winnebago Industries was listed as one of the "100 Fastest-Growing Companies" in Fortune magazine's Sept. 16, 2013, issue. "We are honored to be named to Fortune's 100 Fastest-Growing Companies list," said Winnebago Industries Chairman, CEO and President, Randy Potts. "We have worked extremely hard to turn the company around following the recession and we are very pleased with our progress so far." Winnebago was ranked at No. 65, out of 100.

Nexus RV, a factory-direct manufacturer of Class C motorhomes, has received final approval for entry into the Canadian markets. Dave Middleton, the company's vice president and co-founder, said, "Nexus is excited to now be able to sell products to the Canadian customers who have visited our production facility in Elkhart, Ind." Nexus President Claude Donati added, "Many experts estimate that 20 percent of all RVs manufactured in the U.S., are exported to Canada. We believe our products are well received by the Canadian customers as we build product to be used year-round."

Entegra Coach, a division of Jayco Inc., recently commemorated the production of its 1,000th motorcoach with a celebration at its manufacturing plant in Middlebury, Ind. Employees enjoyed a catered lunch after speeches from executives Wilbur Bontrager, chairman of the board; Derald Bontrager, CEO; and John Ganyard, general manager and vice president of the motorized division. "Jayco established Entegra Coach in 2009 as its flagship motorhome division, and today we have more than 150 employees. We think it's important that we make it clear to all of them, they each play an important role in our success." said Ganyard.





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Three slideouts add to the roominess of this mid-sized coach and, like every Sightseer and Sunova, the 35G features premium amenities at a very attractive price – one thing you'll be glad hasn't changed.

See the new 35G at your nearest dealer, see all our models online at WinnebagoInd.com, or call 800-643-4892. And make a change – make that a transformation – for the better.



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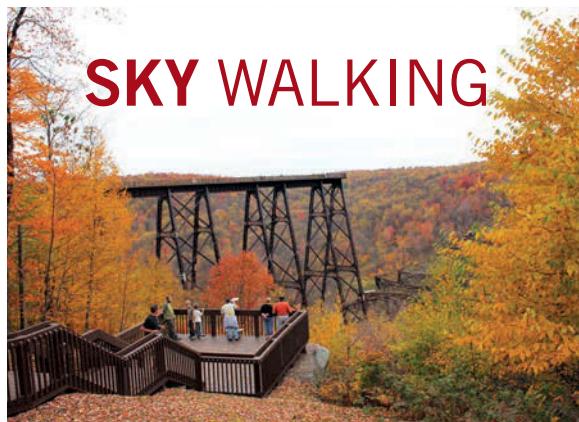
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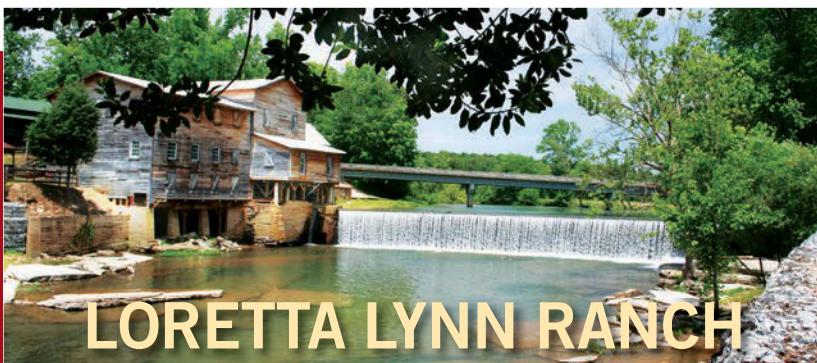


SKY WALKING

Kinzua Skywalk at Kinzua State Park, 4 miles north of Mount Jewett, Pa., beckons visitors to bravely walk out 300 feet above the valley floor and take a stroll in the steps of rail and engineering history. The viaduct bridge was built in 1882 as a way for trains carrying coal, lumber, oil, and thrill-seeking passengers to span

the deep gorge high over Kinzua Creek. At the time of its construction, it was the world's highest and longest railroad bridge and an engineering wonder. It remained in use for rail cargo until 1959 and for excursion trains and pedestrians until 2002. It was then closed after an inspection revealed extensive rusting and potential danger. In 2003, a tornado with 112 MPH winds took down more than half of the towers and left them crumpled like twigs on the gorge floor. In 2011, this historic site was reborn as Kinzua Skywalk. The walkway provides dramatic views. Today's thrill-seekers can stand on a see-through section at the end platform with nothing but glass between them and the ground below. Located on 329 acres in north central Pennsylvania, the park is dog friendly and open year-round.

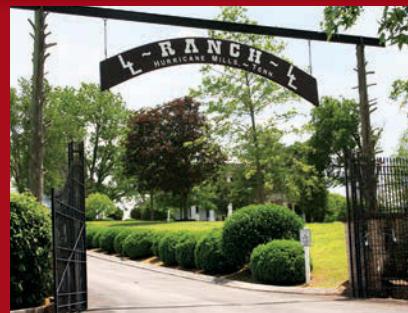
For more information, call 814-965-2646, or visit www.dcnr.state.pa.us/stateparks/findapark/kinzuabridge. — *A.M. Murphy*



LORETTA LYNN RANCH

Located in Hurricane Mills, Tenn., the Loretta Lynn Ranch is a great destination for RVers. The Ranch hosts country and gospel music concerts (three times a year Loretta Lynn takes the stage), professional rodeos and annual events such as the Mountain Man Rendezvous (celebrating early trappers and explorers) and Native American Arts Festival. It also has a full-service RV park that accommodates big rigs. Hiking, fishing, swimming, trail rides on horseback, cookouts and hayrides are available.

Tours of Hurricane Mills Rural Historic District include the old mansion, a reproduction of Loretta



Lynn's childhood home, a simulated coal mine, a flour mill and the 18,000-square-foot Loretta Lynn Museum.

For more information, call 931-296-7700 or visit www.lorettalynn.com — *Arline Chandler* ♦



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Shivering in my neoprene wetsuit, I'm huddled in the corner of a pontoon boat that's slowly making its way across the placid waters of central Florida's Kings Bay. As the first hints of dawn begin coloring the eastern sky on this January morning, the thermometer is hovering just above the freezing mark, an unpleasant surprise that's caught me woefully underdressed and left me none too happy.

As I gratefully accept a steaming cup of cocoa from our captain, Bill "Bird" Oestreich, I try to take comfort in his assurances that there is a definite upside to this unforeseen cold snap. Namely that these frigid overnight temperatures create optimal conditions for what I will soon come to think of as one of the world's most remarkable wildlife encounters.

IN FROM THE COLD

I have come to Crystal River, Fla., to meet the endangered West Indian manatee on its own turf. While manatees can be found as far north as South Carolina during the summer, the protected waters of 640-acre Kings Bay just offshore are home to the world's largest concentration of these gentle marine mammals from November through March.

Though the manatees spend their days alone peacefully grazing on underwater vegetation, they quickly overcome their solitary nature once the winter sun begins to set. Each night, hundreds of manatees — which, despite their blubbery appearance, can be killed by prolonged exposure to water temperatures below 68 degrees — come together to take refuge in the comparatively warm 72-degree waters that flow from Kings Bay's dozens of freshwater springs.

Add the fact that this is the only place in the U.S. where we humans are allowed to swim alongside manatees, and you'll begin to understand what makes this charming Old Florida town so special.

MEETING THE MANATEES

THOUGHT TO BE THE CREATURES ON WHICH ANCIENT LEGENDS OF ENCHANTING SIRENS WERE BASED, FLORIDA'S GENTLE MANATEES MAY NOT WIN ANY BEAUTY CONTESTS, BUT THEY'RE STILL PRETTY DARN HARD TO RESIST.

by ALAN RIDER



MEET-N-GREET

My family and I started our adventure before sunup at Bird's Underwater, the Oestreich family's dockside dive shop and manatee tour operation.

After watching a short video that laid out the do's-and-don'ts of interacting with these whiskered beasts, we wriggled into our rented wetsuits and got kitted out with masks, snorkels and fins. To say the mood of our group was subdued as we trundled out to the boat — whether because of the early hour, the nippy temperatures or a little of both — would be an understatement.

As we motored out into the bay, our outlook began to brighten as the first rays

of the sun turned the mists rising off the water into a golden curtain that magically parted as we approached. Not long after he'd finished plying us with hot coffee, cocoa and donuts, Oestreich cut the engine and quietly eased the anchor over the bow near an imperceptible underwater vent known as King Spring.

Following his lead, I donned my mask and fins, slipped quietly into the water, and swam a good distance without seeing anything more exciting than a small school of fish. Just as I was about to give up and return to the boat though, I noticed two dark shapes approaching me out of the gloom.



This month's stop along Adventure Road: Swimming with the manatees of Florida's Kings Bay (above). Below: The remarkably clear waters of Three Sisters Spring.

Floating motionless on the surface with my heart pounding in my chest, I tried to control my breathing as I watched a mother manatee and her calf slowly come into view. And here's where things got really interesting.

Though they could have easily escaped to the safety of the nearby roped-off manatee sanctuary where we humans were forbidden to follow, the pair continued swimming toward me until we were quite literally face-to-face.

Though it's hard to say precisely when, it was somewhere in this first encounter that my mind was completely blown by a rather remarkable realization. Unlike most wild creatures that are inclined to turn tail and flee at the sight of humans, these two manatees honestly seemed as eager to meet me as I was to meet them.

SCRATCH THAT ITCH

While I hated to leave my two new friends, Oestreich eventually rounded up our group with the promise of another site that — hard as it seemed to believe — would top what we'd just experienced.

After slowly cruising up a man-made canal lined on one side with modest houses, he switched off the motor and gently

PHOTO: BILL OESTREICH



PHOTO: WWW.VISITCITRUS.COM



Above left: Cold nighttime temperatures force manatees to overcome their solitary nature and seek shelter in dozens of local springs. **Above:** Despite protections such as reduced speed limits, countless manatees bear scars from boat propellers.

lowered the anchor at another nondescript spot flanked by a wall of trees. Though this certainly didn't look any more promising than our last location, we once again slipped into the water and followed our guide several boat lengths farther up the channel.

With the sun now higher in the sky, visibility here was much improved. It wasn't long before we were greeted by several large adult manatees, all of whom seemed to be genuinely curious about



these peculiar creatures in their midst.

If I had any lingering doubt that manatees were more than just dumb animals, it was completely erased by what happened next. As I was tentatively rubbing the flanks of the biggest male in the group, he reached out with his forelimb and gently moved my hand to a spot on his rough moss-covered hide where he apparently had an itch that needed to be scratched.

After having this same experience with three different manatees, I became convinced these were genuinely symbiotic interactions rather than just mere coincidences. Needless to say, in each case I was more than happy to oblige.

If You Go

Crystal River, Fla., is located about an hour southwest of Ocala. There are a number of RV parks nearby but, as with all Florida destinations during the winter months, it's a smart idea to make reservations as far ahead as possible.



A large gathering of manatees.

Bird's Underwater (800-771-2763, www.birdsunderwater.com) offers manatee tours year-round, but winter months offer the best chances of having an up-close-and-personal manatee encounter. Likewise, though Bird's does offer trips later in the morning, their pre-dawn departures offer the best chance of catching the local manatees before they move out into the bay to feed. Midweek trips (Tuesday-Thursday) also minimize the number of other boats on the water, thereby increasing the amount of quality time you're likely to get.

Finally, hopefully I don't need to tell you to dress more warmly than you think you have to. Also, if you've never snorkeled before, you can increase your comfort level by stopping by Bird's Underwater the afternoon before your tour to pick up your mask, snorkel and fins so you can practice in the RV park's pool.

SUPER, NATURAL MAGIC

With my back-scratching duties complete, Oestreich once again gathered our group together and pointed to the narrow mouth of a nearby creek we'd completely overlooked. It was the entrance to a spring complex known as Three Sisters.

While the underwater visibility at our first two snorkeling sites was good, nothing could have prepared me for what was waiting at the end of that short tree-shaded channel. As I emerged from the darkness into the first of the three sunlit springs, I was greeted by a brilliantly white sandy bottom and water as clear as any swimming pool, not to mention the half-dozen manatees resting like huge logs on the bottom 20 feet below.

Compared to our previous stops, the

time we spent here had a distinctly dream-like quality to it, as if we'd been dropped into an enormous man-made fish tank at some theme park. The difference, of course, is that here in this hidden Florida kingdom, the magic we were experiencing was the real deal.

MORE THAN JUST A PRETTY FACE

For animals that can grow to the size of a small car, the manatees I met in Kings Bay were remarkably gentle. While there's no record of a human ever being injured by a manatee, unfortunately the opposite is all too common, as evidenced by the deep scars from boat propellers on the backs of virtually every manatee we encountered.

The manatees of Kings Bay are also exceptionally graceful for their size. Watching them effortlessly perform slow-motion barrel rolls underwater made me feel as clumsy as a 4-year-old thrashing about in water wings.

While both these impressions remain vivid months later, the most profound

and lasting memory I brought home with me was the feeling that I'd been in the presence of truly sentient beings. If that conclusion seems like a bit of a stretch, I challenge anyone to spend time looking into the eyes of these highly intelligent creatures and then try to argue otherwise.

WARM AND FUZZY

By the time we were back on dry land, the mid-morning sun had chased away the chill and a gentle breeze was blowing in off the bay. As my family walked out of the Bird's Underwater shop with armloads of manatee-related memorabilia (what can I say, I'm a softie), my wife asked me if I'd had fun. My answer was simple: Meeting the manatees of Kings Bay was an adventure that, in hindsight, was worth every bit of shivering. ♦



Alan Rider has been wandering the backroads of America for more than four decades. Though he's never been big on traditional souvenirs, he's passionate about collecting memories of the remarkable people and unforgettable places he encounters along the way.

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FIND ADVENTURE AND FUN IN **NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S COLOMA-LOTUS VALLEY**

by KEN REID



Like many other motorhome enthusiasts, my wife and I have often daydreamed about what our ideal campsite would look like. The most important factor for us is close proximity to water. Being able to see and hear a stream or river flowing by, or waves lapping on the shore, adds an aura of peaceful tranquility to whatever else is going on. If the location also offers generally good weather, fantastic vistas, a variety of fun things to see and do, and interesting people to meet, all the better.

We've never found a place that offers more of the attributes we seek than being camped in our motorhome right on the banks of the American River in Northern California's Coloma-Lotus Valley. We've returned dozens of times to stay for weekends and weeks on end, during winter, spring, summer and fall. There are so many attractions in the area that just about anyone should find plenty of interesting options from which to choose.

Several campgrounds are located near or on the banks of

LIVING AN RVER'S DREAM



the river. Our favorite is Ponderosa RV Resort. Situated where historic Highway 49 crosses the South Fork, about halfway between the towns of Placerville and Auburn, it is central to just about everything of interest in the area.

So what are some of the factors that draw us, and so many others, back to the same place year after year?

Being able to set up on the bank of the river, with the front windows facing all of the action on and around the water, is certainly close to the top. Whether the preference is to be inside or out, you'll be able to watch all that is happening. Evening options include enjoying peaceful solitude, or sitting with others around a nice campfire, the pleasant sound of the rushing river in the background. An added bonus on a recent trip was a blue moon rising over and reflecting upon the water just after dark. Apparently this second full moon of the month only occurs once about every two and a half years.

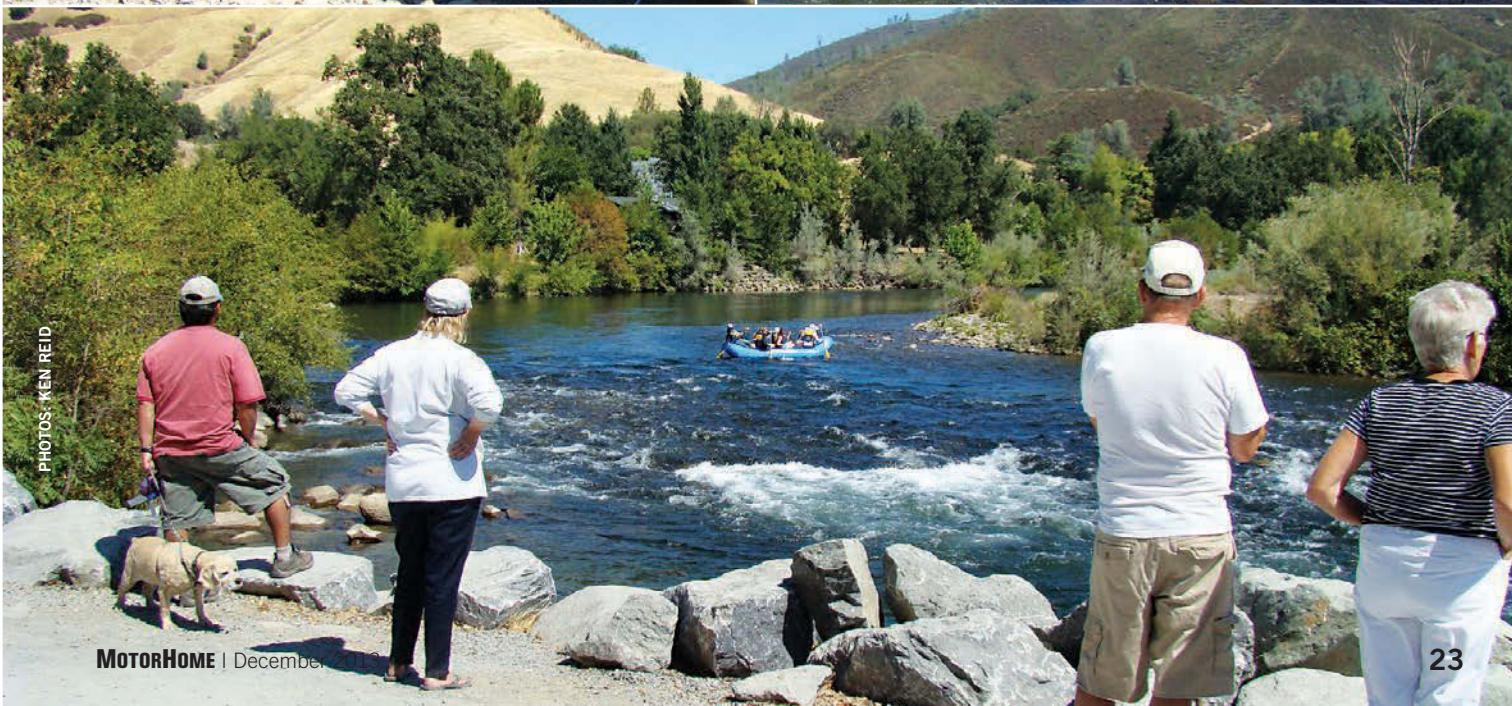
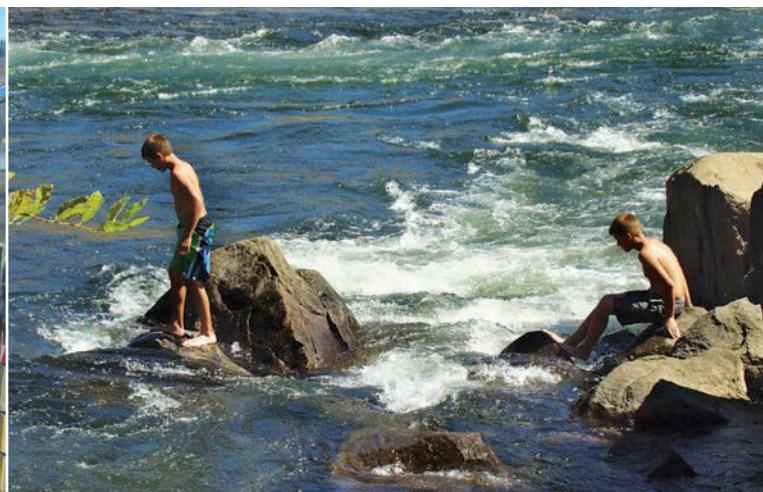
Our spot right on the riverfront affords numerous oppor-

tunities to view and photograph the action — and occasional craziness — exhibited by those coming down the river. Most are in kayaks, rafts or tubes. But we've also seen people traversing the rapids on pretty much anything that floats, including some that were walking or running on waterwheels (like hamster treadmills). This part of the river draws abundant wildlife, too. Deer, otters, ducks, geese and wild turkeys are frequently sighted. Occasionally bobcats, coyotes, osprey, bald eagles and mountain lions have been seen.

