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JANUARY 2015

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Open Range 3X



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22



28



48

FEATURES

16 Silver State Gem

Experience the wonder of Nevada's ecologically diverse Great Basin National Park, where ancient bristlecone pines grow, a cave shares its sculpted-in-darkness glory and thousand-year-old pictographs tell the story of a long-gone civilization

22 The Flip Side of Florida

A coastal road trip across the Florida Panhandle from Tallahassee to Pensacola reveals the less-visited side of the state with dazzling blue-green surf, sugar-white beaches, friendly locals and a distinctly Deep South vibe

28 Going to the Dark Side

Step into a magical realm of subterranean treasures at Kentucky's Mammoth Cave, Missouri's Marvel Cave and New Mexico's Carlsbad Caverns

34 Seal of Approval

The results are in for the third annual Readers' Choice Awards

42 Open Range 3X349RLS

A fold-down patio takes center "stage" in Highland Ridge's latest fifth-wheel

48 Winnebago Era 70C

A comfortable Class B with a sofa-bed slide-out and a surprising number of cabinets

54 White Water Retro 150

Riverside RV brings back the days of simple camping with its line of classic-looking lightweight trailers with contemporary amenities

58 Quiet Heat, Continuous Hot Water

Trailers and fifth-wheels can now be fitted with an Aqua-Hot hydronic system formerly reserved for Class A motorhomes

Nevada's Great Basin National Park has numerous hiking trails and the world's oldest living trees. Page 16



DEPARTMENTS

6 Driver's Seat

Reliving the Past Through the Present

8 Letters

Readers respond loud and clear

11 Around the Bend

News, events, places and trends

14 RV Resolutions

Trailer Life is your referee

62 New Products

Goodies to improve the RV lifestyle

64 Performance Corner

Tech, accessories and news

68 Hands On

DualLiner truck-bed protection

72 RV Clinic

Answers from the *Trailer Life* tech team

77 10-Minute Tech

Now why didn't I think of that?

82 America's Outback

Coachella Valley, California



➤ The I-GO has returned to EverGreen's 2015 lineup with eight new floorplans. Page 12

On the cover: Relaxing on the patio of the Open Range 3X349RLS at Pechanga RV Resort in Temecula, California. Photo by Scott Hirko

The Grand Design Owner's Pledge



Grand Design RV, Circle 113 on Reader Service Card

Our Owner's Pledge is a unique commitment between our company and our dealers to any Grand Design owner who is travelling and may require specific service to their RV.

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Reliving the Past Through the Present

Innovative features and retro styling cater to the changing needs of RV enthusiasts



It's hard to build a better mousetrap in the RV industry. After all, there are just so many ways to design floorplans with unique features. But I have to give the industry credit for thinking outside the box. While RVs clearly have square-footage limits, designers are spreading out. Case in point: the Highland Ridge Open Range 3X featured on page 42.

In the Highland Ridge, a nice-looking elevated patio deploys from the side wall and, when set up, becomes the focal point of this unique fifth-wheel. Patios are not new. Through the years, a number of retractable outdoor floors have been integrated into the patio side of RVs. Most were trendy for only short periods of time because they were nothing more than an auxiliary floor that covered the space alongside the RV. One-time luxury motorhome builder Country Coach wooed the industry with its patio in a slide, and a number of builders of toy haulers are using the loading ramp as an elevated patio by adding legs and railings.

Clearly, there are RV enthusiasts out there who prefer to get off the ground when enjoying the outdoors. I like the added height; there's something special about hanging out on an elevated deck and overlooking the surroundings. As pointed out in Chris Hemer's evaluation, this accessory is not for everyone — and there are space considerations before choosing a site.

No doubt, RVers like to spread out, but there is also a growing interest in more diminutive trailers, and especially those that allow the owners to reminisce about the early years of trailer travel. The Riverside Retro 150 (page 54) is just one of many compact new trailers that are revisiting the past. Interior livability is certainly more confined, but modern components make it easy to enjoy the RV experience — of course, spending more time outside is paramount.

Some will argue that simple trailering was more fun and carefree. In some respects, they are right; high-tech systems and conveniences are more complicated, and it's harder to become detached from everyday life. Admittedly, I'm a fan of amenities like the Aqua-Hot hydronic comfort and water-heating system featured on page 58.

It's fun to romanticize the simplicity of the old days while enjoying the conveniences of modern times. Kudos to the RV industry for giving us innovative choices. 🚐

— **Bob Livingston, publisher**

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DARK SIDE OF THE MOON

On January 20, the moon's orbit will take it between the earth and the sun — what's known as a new moon. If you'll be out in your RV, be sure to pack a telescope because, with no moonlight, this is the best night of the month to observe far-off constellations and galaxies.

TRAILER LIFE

FOLLOW THE ROAD TO ADVENTURE

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SoCal Hot Spots

Beyond the three Santa Barbara RV parks listed in November 2014's "10 Hot Spots to Escape Winter's Chill," nearby Carpinteria State Beach has a great dry camping area close to the beach (maximum trailer length: 35 feet), as do Santa Barbara's El Capitan and Refugio state parks.

Carell Jantzen, Santa Barbara, California

Another good Southern California choice is Flying Flags RV Resort, a beautiful park in Buellton, surrounded by wineries and only 3 miles from the quaint Danish village of Solvang.

**Barbara and Barry Evans
Phoenix, Arizona**



PHOTO BY DONNA IKENBERRY

On Top of Texas

In Donna Ikenberry's "West Texas Oasis" article in your November 2014 issue, you showed an excellent photo of the Guadalupe Mountains and El Capitan. In the caption, it says that El Capitan is the eighth highest peak in Texas. This is not correct.

Bill Goodman, Lubbock, Texas

According to the U.S. Geological Survey's National Elevation Dataset (NED), El Capitan is the eighth highest peak in Texas. However, some claim that El Capitan is the seventh tallest, considering that NED's fifth and seventh highest Texas elevations (Baldy Peak and Mount Livermore, respectively) are part of the same summit block and can be deemed a single peak. — Editors

Screen-Door Security

Regarding Burke Grilione's "Screen Lock Solution" in November 2014's

Teardrop Topper

Wow! Our Wherever Adventure Takes You photo contest prize arrived today, and it is great! I have already installed the Coleman SunForce solar battery charger on top of our teardrop trailer. Thank you very much. We're off on another 3,000-mile trip, running our ham radio station from the teardrop. Camping keeps you young!

**Captain Bob and Peggy Grant
Albuquerque, New Mexico**



10-Minute Tech, we actually did this back in June. It is amazing how much peace of mind a simple sash lock on the RV's screen door gives you!

**Lisbeth Fugal Greist
Stratford, Connecticut**

I should have thought of Grilione's idea!
Eric Sinkler, Green Bay, Wisconsin

Think It Through

After reading Chris Hemer's "Tales from the Heartland" in November, we found ourselves nodding in agreement regarding RV design and space allocation issues that are not well thought out. We've had to deal with similar issues in our new fifth-wheel.

**George and Carol Bremner
Hilton, New York**

Fuel-Efficiency Tips

In November's RV Clinic, Bill Ehler queried about extending gas mileage in his 2007 Toyota Tundra. Here are a few more ideas: check for proper tire pressure, reduce your speed and use cruise control as much as possible.

Robert Prut, Plainville, Pennsylvania

Going Mapless . . . Not!

Regarding October 2014's "Lost & Found" by Kristopher Bunker, GPS devices are useful, but you had better have a good set of maps to keep on the right path. My wife and I recently completed a 5,000-mile trip that I

plotted beforehand using DeLorme Street Atlas on my laptop. On several occasions, the GPS in my Ford F-250 decided on a different route. After ending up on a narrow, winding state highway on the way to Lewiston, Idaho, I took out the paper maps and laptop to make sure from then on.

On the way to Albuquerque, the truck GPS wanted us to take a "shorter" route. I got out the maps, and we headed back to the main highway. No more winding, narrow state routes, particularly when the KOA we were heading for was right off Interstate 25, which we were already on. GPS devices are getting better, but you still need to do your homework and have the old paper maps close at hand.

**John Harrigan
Hacienda Heights, California**

Thanks for Your Service

As a Vietnam veteran, I appreciated Bill Graves' comments in November's America's Outback ("Veterans Day in Texas"). Many years ago I read a sentence that summed it all up: "Vietnam was an unpopular war fought for an ungrateful nation."

Dale Berger, Englewood, Florida

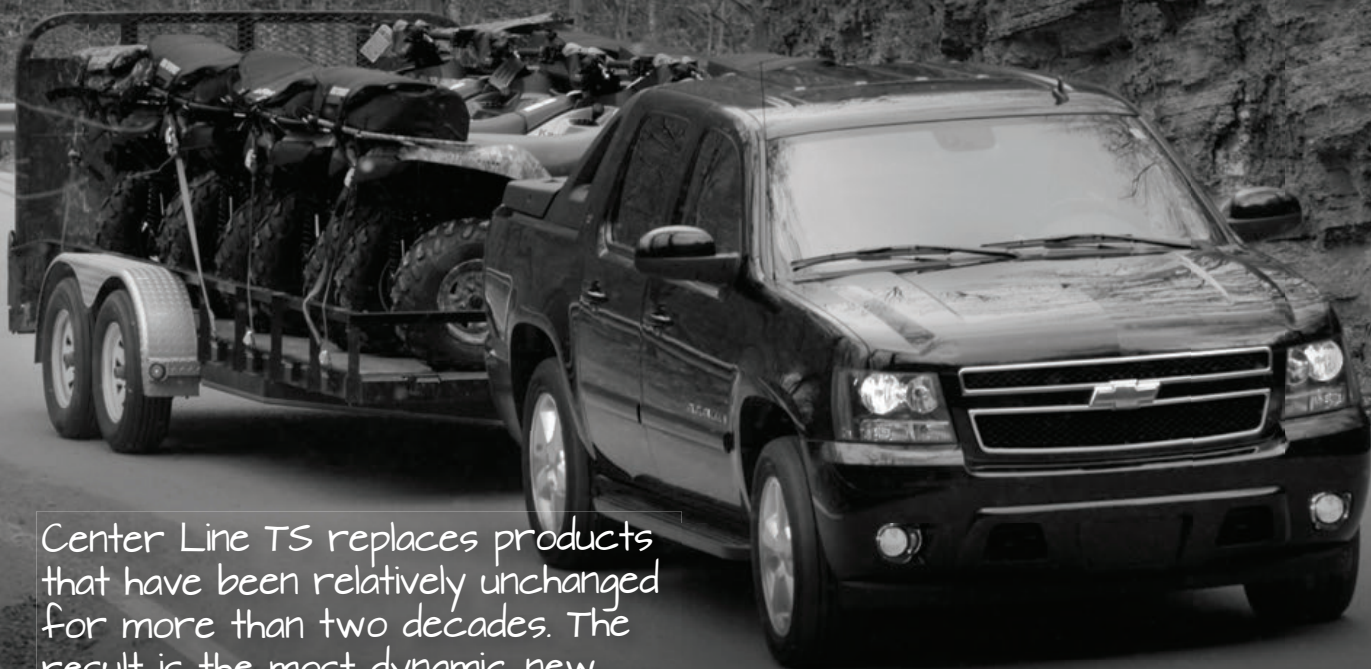
Bill Graves' comments regarding our veterans were well expressed. However, please remember that it is not only "soldiers, sailors and Marines" but also airmen who have served and

NEW!

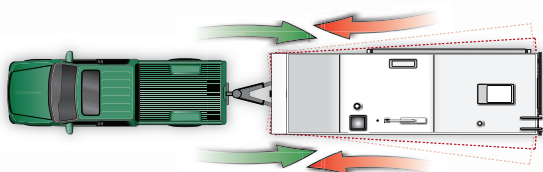


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LETTERS

sacrificed a great deal. I'm proud of my 21 years serving in the U.S. Air Force.

Michael Roden, Bountiful, Utah

Bill Graves replies: *How I happened to leave out airmen is beyond me. You are so right — we are all in this together. Forgive me, thanks for writing and thanks for your service.*

Not Quite North Carolina

Thank you for Kathy Cabrera's October article "Autumn Across America." My wife and I travel in the fall, and next year we'll visit some of the locations featured in the story. Note that Mabry Mill, pictured in the article's North Carolina section, is actually across the border in Virginia on the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Ted Jacobson, Fancy Gap, Virginia

Don't Neglect the Northeast

I am a subscriber and do look forward to the issues, but I wish you would throw in an article now and then about the Northeast. Have you thought about

the beautiful fall colors of the Adirondacks or the Finger Lakes? How about Allegany State Park? Maple syrup!

On a similar note, how about a winterizing article for us forgotten here in New York? It would be great to see how the dealerships do it and then have you show the tricks and shortcuts to us weekend mechanics.

Joe Zee, Buffalo, New York

This Is a Stickup

In October's "Decal Dilemma" letter, Jim Marvin asked for references to a shop that does excellent work on RV decals. I recommend Stripes and Stuff (www.stripesandstuff.com) in Springfield, Missouri.

Susan Gable, Charlotte, North Carolina

Alaska: Easy as ABC

Though a dedicated fifth-wheeler, I recently flew to Alaska and rented a Class C motorhome for the two-week trip. We had an unexpected problem with taillights, discovered long after we

left the rental site. A technician was sent from the company but was not able to fix the problem (supply issues, not lack of skill). The unit was exchanged for another, of even higher quality than we had originally rented, and the trip continued without lane-change anxiety. I recommend ABC Motorhome and Car Rental in Anchorage to anyone considering such a trip. The office is close to the airport, and transportation is provided to and from the same.

Michael L. Jordan, Pawhuska, Oklahoma

Keep on Camping

Best day of the month is when *Trailer Life* shows up in the mailbox. Love this magazine and all those great tips, places to see and products to check out.

