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24



31



48

FEATURES

20 Winnebago Latitude

There's plenty of room to spread out in the 34RG fifth-wheel with a creative designer kitchen

24 True North

With dramatic coastlines, soaring mountains and extravagant wildlife, the ultimate road trip takes RVers into the heart of North America's Last Frontier in the second of a two-part series

31 Seen at SEMA

Miles of aisles at the world's largest automotive aftermarket-accessory event showcased the latest products for your tow vehicle

36 Deep in the Heart of West Texas

Rugged and remote Big Bend National Park is a utopia of mountains, deserts, rocky peaks and limestone canyons where the mighty Rio Grande serves as an international boundary

44 Without a Hitch

PullRite's ISR Series SuperRail Mounting Kit makes it easy to install or remove the fifth-wheel hitch assembly at will + 47 Puck-Ready PullRite

48 Tennessee Treasure

Sprawled across the Cumberland Plateau between Nashville and Knoxville, Fall Creek Falls State Park sets the stage for adventure with thundering waterfalls, untouched forests and scenic hikes



Texas' remote Big Bend National Park offers scenic alternatives to traditional park service campgrounds. Page 36

DEPARTMENTS



➤ The 2155 is Lance's first double-slide travel trailer and packs in a lot of amenities in a 22-foot 2-inch floorplan. Page 12

4 Driver's Seat

Outfitting a Tow Vehicle Is a Rite of Passage

6 Letters

Readers respond loud and clear

11 Around the Bend

News, events, places and trends

16 75 Years of Trailer Life

A tribute to the magazine's long history

18 RV Resolutions

Trailer Life is your referee

52 Hands On

Steadyfast Stabilizing System

54 10-Minute Tech

Now why didn't I think of that?

56 New Products

Goodies to improve the RV lifestyle

58 Performance Corner

Tech, accessories and news

62 RV Clinic

Answers from the *Trailer Life* tech team

72 Free Travel Information

Help with trip planning

74 America's Outback

Temecula Valley, California

On the cover: Winnebago's triple-slide Latitude 34RG has more-than-ample space for couples looking to spend lots of time traveling.

Outfitting a Tow Vehicle Is a Rite of Passage

Aftermarket accessory suppliers gather once a year in Las Vegas to make wish lists a reality



When it comes to the saying “The difference between men and boys is the price of their toys,” nothing rings truer than a guy’s love affair with his pickup — especially if it’s used to tow a travel trailer or fifth-wheel. Today’s trucks are certainly not spartan, but adding aftermarket accessories not only makes a statement, it transforms the truck into a much more suitable towing machine and creates a foundation for handling the plethora of gear — and, of course, the earned bragging rights.

The ultimate array of equipment and accessories for trucks and SUVs is on display every year at the mammoth Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) Show in Las Vegas. To the dismay of the majority of gearheads, this show is closed to the public, but the stuff on display will make its way into auto- and RV-parts stores in the months that follow. It’s impossible to show all the new items, but author Gary Wescott has compiled a preview of some of the standouts in his article on page 31.

Space dedicated to towing products at the SEMA Show is growing every year. Of special interest was the large field of weight-distributing hitches with sway-control features that make towing safer and, for fifth-wheel owners, the impressive number of available choices. It took truck manufacturers a long time to finally figure out that RVers tow fifth-wheels, but now the preinstalled under-bed hardware with puck systems (see page 47 for one example) is becoming a lot more common — and hitch suppliers are responding aggressively.

Driving range is important to RVers, and there was a strong showing of auxiliary fuel tanks. Choices included a replacement or secondary tank under the bed and a transfer-type tank behind the cab with room for tools and supplies. We were really impressed by the number of specialty organizer boxes designed to mount in the unused nooks and crannies in the bed. And if you want ultimate protection from the elements and prying eyes, bed covers are the way to go. It was nice to see how many suppliers pay special attention to accommodating fifth-wheel towing.

Running boards or side steps to make getting in and out of the cab easier were plentiful. In this arena, there were quite a few to choose from, but our preference is for a retracting model to keep the lines of the truck looking smooth. Clever steps were also offered to ease climbing in and out of a truck bed.

Once the necessities were covered, it was time to drool over wheels, tires, appearance options and, of course, the breathtaking array of electronic devices.

Stock trucks are cool, but you just can’t beat personalization. 🚚

— Bob Livingston, publisher

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DID YOU KNOW?

The recreational vehicle industry employs more than a quarter million Americans at more than 12,000 RV-related businesses. Approximately 60 percent of all U.S.-made RVs are manufactured in Elkhart County, Indiana.

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Spin Control

In Ken Freund's December 2015 "RV Tires 101" article and Bob Livingston's related Driver's Seat column, "Keep on Rolling," you seem to repeat the RV-industry mantra that tire failures are largely a result of abuse or inattention by trailer owners. I disagree. My bet is that many tire failures on trailers occur because the tires installed by manufacturers aren't rated to handle the large additional dynamic forces that are inevitable when under way.

Using my fully loaded trailer as an example, the margin between the weight on each of the factory tires and the load rating of those tires is only about 10 pounds per tire when the trailer is standing still in my driveway. This is as designed by the manufacturer and based on the gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) assigned to my trailer, its published tongue weight and the load rating of the tires stamped on their sidewalls. Because the margin between loaded trailer weight and tire load rating is so small, almost any additional force on the tires due to movement will cause a tire overload.

I've estimated that the factory tires are overloaded by more than 500 pounds each when my trailer leans on a moderate curve driven at 20 MPH. I've also estimated that they're overloaded by more than 300 pounds per tire due to the sideways force of a 30-MPH crosswind. These are huge overloads that can occur repeatedly in otherwise normal usage. Given this, it's not surprising that tires might fail despite the best efforts of trailer owners.

Charles Rollman
Colorado Springs, Colorado

Interesting tire articles in the December 2015 issue, but it still comes down to the fact that nobody makes a Special Trailer (ST) tire that doesn't fail in two to four years.

For the past 20 years, I have had fifth-wheels in the 29- to 31-foot range. The first, a NuWa HitchHiker 27RK, came with Goodyear Marathon ST tires.

Protect Your PSI

I had a blowout on a fifth-wheel four years ago that did a fair amount of damage to the trailer. As soon as I got home, I ordered a tire-pressure monitoring system (TPMS) from TireMinder. Last summer I was towing my 2012 Raptor toy hauler to Sturgis, South Dakota, for the annual motorcycle rally when I got a pressure warning. Since the reading was changing rapidly, I quickly found a wide spot to pull over, and sure enough, the center tire on the right side was hissing and soon to be flat. Experience has taught me to be prepared, so out came the jack, an 18-volt impact driver and a spare tire. I was back on the road inside of 15 minutes. A TPMS does work extremely well and can save many hundreds of dollars in potential repairs. I really urge trailer owners to obtain one.

I was pleased to see the "Tire Guardians" article in the December issue, but I need to make one small correction. The article states that all passenger cars and tow vehicles purchased after 2007 have a TPMS installed. Not so. Ford F-350/450 dual-rear-wheel pickups do not have that system; only single-rear-wheel trucks come with a factory TPMS.

Lee Christianson, Baldwin, Wisconsin



A year after purchase, the fifth-wheel had its first blowout. I replaced the tire, and the remaining tires were replaced under an unpublicized Goodyear warranty. Backing into a campsite on another trip, the tread on two of the tires started to come off. They were five years old with proper pressure and looked good before the trip.

Over the years, I had two more blowouts on the highway and several instances when I caught tires bulging. The truck and trailer were weighed together, and the truck was weighed alone, with the trailer fully loaded. No problem on the axles with a rating of 10,000 pounds for the pair and 8,640 pounds on the axles.

That fifth-wheel was replaced with a HitchHiker Discover America with Michelins. When I commented on the Light Truck (LT) tires, NuWa said they went to LTs because they had so many problems with STs. The trailer has 6,000-pound axles, and the tires are rated at 3,042 pounds each. The axle weight is in the 8,600-pound range for

both axles, so there is still plenty of load room to spare. In the five years we have had the newer trailer, we have not had any tire problems.

The rubber compounds in ST tires may have more UV protection, but while the tires don't "turn" like a standard tire, backing into a space causes enough side scuffing that they come apart over time. I'll keep my LTs as long as I am trailering.

John Harrigan
Hacienda Heights, California



I own a 2012 Prime Time Crusader fifth-wheel that came equipped with ST235/80R16 load range E tires. Last week I had my second blowout in just over three years (see the above photo).

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LETTERS

Previously, I owned a 2005 Dutchmen Denali of which had three blowouts in seven years with the same size ST tires from three different manufacturers.

Before anyone jumps to conclusions about overloading, I had both trailers weighed with everything on board that we normally carry, and they were well within the GVWR. I run the tires with an initial cold-tire air pressure of 75 PSI to allow for pressure buildup, as heat in the tire is generated, and I now have a

TPMS. The tires, including the spare, are always covered (unless we are on the road) to protect against the sun. This last blowout, I had no warning.

About two years prior to trading in the Denali, I installed four LT tires. I will now be doing the same for the Crusader. If I ever purchase another fifth-wheel, it will not leave the dealership without replacing the ST tires with LTs.

Jim Van Horn, Atlantic Beach, Florida

I have a suggestion to add to Bob Livingston's December 2015 column on tire care: watch your load. My husband, Don, and I logged hundreds of thousands of trailer miles for vacation travel and with race cars. Don noticed that tires tended to fail whenever he was carrying more than about 70 percent of the recommended load rating for the trailer. His solution was to install a third axle to the trailer, but short of that, lighten your load. In addition to the tire and wheel checklist, we always visit the scales at the truck stop before hitting the highway. Since adhering to the 70 percent rule, we have had no more trailer tire incidents.

Lynn Bootes, Bixby, Oklahoma

Camping in the Keys

December's "All Keyed Up" article about Dave Houser's trip to Key West, Florida, was worth the entire annual subscription cost. We can't wait to duplicate this trip ourselves.

Milton Howell

Greensboro, North Carolina

Can You Imagine?

I enjoy your RV tests but believe it would be a good addition for reviewers to comment on access in transit, specifically the functionality of the RV with all slides retracted. Sooner or later, most folks find themselves at a rest area or Walmart, unable to stabilize and deploy the slides. Many units render the living area, refrigerator or bathroom inaccessible with the slides in. The Grand Design travel trailer tested in December's "Imagine This" article appears to block access to the bedroom when on the road.

Jim Georger, Lyndonville, New York

In reference to Chris Hemer's December article on the Grand Design Imagine 2800BH, I am confused as to the GVWR and gross axle weight rating (GAWR) numbers. I have pulled all types of trailers, both recreational and commercial. My understanding of these ratings is that GVWR is the maximum total weight allowed for the trailer when put on the scales and GAWR is the maximum weight the axle can safely

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maximum weight the axle can safely carry. If this is the case, the numbers published for this trailer indicate the 7,700-pound GVWR to be 700 pounds over the rating for the two 3,500-pound axles (2 x 3500 = 7,000). Please educate me if I am wrong. I have had a commercial trailer impounded by the Texas Department of Public Safety for the trailer weight exceeding the axle rating.
Joe Prater, Amarillo, Texas

Chris Hemer replies: *Joe, you aren't taking the hitch weight of the trailer into consideration. Hitch weight is typically 10 to 12 percent of the trailer's weight, so not all of the weight is carried by the axles. Of course, it's entirely possible for an owner to overload any trailer.*

Nineteenth Largest National Park

I wanted to let you know how much I enjoy reading America's Outback each month. I like the fact that the columns are always unique, concise and with a twist of humor. One quick note on the December column, "Christmas in Dollywood." Bill Graves mentions that Great Smoky Mountains is America's largest national park at 816 square miles. We are Northern California residents and very familiar and passionate about Yosemite, which has a total land size of 1,190 square miles.

**Kevin Manning
 Sacramento, California**

While we got it right that Great Smoky Mountains is America's most-visited national park, it's only the 19th largest. Yosemite is the 16th largest, Kevin. The true title-holder, Alaska's Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, occupies 13.2 million acres. To learn more about Wrangell-St. Elias, turn to page 24 and "Alaska Odyssey, Part II: True North." — Editors

Dish It Out Again

We read the "Pay-As-You-Go Problem Solved" letter from Jeff Glanzman in the December issue and were so excited to see that the problems with Dish billing had been resolved. We called Dish today to put our service

on Pause and identify our account as Seasonal, as was suggested in the letter. The customer-service girl and her supervisor both acted like they didn't know what we were talking about. We were finally able to pause the service, but our account will still show as Residential rather than Seasonal.

Whenever we go out in our travel trailer, we know that we will be calling Dish because something always goes wrong. When we call, we have found

that we need to tell them not only to take our account off Pause but that we want the same type of service as we had in the past.

**Gary and Cheryl Thornton
 Oklahoma City, Oklahoma**

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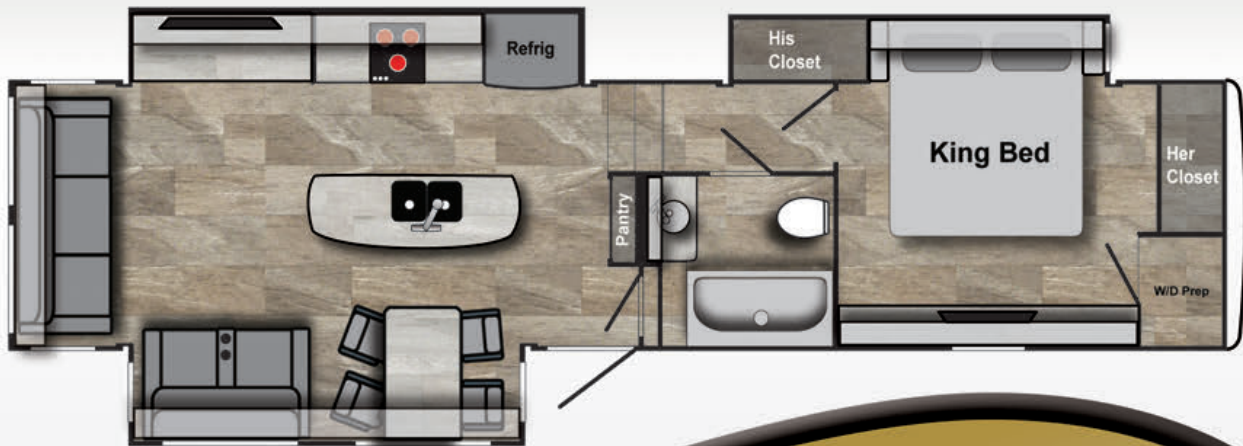
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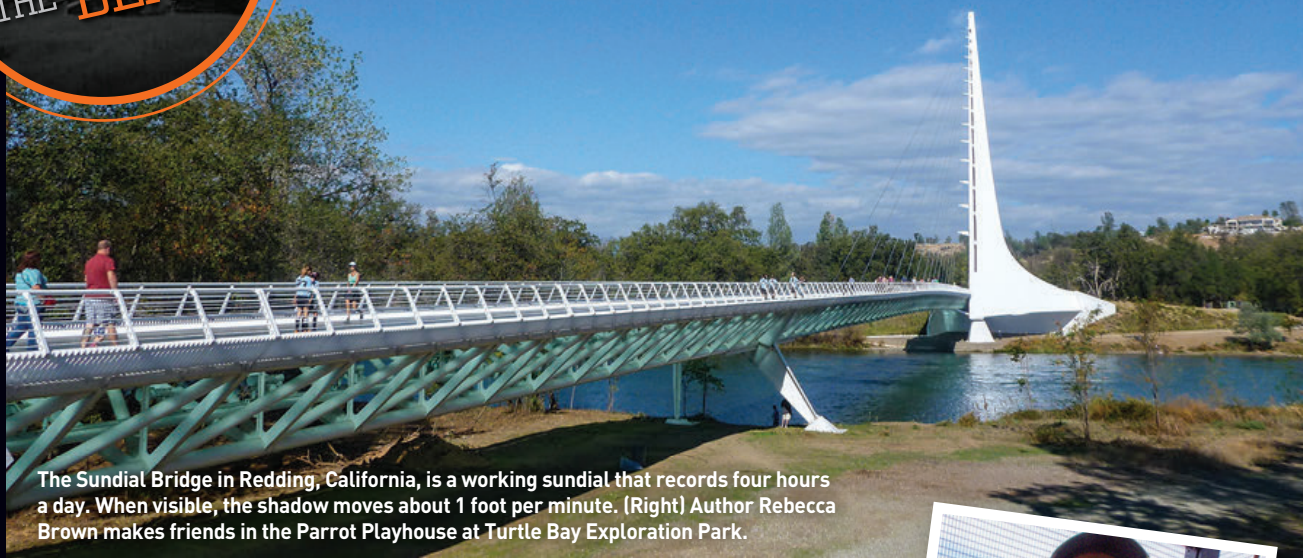


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The RV Factory, Circle 120 on Reader Service Card



The Sundial Bridge in Redding, California, is a working sundial that records four hours a day. When visible, the shadow moves about 1 foot per minute. (Right) Author Rebecca Brown makes friends in the Parrot Playhouse at Turtle Bay Exploration Park.

Gateway to the Sacramento River

Redding, California's Turtle Bay Exploration Park is linked by a working-sundial bridge and offers botanical gardens, a wildlife center, a museum and acres of trails to hike and bike

article and photos by **Rebecca Brown**

With a view of Mount Shasta and the Sacramento River winding through its midst, Redding is a Northern California gem for RVers. Whether heading north or south on Interstate 5, it's the perfect place to stop and stretch your legs for an afternoon or a few days' stay.

Coming into town, you will catch a glimpse of the Sundial Bridge that rises above the treetops as it spans the Sacramento River. Opened in 2004, this architectural wonder is a beautiful work of art as well as one of the world's largest working sundials. Its frosted-glass walkway is open to pedestrians and bicyclists. The day we visited, people were out with strollers, bikes and running shoes, and we had fun peering over the railing to watch anglers cast their fishing lines below.

The Sundial Bridge serves as a hub for many area biking trails. Our mellow ride along the Sacramento

River National Recreation Trail was one of the highlights of our trip. If time is limited, a walk across the bridge and a stroll through the McConnell Arboretum and Botanical Gardens is a great way to see the area and get some fresh air.

The Sundial Bridge is just one of the attractions at Turtle Bay Exploration Park, a 300-acre delight for all ages. Featuring 34,000 square feet of indoor exhibits in the Turtle Bay Museum, along with Paul Bunyan's outdoor educational Forest Camp with live animals and hands-on activities, the park is an easy place to pass an entire day.

There are five permanent exhibits, as well as changing exhibitions in the museum and a variety of animals to see in the forest camp. Plan to spend time in these areas if you have kids, as they'll enjoy seeing a barn owl, a porcupine, and snakes and foxes.



The Parrot Playhouse allows you to feed the birds as they land on you and peck at your toes.

While enjoying lunch, Turtle Bay's indoor/outdoor café provides a perfect place to watch pedestrians cross the bridge and people float by on the river. Camping, hiking and water-play opportunities can be found at nearby Whiskeytown National Recreation Area.

Turtle Bay Exploration Park
800-887-8532, www.turtlebay.org

RV Parks and Camping
Mountain Gate RV Park
800-404-6040, www.mt-gatervpark.com

Redding RV Park
530-241-0707, www.reddingrvpark.com

Whiskeytown National Recreation Area
www.nps.gov/whis/planyourvisit/whiskeytown-camping.htm

Lance's Opposing-Slide Travel Trailer

Lance introduced its first double-slide travel trailer, the 2155, at the Louisville, Kentucky, National RV Trade Show last December. The 2155 packs a lot of amenities in a 22-foot 2-inch floorplan that sleeps four and features an inviting kitchen island that houses a sink with a pullout sprayer faucet. A skylight over the island lets in natural light, while the 6-foot 6-inch interior height accommodates tall folks.