Bountiful wildflowers are in evidence much of the year. Those, combined with native riparian foliage in many shades

Clockwise from below: The author's grandsons make their own fun on the river at the Ponderosa. Campers come by just to watch the action on the river. One of the many riverfront sites at Ponderosa RV Resort. Opposite page: American River rafters tackle a tier of rapids known as Troublemaker. A replica of Sutter's Mill was erected near the original site in Coloma.

ON THE AMERICAN RIVER



PHOTOS: KEN REID

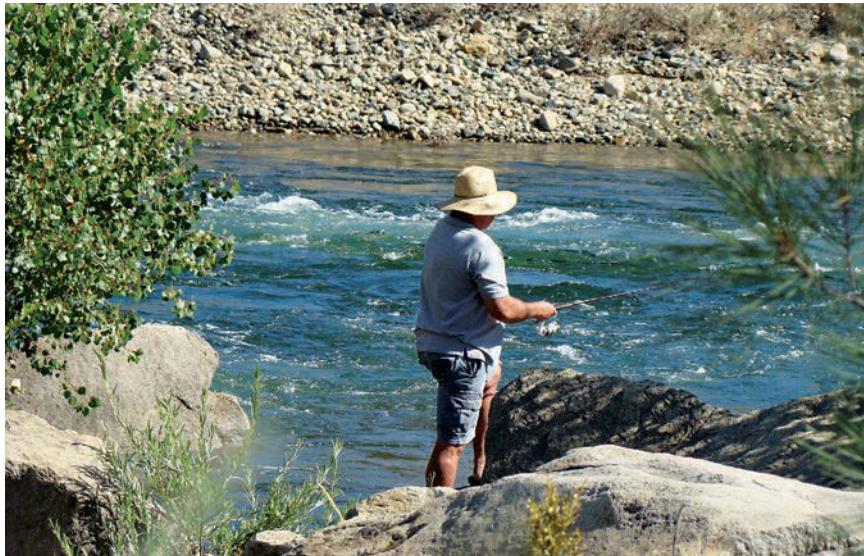


of green, plus rolling hills dotted with pines, oak and scrub brush, offer a beautiful panorama year round. If the wind is right, paragliders of many colors contribute even more to the spectacular view.

Campers from throughout the resort come by walking their dogs, and even cats. Still others come just to watch and photograph the river. We've met people from all across the country. Impromptu social gatherings occur frequently, especially around cocktail hour. Of course there are plenty of other things to do at the resort; right behind the motorhomes parked along the riverfront, there is a nice bocce ball court. Horseshoe pits and a volleyball court are also located nearby.

We found it interesting that Native Americans made camp in this same area, maybe even enjoying a similar view of the river. There are several bedrock mortars or "grinding holes" in boulders overlooking the river, right in front of where we generally set up. These holes were created over perhaps thousands of years as acorns were ground into meal and flour. Occasionally, arrowheads or other artifacts can be found, especially after heavy rains.

Above left: Clowns entertain kids at Ponderosa RV Resort most weekends during the season. Above right: Bedrock mortars in the boulders overlooking the American River at Ponderosa were created by Native Americans. Below: The river offers up decent trout for those who have the patience.



Running a close second to the outstanding layout and view overlooking the river is the resort's central location to all the fun things to do in the area. In addition to the variety of recreational opportunities the river affords, there are many other attractions. Nearby Henningsen Lotus Park has a .42-mile concrete loop for walking or jogging, along with a six-station parcourse. You can walk there from the Ponderosa, taking advantage of a wonderful trail along the river in the process. For those seeking longer, more challenging hikes, there are several nearby trailheads that lead through many miles of scenic and varied terrain. Some of those are within walking distance of the Ponderosa. The nearby 1,414-acre Cronan Ranch

Regional Trails Park offers several more miles of trails for hiking, biking and horseback riding, through foothills and along the river. And it is just a short drive away in Pilot Hill.

Decomposed granite, combined with well drained gravelly soil and compatible weather make the area ideal for growing certain varietal wine grapes. Dozens of mostly family owned wineries can be found in the Coloma-Lotus Valley. In addition to wine tasting, some of them offer food pairings, live music, dancing and special events.

There are other, much larger functions in the area, too. The Annual American River Festival is held in early September; the Coloma Gold Rush Live, complete with historic re-enactments is held in October; and Christmas in Coloma is held in December (Dec. 14-15 this year).

Before deciding where to go and what to do, we suggest you obtain free copies of the most recent Coloma-Lotus Guide, produced by the Coloma-Lotus Chamber of Commerce, and the El Dorado County Visitors and Farm Trails Guide. Both are generally available at the Ponderosa. If not, Sierra Rizing Bakery, located across

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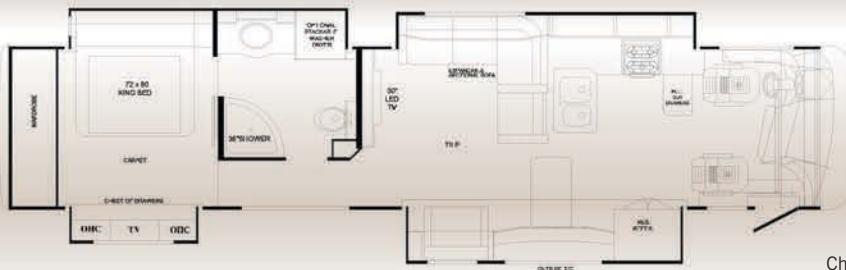
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Highway 49, carries the guides as well. Open year-round from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m., it offers breakfast and lunch items, plus a wide variety of breads and pastries. There is also free Wi-Fi.

The Coloma-Lotus Guide includes a wealth of information about the rich history of the area, along with places to go and things to see. There is a humorous graphic representation of the river, along with the names and locations of the

many rapids one can experience, such as Troublemaker, Widowmaker and Meat Grinder. The major white-water adventure trip providers operating in the valley are listed in the publication. For those who suffer from wanderlust, the guide also has detailed maps of the many trails that can be accessed for biking, hiking and horseback riding.

The El Dorado guide includes maps and information about the wineries in the

area, plus local entertainment, dining and a variety of unusual attractions. If you're seeking adventure in the form of backpacking through wilderness areas, four-wheeling, using ATVs and the like, review this publication.

Naturally, the economy of the Coloma-Lotus Valley is very much tied to the river, primarily through white-water rafting and kayaking. The American River is known as the most commercially rafted river west of the Rockies. For those who yearn to experience the many Class II and III-plus rapids along the South Fork, there are two major segments. The Ponderosa RV Resort is about midway between them. The upper part begins at a place called Chili Bar. The lower part begins in the Ponderosa and Lotus Park areas, then terminates where the river goes into the upper end of Folsom Lake, near Salmon Falls Bridge. Having rafted and kayaked both the upper and lower portions, we can say there are challenges for all but the most experienced. And the scenery is nothing short of spectacular.

An additional convenience of staying at the Ponderosa is that Gold Rush Outfitters has contracted with the resort. Their facility is right on resort property. During the season (May through September), they offer discounted rafting trips on both the upper and lower parts of the river. The company also operates a general store and small restaurant on the property. Free Wi-Fi hotspots can be found at the store/restaurant and at the resort's lodge.

Another option is to walk or drive the mile or so into the historic town of Coloma, now part of Marshall Gold Discovery Historic State Park. On Jan. 24, 1848, James W. Marshall discovered gold in the river at the site of a sawmill he was building for John Sutter. By 1849, word had spread far and wide. People came from around the world hoping to get rich and the California Gold Rush was born.

Roam through the town, museum and expansive park grounds to learn about the rich history of the area in general and the Gold Rush in particular. A replica of Sutter's Mill was erected near the original site. Also on display are many examples of equipment developed for use with various mining techniques that proved more efficient than panning for gold. If you take

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the time to check out all of the historical markers, equipment, structures, museum and other items of interest scattered along the many trails in the park, you can easily spend the better part of a day.

Gold panning has again become a popular activity, particularly since gold generally fetches more than \$1,000 an ounce on any given day. From the state park people can be seen panning along both sides of the river. Others can be seen trying their luck at the Ponderosa, especially where the rapids curve around the bend, near the north end of the property.

If panning for gold doesn't sound like fun, you can always try searching for pieces of a meteorite that impacted in the Coloma-Lotus area on April 22, 2012. Ac-

ording to several news reports, collectors may be willing to pay up to \$17,000 a gram, much more than the price of gold. If neither of those activities is of interest, there is always the chance to strike it rich at the Red Hawk Casino in Placerville. It is only about a 25-minute drive from the Ponderosa.

This wonderful valley surely won't disappoint. And the locals are so laid back you can't help but feel welcome. It

is a destination that offers everything from peace and harmony to activities worthy of most adrenaline junkies. Of course, being able to camp right along the river is a big part of the experience. For us, it brings to mind the phrase, "life's a beach." ♦



Ken Reid is a freelance writer and photographer who travels extensively with his wife, Gayle, in their Southwind motorhome. Ken is also a frequent contributor to various travel magazines.

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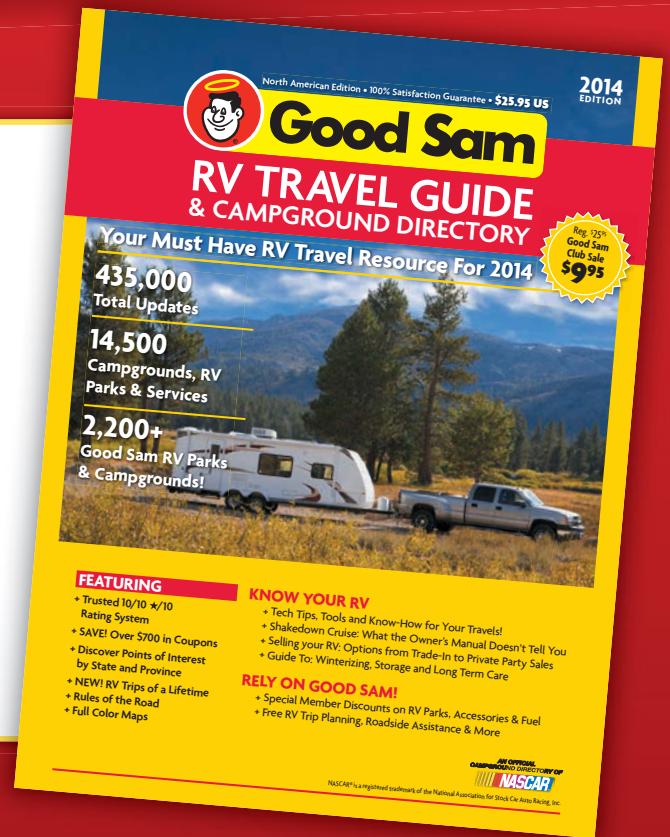
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FLY AWAY TO THE THE MAGIC VALLEY

SNOWBIRDS HEAD TO SOUTH TEXAS FOR WARM WEATHER, BOUNTIFUL WILDLIFE AND A LITTLE TASTE OF MEXICO

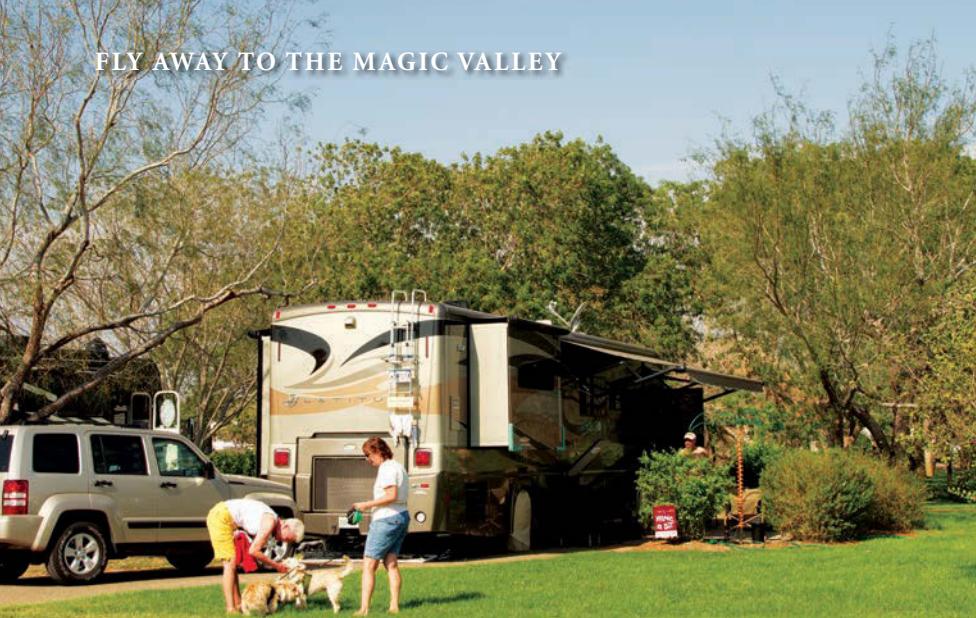
by BOBBIE HASSELBRING
photos by ANNE WEAVER

They call it “El Magico Valle del Rio Grande” (The Magical Valley of the Rio Grande) and thousands of RVers who flock here every year for warm weather, bargain-priced living and loads of wildlife, agree.

For years, we’d heard about “Winter Texans,” intrepid RVers from the Midwest and East Coast who trade icy, cold winters in their home states for the tropical climate of the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. We wanted to discover the magic of this valley for ourselves so we headed to the Lone Star State.

We started our adventure in Mission, a little town in the upper Rio Grande Valley (RGV), what locals call “The Valley.” The RGV is an area in the southernmost tip of South Texas along the northern bank of the Rio Grande that separates the United States from Mexico. It’s not really a valley, but rather a delta or floodplain. The area’s woodlands and dry thorny landscape

Clockwise from top: A yellow crowned night heron watches a nearby pond for food at Estero Llano Grande State Park. Chachalacas, second cousins to wild turkeys, are frequently found in the underbrush at Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park. Migratory redwing blackbirds blacken the sky at Estero Llano Grande State Park, one of nine World Birding Centers in the Rio Grande Valley. Bird-watchers at Estero Llano Grande State Park keep an eye on local and migratory birds in a pond.



Clockwise from right: Quinta Mazatlan is one of the oldest adobe homes in the RGV and features colorful Mexican tiles. Volunteers assist in planting flowers and native vegetation at the National Butterfly Center, which attracts nearly 200 species of butterflies. Model rail enthusiast Arthur Nemes has used modern technology and old-style rail models to lovingly re-create an impressive exhibit at Old Hidalgo Pumpthouse. Great Mexican food, like the tamales at Delia's Tamales, is another reason to visit the RGV. Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park is one of the top birding destinations in the country and serves as the headquarters for the World Birding Center. The RGV has some of the finest citrus in the world, including the iconic Texas red grapefruit. RVers at Bentsen Palm Village RV Resort enjoy the park's abundant green spaces.



are dotted with oxbow lakes or resacas, U-shaped bodies of water formed by pinched-off meanders of the Rio Grande. These waterways, the subtropical latitude (the same as Miami, Fla.), and the Valley's location at the confluence of two major flyways between North America and South America, make it a hot birding spot.

BIRDING IS BIG

With more than 500 documented species, the Valley hosts one of the most spectacular convergences of birds on earth, and it attracts RVing bird enthusiasts like John Kaye, a retired computer programmer formerly from Menasha, Wisc. Fifteen years ago, Kaye and his wife discovered the Rio Grande Valley and became RVing Winter

Texans. Now they've moved full-time to the Valley. "We're bird-watchers and this is one of the best bird-watching places in the United States," he says. "We just fell in love and found it's an ideal place for nature lovers to retire."

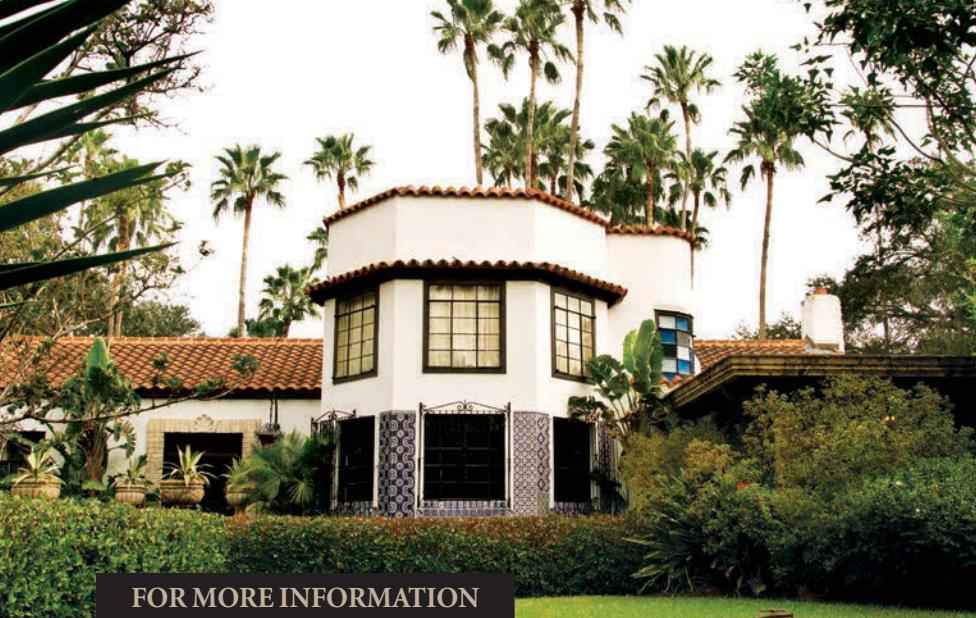
The RGV's World Birding Center (WBC) — a joint partnership between the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Rio Grande Valley communities and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service — is a network of nine distinctly different birding sites set along a 120-mile historic river road. We're at Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, the WBC's headquarters.

It's also where RVers Jack and Peggy Halpin volunteer. Each fall, they drive from Maine and volunteer for two months



Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, World Birding Center.

PHOTO: KENNY BAUN/TEXAS TOURISM



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at Bentsen. They lead bird walks and teach a Birding 101 class a few hours a week and, in exchange, pay nothing to park their motorhome here.

“We come for the birds,” says Peggy. She and Jack are guiding a group of a dozen visitors on one of the park’s daily bird walks and they’ve stopped at a feeding station where several chachalacas, large brown birds that are second cousins to wild turkeys, have gathered. As we watch, three bright green jays with dramatically marked blue and black heads fly in, causing several smaller kiskadees and sparrows to take flight. “With so many colorful birds, I feel like I’m living in a tropical paradise.”

In addition to 8 miles of birding

trails, bike rentals and free tram shuttles, Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park boasts a two-story hawk observation tower with a 210-foot-long wheelchair-accessible ramp that gives visitors a bird’s-eye view of the tree canopy. In addition, two enclosed bird blinds and a birding wall allow visitors to see birds up close and watch their behaviors.

Just a mile up the road is the National Butterfly Center (NBC), the only such site dedicated to protecting butterflies and the largest native plant propagation garden in the country. As we stroll through the raised beds, flashes of color — black, orange, red, blue — dart around the plants. Max Munoz, our guide, points out the tiny red-bordered pixie and the Mexican silverspot. Forty percent of the nation’s 700 butterflies come to the Rio Grande Valley and more than 200, many rare breeds, are seen here at the National Butterfly Center.

“Until recently, people haven’t thought of butterflies as wildlife,” Executive Director Marianna Wright tells us. “But they are an indicator species, even more so than honey bees, and they’re wonderful pollinators. Our goal is to get people to plant native gardens in their own backyards to attract butterflies.”

The NBC’s 100-acre property features a bright-green exhibit building, gardens with native plants alive with butterflies, a wooded area with trails and butterfly feeding stations, and a birding area with a water feature and picnic tables. Munoz regularly fills the butterfly feeders with a mixture of ripe banana, brown sugar, and dark, non-pasteurized



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beer — and judging from the dozens of butterflies flitting about, they love the stuff.