Bruce Britton, Brooksville, Florida 🚐

TALK TO US! Write to: *Trailer Life*, 2750 Park View Court, Suite 240, Oxnard, California 93036 or email info@trailerlife.com. Please include your full name and location.



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We are also honored and thank you for having been selected once again by Trailer Life readers as a "Readers Choice" in the Truck Camper category.

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Lance

TRAILER READERS CHOICE AWARDS



Staying Fit on the Road

Five tips to help you keep active and eat healthy during your RV travels by Kathy Cabrera



It's January and a new year! If your RV isn't pointed south or you haven't set up camp in a warm environment, you might be tempted to stay cozy inside rather than brave chilly temperatures outdoors. But taking a brisk walk in the winter can offer a refreshing change of pace, plus the cold air can be invigorating and clear your mind. If the weather is really bleak, see if your RV park offers a fitness room or find a local gym and hop on the treadmill.

Here are five more quick tips for eating healthy and exercising regularly while on the road in the middle of winter.

TIP 1: Make it a point to take a hike at every stop. This means planning ahead to schedule your arrival at the next RV park in the afternoon versus driving into the night. Plus, this way you'll arrive in daylight hours, which makes it easier to get situated at your campsite.

TIP 2: Sampling the local fare is part of the fun. Consider dining out at local restaurants during lunch rather than dinner. "Prices are lower, and you have the rest of the day to work off calories," advises Janet Groene of the Solo Woman RV blog.

TIP 3: Invest in a crockpot. Danny-J Johnson, founder of the Sweaty Betties, an online community dedicated to having fun while working out, advises putting chicken, turkey or beef with nearly anything in a slow cooker, and you'll have a great meal in a few hours. Johnson and her husband sold their belongings and now travel full time in their RV. On her own experience, she shares: "If we are driving, we can run the generator and leave the crockpot in the sink, so it doesn't topple over."

TIP 4: If you opt for fast-food fare like

Taking a brisk walk in fresh air and snacking on nuts and fruits will spark energy.

burgers and fries, choose either the bun or the small fries as your complex carbohydrate, says Lisa Cain of www.snack-girl.com. Cain writes about simple snacks and offers healthy recipes. She suggests that when "buying from a service plaza, choose roasted nuts or flavored popcorn over potato or corn chips. Look for nut bars like Kind bars, which feature whole foods, versus granola or cereal bars."

TIP 5: In the mood for dessert? "Push away from the table and eat it while taking a brisk walk," says Groene. Better yet, snack on a piece of fresh fruit.

We hope these tips help you eat healthy and stay physically active to start your RV travels off right in 2015!

I-GO Where You Go

EverGreen's I-GO travel trailer has returned for 2015 with multiple changes, including a high-gloss aerodynamic front cap that the company claims allows for even easier towing and better fuel mileage. Eight floorplans come with new interior layouts and decorative touches such as a swivel rounded-corner entertainment center for viewing the TV from both the bedroom and living area, a stylish splash board in the kitchen and window valances that hide pull-blinds when not in use.



Inside, a 42-inch-deep slideout houses the dinette, with sofas offered in some models (two models have two slides). The new galley design features a microwave oven, three-



burner range and double-door refrigerator that make prepping meals simple.

Sporting new graphics, the sleek I-GO is available in lengths from 25 feet 6 inches to 39 feet 9 inches and a width of 8 feet. Several models have outdoor kitchens, and active families will appreciate the G210RB with a bike locker and outside shower. Larger families can choose between several bunk models that sleep up to eight adults.

Underneath the I-GO, a heated and ducted enclosed underbelly isolates electrical lines and mechanicals to keep tanks from freezing and safeguard from pests and road grime. MSRP ranges from \$18,000 to \$25,000.

574-825-4298, www.goevergreenrv.com

NEWSWIRE

INDUSTRY NEWS



Winnebago Towables Donates \$53,000 to American Cancer Society

The special-edition pink Minnie added to Winnebago Towables' 2015 trailer lineup in support of the American Cancer Society (ACS) has generated \$53,000. Winnebago donated \$1,000 to the ACS for each pink Minnie that was purchased. "This

program has generated one of the largest donations to Making Strides Against Breast Cancer from an RV manufacturer, as well as providing a unique awareness opportunity," said Cinda White, ACS representative.

Said Winnebago Towables President Johnny Hernandez, "The overwhelmingly positive response we received from our dealers and the general public was extremely gratifying for us to provide support to the American Cancer Society, allowing them to move closer to finding a cure for this devastating disease."

VETERANS AFFAIRS



Free Camping for Military Families

Founded in 2009 by Charlie Curry as a way of thanking the men and women who serve in the armed forces for their hard work and sacrifices, Tents for Troops (T4T) provides complimentary RV and tent sites to active members of the military and their families nationwide. Currently, T4T has grown

to include more than 300 family-friendly parks across 47 U.S. states and Canada.

"We're in the early stages of developing a program that will offer the complimentary use of a travel trailer or other camping unit if the military member does not already have one at their disposal," said Curry. "We are asking RV dealers of all sizes and in all locations to help us make this program possible by donating a new or used unit." Campground owners, too, are encouraged to donate two sites for two nights.

www.tentsfortroops.org

Lightweight Escape

Escape Trailer Industries, a family-owned and -run business based in British Columbia, Canada, unveiled its Escape 5.0TA 21-foot 2-inch fifth-wheel. Weighing 3,800 pounds dry, the Escape has a molded fiberglass unibody with an interior height of 6 feet 4 inches. The 5.0TA has more than 7 feet of usable floor space, an almost 3-foot-long kitchen counter, oak cabinetry, high-grade linoleum flooring, a 6.7-cubic-foot refrigerator, a full-size shower, a queen upper bunk and lots of storage space. All Escape trailers have a low center of gravity and a rubber torsion axle for reduced vibration while traveling. Prices start at approximately \$26,000.

855-703-1650, escapetrailer.com



Georgia Snowbird Special

Seven state parks in Georgia are offering 50 percent off campsite fees on stays of 30 nights or longer through February 28, 2015. Sun-seekers looking to escape the cold can bask under the Georgia sun while partaking in a variety of activities such as hiking to waterfalls and lakes, and fishing, boating and birding. The following Peach State parks are offering the snowbird discount:

Chattahoochee Bend State Park

Near Newnan, this park is a haven for paddlers, campers, anglers and hikers, offering 6 miles of wooded trails. The campground has a boat ramp, paddle-in campsites and an observation platform for views of the river and forest.

770-254-7271, www.gastateparks.org/chattahoocheebend

Florence Marina State Park

For those who love fishing and boating, this quiet park sits on the northern end of 45,000-acre Walter F. George Lake. Birders may see herons, egrets and bald eagles. Providence Canyon State Park, 10 miles to the southeast, is known as Georgia's Little Grand Canyon with its colorful hues.

229-838-6870, www.gastateparks.org/florencemarina

Kolomoki Mounds State Park

This historically significant park near Blakely is the oldest and largest Woodland Indian site in the southeastern United States. Georgia's oldest great temple mound stands 57 feet tall. Enjoy fishing and geocaching.

229-724-2150, www.gastateparks.org/kolomokimounds

Magnolia Springs State Park

Crystal-clear springs flow 7 million gallons per day, and a boardwalk spans the water so visitors can view alligators and turtles. Archaeological digs have uncovered the most significant recent Civil War findings.

478-982-1660, www.gastateparks.org/magnoliasprings

Reed Bingham State Park

Located just off Interstate 75, this park is known for its abundant wildlife around a 375-acre lake, and fishing for bass, crappie, catfish and bream is excellent. During winter, thousands of black vultures and turkey vultures roost in the trees and soar overhead.

229-896-3551, www.gastateparks.org/reedbingham

Seminole State Park

Many campsites are right on the water of 37,500-acre Lake Seminole,



and some have space for boats to pull up near shore. Nearby are a 2.2-mile nature trail, minigolf course, geocaching and restaurants.

229-861-3137, www.gastateparks.org/seminole

Stephen C. Foster State Park

Known for its dark skies perfect for stargazing, this remote park is a primary entrance to the legendary Okefenokee Swamp. Paddlers and photographers enjoy breathtaking scenery and abundant wildlife.

912-637-5274, www.gastateparks.org/stephencfoster

Reservations are necessary. When reserving online, the full rate is charged but is adjusted to the discount price on arrival; it's best to call the park directly for reservations. Use promotional code SnowBird50% when calling 800-864-7275 or on www.gastateparks.org/reservations.

For additional details, visit www.gastateparks.org/snowbird.

Good Sam Announces Top-Rated RV Parks

Reaching the pinnacle of campground excellence, 137 RV parks have earned perfect 10/10*/10 ratings from the 2015 Good Sam RV Travel & Savings Guide, the most recognized source of campground listings in North America.

Published in December, the 1,864-page guide lists details about more than 13,000 personally inspected RV parks across North America, along with helpful lifestyle articles, handy travel guides and money-saving offers that include \$1,000 worth of Camping World coupons, and up to \$500 in savings powered by Entertainment.

Each of the perfect-rated RV parks has earned top marks in three categories: environment, cleanliness and facilities. These parks represent only 2 percent of all RV parks personally inspected by the guide's traveling consultant teams.

The 2015 Good Sam RV Travel & Savings Guide is available at the 100-plus Camping World SuperCenters located throughout the United States and on www.campingworld.com.

For a list of the top-rated parks, visit www.trailerlife.com. 📱





Tire and Axle Trouble

An Ohio couple reached out to RV Resolutions after their RV dealer and manufacturer weren't able to help when their fifth-wheel showed signs of abnormal tire wear:

► We have a 2012 Keystone Cougar that we purchased new with a one-year warranty. We picked it up on February 22, 2012, and left for Florida. When we returned in April and had warranty work repairs attended to, we asked about the tire wear on the left-front tire's outside tread. We were told that once the unit was broken in, the axles and tires would settle into their proper positions.

In February 2013 we left for Texas, continued on to Florida and then traveled to the Smoky Mountains and Blue Ridge Parkway, putting on approximately 10,500 miles. When we returned home in June, we again went to the dealership about our tire-wear concerns. It was suggested that we have both the trailer and the tow vehicle aligned. We did this at our expense and also had the spare tire installed to replace the left-front tire that had severe wear by then.

That August we took a trip to Nova Scotia, then went to Florida for the winter, returning home in April 2014. On these two trips, we put on another 10,000 miles and by then had four tires that were worn to the point that we were not comfortable going down the highway. The

dealership sent us back to the alignment shop. This time they found that the axles were $\frac{3}{8}$ inch from parallel.

The warranty has expired, and we could really use your help!

Pat and Ed Hill, Lindsey, Ohio

RV Resolutions sent a letter to Keystone RV and heard back from Doug Huffman in the owner-relations department, saying he would contact the Hills personally. After speaking with Huffman, the couple mailed the following update:

► Doug Huffman recommended that we call Dexter Axle, and they supplied two new axles rated at 6,000 pounds that came complete with hubs, drums and heavier springs with an extra leaf. Everything worked out perfectly. If it wasn't for RV Resolutions' connections, nothing would have been taken care of on our fifth-wheel.

P. and E. H.

On the Edge of Their Seats

When the cushions on their new trailer's bench seats didn't fit, a Michigan couple had trouble getting them replaced under the warranty:

► On March 20, 2013, my wife, Rose, and I purchased a 2013 Coachmen RV Freedom Express travel trailer from General RV Center in Birch Run, Michigan. On our first trip, we noticed that the dining table's back cushions did not fit properly when upright or made into a bed.

I took the trailer back to General RV so they could repair a number of other items while the RV was under warranty. At that time, my wife and I showed the service-department manager the improperly fitting cushions. He contacted Coachmen and even sent pictures, but Coachmen has refused to accept the fact

that the cushions do not fit. We checked other Coachmen Freedom Express models, and the cushions fit as they should.

Harry Block, Davison, Michigan

After RV Resolutions contacted Coachmen RV regarding the Blocks' ill-fitting seat cushions, we heard from the company's owner-relations manager:

THE COMPANY RESPONDED

According to our records, the Blocks'

Freedom Express trailer was at the dealer's for warranty repairs three times, and there is no mention on the work orders regarding the cushions. However, in the interest of customer satisfaction, we ask that the Blocks contact a local upholstery shop and have the shop cut down the seat cushions to make them fit when folding into a bed. We will reimburse the customers up to \$125 as a goodwill gesture.

**Mel Williams, Owner-Relations Manager
Coachmen RV, Middlebury, Indiana** ✉

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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Experience wonder at Nevada's ecologically diverse Great Basin National Park, where ancient bristlecone pines grow, a cave shares its sculpted-in-darkness glory and thousand-year-old pictographs tell the story of a long-gone civilization

article by Pamela Selbert
photos by Guy and Pamela Selbert

For more than 400 miles, U.S. Highway 50 — much of it aptly nicknamed the Loneliest Road in America — runs east across Nevada toward Great Basin National Park. The 287 miles between Fernley and Ely course through just about the most parched, dried-up landscape you'll see anywhere outside the Sahara. Along certain stretches, you pass nothing but crusted mud where long-gone lakes once were, though now the ground sprouts not so much as a sprig of sagebrush.

Elsewhere, there's a scattering of dry grass, clumps of sagebrush and rabbitbrush in this series of enormous bowls rimmed by rugged mountains, where passes are high (many of them upward of 7,000 feet), and even the rock outcrops look sunburned. More distant peaks are purple in the afternoon sun against a pale blue sky.

It's a lonely, desolate land, where

signs of life — of any variety — are few, though some folks (my husband and I among them) find it strangely beautiful. Just make sure your vehicle's fuel tank is full and you have plenty of drinking water before setting out, as it gets hot here (with winters quite the opposite), and services are rare as rubies.

There's a reward for driving this empty road across the Silver State, other than the thrill of seeing the crumbled, pueblo-like ruins of long-ago Butterfield Stage stops and a couple of historical markers noting the similar-era route of Pony Express riders, or of finding a sun-bleached cow skull resting against a clump of sagebrush near the pavement (no live cows in sight, however).