Within easy reach of the island are a 6-cubic-foot double-door refrigerator, a three-burner range with

a backsplash and an optional microwave oven, all flanked by hardwood cabinet doors and lightweight solid-surface countertops. Step up to the four-seat dinette with reversible cushions



and roll-out storage drawers for a view through a large picture window.

Separating the bedroom, with its queen pillow-top mattress, is an entertainment center with pullout drawers and an optional fireplace, as well as privacy divider doors. Wardrobes bookend the bed, and the room features LED reading lamps and mood lighting.

Outside conveniences include frameless, tinted dual-pane windows, an exterior wash station and a pass-through storage compartment with a slam-latch door. This travel trailer is constructed of aluminum-framed side walls, floor and one-piece TPO roof, and has block insulation throughout. Lance offers an optional-equipment Four Seasons All Weather Package for \$583.

The 2155's claimed dry weight is 4,600 pounds, and fresh-, gray- and black-water capacities are all 45 gallons. Base MSRP is \$34,647.

Lance, 661-949-3322, www.lancecamper.com

NEWSWIRE

INDUSTRY NEWS



Jayco Expands

Jayco, Inc., manufacturer of towable and motorized RVs through its Jayco, Starcraft, Entegra Coach and Highland Ridge RV divisions, announced that it is adding 36,000 square feet to the parts and warehouse area of the company's customer-service building to accommodate significant growth.

Said Dave Eash, vice president of customer service towables and Jayco corporate parts, "The increase in space will allow us to cut lead times on parts shipping by allowing us to stock more parts, especially those which are critical to the use of our units."

Jayco plans to have construction completed in the spring of 2016.

RV IMAGING



Winnebago WinnVision

Winnebago Industries announced that some of its models are now available for viewing online with WinnVision, a virtual imaging and display technology that gives RV buyers tours of its products. Images are created with a specialized scanning camera that captures multiple-scene locations in three dimensions and then is uploaded for processing into a single viewable tour. Visitors to the website can see floorplans and a 3D "dollhouse" view, which provides an outside-looking-in perspective. Currently, WinnVision is set up for select gas and diesel motorhomes, with towables on the way. www.winnebagoind.com

STAY AND PLAY



California RV Resort

Pala Casino Spa and Resort in Southern California's San Diego County is scheduled to open an adjacent RV resort in May. Construction has started on the \$5.6 million resort, which will offer 100 full-service RV campsites.

The RV resort will feature a luxury clubhouse with a heated outdoor swimming pool and two spas. Indoor amenities will include a billiard table, card tables, three flat-screen televisions and a laundry room. RVers will have access to five grills, table-tennis games, horseshoe pits and a fenced dog park. Provided is 24-hour shuttle service to Pala's hotel and casino. www.palacasino.com



Fantasy RV Tours

Looking for adventure and want to go with likeminded RVers? Fantasy RV Tours and Creative World Travel offers escorted group tours based on RVers' requests for their dream destinations. Here are a few of the 2016 offerings:

- A 45-day tour follows the path of Lewis and Clark along the Missouri, Snake and Columbia rivers to the Oregon coast, departing from St. Charles, Missouri, on May 15. Guests will experience living-history performances, boat cruises, capitol buildings, Montana's Glacier National Park and St. Louis, Missouri's Gateway Arch.
- Leave Bar Harbor, Maine, on July 22 for a 27-day Best of Canadian Maritimes tour of New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia. Visit geological wonders, historic sites dating back to the 16th century, quaint villages and lighthouses with spectacular scenery as a backdrop.
- Polar Bear Migration tours depart October 3 and October 6, and explore northern Manitoba for two weeks. Marvel at close-up encounters with adult bears and cubs from a privately chartered Tundra Buggy. Start off with a caravan escort from the International Peace Garden on the North Dakota-Manitoba border, then travel by plane and train to watch the King of the Arctic migrate and socialize.
- According to the company, Alaska has been the number-one RV travel destination for more than 20 years. Choose from 48-, 60-, 61- and 62-day tours to America's Last Frontier to enjoy untouched wilderness, glaciers, dramatic coastlines and wildlife. Call for 2016 dates.

Good Sam members receive discounts as part of the Smile & Save program. 800-952-8496, www.fantasyrvtours.com

Team Ford Livin' Lite

Livin' Lite Recreational Vehicles has teamed up with Ford Motor Company to create a line of Ford-branded toy haulers, travel trailers and slide-in campers. "Exploring America is in our customers' DNA, and recreational vehicles are part of Ford's history, so these new camping options are great for our adventurous customers," said Mark Bentley, Ford's licensing manager. The RVs will be built by Livin' Lite, a subsidiary of Thor Industries, known for its lightweight aluminum-alloy construction.

Ford slide-in truck campers will be offered for 6- and 8-foot truck beds. Travel trailers and toy haulers will come in 22- and 24-foot lengths, and additional products, including longer fifth-wheel trailers and shorter pop-up campers, are planned. Ford truck campers will be available through certified Livin' Lite dealers in early 2016, and travel trailers and toy haulers will be available by the second quarter of 2016.



Dine and Discover in Rhode Island

The honor of the nation's first diner restaurant to be on the National Register for Historic Places goes to Modern Diner in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. The restaurant is in an old Sterling Streamliner, a railcar which was built from 1936 to 1942, and it's located in the Oak Hill neighborhood of the historic mill town.

The restaurant can add another first to its name: the Food Network's *Top Five Restaurants* named Modern Diner's custard French toast America's Best Diner Meal. The signature dish is a colorful and calorie-laden creation of custard, fresh strawberries, blueberries, kiwi, candied pecans and raspberry syrup piled on top of French toast. If your mouth is watering, you can find the diner at 364 East Avenue.

401-726-8390, www.moderndinerri.com

The Pawtucket area is home to art districts, ethnic and cultural entertainment, and outdoor recreation. Neighboring Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor was created in December 2014 as America's 402nd national park to preserve the resources that symbolize the heritage of the birthplace of America's Industrial Revolution.

www.tourblackstone.com
www.pawtucketri.com

Normandy Farms Family Camping Resort is nestled in the woods about 16 miles from Pawtucket and offers a bike park, a dog park, disc golf, volleyball and basketball courts, a creative-arts center and nature trails. 866-673-2767, www.normandyfarms.com



National Park Service Centennial

This August, the National Park Service (NPS) turns 100 years old. In celebration, the NPS has set up a Find Your Park website where you can share what your favorite national park means to you. Upload a video, a dance, a song or a painting for others to enjoy.

Additionally, the NPS is hosting a contest where entrants upload YouTube videos about their favorite national parks (deadline: March 4). Five winners will be invited to Playlist Live, an annual Orlando event for YouTube content creators, where the winning videos will be showcased. Winners will also receive an outdoor kit that includes a backpack, a dog leash, a \$150 gift card and a Coleman camp package. www.findyourpark.com

FEBRUARY RV SHOWS

February 4 to 7
Ocala RV Show, Ocala, Florida
813-741-0488

February 10 to 14
**Detroit Camper and RV Show
Novi, Michigan**
517-349-8881, extension 11

February 11 to 14
**Minneapolis/St. Paul RV, Vacation
and Camping Show, Minnesota**
847-229-6730

February 12 to 14
**Atlantic City RV and Camping Show
New Jersey**
804-243-8847

Richmond Camping RV Expo, Virginia
804-337-6479

February 25 to 28
**Harrisburg RV and Camping Show
Pennsylvania**
847-229-6730

**Colorado RV, Sports, Boat and Travel
Show, Denver**
847-229-6730 🚐

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Geico, Circle 104 on Reader Service Card



Sentimental Journey

In the fall of 1948, *Trailer Life* rolled with the times

In the post-World War II years, movies and the media often portrayed returning GIs with their girlfriends or young wives, and *Trailer Life* was no exception. The November 1948 cover of *Western Trailer Life* ("Western" was dropped the following year) showcases a University of Southern California letterman holding hands with a smiling coed. Parked between them and the Los Angeles Coliseum is a 23-foot Columbia "trailer coach." The then-state-of-the-art trailer, equipped with an electric refrigerator and water heater, sold for "a moderate price that is attracting collegians and young folks," reads the caption.

With the end of rationing and a booming economy, couples were living the American dream with a home, a car and, if they were lucky, a travel trailer. Manufacturers that provided temporary military housing during the war had returned to building trailers and were busy bringing out innovations. The November 1948 issue promotes the virtues of Masonite exteriors and dual butane cylinders,

and introduces trailer turn signals from Bargman, a company that still supplies light fixtures and wiring to the RV industry. Bathtubs and flush toilets also appeared in the late '40s, and heaters that ran on bottled gas were replacing oil-fueled models.

As trailers became more sophisticated, so did *Trailer Life*. Page layouts show the influence of *Life* and *Look*, popular magazines in the '40s

known for their photo essays. In a November 1948 article on making a sofa bed, a series of black-and-white photos shows a woman in pajamas demonstrating each step. Another page pictures a "young miss" who could double for the teenage Shirley Temple displaying the proper way to light a kerosene wall heater.

Editor Milt Hill understood that pretty girls and celebrities sell magazines. His November 1948 column drops the names of luminaries who "have taken to trailing," including Cornelius Vanderbilt, Leopold Stokowski and his wife, Gloria (another Vanderbilt), and Prince Peter and Princess Irene of Greece and Denmark.

Ads in the November 1948 issue have come a long way from those in the 1941 debut, particularly *Airstream's* center spread, which helped establish the now-iconic trailer's image. Other trailer brands that advertised in the issue didn't stand the test of time, including sound-alikes *Travelite*, *Travelon* and *Traveleze*, although the latter had a long run from 1931 to 1990. The Columbia Trailer Company, manufacturer of the retro-cool two-tone rig on the cover, went on to build trailers for another 10 years. 🚐

Signs of the Times

A Columbia trailer shares the November 1948 cover with a couple of college students (lower right). In-side the issue, a two-color Pan-American spread (left) shows the W.B. Butlers in their 27-foot trailer, and ads for Main-Line, Travelite and International Oil Burner (below, left to right) exude the late-'40s vibe.



By RVers, for RVers

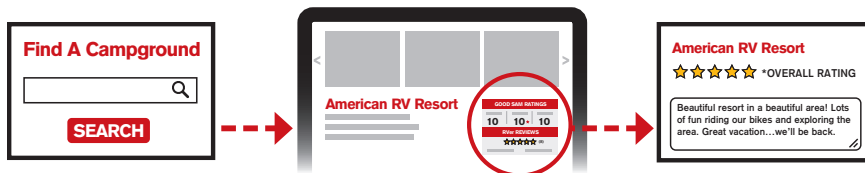
The Good Sam Club's crowd-sourced RV park reviews are the latest online tool for smart vacation planners

The quality of your accommodations can make or break a vacation, which is why millions of people click through user-generated hotel reviews before making reservations. Good Sam now offers a comparable feature for the campground crowd: RV park reviews written by people who have actually stayed at the parks. This latest addition to the club's website lets the RV community candidly praise or pan the RV parks they visit and rate their experiences from one to five stars.

With thousands of reviews uploaded since this feature launched last fall, the website is on its way to becoming the go-to place for RV park reviews. RVers don't need to be Good Sam members to post or search the reviews, so spread the word.

How to Review an RV Park

1. Go to www.goodsamclub.com/travel/campgroundsandrmparks and use the Find a Campground search tool to locate the RV park you'd like to review.
2. Click on that park's information page.
3. Under RVer Reviews, click on Write a Review and start sharing.



To get the big picture on RV parks throughout North America, check out both the new user-generated reviews and the annual ratings submitted by Good Sam's professional inspectors. These three-number ratings, with a maximum combined score of 30, evaluate the facilities, restrooms and appeal of nearly 7,000 privately owned RV campgrounds using uniform standards.

Golden Anniversary Giveaways

Scratch a ticket at Camping World for the chance to win an RV

In celebration of their 50th anniversaries, Camping World and the Good Sam Club are giving away a Thor Windsport Class A motorhome, five Coleman travel trailers and \$5 million in camping at Good Sam Parks. For a chance to win, visit any of the more than 115 Camping World SuperCenters before September 11, 2016, and receive a Golden Giveaway scratch-off card with every purchase. Scratch the ticket to see if you're a winner of one of the five travel trailers or a share of the free camping. If you're not an instant winner, you still have a chance to win the motorhome, valued at \$140,000, in the grand-prize drawing.

Find out more at www.campingworld.com/goldengiveaway.

RV SHOWS

Good Sam members can get up to two half-price tickets at the following RV shows when they provide their membership number online or their membership card at the ticket window.

Minneapolis/St. Paul RV, Vacation and Camping Show
February 11 through 14
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Atlantic City RV and Camping Show
February 12 through 14
Atlantic City, New Jersey

Richmond Camping RV Expo
February 12 through 14
Richmond, Virginia

Colorado RV, Sports, Boat and Travel Show
February 25 through 28
Denver, Colorado

Harrisburg RV and Camping Show
February 25 through 28
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Greater Atlanta RV Show
March 4 through 6
Atlanta, Georgia

Rhode Island RV and Camping Show
March 4 through 6
Providence, Rhode Island

Virginia RV Show
March 11 through 13
Hampton, Virginia

► See the full list of Good Sam-sponsored RV shows at www.gsevents.com.

► Find more Good Sam Club events at www.goodsamclub.com/events.



PET TALES While camping in the north Georgia mountains, Good Sam members Bob and Kay Gray's golden retriever, Honey, used her nose to open the slide on their Airstream trailer's screen door. Bob scrambled for the camera and was able to get this photo before Honey nearly tore the screen door off trying to get out. pettales@goodsamclub.com



Black-Water Bummer...Again

In his request for help from RV Resolutions, an Indiana reader cited a 2015 letter about an identical plumbing problem in his trailer:

► We own a 2015 Sonic trailer from the Venture RV division of K-Z and experienced the same problem that Joe Zeiner described in his February 2015 RV Resolutions letter, "Black-Tank Bummer." Like the Zeiners, who also own a Sonic, we are experienced trailer owners (four previous RVs) and never had this type of problem with the black tank not draining.

We have found that it takes an enormous amount of water to remove debris from the ball valve to keep the tank draining. If this option does not work for us, we have to pry the collected tissue away from the bottom of the tank with a rod through the toilet opening. We are unable to take the trailer to campgrounds that do not have a freshwater hookup, as we will drain the tank in no time just flushing the toilet.

Cecil Poyner, Nashville, Indiana



After RV Resolutions brought this to the attention of K-Z Recreational Vehicles, we received the following thank-you letter from Cecil Poyner:

► K-Z shipped a new black-water tank, of different design, to Colerain RV of Indianapolis. With the new tank installed, we traveled to Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, and did not experience any problems. Thank you, *Trailer Life* and RV Resolutions, for the time and assistance you have given in helping us.

C.P.

Wall in Good Time

When the interior wall of their trailer couldn't be fixed to their satisfaction under warranty, a North Carolina couple asked RV Resolutions to plead their case:

► We purchased a Jayco Jay Flight Swift 154BH trailer in February 2014 from Tampa RV in Dover, Florida. After only several uses, we noticed an unsightly area on the wall where the nails were pushing out the wallpaper over the dinette. We started calling Tampa RV in early 2015 about getting this fixed and were finally given an appointment for April 23, 2015.

When the repairs were finished in May, we were out of town, so we arranged for a friend to pick up the trailer and bring it home. After we returned, we saw that nothing had been done to the unsightly area. We called Tampa RV and were told that everything had been fixed that could be fixed. Since we were in the

process of moving from Florida to North Carolina, we decided to find another dealer.

Our son needed to use the trailer during his move to Iowa, and he took it to Thompson Family RV in Davenport. The dealership submitted a report to Jayco for warranty work and was told that this area in the wall could not be fixed, but they offered to patch it with seam tape.

We feel that the trailer should be restored to its original condition under the warranty coverage. Any help you can provide would be greatly appreciated.

**Bob and Linda Legg
High Point, North Carolina**

THE COMPANY RESPONDS

RV Resolutions reached out to Thompson Family RV on the Leggs' behalf and received the following response from the dealership's president:

Resolution of Mr. and Mrs. Legg's issue has been concluded per their conversations with Jayco.

**Mark Thompson, Thompson Family RV
Davenport, Iowa**

Thompson's response included a copy of the work order showing the dealership's receipt of a panel and batten from Jayco. The Leggs plan to have the wall repaired with the new parts at a dealership in North Carolina. 📧

NEED HELP? » RV Resolutions is a forum for the settlement of conflicts between consumers and RV dealers and manufacturers, accessory suppliers and service providers. After exhausting all other resources without success, please send a typed letter to *Trailer Life* RV Resolutions, 2750 Park View Court, Suite 240, Oxnard, California 93036. Include copies of appropriate bills and correspondence as well as a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

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Limit 1 coupon per customer per day. Save 20% on any 1 item purchased. *Cannot be used with other discount, coupon or any of the following items or brands: Inside Track Club membership, extended service plan, gift card, open box item, 3 day parking lot sale item, compressors, floor jacks, saw mills, storage cabinets, chests or carts, trailers, trenchers, welders, Admiral, CoverPro, Dayton, DeLo, Franklin, Hercules, Holt, Jupiter, Predator, Silk-Tek, StormCat, Union, Vanguard, Viking. Not valid on prior purchases. Non-transferable. Original coupon must be presented. Valid through 5/12/16.



26343208

SCISSOR SUPER COUPON

FREE

WITH ANY PURCHASE
3-1/2" SUPER BRIGHT NINE LED ALUMINUM FLASHLIGHT



LOT 69052 shown
69111/62522/62573

\$4.98
VALUE

LIMIT 1 - Cannot be used with other discount, coupon or prior purchase. Coupon good at our stores. HarborFreight.com or by calling 800-423-2567. Offer good while supplies last. Shipping & Handling charges may apply if not picked up in store. Non-transferable. Original coupon must be presented. Valid through 5/12/16. Limit one FREE GIFT coupon per customer per day.



26312315

SCISSOR SUPER COUPON

26" 4 DRAWER TOOL CART
US*GENERAL
LOT 95659 shown
61634/61952

• 580 lb. Capacity

SAVE \$250

Customer Rating
★★★★★

\$99.99
~~\$159.99~~
comp at \$349.99



26344294

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SCISSOR SUPER COUPON

16 OZ. HAMMERS WITH FIBERGLASS HANDLE

PITTSBURGH
CLAW RIP
LOT 69006 LOT 47873 shown
60715/60714 69005/61262

Customer Rating
★★★★★

SAVE 83%

YOUR CHOICE \$2.99
comp at \$17.99



26301390

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SCISSOR SUPER COUPON

12" SLIDING COMPOUND DOUBLE-BEVEL MITER SAW WITH LASER GUIDE

CHICAGO ELECTRIC
LOT 69684 shown
61776/61969/61970

★ WINNER ★
Best Value Award
-The Family Handyman

Customer Rating
★★★★★

SAVE \$264

\$134.99
comp at \$399



26307143

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SCISSOR SUPER COUPON

6.5 HP (212 CC) OHV HORIZONTAL SHAFT GAS ENGINES

Customer Rating
★★★★★

LOT 60363/69730/68120
LOT 68121/69727 shown
CALIFORNIA ONLY

SAVE \$230

\$197.99 ~~\$119.99~~
comp at \$328



26310530

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SCISSOR SUPER COUPON

18 VOLT CORDLESS 3/8" DRILL/DRIVER WITH KEYLESS CHUCK

drillmaster
LOT 69651
62868/62873
68239 shown

SAVE 65%

Customer Rating
★★★★★

\$16.99
comp at \$49.21



26328181

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SCISSOR SUPER COUPON

CENTRALPNEUMATIC 3 GALLON, 100 PSI OILLESS PANCAKE AIR COMPRESSOR

LOT 60637
61615
95275 shown

SAVE 55%

\$39.99
comp at \$89



26345604

LIMIT 5 - Good at our stores or HarborFreight.com or by calling 800-423-2567. Cannot be used with other discount or coupon or prior purchases after 30 days from original purchase with original receipt. Offer good while supplies last. Non-transferable. Original coupon must be presented. Valid through 5/12/16. Limit one coupon per customer per day.