We pull into Bentsen Palms RV Resort, a motorhome park popular with nature lovers. Most RVers here come for the season, but we find a rare empty site for a few nights. This RV park attracts a lot of bird-watchers who walk or ride free bikes into Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, which is next door. They also like the full hookups, swimming pool and spa, fitness center, wood shop, dog runs and organic garden. As the sun sets, a live Western band begins playing and we can't resist joining other RVers for a bit of West Texas line dancing.

While Bentsen Palms RV Resort is usually full during winter's high season, the Valley has hundreds of RV parks where you can stay for a day, a week, a season, or a lifetime. Some are modest and inexpensive; others are quite elegant and charge higher rates. A number cater to the 55-and-older crowd and, in many, people return year after year and create close-knit communities. In all the parks, we find people are incredibly friendly and welcoming.

HISTORY, GRAPEFRUIT, TAMALES

Nothing in the Rio Grande Valley is far away. Towns like Pharr, Edinburg, Harlingen, Hidalgo, McAllen, and Weslaco are strung like pearls connected by Highway 83, a modern freeway that runs the length of the Valley. We motor north just off 83 to Edinburg, home to the Museum of South Texas History. Located in a beautiful Mexican-style building decorated with colorful tile and wrought iron, this museum traces the history of the area from its origins as an ancient sea through original peoples, Spanish exploration, the Mexican War, cattle ranching and the expansion of the railroads, and how irrigation and farming shaped the Valley.

We head over to McAllen, one of the Valley's largest towns, to Quinta Mazatlan, a historic adobe home built in the 1930s and now owned by the City of McAllen. It's a 20-acre urban birding preserve and part of the World Birding Center. As we walk along Quinta Mazatlan's winding paths, chachalacas scurry underfoot and a screech owl pokes its head out of a hole in

a palm tree. Despite a busy street and the McAllen International Airport just across the road, Quinta Mazatlan feels quiet, protected and natural.

"Even though we're an urban sanctuary, you'll see 20 different species of birds that don't migrate north of the Valley," says Colleen Hook, public relations director for the site.

We pass a recently added pond area and a belted kingfisher swoops in and scoops up a small fish. Next door is a green-built education building where homeowners learn how to transform their own backyards into wildlife sanctuaries. "We're changing the world one backyard at a time," Hook says.

Another piece of Rio Grande history can be found at the Old Hidalgo Pumphouse Museum and World Birding Center a few minutes away in the little town of Hidalgo. Irrigation has played a huge part in the development of the Valley, and this old pump house is where it all started in 1909. The Hidalgo Pumphouse, once run by giant steam engines, delivered 25,000-acre-feet of water to grow citrus and vegetables, and much of the old machinery, pipes and pumps are still intact.

Downstairs, there's a fascinatingly detailed model rail exhibit documenting the railroad's influence on the Valley. Built with countless hours by model rail enthusiast Arthur Nemes and valued at more than \$100,000, the rail cars and tiny towns on display are accurate miniatures of railroading in South Texas in the 1950s and '60s.

Hidalgo Pumphouse has spurred our interest in the Valley's agricultural past, so we go in search of Texas Reds, the area's super-sweet red grapefruit. They're in season and we want to buy them from the source, so we drive a few miles of out of McAllen to Klement Grove & Country Store. This family-owned farm sells 20 different varieties of citrus fruit, including grapefruit, oranges, tangerines, tangelos, kumquats, limes and lemons. While the Valley's agricultural land is threatened by development, farmers like the Klements are hanging on. We buy a half-bushel of Rio Star grapefruit at the bargain price of \$7.50.

Another unique characteristic of the Rio Grande Valley is that it's a country-

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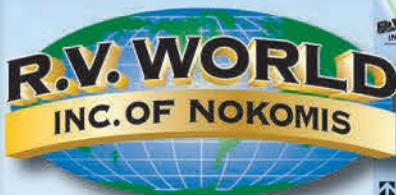
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FLY AWAY TO THE MAGIC VALLEY

within-a-country. Nearly 80 percent of the RGV's population is Hispanic, so you'll find plenty of beautiful Mexican architecture and Talavera tile, lively Tejano music and deliciously authentic Mexican food. Twice we stop at Delia's, a small local chain selling handmade tamales by the dozen, to load up our motorhome's freezer. We also stock our refrigerator with handmade tortillas and super-melty Oaxaca cheese.

We shop downtown McAllen with stores catering to Mexican tastes, including elaborate, sparkly dresses for girl's sweet-15 parties (Quinceañeras). Even grocery stores in the RGV are fun to shop, with plenty of Mexican and international foods and goods you don't usually find.

Our time in the RGV is nearly over and we want one last chance to see the area's birds. We drive to Estero Llano Grande State Park and World Birding Center, at 230-acres, home to the largest wetland network in the WBC. Because of the many shallow lakes, woodlands, and thorn forest, this park attracts a spectacular array of water birds. We join a group of 40 or so birders and six volunteer leaders and, before we travel 10 feet, we spot green-, blue-, and yellow-crowned herons in the shallow ponds. Then there are neotropical cormorants, American coots, stilts, white pelicans, laughing gulls and more.

It's hard to imagine that this area was once cultivated farm fields. Through a cooperative effort by several agencies and nonprofits, including the Texas Parks Department and Ducks Unlimited, and countless hours put in by RVing volunteers like Mary Elder and her husband, Dave, of Ontario, Estero Llano has become the crown jewel of the World Birding Center.

"This is the best little park in Texas," Dave says, peering through his binoculars at a blue heron dressed in elegant mating plumage. "We have a lot of water here and a concentration of birds that makes it really easy and fun for anyone to see."

Those birds are just one of many great reasons we'll be flying back to the Rio Grande Valley again and again. ♦



Bobbie Hasselbring is a frequent contributor to *MotorHome* and editor of www.realfoodtraveler.com, which covers authentic food and travel. Bobbie owns a Class C Jayco Greyhawk SS.

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by CHRIS HEMER



For many of us, the end goal in a lifetime of RV experience is a diesel pusher. When it comes to long-distance travel, the appeal of one of these coaches is hard to ignore; rolling effortlessly down the highway with an unobstructed view of the world around you, the comforts of home and luxury appointments close at hand. There's a reason why professional musicians tour this way — because the spaciousness, convenience and tranquility of a diesel pusher is unmatched by any other form of travel.

Like any RV purchase, there are varying levels of splendor depending on your budget, needs and personal preferences. As an RV manufacturer, determining what customers really want from a luxury diesel pusher and what they're willing to do without at a certain price point is an unenviable task, but one that Forest River has executed with finesse in its new 43-foot Charleston 430FK diesel pusher.

Built on a Freightliner XC chassis with an 8.9-liter, 450-hp Cummins and an Allison 3000 six-speed automatic transmission, it's got the goods from a mechanical standpoint. It looks the part, too, resplendent in one of four available full-body paint schemes (Cinnamon Glaze pictured). And once you step foot into the living area with the slideouts deployed, you'll be hard pressed to tell the difference between the Charleston's interior, and one of a coach costing much more. Porcelain tile flooring, cherry cabinets, genuine Corian countertops and Ultraleather furniture tell you that no expenses were spared here. Naturally, we were eager to settle into the comfy Flexsteel pilot and copilot seats and embark on a full test to see how well Forest River delivers big pusher luxury for a price well south of \$400,000.

Like most coaches in this class, the Charleston features side-hinged luggage doors, cavernous pass-through storage, and

slide-out storage trays to make loading/unloading easier. The area easily accommodated the trappings for four people with room to spare — but checking the other compartments in the coach, we were pleasantly surprised to find that everything has been designed for easy access — from the 10 kW Cummins Onan genset that slides out of the nose, to the four 6-volt house batteries on a slide-out tray in the rear. Moreover, we noted that Forest River made a concerted effort to make maintenance easy; the transmission and diesel exhaust fluid (DEF) reservoirs are located within their own exterior compartments, and the plumbing and electrical systems have been laid out in a logical, intuitive manner.

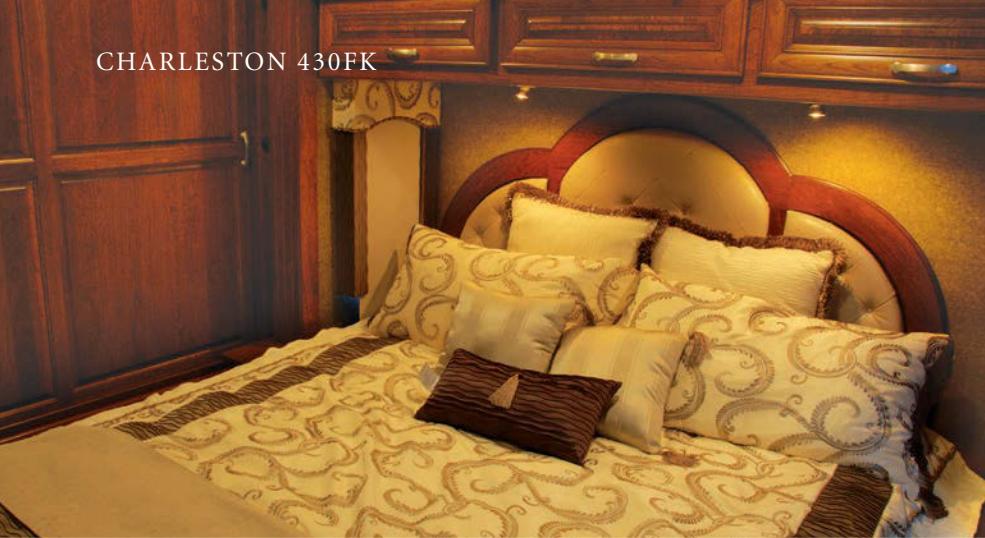
On the road, the Freightliner's 55-degree wheel cut makes maneuvering through residential streets a no-stress affair, and with the expansive one-piece front windshield and side-view cameras, visibility is no concern, either. We headed east on U.S. Highway 101 toward California's Conejo Grade, a long, 6 percent that will put any coach or big rig to the test. At full throttle in fourth gear, the big Cummins managed to keep speed at 52 mph, which is perfectly acceptable for a coach of this size.

On Interstate 210, we were reminded once again about a diesel pusher's highway manners in general. Approaching the desert oasis of Palm Springs, Calif., side winds were nearly ever present, yet the big pusher seemed as stable as a house on a concrete foundation. And with the engine mounted some 40 feet behind us, about the only thing we heard was the whoosh of passing air, interrupted only by the occasional squeak or rattle from the cabinets and/or furniture — a common trait in most homes on wheels. Not so common was the racket created by the entry door, which screeched like an enraged squirrel when the headwinds picked up — but we're sure this is something that could be remedied with a few adjustments at the dealership.



PHOTOS: CHRIS HEMER

The Charleston 430FK features an abundance of interior lighting with dimmer switches, as well as accent lighting on the window valances and behind the TV.



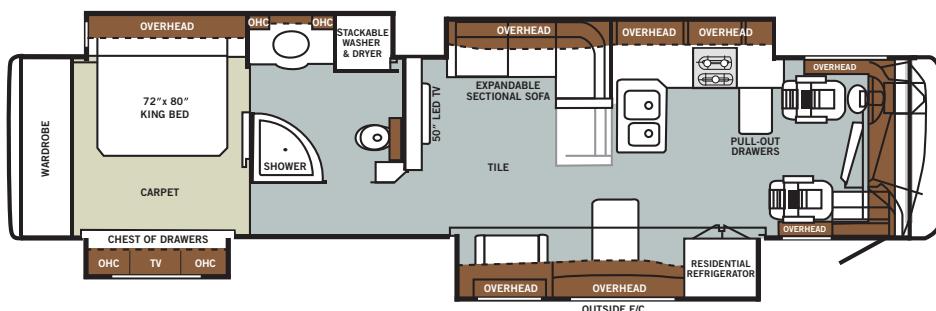
Even though it was an afternoon before the weekend, we didn't anticipate much traffic, and looked forward to smooth sailing all the way to our destination at Outdoor Resort Palm Springs (which is actually located in nearby Cathedral City, Calif.). But this is Southern California, and of course, we were dead wrong. By Pasadena, traffic was reduced to stop and go, which could have been a stressful situation. But we soon recomposed ourselves when we found that the coach's air brakes were excellent — and the standard two-stage engine brake made short stops effortless. In the first mode, the brake simply slows the coach down — but in the second, more aggressive stage, it slows the coach as if the brake pedal were firmly applied. Very comforting, indeed.

We rolled into our destination and were greeted by a well-manicured golf course and sweeping mountain vistas. Outdoor Resort is a gated RV community with RV sites for sale or rent, full hookups with 50-amp service and amenities such as 27 holes of golf, 14 lighted tennis courts, eight swimming pools, a fitness center and more. Our hosts were kind enough to provide us with a site that backed up to the golf course, and soon we were hooked up and ready to enjoy the evening.

One of the paradoxes of the RV industry is that, the larger and more luxuri-



ous the coach, the less room it has for its occupants. While an \$80,000 Class C might have room to accommodate six or more, the majority of diesel pushers are designed for two, possibly four occupants total. While the Charleston is similarly designed, its living area and galley are perfectly suited for entertaining substantially larger groups. The galley has an abundance of counter space, and if you need more, a pullout counter/drawer extension creates a U-shape workspace large enough for two chefs to enjoy. Also unlike many luxury coaches, this one actually has a three-burner gas stove, which is accompanied by a large Whirlpool con-



SPECIFICATIONS

PERFORMANCE

FUEL ECONOMY: 6.4 MPG

CHASSIS

MODEL: FREIGHTLINER XC RAISED RAIL

ENGINE: 8.9-LITER CUMMINS ISL

SAE HP: 450 @ 2,100 RPM

TORQUE: 1,250 LB-FT @ 1,400 RPM

TRANSMISSION: ALLISON 3000MH

6-SPEED AUTOMATIC

AXLE RATIO: N/A

TIRES: P275/80R/22.5

WHEELBASE: 266"

BRAKES: 17-INCH AIR DISC BRAKES WITH ABS FRONT; 16.5 X 7-INCH DRUM WITH ABS REAR; 15 X 7-INCH DRUM WITH ABS TAG AXLE

SUSPENSION: NEWAY AS AIR SUSPENSION FRONT; NEWAY AD AIR SUSPENSION REAR; NEWAY NON-LIFTING CA-110 WITH AIR SUSPENSION AND AIR DUMP, TAG AXLE

FUEL CAP: 100 GAL

WARRANTY: 3 YRS/50,000 MILES

COACH

EXT LENGTH: 43'

EXT WIDTH: 8' 4"

EXT HEIGHT: 12' 2"

INT WIDTH: 8'

INT HEIGHT: 7'

CONSTRUCTION: TUBULAR ALUMINUM/STEEL FRAMING; VACUUM BONDED FLOOR; 2-POUND DENSITY BLOCK FOAM INSULATION, VACUUM BONDED SIDE WALLS, GEL-COATED FIBERGLASS SKIN; CROWNED FIBERGLASS ROOF; FIBERGLASS FRONT/REAR CAPS

FRESHWATER CAP: 86 GAL

BLACK-WATER CAP: 60 GAL

GRAY-WATER CAP: 60 GAL

WATER-HEATER CAP: CONTINUOUS

LP-GAS CAP: 24.5 GAL

AIR CONDITIONER: (1) 13,500-BTU LOW PROFILE WITH HEAT PUMP FRONT; (1) 13,500-BTU LOW-PROFILE WITH HEAT PUMP REAR; (1) 11,000-BTU LOW PROFILE CENTER

FURNACE: (2) 20,000 BTU

REFRIGERATOR: 19.8 CU-FT RESIDENTIAL

INVERTER/CHARGER: 2,000 WATTS/50 AMPS

BATTERY: (2) 12-VOLT CHASSIS, (4) 6-VOLT COACH

AC GENERATOR: 10 KW

MSRP: \$359,993

MSRP AS TESTED: \$359,993

WARRANTY: 1 YR

WET WEIGHT

(WATER & HEATER, FUEL, LP-GAS TANKS FULL; NO SUPPLIES OR PASSENGERS)

FRONT AXLE: 12,000 LBS

REAR AXLE: 21,880 LBS

TOTAL: 33,880 LBS

CHASSIS RATINGS

GAWR, F/R: 14,350 LBS/20,000 LBS (10,000 TAG)

GVWR/GCWR: 44,320/59,320 LBS

ROCCC: 10,440 LBS (DEDUCT WEIGHT OF PASSENGERS FOR NET CARGO CAPACITY)

GAWR: GROSS AXLE WEIGHT RATING

GVWR: GROSS VEHICLE WEIGHT RATING

GCWR: GROSS COMBINATION WEIGHT RATING

ROCCC: REALISTIC OCCUPANT AND CARGO CARRYING CAPACITY (FULL WATER, NO PASSENGERS)

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vection microwave that takes the place of a traditional oven. At the other end of the galley is a large double stainless sink, and on the curb slide, a stainless steel residential Whirlpool refrigerator that operates on inverter power when you're not plugged in. After preparing several meals, we found very little fault with the galley; about the only things on our wish list were a pantry and more storage space down low for heavier items and/or a trash can.

For years, whenever you wanted to watch a movie, it meant everyone had to swivel their heads to the front of the coach, and look up at the cockpit-mounted TV that cracked you in the head every time you got into, or stepped out of, the driver's seat. Thankfully, those days are largely behind us — but it still seems like many floorplans struggle with a logical, comfortable place to put a large flat-screen TV where everyone can see it. The 430FK, on the other hand, essentially features what can be described as a mini living room, with an expandable sectional sofa that faces a 50-inch LED flat-screen over an electric fireplace. It's not only a cozy place for four

or more, the TV can be seen comfortably from the curbside recliner, two-place extendable dinette, or the swiveling cockpit seats. By our count, entertaining eight to 10 comfortably shouldn't be a problem.

In fact, you could probably entertain several more outside, courtesy the one-touch power awning and outdoor entertainment system mounted in the side wall and protected by a separate door. The system works fine, except it seems small for a coach of this size — and the lack of exterior lighting doesn't make for a festive outdoor experience. Full-length LED lighting along the awning would be a very welcome addition here.

While rear bath models with a mid-coach half bath are more convenient for multiple users, the 430FK's large bath, with its Jack-and-Jill arrangement, works well enough. There's an entry door off the short hallway that allows access from the living area, as well as a pocket door off the bedroom. Just make sure to lock both doors once inside to avoid any awkward encounters. We found the area to be very roomy, with plenty of countertop space and ade-

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quate storage for towels and such. The ne-angle shower looks great and is wide, but not very deep; I'm 6-foot 1 inch and 190 pounds and had to be economical with my movements. Also, while the tankless water heater provides endless hot water, we found that mixer valve caused the temperature to fluctuate too quickly for us to adjust.

The bathroom area in our test coach featured a stacked washer/dryer in its own cabinet, a great convenience on the road. But we learned the hard way that you have to make sure to always close the cabinet

doors before you pull in the bedroom slide. The streetside bedroom slideout also incorporates the bathroom wall, so while the lav and washer/dryer cabinet move in/out with the slide, the other components in the room remain fixed. No problem in and of itself, but when you're stowing the slide, you're standing in the hallway and can't see into the bathroom to make sure everything's out of the way. As I brought the slide back in, I was startled by a sharp cracking sound, and immediately stopped the slide to see what was wrong. Earlier

in the day, I had opened the washer/dryer cabinet doors, and as I brought the slide in, the right door interfered with the toilet overhead cabinet, and was subsequently relieved of its hinges. A factory-applied warning label inside the slide control panel would have been helpful, but in lieu of this, I'd recommend you make your own.

Big is the name of the game in a luxury motorcoach, and like many on the market today, the Charleston comes standard with a 72-by-80-inch king bed. Equipped with a Sleep Number air mattress, it's an extraordinarily comfortable place to sleep — but the extra width of the bed means walk-around space is compromised. In my opinion, a queen size bed would be more appropriate here, but that's a matter of personal preference. A large, cedar-lined closet is located along the rear wall, while a chest of drawers with overhead cabinets and a 32-inch LED TV is located in the opposing curbside slide.