Great Basin National Park, 68 miles east of Ely and a dozen or so miles west of the Utah state line, is the payoff — and also our destination. The park, created in 1986 to preserve 77,000

Great Basin National Park

Admission to the Nevada park is free, but fees are charged for cave tours and stays at the five developed campgrounds. A café and a gift shop next to the Lehman Caves Visitor Center are open in summer.

(Right) Magnificent speleothems decorate the interior of Lehman Caves in Great Basin National Park. (Far right) Sky Islands Forest Trail greets visitors with babbling brooks at the end of steep Wheeler Peak Scenic Drive.

acres in the south Snake Range, may not be well known, but it is nonetheless among the finest of the many national parks we've visited.

Ranging in elevation from 6,200 feet to more than 13,000 feet at permanently ice-capped Mount Wheeler's summit, the park represents the entire Great Basin, which occupies a "physiographic region" of some 200,000 square miles, stretching from California's Sierra Nevada to Utah's Wasatch Mountains, spanning most of Nevada and reaching into Oregon and even Idaho.

This world of sagebrush-covered valleys and narrow-but-steep mountain ranges was named for its lack of drainage outlets to the sea. The few streams that enter Great Basin dead-end in valleys, where the water collects in shallow salt lakes, marshes and mudflats, and evaporates in the dry desert air. Plants that grow here tolerate salt and manage to survive on



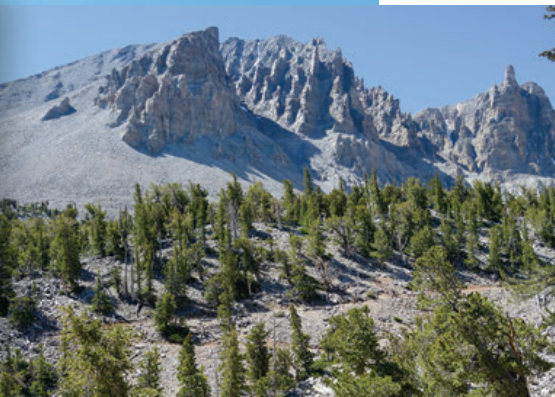
as little as 5 inches of rain a year.

Viewing America's largest desert, it's hard to believe that 15 millennia ago glaciers sprawled among the peaks of the Snake Range, and the valleys were filled with sinuous lakes, the largest being Lake Bonneville. But 5,000 years later, the climate began to warm. Glaciers melted, and the lakes dried up, leaving Utah's Great Salt Lake a "shrunk remnant" of what Bonneville had been, so huge it lapped

at shores just 10 miles from today's park boundary.

Visitors to Great Basin National Park have much to enjoy, including a spectacular cave that started forming some 600 million years ago, thousand-year-old Native American pictographs, a scenic drive that climbs more than 3,400 feet in a dozen spiral miles, numerous hiking trails and





the oldest living trees in the world. The park has five campgrounds, with Lower Lehman Creek being the only one open year-round (it does not offer water in the winter).

To get to the park from Highway 50, take State Route 487 south to tiny Baker (half a dozen miles west of Utah), where the Great Basin Visitor Center (summer hours only) is located. There, 25 minutes of films and dozens of exhibits tell the story of the area and the park.

Drive west on State Route 488 for 6 miles to the park and the Lehman Caves Visitor Center (open year-round), where similar information is available. Just out back is the entrance to the highly ornate subterranean world that is Lehman Caves — a single cavern despite the name. Lehman Caves is not extensive by some standards

A several-thousand-year-old bristlecone pine stands for centuries after its death. The wood is so dense that it weathers like stone into gargoyles.



(Above from left) An 8.4-mile trail leads to the summit of Wheeler Peak, topped in snow for much of the year. Cowboy comedy: An old jalopy has been welded up on legs and is “driven” by a cow skeleton.

(think Carlsbad or Mammoth, both explored in this issue starting on page 28). Instead, it seems that Mother Nature was given just half a mile to decorate and decided to shoot the works. Daily tours pass by — in places, *squeeze* by — an almost bewildering array of stalactites, stalagmites, columns, flowstone, soda straws and draperies.

Heading back down the mountain from the visitor center, a right turn on Baker Creek Road took us to Pole Canyon Picnic Area and Baker Creek Campground. The road also leads to Grey Cliffs and Upper Pictograph Cave, our reason for making the turn. The drawings are believed to have been made by the Fremont culture, farmers and hunters who lived in villages in the Snake Valley from about A.D. 1000 to 1300. Most of the drawings appear to represent human or animal shapes. Others are more abstract, and their subjects are, today, anybody's guess.

We returned to the main road and continued east a short distance to the left turn onto Wheeler Peak Scenic Drive, a dozen miles of hairpin turns and an 8 percent grade up the

Campgrounds in the Great Basin

The **Border Inn Casino**, on the Nevada-Utah border in Baker, is open year-round and has pull-through sites, all with full hookups. 775-234-7300 www.borderinncasino.com

Great Basin National Park has four first-come, first-served campgrounds along with one group campground (775-234-7511) that requires reservations. 775-234-7331 www.nps.gov/grba

Silver Jack Inn & Lector-Lux Café in Baker offers free primitive camping when RVers patronize the restaurant or grocery store. 775-234-7323 www.silverjackinn.com/services

Whispering Elms Motel and RV Park in Baker is open spring, summer and fall, and has 25 full-service sites. 775-234-9900 www.camptheelms.wix.com/the-elms

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shoulder of the massive mountain. Driving the corkscrew road, we passed numerous overlooks for wide views of the mountain and the desert far below, and elevation signs — 7,000 feet near the start to over 10,000 feet at the summit. There, we looked south to the snow-furrowed 13,063-foot peak, the highest point in the park.

Incredibly, a campground at the summit had several small RVs parked in the wooded sites (24 feet is the maximum length allowed for vehicles traveling the scenic drive). Five trails begin here, ranging in length from the 8.4-mile Wheeler Peak Summit Trail to the .4-mile Sky Islands Forest Trail, an easy jaunt through the trees — all we attempted our first day, as the sun was setting.

We returned the next day for another go at the 12-mile scenic drive, this time to hike the 3-mile Bristlecone Trail, which starts at the summit and is not an easy walk. The path is narrow, bulging with rocks and occasional boulders, webbed with stout tree roots, and here and there overlaid with a dead tree trunk, fallen in this spruce and limber pine forest. The path also climbs 600 feet in its entirety, crosses a talus slide and for the last half mile or so is little more than a scrape across the mountain, a near-vertical up to one side and a near-vertical down to the other. There's also the altitude — around 11,000 feet — to contend with. Carry water. Wear sturdy shoes. In winter months, the trail is open, but there's snow from around the end of October through March.



A couple of hikers who braved the steep 3-mile Bristlecone Trail study an ancient pine. These trees survive due to their dense, resinous wood and because they thrive where little else can grow.

The hike is worth it. At the top, among the rocks, stands a grove of the oldest living things on earth, bristlecone pines. One of the trees, now called Prometheus, was dated to be more than 4,900 years old in 1964. Unfortunately, before this was a national park, Prometheus was cut down so its growth rings could be measured. Today, a 4,600-year-old bristlecone in California predates Great Basin's remaining conifers. Placards explain that bristlecones survive because of their unusual ability to adapt



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to the environment. Their growth is slow, the wood fine-grained, resinous and resistant to decay. Thus, even after death, the trees can stand for thousands of years. A tree named Adversity is among these, bleached creamy yellow and gray in death. The tree was "born," reads the placard, in 100 B.C. — the same year as Julius Caesar, it occurred to me, though despite its name, Adversity lived far longer, until A.D. 1400.

Later, at the Border Inn Casino campground, 13 miles east of the park, we watched the evening sun pour amber light on Wheeler's high flanks, the color slowly dimming to black against a yellow sky. The winding road up had become invisible with distance, and once again, as before we'd driven and walked it, Mount Wheeler seemed unknowable, somber, forbidding. Although our acquaintance had been brief by the mountain's reckoning — and even by our own — we knew better. 🚗

Nearby Attractions

Cave Lake State Park

Featuring a 32-acre reservoir at 7,300 feet, this 4,160-acre park borders Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. Facilities include two campgrounds (first-come, first-served), hiking trails and a boat launch. In winter visitors enjoy ice-skating, ice-fishing and cross-country skiing, and can view the remarkable snow sculptures at the White Pine Fire & Ice Show (January 16-18, 2015, 800-496-9350). Open year-round, weather permitting, Cave Lake is 15 miles southeast of Ely. 775-728-4460 www.parks.nv.gov/parks/cave-lake-state-park

Nevada Northern Railway

Visitors can take a 90-minute train ride to experience the Old West and what it was like to move a



Winter fun at the Fire & Ice Show in Cave Lake State Park with snow sculptures like *Bones*, ice bowling, sledding and skiing.

mountain of copper ore. A 19th-century steam locomotive pulls vintage Nevada Northern railcars along the country's best-preserved short-line railroad, a National Historic Landmark. Trains run from Ely toward the Ruth mine on weekends from April through January and daily from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day. 866-407-8326 www.nevadanorthernrailway.net

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THE FLIP SIDE OF FLORIDA

A coastal road trip across the Florida Panhandle reveals the less-visited side of the state with dazzling blue-green surf, sugar-white beaches, friendly locals and a distinctly Deep South vibe

We pulled into the bridge's tollbooth lane, pleasantly stuffed from our dinner of fresh batter-fried snapper, hush puppies, coleslaw and turnip greens. "Well, hello, y'all," the cheery tollbooth attendant greeted us. "So what did y'all do over there on the bayou? Did you go have dinner?" Rather astonished (a tollbooth attendant making conversation?), we answered, well, yes, we had gone out for dinner. "Oh, where'd y'all go?" she continued. "Nick's Seafood? Mmmm-hmmm, yes, that is *sooo* good," she said after we told her. "Now y'all be careful up there on the bridge with all that wind," and she waved us off with a smile. We turned to

each other and said, "Only in the South!" Indeed, the Florida Panhandle is the Deep South, a truly different culture from the rest of the state.

The soft cadences of Georgia, Louisiana and Alabama are everywhere, and most restaurants offer sweet tea, grits and gumbo. In fact, locals say that the farther north you go in Florida, the farther south you get. This area is much closer to Alabama and Georgia, both geographically and culturally, than it is to the cosmopolitan metropolis of Miami or the playgrounds of Orlando. The off-seasons of autumn and spring offer substantial discounts at hotels, restaurants and shops, along with less humidity, highs of about 80

degrees, soothingly warm ocean water and no crowds.

This is a Florida few know, other than Southerners. It's a Florida of exquisite tropical beaches, incredibly lush natural vegetation and unspoiled villages. It's a Florida so apart that a large portion of it observes Central Time, while the rest keeps Eastern Time.

These are among the least-developed and cleanest beaches in the world, consisting of unspoiled sand dunes, vegetation and wildlife. The beach sand is amazing: clean, as white as sugar and seemingly more powdery, and pleasantly cool, even when the afternoon sun is relentless. The water is marvelous: Coca-Cola-bottle green and so clear you can see tiny seashells on the bottom and little fish playfully darting around your toes. The good news for parents of small children, as well as those intent on just relaxing, is that the water is almost always calm, and undertows and rip currents are rare.

This part of the gulf is famed for its deep-sea fishing, with abundant cobia, snapper, grouper, blue and

In South Walton County, turquoise waters lap white-sand beaches for 26 idyllic miles.



PHOTO COURTESY VISIT SOUTH WALTON



(Above from left) Climb 92 steps to the top of the reconstructed Cape St. George Light for spectacular views of the gulf. Chances are good you'll spot bottlenose dolphins soaring as high as 20 feet.

white marlin, and more. Seventeen fresh- and saltwater lakes and Choc-tawhatchee Bay add to the already abundant recreational waterfront. Inland areas are heavily wooded with pine forests and hardwood hammocks. Best of all, this region has a wealth of well-run, beautifully situated RV parks (see "Where to Camp on the Florida Panhandle" on page 26).

We started our Panhandle journey in Franklin County in the western portion, near Tallahassee. Right away, driving south on Route 319, we noticed hand-lettered signs for boiled peanuts — an acquired taste for some, but we loved the warm, salty and addictive snacks right away, buying small bags at roadside stands throughout our trip. We also saw charming signs for down-home barbecue joints (Austin's Smokin' Butt-Hut in Fountain) and produce stands (Fresh 'Maters). One enterprising vendor's sign advertised "We Need the Bucks!"

Carrabelle is a delightful small town with no traffic lights, no heavy industry and no crowds. What it does offer are gorgeous white-sand beaches, abundant seabirds and frolicking dolphins, a lovely river walk and wharf area, several historical sites and the outstanding Carrabelle Beach RV Resort.

If you're a history buff, don't miss the small but worthwhile Carrabelle History Museum and the Camp Gordon Johnston WWII Museum, telling the

story of the troops that trained here for the D-Day invasion of Normandy. The Crooked River Lighthouse, with its Keeper's House Museum, is a pleasant spot to climb and peruse your surroundings for miles around. Carrabelle, considered the Gateway to the gulf, has a natural deepwater harbor and easy access to three rivers, attracting kayakers, sailors and other boaters.

About 15 minutes down the road, we reached the pretty little hamlet of Apalachicola. With a rich maritime heritage, a working waterfront, famed oysters and more than 900 historic sites, Apalachicola charmed us into a blissfully slow pace. We enjoyed walking the wide, tree-lined streets and viewing the working waterfront, the old brick-and-granite cotton warehouses and little shops and cafés. A must-visit is the Apalachicola Maritime Museum, which runs full-moon boat tours each month and features a maritime library and exhibits, as well as a wooden boat school, paddle and sail training, kayaking and various lectures.