SCISSOR SUPER COUPON

AUTOMATIC BATTERY FLOAT CHARGER

CENTECH
Customer Rating
★★★★★

SAVE 82%

\$5.99
comp at \$34.99



26302983

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SCISSOR SUPER COUPON

RAPID PUMP® 3 TON LOW PROFILE HEAVY DUTY STEEL FLOOR JACK

PITTSBURGH AUTOMOTIVE
• Weighs 73 lbs.

LOT 61282 shown
68049/62326
62670/61253

SAVE \$85

\$84.99
comp at \$169.99



26308734

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SCISSOR SUPER COUPON

ADJUSTABLE SHADE AUTO-DARKENING WELDING HELMET

ELECTRIC WELDING
LOT 61611
46092 shown

SAVE 49%

\$40
~~\$49.99~~
comp at \$79.99



26310795

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SCISSOR SUPER COUPON

10 PIECE DRAGONFLY SOLAR LED STRING LIGHTS

NEW
LOT 62689
60758 shown

SAVE 76%

\$7.99
comp at \$34.49



26341366

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SCISSOR SUPER COUPON

12,000 LB. ELECTRIC WINCH WITH REMOTE CONTROL AND AUTOMATIC BRAKE

LOT 61256
60813/61889
68142 shown

SAVE \$453

\$299.99
comp at \$752.99



26332351

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SCISSOR SUPER COUPON

MOVER'S DOLLY

HaulMaster
LOT 60497/61899
62399/93888 shown
• 1000 lb. Capacity

SAVE 56%

\$87.60 ~~\$119.99~~
comp at \$19.97



26316246

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Lot of Latitude

A wide-open floorplan with a designer kitchen and plenty of room to spread out are hallmarks of Winnebago's 34RG fifth-wheel

In the relatively few years since Winnebago hung the "Towables Division" sign on its Middlebury, Indiana, facilities, the fifth-wheel products rolling off the assembly line have shown great promise as major players in the industry.

Obviously, Winnebago's expertise in building one of the most popular lines of motorhomes in America is rubbing off on its towables division. Interiors with a distinct motorhome flavor are proving to be highly livable floorplans. No doubt, the designers are taking a few cues from the mother ship and integrating them into fifth-wheels like the 2016 Latitude 34RG, which exudes creativity and posh living at a midrange price.

From the moment one enters through the midway door and faces the staircase with its wrought-iron banister, the homelike interior becomes apparent. There's a vast amount of space,

partially because the 34RG designation is really a misnomer; this fifth-wheel is almost 42 feet long — and it has three slideouts. The extra footage gives designers a pretty nice size palette to

create a fifth-wheel that can easily be a full-timer's pad.

Up front, the plan is more traditional with a hall leading to the passenger's side bathroom and the front bedroom. But the rear is much more dramatic, featuring a kitchen with a counter that wraps to the center and doubles as a breakfast bar with two chairs. The stove, with its commercial-looking range hood, is positioned in the corner of the continuing galley counter, which can't help but appeal to cooks who normally have to give up the expanse of a stationary home kitchen when living in an RV.

Everyone who entered this fifth-wheel focused on the kitchen, and rightly so. The light-colored solid-surface countertop is large and unencumbered. Contrasting cabinetry, stainless-steel appliances and the faux-wood floor lend a striking visual appeal. It's the kind of kitchen people will want to hang out in. The large microwave and residential refrigerator are part of the optional Residential Stainless Steel Package and complement



the stainless-steel double sink and RV range and oven. Cabinet and drawer space is abundant, and strategically placed windows, along with LED lighting, make for a bright working area. A piece of the rear exterior graphics goes across the kitchen window, which obstructs the view; simply moving it up or down will make for a clear view. Overall, cooks will love preparing meals in this kitchen and entertaining campground guests.

When the opposing slides are open, the living area becomes incredibly expansive. The secret to the extra space in the living room is the wide-open floor, which has no fixed furniture; all of the seating areas and the entertainment structure are contained within the slideouts. On the left, the larger of the two slides is filled with a walk-in pantry closest to the kitchen, the optional freestanding table and chairs and the entertainment center. The eye has no trouble blending the transition from the kitchen to the dining area; it simply looks like a modern

(Right) Stainless-steel-clad residential-type appliances in the kitchen complement the corner-mounted stove and oven, and the expansive solid-surface counter. (Below right) A staircase leading to the bathroom and bedroom helps create a homelike feel.

condo and offers plenty of area for free movement, especially when guests are over. The large windows in the slide offer wonderful lighting and a great view to the outside.

We liked the position of the big-screen HDTV hanging on the wall above the cabinet that houses the fireplace and stereo components. A couple of cabinets on the sides of the fireplace can be used to stash smaller items. The position of the TV makes it clearly visible without neck distress from the couch and recliner situated in the slide directly across from the entertainment center. The sofa has a hide-a-bed, which sleeps two guests and is relatively comfortable. Settling into the recliner takes some finesse, since the seating dimensions are on the narrow side.

The use of big windows in the slide

continues the theme that's carried throughout the interior. The living room looks and feels airy, and it's a pleasure to hang out in the lower portion of the fifth-wheel.

The aforementioned stairway and landing area are wide open, which is a departure from the typically used narrow steps and dark hallway to access the front areas. It looks and feels residential, and the shelf and storage cabinet are great places to toss items used on a daily basis. Another well-placed window adds to the atmosphere.

A few steps into the landing area lead to the bathroom. Here, the residential-size shower steals the show. Large glass sliding doors enclose the fiberglass surround with molded-in features, like a seat and shelves for soap and shampoo that are welcome touches.





(Far left) An entertainment center, freestanding table and chairs, and a large pantry tuck nicely into the Latitude's patio-side slideout. (Left) The optional king-size bed restricts access to the large front wardrobe in the bedroom, but the memory-foam mattress is hard to resist.

The extra space keeps the seat from infringing on floor space, which is big enough for two people.

Residents might find the lavatory sink and counter on the small side for such a large fifth-wheel, but it works with the help of the mirrored toiletry cabinet and the storage space below the sink. A porcelain toilet with plenty of surrounding space is logically placed in the room. There are no windows in the bathroom, so moisture removal relies on the exhaust fan. A Fan-Tastic Vent would do a better job, but these fans are offered only as options in the bedroom and galley area.

Options play a critical role when setting up the bedroom configuration. In the Latitude, a fair amount of space is dedicated to this area, and the bed travels in the slide for additional square footage. But ordering the king bed option (as in the test trailer) will close down the space between the mattress and front-wall wardrobe closet. The optional memory-foam mattress is a must-have item, and the extra room

afforded by the king-size dimensions is dreamy, but there are trade-offs when it comes to space and access to the front wardrobe. Also, the shelf next to the bed is on the small side, and we'd like to see 120-volt AC outlets on both sides of the bed, instead of the one that is provided.

Mirrored sliding doors lead to a generous space for handling clothes and other items, and next to the wardrobe is a closet that can be ordered with optional washer and dryer prep. Across from the foot of the bed are a cabinet structure and an optional 32-inch HDTV. Large windows and LED lighting keep the area bright and cheery, regardless of the time of the day.

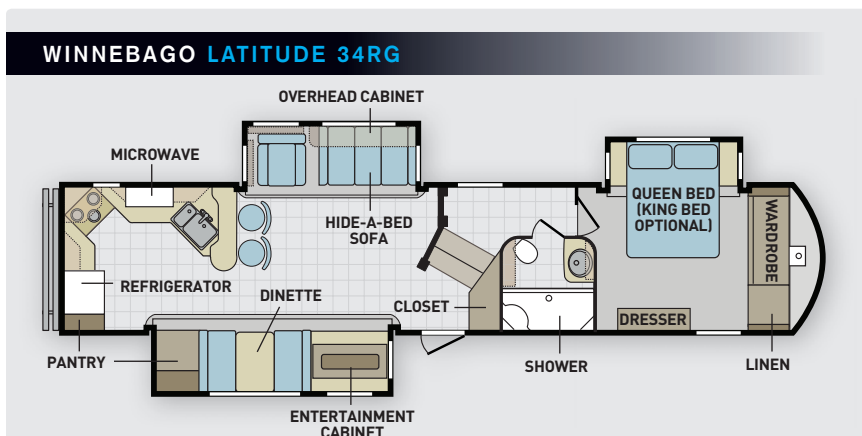
Full-timing couples and those who spend long periods of time on the road will have no trouble spreading out inside this fifth-wheel. And at the price point, the Latitude has a lot of amenities. The list of options on the test trailer is not that long, and most of the items that make this fifth-wheel so livable are included in the Customer Value Package, which is another misnomer.

This package is priced as an option, but it's mandatory, so in reality it's not optional. Nevertheless, it's worth the \$6,000 price tag.

Obviously, people who opt for a fifth-wheel that's in the 40-foot range are interested in healthy storage capabilities, and in this department Winnebago has provided a 54-inch pass-through compartment up front that's accessed via insulated, slam-latch compartment doors. The floor and walls are well finished with only the rafters showing, which is part of the all-aluminum structure that includes laminated walls with block-foam insulation. The body sits on a chassis built around a 10-inch beam frame, and there's good capacity to load in the essentials.

The utility center is built into a portion of the pass-through compartment on the left side, and a separate door provides access. The hookups are clearly marked, and it's easy to make the connections. There's a smaller compartment door toward the front of the pass-through that leads to the

(Right) An extra-large shower stall is fitted with shelves and a seat for convenience. Limited counter space is augmented by generous-size cabinets.



SPECIFICATIONS

WINNEBAGO LATITUDE 34RG

Exterior Length	41' 9"
Exterior Width	8'
Exterior Height	12' 7"
Interior Width	7' 8"
Interior Height	8' 5"
Construction	Aluminum frame, laminated side walls with block-foam insulation, high-gloss gel coat fiberglass, ⁵ / ₈ -inch plywood floor with fiberglass insulation, EPDM roof
Freshwater Cap.	50 gal.
Black-/Gray-Water Cap.	41 gal. / 82 gal.
LP-gas Cap.	14 gal.
Water Heater Cap.	10 gal.
Refrigerator	12-cu-ft residential
Furnace	35,000 Btu
Air Conditioner	15,000 Btu
Inverter	1,000 watt
Converter	75 amp
Battery	Dealer supplied
Tires	235/80R16 LRE
Suspension	Equa-Flex, E-Z Lube axles
Weight (freshwater, water heater, LP-gas full; no cargo)	12,040 lbs.
Hitch Weight	2,860 lbs.
Axle Weight	9,180 lbs.
GVWR	15,000 lbs.
GAWR (2)	6,000 lbs.
Cargo Carrying Cap.	2,960 lbs.
Base MSRP	\$55,093
As-Tested MSRP	\$72,223
Basic Warranty	1 year

Winnebago Towables

574-825-5250, www.winnebagoind.com

Circle 134 on Reader Service Card

batteries (only one battery was provided for the test) and controls for the optional four-point, electric leveling system. It took some time to figure out the controls, but after a while we got acclimated to the button sequence. It's probably just an oversight, but there needs to be a strut or latch to keep this compartment door open so the user's hands can work the jack controls and access the batteries, rather than hold the door open.

To help smooth out the ride, an Equa-Flex equalizer is incorporated into the leaf-spring suspension, and, when tied to the optional Trailair Rota-Flex pin box, an improvement in ride quality can be expected. For maintenance convenience, the suspension has E-Z Lube spindles and Nev-R-Adjust brakes.

Winnebago's intention is to provide a fifth-wheel that has four-season capability, and does so by offering an optional Extreme Weather Package, which was built into the test fifth-wheel. The Customer Value Package includes an enclosed, heated underbelly, which protects the plumbing and basement compartment, and the Extreme Weather Package encloses and heats the dump valves and low-point drains. Also, the holding tanks are warmed by UltraHeat 12-volt DC heating pads for additional winter protection.

We didn't get a chance to try out the winter package during the test, but we were surprised how well the single 15,000-Btu air conditioner worked in warm, muggy weather.

Although the performance of the single air conditioner was a testament to the insulation integrity, we would probably opt for the second 13,500-Btu air unit if the fifth-wheel were going to be used in hotter weather.

The gray and blue exterior treatment, combined with frameless, tinted windows, stylish wheels and a commanding Winnebago logo on the front cap (with LED lighting) make for a very handsome fifth-wheel. There's no question that owners will be proud to roll into camp with this RV.

The Latitude is an excellent value in the fifth-wheel market, and Winnebago's entry into this segment of the RV business has proven to be a good move. Capitalizing on its motorhome-building experience gives the company a leg up on integrating motorized-RV features into its fifth-wheel lines that are appreciated by hardcore enthusiasts. The list of items that can be added to the Latitude is too long to show here, and there's not much missing when it comes to making this fifth-wheel suitable for couples looking to spend a great amount of time on the road. 🚐



TRUE NORTH

With dramatic coastlines, soaring mountains and extravagant wildlife, the ultimate road trip takes RVers into the heart of North America's Last Frontier

In *Alaska Odyssey, Part I*, I discussed the first leg of our journey, starting in Prince George, British Columbia, and traveling about 1,700 miles to Denali National Park and Preserve via the Stewart-Cassiar, Alaska and George Parks highways, with detours up the Klondike and Top of the World highways. *Part II* follows our route to the Kenai Peninsula, Valdez, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, Skagway and back home.

KENAI PENINSULA

The first 110 miles of the Sterling Highway (Alaska 1) en route to the Kenai Peninsula are about as pretty a drive as you can experience. With water on one side and mountains on the other, and Portage Glacier posing for a portrait, we're enthralled. We're headed to Homer, the self-styled Halibut Fishing Capital of the World.

Homer was established in 1895 and has a fun, funky vibe that attracts artists and other creative types. The town is divided in two, with a 4.3-mile spit protruding into Kachemak Bay and a traditional downtown where you go to buy groceries. The spit is where the action is. The restaurants are without pretension, the shops don't scream "tourist," and the angler has a multitude of charter-boat choices.

Our experience was significantly

influenced by a chance encounter. While having coffee and a nosh on the deck at a local bakery, a chat with our neighbor led to an invitation to their home for dinner and a chance to join them the next day on their boat for a trip to nearby Halibut Cove, a charming landlocked village a few miles across the bay. Cheers, Larry and Petja!

Camping options on the Homer spit are plentiful, and all of them have the benefit of proximity to the bay. Most of the campgrounds are functional and a bit funky, an ambience that fits with the rest of the town. Dry campers have access to two municipal campgrounds perched on the bay. Boondockers will find Homer pretty liberal about where you camp, and you see tents and RVs scattered along the beach.

Hooked on Alaska: Of the more than 12,000 rivers in the Last Frontier, none is more popular for fishing than the Kenai.





(Above, from left) Native people, gold prospectors and early traders used Portage Glacier as a “portage” between Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet. The Kennecott copper mine operated from 1911 until 1938 and is now part of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve.

Or you can do as we did the first two nights and camp at the upscale Heritage RV Park and partake of the round-the-clock espresso bar. The rest of our stay was spent at the more modest Homer Spit Campground, not for financial reasons but because it fit better with what Homer seemed to demand and was within easy walking distance of most of the places we wanted to visit.

I like unique knives and my wife, Mara, likes jewelry. Homer is a good place to look, as many craftspeople sell their wares here. I noticed that much of what we saw claimed to be made of exotic materials, particularly ivory from the woolly mammoth. Suspecting a scam, I learned that in Alaska ivory from extinct animals is legal to sell. Further research disclosed that ivory and bones were uncovered as by-products of mining and of native people excavating in their traditional home sites, as well as on lands uncovered by retreating glaciers, covered with ice for millennia.

With two people and limited refrigeration, fishing charters were out, so we focused on the educational. Homer’s Pratt Museum and the Alaska Islands and Ocean Visitor Center both offer insights into life on the bay.

Field-tested tips from locals are always welcome, and Larry and Petja shared these with us. Best conventional seafood dinner: Captain Pattie’s, where they will also cook your fresh-caught fish. Best breakfast: La Baleine Café, with meals for the hearty eater. Best

place to drink: Salty Dawg Saloon, with the right mix of locals and visitors so you feel right at home. Best bakery: Two Sisters, downtown.

As promised, Larry and Petja pick us up for the 7-mile voyage to Halibut Cove, founded in 1880. Early this century, it had a population of 1,000 and housed 42 herring salteries where the fish were processed. Today, it is largely a day-trip destination to the island’s lone restaurant, the Saltry. Try the seafood chowder or the seafood combination plate. There are no roads, but hikers can navigate the boardwalks and trails that populate the island. Bird-watching and kayaking are popular pursuits. Halibut Cove is home to one of America’s few floating post offices.

Compared to Halibut Cove, the village of Seldovia is a metropolis. Also reached by boat, it has a road and four restaurants. The road is only 12 miles long and doesn’t connect to other communities on the peninsula, but so what? Like Halibut Cove, it’s best thought of as a day trip or weekend getaway. We walk around its boardwalks and gravel streets in utter quiet; a poet would feel at home here, and a few probably do. We enjoy the Seldovia Village Tribe Museum and the St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, perched on a bluff overlooking the town and serving parishioners since 1891.

An interesting side note: Cook Inlet, the waterway that borders Homer and runs along the west side of the peninsula, branches into Turnagain Arm, which has the fourth highest tidal range in the world. Tidal fluctuations in Cook Inlet are not as extreme but can exceed 25 feet. If you are playing or camping on the shoreline, be aware of your circumstances.

Seward beckons, home to Kenai Fjords National Park. To get there from Homer, backtrack north on the Sterling Highway to the intersection with the Seward Highway (Alaska 9) and drive south until it ends. Where Homer is open, Seward is nestled on Resurrection Bay between mountain ranges and has a different feel. It was the original southern terminus of the Iditarod Trail, established in 1910 as a mail route between Seward and Nome, and later made famous by the sled-dog race that bears its name. The southern terminus was later relocated to Anchorage.

Kenai Fjords National Park is mostly water and mountains, and is best explored by boat. The National Park Service works closely with private charter operators who will take you out and entertain you with wildlife and fjord viewing. The 8.2-mile-roundtrip Harding Icefield Trail and shorter hikes to Exit Glacier provide options for people who

► **DID YOU KNOW?** ONLY 201 MILES OF THE 1,387-MILE ALASKA HIGHWAY ARE ACTUALLY IN ALASKA.



Located on the south shore of Kachemak Bay, the landlocked village of Seldovia got its name from the Russian word *seldevo*, meaning “herring bay.”

would rather walk.

Camping here is a pleasure. The municipal Waterfront Park on the outskirts of town has five campground locations. We stay in the Resurrection section, right on the bay, with electric and water hookups.

VALDEZ

Leaving Seward, we prepare for the drive to Valdez and our last days on the coast before heading inland. To get there, we take the Glenn Highway (a different stretch of Alaska 1) to the junction with the Richardson Highway (Alaska 4), and then south to Valdez.