Two extra guests can sleep in a tri-fold pullout bed in the sectional sofa, but not very conveniently. A recent trend in the RV industry is to supply an air mattress instead of a regular mattress in the pullout bed; we're guessing the reason behind this is that it's more comfortable than the standard thin mattress used in conventional couch beds. Perhaps, but unfolding a bed, then unrolling a mattress, plugging it in and blowing it up with a loud air pump isn't an ideal scenario, particularly if those in the bedroom are already asleep. Putting the bed away in the morning also takes a lot longer, and of course, you've got the normal air bed issues to contend with, like excessive bouncing when your partner turns over, and little air leaks that appear over time.

Overall, however, there was very little to complain about. In fact, the only other recommendation we would make is to replace the inexpensive cable-operated slide mechanisms with more robust hydraulic units, at least in the large, heavy dinette slide. Here, the mechanism seemed to labor excessively to bring the slide back in, which was cause for consternation, as cables have a tendency to stretch, even break over time.

As we drove home, our eyes shielded from the sun by the excellent power shades, our initial impression of the Charleston 430FK was unchanged — this big pusher offers great bang for the buck — and probably more than you would expect. ♦



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IN A MARKET DOMINATED BY THE MERCEDES-BENZ SPRINTER CHASSIS, SEVERAL NEW PLAYERS EMERGE FOR 2014

by BOB ASHLEY



2014 Freightliner Sprinters

FIRST-CLASS B's

Change is coming to the Class B motorhome market in 2014 with two new European-based platforms on which RV manufacturers are expected to build: The new ProMaster van, already available from Chrysler's Ram truck division, and the 2015 Ford Transit van that is expected to debut early next year.

Both will challenge the decade-long market supremacy of the diesel-powered

Mercedes-Benz Sprinter chassis, which, as an RV platform, outsold the domestic Chevy Express van by more than two-to-one in 2012. The Chevy Express has been the Sprinter's primary competitor in the RV market since Ford mothballed the popular Ford E-series van last year.

And camper van builders are quickly adapting. Winnebago Industries Inc. got a jump on the market this summer with the introduction of the long-anticipated

Travato van camper on the Ram ProMaster chassis, while others already have plans to add the Ford Transit to their stable when it becomes available.

"There is additional competition coming," noted Jim Brieske, specialty vehicle manager for General Motors Fleet and Commercial Operations.

The suddenly increased competition in the Class B market portends well for consumers. More chassis mean more



Ford Transit



Ram ProMaster

choices with regard to price, floorplans and powerplants.

Horsepower and gross vehicle weight rating (gvwr) for Ford's unibody Transit haven't been established yet, but it will be equipped with a V-6 gas or 3.2-liter diesel engine with wheelbases from 130 to 147 inches.

The Ram ProMaster, powered by a 280-hp 3.6-liter gasoline engine, features high- and low-roof models with a gvwr of 9,350 pounds and wheelbases up to 159 inches, while the Chevy Express provides a gvwr up to 9,600 pounds with a 324-hp 6.2-liter powerplant.

Although new to North America, both the ProMaster, based on the European Fiat Ducato, and the Ford Transit, upfitted for the U.S. market, have long been used in Europe as motorhome and commercial van platforms.

"Transit has been available in Europe for more than 40 years," said Craig Hall, Ford Motor Company's specialty vehicle marketing manager. "It's not a new vehicle, per se."

Hall says the Transit — not to be confused with the smaller Transit Connect — will be available in several lengths, roof heights and gvwr. "Fuel prices are going up, and the consumer wants better fuel mileage, which the Transit will provide," he said.

The Ram ProMaster also has a long history. "The ProMaster is a proven platform," said Joe Benson, head of Ram commercial trucks. "It's been on the European market for over 30 years and 4.5 million have been sold worldwide. Two out of every three RV owners (in Europe) have chosen the Ducato on the Fiat platform."

Meanwhile, the Class B king, Mercedes-Benz, isn't sitting still. The luxury European manufacturer is modifying the 2014 Sprinter chassis — released in September — with a redesigned front end and new 4-cylinder diesel engine that is expected to get 15 to 18 percent better fuel economy. Most van camper manufacturers that build on the Sprinter chassis will make the change to the new chassis in the middle of their 2014 model year.

Here's a look at what some prominent B-van manufacturers are offering for 2014 (note: Sprinter-based photos are on the 2013 chassis).

ADVANCED RV

Factory-direct Advanced RV LLC of Willoughby, Ohio, offers an optional "Independence Package" in the all-diesel Gulf Coast and Ocean One Class B motorhomes that include two solar panels to charge a set of lithium-iron batteries that also can be charged by a shore connection or through an optional generator attached to the engine. Standard with diesel ap-



pliances — including a hydronic heating system and on-demand hot water — the Gulf Coast is built on the standard 22-foot Sprinter chassis while Ocean One 24-footer is assembled on the Sprinter's dual-wheel extended platform. Both include a touch-screen Silverleaf multiplex system to monitor tank levels and batteries; it also acts as a thermostat and starts the generator. Although highly customizable, Gulf Coast and Ocean One are equipped with convertible electric sofas — fixed double or twin beds are optional — LED lighting, heated floors, custom ground effects with integrated running boards, European-style cabinets, portable single-burner induction cooktop and a Keurig K-Cup coffeemaker. Retail prices start at about \$137,000.

**Advanced RV, 440-283-0405,
www.advanced-rv.com**

AIRSTREAM

Jackson Center, Ohio-based Airstream Inc.'s Interstate Class B has been the best-selling van camper brand for the last three years and will be mounted on the 2014 Mercedes-Benz Sprinter chassis with a standard 161-hp 6-cylinder diesel engine by the time you read this. Available in seven 22 and 24-foot floorplans on standard and extended Sprinter chassis, the Interstate has been upgraded for 2014 with a larger TV, Alcoa DuraBright aluminum wheels, an enhanced navigation system and Xenon headlights with automatic rain-sensing washers. Other standards include Corian countertops and pedestal tables, high-gloss laminate cabinets, power rear sofas or twin beds, Ultraleather seating and adjustable LED lighting. MSRPs start at \$137,364.



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FIRST-CLASS B'S

GREAT WEST VAN CONVERSIONS

Great West Van Conversions Inc. of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, builds three van



campers: the Legend, Legend SE and Legend XE — all mounted on the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter diesel platform with a gvwr of 11,030 pounds. Two floorplans, one with a tri-fold rear bed, the other with twin beds, are available in all three models. The Legend and upgraded Legend SE are 22 feet, while the Legend XE is 24 feet and

offers more living space, a longer bed and four coach batteries. Both the Legend SE and XE are equipped with hydronic heating/hot water, along with a standard 85-watt solar panel. All models feature solid wood cabinets, recessed LED lighting, Avonite countertops and laminate hardwood-look floors. Base MSRPs: Legend, \$110,000; Legend SE, \$120,000; Legend EX, \$128,000.



Great West Van Conversions, 204-338-9303, www.greatwestvans.com

PLEASURE-WAY INDUSTRIES

Pleasure-Way offers two Class B platforms in varying lengths — the 19½-foot Ascent and 22-foot 9-inch dual-wheel Plateau on the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter; and the 20½-foot Lexor on the Chevy 3500 Express. GVWRs are 8,500 pounds on the Ascent, 11,030 pounds on the Plateau and 9,600



pounds with a 320-hp gas engine on the Lexor. Pleasure-Way will start building on the 2014 Mercedes-Benz Sprinter equipped with a 4-cylinder diesel engine when they become available later this year. Standard features include a

shower, maple cabinets, Corian countertop, stainless steel sink and two-burner stove/cooktop. Its 2014 RVs come with a 5 Year/60,000 mile limited warranty. Base MSRPs: Lexor, \$87,000; Ascent, \$109,000; Plateau, \$111,540.

Pleasure-Way Industries, 800-364-0189, www.pleasureway.com



ROADTREK

Roadtrek Motorhomes Inc., Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, has introduced for 2014 the 22-foot CS-Adventurous series built on the Sprinter dual-wheel chassis with a gvwr of 11,030 pounds. The floorplan is versatile with three captains chairs up front and a rear convertible sofa or twin beds, either of which can be converted into a king-size sleeping platform. The front-seating and rear-sleeping areas allow two people to get up and go to bed at different times without disturbing each other. Features on the new CS-Adventurous include frameless windows, marine toilets, engineered granite countertops, cherry cabinet doors and heavy-duty vinyl flooring. An optional E-Trek package allows the coach to be operated "off-the-grid" with an engine-mounted 3500 watt generator, eight 6-volt solar-charged AGM batteries and an Alde comfort heating system that includes hot water. Base MSRP: \$115,960. Roadtrek Motorhomes, 519-745-1169, www.roadtrek.com



TRIPLE E RV

Winkler, Manitoba, Canada-based Triple E RV has designed a driver-side slideout in the 2014 Leisure Travel Vans Free Spirit FS22SS Class B motorhome. Built on the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter chassis with a gvwr of 11,030 pounds, Triple E will give the buyer the option of a 4- or 6-cylinder diesel engine when it goes into production with the 2014 Sprinter chassis. New to the 22-foot 9-inch Free Spirit for 2014 is an electric convertible sofa, new roof trim with integrated power awning and a 4.8-cubic-foot refrigera-



tor. The FS22SS, one of two Free Spirit floorplans, takes a cue from European designers with curved cabinets and a self-contained lavatory. Standards include contoured Corian countertops, radius windows and powered patio awning. Base MSRP: \$113,815. Triple E Recreational Vehicles, 877-992-9906, www.tripleerv.com

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WINNEBAGO

Winnebago Industries Inc., long an innovator in the Class B market, has introduced the Travato motorhome assembled on the Ram ProMaster chassis with a gvw of 9,350 pounds. The more affordable 21-foot, front-wheel drive Travato from the Forest City, Iowa, manufacturer is equipped with a 280-hp V-6 gasoline engine that gets an estimated 15 to 18 MPG. With more vertical side walls than Winnebago's Sprinter-based Era Class B, the Travato provides 4 additional inches of shoulder room and offers features such as a soft vinyl ceiling, LED interior lights, shower, powered patio awning, laminate countertops, two-burner range and a refrigerator with a removable freezer unit. MSRP: \$84,039. **Winnebago Industries, 641-585-3535, www.winnebagoind.com** ♦



Bob Ashley is a columnist for RV Business magazine and has covered the industry for nearly 20 years. He is a recipient of the "Distinguished Service in RV Journalism" award from the Recreation Vehicle Industry Association (RVIA).

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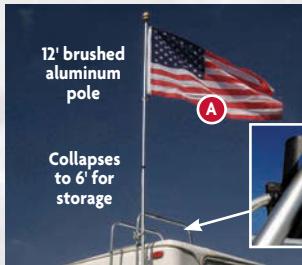
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PHOTO: CHRIS HEMER

TREAD SMARTLY

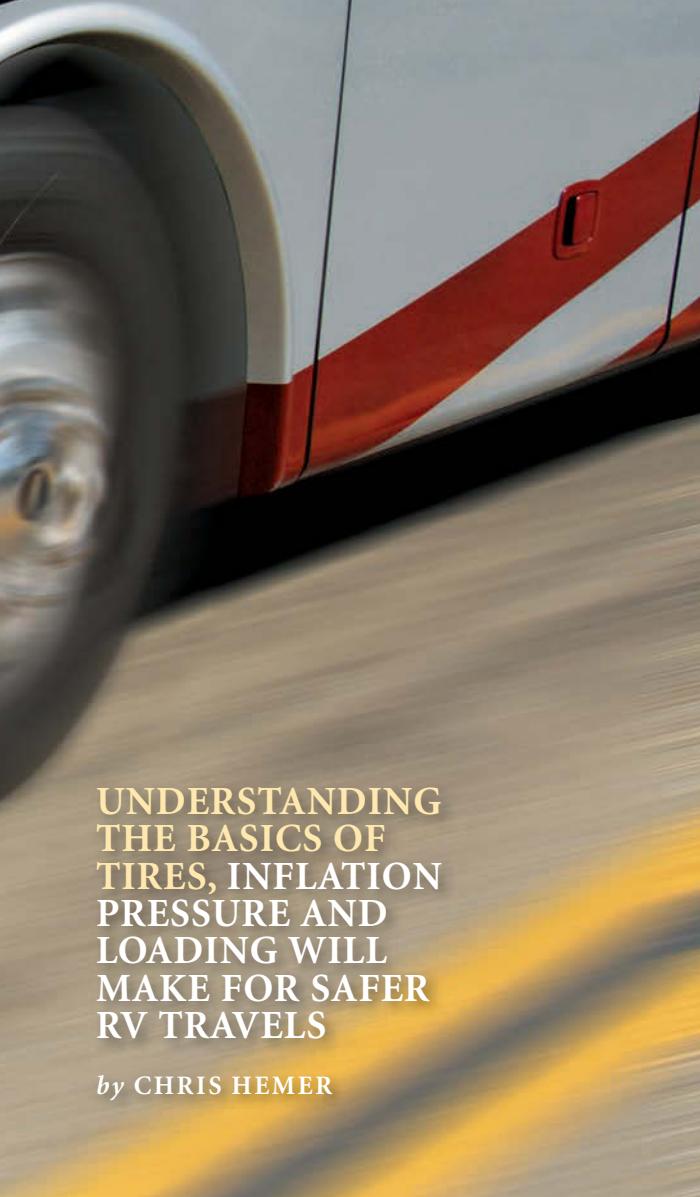
When you stop and think about the things you love about your motorhome, you might consider its sleek appearance, comfy living area and cavernous storage capacity — not to mention all the memories you’ve made over the years with family and friends. But we’re willing to bet that your rig’s tires are probably not on the list of things you love — and that’s a shame, because they’re quite possibly the most important components on your coach. In addition to a good ride and stable handling, motorhome tires must safely support the load placed on them, endure thousands of miles and last up to 10 years. How well, or more importantly, how safely these tires carry out their objectives has everything to do with proper inflation pressure, loading, storage and maintenance — responsibilities that you, the motorhome owner, must take charge of. As such, it’s important not only to learn about motorhome tires, but also to become somewhat of an expert on the subject. The safety of yourself, your family and the other motorists you share the road with depend on it.

With all this in mind, we’re providing a primer on load/inflation, an overview of tire sidewall numbers, tips on tire care and a guide to help you find the right tires for your

coach. Though the focus of this article will be on the commercial-style tires found on Class A motorhomes, keep in mind that many of the same principles (including tire inflation pressure, weight and loading) still apply to the light truck (LT) tires used on Class B and most Class C motorhomes.

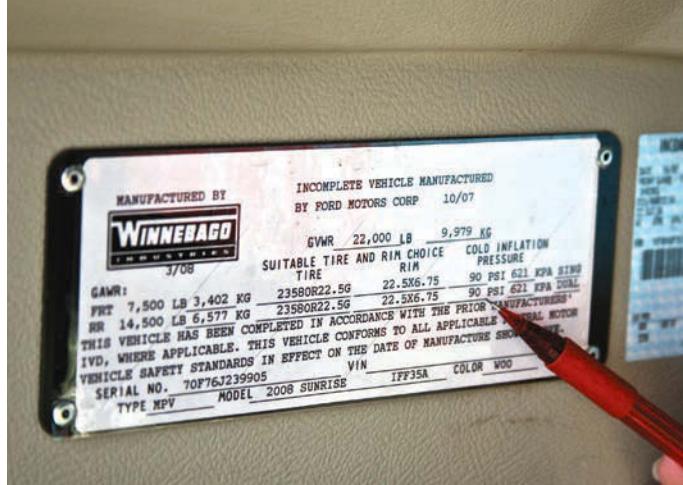
PERFORMANCE UNDER PRESSURE

Unlike passenger car tires, where the maximum inflation pressure on the sidewall should never be exceeded, the pressure figure on the sidewall of a light truck or medium duty truck tire is the *minimum* pressure necessary to carry the *maximum* load. In other words, if a tire reads “Max load single: 3,640 lbs at 65 psi cold,” 65 psi is the minimum cold inflation pressure necessary to carry the maximum load figure. As such, some motorhome owners may be inclined to inflate the tire in our example to 65 psi — but unless that tire is carrying its maximum load, the extra pressure isn’t necessary. In fact, tire manufacturers like Goodyear and Michelin publish load/inflation tables (available online) that indicate how much weight a tire can carry based on inflation pressure. Therefore, it is recommended that you weigh your coach when it is loaded and ready for travel (including passenger weight,



UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF TIRES, INFLATION PRESSURE AND LOADING WILL MAKE FOR SAFER RV TRAVELS

by CHRIS HEMER



If you haven't weighed your coach, the safest bet is to refer to the weight tag in the cockpit for the recommended inflation pressure.



A dual chuck tire inflator, like this one, will allow you to effectively access the valve stems of both tires in a dually arrangement.

fuel, fresh water, supplies, etc.) to determine the amount of air necessary to carry your load. While you may find that you need to inflate the front and rear tires to different pressures for their respective loads, it is critical that tire pressures remain the same across an axle (even if the weight from side-to-side is different) to ensure safe handling.

Once you've determined proper inflation pressure, it's important that you check inflation pressure regularly. Michelin recommends you check it at least once each month and before embarking on any long trip. If your trip takes more than one day, it should be checked every morning before continuing on; if you are on a day trip, it should be checked before you leave, and again before returning home. Tire pressure should always be checked when the tires are cold — i.e., not driven for more than 1 mile. If you must check tire pressure when the tires are warm, allow for an increase in air pressure of up to 15 psi and be sure that tires on the same axle carry the same air pressure. If your coach has dual rear wheels with the stock stem arrangement in place, the best way to do this is to use a truck tire air pressure gauge that has an angled, dual head that allows you to check inflation pressure on the inner and outer dual wheels of your coach.



Dually valve kits feature valve extensions (pictured) that make it easy to inflate/check inner dual tires.

Another option is a “dually valve” adapter kit that makes checking tire pressure easier without the use of any specialized equipment.

Apart from the fact that correct inflation pressure will yield the best fuel economy, ride, handling and longevity, it will also help prevent damage that can cause sudden tire failure. Remember that, any time an underinflated tire is run at normal highway speeds, the excessive flex builds heat that can damage the inner liner, casing and outer sidewall of the tire. What's more, when one tire in a dual configuration is underinflated, the other tire can be overloaded, and should be inspected for damage as well.

Incidentally, the improper use of leveling blocks can cause damage similar to that created by overloading or under inflation. When purchasing or building leveling blocks for your coach, make sure that they are wider than the tire's tread, and longer than its footprint. In the case of the rear duals, make sure both tires are supported equally to prevent overloading.

BY THE NUMBERS

Besides load and inflation, another thing motorhome owners must become accustomed with are the numbers molded into the sidewalls. What you need to concern yourself with in particular are size, load ratings and the DOT number, which indicates (among other things) the date the tire was manufactured.

Let's start with size. A typical Class A motorhome tire would be a 275/70R22.5. “275” is the design width of the tire expressed in millimeters; 70 is the aspect ratio, expressed as a percentage. The aspect ratio indicates the height or profile of the sidewall relative to the cross section width. In this instance, the sidewall is 70 percent as tall as the cross section is wide. “R” indicates radial, and 22.5 is the rim diameter. One thing that's absent from a large motorhome tire that you'll see on an automotive tire is a speed rating. That's because motorhome tires do not have to pass the same high-speed tests as passenger car tires, so most use a blanket rating of 75 mph. It's unlikely that you'd ever need (or want) to drive beyond this speed, but just keep in mind that doing so will exceed the tire's design limit — and could result in sudden tire failure.

CONTINENTAL

Like many tire manufacturers that offer RV-specific tires, Continental offers tires for both steer and drive applications.



Steer: HSL1 Coach

The HSL1 Coach offers superior comfort and quiet running with low vibration. The tire's 19/32" five rib tread pattern offers great handling for maximum safety, while a low rolling resistance compound provides excellent fuel economy. Available in 315/80R22.5, Load Range L.

Steer: HSR 19.5

This 16/32" all-position tread pattern provides long mileage in regional and local service. Even with its aggressive tread design that improves wet handling performance, the HSR offers excellent lateral stability to minimize squirm, and the closed shoulder pattern provides even wear and reduced noise. Parking in the city? A scuff rib protects against curbing, cuts and abrasions. Available in 225/70R19.5, Load Range G.