Crossing two bridges, we found the sublime, quiet barrier island of St. George with just two small markets, a few shops and five or so small restaurants (a Subway is the only chain establishment). The gorgeous St. George Island State Park is 9 miles long, with wide white-sand beaches, clear green waters, a large population of seabirds and a 60-site campground. Visitors

can access 4 miles of beach along the park's main drive. The last 5 miles are accessible only on foot or by special permit for four-wheel-drive vehicles. St. George is the place to take in nature, climb the lighthouse and get away from the overbuilding often found in other beach towns.

Moving on from Franklin County, we continued west on Highway 98, mostly hugging the coast but also meandering into small rural areas like picturesque Port St. Joe for a succulent barbecue lunch (with plenty of sweet tea!) and some exploring at St. Joseph Peninsula State Park at the tip of Cape San Blas. The cape is a 17-mile-long barrier peninsula known for its spectacular blue-green waters and excellent shelling. A short detour from 98 will take you to Wewahitchka, made famous in the 1997 film *Ulee's Gold*. This town has harvested its renowned Tupelo honey for more than a century and hosts the annual Tupelo Honey Festival, taking place on May 16, 2015 (www.tupelohoneyfestival.com).



(Right) A habitat for shorebirds, pristine Perdido Key attracts gulls, terns and skimmers.



(Above from left) Biking the Bay Walk Trail along St. Joe Bay, snorkeling among rock jetties at St. Andrews State Park and (right) fishing from one of four piers in Panama City Beach, two of which stretch 1,500 feet into prime cobia, mackerel and flounder territory.

We passed on to bustling Panama City, long famed for its college spring break crowds. The largest city between Tallahassee and Pensacola with 50,000 residents, Panama City Beach is another splendid white-sand paradise, part of the so-called Emerald Coast. Nestled between St. Andrews Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, Panama City is part military city, part industrial hub and part beach getaway. Nearby Panama City Beach is where you'll find a bevy of arcades, theme parks, restaurants and bars, clubs, waterparks and even a Ripley's Believe It or Not! Odditorium. You can catapult yourself from a giant slingshot, perform

karaoke or swim with dolphins.

In South Walton County, just beyond Panama City, 16 beach communities along State Route 30A have committed to preserving their pristine environment, serenity and quality of life. These communities offer 26 miles of a Florida some might think no longer exists, with 15 coastal dune lakes (your chance to try standup paddleboarding), as well as white sand and turquoise gulf waters. South Walton County hosts the sixth annual 30A Songwriters Festival, January 16-18, 2015, with more than 200 shows in 25 venues (www.30asongwritersfestival.com).

One of the oldest towns on the

Panhandle coast, founded in the mid-1880s, Grayton Beach is home to turn-of-the-last-century weathered cypress homes with palm-tree-studded lawns, wide porches and hammocks swinging in the shade. Recent years have increased Grayton's popularity, displacing many of the surfers and beach bums who formerly lived here. Prices have increased in accordance with the newcomers, but Grayton's charms are still here for all to enjoy.

Rosemary Beach, established in 1995, reminds some of Europe, others of the Caribbean, and still others of St. Augustine or New Orleans — that's because its designers and architects modeled the city on all four destinations. Upscale and quietly elegant, Rosemary Beach has homes with wraparound porches, Spanish-style courtyards and gas lanterns, as well as posh shops and inviting bistros.

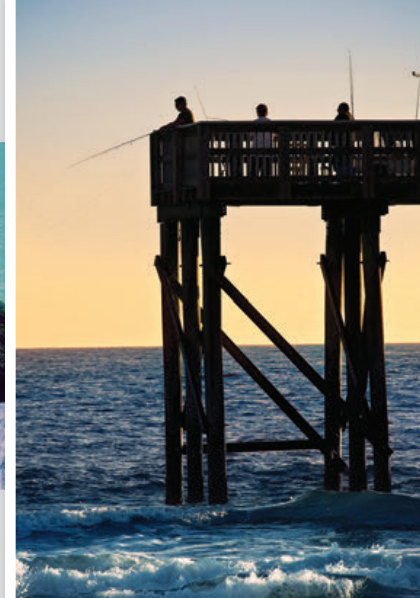
Seaside is an irresistible 80-acre neighborhood reminiscent of a New England watercolor painting. Home to pastel-painted cottages surrounded by porches, gazebos and picket fences, Seaside was immortalized in the 1998 movie *The Truman Show*. Bike paths, boardwalks and beach pavilions add to the cozy neighborhood feel, while concerts and Shakespearean plays take place in the outdoor amphitheater.

Sandestin, just west of Highway 30A, is the largest of the developments in this area. Overlooking both the gulf and the Intracoastal Waterway, it features 72 holes of golf on award-winning courses and a wide variety of accommo-



At Grayton Beach State Park, salt marshes guide paddlers to the gulf.

PHOTO COURTESY VISIT SOUTH WALTON



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THE FLIP SIDE OF FLORIDA

dations, restaurants and shops. On our visit, we were lulled by the pleasant din of cicadas, crickets, frogs and toads.

Grayton Beach State Park has nearly 2,000 acres of pristine coastal vegetation, massive dunes, more than 4 miles of hiking and biking trails, a coastal lake, pine flatwoods, a marsh area and a spectacular beach.

Topsail Hill Preserve, a 1,600-acre

state park, is said to be the most pristine and environmentally protected piece of coastal property in the state. If you visit the *Robinson Crusoe*-like beach, you may not see another soul there, other than the dolphins and turtles that come to play.

On trips to the Panhandle when our kids were small, we somehow missed Pensacola but were now pleased to

WHERE TO CAMP ON THE FLORIDA PANHANDLE

CARRABELLE

Carrabelle Beach RV Resort

A pet-friendly place, Carrabelle Beach RV Resort has direct beach access and a boat club for rentals, charters, fishing and relaxing on the shaded observation deck. All 58 pull-through RV sites include full hookups, a picnic table, Wi-Fi and cable. Facilities include a swimming pool, a convenience shop and a game room with foosball, billiards and TV. Streets are narrow, and many sites have a slope, so leveling blocks may be needed. 850-697-2638

www.rvcoutdoors.com/carrabelle-beach

PANAMA CITY BEACH

Emerald Coast RV Beach Resort

On 25 manicured acres in the heart of Panama City Beach, Emerald Coast RV Beach Resort features two large ponds with fountains and 157 RV sites with full hookups, Wi-Fi and 75-channel cable television. Pets are welcome, and guests can take advantage of the basketball and volleyball courts, the saltwater pool and a new pool house with bathrooms, a laundry room, a fitness center and a game room. 800-232-2478, www.rvresort.com

Topsail Hill Preserve State Park

Within this coastal state park is Gregory E. Moore RV Resort with 156 full-hookup campsites, a swimming pool, shuffleboard courts, bathrooms and laundry facilities. Pets are welcome at the RV sites. The camp store sells supplies, snacks and drinks, and beach carts and kayaks are available for rental. Guests

can hop the tram or walk or bike a half-mile to the white-quartz beach. 850-267-8330

www.floridastateparks.org/topsailhill

PENSACOLA BEACH

Pensacola Beach RV Resort

On the bay side of narrow Santa Rosa Island, Pensacola Beach RV Resort is a short walk from the boardwalk with its many shops and restaurants. A walkway across the road leads to the white-sand beaches of the gulf. This tidy, pretty RV resort offers a large clubhouse, Wi-Fi and 72 concrete sites equipped with power, water, sewer and cable hookups. The resort has 19 waterfront sites and one pull-through.

850-932-4670

www.pensacolabeachrvresort.com

ST. GEORGE ISLAND

St. George Island State Park

With its white-sand beach, this 60-site state park campground has water and electric hookups, two bathhouses and a central dump station. Pets are allowed in the camping area. Six large picnic shelters are equipped with grills, tables and nearby restrooms. This barrier island offers opportunities for swimming, shelling, canoeing, boating, hiking and nature study. Two natural boat ramps provide access to the bay for small craft. Anglers can fish for flounder, redfish, sea trout, pompano, whiting, Spanish mackerel and other fish off the beach or in the bay. 850-927-2111

www.floridastateparks.org/stgeorgeisland

Carrabelle Beach RV Resort



find the same gorgeous beaches as on the entire Panhandle, sophisticated urban dining and culture, and a rich military and naval heritage. Pensacola has an Old World feel to it with lovingly restored homes, filigreed balconies, brick streets, flowering bushes and wide walkways lined with enormous live oaks and magnolias. This area was the first major settlement attempt in America by the Spanish, 450 years ago.

We spent time touring Historic Pensacola Village next to the Seville Square Historic District and the posh boutiques and lively bars of Palafox Street, home to a plethora of local businesses. We also visited Plaza Ferdinand, where in 1821, General Andrew Jackson claimed Florida from Spain and declared Pensacola the capital of the new Florida Territory. A bust of Jackson denotes the spot.

Our next stop was the National Naval Air Museum, which screens a thrilling IMAX film on the Blue Angels and includes the Cubi Bar Café with its memorabilia from the Officers' Club in the Philippines. We also toured the Pensacola Lighthouse and fascinating Fort Pickens, a massive pre-Civil War brick fortress where Apache Chief Geronimo was imprisoned, an interesting and little-known tale.

Just a short drive away is Perdido Key, with 16 miles of beyond-beautiful beaches. At Santa Rosa Island's Pensacola Beach, a 1,471-foot-long fishing pier stretches into the emerald waters of the gulf.

Nicknamed the City of Five Flags for having been ruled by England, France, Spain, the Confederacy and the United States, Pensacola is famed for being the training ground of Navy, Marine and Coast Guard aviators. You're sure to see military types wherever you go, and their presence adds a cosmopolitan diversity to the city.

This part of Florida offers a true getaway, not just because of the exquisite beaches and frolicking dolphins or the wealth of recreational activities. It's because it's one of the increasingly few spots in the country that still feels "different," with a unique culture, ambience and grace. 🐬

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GOING TO THE DARK SIDE



Step into a magical realm of subterranean treasures at Kentucky's Mammoth Cave, Missouri's Marvel Cave and New Mexico's Carlsbad Caverns

Across America, caves form the backbone of mountain ridges. Some remain wild; others are open for tours. While many of America's tourist caves share similar characteristics, each has its own story. Consider central Kentucky's Mammoth Cave, southern Missouri's Marvel Cave and southeastern New Mexico's Carlsbad Caverns, three well-known show caves with watery origins and a common history of mining.

Mammoth and Marvel caves were carved over time by rivers, and Carlsbad Caverns by an ancient sea. In Mammoth Cave's deepest chambers, Echo River and River Styx still flow. Marvel Cave's two underground lakes are long, and no one has fully explored the lower depths. Carlsbad Caverns, in the arid

Chihuahuan Desert, is now dry.

Before they opened for tours, the underground passageways of all three caves were mined for guano deposited by cave-dwelling bats. Miners hauled out tons of nitrate-rich guano at Mammoth and Marvel caves in the 1800s for use in making gunpowder. In the early 1900s bat guano was excavated from Carlsbad Caverns to make a potent form of fertilizer.

Despite their similar histories, Marvel, Mammoth and Carlsbad are very different subterranean chambers, particularly in size. The longest known cave in the world, Mammoth Cave has more than 400 miles of discovered passages, and geologists estimate hundreds more yet to be mapped. Mammoth's mostly narrow yet

sometimes wide passages overlap like spaghetti layered on a large platter.

The Big Room of Carlsbad Caverns, approximately 750 feet under the earth, covers 8.2 acres and rises 250 feet, a space that could hold 14 football fields. With its stalactites, stalagmites and other delicate cave formations, Carlsbad is a world apart from the cactus-dotted desert that lies overhead.

A wet limestone cavern, Marvel Cave lies somewhere between these two national park caves in size and depth. The privately owned cave showcases a dramatic waterfall, sugar-white flowstone as tall as a throne and thin soda-straw stalactites hanging down like icicles.

All three caves lay claim to domes and pits, often described as bottomless.

When rocks tossed into the Gulf of Doom in Marvel Cave did not resonate with sound, superstitious locals believed the black hole was a gateway to the underworld. Later explorers discovered that clay and bat guano covered the bottom of the pit's floor, 100 feet below.

Likewise, a gaping hole in Carlsbad Caverns appeared to be bottomless to early explorers who carried only dim lighting. Measured in later years, the pit descends 140 feet. A cavity overhead, eaten by acidic solution when the cave was filled with water, is named Liberty Dome. The vertical distance from pit to dome is greatest at this point.

The three caves ultimately opened to the public, with Mammoth Cave tours dating back to 1816 and Marvel Cave opening in 1893. James White, often credited with discovering Carlsbad Caverns, took his first tourist party into the subterranean depths in 1922, 21 years after he initially ventured inside. When the three caves opened for tours, all were relatively isolated, with barely passable roads leading to their underground mysteries and fanciful beauty.

BATS, BEARS AND A COWBOY

Before Mammoth Cave and Carlsbad Caverns became federally protected properties, Native Americans used the underground chambers for shelter, but superstitions and whispered stories kept Marvel Cave a secret deep within the Missouri Ozarks. Osage Indian folklore tells of a young tribal hunter who chased a bear up a wooded mountainside, leaping to a rock ledge to better aim

his spear into the bear's heart. His lunge took him and his prey over the edge and through a dark hole in Roark Mountain. No sound echoed from the deep, black opening. Osage kinsmen slashed sideways V's in the surrounding trees to warn of evil and called the place Devil's Den.

Tales circulated among pioneers that Ponce de León had explored Marvel's depths, seeking his Fountain of Youth and leaving behind caches of gold. However, no recorded person entered Marvel Cave until a lead mining magnate and a few explorers lowered themselves into the dark hole in 1869. Because the explorers believed marble

signify that Native Americans were in Mammoth Cave long before.

Bats, not bears, got the attention of young Jim White in the 1890s as he was mending a fence in the New Mexico desert. At first, the 16-year-old cowboy thought the black plume rising from a hole in the Guadalupe Mountains was a volcano. As he got closer to the crevice, he discovered a swarm of bats as thick as smoke.