I have always had this dream of finding the perfect campsite. It would be situated on a quiet, pristine lake. There might be a trout or two splashing about. The area would be beautiful, with nobody else in sight. Would I ever find it? Not until now. Based on a tip, we stop at Blueberry Lake State Recreation Site, 30 miles outside Valdez, and find campsite number 7 vacant. Without a word, we park and self-register. Mara collects wild blueberries to enliven our morning flapjacks, and I catch and release my trout.

A couple of days later, entering

Valdez, we come upon Dayville Road, leading to the Solomon Gulch Fish Hatchery. Where there are fish, there are bears, and since the salmon are migrating, we think we might chance upon a hungry one. Sure enough, as we approach the hatchery, mother black bear is teaching her three cubs to fish.

Most of us know the salmon life cycle: born in freshwater, migrate to the sea, and return to spawn and die at their place of birth. At the hatchery, we witness thousands of fish fulfilling their destiny, preyed upon by voracious gulls, a pod of pinnipeds and anglers after an easy catch, a disconcerting sight. One would wish a more dignified end to their lives.

Nestled in the Chugach Mountains and bordered by Prince William Sound, Valdez has been called Alaska’s Little Switzerland. It was established in 1897 as a port of entry for prospectors hoping to strike it rich in the Klondike Gold Rush. From the picturesque harbor, one can board a boat to fish, visit the Columbia Glacier or view wildlife in Prince William Sound. Sea kayak rentals are a thriving business.

Valdez has quite a history. Not only is it the southern terminus of

one of the world’s largest crude-oil conduits, the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, it was near the epicenter of the 1964 Great Alaska Earthquake, the second most powerful ever recorded, and the closest city to the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, the largest in U.S. waters before the 2010 Deepwater Horizon spill. All of this we explore in the Valdez Museum and Historical Archive.

WRANGELL-ST. ELIAS

At 13.2 million acres, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve is the largest in the national park system. Nine of the 16 highest peaks in the United States ascend from here. The park has the highest concentration of glaciers in North America, and the only access routes are two horrible gravel roads.

Why, you might ask, would we want to visit a huge place with limited vehicle access? Because this is the “real Alaska” — wild, undeveloped and populated by folks who don’t live like the rest of us, and don’t want to. Its millions of acres of land are rarely if ever touched by humans. Hike a few miles off any road, and what you get is pure wilderness.

After backtracking on the Richardson Highway from Valdez, we head east on the Edgerton Highway (Alaska 10). The Edgerton is paved to the village of Chitina (pronounced *Chit-na*), where it becomes the McCarthy Road. After a few miles, we discover that this drive will vie for the Worst Road in Alaska. We backtrack to a primitive campground and set up for the night. A hand-printed sign near the toilet warns us that fresh grizzly scat has been spotted nearby.

In the morning, I introduce myself to Ranger Earl. Mentioning my experience on the road, I inquire about the condition further on. He notes that the part we drove was the good part. We’re headed to McCarthy, and he advises us of a shuttle service that will take us the 60 miles. Comparing the cost of the shuttle

Connecting Valdez to Fairbanks, the Richardson Highway ribbons around the Chugach Mountains and the Alaska Range.





THE BEST OF WHERE WE CAMPED

ALASKA

Denali

Denali Grizzly Bear Resort

866-583-2696, www.denaligrizzlybear.com

Homer

Heritage RV Park

907-226-4500

www.alaskaheritagervpark.com

Homer Spit Campground

907-235-8206

www.alaskacampgrounds.net

Seward

Waterfront Park

907-224-4055, www.cityofseward.us

Tok

Tok RV Village (Good Sam Park)

907-883-5877, www.tokrv.net

Valdez Area

Blueberry Lake State Recreation Site

907-269-8400, www.dnr.alaska.gov/parks

Wrangell-St. Elias

Kendesnii Campground

907-822-7401

www.nps.gov/wrst/planyourvisit

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Dawson Creek

Mile 0 Campground

250-782-2590, www.mile0park.ca

Muncho Lake

Muncho Lake Provincial Park

250-776-7000, www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks

Smithers

Riverside Municipal RV Park

and Campground

250-847-1600, www.tourismsmithers.com

YUKON

Whitehorse

The Caribou RV Park (Good Sam Park)

867-668-2961, www.caribou-rv-park.com

(about \$100 per person) with the cost of new tires and a suspension system, we decide to wimp out and take the shuttle. As a bonus, our dog can come, too.

The hamlet of McCarthy and this road exist because of copper, discovered near the Kennicott Glacier. Five miles away, the abandoned mining camp of Kennecott (a misspelling that stuck) operated from 1911 until 1938. McCarthy grew up to house and entertain mine employees, and we intend to see it and the mine.

Our driver is Annika. She and her pal Eva pick us up the next morning at 8 sharp at Kenny Lake RV Park. Our coconspirators are a young couple from San Francisco undertaking a 10-day backpacking trip and three ladies from the Midwest looking for an antidote to cruise ships.

Annika, Eva and another driver who handled the return trip live here but are not native Alaskans; all came to visit and never left. They are intelligent and seemingly happy, a couple of divorces notwithstanding. None have running water or inside plumbing in their homes. They carry water from a stream or village well in 5-gallon buckets. A nice outhouse, or one with multiple seats, is a source of domestic pride, like a Mercedes in the driveway. All are at home with guns and use them to gather food and for protection.

Eva told us funny bear stories based on the theme of "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner." Here you have a group of people who live in a way that some would consider primitive but do so by choice. You can tell from their body language that they feel sorry for us flatlanders who sacrifice the opportunity to

live in this majestic place for creature comforts and material things.

McCarthy (population 50) hasn't changed much since its mining days: no central water supply, no sewer or electricity, no medical facilities and no school. The now-abandoned mine is owned and managed by the National Park Service. Private concessions offer experiences like ice-climbing.

On a roll, we decide to check out the only other road into the park, the Nabesna Road. From Chitina, we backtrack to the Richardson Highway and take it north to the Tok Cutoff. The village of Slana is the site of another ranger station and the road to the old Nabesna gold mine, now off-limits.

We learn that, of the 42 miles of road, the first 16 are paved and the next 12 are dirt and navigable by medium-size RVs. Twenty-eight miles sounds about right, getting us to our goal of Kendesnii, Wrangell-St. Elias' only National Park Service campground, with pit toilets and much solitude. The 10 sites are full when we get to the campground, so we set up at a pull-off (this is allowed here) and let a flock of trumpeter swans serenade us. Not bad.

Camping here caused me to reflect on what Alaska travel is about. You will see majestic mountains, and after a while, another one just becomes another one. So it isn't about viewing mountains or glaciers with names but experiencing the vastness of the place and the people who have chosen to live here.

SKAGWAY

Since we need to pass through Whitehorse again, we make the 100-mile detour to Skagway. We return to Tok and then head south on the Alaska Highway toward Whitehorse. The road is brutal for 90 miles. We come to the tiny Yukon town of Burwash Landing and marvel at the quality of the exhibits at the Kluane Museum of Natural History.

I call Skagway the Un-Alaska. It was a very important player during the



Near Valdez, a bald eagle keeps watch (far left) and a black bear feeds on migrating salmon (left). When the salmon are running, bears can often be seen near the Solomon Gulch Fish Hatchery, the largest salmon hatchery on Prince William Sound.

Klondike Gold Rush and by late 1897 had a population of 20,000. The boom led to bust within two years, and soon Skagway's population was 500, but it survived to fight another day.

Period buildings remain, but the town exists to serve cruise ships — two and sometimes three were in port during our stay. Jewelry stores line both sides of the street and outnumber other types of businesses, even T-shirt shops. One salesman greeted me in a mink coat. Alaska cruises have their place, and the Inside Passage is undeniably beautiful, but Skagway isn't part of the real Alaska anymore.

CONCLUSION

One of the reasons many of us go camping is to get away from it all for a time. There is no place in North America and few places in the world where you can do that on this scale on (mostly) roads suitable for RVs.

Our trek started in the San Francisco Bay Area and ended in the same place, 9,500 miles later. More than 5,700 of those miles were in Canada and Alaska, and we spent \$2,200 on gas. All in all, a bargain.

This is more a journey than a road trip. It's not a place to set up cruise control and count the miles from point

A to B. You will be motivated to drive as slowly as traffic will allow, gazing to the left, then to the right. Mountains and glaciers announce themselves with some warning; bears, caribou and other critters do not, and you don't want to miss them.

Every swamp looks like moose habitat. Every white speck on a distant peak may be a mountain goat. Bears will be inspected for the telltale hump that defines a grizzly, somehow more important than a mere black bear. Tiny towns have world-class museums, and you don't want to miss those, either.

Many RVers have the Alaska Highway on their bucket list. My advice is to empty that bucket as soon as possible. 🚐

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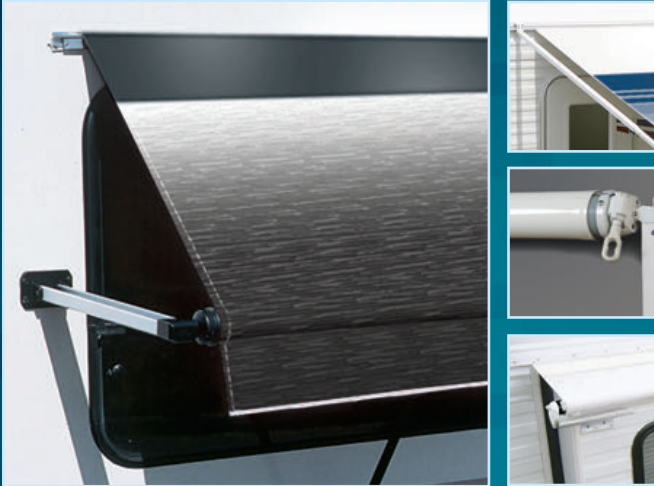
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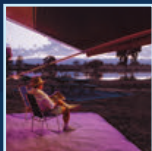
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These fun, water resistant, energy saving LEDs are great for parties or just enjoying the evening outdoors. The 3M adhesive-backed, LEDs can be trimmed to fit and attached to your awning, the side of your coach or just about anywhere you want them. Choose from White or RGB Color. White LEDs have adjustable brightness.



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No. 1 in specialty RV insurance from 2013 Millward Brown national survey data.

Seen at SEMA



Miles of aisles at the world's largest automotive after-market-equipment event showcased the latest products for your tow vehicle

It started in 1963 when a handful of automotive businesses formed what was then known as the Speed Equipment Manufacturers Association, or SEMA. Today, SEMA stands for Specialty Equipment Market Association, representing a far broader spectrum of products than speed equipment alone. The association's annual SEMA Show in Las Vegas is the largest automotive-equipment event in the world, with more than 2,400 exhibitors, and 140,000 buyers and media representatives. The mega show covers 2.5 million square feet of exhibit space and features more than 1,500 one-of-a-kind project vehicles. The bad news is that it's a trade-only show that's closed to the public.

The good news for those not in the business is that, outside the convention halls, many of the amazing specialty vehicles are on

display. As the show winds down on Friday afternoon, thousands gather in bleachers and along the parade route, as all manner of super cars and trucks rumble out to the SEMA Ignited event just across the street. Food stands and live bands add to the carnival atmosphere.

We spent four days walking the miles of aisles looking for new items that may already be available at your local auto-parts and RV stores. The unique products the industry invents are always amazing. Who would guess that you could use a battery-powered hand drill to pull 1,000 pounds up a ramp? And can you imagine a ball mount that tells you the hitch weight of your trailer at a glance? We can't possibly show you everything — we're not even sure if we saw it all — but here you can get a glimpse of some of the products that caught our eyes. All you need at the end of the show is a foot rub.

Although the SEMA Show is not open to the general public, plenty of attractions can be seen outside the convention halls.



Seen at SEMA

For full-size trucks or vans, the innovative **Decked Storage System (1)** incorporates two bed-length drawers that roll out to provide easy access to tools, equipment and additional gear. The deck of the storage system is built from recycled high-density polyethylene co-molded to a steel sub frame, providing a 2,000-pound load capacity; drawers are claimed to hold up to 200 pounds. The storage organizer is weatherproof and can be configured to accommodate tie-downs or rack systems. **Decked, 208-806-0251, www.decked.com**

Yakima's LoadWarrior (2) is a good solution for all the camping stuff there's never room for. The rooftop rack fits round, square or factory crossbars right out of the box and can carry up to 140 pounds of gear on the rooftop of your vehicle, according to the company. An optional LoadWarrior 18-inch extension kit expands cargo capacity by 40 percent. The rack is made of weather-resistant heavy-duty steel, and a custom wind fairing is included for noise reduction. Locking brackets are sold separately. **Yakima Products, 888-925-4621 www.yakima.com/loadwarrior**

A convenient single-use bottle of **Amsoil Diesel Injector Clean (3)** was introduced to round out the company's line of premium diesel additives.

The new 8-ounce size is ideal for applications treating 15 to 20 gallons of fuel. Amsoil Diesel Injector Clean is formulated with a concentrated alcohol-free chemistry that is said to provide optimized performance in diesel applications. It removes performance-robbing deposits found in fuel injectors and the combustion chamber. **Amsoil, 800-956-5695, www.amsoil.com**

Beautifully tailored **Covercraft DashMats** protect vinyl surfaces in vehicles from damaging sun and eliminate annoying glare. The company specializes in custom-vehicle and RV covers. **Covercraft, 800-426-8377, www.covercraft.com**



Long the world standard for transporting gas, diesel or water, NATO-style containers are now available again in the United States. The **Wavian Jerry Can (4)** is the first EPA/CARB/DOT/OSHA-compliant military-spec steel fuel-can system in North America, according to the company. The cans are available in 5-, 10- and 20-liter sizes in red (for gas), yellow (for diesel) and blue (for water). **Wavian USA, 530-872-4988, wavianusa.com**

The **BD Diesel TapShifter (5)** gives owners of the Ford 6.0-liter diesel

access to all five gears with the tap of a button, allowing the user to gear down during hill descents and lock out overdrive for hill climbing and curvy roads. It also utilizes the factory variable-geometry turbocharger as an exhaust brake for added retarding force. The kit comes with a mini gear display, new Ford OE shift lever, wiring harness and all related installation items. It's designed for 2003 to 2007 Ford F-250 and F-350 models with the 6.0-liter Power Stroke V-8 and is compatible with most tuners, according to BD. **BD Diesel Performance, 800-887-5030 www.dieselperformance.com**

Though not a brand-new product at this year's show, we appreciated the **Weigh Safe Drop Hitch (6)**, which features a built-in scale that measures trailer hitch weight. Available with 4-, 6-, 8- and 10-inch adjustable drop bars, the ball mount comes with 2-inch and 2⁵/₁₆-inch stainless-steel balls. **Weigh Safe, 855-492-6444 www.weigh-safe.com**

The **Bolt Receiver Lock (7)** locks trailers, bikes and equipment with your car key and now comes in models for all trailer-hitch receivers. The unique Receiver Lock — and all other Bolt locks — can be coded to your vehicle ignition key, keeping your keychain uncluttered. **Bolt, 877-251-8798, www.boltlock.com**



The **Craftsman 20-Watt Rechargeable LED Light (8)** is designed to offer a versatile lighting option, with hands-free and cordless operation. The light is weatherproof for indoor and outdoor use, and comes equipped with a charger and a rechargeable 6,600-mAh lithium-ion battery. **Craftsman, 800-549-4505, www.craftsman.com**

The **Transfer Flow Hauler (9)** in-bed auxiliary fuel-tank system offers 100 gallons of extra diesel-fuel capacity at a reasonable price. Available for 2000 to 2015 full-size Dodge Ram, Ford and GM diesel pickups with 8-foot beds, the tank is constructed of aluminum diamond-plate and mill-finish aluminum, and is fully baffled to minimize sloshing and maximize tank strength. It operates with Transfer Flow's TRAX 3 fuel-monitoring system that automatically transfers fuel from the auxiliary tank to the truck's main tank at predetermined levels. A dash-mounted LCD screen shows fuel-level percentages in each tank. **Transfer Flow, 800-442-0056 www.transferflow.com**

Torklift's HiddenPower Battery Mount (10) is designed to hold an auxiliary battery under the vehicle with a no-drill installation and works for all types of Group 24, 27 and 31 12-volt batteries. With quick-disconnect electrical connectors, the system attaches to the truck's frame and connects to

the vehicle's charging system. **Torklift International, 800-246-8132 www.torklift.com**

The new **Odyssey Performance Series Battery** uses the same thin-plate pure-lead technology as the Odyssey Extreme Series but with a slightly lower reserve capacity and cranking amps — and a 20 percent lower price. All other features remain the same, including an expected service life of three to 10 years and a four-year full-replacement warranty. **Odyssey Battery, 800-538-3627 www.odysseybattery.com**



The new **Armor All Outlast Brake Dust Repellent (11)** (previously called Armor All Wheel Protectant) forms an invisible barrier that is said to last up to four weeks. The product demonstration at the SEMA Show was impressive. Powdered dust and even sticky drops of honey slid off when the test rim was tipped sideways. **ArmorAll, 800-222-7784, www.armorall.com**

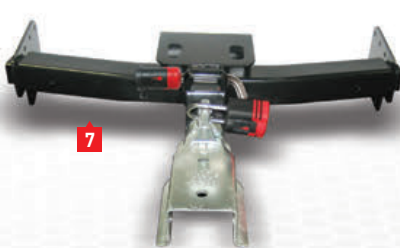
Dash cams are becoming increasingly popular for recording and storing everything that goes on in front of the vehicle as you drive. The amazing video quality of the new **DOD RX400w Dash Cam (12)** in all light conditions

is produced by the combination of a 3-megapixel CMOS sensor and a Japanese-made six-element glass lens. DOD dash cams are built into an ultra-thin clip-on rearview-mirror replacement with an optional rearview camera. **DOD Tech Canada, 888-866-8993 www.dod-tech.ca**

Warn's Drill Winch (13) turns a mere handheld power drill into a portable, versatile pulling tool. With a capacity of 500 pounds (1,000 pounds double-lined), the device can even pull a small vehicle onto a trailer, according to the company. **Warn Industries, 800-543-9276 www.warn.com**



New **Hellwig LP-15 Helper Springs** for the 2015 two- and four-wheel-drive Chevy Colorado/GMC Canyon are rated up to 1,500 pounds. The kit includes four multi-leaf springs that bolt onto the top of the factory leaf pack on either side of the axle U-bolts. The U-bolts can be adjusted to change the rate of the helper springs, allowing the user to match them to their specific loads or to level the vehicle for improved handling, braking, better ride and aesthetics. **Hellwig Products, 800-435-5944 www.hellwigproducts.com**



7



9



12



8



10



11



13

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has an attached 8-inch flexible straw that bends and keeps its shape, allowing users to get around corners and crevices to deliver WD-40 Multi-Use Product exactly where it's needed.

WD-40, 888-324-7596, www.wd40.com/ez



Stayhold Cargo Organizers

come from Ireland and have small dividers that attach with hook-and-loop fasteners to any carpeted surface to keep groceries or other equipment and toys from sliding around in the back of a pickup or other vehicle.

Stayhold, 353-1-808-4657, www.stayhold.com



Lund's AVS Aeroskin II Hood Shield

is designed to flow with the contours of a vehicle to provide the ultimate protection from bugs, dirt and stones. Aeroskin II applications include the 2015 to 2016 Ford F-150 and the 2014 to 2016 Chevrolet Silverado/GMC Sierra. The hood shield installs without drilling holes using 3M automotive-grade adhesive.