Drive: Conti EcoPlus HD3

The Conti EcoPlus HD3 features a new casing with high air dispersion for improved durability and enhanced retreadability. Its wide, closed shoulder tread design with 3-D sipe technology provides superior stability, excellent traction and improved mileage. The advanced tread compound provides low rolling resistance, and the patented groove technology means minimal stone retention in the 26/32" deep treads. Available in 11R22.5, 295/75R22.5 and 11R24.5 in load ranges G and H.

Drive: HDR

The HDR offers a multi-service tread compound designed for local and long-haul service. Its offset center tread blocks provide excellent all-weather traction, and its tapered tread grooves reduce stone retention for long casing life and multiple retreads. Available in 245/70R19.5 and 265/70R19.5 in load range H with 20/32" tread depth; 285/70R19.5 in load range H with 21/32" tread depth; 255/70R22.5 in load range H with 26/32" tread depth; and 275/70R22.5 in load range H with 22/32" tread depth.



GOODYEAR

Goodyear only offers the Unisteel G670 RV tire for Class A motorhome applications, but it is offered in multiple sizes and load ranges to suite most applications. The tire's circumferential grooves enhance wet weather traction and the “high technology” belt system improves ride comfort. In addition, the tread pattern is designed to produce lower heat, greater strength and reduced tread squirm for better handling. The casing design helps improve fuel economy, while the compound helps guard against the harmful effects of ozone and UV rays. It's backed by a 4-Year Limited Warranty. Available in sizes from 225/70R19.5 to 315/80R22.5, load ranges F through L.

MICHELIN

Michelin offers three different lines of RV tires to suit a multitude of applications: The XRV, the XZA and the XZE.



XRV

The XRV is an all-position (drive or steer) radial that was designed specifically for motorhomes. Wide “see-through” grooves along with multi-siping promote drainage for better wet weather traction as well as long, even wear characteristics. A stable tread with cool-running compound is engineered to reduce squirm and improve handling/durability. Available in five sizes ranging from 225/70R19.5 through 305/70R22.5 and load ranges F,G and L.



XZA2 Energy

The XZA2 Energy features a unique intermediate rib design that helps combat the onset of irregular wear in highway service. An optimized shoulder design yields exceptional handling and responsiveness, while traction and lateral control is enhanced by miniature sipes and variable groove angles. Available in 275/70R22.5, load range J; 295/60R22.5, load range J; 295/80R22.5, load range H; and 315/80R22.5, load range L.



The **XZA3 + EVERTREAD** is Michelin's next-generation, ultra fuel-efficient radial that delivers the company's longest original tread life in long haul service. The tire also offers maximum retreadability, backed by a 3-Retread Manufacturing Limited Casing Warranty: three retreads or 700,000 miles or seven years when retreaded by an authorized Michelin Retread Technologies (MRT) dealer only. The tire also features Michelin's patent-pending Dual Compound Tread for greater fuel efficiency. Available in 11R22.5, load range G or H; 275/80R22.5, G or H.



XZE

If you need an extra tough motorhome tire, the XZE might fill the bill. This all-position radial features an extra-wide, extra-deep tread and beefy, buttressed shoulders to help resist tearing and accelerated wear in high-scrub applications. Extra-strong curb guards help protect the sidewalls against most impacts and abrasions for long casing life. Available in sizes 225/70R19.5 load range F through 275/80R22.5 load range H.

SUMITOMO



Steer: ST 778 SE

The ST 778 is the next-generation Sumitomo long-haul steer tire. Incorporating a collection of advanced features the company calls S-Tech Design, the ST 778 delivers remarkable miles to removal, excellent handling for safe operation, and the dependable retreadability of the Sumitomo casing. The tire's flat contact technology minimizes irregular wear by controlling the shape and pressure distribution of the tire footprint. Available in sizes 11R22.5, load range H; 295/75R22.5 load range G.



Steer: ST 709

Tires designed for regional, steer axle use must be durable across a broad range of conditions. The ST 709 is durable enough when there's serious work to be done, but versatile enough to display on-highway manners. Among this tire's many features are a beefy 20/32" tread with chevron block center ribs and lateral sipes to cut water film, and thick curbing ribs to protect against sidewall damage. Available in sizes 11R22.5, load range G or H; 295/75R22.5, load range G.



All-Position: ST 727

The ST 727 features an all-steel casing for retreadability, plus patented rubber compounds for long mileage and good traction. Its five-rib design offers better vehicle stability in all weather conditions. Available in sizes from 9R22.5, load range G through 275/70R22.5 in load range H.

YOKOHAMA

RY023

Durability and high performance under the toughest conditions are the hallmarks of the Yokohama RY023.

This sure-footed, five-rib, all-position workhorse features a tough band of additional rubber that protects the sidewall from scrubbing damage caused by curbing and other abuses. The long-wearing tread design with semi-rounded shoulders reduces the potential for shoulder ripping/tearing, while enhancing lateral stability, water dispersion and overall traction. A sidewall abrasion guard reduces damage to the sidewall caused by curbing and other accidental scrubbing. Available in sizes 225/70R19.5 load range F through 295/75R22.5 load range H.



As we discussed in the previous section, inflation pressure and load capacity go hand in hand, so the two figures are displayed together on the sidewall. Again, a typical example might read, “Max load single: 6,940 lbs at 130 psi cold; Max load dual: 6,395 lbs at 120 psi cold.” Note that the tire in question is capable of carrying more load single at 130 psi than it is when paired with another tire, which seems odd. But there is a logical reason for this, and it has to do with what is known as road crown.

Almost every road is built with a crown (higher in the center than the sides) to promote water run-off. If you can picture a motorhome with dual rear wheels straddling a crowned road, it’s easy to see that the inner tires are carrying more load than the outers. As such, tire manufacturers reduce the load rating in a dual configuration to prevent overloading.

Finally, remember that just because the tires on your motorhome have tread left doesn’t mean that they should not be replaced. Recall that earlier, we mentioned that motorhome tires are designed for long life — and you may only put 5,000 miles a year on your coach. As such, it is likely that your tires will “time out” before they wear out. This is where those last four digits of the DOT number



When using leveling blocks, always make sure that the block is both wider than the tire’s tread and longer than its footprint.

on the sidewall come in; the first two indicate the week the tire was made, the second two the year. So if the last four numbers read “5004,” it means that the tire was manufactured in the 50th week of 2004. At the end of five years of service, you should have your tires inspected annually by a tire specialist, regardless of the miles they have traveled. Moreover, tire manufacturers are saying seven to 10 years is the age at which a tire should be replaced (including the spare), regardless of apparent condition.

TIRE CARE

The subject of wear indicators and replacement tires is a story unto itself, but we can provide you with some quick tips to keep your tires in tip-top shape.

While the motorhome is in use, keep the tires properly inflated, and rotate them according to the coach manufacturer’s recommendations. Avoid prolonged exposure to UV rays; if you will be parked in an area where direct sun will be on one side of the coach for prolonged periods, use tire covers or some other heavy material to help protect the tires from the sun’s wrath. Keep the tires clean using mild soap (such as car wash soap) and a tire brush, and stay away from tire protectant products that contain alcohol, petroleum products or silicone. When storing your coach, place something between the tires and the concrete or earth; this could be something as light as a plastic tarp or as heavy as plywood covered with sheet metal. Finally, avoid parking near electric generators or transformers, and don’t store your motorhome anywhere that has mercury vapor lamps, or where welding may be performed.

When it comes time to replace your motorhome’s tires, make sure the size and load rating is the same as the tires you are replacing — and know that a tire with a higher load rating may not necessarily be a good thing. For example, a higher load-rated tire may require 105 psi, and your rims may only be rated for 80 psi. The rim’s maximum load and inflation pressure are usually stamped on the rim, but it may be necessary to check with the coach manufacturer to get this information. A qualified tire dealer accustomed

to motorhome tires can help you find a suitable replacement, but it never hurts to do your own homework now, before a replacement is necessary.

Although the preceding might seem like a lot to digest, there’s actually a lot more to learn — more than we have space for here. Continental, Goodyear and Michelin offer excellent resources that you can download to learn more about weight and loading, tire wear, alignment, repair and more. In the end, all you have to do is remember the basics: Proper tire, proper inflation pressure, proper maintenance — and you’ll enjoy safe motorhome travel for years to come.

We contacted some of the leading names in the tire industry, and asked them to provide us with a list of products suitable for RV applications, as well as product descriptions in their own words. While some tires are not designed specifically for RVs (some are listed for commercial truck use) they still can be used on a motorhome provided they are the correct size and load range. Always conduct your own research to find the right tire for your specific application and be sure to consult with your tire dealer to be certain that the tire you’re considering will work on your coach. ♦

FOR MORE INFORMATION

**CONTINENTAL TIRE —
THE AMERICAS, LLC**
704-583-3900,
www.continental-truck.com

**THE GOODYEAR TIRE
AND RUBBER CO.**
800-321-2136,
www.goodyearrvtires.com

MICHELIN U.S.
800-847-3435,
www.michelinrvtires.com

SUMITOMO TIRE
800-238-6469,
www.sumitomotire.com

YOKOHAMA TIRE USA
800-722-9888,
www.yokohamatire.com



AN EASY **TABLET TO TAKE**

WITH THE VERSATILITY OF A SMARTPHONE AND THE POWER OF A LAPTOP, **TABLETS CAN OPEN UP A WHOLE NEW WORLD** OF TRAVELING

by E. DON SMITH

Twenty-five years ago, you could earn your geek badge by simply owning a desktop computer. A few years after that, it took a laptop computer to be a certified computer junkie. Then came the smartphone with Internet and Wi-Fi capability that allowed you to take some mobile computing

ability with you on the road. While this is a huge advantage in that you can search the Internet and use a wide variety of “apps,” the small screen makes using a smartphone as your primary Internet connection tool very hard to do, especially with eyesight that starts to decline past the age of 40.



TABLETS — THE LATEST THING

The latest device, known as a tablet, offers all the mobile connectivity of a smartphone with a size that’s in between a laptop and a phone. Just as with most smartphones, there is not a separate keyboard; instead, the keys are part of the touch screen. Though typing on a touch screen can take a bit of practice, it is the lack of a separate keyboard that allows a tablet to be so small and portable. The tablet is much smaller and easier to carry than a typical laptop and the use of apps makes it a tool worthy of any road warrior. As a die-hard computer geek dating back to the early 1980s, I usually travel with a laptop for serious computing and writing as well as a tablet and a smartphone for more mobile use. When I can only take two, I usually default to the

PHOTOS: E. DON SMITH

smartphone and a tablet.

If you don't already own a tablet, consider the advantages of using one on the road. Imagine being able to find the best restaurants on the road, buy the cheapest fuel, or stay at the best campgrounds. Having a tablet can enhance your RV/travel experiences and open up a world of travel options.

APPLE OR ANDROID?

As with smartphones, there are numerous manufacturers of tablets, but I made the migration to an all-Apple arsenal and my tablet of choice is now an Apple iPad. My wife's choice is the iPad mini, which is just a slightly smaller version of the iPad. I chose the iPad because of the ease of connectivity with my other Apple devices (an iPhone 5, MacBook and iMac). This, in combination with the huge library of apps available in the Mac App Store, is reason enough for me — but if you want to use something else, there are numerous Android-based touch-screen tablets on the market, such as the Samsung Galaxy, Amazon Kindle Fire, Google Nexus, Sony Xperia and many others. If I told you there were 1 million apps available for the iPad/iPhone I would only be slightly exaggerating, as the current total is more than 900,000 for the trio of mobile devices offered by Apple.

Once you decide that a tablet is going to be a tool you use, just make sure the one you purchase meets your needs. In the long run, it serves no purpose to save money and buy a low-cost tablet that will not allow you to do the things you want to do. This means having access to a large library of apps, which is at least half of the reason that a tablet can be such an important tool on the road.

When picking a tablet, make sure you understand the difference between one that is able to get online only through a Wi-Fi connection versus one that can use Wi-Fi and a phone connection to stay connected. Of course, a tablet with a data plan will result in an added expense from your mobile phone carrier, so choose wisely. If you are usually in an area with a Wi-Fi network, you can save some money on the device and access plan, but then you'll be limited to Wi-Fi locations only and you won't be able to use the tablet as a GPS.

Apps, Apps and More Apps



IMAGE COURTESY OF KROMKRATHOG AT FREEDIGITALPHOTOS.NET

Once your touch-screen tablet is up and running, you can start loading apps. I've been using a tablet since the first iPad was released in 2010, and since then I have collected a list of apps that I consider necessary for travel. Of course, every person's needs are different, but hopefully my favorite apps will help you get familiar with the type of apps that are available.

If you are a full-timer who lives in one or two areas of the country, you may not need info on all the rest stops along a particular interstate, or the closest Walgreens to refill your prescription, but you may want to check the value of your IRA online, or want to Skype in audio and video with your family back home. If you are a serious computer user you will probably end up with dozens or maybe even hundreds of apps to take on the road with you.

TRAVEL SERVICES

When traveling, you will likely need to access information about rest areas, fuel, RV parks, etc. For these normal "on the road" travel-related services, a few of my favorite apps are GasBuddy (fuel prices near your current location) and Waze (community-



based traffic conditions and navigation). Virtually all of the national-based truck stops offer apps to help you find their facilities, such as My Pilot, Sinclair, TA, etc.

Another thing you may need along the road is the location of the nearest suitable campground, or Wal-Mart for overnight or longer stays. Apps include Good Sam Camping, Passport America, KOA Finder, etc. Wal-Mart has an app to help you first locate the nearest location and then call to determine if overnight camping is allowed. RV Parks is a free app for locating nearby campgrounds. State Lines is another useful app. It provides information on each state, such as sales tax, radar detector laws, towing laws, cellphone and texting laws, etc. RV Dump Stations is another popular app that can be of major importance when boondocking or making long trips across the country.

ATTRACTIONS

When looking for nearby attractions, Roadside America is a good way to find things to see or do in the immediate area. Another great app that I use multiple times every day on the road is Yelp. Yelp is used by 100,000,000 people every month and is a great way to not only find businesses (most anything) in areas you are not familiar with, but you can see ratings on business by people just like yourself. In particular, it is great for finding restaurants, but don't think it is limited to food only. Think of it as a phone book with ratings and in some cases the ability to make reservations. It is one of my Top 5 apps.

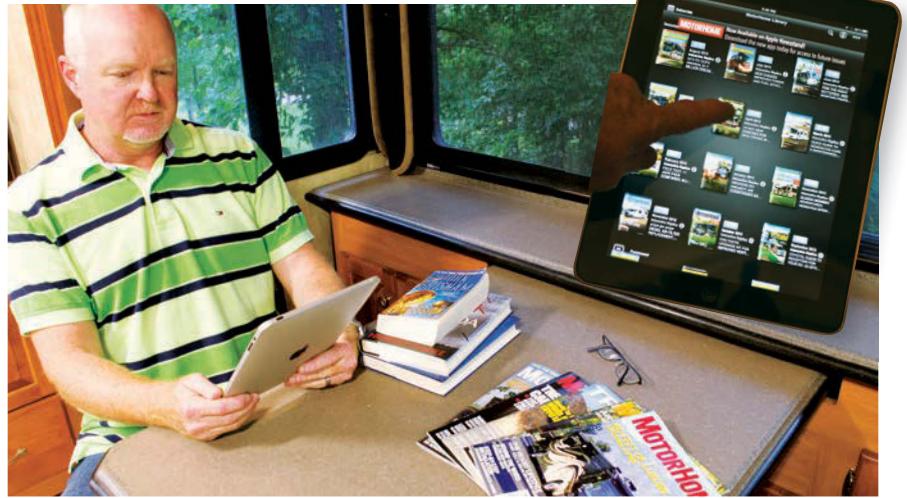
Another really handy app that I use on my smartphone and tablet is Flashlight. It may be hard to always carry a flashlight around, but in a restaurant when you can't read the menu this one can be really important.

WEATHER

Weather is important to anyone traveling or living in a RV and there is no shortage of weather apps. I use Weather Bug, but many others, such as The Weather Channel, are also very popular.

NEWS

All major news networks have their own apps for up-to-date info such as CNN, Fox News, ESPN, as well as all major networks. If you have satellite TV, both DirecTV and DISH have apps that allow you to set your DVR,



check the schedule and in some cases access programming for mobile viewing.

ENTERTAINMENT

If you are an Amazon Prime member, there is a huge library of free content available in the Amazon instant video app that you can watch from any location on your tablet as long as you have Wi-Fi or a data plan that allows unlimited usage. Searching for movies and theater locations is a lot easier if you use Fandango to find all the info you need including reviews and show times.

Reading no longer means you have to carry bulky books or magazines around or wait on magazine subscriptions to arrive by mail. Many magazines such as *MotorHome* can be downloaded right to your iPad, as can many books from the iTunes store. Another great source of content is podcasts, which are audio, or audio/video programs that you can download for free on just about any topic and then listen to at your leisure. Think of them as talk-radio programs that you can download and choose when and where you enjoy them.

SiriusXM radio, another great source of material, is one that you can enjoy if you have an account though its app. It allows access to all your channels on the road. Pandora is another great source that

allows you to set up personalized music channels and then randomly stream similar music to your tablet for your private listening.

FINANCE

Most all large banks and credit unions offer apps so you can check your account balances, transfer money from checking to savings or even snap a photo of a check and deposit it right into your account without ever going to a branch.



For keeping track of stocks, IRA/401K balances, I prefer Daily Finance, which is an app that you can use on a tablet as well as a regular computer. Once you set up your stocks, you can continually check values, see charts on prices and get market news throughout the day. Most online brokerage firms also have apps, which allow you to make trades right from your smartphone/tablet. Of course the Wall



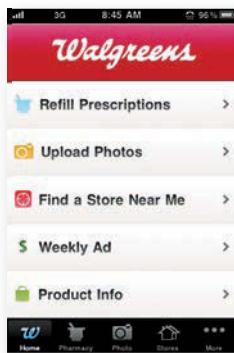
Street Journal also has an app as do all major newspapers and TV affiliates to stay up to date on local and national financial news. There is even an app called ATM Finder to help you locate the nearest ATM.

SHOPPING

An app I find useful when shopping is QR Reader. It allows you to scan a product barcode and check pricing online as well as get more product info, when available, through the use of QR codes, which are sometimes available in stores or on various products. Another neat feature is the ability to scan a receipt or other document and save it as a PDF file. This can be very handy for saving receipts, etc.



One thing that really annoys me is carrying all those reward cards for various stores and frequent user programs. Key Ring is an app that allows you to leave those at home. Once you set up a free account and enter all your reward card numbers by scanning them with your tablet or smartphone, you can leave the cards behind and simply access the info needed on the card via the tablet. Many retailers offer discounts specific to Key Ring users.



Drug stores, such as Walgreens and CVS, as well as most other large pharmacies, offer apps to help you refill prescriptions, find locations, etc.

SOCIAL MEDIA

For personal and home security reasons,



I try to avoid advertising to my friends on various social networking sites that I am out of town in the motorhome. However, any review of apps would be incomplete without mentioning apps like Facebook, Vine, Twitter and Instagram. Even if you do not want to post updates or photos of your travel, they are great for keeping up with everyone else in your inner circle.

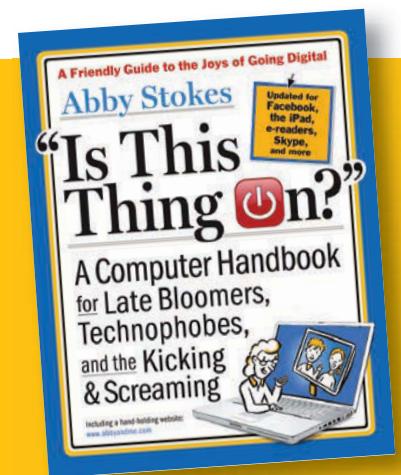
If you are an Internet junkie, there are several apps that make keeping track of your favorite forums and log-on info a lot easier. Two popular apps are Forum Runners and Tapataik. Once you sign into a forum once, it keeps all your info

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Is This Thing On?