Back at his cowboy camp, White gathered up rope, wire and a lantern and returned the next day to explore the opening of what's now known as Carlsbad Caverns. When he tried to tell the other cowhands about the forest

DESPITE THEIR SIMILAR HISTORIES, MARVEL, MAMMOTH AND CARLSBAD ARE VERY DIFFERENT SUBTERRANEAN CHAMBERS, THOUGH ALL THREE LAY CLAIM TO DOMES AND PITS, OFTEN DESCRIBED AS BOTTOMLESS.

covered the cave's ceiling, chambers and passageways, it was originally named Marble Cave.

Mammoth Cave, too, carries an ursine legend. As the story goes, at the end of the 1700s, a man named John Houchin spotted a black bear in the Kentucky woods. He shot the bear, and failing to kill it outright, chased the animal until it led him to the mouth of Mammoth Cave.

Did the hunter get the bear? Or did the angry carnivore chase the hunter until he dropped into the sinkhole to get away? No one knows. Houchin gained credit for discovering Mammoth Cave, but the year is still debated — sometime between 1797 and 1802. Ancient bones and charred torches within its passages

of stalagmites inside the mountain — formations he called "stickie ups," for lack of a better word — no one believed him. For more than two decades, White explored and promoted Carlsbad Caverns on his own.

STALAGMITES, STALACTITES AND BOTTOMLESS PITS

Early tour-takers entered the caves carrying lit candles, lanterns or flaming torches. At Marvel Cave, rickety rope and wooden ladders descended into the natural opening. Tourists donned overalls with leather seats that eased their slide into the Cathedral Room.

Passionate about sharing Carlsbad's fairyland beauty with the world, White lowered the earliest

(Left) A tour group explores Kentucky's Mammoth Cave. (Right) Water flows underground from the sinkhole plain south of Mammoth Cave National Park and finds outlets through innumerable springs. (Far right) Spectacular limestone formations decorate Doll's Theater in the Big Room at Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico.



PHOTO BY DANIEL MAYER

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Stalactites drip from the ceiling of the Big Room in Carlsbad Caverns, the largest natural limestone chamber in the United States.

visitors two at a time into the cavern in buckets that had been used for guano mining. Marvel Cave's first tours were led by Ozark hill folks and the two daughters of the Canadian entrepreneur who purchased the cave sight unseen in the late 1800s.

Mammoth Cave's original guides and explorers were slaves. One of the slave guides inspected a "bottomless" pit from top to bottom. Afterward, the cave's owner ordered a wooden bridge built over what is still called the Bottomless Pit. Today, visitors trek over that deep hole on a strong metal bridge, as soft lighting illuminates the bottom.

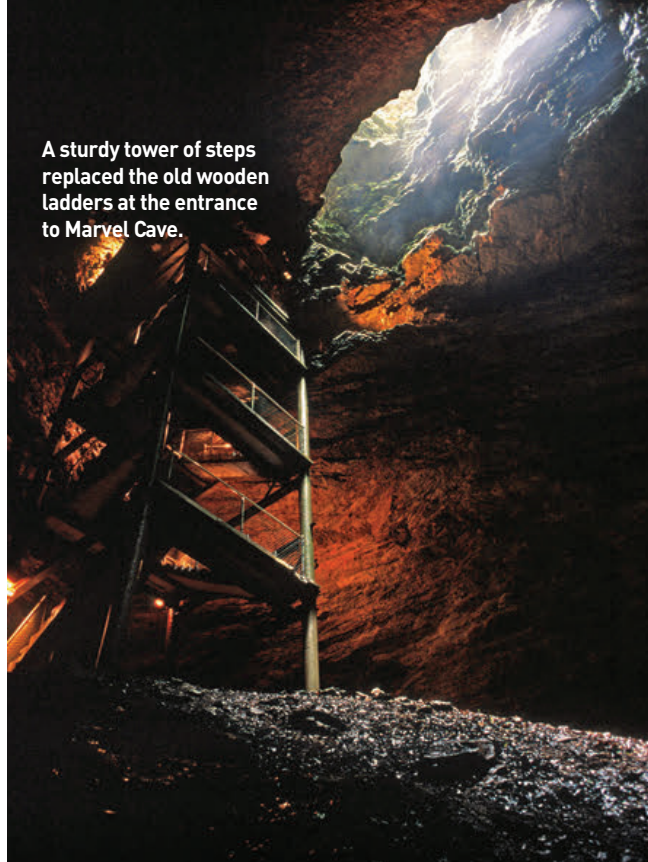
Before Mammoth and Carlsbad became national parks and Marvel Cave received national natural landmark status, no one thought much about preserving the fragile stalactites, stalagmites, flowstone, thin stone draperies and crystal formations called popcorn. One guide at Carlsbad Caverns states that many older gardens in the town of Carlsbad are outlined with broken stalactites from the cave's ceiling. Names and dates etched or burned on cave walls with blackened torches remain evident in parts of the caves.

After mining operations at Marble Cave ceased, the new Canadian owner, William Lynch, took up residence on the woodland property and changed the name to Marvel Cave. Early on, he hired 15-year-old Fannabelle Ford to assist his daughters, Miriam and Genevieve, with guiding tourists. Since the cave served as refrigeration for meals at the guest lodge the Lynches built, Fannabelle carried both food and spring water from the cave's depths over the debris pile and up a 94-foot

(Below, left to right) Walking through the natural entrance to Carlsbad Caverns (fees to enter the New Mexico caverns will be waived February 14 through 16, 2015, in honor of President's Day). At Missouri's Marvel Cave, lights illuminate the Waterfall Room. Early Marvel Cave visitors descended on tall ladders and were guided by owner William Lynch's daughters on candlelit tours.



A sturdy tower of steps replaced the old wooden ladders at the entrance to Marvel Cave.



Three-of-a-Kind Caves

Carlsbad Caverns National Park

Tucked in the Guadalupe Mountains of southeastern New Mexico, Carlsbad Caverns National Park covers 46,766 acres and possesses 118 limestone caves in addition to the eponymous caverns. 575-785-2232, www.nps.gov/cave

Mammoth Cave National Park

Encompassing 52,830 acres of Kentucky woodland with the world's longest cave as its centerpiece (more than 400 miles of passages surveyed to date), Mammoth Cave National Park lives up to its name. 270-758-2180, www.nps.gov/maca

Marvel Cave at Silver Dollar City

Showcasing the largest cave entrance room in America, Missouri's deepest cave is 505 feet beneath Branson's Silver Dollar City theme park. Highlights include the 20-story Cathedral Room. 800-888-7277, www.silverdollarcity.com

wooden ladder to daylight.

Young mountain boys also worked for Lynch, staying on for decades as the land above the cave transformed into the Silver Dollar City theme park, patterned after the old mining town of Marmaros, originally called Marble City. One descendant recalls wages for her grandfather might have been a quarter and an apple.

In contrast, the masters of Mammoth Cave owned their guides, several of whom are credited with discovering new passages. During the early mining days, slaves also hauled the loose soil in the cave to the site of vats where the dirt was leached with water to separate the white, powdery nitrates. A hotel on the cave property served guests. Many banquet meals, prepared in the hotel kitchen, were carried into the cave in baskets by black men and women who served the food on flat rocks.

Music resonated in all three caves. In its Rotunda, Mammoth Cave hosted

visiting bands, as well as its hotel's own musicians. Stories relate that Marion Lynch, trained in opera, had a piano lowered into the Cathedral Room at Marvel Cave and entertained guests with arias. Later, bands of guitars, fiddles and a stand-up bass played in the same large room while folks from around the region danced in naturally air-conditioned comfort.

In the Kings Palace of Carlsbad Caverns, the floor has little evidence of the stalagmites described by Jim White. A guide states that dancers over the years had broken off the formations growing upward toward the ceiling. For three decades, Carlsbad High School held its prom in the Kings Palace.

ROUNDTrip TICKET TO THE UNDERWORLD

Today, the three caves offer guided tours of varying lengths and difficulty, including lantern tours — electric lights are turned off, and visitors view the rooms and formations as early tourists

and explorers did.

Mammoth Cave offers a variety of guided tours — Star Chamber, Violet City, Great Onyx and River Styx, among others — that change according to the seasons. One tour passes through dramatic domes and dripstones, and the Wild Cave Tour takes small groups climbing and crawling through less-visited passages. All tours walk in and out, using manmade towers and steps, and reservations are recommended.

Marvel Cave's Traditional Tour, leaving from Silver Dollar City's Hospitality House every half hour during its hours of operation, is included in an admission ticket to the 1890s theme park (the afternoon lantern tour requires an additional fee). After the hour-long tour, a cable train transports visitors from an exit point blasted above a flowstone formation in the 1950s.

Among the three caves, Carlsbad is the only one that allows the public to explore unescorted. Elevators whisk visitors down almost 800 feet to an area

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with a snack bar and restrooms. A short walkway leads to the self-guided Big Room Tour. The Natural Entrance Tour, also self-guided, follows a corkscrew paved trail descending almost 800 feet. Elevators speed visitors back to the visitor center on top.

Rangers guide other tours, giving historical and geological information and briefly turning off all lights to experience the darkness the discoverer, Jim White, described as "tons of black wool." From May to October, the outdoor amphitheater affords visitors a view of the nightly bat flight. Park rangers present information about the bats prior to their winged exodus from the cavern, typically around sunset.

Caves are America's underground treasures, preserving cultural and natural history beneath the earth's surface. Marvel, Mammoth, Carlsbad and numerous other tourist caves around the country welcome visitors to go over to the dark side and experience the magical subterranean world. 🚗

Caveside RV Parks

Here's a sample of RV parks and campgrounds near three of America's favorite tourist caves. For a more complete list, go to www.goodsamcamping.com.

CARLSBAD CAVERNS, New Mexico

Carlsbad KOA

800-562-9109

www.koa.com/campgrounds/carlsbad

Carlsbad RV Park and Campground

888-878-7275, www.carlsbadrvpark.com

White's City RV Park

575-785-2291

www.hotelscarlsbadcaverns.com/rv-park

MAMMOTH CAVE, Kentucky

Diamond Caverns RV Resort and Golf

877-570-2267, www.rvonthego.com

Maple Springs Campground,

Mammoth Cave National Park

877-444-6777, www.recreation.gov

Mammoth Cave Campground,

Mammoth Cave National Park

877-444-6777, www.recreation.gov

White's City RV Park
near Carlsbad Caverns



PHOTO COURTESY WHITE'S CITY RV PARK

Singing Hills RV Park and Campground

270-773-3789

www.singinghillsvrpark.com

MARVEL CAVE, Missouri

Acorn Acres RV Park and Villas

800-338-2504

www.bestbransonrvpark.com

America's Best Campground

800-671-4399, www.abc-branson.com

Branson View Campground

417-338-1038

www.thebransonviewcampground.com

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www.silverdollarcity.com/wilderness

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READERS' CHOICE AWARDS

2014

SEAL OF APPROVAL

READERS' TOP PICKS IN THE THIRD ANNUAL RV POLL

One of the great things about RVers is a nearly universal willingness to share hard-earned RV know-how. Visit any RV park, and chances are, it won't take long before you're exchanging tips on backing into a campsite with the couple next door. Wherever RVers meet, the conversation naturally turns from small talk to recommendations on everything from the best fuel stabilizer and fifth-wheel hitch to the most reliable trailer tires.

In 2012 we came up with a way to capitalize on *Trailer Life* readers' collective RV intelligence and share it on a grand scale. Each year we conduct an online poll to find the places and brands readers rely on most during their RV travels. With last year's results now in, we're pleased to announce the 2014 Readers' Choice Awards — gold, silver and bronze medalists in 28 RV-centric categories.

And the winners are....

ENGINE OIL



Gold: Shell Rotella

Produced by the Shell Oil Company, Rotella heavy-duty engine oils and synthetic lubricants control wear, buildup and emissions.

800-237-8645, www.shell.com/rotella

Silver: Mobil 1

800-662-4525, www.mobiloil.com

Bronze: Amsoil

800-956-5695, www.amsoil.com

FIFTH-WHEEL HITCH



Gold: Reese

Reese has been in the business of making towing devices since 1952 and specializes in heavy-duty fifth-wheel hitches and weight-distribution systems.

800-632-3290, www.reeseprod.com

Silver: B&W

800-810-4918, www.turnoverball.com

Bronze: PullRite

800-443-2307, www.pullrite.com

FIFTH-WHEEL TRAILER



Gold: Keystone

The No. 1 manufacturer of RVs in North America, Keystone builds fifth-wheels, travel trailers, toy haulers and destination trailers.

866-425-4369, www.keystonerv.com

Silver: Forest River

574-389-4600, www.forestriverinc.com

Bronze: Heartland

877-262-8032, www.heartlandrvs.com

FOLDING CAMPER



Gold: Starcraft

In business for five decades, Starcraft manufactures RVs from entry-level folding campers and lightweight trailers to luxurious fifth-wheels.

800-945-4787, www.starcraftv.com



Gold: TrailManor

TrailManor's unique retractable hard-wall trailers fold down for easy towing, can be pulled by vans and SUVs, and fit in an average-size garage.

402-316-7288, www.trailmanor.com

Silver: Chalet

541-791-4610, www.chaletrv.com

Silver: Forest River

574-389-4600, www.forestriverinc.com

Bronze: Aliner

724-423-7440, www.aliner.com

FUEL ADDITIVE



Gold: Lucas Oil

Lucas Oil provides premium oil, grease and additives, including Fuel Stabilizer for preventing gasoline breakdown during storage.

800-342-2512, www.lucasoil.com

Silver: Amsoil

800-956-5695, www.amsoil.com

Bronze: Sta-Bil

800-367-3245, www.goldeagle.com

FUEL STATION



Gold: Pilot Flying J

The Pilot and Flying J chains merged in 2010 to form North America's largest network of travel plazas with more than 650 RV-friendly locations.