Lund, 800-241-7219 www.lundinternational.com



The Du-Ha Tote Box

is a portable, lockable storage case that can be carried in the back of a pickup or SUV, or an RV basement compartment. A locking track can be installed with two removable 1/4-inch bolts. The Tote Box can be loaded with tools, jumper cables, and camping or fishing gear — it even doubles as a legal gun case in most states, according to the company. The case slides out for easy access and can roll around on its built-in wheels.

Du-Ha, 866-306-3852, www.du-ha.com



Griot's Fine Glass Polish

can be used by hand or with a tool like Griot's 6-inch Random Orbital Polisher equipped with the company's synthetic Glass Polishing Pads. We actually tried this before the show, and it left the glass amazingly clear and smooth. The polish removes spots you normally see on the vehicle's windshield, sunroof and side windows that are hard to feel with your fingernails.

Griot's Garage, 800-345-5789 www.griotsgarage.com



The CarGo Apron

is an innovative cargo liner you can leave in your van, SUV or hatchback, or easily store until you need it. The woven-polyethylene liner has flaps that go up the side walls and rear seat backs inside the vehicle to keep the cargo area clean.

CarGo Apron, 888-481-1795 www.cargopron.com



The sleek new Truck Covers USA American Truck Rack

can quickly be reconfigured to extend over the pickup's cab to hold kayaks, stand-up paddleboards and other long equipment. A lower secondary cargo level over the bed can also be added when needed.

Truck Covers USA, 888-808-2872 www.truckcoversusa.com



Quick Fist Clamps are one-piece rubber clamps available in sizes to fit around anything from a flashlight to a bulky electrical cord, a hose or even an LP-gas cylinder. Each clamp can be attached with one bolt or screw to make securing items easy.

End of the Road, 615-828-2600 www.quickfist.com



Whether it's taking a load of camping gear on an adventure or a pile of trash to the dump, **TuffTruckBag** keeps the dirt out of your nice clean truck bed and the rain off your camping equipment. Heavy-duty rings and four bungee cords secure the bag to the bed. When not in use, the bag stores in — what else? — an included tote bag.

Tuff Truck Bags, 877-535-8833 www.tufftruckbag.com



Considering all of the things that we need to wipe clean in our lives — eyeglasses, smartphone screens and lenses, GPS and computer screens, camera lenses, binoculars, telescopes and mirrors — we were glad to see the new 20-pack of disposable **Invisible Glass Lens Wipes**. We now keep a box in every vehicle, as they soon become addictive.

Invisible Glass, 800-992-5093 www.invisibleglass.com



The SXT Tonneau Cover from ATC

is there when you need it and gone when you don't. Each interlocking section is removable and can be stored in the supplied bag, so you can keep it in your truck or leave the sections you don't need at home. The covers are made of aircraft-grade composites and aluminum with an automotive finish.

ATC Truck Covers, 800-983-2787 www.atctruckcovers.com



Westin Automotive's Thrasher

step running boards are constructed from one-piece stamped steel and have indented louvers that make for rugged styling. They come with a vehicle-specific mount kit and feature injection-molded bracket covers.

Westin Automotive, 800-345-8476 www.westinautomotive.com



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FULL-TIMERS: This offer is not available to applicants who use their RV as a principal dwelling (Full-Timer); visit website for Full-Timer rates and terms.

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EQUAL HOUSING LENDER

DEEP IN THE HEART OF WEST TEXAS

Rugged and remote Big Bend National Park is a utopia of mountains, deserts, rocky peaks and limestone canyons where the mighty Rio Grande serves as an international boundary



Big Bend National Park is an RVer's delight with a full-hookup campground at Rio Grande Village and lots of dry-camping options (below) where you can enjoy true wilderness and rugged beauty from the comfort of your RV. (Right) A scenic overlook offers stunning views of the Chisos Mountains.



Big Bend, Texas, covers a vast area along the Rio Grande, cradled by the sweeping turns the river makes as it flows along the state's southern border. Much like Texas itself, this area is both large and varied, offering everything from tall mountains to dry deserts to exotic rock formations to watery oases that lie between sheer canyon walls. Big Bend is so special that there is not only a national park but a state park as well, and Mexico has two large national parks of its own on the south side of the border. An effort to establish an international peace park combining parks on both sides of the border has been under way since the 1930s.

The most startling thing we found when we took our 36-foot fifth-wheel trailer to Big Bend was the sheer size of the national park. Driving our truck on the 43-mile-long Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive from the center of the park to the southwest corner, we found ourselves on a winding road that wove up and down between rocky peaks. The Texas state flower is the bluebonnet, and in late February these pretty blue flowers are in bloom everywhere along the roadway. As we made one turn, we came across a gorgeous rock garden filled with wildflowers, wonderful evidence that nature is the supreme landscape architect.

At the end of the drive, we discovered a small beach at the foot of the towering cliffs of Santa Elena Canyon. A placid body of water glistened in the sun and disappeared between the rock walls. Double-checking our map, we realized that this was the Rio Grande! At this point in its journey, the river seemed very meek and small, with nothing grand about it. It was almost standing still as it lazily reflected the images of the soaring rock faces in its depths.

A British family was playing at the water's edge, and the kids seemed

as surprised by this humble body of pondlike water as we were, their accented voices singing out the words "Rio Grande" as they ran alongside this river that flows between two nations.

The Santa Elena Canyon Trail goes back into this dramatic chasm, beginning with a long series of stairs and uphill walking. Hikers coming down assured us that the climb was well worth the effort as we kept huffing and puffing along. I got separated from my husband, Mark, because I was suddenly lured off the trail by a glow in the water in the distance. Crawling along the edge of a cliff and trying not to look straight down at the water far below me, I crept under a rock overhang that was illuminated by the sun's ethereal light reflecting from the water up onto the rocks.

Scrambling back onto the trail, I rejoined Mark at the end of the hike where the river widened. The canyon walls rose up around us on all sides, and we were enclosed in a beautiful cathedral with large, round boulders strewn across the floor and into the river. At the far end, the rock walls narrowed, and the sun lit the cliffs and water in beautiful shades of burnt orange.



LONE STAR LONESOME

Out-of-the-way doesn't begin to describe the remoteness of Big Bend, one of the least-visited national parks. From Interstate 10, take U.S. Route 385 to Marathon, the closest real city to the park, then it's 70 miles south to park headquarters. Wherever you're coming from, it's quite a drive, but well worth it.

Big Bend National Park, 432-477-2251, www.nps.gov/bibe



The fun thing about Big Bend National Park is that you can pick your activities to suit the day's weather. Not only does the temperature vary with the elevation, but the weather is totally unpredictable. The conditions reported at each of the five visitor centers can be quite different. On hot days, we headed into the Chisos Mountains in the center of the park where the air was cool and crisp. On cold days, we stayed down on the desert floor or went to the lowest elevation in the park at Rio Grande Village Campground on the far-east end.

After many days of highs in the 80s, we woke up one morning to find the valleys on the north side of the Chisos Mountains covered with a delicate layer of snow and frost. Desert plants that normally decorate this arid land in shades of pale green, beige and brown were suddenly trimmed in white lace. Everyone who

The Grapevine Hills Trail leads to an enormous balancing rock that dwarfs hikers posing for photos underneath.



was heading up or down the mountains for a day of exploration pulled over on the side of the road to get photos. It was a moment of exquisite beauty that quickly vanished, as the sun spread its rays and radiated its warm embrace.

Big Bend is a hiker's paradise, and many people come to do multiday backcountry hikes across the park. For those who aren't so hard-core, like ourselves, the park's easier hikes include the Window Trail, starting high up in the Chisos Mountains. The trail goes downhill across a wide-open area before reaching a canyon lined with a smooth and curving rock floor. The National Park Service has carved stairs into some of the rocks to make it easy to traverse the area. At the end of the hike, the "window" turned out to be more of a vast doorway between the canyon walls with a lovely view of the valley beyond.

We found a completely different kind of terrain on the Grapevine Hills Trail. Feeling like we had suddenly been transported to Arizona or Utah, we hiked past rock hoodoos and scrub brush. The trail took us to a huge pile of massive boulders and led us upward on tiny switchbacks. Climbing higher,

we suddenly spotted an enormous balancing rock in the distance. Two large boulders supported a massive lintel, creating an inviting opening. Playing around taking selfies and swapping cameras with other hikers for portraits with this immense frame around us, it was hard to imagine the extraordinary forces that placed one boulder atop the other two with such precision.

After all these hikes, we had reached the saturation point and were ready for a change of pace. Over at the east end of the park, not far from Rio Grande Village Campground, there is a small settlement on the Mexican side of the river, Boquillas del Carmen. With passports in hand, we walked over the U.S.–Mexico border to have a look around. A short trail leads from the border crossing to the edge of the Rio Grande, and as we approached the riverbank, we saw a young fellow cast off in a rowboat and row across to us. We soon discovered that this was the ferry.

He invited us to climb aboard, and in no time he was rowing us to the other side. Meanwhile, the air was filled with the deep tones and rich melodies of a man's voice singing a Mexican folk song

Old Mexican-style graves and shrines honoring the mercury miners who toiled here decades ago fill the Terlingua Ghost Town Cemetery.





Sheer rock cliffs highlight several hikes at Big Bend National Park. On the Santa Elena Canyon Trail (left), the Rio Grande carves its way between towering rock faces. The Window Hike (right) offers views between steep canyon walls.

from a bluff on the far side. It gave me goosebumps. What a welcome!

Once across, we put a few American dollars into a jar to pay for the ferry and were given a choice of walking to town or riding a burro. While the burro was tempting, and we saw others enjoying the ride, we opted to walk, and a guide accompanied us into town where we completed our very brief Mexican entrance paperwork in a small office in front of a uniformed official. All legalities finished, we wandered about this tiny dirt-street village and were charmed by what we found.

We have traveled extensively in Mexico and were unsure if a village that

lies 25 miles from the next Mexican community but is walking distance from a major American national park would feel authentic or would just be a tourist trap. We were delighted to discover that, for us, this community was as much the real Mexico as any of the places we've visited throughout the country. Mexican pottery and baskets filled the shops, and the dusty streets between them were sunbaked. Two men rode past on horseback, and, with a bright yellow building and the Sierra del Carmen mountains as a backdrop, they looked for all the world like they were riding right out of a movie.

A barefoot little girl wearing a T-shirt

emblazoned with a big heart and the word "Love" on it came running up to us to sell us something she clutched in her fingers. Practicing what little Spanish I could muster, I found out her name was Maria and she was four years old. Her barefoot companion was even smaller, and she said he was not her brother but was just a friend, and he was three.

The guide stayed with us, or nearby, throughout our visit, a part of the system this village has established to help wide-eyed tourists and provide a little tip income for the villagers. He showed us the church, the small health center and the solar-power system that provides electricity to the community,



The funky town of Terlingua is built in and around old adobe ruins of homes and businesses that were once filled with the voices of the local mining community.

and then he pointed out his house down in a valley in the distance.

Our guide bid us farewell so we could enjoy lunch alone at one of two cantinas in town, José Falcón, which has an inviting patio overlooking the Rio Grande. (Mexicans call this river the Rio Bravo.) Enjoying Coronas, tacos and burritos while taking in a lovely view was an ideal way to spend an hour or two, and we were reluctant to leave this pretty spot.

Back in Big Bend National Park, we took another day trip to an equally unusual community at the opposite end of the park, the hippie and artsy ghost town of Terlingua. This town is built on the ruins of an old cinnabar mining operation that employed many Mexican miners until it closed in 1946. A cemetery pays homage to the Mexicans who lived and died here years ago, and many of the grave markers are little shrines. This cemetery springs to life with festivities on the night of the Day of the Dead (November 1) each year, but

we found it mysteriously engaging even in broad daylight in a different season.

The old adobe ruins of the miners' homes stand in various stages of decay all around, and the modern-day hippies and off-beat types who make Terlingua their home today have creatively built their houses into and around some of these old ruins. Odd metal sculptures of giant bugs and antique motorcycles adorn the town, and one guy has turned his home into a three-masted ship with the name Passing Wind. The old Chisos movie theater of the 1930s is the Starlight Theatre Bar today, and La Posada Milagro offers rooms for rent and is the morning coffee hangout for locals and travelers alike. It is a great spot to feel the unique vibe of this community.

We enjoyed one more hike in Big Bend National Park before our two-week stay drew to a close. Beginning partway up the Chisos Mountains, the Lost Mine Trail climbs up to a ridge where we soaked in the

RVING NEAR THE RIO GRANDE

Beyond Big Bend's scenic dry-camping locations, two of the best places to stay are a national park campground with full hookups at the east end of the park and a Good Sam Park in Terlingua.

BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK
Rio Grande Village RV Park
877-386-4383, www.nps.gov/bibe/planyourvisit/rgv_hookups.htm

TERLINGUA
Big Bend Resort and Adventures RV Park
877-386-4383, www.bigbendresortadventures.com/rvpark

immense views and felt really glad to have taken the 100-mile detour off Interstate 10 to explore this vast park on the southern border of Texas. It is a world apart, not only because of its remote location but because of the unique and special communities that thrive on the fringes. 📍

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WITHOUT A H

PullRite's ISR Series SuperRail Mounting Kit makes it easy to install or remove the fifth-wheel hitch.

Going big right out of the gate or upgrading from a smaller travel trailer to a fifth-wheel is fraught with decisions, especially when it comes to your truck. Because, beyond determining how much fifth-wheel it can tow and pin weight it can shoulder, you have to get used to the fact that installing the hitch will likely require some permanent modifications, and that the very thing that makes your truck a truck — its bed — will forever be compromised by a large, heavy hitch assembly that is difficult at best to remove.

PullRite feels your pain. Using the company's patented Clean Bed Technology (CBT), the ISR Series SuperRail Mounting Kit restores the full use of the truck bed. You simply unpin the hitch, unpin the rails, and the entire hitch assembly can be lifted out. Then it's just a matter of giving the four mounting posts a twist, and you have

a completely flat load floor. The only things that would even clue you in to the hitch's presence are four holes in the bed. Adding to the convenience of this system are the custom, application-specific brackets that bolt to the frame, most of which don't require drilling.

PullRite's ISR Series mounting kits with CBT are available for most late-model three-quarter-ton (2500 series) and one-ton (3500 series) trucks. PullRite tests all of its installation kits to SAE J2638 standards and rates them accordingly. It's still a good idea to check with your dealer or PullRite to make sure you get the proper fit and weight rating for the specific application.

We recently visited Richardson's RV Center in Riverside, California, and observed as the ISR Series SuperRail Mounting Kit was installed in a 2013 GMC 2500 HD. This kit, rated at a stout 24,000 pounds, was used to mount a PullRite SuperGlide hitch, rated at

18,000 pounds. Now, while the guys at Richardson's are obviously well practiced in such installations, we were still surprised that the entire process took less than an hour. With first-time scrutiny, some hand tools and a little patience, however, we think it would be possible for an experienced do-it-yourselfer to complete the job in two hours, which is still pretty amazing. And once installed, it takes minutes to remove the entire hitch assembly, albeit with the help of a friend or a hoist. The slider hitch in particular is too heavy for one person to lift out of the bed safely.

So, if an obstructed bed is the only thing that's kept you from choosing a fifth-wheel, rejoice. The ISR Series SuperRail Mounting Kit provides the safety and stability of a fifth-wheel hitch without compromising bed space.

PullRite/Pulliam Enterprises
800-443-2307, www.pullrite.com



1) Part of what makes installing the PullRite ISR Series SuperRail Mounting Kit so easy is this cleverly engineered, application-specific bracket system that bolts to the frame just above the rear wheels.

2, 3) Starting on the passenger side, the bracket is moved into place behind the tire, and then hung on the frame rail.

4) The piece of supplied fish wire is fed through the hole in the bracket and the corresponding hole in the frame, and then passed back out through the larger oblong hole in front of it.

HITCH

h-wheel hitch assembly at will

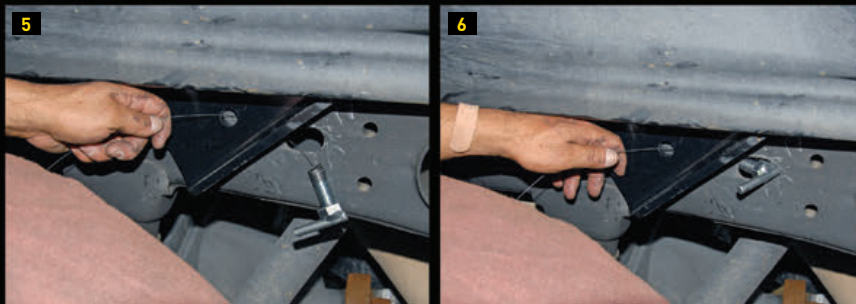
5, 6) Now the bolt can be threaded into the coiled section of the fish wire, then pulled back into the frame. The piece of stock welded to the head of the bolt will prevent it from turning inside the frame when the nut is attached and tightened.

7) The same steps are repeated for the rearmost hole in the bracket. Pull slowly and carefully to prevent the bolt from falling off in the frame. Once this bracket is installed, the process is repeated on the driver's-side frame.

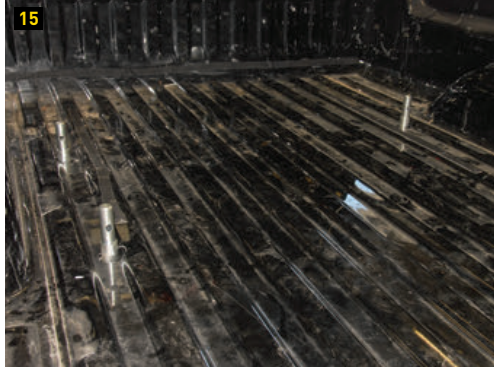
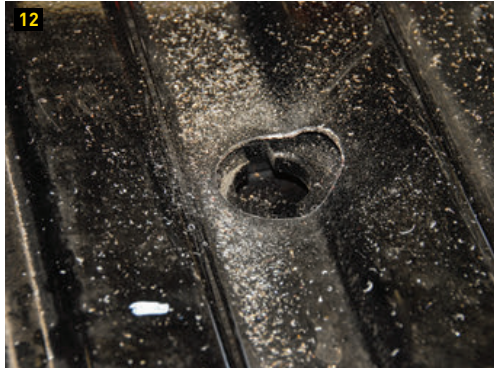
8) Another way PullRite alleviates installation anxiety is with this application-specific template that helps determine where the hitch base plate should be located in the truck bed. It is made of plastic, so it lies perfectly flat and isn't easily damaged.

9) As with almost every installation, careful measuring is key. The instructions for this particular truck call for the template to be positioned 24½ inches from the end of the bed on both sides. The edge of the template is then outlined with a white marker.

10) Once the template has been carefully measured from side to side to ensure it is centered, the holes marked in the template can be drilled through.



WITHOUT A HITCH



11) A hole saw is used to cut through the bed sheet metal. The new hole should align perfectly with the hole in the bracket beneath.

12) As you can see, the hole cut does indeed line up perfectly with the bracket underneath. Some minor grinding on one side of the hole was required so the posts could be inserted and turned more easily.

13, 14) When you're ready to tow, the hitch installation starts by inserting these posts through the hole, then turning them slightly to lock in place.

15) The rest of the holes are cut and the posts inserted.

16) The rails are positioned over the posts and pinned in place — no tools required.



17) The mounting brackets are positioned at the correct locations atop the rails and pinned in place as well.

18) The hitch assembly is lifted into the truck and the cross members placed into the mounting brackets. Note that holes in the hitch cross member allow it to be adjusted from side to side.