Staying up to date with the latest technology can be a daunting task. For those of us who didn't grow up in the digital age, there's an easy-to-follow resource: "Is This Thing On? A Computer Handbook for Late Bloomers, Technophobes, and the Kicking & Screaming by Abby Stokes (Workman Publishing, \$16.95). The guide covers everything from anti-virus software to zip files, and includes a website (www.abbystokes.com) for even more information. — Eileen Hubbard



few, you will likely find many others that suit you and your lifestyle. For me, the iPad mini is a perfect size to allow me to read it easily (even without reading glasses) and use it as a GPS, yet it is small enough to carry almost anywhere I need it, much like a phone can be carried around.

For those of you who are not computer gurus, don't let this scare you off — tablets are very easy to use and very hard to damage, and unlike a traditional computer, it's difficult to accidentally erase important data. Most retailers offer free classes for new tablet buyers and once you get up and running, you will wonder why you waited.

Taking your tablet does not have to mean swallowing a large pill — though there is an app called RxmindMe from Walgreens to help you keep track of your daily medicine and dosage if you need help keeping that organized, too. ♦



E. Don Smith is a Tennessee-based freelance writer and photographer who has been a frequent contributor to *MotorHome* since 2006. He is the proud owner of a Tiffin Phaeton coach.

and makes getting back there and logging-on a lot easier.

If you find yourself wishing you had more space for documents, photos, spreadsheets, etc., on your phone, one app that can really help you is Dropbox. Using a free Dropbox account you can save files from one device (home, tablet, smartphone, etc.) and have access to it on another connected device. You can also use it to share large documents or photos that you don't want to take the time to upload multiple times. This allows you to share large groups of photos or other files

with friends back home.

Speaking of photos, don't forget that an iPad is also a pretty good camera. By combining the built-in 5 megapixel camera with one or more of the better photo apps such as Camera+ or Pro HDR, you can take photos including HDR (high dynamic range) that look like they came from a high-end digital SLR camera and not have to carry one around with you.

Though it may seem that we have covered a large amount of apps, we have really only scratched the surface. There are so many more, and once you start using a



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(WITH HOT WATER)**
TO NORTH AMERICA

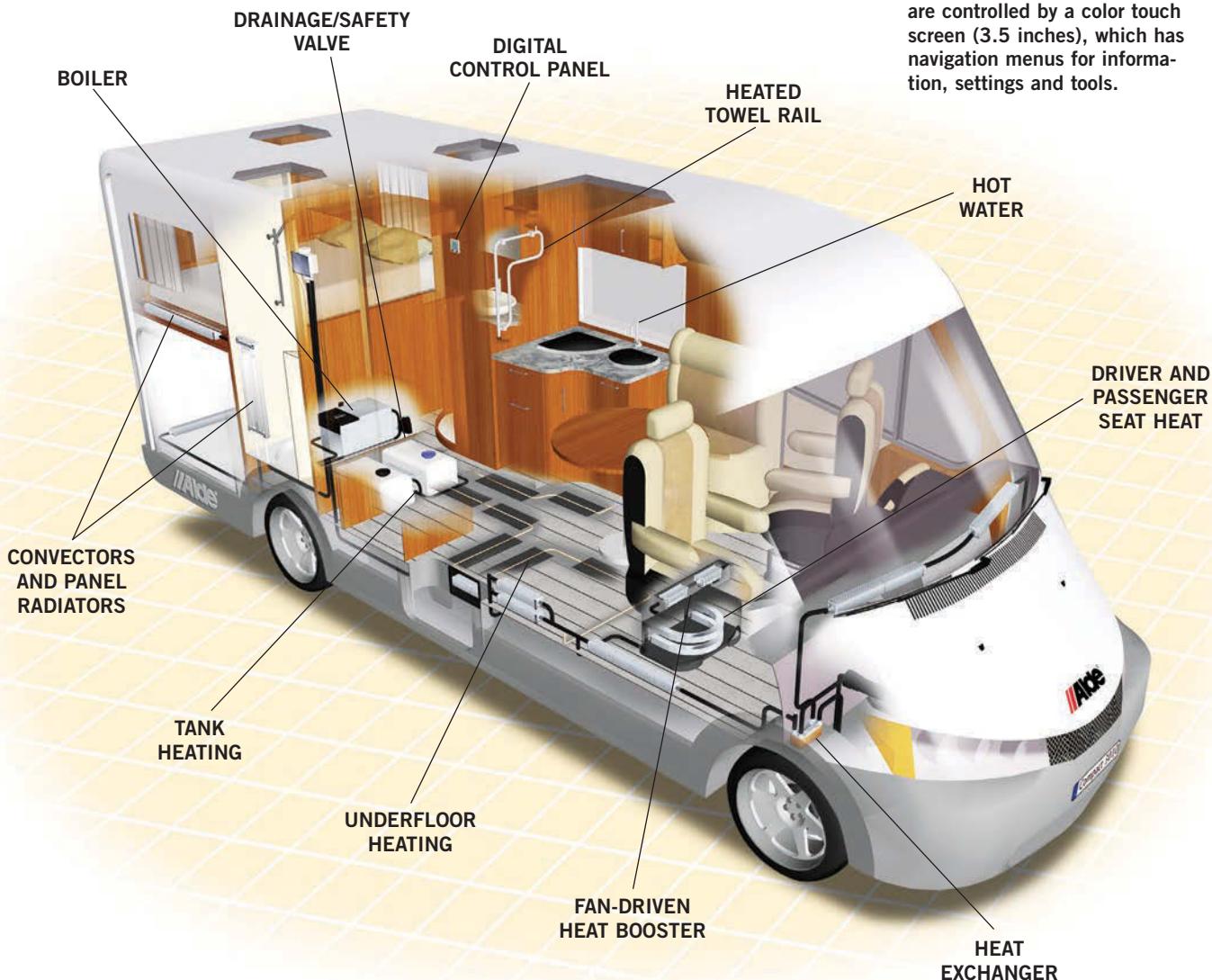
by BOB LIVINGSTON

With the onset of winter, motorhome enthusiasts will rely on their furnaces to keep the interiors cozy. The most common heat source is a forced air furnace that uses a combustion chamber and a blower to distribute warm air through strategically placed registers. Higher-end coaches may be equipped with a hydronic system like the Aqua-Hot, which uses tubing to route heated liquid to heat exchangers that are located throughout the interior. Advantages of a hydronic system include relatively quiet operation, good energy efficiency, balanced heat distribution and an integrated hot water provision, eliminating the need for a separate appliance.

A new company on the scene in America, Alde, uses a different approach to hydronic heating in a motorhome: silent convec-



Systems installed in motorhomes are controlled by a color touch screen (3.5 inches), which has navigation menus for information, settings and tools.





The well-designed Compact 3010 hydronic system can be serviced easily using simple hand tools. Here, the combustion fan is removed with little effort.

tion and radiant heat produced by a boiler that operates on LP-gas or 120-volt AC power. The Alde system uses a network of convectors that are located on the interior walls; air warmed by the convectors flows up the walls and around the furniture to heat the interior while forming a barrier in front of the windows that prevents the cold air from entering the coach. Once this warm air reaches the ceiling, it circulates to the floor where it is reheated by the convectors. The result is warm, even heat that has a soothing effect on residents, without annoying fan noise.

Alde's heating system may be new to the U.S., but it's a staple in the European motorhome industry, with a number of trailer (caravan) builders also electing to install the hydronic system on higher line models. The Swedish company was founded in 1949 and started out manufacturing products for cars and tractors. By 1966 it built its first central heating system and today is a major — and well-respected — supplier to the European RV industry.

The heart of the Alde hydronic system is a compact boiler that can be mounted under a dinette or other suitable compartment inside the coach. Across the pond, limited space and tight dimensions are the norm, so the company has developed a finely crafted, compact boiler that heats the liquid and pumps the fluid to convectors and radiator panels, resulting in uniform interior warmth using the science of convection currents. An easy access coolant reservoir is tied into the boiler and the heated liquid is distributed through a system of tubing that leads to the convectors and panels. Additional pipe loops with diffusion plates are integrated into



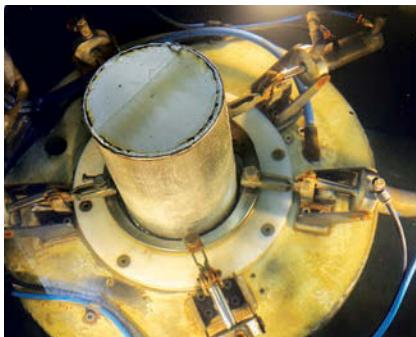
Rolled edges and precision welding are two attributes of the inner boiler wall assembly. Each component is closely inspected during manufacturing.



Heating elements that operate on 120-volt AC power are installed on the inner wall of the boiler. Antifreeze is heated inside this chamber.



The entire tank assembly is pressure-tested for leaks using a machine that holds it underwater for a period of time. Every tank is subjected to this test.



The heat exchanger is pressure-tested during the welding process. Each step goes through rigid quality control inspections.



A machine rotates the unit during precision welding where robotics ensure each piece holds tight tolerances.

PHOTOS: BOB LIVINGSTON

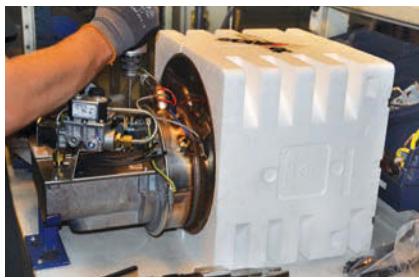
the floor to offer radiant heating.

Flat panel radiators are used in restricted spaces — such as bathrooms and wardrobes — where it would be difficult to mount normal convectors. In order for the warm air to move freely via convection, the hardware is placed using pinpoint precision and the system must be custom designed for individual floorplans. Alde engineers take an active role with RV designers, analyzing each floorplan and providing recommended convector locations. This requires placing cabinets and furniture so that a small space is allocated for the air to circulate. In many cases, the interior must be reconfigured to accommodate the heating system. This precise integration of components results in even heating throughout the coach with almost no cold spots, an outcome that can't be matched by traditional forced air furnaces.

To test the efficiency of this system, I was invited to participate in an extreme cold weather test. A prototype motorhome was placed inside a cold locker where the temperature was monitored at minus 22 F. Thermocouples were carefully placed throughout the interior and temperatures were recorded on digital instrumentation. The company was developing a system for this particular coach, so the evaluation was a work in progress.

Upon entering the motorhome, it was immediately evident that the interior was quite comfortable, which was remarkable considering the “outside” temperature. I took off my shoes to check out the floor and the comfort level was heavenly. Heat guns were used to validate heat distribution and locate cold spots. One cold spot was discovered behind the seat adjacent to the entry door and Alde engineers were using that data to relocate convectors before presenting the final blueprint to the motorhome manufacturer. The rest of the interior — including areas in front of the windows — was consistent with the temperature set on the digital control center. This type of engineering prowess and manufacturing support is refreshing and the results speak for themselves.

The boiler also produces hot water for the bathroom and galley and can be set to produce only hot water in summer when comfort heating is not needed. Capacity for the standard system is somewhat



Boiler tank is wrapped in Styrofoam to control temperature and heat loss of the exterior housing. Gas valve assembly is to the left of the boiler in this orientation.



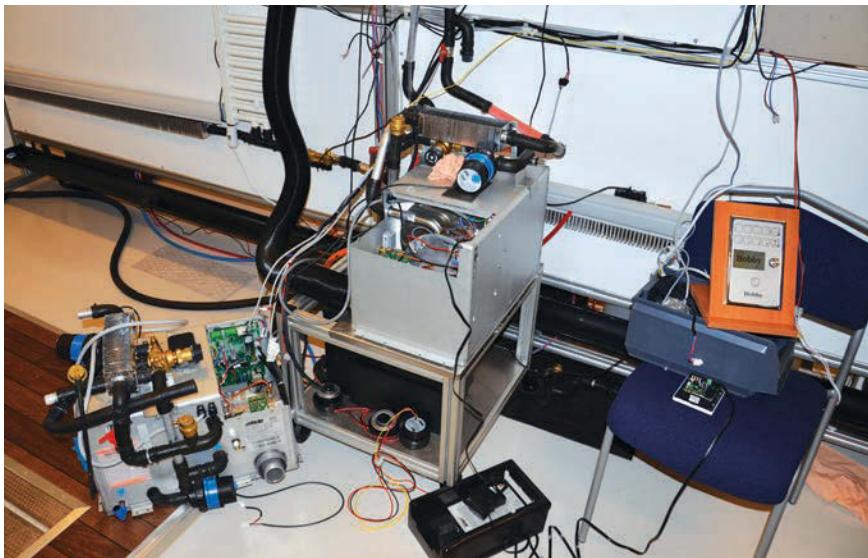
Expansion tank is usually mounted above and near the boiler housing. The system is required to use nontoxic antifreeze in order to meet U.S. manufacturing standards.



Every unit is bench tested and given a serial number corresponding to recorded results, which are used to provide support for installers and end users.



Circuit board and connections are easily serviceable via an access plate. Test procedures can be performed without removing the boiler housing.



A fully operational network of piping, convectors and radiators allows technicians to test existing and newly developed products. Testing results are recorded using accurate digital instrumentation.



Aluminum convectors are constructed using a tube that's surrounded by evenly spaced fins. The convectors are available in a number of lengths and configurations.



System efficiency during installation prototyping is checked using a heat gun. Screen graphics show whether or not temperature is consistent with control setting.



A motorhome is tested in a cold locker that reduces outside temperature to minus 22. Frozen water is a good visual that confirms extreme outside temperature.



Top: Heated towel railing is a nice touch to any motorhome bathroom when traveling in cold country. Left: The more exotic towel radiator is a high performance unit with an adjustable thermostat.



limited at this time (about 4 gallons of mixed warm water), but optional components are available that can expand capacity, and will likely be used by U.S. builders.

There are a number of other features that can be tied into the Alde system that enhance its operation. On the creature comfort side, a heated towel bar can be incorporated into the pipe loop, a luxury used more commonly in Europe. To increase driver comfort, a specially designed convector can be installed to boost heat in the cab and a fan-driven heat booster (convector with small fans connected in series) can be strategically placed to rapidly heat areas like, for example, the cockpit or wardrobes and/or compartments where wet clothing may be stored.

Also, the system can be equipped with a heat exchanger that circulates

engine coolant through the tubes, reducing the consumption of LP-gas while on the road. Heat can also be directed into the holding tank area to prevent the contents from freezing in cold weather. If the RV is stored in cold weather, a safety valve will automatically open, draining the system and preventing freeze damage.

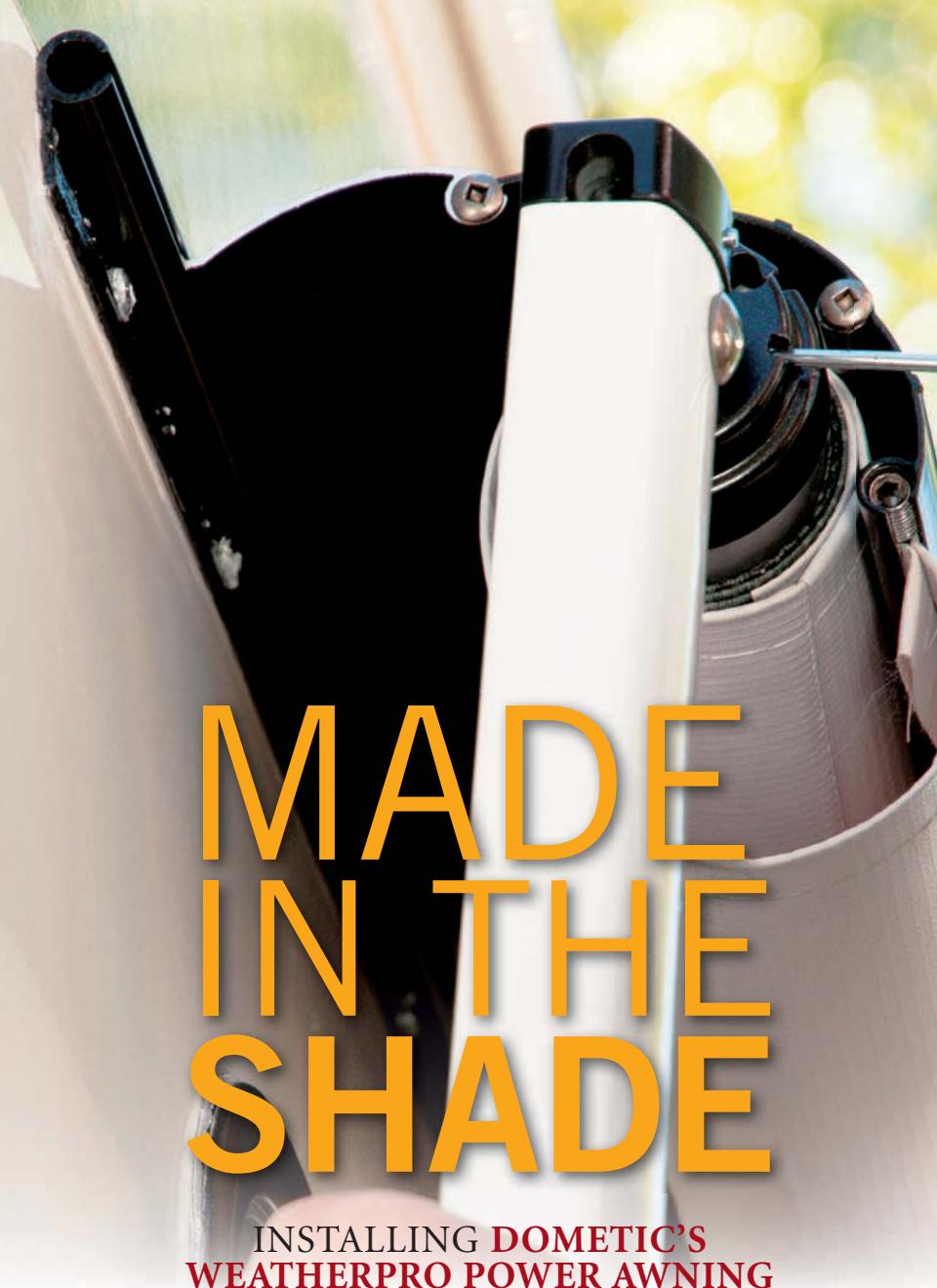
After spending time with Alde engineers, I was given the opportunity to dismantle a boiler to experience serviceability. The process is relatively intuitive using simple hand tools; access to the electronics and components for diagnostic purposes is provided without removing the boiler. I was immediately impressed with the finish quality of the boiler and the fact that technicians won't have to wear Kevlar gloves to prevent cuts when handling the components and housing.

Operation of the Alde hydronic system requires a different mindset. Owners familiar with fan/heat cycling and the temperature fluctuations that go with typical forced air furnace function will enjoy the even temperature afforded by the Alde. But, it takes about four hours to get the rig up to temperature (from storage) and stabilize the desired heat level based on control panel settings. This is a completely new paradigm (think preplanning) for the majority of North American RVers, who typically click on the thermostat when reaching their destination or heading out on the road after the coach has been in storage.

One of the first North American adopters is Canadian manufacturer Roadtrek. It's using the Alde system in the CS-Adventurous, a Sprinter-based Class B motorhome (see page 45). The inherent benefits of a heating system with integrated hot water are even more dramatic in a small coach where space for appliances and suitable locations for bulky ducting and registers is at a premium.

Alde's hydronic system raises the bar when it comes to efficient RV comfort heating technology and makes it practical to travel in cold weather without shivering and listening to furnace cycling. Alde is experienced in building heating systems for RVs used in the cold north, which makes it uniquely qualified to be a new supplier to the U.S. RV industry. ♦

Alde, www.alde.se/usa



MADE IN THE SHADE

INSTALLING **DOMETIC'S
WEATHERPRO POWER AWNING
AND CUSTOM WINDOW AWNINGS**
WILL ADD A TOUCH OF CLASS
TO ANY MOTORHOME

by BILL AND JENN GEHR



Patio awnings are found on most RVs built today — and during the last few years, the transition to electric models has become commonplace. While there aren't many motorhomes being fitted with manual awnings from the factory anymore, there are still thousands of owners of older rigs still unlocking awning arms by hand and pulling the fabric out using the extension rod. Once you use an electric assist, extending and retracting an awning manually seems like a process from the Dark Ages. Fortunately, those who own a rig with a manual awning, or have no awning at all, can benefit by installing a Dometic WeatherPro Power Awning.