877-866-7378, www.pilotflyingj.com

Silver: Love's Travel Stops

800-655-6837, www.loves.com

Bronze: Costco

800-774-2678, www.costco.com

Bronze: Maverik

800-789-4455, www.maverik.com

HOLDING-TANK CHEMICALS



Gold: Thetford

Thetford is the world's leading manufacturer of mobile sanitation products for the RV, marine, camping and truck markets.

800-543-1219, www.thetford.com

Silver: Dometic

800-544-4881, www.dometic.com

Bronze: Camco

800-334-2004, www.camco.net

Bronze: Odorlos

800-869-8764, www.yara.us

PERFORMANCE-ENHANCING PRODUCT



Gold: Banks Power

Banks offers a range of emissions-

legal products to improve power and fuel economy from cold-air intake kits to PowerPack systems.

800-601-8072, www.bankspower.com

Silver: Edge

888-360-3343, www.edgeproducts.com

Bronze: Bully Dog

877-285-5936, www.bullydog.com

REFRIGERATOR



Gold: Dometic

A leading supplier of RV refrigerators, Dometic also offers RV awnings, toilets, air conditioners, and portable refrigerators and freezers.

800-544-4881, www.dometic.com

Silver: Norcold

800-543-1219, www.norcold.com

Bronze: Samsung

800-726-7864, www.samsung.com

RV AWNING



Gold: Dometic

Dometic's wide selection of RV awning products includes patio, door and window awnings, slide toppers and screen rooms.

800-544-4881, www.dometic.com

Silver: Carefree of Colorado

303-469-3324

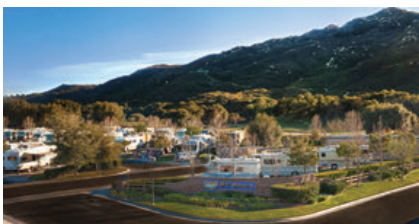
www.carefreeofcolorado.com

Bronze: Awnings by Zip Dee

800-338-2378

www.awningsbyzipdee.com

RV CAMPGROUND/RESORT

**Gold:** Pechanga RV Resort, Temecula, California

With 168 full-hookup campsites and all the amenities, Pechanga RV Resort is a short walk or shuttle ride from California's biggest casino.

877-997-8386, www.pechanga.com

Silver: The Campsites at Disney's Fort Wilderness Resort, Orlando, Florida
407-934-7639

www.disneyworldcamping.com

Bronze: Billings KOA, Billings, Montana

406-252-3104

www.koa.com/campgrounds/billings

Bronze: Ocean Lakes Family Campground, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina

843-238-5532, www.oceanlakes.com

RV CASINO RESORT

**Gold:** Pechanga Resort and Casino, Temecula, California

A 200,000-square-foot gaming floor makes this California's largest casino, and Pechanga RV Resort is conveniently located next door.

951-693-1819, www.pechanga.com

Silver: Laughlin/Avi Casino KOA, Laughlin, Nevada

702-535-5450

koa.com/campgrounds/laughlin

Silver: Seven Feathers Casino Resort, Canyonville, Oregon

800-548-8461, www.sevenfeathers.com

Bronze: Coushatta Casino Resort, Kinder, Louisiana

800-584-7263

www.coushattacasinoresort.com

Bronze: Grand Casino Hinckley, Hinckley, Minnesota

800-472-6321

www.grandcasinomn.com

Bronze: Jackson Rancheria Casino Resort, Jackson, California

800-822-9466, www.jacksoncasino.com

Bronze: Sam's Town Hotel & Gambling Hall, Las Vegas, Nevada

702-456-7777, www.samstownlv.com

Bronze: Turning Stone Resort Casino, Verona, New York

800-771-7711, www.turningstone.com

RV CLEANING PRODUCT

**Gold:** Protect All

Protect All's line of products includes polishes, washes, wheel and tire cleaner, rubber-roof treatment, slideout lubricants and black-streak removers.

800-322-4491, www.protectall.com

Silver: Dometic

800-544-4881, www.dometic.com

Bronze: Meguiar's

800-347-5700, www.meguiars.com

RV COVER

**Gold:** ADCO

Established in 1955, ADCO specializes in RV covers, as well as covers for RV tires, windshields, air-conditioning units and propane cylinders.

800-541-2326, www.adcoprod.com

Silver: Calmark

800-838-7236

www.calmarkcovers.com

Bronze: Classic Accessories

800-854-2315

www.classicaccessories.com

RV GENERATOR

**Gold:** Honda

A manufacturer of long-lasting and quiet generators, Honda has a range of portable power stations for RV use.

770-497-6400

www.powerequipment.honda.com

Silver: Yamaha

800-962-7926, www.yamaha-motor.com

Bronze: Cummins

800-888-6626, www.power.cummins.com

RV RETAILER

**Gold:** Camping World

Camping World is America's largest retailer of RV supplies, accessories and new and used RVs, with more than 100 locations across the country.

888-626-7576, www.campingworld.com

Silver: Local Dealer

Bronze: Walmart

800-925-6278, www.walmart.com

RV TIRES

**Gold:** Goodyear

The No. 1 tire maker in North America, Goodyear has been in business since 1898 and continues to make tires for most trailers and tow vehicles.

800-321-2136, www.goodyear.com

Silver: Michelin

866-866-6605, www.michelinman.com

Bronze: Maxxis

800-462-9947, www.maxxis.com

RV TOILET



Gold: Thetford

Thetford markets RV toilets under the Tecma, Aria and Aqua Magic brands, and offers toilet chemicals, cleaners, convenience products and portable toilets.

800-543-1219, www.thetford.com

Silver: Dometic

800-544-4881, www.dometic.com

Bronze: Fiamma

407-672-0091, www.fiammausa.com

SATELLITE HARDWARE



Gold: Winegard

Winegard is a leader in mobile TV reception, from broadcast antennas to portable and roof-mounted satellite systems.

800-288-8094, www.winegard.com

Silver: Dish Tailgater

888-656-2461

www.dish.com/technology/tv-outdoors

Bronze: King

952-922-6889, www.kingcontrols.com

SATELLITE PROVIDER



Gold: Dish

Dish provides 14 million direct-broadcast satellite-TV subscribers with hundreds of high-definition channels.

800-823-4929, www.dish.com

Silver: DirecTV

888-777-2454, www.directv.com

Bronze: Shaw

888-472-2222, www.shaw.ca

SIT-DOWN RESTAURANT



Gold: Cracker Barrel

Cracker Barrel welcomes RVers to more than 600 restaurants across the United States that offer home-style cooking and free overnight RV parking.

800-333-9566, www.crackerbarrel.com

Silver: Denny's

800-733-6697, www.dennys.com

Bronze: Applebee's

888-592-7753, www.applebees.com

STATE TO RV IN



Gold: Utah

With five national parks, seven national monuments, two national recreation areas, one national historic site and numerous state parks, Utah is a must-see destination for RVers.

800-200-1160, www.visitutah.com

Silver: Colorado

800-265-6723, www.colorado.com

Silver: Oregon

800-547-7842, www.traveloregon.com

Bronze: Michigan

888-784-7328, www.michigan.org

TIRE-MONITORING SYSTEM



Gold: TireMinder

TireMinder's tire-pressure monitoring systems keep tabs on tire pressure for greater peace of mind while on the road.

772-463-6522

www.minderresearch.com

Silver: HawksHead

888-321-8767, www.tpms.ca

Silver: Truck System Technologies

770-889-9102, www.tstruck.com

Bronze: Pressure Pro

800-959-3505

www.advantagepressurepro.com

Bronze: RVibrake

800-815-2159, www.rvibrake.com

TRAILER HITCH



Gold: Equal-i-zer

Made in America for more than 70 years, the Equal-i-zer hitch combines weight distribution with sway control for a smoother, safer ride.

800-478-5578, www.equalizerhitch.com

Silver: Blue Ox SwayPro

800-228-9289, www.blueox.com

Bronze: Hensley

800-410-6580, www.hensleymfg.com

TRAVEL TRAILER



Gold: Forest River

Launched in 1996, Forest River is now one of America's largest RV manufacturers, with a wide range of towable and motorized RVs.

574-389-4600, www.forestriverinc.com

Silver: Jayco

574-825-5861, www.jayco.com

Bronze: Keystone

866-425-4369, www.keystonerv.com

TRUCK-BED LINER



Gold: Line-X

A leader in truck-bed protection, Line-X offers fast-curing spray-on bed liners that bond permanently and provide tough protection with long-lasting polymer coatings to keep truck beds looking good.

877-330-1331

www.linex.com

Silver: Rhino Linings

800-422-2603

www.rhinelinings.com

Bronze: BedRug

800-462-8435

www.bedrug.com

TRUCK CAMPER



Gold: Lance

Awarded the highest rating from Consumers Digest, Lance makes America's most popular truck campers as well as a line of travel trailers.

661-949-3322, www.lancecamper.com

Silver: Alaskan Campers

360-748-6494

www.alaskancamper.com

Silver: Bigfoot

250-546-2155, www.bigfootrv.com

Bronze: Chalet

541-791-4610, www.chaletrv.com

Bronze: Four Wheel Campers

800-242-1442

www.fourwheelcampers.com

Bronze: Hallmark

877-659-5753, www.hallmarkrv.com

Bronze: Host

541-330-2328, www.hostcampers.com

Bronze: Northern Lite

250-765-3702, www.northern-lite.com

Bronze: Northstar Campers

319-233-3461

www.northstarcampers.com

Bronze: Northwood

800-766-6274, www.northwoodmfg.com

TRUCK FOR TOWING



Gold: Ford

Ford's popular F-Series truck lineup includes the ubiquitous F-150, America's best-selling truck for 37 years and best-selling vehicle for 32 years.

800-392-3673, www.ford.com

Silver: Ram

800-423-6343, www.ramtrucks.com

Bronze: Chevy

800-222-1020, www.chevrolet.com

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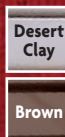


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Charcoal #58707 Desert Clay #32516
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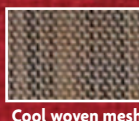
CLUB SALE \$27.97
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Awning Rope Light Kit, 18'L #69032
Clear rope light and track in one.
Ship Wt. 2 lbs. | ♥

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Walnut #69218
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\$18.99

24"H x 12"W x 15 1/2"D



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Collapsible for storage.
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17½"H x
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Blue #T2084 **Orange #T2082**

1 qt. and 2 qt. covered saucepans, 6 qt. covered stockpot, 3 qt. covered sauté, 8½" and 10" skillet. | 🚚 \$14 \$9



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Only 8 lbs.!**

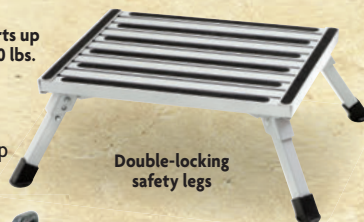
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Supports up to 1000 lbs.

Double-locking safety legs



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150 lb. capacity

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- 200 sq. in. cast iron cooking surface

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37⅞"W x 17¼"D x 15½"H. | 🚚 \$20 \$9



Foldable side tables

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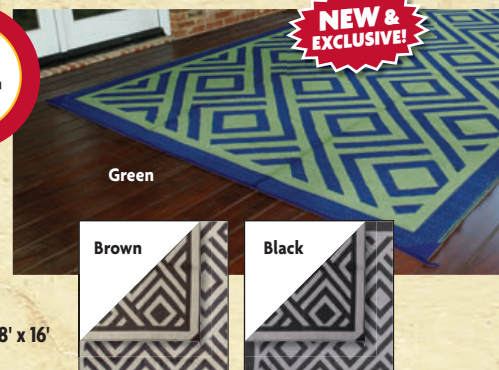
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NEW & EXCLUSIVE!



Some Assembly Required

The Open Range 3X349RLS by Highland Ridge RV takes longer to set up than most fifth-wheels, but the extra effort is worth the time

When we were kids, the best gifts underneath the Christmas tree always required some sort of assembly, be they bicycles, wagons or dollhouses. The anticipation of the finished product, patiently assembled by Mom or Dad, bordered on excruciating. And though we were always delighted when the moment of completion arrived and we could finally enjoy our special gift, there seemed to be just a tinge of disappointment when we realized that moment was now over, not to be relived again until next year, if we were lucky. Happily, the Open Range 3X349RLS by Highland Ridge RV recaptures some of that Christmas morning excitement, and the good news is, you can reassemble this toy again and again.

Certainly, all fifth-wheels require some setup, which most of us look forward to as a sort of ceremony leading up to a

weekend, or several weeks, of relaxation with friends and family. But this particular floorplan offers an optional exterior deck that folds down from the curbside slideout, which not only adds to the entertainment space but provides a feeling of openness few RVs can match.

The idea of an outdoor deck is not a new one, but as with all RV components, the success of a feature depends on its overall execution, how well it complements the floorplan as a whole, and in general, if it is truly useful or just a gimmick. In the case of the 3X349RLS, the concept works whether you're enjoying it in the summer or winter months. The residential-style sliding-glass door admits welcome light from the outdoors, which prevents feelings of claustrophobia on rainy or snowy days. And in the summer, the door can be opened and the screen left shut to bring the fresh breeze inside. Of



(Above) The kitchen features a movable island with a matching solid-surface countertop. Stainless-steel appliances, a dual-bowl sink with pull-out sprayer and a decorative back-splash add upscale flair. **(Right)** A residential-size shower and handsome vessel sink highlight the roomy bathroom.



course, the deck itself would be essentially worthless if it couldn't support the weight of a few guests, so Highland Ridge built it to hold up to 1,500 pounds — more than enough capacity for a few revelers.