19) The fasteners are installed and tightened to specifications.



20) Finally, the hitch head is slid forward and the rails treated to silicone spray for smooth operation. All of the fasteners used in the installation are then torqued to specifications.

PUCK-READY PULLRITE

THE OE SERIES SUPER 5TH HITCH FITS RIGHT INTO THE FORD FACTORY MOUNTING SYSTEM



article by Bill and Jenn Gehr photos by Bob Livingston

When Ford introduced the puck-style fifth-wheel mounting-system option on its 2011 trucks, it was certain to start a trend. Soon, Chevy and Ram heavy-duty models followed suit, and the gateway was officially opened for aftermarket fifth-wheel hitch manufacturers to offer alternatives to the factory option. PullRite, a longtime manufacturer of innovative fifth-wheel hitch products, has introduced a system that mounts in the Ford pucks with only a couple of hand tools and no drilling. Dubbed the OE Series Super 5th, the hitch is offered in two weight ratings — 18,000 and 25,000 pounds — to handle just about any production fifth-wheel on the market.

PullRite's patented jaw assembly is one of the best in the industry and virtually eliminates annoying clanking noises during starts and stops. Backed by a five-year warranty, the OE Series Super 5th hitch is eloquently designed with an American flag decal that signifies it is made in the USA.

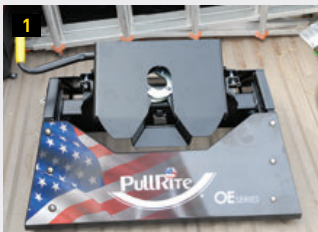
Installing the hitch into the Ford puck system takes no

more than half an hour, and the process is incredibly easy. Once the mounting washers are placed in the existing puck holes, the hitch is positioned onto the mounting washers, making sure it is fully seated; the hitch saddle can be removed to lighten the weight. The four clearly marked post handles are pushed through the hitch flange and into the puck washers, and then turned to lock in place.

If the hitch feels loose, the castle nuts on the lift handles can be tightened. It's important to make sure that the castle nuts are snug but not overtightened and the cotter pins are in place. It might be necessary to make additional adjustments after several towing sessions.

PullRite is known for its close jaw tolerances, so there's a bit of a learning curve when hitching up because the jaws fit so tightly. Once you get the process down, you'll be treated to an absolutely silent towing experience.

The PullRite OE Series Super 5th hitch retails for around \$1,200 for the 18K model and \$1,700 for the 25K. 🚚



1) PullRite's patriotic OE Series Super 5th hitch fits nicely in the bed of the Ford F-350 and has a custom look. The hitch is easy to remove when the bed is needed for other duties. 2) Mounting washers provided with the hitch kit fit into the existing pucks in the Ford truck bed. 3) Once the new mounting washers are securely in place, the hitch assembly is positioned over the washers. The hitch saddle was removed to lighten the load. 4) Post handles are clearly marked with numbers stamped in the ends. These numbers correspond to labeling on the hitch and are not interchangeable.



5) Once the hitch assembly is in place, the post handles are pushed into the mounting washers and turned toward the center of the hitch body. 6) If the handles turn freely toward the center, they are locked in place and can be secured to each other using the locking bracket. 7) If there's play in the hitch after mounting, the castle nut on each post handle can be tightened. 8) The castle nuts should be snug enough to prevent the hitch from moving but not overtightened. Once secure, the cotter pins are bent into place.

TENNESSEE TREASURE



Sprawled across the Cumberland Plateau between Nashville and Knoxville, 26,000-acre Fall Creek Falls State Park sets the stage for adventure with thundering waterfalls, untouched forests, scenic hikes and a first-rate campground



A favorite romantic spot, Buzzard's Roost pokes a stone finger into the canyon for a spectacular panorama.

Fall Creek Falls State Park in southeastern Tennessee stretches across more than 26,000 acres of some of the most dramatic landscape you can imagine. Poised atop the Cumberland Plateau — the longest such forested plateau in the world, spanning eastern Tennessee all the way from Alabama to Kentucky — the park is a study in rare geology. And for breathtaking scenery, it doesn't get any better.

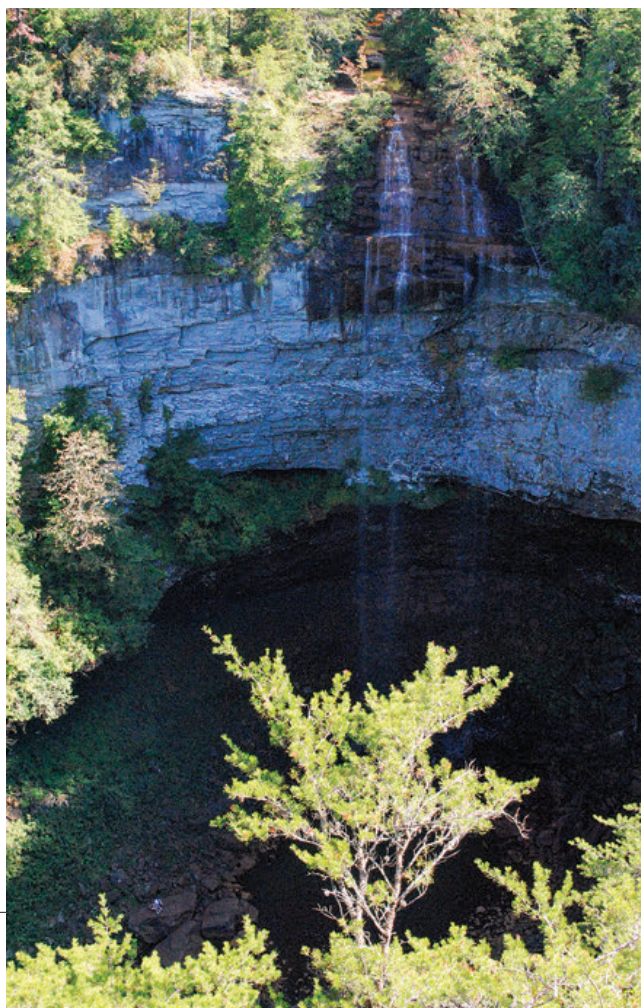
Among the wonders is Cane Creek Gorge, a massive, thickly treed limestone cleft that bores some 800 feet into the earth and extends nearly 8 miles. Picturesque, fast-flowing streams feed into Cane Creek at the base of the gorge, bubbling over and around pebble-studded boulders shaped like giant turtles. The streams wind past stands of some of the country's last remaining virgin forest — trees that, remarkably, have never been touched by ax or chainsaw. And, of course, there are the namesake falls, plus five others that are nearly as grand.

Fall Creek Falls, even though its drop is below the rim of the gorge, plunges a mighty 265 feet into a deep, tannin-black pool. Numerous overlooks along the rim, some fenced for safety, some not, provide stunning views of the falls, which from the distant vantage could be long strands of crimped white hair extending into shafts of light. According to Tom Solomon, head of resources management and program services for the park, these are the highest "plunge" falls east of the Rockies. And while the volume of water may be far less than Niagara's, the drop starts almost 100 feet higher.

Above the falls, a dam has harnessed Fall Creek into shimmering-silver 365-acre Fall Creek Lake. Solomon notes that the amount of water going over the falls can be controlled from here. He adds that all "surface water" in the park eventually flows into Cane Creek, the stream, which, aided by long-ago glaciers and geologic uplift, has helped shape and carve this rugged landscape. He says it's a process that has been going on for somewhere around 350 million years.

The park's other waterfalls include 95-foot-high Piney Creek Falls, 125-foot Rockhouse Falls and 250-foot Coon Creek Falls. There is also Cane Creek Cascades, a wild sweep of water that thunders over a 45-foot-high rocky stair-step, splashes into a wide pool (on a hot day you may see swimmers here), then races along a rock-strewn course to drop over 85-foot Cane Creek Falls into a deeper pool.

A nature center stands high on the bluff overlooking the cascades. It includes a small museum with a bookstore, a gift shop and a variety of exhibits with dozens of mounted native birds, mammals and reptiles, and a wall of historical photos entitled "Life in the Cumberlands," featuring the handful of Scots-Irish pioneers who settled the area in the early 20th century. Other walls hold paintings by Civil War artist Gilbert



(Top right) A couple with their dog venture to the edge of Cane Creek Falls for a closer look at the 85-foot plunge. A view of the falls from the base can be accessed via the Cable Trail, a steep and rocky path lined with cables that descends into the gorge at a 45-degree angle. **(Right)** Higher than Niagara Falls, though modest in summer flow, Fall Creek Falls drops a dizzying 265 feet into a black pool.



FALL CREEK FALLS STATE PARK IS THE LARGEST AND NOW THE MOST POPULAR OF TENNESSEE'S 56 STATE PARKS, DRAWING MORE THAN 2 MILLION VISITORS A YEAR.

Gaul, who once lived here. There's also a 15-minute video that tells the story of the land and the park.

In 1937 the federal government began buying up eroded land around Fall Creek Falls from locals to develop a park, the video explains. Over the next few years, the Works Progress Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps restored the forest and built trails, bridges and other facilities. Then in 1944, the government deeded the park to Tennessee. It's the largest and now the most popular of the state's 56 state parks, drawing more than 2 million visitors a year.

Much of the land has been preserved in its natural state, and a number of old farms that were merged into parkland have been allowed to reforest naturally, while other large fields have been planted with pines.

Behind the nature center are two footpaths. To the right is a trail to the long, steep wooden stairway leading to the base of the cascades and its pool. To the left, a path leads to Woodland Trail via a 150-foot-long swinging bridge (featured in the 1994 movie *The Jungle Book*) that crosses over the cascades. Only six people are allowed on at a

time, but even with two or three, the bridge sways and shakes alarmingly; if you can, go alone. (After walking it ourselves, we watched in amazement as a blind man, his hand on his wife's shoulder, followed her across.) The trail continues for nearly a mile to the dramatic Fall Creek Falls Overlook.

Eight other hiking trails ranging in length from the .2-mile Campground Trail to the 4.45-mile Gilbert Gaul Loop wind through the park's forested acres, past rock-studded streams and along the gorge, offering long views across tier upon tier of distant mountains, lushly green fading to smoke-blue at the horizon, and stunning waterfall vistas. The trails also range in degree of difficulty, from near-level to steep and bulging with rocks and tree roots — and even involving a little not-too-strenuous rock climbing. There are also a half-dozen bike paths and a couple of longer overnight hiking trails.

Guy and I hiked a number of the trails and included our dogs on two of them, the Piney Falls Side Trails, each ¼-mile long. From the parking area, the trail to the right is a steep, rugged descent to the Piney Falls Overlook. You'll want to sit awhile on the shelflike



HOW TO GET THERE

If a visit to Tennessee's Fall Creek Falls State Park is in your travel plans — and we recommend it — keep in mind that every road is “scenic” in this part of the country, and mountainous terrain limits access to the park. To get there, drive north from outside Chattanooga on U.S. Route 27, then follow State Route 111 for a little more than 50 miles, or drive south from Cookeville a little less than 50 miles on U.S. Route 70 and Route 111. To reach the park's southwest entrance, turn east on State Route 284. To reach the north entrance, take State Route 30 and turn south on Route 284.

We've driven each of these formidable mountain routes. Whichever one you travel guarantees that you'll be in for some thrills — lots of long, steep pulls and spiral roads that seem to climb or drop forever and provide spectacular long vistas.

Several years ago we installed a DP-Tuner chip, which acts like an engine brake on our big pickup. Driving the steep mountain roads while pulling a heavy trailer is now a piece of cake (DP-Tuner, of thee I sing). Don't be surprised if a flagman waves you to a stop along the way. Roadwork could be under way, as it was on our recent visit, but it posed no problems.

Fall Creek Falls State Park

423-881-5298

www.tnstateparks.com/fallcreekfalls

WHERE TO STAY

Across the way from the Inn at Fall Creek Falls (with 145 guest rooms, two- and three-bedroom cabins, and group lodges) is Fall Creek Falls State Park Campground. This fine campground is open year-round and has 222 wooded sites, each with water and electric hookups, a table and a grill (92 sites also have sewer hookups, and some sites accommodate RVs up to 45 feet). Reservations are recommended and can be made up to a year in advance. **800-250-8611, www.tnstateparks.com/parks/campground/fall-creek-falls**

Places to stay range from lakeside cabins (left) to the beautiful, fully equipped campground (right) with 222 paved, level sites. (Far right) One of thousands of not-too-shy deer stares out of the woods at passersby.

rock to savor the view. The trail to the left also goes steeply and ruggedly downhill to the 180-foot swinging bridge over Piney Creek. Our dogs loved the walk but hated the wildly swaying bridge.

Fortunately for visitors today, much of the gorge is virgin forest, saved from logging years ago by its inaccessibility. Oaks, hickories, yellow poplars, hemlocks and towering pines grow thickly, many of them upward of 100 feet tall. Most amazing, though, are the ubiquitous rhododendrons — not the 3-foot-tall dwarfs that resist growing a few hundred miles farther west because the soil's not right (oh, how my father tried), but bona-fide trees with loopy trunks as thick as stovepipes and jade-green leaves the size of footballs. In May and June these elegant plants erupt in showy blooms like clouds of pink chalk (though even in fall, the time of our visit, the plants are lovely, flaunting bronze-hued leaves among the green).

Hiking the 34-plus miles of trails may be a main activity here, but the park offers lots more — such as boating on Fall Creek Lake (kayaks, canoes and paddleboats can be rented, or bring your own), fishing for largemouth bass, channel catfish and bluegill (flat-bottom boat rentals are also available), golfing on the 18-hole championship course, horseback riding (with guided trail rides), tennis and a newly renovated Olympic-size swimming pool scheduled to be open Memorial Day to Labor Day.

The park also includes ZipStream, an aerial-adventure course with zip-lines and more than 70 "suspended obstacles" that is open on weekends. There's a general store and Gaul's Gallery Restaurant, which serves Southern-style buffet cuisine and can seat 220 diners. A 300-seat amphitheater, also newly renovated, presents special programs. The park truly offers something for everyone. 🚐



PHOTO BY PAMELA SELBERT



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No More Wiggles

Steadyfast stabilizers for trailers and fifth-wheels eliminate annoying movement when in camp

DIFFICULTY 1 2 3 4 5

TIME TO COMPLETE TWO HOURS

TOOLS NEEDED DRILL MOTOR, DRILL BITS, IMPACT DRIVER OR SOCKET SET, WRENCHES, TAPE MEASURE

Certain aspects of RV ownership and the lifestyle are to be expected, such as the wiggle felt inside a trailer or fifth-wheel when occupants move around. Even though leveling jacks and stabilizers do a credible job of steadying the platform, there's usually still a little movement that can be annoying — and some people are more sensitive to it than others. For those owners, there's Steadyfast, a stabilizing system that allows you to discard those extra remedies that typically don't work.

In our fifth-wheel, which is equipped with a four-point power leveling system, the movement developed into an irritating squeak that grated on our nerves and could actually be heard outside. Although the movement was fairly subtle, pushing laterally on the front of the fifth-wheel could initiate the squeak. After installing the Steadyfast unit on the front only, the fifth-wheel became rock-solid, and the squeak, thankfully, disappeared.

The Steadyfast system is designed to mount to front and rear scissor-type stabilizers on travel trailers, and to the front landing jacks and rear stabilizers on fifth-wheels. It's also compatible with power leveling systems, and a kit is available for attaching the necessary hardware to existing footplates on most electric and hydraulic systems. We opted for a kit for the power leveling system that uses bolt-on swivel clamps for the footplates, but we were sidelined from installing the rear arms due to the position of the spare tire, which



1) Once the two 3/8-inch holes are drilled through the footplates used on the legs for the power landing jacks, a countersink drill bit, supplied with the kit, is used to make sure the bolt heads are flush with the bottom surface. 2) Swivel clamps are bolted to the footplate, and then the arms are connected. Locking nuts make it possible to provide just enough clearance for the arms to move with the travel of the jack.

restricted clearance. While installing front and rear arms will certainly offer ultimate stabilization, we found that the front hardware alone did the trick. The power leveling kit with swivel clamps retails for \$284.

Installation is fairly easy, although the instructions could use some clarity; fortunately, the photos help. We started by drilling holes in the front jack footplate and countersinking the special bolts that come with the kit; a countersink drill bit is also supplied. Countersinking is necessary to keep the footplates level when on the ground. From

there, attaching the clamps was pretty straightforward.

After measuring the pathway for the stabilizing arms, we determined that the front arm would work best attached to the right-side landing jack. The other end terminates at a locking bracket that's bolted to the frame. Mounting the bracket requires drilling pilot holes to accept the 5/16-inch self-tapping bolts. Nothing too complicated here, other than making sure the drill bit and bolt don't hit wire looms, water or LP-gas lines. Seating the bolts takes some pressure, so we used a cordless



STOP THE ROCK AND ROLL » To end the wiggles, Steadyfast's stabilizing arms are positioned from the right footplate to the left side of the fifth-wheel and toward the back on the passenger's side. The arms move freely while extending or retracting the landing jacks.

impact driver that took all the straining out of the process; a ratchet and socket will work but will require more effort. The bracket can also be welded to the frame, but make sure nothing will be burned by the process.

A second bracket is installed on the side of the fifth-wheel for the front-to-rear stabilizing arm. Care must be taken to make sure there's adequate travel in the arms and that the ends don't pull out of the brackets when the jacks are extended. A similar process applies for installing the rear arms.

Using the system couldn't be easier, but you have to remember to loosen the locking handles before extending or retracting the landing jacks. The arms stay put when in travel mode, so there's nothing to store. The whole thing looks too simple to work, but it really does the job. 🗨️

Steadyfast/Handscom Enterprises

866-498-8754

www.steadyfast.com



3) A section of the underbelly material is cut away to allow for proper seating of the locking brackets to the frame. **4)** After drilling pilot holes, the self-tapping bolts used to mount the locking brackets are tightened with a cordless impact driver. **5)** Set bolts are used to secure the arms after routing through the locking brackets. The arms must be long enough so they do not fall out of the locking brackets when the jacks are extended. **6)** Locking handles are used to tighten the arms, which is the key to stabilizing the trailer. They must be loosened before using the leveling or stabilizing jacks.

GET SO MUCH MORE THAN SHADE AND SHELTER!

The 2016 line of Solera® Awnings offers a range of unique awning styles, sizes and options including awning lights, speakers and multiple fabric and hardware color options. The new XL 9-foot-8-inch projection Power, Hybrid and Destination awnings are perfect to extend shaded area for taller units and RVs with slide-outs under the awning. We've also got a range of premium Solera accessories you're going to love including the Awnbrella™ canopy support system, Solera Shield fabric guard and Solera Shades and Rooms.



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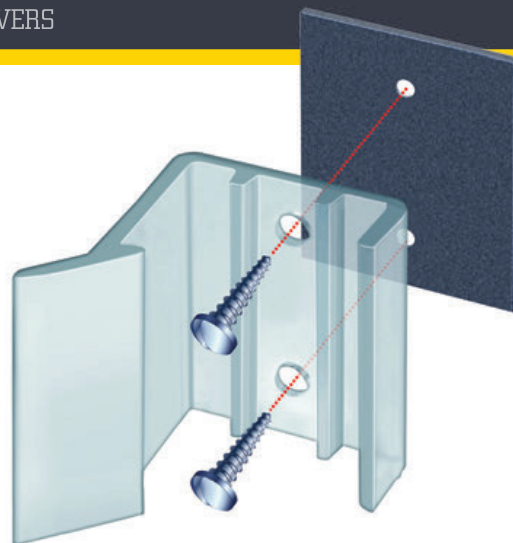


Solera Family & Screen Rooms

Less-Stress Closet Latch

Over the years, a few of the plastic latches on my RV's sliding closet doors have broken. Universal replacement latches vary somewhat in the location of the mounting holes, and it is difficult to get the tension just right on the latch. Even after finding the best location, the latches break again after a while. I have looked for more rugged latches to no avail, so I came up with a way to improve the flexibility of the latch. My repair included a layer of rubber shelf material between the latch and the closet door frame. Now the latch and rubber layer flex, and the stress on the plastic latch is reduced. Screws are tightened to just snug. So far, so good.