We performed just such an upgrade on an earlier coach, and added Dometic's window awnings for another element of convenience and comfort. The awnings were installed on a Class C, but this project can be completed on any motorhome as an upgrade or new project.

Dometic's WeatherPro Power Awning allows the user to operate the awning from a control panel inside the motorhome or by using a key fob from either inside or outside the coach. This push-button operation relieves the user from having to struggle with cumbersome, manual upright awning arms, especially when there is a sudden change in the weather that requires the awning to be retracted quickly to avoid damage to the arms, fabric or even the motorhome. For those times when the awning is extended but the owners are away from the coach, a built-in wind sensor will signal the electronic control unit (ECU) to automatically retract the awning.

It's great to have the peace of mind knowing that the awning will retract before becoming damaged, but the patented hardware design of the WeatherPro goes beyond automatic retraction. It's able to flex in moderate winds to avoid retracting continuously, which speaks to its durability. In a heavy rainstorm, the awning will



From far left: ECU is mounted inside a compartment behind the front awning arm. Manual switch in cabinet end can be used in lieu of key fob.

also flex to help remove rainwater.

There are two fabric options and a wide variety of colors and patterns to choose from. Both the double-sided vinyl and the woven acrylic fabrics offer excellent overall durability for long-term use, although the acrylic is upgraded material. The WeatherPro model also has an aluminum cover that rolls over the retracted fabric and protects the material from the elements, including harsh sunlight. This aluminum cover is offered in six matching hardware color options to meet most RV paint and color schemes. Dometic even offers special hardware for use when mounting an awning over a slideout.

The WeatherPro we installed and tested included an LED light strip that runs the length of the awning near the mounting railing. This clever light strip floods the area underneath the awning with enough light to enjoy a game of cards or cook on a barbecue without the need of a flashlight. Most coach porch lights alone are not bright enough light to do this.

Unless the coach is already fitted with an awning, accurate measurements will be critical to a successful installation. The tricky part is that the awning can only be ordered in 1-foot increments, so it may be necessary to order one that is longer or shorter than ideal. The length of the awning will ultimately be determined by the need to clear the entry door, windows, storage compartment doors or any other accessory built in — or mounted to — the side of the motorhome. In our case, we had to settle for a shorter awning because a window was in the way of where the upright arm needed to be mounted.

When making the measurements, keep in mind that the wiring will connect to the front arm and you'll need to decide if the control box will be installed in a nearby storage compartment or interior cabinet. Kits are available for both of these installations. For the test motorhome, the ECU was mounted in an interior compartment that was located behind the top portion of the front awning arm, which greatly simplified the installation.

Prior to installation, everything from the boxes was removed to make sure all the pieces were provided. To prevent scratches, blankets were used under the fabric roller tube assembly (FRTA) while the front and rear arms were attached to the castings using the supplied bolts, washers and



1. It takes three people to slide the awning into the railing. The fabric is unwound by one or two wraps before positioning it in the railing.



2. Make sure the upright arms are vertical and install the upper bracket using the supplied lag bolts. Seal the threads and heads with proper sealant.



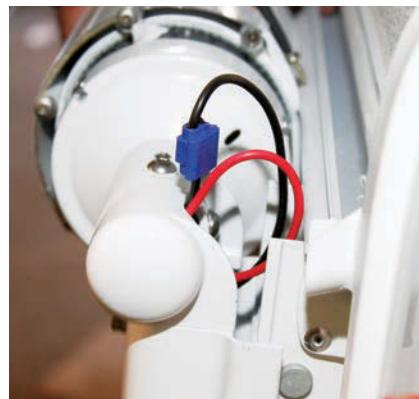
3. Front arm houses the wire for the roller motor and should be moved out of the way before mounting the upper bracket.



4. Once the fabric is aligned and the front arm vertical, bolt the bracket to the side wall with lag bolts and seal properly.



5. The cable ties should not be cut until the top brackets are secured. Cut before extending but not before the brackets are mounted.



6. Dielectric grease must be used on the external wire connectors to prevent moisture from penetrating and impacting operation.

spacers. Do not remove the nylon cable ties on the arms at this time; doing so will create havoc with the installation.

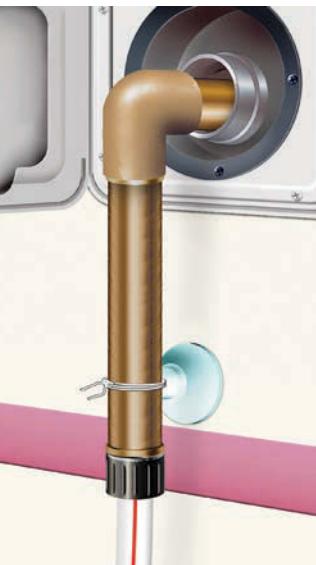
To prep the awning railing, expand the opening slightly with needle-nose pliers and file any sharp edges on the end that will receive the awning material when mounting to the side of the coach. This prevents tearing or catching the fabric as

it's slid through the railing. You will need three people for this process. One person on a ladder feeds the fabric into the rail and the other two helpers hold/maneuver the upright arms.

Before installing the awning on the railing, the fabric needs to be unwound by one wrap. Once the awning is aligned,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 78

▼ HOSE HOLDER



At my house, the spigot I use to fill my fresh-water tank is about 40 feet from the RV. It used to be that, when I turned on the spigot, the water pressure blew the filler nozzle out of the horizontal inlet. I grew tired of walking back and forth and replacing it several times before the tank was full. I solved

the problem by affixing a suction cup to my homemade nozzle.

ROBERT FALK | SEQUIM, WASH.



▲ BOTTLE BUNGEE

The wire retainer for the lower door shelf on my Norcold refrigerator was insufficient to keep bottles and containers from falling off the shelf while traveling or opening the door. To solve the problem, I used a length of 1-inch-wide braided elastic with loops sewn in the ends. The loops slip over the ends of the retainer and now my bottles and cans stay put.

**ART SZUSTAK
CLEVELAND, TENN.**



STEERING-WHEEL STATION



Not too many motorhomes have a laptop workstation or even a dedicated table and chair that could serve the purpose. Most of us use the dinette table, which is not the most comfortable place to work. The dinette is also a busy place and not always available for that purpose. I moved the laptop to the steering wheel. It turned out to be an ideal location. The driver's seat is very comfortable and the wheel is adjustable.

The hanger is easy to make. I used $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch by $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch aluminum flat stock and bent it in a vise over 1- or 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pipe. The cross piece was riveted on, or it can be glued on. Finally, some $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-thick foam tape was applied to protect the wheel and the computer. The laptop fits nicely and is out of the way of foot traffic. Speaking of traffic, do not use while driving.

ERVIN BITTNER | WEST CHICAGO, ILL.

THAT'S USING YOUR BOBBIN ▼

While we were on the road in our 2003 Southwind, we stopped at a campground in Ohio for the night. Getting ready for bed, I reached over and tried to close the shade in the bedroom, and heard a snapping sound. I had broken the plastic anchor that holds the string for the shade. Getting home the next day, we didn't have time to get a repair part before we had to take off again. My wife took a metal sewing machine bobbin and replaced the anchor. It's the same size as the plastic part, works great, is sturdier than the original plastic part and we didn't have to buy the entire repair kit to fix it.

HAROLD AND TERESA MITCHELL | ILION, N.Y. ♦



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Quick Tips, *MotorHome's* monthly column of handy, simple tips by fellow RVers, is looking for submissions. Please send your favorite do-it-yourself ideas to: *MotorHome* Quick Tips, 2575 Vista Del Mar Drive, Ventura, CA 93001, or email letters@motorhomemagazine.com. Be sure to include photos, illustrations or drawings, if necessary. If your tip is selected for publication, you'll receive \$35.

techsavvy

HANDS-ON | HOT LINE | COACH & POWERTRAIN



HANDS-ON | by BOB LIVINGSTON

CLEARING THE AIR

Australian tea tree oil based Kanberra Gel is a natural way to control mold, mildew and bacteria — and associated bad odors

After a while, RVs tend to take on an unpleasant odor that can affect the joy of living on the road. Natural odors from wood, carpet, upholstery, cooking and bedding exacerbated by mold, mildew and/or bacteria, can really foul the air. The problem is compounded when the motorhome is locked up in storage and subject to reduced airflow and temperature extremes. Masking the odor with products that emit fragrances is not a long-term solution — and the typically strong artificial smell may be worse than the inherent odor. A better solution is to neutralize all the offenders with Kanberra Gel, a product I ran into at The Rally in Syracuse, N.Y., last summer.

Kanberra Gel caught my attention because I was living in a used rig at the Rally supplied by a local dealer. It was pretty stinky inside — an odor all too familiar, commonly present in used RVs. After hearing the sales pitch, I challenged the company representative to a test. The idea that the bad odor would dissipate within the claimed 24 hours was hard to believe, so I set up a 2-ounce container of the gel in the living room. Sure enough this stuff really worked. While the smell was not completely gone within 24 hours, occupants were no longer hit with strong odors when entering the rig. After five days, the inside was free of musty odors.

The key ingredient is pharmaceutical-grade Australian tea

tree oil. Kanberra Gel is formulated by blending Australian and lemon scented tea tree oil. As the natural antiseptic properties of the tea tree oils become airborne through evaporation, the air absorbs the oils. The air then circulates throughout the interior, lands on any sources of odor, like mold and mildew, and neutralizes them on contact.

To test the effectiveness of the Kanberra Gel in larger areas, a 4-ounce container was set up in a stationary house living room and another one placed in a bedroom. The house is in an area with a moist climate and suffered from a musty odor when closed up. I also put a sample cup in a Jeep Wrangler that's used as a dinghy and stored most of the time. By the end of the three-month test about 70 percent of the gel was gone from both 4-ounce containers and just about all the gel was evaporated from the Jeep. The results were impressive; musty odors were gone in all three places and the only perceptible fragrance, which was pleasant, was in the Jeep — attributable to close quarters and limited airflow. The effect in the Jeep was regulated by closing the container periodically, depending on how long the vehicle was in storage. The recommended procedure is to remove the container lid for the first two or three days to put the gel in shock mode. After that the diffuser lid will slow down evaporation. A pump spray (8 ounces, \$19.99) is available to jump-start the results in severe conditions.

According to the company, the gel should completely evaporate in three to eight weeks and from there the residual effect lasts up to 45 days. Specific conditions will influence the process, but it's nice to have a product that generally over-delivers.

The recommended "dosage" is one 2-ounce container for use in motorhomes up to 30 feet; two for coaches up to 45 feet. If three or more showers are taken each day, add another 2-ounce container to compensate for the added humidity. The gel is all natural and safe for people and pets.

Two-ounce containers sell for \$19.99 with a number of larger sizes priced accordingly. Refilling from a 24-ounce pouch (\$100) with a twist-off cap is the most economical use of the product. Kanberra Gel is not inexpensive but your nose—and motorhome—will thank you.

Kanberra Gel, 800-683-0021, www.kanberragel.com





Hurricane Hubbub

AT ODDS WITH A CAMPGROUND OVER ITS REFUND POLICIES, TWO READERS ASKED HOT LINE FOR HELP. THEY WROTE:

We had a reservation for eight nights at Bethpage Camp-Resort in Urbanna, Va. A few days prior to our arrival date, there was a hurricane in the area and we had a power outage at our house. We called the campground and left a message asking that the manager call us back regarding our need to cancel our reservations due to the inability to leave our home under such difficult circumstances. We weren't asking for a refund, just a rain check. We received a call from the manager who said that since the campground was operational, they could not give us a refund or a rain check.

We have been camping since 1979, and have stayed at Bethpage numerous times in the past. Can Hot Line please help?

THOMAS AND CAROL HALL
PASADENA, MD.

Hot Line contacted Bethpage Camp-Resort on the Halls' behalf. The company's response follows:

Thank you for your letter regarding Thomas and Carol Hall. Our policy requires a two-night deposit payable at the time of reservation. Cancellations received a minimum of 14 days prior to arrival will be refunded the deposit, less at \$20 administrative fee. Cancellations received less than 14 days prior to arrival will forfeit the deposit.

I regret that the Halls were affected by the hurricane and because they are customers of Bethpage, I would like to extend a gift certificate to them for three premium nights. I hope this addresses the Halls' concerns and resolves the situation.

LINDA FOSTER
RESERVATIONS MANAGER
BETHPAGE CAMP-RESORT
URBANNA, VA.

TURBO TROUBLE

Of the impression that a component on his motorhome was eligible for replacement because of a pre-existing record of failure during its warranty period, a reader requested that Hot Line get involved. He wrote:

I have an issue with Cummins, related to the turbo unit on my diesel engine in my Fleetwood Expedition. Up to now, Cummins has paid for half of the part cost of about \$1,800. I am seeking to have the company pay the total cost of the parts and labor.

It all started on our first long trip, which was in June 2006. I noticed the CHECK ENGINE light came on and we seemed to be losing power. I contacted Cummins Rocky Mountain in North Las Vegas, Nev., and they were wonderful to work with, though we lost several days of our vacation, as they had to order and replace the turbo assembly. The good news was that work and parts were under warranty with Cummins.

In May 2012, I noticed the CHECK ENGINE light coming on again. At the recommendation of my local RV dealership, I took my coach to Rincon Parts & Service, a Cummins repair service in San Clemente, Calif. They indicated that the turbo unit needed to be replaced. This was the second turbo replacement and I had to pay \$3,652.36 for the repair, out of my pocket.

In July 2013, again I noticed the CHECK ENGINE light came on. We were in Wyoming at the time. I called Cummins and talked with a technician. His comment was to not let it interfere with our vacation unless the STOP ENGINE light came on. When we returned home, I went to Rincon Parts & Service. After several days of testing, Rincon could not find the problem, so they talked with the Cummins district field engineer and a Cummins factory technician. They determined that the turbo unit once again needed to be replaced. This time the cost to me would be

about \$5,200 for a new turbo and the work performed in trying to analyze the problem. Since the turbo unit was one month out of warranty, a third turbo replacement unit was installed.

I received a call from the service writer at Rincon Parts & Service saying that Cummins had offered to pay half the cost of the turbo unit, or about \$1,800 of my cost for a rebuilt turbo unit, but nothing toward the labor. I said that was not a satisfactory offer, but to get my RV back and out of his shop I would pay the difference of \$3,526.

I asked if this was a typical problem with my type of Cummins diesel engine. They answered no. Do they replace turbo units this often on RVs? No. Do ISB 300s have a history of issues with turbo units? No. What exactly caused the problem? Not really sure, maybe some rust on an electronic control unit.

Clearly this is a major cost that is not reasonable for me to pay to drive an RV with a Cummins diesel engine. I believe Cummins should reimburse me the \$3,526 and extend the 12-month warranty to 36 months. Help!

EMERSON DAVIS
FOUNTAIN VALLEY, CALIF.

Cummins was contacted on Davis' behalf for any further help it could provide. Soon afterward, Davis sent us a follow-up response that put an end to his dilemma. It read:

I am pleased to let you know that my issue with the fourth replacement turbo unit for my Cummins diesel engine has been resolved. I ended up paying \$542 rather than \$5,430 and have a one year warranty for a reconditioned turbo unit. I must say I had good communication with the Cummins corporate and regional offices. Another plus was my dealing with Rincon Parts & Service — I found them to be very professional and performed quality work on my coach.

I appreciate Hot Line's assistance in helping me to resolve my turbo issue.

E.D.

TO CONTRIBUTE TO HOT LINE, please refer to Contact MotorHome, on page 10.

Loose Steering

I have a 1999 Fleetwood Bounder 34V on a Ford F-53 chassis. Since I have owned the unit, (about seven years) there has been movement in the steering column back and forth, left to right, about 3 inches within the cutout in the dashboard when making turns and the body leans. From what I have read, it seems as if the F-53 chassis always rides like a stagecoach. so I discounted it as being the nature of the beast.

Recently, I drove my friend's 2000 34-foot Bounder on the F-53 chassis and there was no similar motion in the column and the overall feel was very different. Now I wonder if something is wrong with my unit, or if Fleetwood made changes between the 1999 and 2000 model years that would account for the difference? Any help you can give me to trace possible causes of my situation would be appreciated.

ED SMIZER | READING, PA.

The only difference in the steering of the Ford F53 chassis between the 1999 and 2000 model years that I know about is that Ford installed a steering damper on 1999 models and not on 2000 chassis. This could give the front end a tighter feel. Fleetwood didn't do this, Ford did.

There are a number of places between the steering wheel and front tires where there can be play or looseness. A very simple test is to have an assistant turn the steering wheel left and right just to the point where strong resistance is encountered. This is done with the engine OFF, in PARK with the parking brake set and the wheels blocked for safety. If the outer steering column itself is moving around, that calls for immediate correction by tightening the mounting bolts. By looking at each movable point (tie rod ends, drag link, steering box, flex disc, etc.) you can quickly see where any excess play occurs. There should be some free play inside the steering box, but not much. You could also compare your coach

to your friends'. Replacing or adjusting components should correct excess play. This is a safety concern and should be corrected before the coach is returned to normal service.

OIL PRESSURE CONCERN

I have a Class A diesel-pusher powered by a 330-hp Caterpillar engine. The oil pressure gauge can read from 0 to 100 psi. When I first start the engine, it reads 25 psi. After driving for a while it drops to 10 psi. Is this normal?

BOB GAGNON | VIA EMAIL

You should see roughly 60 psi or more on a cold startup, roughly 40 psi driving down the road and around 15-20 psi at hot idle. These numbers are approximate. In order to look up the actual specs on your engine, the engine serial number is needed. It's very likely

that the oil pressure gauge is inaccurate, either due to a faulty sending unit, gauge or wiring. Actual oil pressure should be checked right away before continued operation, using a mechanical test gauge; shops should have these. Then, the electrical gauge can be diagnosed as needed.

RIDES LIKE A LUMBER WAGON

I have a 2011 Winnebago Vista 30W on a Ford F-Series motorhome chassis with a gross vehicle weight rating (gvwr) of 18,000 pounds. It was delivered with Continental HSR 225/70R 19.5 tires. When I had the coach in for a 15,000-mile service at the Winnebago facility in Forest City, Iowa, I asked the Customer Service Advisor to check the front shocks, as the coach rides rough and it sounded like the supports were loose. After he checked the shocks and took it for a test drive, he asked me if I had changed the tires (I didn't) as he thought the tires were too hard and said it rode like a lumber wagon! Did Ford/Winnebago match the right tires for the load the Vista model carries?

**ALAN PEARSON
HIGHLANDS RANCH, COLO.**

The tires come from Ford with the chassis and are specified based on the chassis weight ratings. Manufacturers don't put tires on coaches that are rated far above the axle and gross vehicle weight rating because they would ride too hard and cost more.

If you are not convinced, you can weigh your fully loaded coach one axle at a time on a truck scale and compare the weight readings to the ratings molded into the sides of the tires. Everyone should do this anyway. Then calculate the weight on each corner and look up the proper tire pressure in the Load Inflation Table, which is available on tire manufacturers' websites and at tire dealers. Many people inflate tires to the inflation pressure molded on the sidewalls. This will result in a harsh ride if the tires are not carrying enough weight to require that much pressure. It may be that your tires are overinflated for the loads.

MANY PEOPLE INFLATE TIRES TO THE INFLATION PRESSURE MOLDED ON THE SIDEWALLS.

THIS WILL RESULT IN A HARSH RIDE IF THE TIRES ARE NOT CARRYING ENOUGH WEIGHT TO REQUIRE THAT MUCH PRESSURE.