As you might expect, a trailer as unique as this one requires some consideration when planning trips. The Open Range 3X349RLS starts out with a wide, 102-inch exterior, then adds two giant opposing slides. This alone makes the 3X349RLS big enough to fill most RV park sites, but add the deck, and the width roughly

equals one-and-a-half fifth-wheels. For our test, we reached out to our friends at Pechanga RV Resort and Casino in Temecula, California, who set us up with a large deluxe site bordered by a grassy area featuring a picnic table. By moving the table and folding down the deck, we had just enough space to fully deploy the slides and deck but not much more. So, make sure wherever you plan to stay has adequate space. If there isn't enough room, you can still enjoy this floorplan, but you'll have a windowless curbside slideout, as the deck floor will cover the glass slider.

Once we leveled the fifth-wheel with the automatic jack system and deployed the slides, the extra work began. The deck floor unlatches easily from the side and lowers without much effort, thanks to spring assist. Once down, the integrated stab jacks are lowered and adjusted; it takes some practice to guess how long the jacks need to be to provide a level deck surface, not to mention crawling under the deck a few times to make sure the jacks are properly placed. This could become messy if the ground is wet or muddy, so you may

consider carrying a plastic tarp with you to crawl onto if necessary. If the ground is dry and comfortable, it's just a matter of a few adjustments that shouldn't be a problem for those with a good back and knees.

Once this step is completed, it's time to put up the railing. Open Range cleverly provides an extra bin underneath the forward storage compartment in which to store the railing sections and pins. It slides out like a large utility drawer and is secured during transit with a pin. Made of black plastic, the drawer is not the prettiest thing, but it's a far better solution than having the railings tangled with your other belongings in the main storage area. The railings are marked so you know which side

they go on, but even then it takes a bit of time to organize, install and secure them. We recommend you complete this step before the sun goes down.

Once set up, this fifth-wheel is quite a spectacle and drew more than its fair share of interested RVers at the park. The white, gray and blue exterior graphic scheme with frameless windows is handsome, and both

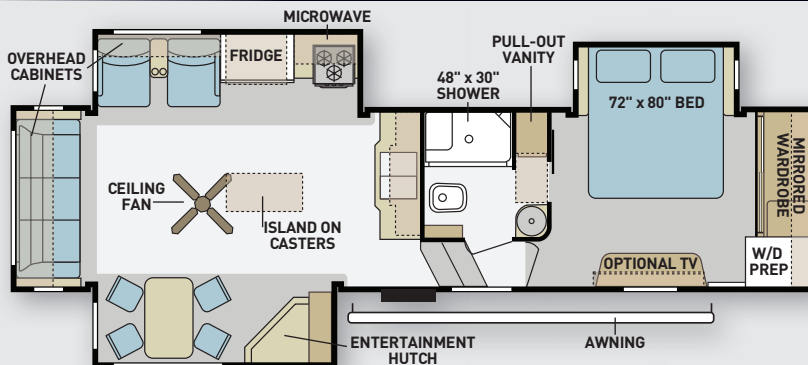
power awnings feature LED lighting, which makes for a cool-looking party pad in the evenings. The unit seemed well-constructed and offered nice features, such as a heated and enclosed underbelly, a Trailair pin box and landing jacks featuring JT's Strong Arm jack stabilizers for a solid, shake-free foundation. We also appreciated the small details, like TV prep on the exterior wall

adjacent to the deck area, which allows you to mount a small TV once the deck is deployed.

Stepping inside, the living area feels massive and is a treat for the eyes with Stone decor (one of three available) featuring light wood cabinetry and faux wood-plank Beauflor vinyl flooring that seemed durable and was easy to clean. Providing visual contrast were the rear couch and streetside theater seating, which were finished in embossed black upholstery with white stitching. Both were very comfortable and perfectly placed for watching the flat-screen television, mounted in an entertainment hutch in the corner of the curbside slideout. The hutch also offers an electric fireplace, making for a cozy environment ideal for kicking back and relaxing during the evening.

The forward kitchen is somewhat unorthodox, in that it offers an optional island with casters that can be located wherever it's convenient for you, although overhead pendant lighting sug-

HIGHLAND RIDGE OPEN RANGE 3X349RLS



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gests it should be placed in the center of the floor space. The island features a dark brown finish, complemented by a solid-surface countertop, and cabinets and drawers with brushed-nickel pulls. During travel, the island stows on the backside of the dinette and is secured with straps (there are anchors in the floor), and the dinette chairs reside upside down on the theater seats so they don't interfere with slideout operation. It's a little extra work, but once you get used to it, setup goes pretty quickly.

A 12-cubic-foot RV refrigerator

(Above from left) The bedroom has plenty of walk-around space, and the mirrored wardrobe features large drawers beneath to store folded items. The living area is well laid out with a large flat-screen television, electric fireplace and audio system. Space between the dinette and sliding door is a bit tight but manageable.

with wood-panel fronts is located in the streetside slideout, and next to it is a stainless-steel three-burner stove with an oven and a residential-size microwave mounted overhead. We found that the corner-mounted stove was rather confining when cooking meals, but the reality is that cooking is only a small portion of meal prep. The bulk of your

time is spent chopping and slicing, and the forward wall, with its large solid-surface countertop and dual-bowl stainless-steel sink provide plenty of space. There's also an abundance of cabinet and drawer space, and a nice-size pantry on the curbside slideout, next to the entertainment hutch. Moreover, we found little to complain about, though

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everyone who walked through the Open Range had negative comments about the floor register located dead center in the living area floor. This is something Highland Ridge should consider locating in a less conspicuous area.

Next to the forward cabinets are a small coat closet and angled stairs that lead up to the bath and bedroom. The entry door has an obscured glass treatment that makes the area feel more open and is just more pleasing to look at than a solid door. The bath area is well executed with plenty of space where you need it most. There's lots of elbowroom around the toilet, and the opposing vanity, with its glass-vessel sink, is an elegant touch. We particularly enjoyed the residential-size 48-inch x 30-inch shower with molded seat and appreciated the drawer space between the shower and bedroom entry. Above the drawers are a mirror and a pull-out counter for extra space, which allows

two people to get ready for a night out at the same time.

The bedroom features a 72-inch x 80-inch bed, bordered by shelves that are perfectly sized for books, water glasses, etc. There is plenty of walk-around room and enough space near the headboard on either side, so making the bed in the morning is not a struggle. A mirrored wardrobe up front easily accommodated our travel essentials, and a cabinet on the curb side offered washer/dryer prep. At the foot of the bed are a chest of drawers for more folded items and space for an optional TV.

Make no mistake about it — the Open Range 3X349RLS isn't for everyone, particularly those who just want to press a few buttons and kick back once they get to their campsite. But for those willing to do a little extra work, this fifth-wheel rewards with a lot of entertaining space and a fun factor that will make you the talk of any RV park. 🚐

Do you need an outdoor patio deck with a sliding-glass door? Maybe not, but it's a fun feature that provides more entertainment space outdoors and more light indoors.

SPECIFICATIONS

HIGHLAND RIDGE OPEN RANGE 3X349RLS

Exterior Length	37' 3"
Exterior Width	8' 6"
Exterior Height	13' 1"
Interior Width	8'
Interior Height	8' 6"
Construction	Steel I-beam frame, aluminum floor joists, plywood decking, fiberglass walls with foam-block insulation, plywood roof decking with PVC-membrane roof, R-38 insulation in floor and ceiling
Freshwater Cap.	85 gal.
Gray-Water Cap.	57 gal.
Black-Water Cap.	41 gal.
LP-Gas Cap.	20 gal.
Water-Heater Cap.	10 gal.
Refrigerator	12 cu. ft.
Furnace	35,000 Btu
Air Conditioner (2)	15,000 / 13,500 Btu
Converter	65 amp
Battery	Dealer installed
Tires	ST225/85R16
Suspension	Leaf springs with Equa-Flex
Weight	12,940 lbs.
Hitch Weight	2,160 lbs.
Axle Weight	10,780 lbs.
GVWR	14,300 lbs.
GAWR (2)	7,000 lbs.
Cargo Carrying Cap.	1,360 lbs.
MSRP, base	\$60,465
MSRP, as tested	\$82,686
Basic warranty	Two-year limited, transferable

Highland Ridge RV Open Range

260-768-7771, www.openrangerv.com

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The B Side

With a sofa-bed slideout and plenty of drawers and cabinets, Winnebago's Era 70C is a comfortable Class B for two

I admit to being a chronic over-packer. When it's time to load up the RV for a trip, my theory is "Why not bring it?" — especially when there's space — because it could very well come in handy. Or a neighboring fellow RVer may just want to borrow that salad spinner. And if we don't need it, well, then, what's the harm? So when Winnebago's latest Touring Coach, the Era 70C, which boasts a wall brimming with cabinets and deep pullout drawers next to the refrigerator, arrived at our offices, my wheels — and the Era's — were turning. Try as I might, even I couldn't fill up the drawers with a variety-pack of kitchen gadgets, enough food to feed a KOA, clothing for an assortment of temperatures and bedding for a three-day meander up the California coast. And souvenirs picked up along the way.

This Class B motorhome is built on a Sprinter chassis with a Mercedes-Benz 3.0-liter 6-cylinder turbodiesel engine and a five-speed automatic that uses Tip Shift technology to allow manual shifting. The Era is equipped with ABS brakes, dual rear wheels and a hitch receiver for towing up to 5,000 pounds. The Era was introduced to Winnebago dealers in 2007 as a 2009 unit and produced in the last half of 2008. The 70C,

one of three Eras in the 2015 Touring Coach lineup, is the first to have a slideout. It also has the largest freshwater capacity at 45 gallons.

The Era's chassis sports a BlueEfficiency badge — essentially, it's a term Mercedes-Benz coined to encompass the fuel-saving and emission-reducing efforts used on the rig. Our test vehicle averaged 17.05 MPG.

The Era is smooth and easy to drive — at an inch longer than 24 feet, it's like maneuvering an oversized van where you monitor the mirrors and pay attention to height restrictions. With its 9-foot 7-inch height, enclosed parking structures are off-limits. The Era's integrated running boards are great for stepping into and out of the motorhome.

We found the cockpit's setup well laid out and efficient. There's plenty of room to store sunglasses, maps, road-trip munchies and music CDs/DVDs. Just watch your noggin when climbing into the cockpit from the living area, as large, practical shelves are at head level. The Ultraleather driver and copilot chairs are super comfortable and have adjustable lumbar support. They rotate and recline — great for use when



in camp because they offer the soothing feel of a La-Z-Boy-type chair.

Armrests are height-adjustable but on the short side. While driving, I had to consciously move my right arm back from what would be a natural position because the armrest's edge fell at the nerve of my funny bone. Armrests are incorporated into the cockpit doors, and keyless entry is offered on all doors. The Infotainment Center (\$1,533 option) with Rand McNally RV GPS has a 6-inch touch-screen, Bluetooth hands-free calling and audio pairing with a smartphone or tablet, AM/FM stereo, CD/DVD player, iPod direct and USB connection, an outdoor thermometer and a color rearview camera display. While driving, we were impressed with how we could carry on a normal-volume conversation, though there was the occasional squeak from the slideout and other sources, and the rattle of the bathroom's pocket door in the rear. The pocket door would benefit from a second hook-and-loop strap at its base.

In contrast to a plethora of inside storage — someone commented that there was enough drawer space for 25 people but room to sleep just two — there is no outside storage. In back, cargo doors can be folded back flush against the body. Large tinted windows, as opposed to solid walls of metal, are attractive and go with the Era's Brilliant Silver color. A spare tire, attached to the left cargo door, is standard on the 70C model only and needs to be swiveled

(Above from left) For a Class B, the Era 70C has a fairly roomy bathroom and ample shower space. An impressive wall of drawers, cabinets and a refrigerator/freezer stands across from the galley. Behind the cargo doors is storage space for larger items. (Opposite page) The large awning provides daytime shade and has integrated LED lighting for socializing after dark.

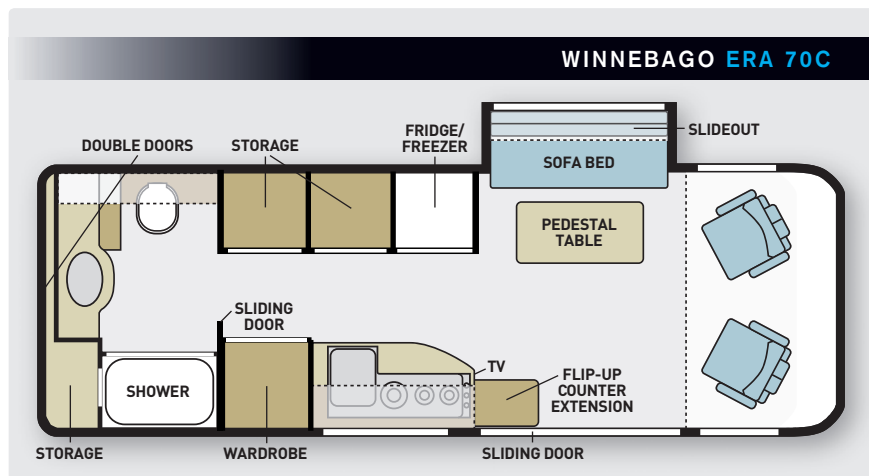
out of the way to open the door.

Behind the back doors is storage where we stowed two camp chairs, two Quik-Fold tables, a large mat, a water hose and the shorepower cord. Winnebago added an access door to the shower from the storage area and provides a carpeted piece of plywood that protects the shower pan, should it be needed to store additional supplies. If you're using the shower for storage, take care how things are packed because during travel items can shift and block the inward-opening shower door.

At the RV park, we settled in and started preparing dinner. We liked the way the kitchen is laid out so that,

while cooking, we were facing the sliding door, which we kept open. With the slider open, we felt like we were working in a large kitchen while watching the goings on outside, plus this inviting look encouraged folks who were curious about the Era to walk up and chat. The accordion-style screen door in the slider was quite a hit.