Stephen Ezzell, Suffolk, Virginia



Quiet Compartments

My trailer's outside rear compartment doors are hinged to the side. They blow in the wind and then bang against the rear slideout. I cut a small piece of foam-pipe insulation to wrap a section of the compartment door front to back and use it between the latch and door to hold the insulation in place. There's now a cushion to protect the side of my trailer.

Rita Reed, Plainfield, Illinois

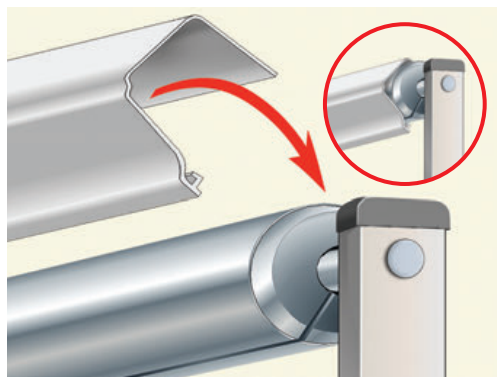
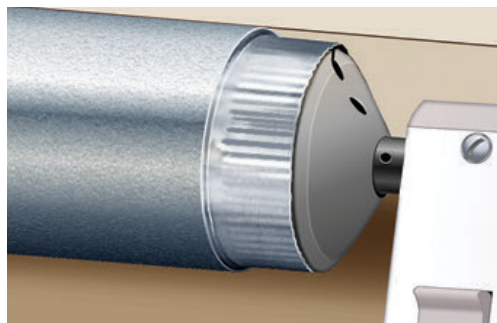
Awning Guard Duo

We recently had to replace the awning on our 2008 travel trailer due to damage caused by storing the trailer outside in inclement weather. To prevent deterioration, I made a cover for the new awning for when the trailer's being stored. I used 4-inch galvanized stovepipe that I bought from Lowe's. I bought enough sections of the pipe to cover the entire awning. One edge of the pipe fits into the rain gutter, while the rest wraps around the awning tube. When it's time to travel, I remove the sections.

David Gance, Morehead City, North Carolina

After years of storing our old travel trailer outdoors, the weather took its toll on our awning. To protect our new RV's awning from sun damage, I bought two 10-foot sections of 4.875-inch K-style vinyl rain gutter from a home-improvement store. I installed them upside down over the awning, which protects it from the elements. Each section cost less than \$5, was easily cut to length and fits snugly over the awning while being stored. Just don't forget to remove the rain gutter sections before hitting the road!

LaMoine Harms, Ames, Iowa 📧



To send your submission, write to 10-Minute Tech, 2750 Park View Court, Suite 240, Oxnard, California 93036 or email 10minutetech@trailerlife.com. Please include an illustration or photo, if applicable. *Trailer Life* will pay \$35 for original 10-Minute Tech ideas.

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It's a Snap

Created by the designers of Lynx Levelers, Origen RV SnapPads are innovative jack pads for 9-inch-round metal landing feet that distribute the RV's load over a wider area and can support more than 10,000 pounds per foot, according to third-party tests. Made from recycled tire crumb claimed to withstand extreme conditions, the 11-inch-wide, 2-inch-deep octagonal pads install in a few minutes and stay on permanently, unless you choose to remove them. SnapPads for Lippert's Level Up system are available for front landing gear and four- and six-position systems. Pads for other popular leveling systems will be introduced later this year.

MSRP: \$49.95/two, \$89.95/four, \$134.95/six
855-762-7723, www.rvsnappad.com
Circle 130 on Reader Service Card



Without a Scratch

No matter how careful you are with your vehicles, scratches are inevitable, and that tree-branch scuff on an otherwise gleaming paint job can be as annoying as something stuck in your teeth. For paint perfectionists, 3M offers the new drill-activated Trizact Precision Scratch Kit. As long as only minor scratches affecting the clearcoat or single-stage paint afflict the vehicle, the kit can restore the surface without having to pay a professional, according to 3M. The repair process requires sanding, compounding and polishing, and the package contains three buffing pads (including a 3,000-grit sanding pad), a drill-pad adapter, and compounds for buffing and scratch removal.

MSRP: \$19.99 at Walmart
888-364-3577, www.3m.com
Circle 131 on Reader Service Card



Change Your Tune


Derive Systems, parent company of Bully Dog and SCT Performance, recently introduced an upgraded flash programmer with preloaded performance tuners, real-time vehicle data, and record and playback logs. The GTX Performance Programmer and Monitor, available in Bully Dog and SCT brands, features smartphone screen quality and user-friendly navigation that allows hand gestures. With the new magnetic mount, the 5-inch touch screen can be removed from the windshield without disconnecting wires or cables. Bully Dog and SCT have been producing programmers (aka tuners) for years, giving drivers on-the-road access to vehicle performance parameters.

MSRP: \$699
866-688-3048, www.derivesystems.com
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Awning Power Players

Sitting under an RV awning with lights, music and a cool breeze is a snap with Dometic's PowerChannel power track and accessories for its 9100 Power Awning (sold separately). Dometic's patent-pending technology provides electric power through the awning's roller tube, allowing RVers to extend the awning and snap on a range of 12-volt DC accessories, including a Bluetooth speaker, a fan and an LED spotlight. The accessories attach to the PowerChannel — cord-free — with a twist and a click, in virtually any position. The power track can run multiple accessories up to 15 amps and provides LED ambient lighting along the length of the awning.

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GCR45110 - 1115

Engine Oils

Cold starts, towing and high summer temperatures are extremely demanding on engines and lubricants. Oil is the lifeblood of our vehicles' expensive engines, so it's well worth the time to learn what types are best for both the vehicles' power plants and our budgets.

Engine oils reduce friction, and therefore, lessen wear on moving parts, but they also improve piston-ring sealing, inhibit corrosion, and clean and cool critical parts such as pistons and valves by absorbing and carrying away heat. Most engine oil is exposed to a wide range of temperatures, from sub-freezing cold in winter to temperatures far above the boiling point of water in hot summer conditions.

Engine oil has an ideal operating range. If oil stays too cold, such as on short trips where the vehicle isn't fully warmed up, blow-by and moisture from cold starts and condensation don't have a chance to boil off, and, as a result, rust and acids form. If oil gets too hot, it thins out, begins to oxidize, and breaks down, losing its lubricating qualities, or lubricity. Therefore, oil temperatures between 180 and 230 degrees Fahrenheit should be maintained, if possible. Adding an oil-temperature gauge is a good idea for hard-working tow vehicles.

In gasoline engines, the top piston rings may expose oil to temperatures of 320 degrees F or more, while diesel engine top rings may expose the oil to temperatures of 600 degrees F or higher. Through all this, the oil must be able to flow easily during cold starts yet maintain film strength and protect components from metal-to-metal

friction. That's a tall order for oil, which thickens like honey when it's cold and runs like water when hot.

Viscosity

Viscosity is a fluid's resistance to flow, which affects an oil's ability to lubricate. The viscosity grade, also known as "weight," is determined by the Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE). Traditional single-grade (or straight-weight) engine oils come in a variety of viscosities, ranging from 10W to 60W. Higher-viscosity oils thin less at higher temperatures than lighter ones. Grades that don't have a "W" are single viscosities.

SAE multigrade-oil labeling protocols consist of two viscosity grades. For instance, 10W-40 designates a multigrade oil where the first number 10 (followed by W for winter) is the viscosity of that oil at cold temperatures (0 degrees F), while the second number (40) is the viscosity at 212 degrees F. So, essentially, this oil will "act" like a 10-weight in winter but a 40-weight when it warms up. Other oil designations, such as 5W-30, 10W-30 and 10W-50, follow the same logic.

To meet the need for an all-temperature oil, special polymer additives known as viscosity index improvers (VII) are mixed with the oil. These additives extend the working temperature range of the oil and create what's called a multigrade, multiweight or multiviscosity engine oil. This often

makes it possible to use one type of oil year-round, in most climates. The downside is that VII additives replace oil but don't provide the same level of lubricity as oil.

There is an optimal viscosity for every situation, and the closer the oil is to this, the better. The selected viscosity needs to flow at the lowest start-up temperature yet still protect engine components at maximum operating temperatures. Always look up the temperature-viscosity chart in the owner's manual and follow factory recommendations. Keep in mind that towing heavy trailers raises oil temperatures significantly, so when in doubt, choose a viscosity that is at the "thicker" side of the recommendation to maintain film strength when hot.

Generally, only lighter-viscosity oils, such as 5W-20, 5W-30 and 10W-30, are labeled Energy Conserving. Heavier viscosities such as 5W-40, 5W-50, 10W-40, 15W-40, 15W-50 and 20W-50 oils are not rated Energy Conserving because the thicker oils slightly increase the resistance as the crankshaft and other parts spin in the crankcase oil. The mileage difference is only about 1 or 2 percent, and it is worth the trade-off, if thicker oil is needed to protect the engine under extreme towing conditions.

Types

Engine oils come from conventional petroleum-based and nonpetroleum-synthesized compounds. Modern oils are typically blended from base oil stocks containing hydrocarbons, polyalphaolefins (PAO) and polyinternal olefins (PIO), organic compounds consisting of carbon and hydrogen. Base stocks of some high-performance engine oils may contain up to 20 percent by weight of synthetic PAO esters.

Synthetic oils and combinations of synthetic and conventional oils (synthetic blends with no more than 30 percent synthetic oil) have become popular due to their superior stability and lubrication qualities throughout the temperature range and ability to go longer between changes. Synthetic oils, made from



For gasoline engines, full-synthetic engine oils such as Pennzoil Platinum provide extra protection under severe conditions, including towing. For diesels, engine oils rated for heavy-duty diesel service, such as Shell Rotella T, are required.

esters rather than distilled crude oil, are more stable and resistant to high temperatures than conventional oils.

Synthetics are priced significantly higher than conventional oils, and synthetic "blends" of the two types are typically priced in between. Some engine manufacturers call for synthetic oils to be used exclusively. If the manufacturer of your vehicle's engine recommends only synthetics, it's best to follow these instructions. In fact, some manufacturers even use synthetic oil for the original fill used during break-in. This should help dispel the myth that you shouldn't use synthetic oil during break-in, as the piston rings seat fine in these engines.

So what type of oil should you use? If you always prefer the very best, and can afford it, use a premium brand of synthetic. If your budget isn't unlimited, but you still want some of the benefits of synthetic oil, consider using a blend of synthetic and conventional oils. Often, conventional oils are fine, particularly if you don't run the engine hard or operate in extreme temperatures. In cases where the oil is changed frequently due to dusty conditions, short trips or other reasons, a considerable amount of money can be saved by using conventional oils. Keep in mind that, with conventional oils, modern gasoline engines typically last more than 200,000 miles, and many diesels reach 500,000 miles or more before a rebuild is needed.

Labeling

Over the years, oils have evolved, just as engines have. The American Petroleum Institute (API), International Lubricants Standardization and Approval Committee (ILSAC) and Japanese Standards Association (JSA) have engine-oil specifications. The API uses specifications for automotive gas engines such as SG, SH, SJ, SL and SM (S stands for spark ignition). The latest API specification is SN, introduced in October 2010 for 2011 and newer vehicles. ILSAC uses GF-1 through GF-5 (the latest).

Diesel engines create much more soot and combustion by-products, and need extra detergent and other additives to neutralize acids. Special oils labeled SAE C (for compression ignition) are

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designed for use in diesels. The three current diesel-engine service designations are CJ-4, CI-4 and CH-4. The 4 indicates a four-stroke diesel (2 is used for two-stroke diesel engines).

Additionally, API created a CI-4 Plus designation for oils that meet certain extra requirements. It is possible for oil to meet both gas and diesel standards, and diesel-rated oils may carry a gasoline specification. For example, API CJ-4 often lists either SL or SM; API CI-4 lists SL; API CH-4 lists SJ, and so on. Always use the type of oil recommended by the engine's manufacturer.

Additives

All engine oils have additives that protect against corrosion and wear, and keep combustion by-products in solution. The base oil package in any oil makes up from 70 to 95 percent of the mix, and the rest is made up of additives.

Graphite, molybdenum and other compounds are used as antifriction additives. Antioxidants are needed to

prevent oxidation and thickening of oil. Foam inhibitors are used to collapse the foam bubbles, which occur from the crankshaft whipping up oil in the pan. Pour-point depressants help oil flow at low temperatures. Corrosion inhibitors are added to engine oils, along with detergents and dispersants, to keep engines clean and sludge-free. In diesel engines, particularly, soot from combustion gets past the piston rings and is absorbed by the oil, instead of being deposited on internal surfaces. This is why diesel oil turns black much faster than oil in gas engines.

Most engine manufacturers don't recommend using aftermarket oil additives, such as those "miracles in a bottle" at auto-parts stores.

Older Engines

Compared to prior API SG automotive oils, many SL oils contain lower levels of ZDDP, a zinc and phosphorus additive that protects against metal-to-metal contact. This is generally a concern only

for older engines with non-roller valve lifters, which rub across the cam face with higher friction. If you don't know which type of lifters your vehicle's engine has, check with the dealer's parts department and look up an image of the lifters in a parts diagram. Automotive racing oil generally meets SG requirements, with higher levels of additives like ZDDP, and should work fine in older engines. Heavy-duty oils, often called diesel oils, have higher zinc levels. These oils, which are typically 15W-40, are rated SJ or SL, plus CH-4.

Special engine oils are designed for worn engines. These oils contain seal conditioners that help soften hardened seal lips and restore their shape to reduce oil leakage. These higher-mileage oils may also have higher viscosities, plus more antiwear additives and viscosity index improvers. This is to help cope with larger bearing clearances, as well as to seal piston rings, improve oil pressure and reduce oil consumption.

Filters

Oil filters extend the life of the oil, and therefore, the engine. Filters have micron ratings, a measure of the size of the openings in the filter media. Smaller openings trap more minute particles. But if the openings are too small, the filter can slow down and even block oil flow, especially when low temperatures thicken the oil. Usually, the engine has a bypass valve, which opens and allows oil to go back into the oil pump without being filtered, if there is too much resistance to flow in the filter.

Therefore, a compromise must be struck between flow and filtration, and engine manufacturers test filters and list the ones that meet original equipment requirements. Look for name brands and read the package to verify that the filters meet the specs. Cheap filters may not filter properly and could disintegrate internally, and sometimes the canisters leak or burst, which could lead to a total loss of oil and engine failure.

Change Intervals

Recommendations on when to change oil run the gamut from every 3,000 miles or less to 15,000 miles or more,

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depending on which oil you choose and who you ask. Many newer model vehicles have built-in oil-change monitors that display a symbol when an oil change is required. These systems use algorithms to track electronic signals from the vehicle, such as operating temperatures, number of starts, engine hours, RPM and distance traveled, to estimate when a change is needed. Alerts generally illuminate between 5,000 and 10,000 miles. Driving mostly short trips will trigger alerts earlier, while long runs will extend the intervals.

Oil should be changed at least once a year, even if total mileage doesn't call for it. I recommend changing oil at the end of the towing season, if the vehicle is stored, to reduce the chance of sludge and acids from damaging the engine.

Although oil-change monitors are fairly accurate, they may not come on soon enough to meet factory recommendations and comply with warranty requirements. Follow the factory recommendations that are listed in the owner's

manual. Keep in mind that towing and hauling are considered severe duty, and follow the maintenance schedules for your type of driving. If you are not sure about the oil-change interval, it's best to err on the side of caution to protect the engine. You can also have the oil analyzed to determine if it needs replacement (see "Analysis").

Many owners prefer to change their own oil and oil filter. When doing this, make sure to perform the other services recommended in the maintenance manual for that mileage and time interval. Retain proof of purchase of oil and filters, or work orders, to document proper service for warranty coverage. Considerable savings can be achieved by shopping for oil and filters on sale. It's OK to switch brands, as long as they meet the engine manufacturer's specifications and are the correct type and viscosity. Military-standard oils, indicated with "Mil-Spec" on the containers, require that brands be compatible with others.

Engine oil is toxic and harmful to the environment, if disposed of improperly. Many auto-parts stores and oil-change shops will accept used oil and filters for proper disposal and recycling for free.

Analysis

Engine oil can be analyzed in a laboratory to determine the condition of the oil and the engine it came from. This can be performed on your tow vehicle's engine oil for a price that's in the same ballpark as an oil and filter change. Oil analysis can determine if the engine is damaged or worn out, if there's an internal coolant leak, if the air filter is not working properly and if the oil has been in service too long, among other things. Samples may be drawn from the dipstick tube with an inexpensive hand vacuum pump without changing the oil or collected when the oil is drained. Sources include Wix, with oil-analysis kits available on Amazon and at auto-parts stores, and Blackstone Laboratories (www.blackstone-labs.com). 🚗



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LIGHTS GO DIM

Q I have a toy-hauler trailer, and the more lights I turn on, the dimmer everything gets. I replaced the converter, but there was no change. It still does this even while plugged into 120-volt AC shorepower. Do you have any suggestions?

Larry Jones, via email

A The lights are powered from the battery bank, which is somewhat recharged by the power converter. A weak or nearly dead battery could cause this symptom, so it should be tested. Many auto-parts stores and other battery retailers will test the battery for free, if you bring it in, but it should be charged first. If your battery passes its test, then it's possible that there's a wiring problem that is not allowing power from the converter to get to



the battery. Measure DC voltage at the battery when it is at rest with no load or charging, and then after the converter is powered up. Voltage should rise gradually from a baseline of about 12.6 volts for a fully charged battery at rest, to about 13.5 volts (or slightly more) while the converter is operating. If the converter is not boosting voltage, you might want to have an RV technician check it out, if you are not familiar with converters. — **Ken Freund**

BATTERY MAINTAINERS

Q I have been an avid reader of *Trailer Life* for a few years and enjoy the content. We have a 2009 Chevy Duramax-powered pickup that we use for towing, and of course, it has two batteries. I drive the truck only a few times in the winter and am a fan of battery maintainers — I use them for all off-season equipment. Can I hook the positive clip of the maintainer to the plus post of one battery and the negative clip of the maintainer to the ground terminal of the other battery? Will this charge both batteries at once, or do I need two maintainers?

Dale DeKay, Verona Beach, New York

A Battery maintainers are a good idea any time a vehicle sits for more than a week or two, because there are so many small current draws from various items such as radios, computers and alarms, which will

discharge batteries during idle periods. Batteries also self-discharge over time. The setup you describe means your Chevy's batteries are connected in parallel, so, yes, you can use one maintenance charger for both batteries. — **K.F.**

SINGLE REAR WHEEL VERSUS DUAL REAR WHEEL

Q I'm considering upgrading from my travel trailer and Ford Excursion to a fifth-wheel and pickup combination. The fifth-wheel I'm considering has a gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) that's just under the tow rating of a single-rear-wheel one-ton. I would prefer a single-rear-wheel axle but don't want to end up with an expensive truck that feels like it's on the edge of control while towing. What differences can I expect in a single rear wheel versus a dual rear wheel?