TIPS FOR PREPARING A COACH FOR STORAGE

Preparing a motorhome for prolonged storage is important. In addition to essential freeze proofing and chassis storage procedures, Shurhold Industries offers the following tips to help ensure the interior of your coach is in great shape during and after long-term storage:

First, banish “stink sources.” Get rid of all things that mold and mildew, and clean areas that tend to support smelly organisms. Start with the obvious stuff, such as the refrigerator, which should be emptied, cleaned and propped open.

Cushions should be removed or propped up to encourage airflow and interior storage compartments should be open for air to circulate. Clean, vacuum and place dehumidifier bags around the cabin, two to three bags for larger coaches.

Clean the drains to keep odors and bacteria from becoming a problem. First clean with Shurhold’s Serious Marine Cleaner (SMC). It can be sprayed on and wiped away with paper towels, rinsed and dried. Then, use Shurhold’s Moldaway to clean the drains in sinks and showers. Put a scoop into each drain with a cup of water; let it work for a few minutes, then rinse. Moldaway will clean and deodorize drains without harming pipes.

Surfaces like carpets and canvas should be thoroughly cleaned. First, vacuum and shampoo carpet with SMC, and let it dry before sealing up the coach. This will reduce the likelihood of any bacteria growth. Then, remove cockpit carpet if possible — roll it up and store it in the cabin after it’s cleaned. It is best to remove canvas and store it in a dry environment.

The mechanical, electronic and other systems aboard need to be prepared for a long storage nap, too. Owners must consult their owner’s manuals on these crucial tasks because it can affect their warranty.

Shurhold, 772-287-1313, www.shurhold.com/rv

CHARGING LINE CHAGRIN

We have a 2004 Jayco Granite Ridge on a Ford E-450 chassis with a 6.8-liter/V-10 engine. After years of towing a Toyota Tacoma using the Roadmaster BlackHawk All-Terrain tow system with a BrakeMaster braking system, we bought a 2012 Honda CR-V. To prepare for a trip and get the Honda set up so the battery wouldn’t go dead while towing, we had a new six-pin receptacle and charge line installed between the rig and CR-V. The old towing setup only had a four-pin, which meant no room to just add the charge line. Camping World upgraded the old system, added a charge line on the coach, wired the CR-V for the charge line so the battery would be charged while being towed, added an in-line 30-amp circuit breaker and a Flexo-Coil 6-Wire kit. They used a 5/16 wire loom and 10-gauge wire. Hereafter I will call this new set up “the charge line.”

Off we went on our trip. When we

stopped, every time we opened the coach door, the steps would retract or lower. After the second night camping, the CR-V was hard to start. We turned on the coach, let it run for a few minutes, tried the CR-V again and it started. Still the steps went in and out. The third night, we disconnected the charge line between the coach and CR-V; the steps worked correctly and no problems with the CR-V starting. Thereafter, at night we disconnected the charge line and reconnected it in the morning.

Why would the charge line stay “hot” after the coach and CR-V were turned off and why would it impact the steps? How do we correct this problem? While the easy solution is to unhook the charge line each night, I’d rather solve the problem.

**CAROL SPINNER
AGOURA HILLS, CALIF.**

The charging line appears to be backfeed-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 74

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 EQUAL HOUSING LENDER

ing the motorhome's electrical system. To find the source of the problem, a mechanic should follow the charging wire from the motorhome's rear plug forward to its terminus. It should go directly to the output on the engine's alternator. There should be circuit protection at each end of a charging line, because when there is a power source at each end of the wire, a short circuit could cause a meltdown without it. I suggest you install an aftermarket device

that's designed to separate the batteries and prevent backfeed. One such device is ToadCharge by LSL Products (www.lslproducts.net/ToadChargePage.html).

TIRE SIZE SWAP

We have a 2008 38-foot Triple E Signature on a Freightliner chassis. The tires are Goodyear G670 RV, 255/70R22.5 and were manufactured in October 2007 (4207). Although they are in good shape

(26,000 miles) I plan to replace them next fall, as they will be 7 years old.

After reading information on Good-year's website, I want to change the tire size to 275/70R22.5. The only difference is they are 1.2-inches larger in diameter. The reason I would like to switch is the 275s require only 95 psi to have the same weight rating as the 255s have at 120 psi, if I'm reading the data correctly. I can easily inflate to 95 psi with the motorhome's auxiliary air supply. To obtain 120 psi, I need to carry a heavy-duty compressor as most light duty units have a max pressure of 100 psi. Are there any problems I'm overlooking in switching to the 275s?

**DERRICK VANDERMEER
KEMPTVILLE, ONTARIO, CANADA**

Goodyear's RV Tire website (www.goodyearrvtires.com) provides excellent information, including care and load-inflation ratings and I recommend it to all of our readers. However, it doesn't anticipate that its users may want to swap sizes as you mention. A larger tire will have a larger diameter, which will result in the coach traveling a little farther with every revolution of the drive tires. This will change the overall "effective" gearing and make the coach go slightly faster for a given rpm, and the speedometer will also read slower for a given road speed. This will reduce acceleration and hill-climbing performance to a small degree, but might help fuel economy a tad (although with the speedometer and odometer off it may not seem like it). But the kicker, which you didn't anticipate, is that with wider tires the rear tire dual spacing will be reduced. Minimum spacing (center to center) with the 255-width tires is 11.2 inches, but with the 275-width tires it must be at least 12.2 inches. Tires bulge and flex in operation, and there must be sufficient space between them. Insufficient space could result in catastrophic tire failure. Have a qualified tire dealer check the spacing before making any changes.

WIMPY WORKHORSE REVISITED

I read the October letter "Wimpy Workhorse" by Darrell Sorenson about his 2004 30-foot Itasca on a Workhorse chassis with a V-8 GM engine and the problems he had.

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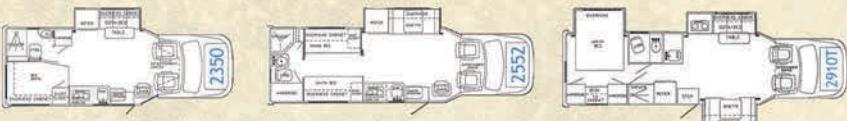


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E-mail: kathy.schurman@goodsam.com

Fax: 270-438-4757 Attn: Kathy Schurman

Workhorse had a recall on those catalytic converters. I had them replaced on my 2004 Holiday Rambler Vacationer; the recall number is 6040LC and Workhorse kit was W8001469. Sorenson might want to see if this applies to his situation.
RAY NICHOLS | SARATOGA SPRINGS, N.Y.

Thanks for writing. I communicated with Sorenson later and he indicated that the spark plug cables (which I had suggested) fixed the problem. However, it is always good to check for recalls, especially if you have changed addresses or are on the road a lot.

OBSOLETE PARTS

We are long-time readers in desperate need of help. We own a 2005 Holiday Rambler Scepter, which has the Firestone IntelliRide system. The control panel is broken. This system is now obsolete. We badly need a control panel and cannot find one. Can someone out there please help us? We would greatly appreciate it.

**MEL AND LINDA VOLKERT
TILDEN, TEXAS**

Finding obsolete parts can be vexing. I suggest you try contacting some of the suppliers listed in this link: www.rv.net/obsolete. You can also do a Google search for RV Salvage Yards. Good luck.

BUDGET-BUSTING BATTERIES

I have a 1998 Fleetwood Bounder 34J with a Chevy 7.4-liter Vortec engine. I'm having to replace the battery cables on the two 6V house batteries (which are being replaced too). Can I replace the battery cables with regular car battery cables? Do you know where I can get an electrical diagram of the 34J? I'm retired and am about out of money and I don't want to cut corners, but using car battery cables would help, the old ones are breaking apart.

BOB DAUGHERTY | VIA EMAIL

I don't recommend using any cables that have thinner conductors (the actual wire diameter or gauge, not the insulation) than the originals. You can make up your own using bulk cable and the appropriate terminals, but you will need a crimping tool. I don't recommend clamp-on terminals because they corrode faster. You can

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get the parts at NAPA stores. You can get chassis wiring diagrams through Helm Inc. (www.helminc.com). For coach wiring, contact Fleetwood (www.fleetwoodrv.com) and see what it has.

INTERMITTENT AIR BRAKE ALARMS — TIP

This is in response to Jeff Roche's problem ("Intermittent Air Brake Alarms," August) with the low air alarm going off. I have the same 2008 Gulf Stream Tour Master. I called Gulf Stream and spoke with a service rep. He said that in 2008, the incorrect size connectors were used on the gauges. He offered to send me new wire harnesses for free (I was well beyond the warranty period) if I put them on, so I agreed. I received 10 wire harnesses and replacing them was easy — just replace one at a time. The problem will be fixed for good.

JACK BERNDT | VIA EMAIL

Thanks for writing. This can save owners a lot of grief and expense. ♦

TO CONTRIBUTE TO COACH & POWERTRAIN, refer to Contact MotorHome, on page 10.



7. Before the ECU was mounted inside the adjacent compartment, a hole was drilled through the awning arm and side wall for routing the wire leads.



8. Silicone rubber is used to seal the hole after the wire leads are routed to the ECU.



9. After opening and closing the awning four times to align it and make sure the arms are nesting properly, self-drilling screws are used to mount the bottom of the arms.



10. Tek screws are used to secure the awning fabric to the railing on both sides. This prevents the fabric from moving during operation.

measure each end to be sure it's evenly spaced from the windows, doors or moldings. While the two helpers hold the arms firmly, positions are marked and drilled for mounting the upper brackets. The nylon ties are then removed and the wire to the motor is plugged in. It's important to use dielectric grease on the external plugs to help prevent corrosion.

At this point, the awning is in place and it's time to go inside the coach. Before mounting the ECU, a hole was drilled from the outside of the motorhome for routing the wire cable. This step may require blind drilling, so care must be taken before proceeding. Next, the ECU was mounted on the back wall inside the aforementioned cabinet using the supplied screws. The manual extend/retract switches and LED light switches were mounted in the end cap of the cupboard. Power was picked up from an adjacent power terminal behind a wall plate, and the ECU power light illuminated, indicating the connections were good. With all components in place, all the wiring was clamped into place and most covered with split loom.

The awning was then opened and closed four times to align the fabric and ensure that the hardware was nesting properly. If necessary, upper brackets can be adjusted. Once satisfied that the arms are straight, No.10-16 self-drilling screws were installed in the two holes in the bottom of the arms. If there is no backing for the bottom screws, the Oscar rivets should be used instead. Be sure to seal the screws/rivets with silicone rubber. Two No. 6-44 Tek screws are used to secure the awning fabric into the railing. This is done to prevent the fabric from moving in the rail.

After the awning was cycled a few more times, the wind sensor was mounted on the front casting using the supplied spacer and locking nut. To ensure that the wind sensor is functioning properly, the wind speed on the ECU was set at the lowest setting and a hair dryer (cooling mode) was used to push air over the sensor to simulate a sustained wind. In 30 seconds, the awning responded and started retracting, as designed. Next, the key fob was tested by depressing the extend button for 30 seconds. The awning rolled all the way out — and after pressing the retract button for 30 seconds, the awning rolled up without a hitch. This installation was

completed in approximately three hours.

WINDOW AWNINGS

Window awnings are much easier to install. Finding the right size awning is pretty simple, since Dometic offers models in specific measurements up to 144 inches. To determine the proper length awning, measure from the outside of each window frame and add 4-6 inches. Use that number to select the proper size FRTA. If you have two windows that are only a few inches apart, it's best to order one long awning rather than two shorter ones.

There are two configurations to choose from when ordering the window awnings. For windows that are 36 inches high or more, select the tall option. For any window less than 36 inches high, standard size may be more appropriate. All of Dometic's window awnings can be ordered to match a wide variety of patio awnings — both in color and style.

Installation should run around 1½ hours. Begin the process by removing the FRTA and hardware from the packaging. Mark the center of the awning rail with a pencil and make a mark roughly 4 inches above the center of the window frame. Line up the marks and install the awning rail by using the supplied screws. Putty tape or silicone rubber can be used to seal the railing, but the latter works better and also “glues” the railing to the side wall for additional strength. Before installing the FRTA, prep one end of the awning rail in the same manner as the patio awning installation mentioned earlier. Install the main arms to the front and rear castings with ¼-20 x ¾-inch truss head screws.

With the help of another person, slide the fabric into the prepped end of the awning rail. Center the main arms and install the foot brackets with the supplied No. 10-12 x ¾-inch screws, or use the Oscar rivets if there is no backing material. Seal the screw heads or rivets with silicone rubber sealant, then remove the cotter pins from each end to release the tension. Pull the awning in and out to center the FRTA and install the No. 6 x ½-inch Tek screws in the awning rail 2 inches from each end. Pull the awning out to full extension (or the desired position) and mark the location for the strap hanger. Mount the hanger with screws or Oscar rivets and use silicone rubber sealant to waterproof. Install



1. Carefully measure and mark the location above the window with a pencil before installing the awning rail. Allow 4 inches between the top of the window frame and railing.



2. Although putty tape can be applied to the back of the railing, the preferred method is to use a line of rubber silicone caulking before attaching the railing to the side wall with the supplied screws.



3. File off the sharp edges on one end of the awning rail where the window awning will be inserted to prevent unwanted slicing or tearing of the fabric during installation.



4. With the help of another person, the end of the window awning assembly is slid into the awning rail and centered above the window.



5. Once the awning is in place, the cotter pins are removed from both ends of the FRTA to release spring tension.



6. One end of the awning is tapped with a hand to center over the window. It is best to use a tape measure to confirm the spacing.



7. While the awning is closed, screws are installed in the bottom bracket. Oscar rivets are used if there is no backing in the side wall.



8. The awning is opened to gain access to the top of the bottom bracket and install fastener. Rubber silicone is used to seal the foot and screws or rivets.



9. After the holes are drilled for the pull-strap bracket, they are filled with silicone rubber.



10. Pull-strap bracket is attached using rivets. Silicone rubber caulking must be applied to seal the bracket and fasteners to the side wall.



11. Carefully measure the distance side to side, centering the awning around the window. The awning is extended by pulling the strap.

the top screw and snap the foot cover in place. The window awning is ready to use.

Dometic's WeatherPro Power Awning with built-in wind sensor will provide years of service and the necessary protection from sun and rain. Meanwhile, window awnings not only improve the appearance of any motorhome, but help regulate inside temperature by deflecting the sun's strong rays. Both of these projects will make life on the road much more comfortable and convenient — and life on the patio much more enjoyable. ♦

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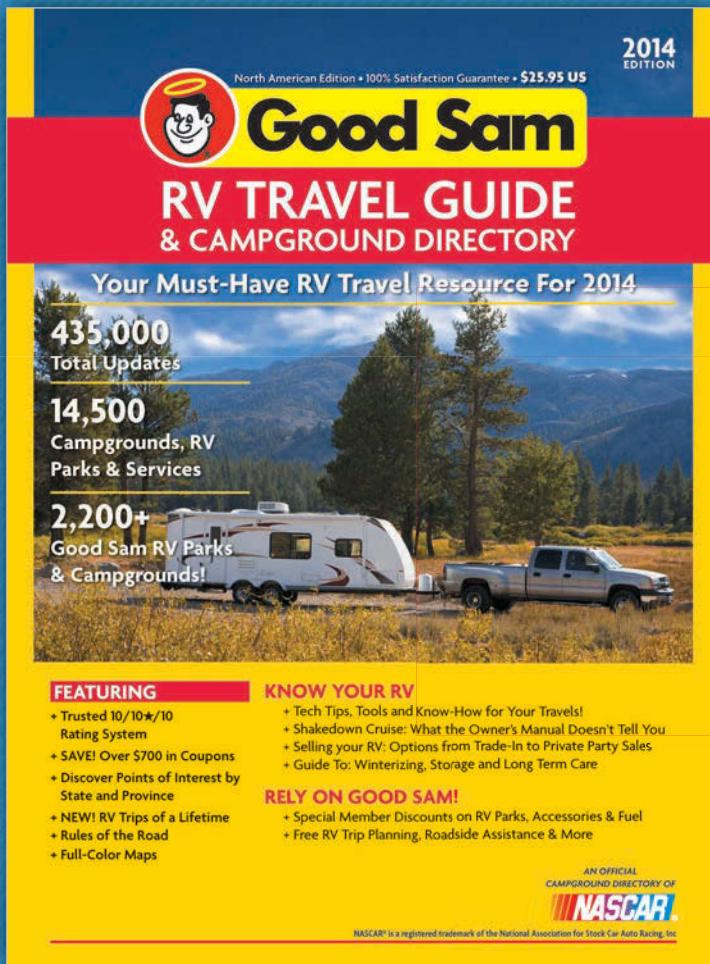
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Wild Times

ESCAPING CIVILIZATION ON CALIFORNIA'S BIG SUR COAST

by ALAN RIDER



Like many RVers, I was a child of the suburbs. Growing up, my idea of wilderness was the small patch of woods in my grandmother's backyard.

In the four decades since I last explored that seemingly remote tangle of crabapple trees, I'll admit that I have

been seduced by the myriad comforts of city life. And yet, deep down, I find my craving for that same sense of freedom and solitude I got from those childhood adventures — those "wild" times — remains undiminished.

Which, in some roundabout way, helps explain my passion for motorhome travel. Because over the years I've come to see my rig as nothing less than a portal between everyday life and the dwindling number of unspoiled places where it is still possible to have a genuinely wild time. Places like Central California's Big Sur coast.

Accessing that wildness, in this case, means driving the road known around the world simply as Highway 1. Winding roughly 90 miles south from the *très chic* seaside community of Carmel, it is arguably the most stunning stretch of asphalt on the planet.

It is also the only paved road in and out of Big Sur, making this section of coastline one of the most isolated places in the Lower 48. And for me, that remoteness is a big part of its attraction.

Coming here at this quieter time of year, after the hordes of summer tourists have gone, never fails to transport me to an uncommonly peaceful place where the concerns of daily life disappear, a place that's more about being than doing. If it's possible for a stretch of road to be therapeutic, this is it.

Perhaps the most important lesson I've learned in my visits here during the last two decades is that the key to fully experiencing this dramatic landscape is slowing down. While it's possible to drive this part of Highway 1 in just a few hours, spending the day — even several days — soaking up the largely untamed wildness that makes Big Sur so special is an opportunity that should not be missed.

One of the best ways to do that, in addition to taking full advantage of the highway's frequent turnouts, is to search out the many Big Sur treasures most summertime visitors drive right by. Call me crazy, but eating lunch on the empty sands of Pfeiffer Beach



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PHOTO: KERRICK JAMES

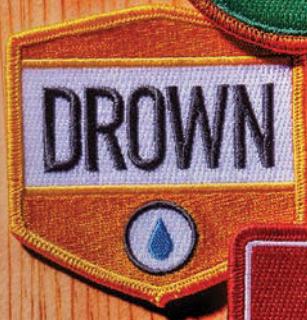
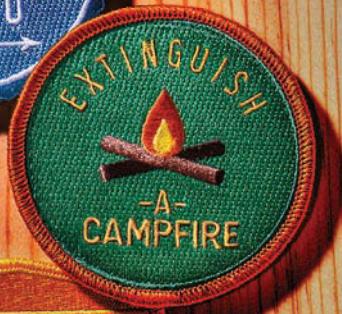
serenaded by the pounding surf that precedes a winter storm or walking unhurriedly through the fragrant redwood groves of a near-deserted Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park, these are my ideas of a really wild time.

In addition to helping me renew my connection with the natural world — something that is all too easily lost traveling in a climate-controlled rolling condo — immersing myself in Big Sur's wildness reminds me why I take to the road in the first place. To paraphrase an old Taoist saying, it's the journey itself that is the reward for my RV travels.

Which is why I always look forward to a good leisurely ramble down Highway 1. Because, at its most fundamental level, this is a drive that's less about getting somewhere than it is just sitting back and enjoying the trip.

Ultimately though, my love for wintertime on the Big Sur coast comes down to this: It is a chance to reconnect with that childhood sense of adventure and wonder. One of those all too rare places where I can feed my need for quiet reflection and my eagerness to see what new wild times are waiting to be revealed just around the next curve in the road ahead. ♦

Alan Rider has been wandering the backroads of America for more than four decades. Though he's never been big on traditional souvenirs, he's passionate about collecting memories of the remarkable people and unforgettable places he encounters along the way.



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