Chris Lefevre, Milton, West Virginia

A I'm glad to see you are considering these things before purchase. It's difficult to predict exactly how your truck will behave with a trailer that is near its limit. Single-rear-wheel (SRW) pickups are convenient because they fit better in tight spaces, including garages and parking lots. Many dual-rear-wheel (DRW) pickups wind up banging into objects while maneuvering into tight spaces, and the rear fenders of used DRW trucks often bear the scars of such encounters. With an SRW truck, you need to buy only one pair of rear tires when replacement time comes. With a DRW pickup, you do get a more stable towing experience, and crosswinds and gusts from passing trucks don't seem to affect a DRW as much. Also, if you get a flat rear tire while towing, you have more control than you would with an SRW pickup.

Modern pickups are extensively tested to their maximum ratings and should provide acceptable performance when loaded within those limitations. Most fifth-wheel trailers when loaded for vacation travel are not at their maximum weight limits, which is to your advantage. If you intend to be a full-timer with this combination, it's more likely you'll use most of that trailer's GVWR. To

THE TECH TEAM



KEN FREUND: Ken is a former ASE Certified Master Technician, service manager and shop owner who has authored numerous books on automotive repair.



JEFF JOHNSTON: Jeff served as technical director of *Trailer Life* for 20 years and has been an RV enthusiast, mechanic and writer since he could hold a wrench.

really get a handle on this quandary between SRW and DRW, in addition to the trailer GWR, you need to get the actual pin weight of the trailer — how much weight it will put on the back of the truck. You can then compare the rear gross axle weight rating (GAWR) of the two types of trucks. If you can't get a loaded weight, which is likely the case, you can estimate how much weight will be added and what percentage of it will be on the pin. Then you can make an informed decision. — K.F.

UNEVEN SLIDEOUT

Q We have a 2010 Jayco Eagle 321 RLMS fifth-wheel trailer. Once again, our RV is in for repairs. We have had problems with the 27-foot-long slideout since we bought it. They have now replaced the complete slide system with a newer, better one. Finally we thought we were good after having many interrupted and missed holidays. Not so! They have to put a wedge in to

lift the rubber seal on the front portion of the slide; it extends ¾ inch at one end. They also need to repair the door to the bedroom, as it no longer closes. To me, this is not fixed.

Do you think this wedge will stand up to travel? And will it hold up if the front part is not level? It cost around \$6,000 for this fix.

**Roberta Whitbread
Surrey, British Columbia**

A A 27-foot slideout room is very heavy and probably twists the frame considerably when it is extended, especially with people in the room. However, it should be possible to properly align the slide mechanism to allow it to operate normally, without wedges. I'm not clear from your description if you had an independent shop do the work or if this was done by Jayco or a Jayco-franchised dealer under factory direction. A price of \$6,000 seems like a lot, and I'm surprised you signed off on it and paid for the work if it wasn't done

properly. I suggest you take it back and demand that the slideout mechanism be repaired so that it works without Band-Aid fixes. — K.F.

BATTERY CHARGING AND SURGE PROTECTION

Q Recently, I read an article about an inline battery charger. If I remember correctly, it provided charging from the generator and the electrical hookup at a campground. It charged and/or did trickle-charging and surge protection as needed. I cannot remember what the unit was. I am looking for something that will fit this criteria.

Jeff Andrews, Arvada, Colorado

A I don't recall any battery-maintenance chargers having a built-in surge protector that could protect the RV's electrical system from voltage spikes and surges. Maintenance chargers generally have lightweight wiring and work on the 12-volt DC side of the

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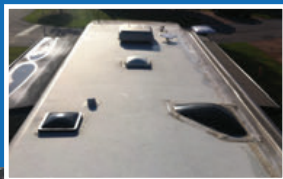
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RV's electrical system. Surge protectors have to protect the 120-volt AC side of the RV's electrical system and require heavy wiring and protection circuitry. If anyone knows of such an item, we'd like to hear from them. — **K.F.**

SHOCKING QUESTION

Q We have a 2004 Mountain Aire 36-foot fifth-wheel. I use a 2003 Dodge 3500 diesel extended cab longbed pickup to tow it. It seems to be level, so do I need air shocks for this truck?

Gerald Hillmann, via email

A If a truck rides level with a trailer hitched up and doesn't have problems with ride or bottoming out while going over dips, it probably doesn't need any modifications or additional parts. Air shocks are more for light-duty applications, and if they are installed and called upon to handle a lot of weight, often the shock mounts (which aren't designed to handle loads in addition to shock-absorber damping forces) will bend or break. Therefore, for owners of larger and heavier vehicles such as yours, when it's necessary to give the suspension a lift for level towing, air springs (aka air bags) should be considered, rather than air shocks. — **K.F.**

TIRES WEARING CROOKED

Q We purchased a 2011 Salem trailer with tandem axles several years ago. Since that time, we have put fewer than 4,000 miles on it. The inside edges of all four trailer tires are incredibly worn, one to the point of being almost down to the cord. I have religiously checked the lug nuts to ensure they were tight and maintained 50 PSI pressure in the tires at all times. Looking under the trailer, the axle seems to be a solid tube that can only sit in the machined lugs, so I have no idea how the wheels can be out of alignment. What can I do to rectify the situation?

Brian Wilkerson, Las Vegas, Nevada

A There are two likely culprits. The wheel bearings might be adjusted too loosely. This would allow the

tires to tilt out at the bottom. However, it's more likely that the leaf-spring bushings are worn out, which can cause all kinds of alignment issues. These bushings are typically made from plastic and last only a few thousand miles (sometimes less) before they wear out, creating excessive movement. It is also possible that the trailer has bent axles or spindles, maybe from hitting potholes or curbs. If the wheel bearings aren't loose and the bushings look OK, have an alignment shop check out the trailer thoroughly. From there, you can make an informed decision on how to rectify the problem. — **K.F.**

ANTI-SWAY HARDWARE

Q I am new to pulling a trailer, although I now have more than 8,000 miles of towing experience behind me. I really enjoyed the trip but sure am tired of the trailer sway. I find that I am always looking in the mirror for a passing truck, bus or motorhome. I am considering the Hensley Arrow hitch and would like to know your thoughts or other ideas. I have been using a weight-distributing hitch and anti-sway bar. My tow vehicle is a 2014 Ford F-150 SuperCrew with EcoBoost.

Lee Phillips, Weston, Vermont

A There are numerous anti-sway-type weight-distributing hitches on the market, and each has its strong points. The Hensley Arrow is the most expensive and also the heaviest, but it works like a champ. We've towed with it numerous times and have felt how well it worked for us. If you can handle the cost, and the hitch weight won't detract significantly from your gross combination weight rating (GCWR) or add too much hitch weight carried by your truck, it's a great choice.

It is also, of course, important to make sure your trailer is properly loaded with at least 11 percent of its weight on its hitch, and the hitch must also be properly adjusted to ensure stable towing. The trailer must also be properly matched to your truck's tow rating, as even an Arrow hitch won't overcome other mechanical or setup

deficiencies, nor should anyone use it as a Band-Aid to solve other problems. — **Jeff Johnston**

TOWING LIMITS

Q We have a 2013 Ford F-150 Super-Crew 4x4 with a 5.7-liter EcoBoost engine and a 3.31 rear end. The truck has a 6½-foot shortbed. I have been looking at towing weights and would like to know if I can tow a KZ Durango D281RLT fifth-wheel without harming my truck. The Durango lists its unloaded weight as 8,510 pounds and its dry hitch weight of 1,490 pounds. The dry axle weight is 7,020 pounds, and net carrying capacity is 1,990 pounds. The GVWR is 10,500 pounds. I think I am approaching the weight limits with this trailer, but could I successfully tow it without damaging my truck?

John Stineman, Lincoln, Nebraska

A There's no 5.7-liter engine in the Ford lineup for the 2013 F-150, but the 3.5-liter V-6 is Ford's EcoBoost engine and also matches up with your truck and axle-ratio description. That truck body and powertrain combination can be rated to tow 9,200 pounds. I'm sure you're aware that the trailer manufacturer's "dry weight" figure is nothing but an approximate starting point; it doesn't include water, LP-gas or cargo you take along, and it often doesn't include some factory-installed options. Of course, you also need to consider the weight of the passengers and cargo you haul in the truck that is applied to the setup's GCWR.

In other words, the trailer you have in mind is too heavy for your truck as configured. We recommend that you shop for a trailer with a GCWR of around 9,000 pounds. That way, you can load the trailer down all you want, and as long as you don't exceed its GVWR, the combination will be appropriately matched, and there's less risk of overloading the truck. Considering the shortbed configuration, you should think about getting a sliding fifth-wheel hitch to prevent trailer-to-cab interference problems during tight turns. — **J.J.** (continued on page 68)

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ADVERTISERS' INDEX

RS#	ADVERTISER	PAGE#
119	Alaska and Canada's Yukon ...	7
101	B&W Trailer Hitches	28
	Camping World	41-43
103	Carefree of Colorado	29
	Classifieds	70-71
126	DISH Network	76
104	Geico	15
	Good Sam RV Loans	35
	Good Sam Roadside Assistance	73
	Good Sam Visa	57
	Harbor Freight Tools	19
105	Hayes Brake Controller	5
106	Hensley Manufacturing Inc.	8
107	Hensley Manufacturing Inc.	69
108	Highland Ridge RV, Inc.	2
112	iBall Hitch Cam	60
109	Lippert Components	40
110	Lippert Components	53
111	Northwood Mfg.	14
	Phoenix USA Inc.	51
113	Progress Manufacturing, Inc.	65
114	Progressive Insurance	30
115	Pull-Rite	59
116	RV Armor, Inc.	64
	RV Buyer's Guide	63
102	RVawningsmart	69
	RV Marketplace	66-67
125	Riverside Resort & Casino	75
117	Sea Eagle	65
118	SpaceCraft Mfg.	8
	Syracuse RV Show	55
120	The RV Factory	10
121	Torklift International	61
122	Transfer Flow Inc.	9
123	Travel Lite Truck Campers ...	68
127	Viking Cylinders by Hexagon Ragasco	77

EDITORIAL PRODUCT INDEX

RS#	ADVERTISER	PAGE#
131	3M Scratch Kit	56
132	Derive Systems	56
133	Dometic PowerChannel	56
130	Origen SnapPads	56
134	Winnebago	20

FREE TRAVEL INFORMATION

RS#	ADVERTISER	PAGE#
140	Alaska and The Yukon	72
141	Alaska Marine Highway System	72
143	Arkansas State Parks	72
145	DeGray Resort State Park, Arkansas	72
146	Florida Keys	72
147	Florida State Parks	72
154	Glacier National Park, Montana	72
144	Hot Springs National Park, Arkansas	72
150	Idaho RV Campgrounds	72
149	Idaho Travel Council	72
148	Lake Harris RV Resort, Florida	72
152	Lake Of The Ozarks, Missouri	72
142	North To Alaska	72
155	Ohio State Parks	72
151	Visit Missouri	72
153	Visit Montana	72
157	Wyoming Tourism	72
158	Yellowhead Highway, Canada	72
156	Yellowstone Country, Wyoming	72

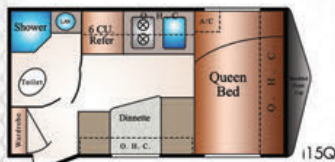
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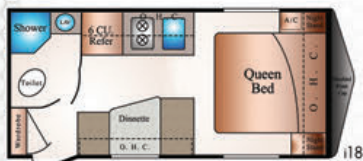
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(continued from page 65)

RV COVER — OR NOT?

Q We have a 30-foot Cameo fifth-wheel that we winterize and store at our residence under a high-end RV cover. Last year, due to an unfortunate accident, we needed to have the roof replaced and were told not to cover the RV. This was from a reputable RV-repair place. We recently had the RV detailed prior to storing it for the winter. Again, we were told not to cover the RV. This is confusing, as all the RV suppliers and dealers promote covering your RV to protect it from the elements when not in use. When questioned, both businesses stated the covers wear down and ruin the rubber roof. What is your take on this? Are they correct?

Carol Reijm
Mount Vernon, Washington

A If you choose a good-quality cover, and fit and install it according to the manufacturer's instructions, you shouldn't have anything to fear for your roof. The fabric is made to be compatible with RV roof materials and, as such, should cause it no harm when properly used. If in doubt, inquire with the RV-cover manufacturer to check any damage warranties that may apply.

It's possible the dealers you spoke to who cautioned about cover use may have been referring to cheap one-size-fits-all covers or blue plastic tarps that you see strapped over RVs here and there. Ill-fitting covers like these can flap in strong winds, and that harsh plastic material can cause damage to an RV roof, endcap and side wall. — J.J.

BACKUP THUMP

Q I own a 1997 Holiday Rambler Aluma-Lite fifth-wheel pulled by a V-10 Dodge 2500. I have started to notice a slight thumping noise when backing the trailer into my storage building. I've been towing the trailer since 2009, and this started last summer. It is most noticeable as the truck is turning to be in alignment with the trailer. I thought it was the surfaces between the hitch and fifth-wheel, so I applied a generous amount of general

grease. The problem persists. Do I need to use a heavier grease? Is there a suggested type or grade to use?

Tom Green, Angola, Indiana

A Any time you're towing a fifth-wheel and turning the truck relative to the trailer, there's going to be some noise, Tom. If you've been towing with the same hitch since 1997, there are bound to be some moving parts that are exhibiting wear. Even with adequate lubrication on the base plate, there's some rotating stress on the hitch, and that noise could come from the kingpin shifting in the saddle, the saddle shifting in the base or the base shifting in the mounting rails, for example. If you give the hitch a thorough inspection, you may well discover some moving parts with more clearance than you'd expect. If you have any doubts about those parts, take the hitch to a qualified dealer and have a technician inspect it and perhaps recommend replacement parts, if needed.

As for the right kind of grease to use, any heavy bearing grease should do the job, but you can also check the hitch manufacturer's instructions for specific recommendations. — J.J.

CONVERTER DISCONNECT

Q Will it harm the power converter if I disconnect and remove the battery while my RV is connected to AC power?

Dave Meekins
Blythewood, South Carolina

A This won't harm your converter at all, Dave, but you might want to make the battery disconnection short-term only. The battery acts as something of a reservoir and "buffer" for the 12-volt DC power coming from the converter. With the battery in place, in effect, you're operating on the 12 volts supplied by the battery, and the converter is simultaneously charging the battery to some extent. Without the battery, your RV is operating strictly on the converter output, and that power may not be as clean and consistent as that which comes from the setup with the battery. You won't harm the converter,

but it's still best to keep that battery as part of the system. — J.J.

BOOSTING STOPPING POWER

Q In the November 2015 issue, you answered Bob Smith's "Can't Stop!" question about his inability to stop when towing his 2013 CrossRoads Cruiser fiveer. While his Ram brake controller may be part of the issue, I think it may have something to do with the trailer.

We have a 2014 CrossRoads Cruiser 35SS and tow it with a 2013 F-250 diesel. In only 2,600 miles of towing, I became concerned that the trailer brakes were underperforming. At a controller setting of 7 to 8 (high for a new trailer, I think), any but the gentlest of stops brought the sensation of being pushed by the trailer. One hard stop and close call really scared us.

Two weeks ago, I had the brakes changed out from electric drum to electric-over-hydraulic disc brakes. The test drive was remarkable. At a controller setting of 6, easy stops were smooth and controlled. Firm stops from 30 to 35 MPH were sure and without any pushing. A hard stop from 45 MPH was incredibly strong, with the combo feeling like a single unit.

I feel a lot more comfortable now. Of course, the best practice is to drive easy, leave lots of room for stopping and pay attention. But when some knucklehead cuts you off, you don't want that sinking feeling that the brakes aren't doing the job.

Jay Six, Arlington, Texas

A There's no substitute for a set of properly sized and adjusted brakes, Jay, along with a properly adjusted brake control. Thank you for passing on your experience with an after-market disc-brake setup. — J.J. 🚚

HAVE A QUESTION? » Email our experts at rvclinic@trailerlife.com or write to RV Clinic, 2750 Park View Court, Suite 240, Oxnard, California 93036. Include your full name and hometown. Selected letters will be answered in the magazine, but time does not permit individual replies. No phone calls, please.

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California's Tuscany

The Temecula Valley is known for its warm climate and award-winning wineries, but it also has deep roots in history and a revered Great Oak tree



Interstate 15 begins in San Diego and heads north toward the Inland Empire of Southern California, then it takes off in a northeasterly direction for Las Vegas and Salt Lake City. It eventually ends up at the Canadian border, making it the fourth-longest north-south interstate highway in the country.

Sixty miles north of San Diego, I-15 passes through Temecula, which is spread between two low mountain ranges. An orderly, affluent community of about 105,000 people, Temecula's major employers are in pharmaceuticals, education and technology. So we can add clean air to the finer points of this city that seems detached from the hustle of the rest of Southern California.

Being isolated by topography probably accounts for some of that detachment. Its cultural history is important, too, as it has given Temecula a pedigree. For thousands of years, this was home to the Temecula Indians and the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians. Spanish missionaries influenced the culture further when they came in the 18th century.

Today, tourists mostly visit to experience the community's 40 wineries. Old Town, with its original architecture, antique shops and cafés, also is an attraction. This valley has a Mediterranean climate, comparable to that in central Italy, and is ideal for growing grapes as well as olives.

Along with wine, growers here are also producing fine olive oil sought by discriminating chefs. The olives are hand-pressed using traditional methods. I sampled some in Temecula's Old Town, which is in itself a mecca for tourists. At the Temecula Olive Oil Company store, there's a tasting bar — like at a winery — where they mix olive oils with exotic vinegars.

The Pechanga Resort and Casino, with its dozen of restaurants and multilevel golf course, is another big draw. The place has ranked first in *Trailer Life's* annual Readers' Choice Awards for the past three years and includes a top-rated RV park.

These are the things that come up around the campfire when our well-traveled colleagues tell us about visiting Temecula. However, this probably won't come up: A mile from the Pechanga Resort is a remarkable work of nature,



(Above) The Great Oak's centuries-old limbs settled to the ground, then reached upward again, giving the appearance of the outside of new tree growth. (Left) Paul Macarro is the Pechanga Band's cultural resource coordinator.

the largest natural-growing indigenous live oak tree in the country, and probably the oldest. It's estimated to be between 850 and 1,500 years old.

From a distance, the Great Oak looks like a clump of trees. That's because many of its branches have settled to the ground, apparently under their own weight. Once the ground is supporting them, the branches have turned upward again like new trees, forming the outer canopy.

Paul Macarro, the Pechanga Band's cultural resource coordinator, took me on the reservation to show me the Great Oak, something he does once a month for the public. On the way, he talked about "going *in* the tree," and when we got there, I discovered what he meant. The branches form a barrier with their foliage, making the trunk inaccessible, except through an opening that the Indians have used for centuries. What we would normally consider "under" the tree is best described as "in" the tree in the case of the Great Oak. It's like entering a quiet, shaded sanctuary with the tree's massive trunk towering in the center.

"To the Pechanga people, the Great Oak has enormous significance as a ceremonial site," Paul said. "The trunk is 20 feet in circumference on the surface, but there is much more underground. The massive branches rise to about 95 feet before they start turning down." The ancient oak continues to expand and branch out, and is an environmental wonder with a turbulent history.

Paul drove me to a group of small buildings nearby that looked more like cabins. They were the residence of Erle Stanley Gardner, the best-selling American author of the 20th century at the time of his death in 1970. He was the creator of the Perry Mason novels and television series, and he once owned this land. Now — once again — it's part of the Pechanga Reservation.

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