The 52-inch-long Ultraleather couch is housed in a streetside slide that adds 25 inches of living space. The no-fuss 16¾- x 35½-inch dinette table (the slide must be out to set up the table) was assembled in a flash. It does not lock into place — a nice feature, on the one hand, because it can be turned out of the way





(Above from left) The streetside slideout holds a couch that folds out to a 52- by 75-inch bed. The cockpit has comfortable Ultraleather pilot's and copilot's seats with adjustable lumbar support and plenty of room for travel essentials.

when you sit down or get up from the couch. However, it doesn't remain level and was unsteady, so we avoided using it for placing cups filled with hot liquid or tipsy wine glasses.

A three-burner stove with a glass top that serves as a backsplash and a stainless-steel sink are housed in an attractive curved Corian countertop. During cleanup, with the range's glass top down, there was not much of a barrier to keep objects from falling behind the cabinet, which is spaced away from the wall to allow room for the Alde convector that heats the living area. Plus, the backside of the cabinet could use a makeover. We'll explain: When the slider door is closed and you're looking through the glass window from the outside, you're viewing unfinished wood and an assortment of pipes, hardware and other stuff that's generally hidden behind a cabinet. Yes, the window is tinted, so that helps hide it, but this unfinished look is a contradiction to the caliber of this motorhome.

Two colors of Italian-style cabinets are used in the Era — dark High-Gloss Marbella Cherry over the couch and in the kitchen, and a cream-colored Sand Back for the rest, which nicely complement each other. Naturally, fingerprints showed up prominently on the high-gloss cherry.

A 20½- x 8¾-inch countertop extension flips up, and we left it up to serve two purposes: as a needed countertop space and to divert people from the TV

Meal prep is a pleasure with the flip-up counter extension (shown down), three-burner range and deep stainless-steel sink.

above, which protrudes into the side entrance. Virtually everyone who stepped up into the RV before we deployed the extension bumped their head on the TV. The extension is also useful for keeping utensils within reach while prepping a meal, but for zealous chopping the surface was too wobbly. Standard is a microwave/convection oven, which can be powered by a 2.5-kilowatt Cummins Onan MicroQuiet LP-gas generator when dry camping.

A 16½- x 3-inch metal shelf over the sink served well as a spice rack once we added Grip-It shelf liner, and it is a good place to drape a dish towel, since there is no towel rack. Four electrical outlets are within easy reach, and the area is well-lit (as it is throughout the rest of the interior) with LED lighting.

Two buttons inside the RV (one in

the galley, one by the passenger door) operate the 13-foot electric awning with integrated LED lighting. Some designer wasn't thinking clearly, in our opinion, when it was decided to place an awning switch in the galley of this coach. It's an accident waiting to happen, because your natural inclination is to stand inside with the slider open and push that button to deploy the awning. But the awning will not clear the slider door when it's open, and if you're trigger-happy and don't get your finger off that switch soon, damage will be done. The best way to open the awning is to close the slider, stand outside the passenger door and use the switch at the base of the seat so you can watch what's going on.

Additionally, the awning's arms were wedged into the rafter assembly so tightly that we had to use a flat-blade



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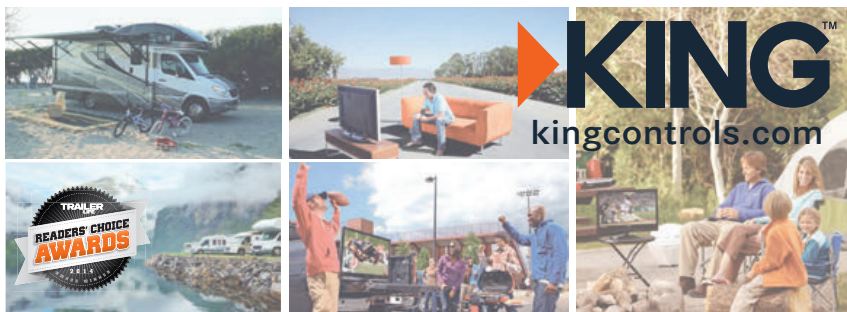
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screwdriver to get them out. Once the large awning was set up, however, we relaxed in our chairs and listened to music playing through the superb outdoor speakers of the Jensen stereo system, which is located just inside the sliding door. The system includes an AM/FM radio, Bluetooth capability, a CD/DVD player and surround sound.

A 22-inch HDTV with a rooftop antenna swivels for viewing from pretty much every angle inside the RV, with an especially good view when reclining in bed. During travel, it stayed securely in place.

Below the TV is a touch-screen panel for the Alde Compact 3010 hydronic radiant heating and continuous hot-water system. Nighttime and morning temperatures can be programmed in, and the furnace was so quiet we weren't quite sure if it was on at first. The system uses a network of convectors located on interior walls: Air warmed by the convectors flows up the walls and around furniture to heat the interior while forming a barrier in front of the windows that prevents cold air from entering. The Alde system also heats the water, supplying what is claimed to be the equivalent of a 6-gallon water heater.

The Ultraleather Flexsteel couch makes into a 52- x 75-inch sofa bed. Brace yourself — tugging the bed out of the frame takes some muscle. The thick cushions made for an impressive, comfortable mattress sectioned into three parts — although our spare blanket kept sliding off because of the slick Ultraleather on the lower portion of the bed (the rest is cloth). Smooth-retracting roller shades, accordion-style windshield shades and side curtains do a marvelous job keeping in privacy and keeping out light. Walk-around space is limited, and one must use care when walking around the foot of the bed to prevent falling down the sliding-door step, especially in the dark.

A pocket door with full-length mirrors on each side separates a surprisingly large bathroom from the galley. Like in the kitchen, the countertop is curved to give it an elegant look, and there's lots of space for stowing toiletries, etc., including a commodious deep

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SPECIFICATIONS

Model	Mercedes-Benz Sprinter
Engine	3.0-liter 6-cylinder turbodiesel
SAE Horsepower	188 hp @ 3,800 rpm
Torque	325 lb-ft @ 1,200-2,400 rpm
Transmission	Five-speed automatic with Tip Shift
Axle Ratio	3.92:1
Tires	LT215/85R16E
Wheelbase	170"
Brakes	Hydraulic disc with ABS
Suspension, Front/Rear	Independent with transverse mono-leaf spring and stabilizer/leaf spring with stabilizer bar
Fuel Cap.	26.4 gal.
Fuel Economy	17.05 mpg
Warranty	Three years / 36,000 miles

COACH

Exterior Length	24' 1"
Exterior Width	6' 4"
Exterior Height	9' 7"
Interior Width	5' 10"
Interior Height	6' 4"
Construction	Steel framing, skin and roof
Freshwater Cap.	45 gal.
Black-Water Cap.	22 gal.
Gray-Water Cap.	25 gal.
Water-Heater Cap.	Equivalent to 6 gal.

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LP-Gas Cap.	16 gal.
Air Conditioner	13,500 Btu
Furnace	16,000 Btu
Refrigerator	5.3 cu-ft
Converter/Charger	45 amp
Battery	Group 31 AGM
AC Generator	2.5-kW LP-gas
MSRP	\$119,069
MSRP, as tested	\$124,352 (Z package)
Warranty	One year/15,000 miles

WET WEIGHT

(Water and Heater, Fuel, No Supplies or Passengers)

Front Axle	3,720 lbs.
Rear Axle	6,100 lbs.
Total	9,820 lbs.

CHASSIS RATINGS

GAWR, F/R	4,410 / 7,720 lbs.
GVWR/GCWR	11,030 / 15,250 lbs.
ROCCC	1,210 lbs.
GAWR	Gross Axle Weight Rating
GVWR	Gross Vehicle Weight Rating
GCWR	Gross Combination Weight Rating
ROCCC	Realistic Occupant and Cargo Carrying Capacity

drawer to the right of the sink. There's a porcelain toilet (an upgrade from prior years' plastic ones), a Fan-Tastic vent and a hanging rod in the shower. The showerhead had a shut-off valve and good water pressure, and the shower was spacious enough.

We like the straightforward approach to the Era. About the only thing we found to grumble about is that the bed has to be made up and put away every day. For as much storage as there is, our bulky bedding took up a good portion of the wardrobe, and this was the only one with a hanging rod for clothing. Aisle space is narrow, so depending on the size of the people, if one person is cooking, for instance, he or she might have to move

out of the way to allow someone else to get to the bathroom.

This is an RV that doesn't have to sit when you're not exploring the country — it's a convenient vehicle for parking at your kids' sporting events, for example, where you'd have a pleasant place to relax and assemble sandwiches and have a not-so-public bathroom. Curiously, the sofa is wide enough to seat two — even three, if they're small people — but there's only one seat belt.

The Era 70C keeps it simple for one or two people to travel in luxury in a motorhome that offers more storage than the average Class B, chic styling inside and out, and fuel economy equivalent to an SUV. 🚐

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WALK-THROUGH: RIVERSIDE RV WHITE WATER RETRO 150

'60s Flashback

Riverside RV brings back the days of simple camping with its Retro line of classic-looking lightweight trailers with contemporary amenities

Remember the good old days of RVing, when nearly any vehicle could tow a trailer? It was easy for the quintessential American family to pile into that big 1960-something rolling-anchor station wagon or sedan, hitch up a relatively lightweight travel trailer and aim the duo down the interstate. Not much luxury, but what an adventure!

While the RV industry was just beginning to boom and grow then, a number of these spartan (by today's standards) trailers have gone on to become classics as the industry has evolved. Trailer shapes used to range from teardrop to rectangle, mostly clad in metal with limited graphics. Those early trailers with minimal offerings have transformed over the years into massive profiles with slide-outs and luxurious interior features with copious amounts of floor space. But memories of the classic earlier models are implanted forever.

A number of manufacturers are bringing back retro-style trailers

with a bit more pizzazz. Riverside RV has a whole line of these trailers, fittingly named Retro. One model is the company's White Water Retro 150, an updated throwback to the past, combining vintage looks, lines and colors with modern features and options. As retro-style trailers go, this one is more modern-square than retro-rounded, so its visual image is not as vintage-impressive as a "canned ham" trailer (see the Retro 155 and 166 for that), but it's still a good-looking unit.

Overthinking was not part of the process when Riverside RV put the Retro 150 into preproduction. Like its small, lightweight predecessors, the 150 is basic but with an aura of quality. Employing some genuine Amish craftsmanship, the 150 begins life on a standard but practical powder-coated-steel square-tube frame sitting above a single axle with 13-inch wheels and tires nicely trimmed with classic moon hubcaps. Working up from the chassis is a 5/8-inch-thick single piece of floor decking, which

ties into the wood-frame walls and roof structure. While parked at camp, a set of rear stabilizer jacks helps to ensure that on-solid-ground feeling.

Supporting the flashback design is an exterior that's finished with nostalgic-looking corrugated metal siding, but the TPO/rubber roof is all 21st century. Topping off the outside is a stylish paint job in true vintage shades of silver with white trim and rich red stripes and understated graphics. Completing the exterior are a small but functional full-width individual compartment at the rear and access points for various utilities, such as sewer, LP-gas, battery, water and power connections — all the usual components needed in an RV.

Stepping into the surprisingly tall 6-foot 3-inch interior reveals a cleanly packaged array of standard features and options, not necessarily expected in a 14-foot 9-inch trailer weighing less than 2,000 pounds. The main bed area is in the back of the trailer, and it comes with a 46- x 78-inch standard RV-style mattress capable of squeezing in two adults with a little breathing room. Directly above is a full-width overhead cabinet with just enough space for weekend getaway essentials.

Centered on the street side is a small but totally functional wet bathroom. The simple lavatory houses no more than a shower enclosure and a

(Left to right) The White Water Retro 150's dinette converts to a sleeping space, and there's another bed in back. (Top) The classic exterior recalls simpler times.



QUICK INFO

Exterior Length	14' 9"
Exterior Width	6' 10"
Interior Height	6' 3"
Exterior Height	8' 6"
Freshwater Cap.	11 gal.
Black-/Gray-water Cap.	5 gal. / NA
LP-gas Cap.	5 gal.

UVW	1,764 lbs.
Hitch Weight	250 lbs.
GVWR	3,500 lbs.
MSRP, base	\$13,400

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toilet. Occupants can get the job done, but we're talking basics here!


The front section is devoted to the dinette. At first glance, it's hard to believe that this setup will seat four hungry adults, but surprisingly, there's a decent amount of elbowroom for two adults per side. And yes, the dinette is slumber compatible for the right-size people — it converts into a 35- x 75-inch bed, which is plenty big for one adult and possible for two small kids who get along. Enhancing the dining ambience are three good-size windows decorated with lightly shaded window coverings.

Last but not least is everyone's favorite spot, the kitchen. Although it's quite small, this tiny galley is meal-preparation friendly. The counter may be a little short on workspace, but it houses important tools like a two-burner stove and a semi-tall faucet over a single-tub sink. Catching all those unwanted cooking fumes is a lighted hood connected to the bottom of the optional microwave oven. Unfortunately,

there isn't a gas oven, but you'd have to give up storage space to fit one. Helping to keep the climate under control is a standard 16,000-Btu furnace. That's plenty of heat for this little thing, even in colder environments.

Those who want to "load" the trailer with more than just essentials will like the Package 1 option, which kicks in a wall-mounted (window-type) air conditioner, the aforementioned microwave and a spare tire. Just below the air-conditioning unit is the Option No. 2, 2.7-cubic-foot gas/electric refrigerator. The bigger fridge upgrade is quite nice for a

trailer this size and extends your stays a little longer (standard is a 1.7-cubic-foot electric, Option No. 1 is 1.7-cubic-foot gas/electric). A hybrid option, which adds sleeping space for two with a 42- x 70-inch mattress that extends from the front of the trailer, is \$1,350 extra.

All in all, the Retro 150 is a mighty capable trailer wrapped in a tiny package with classic looks and quality to boot. If you're interested in a lightweight, light-priced trailer that's towable by nearly any correctly hitched vehicle, the 150 gives a nod to the past while being rooted in the present. 

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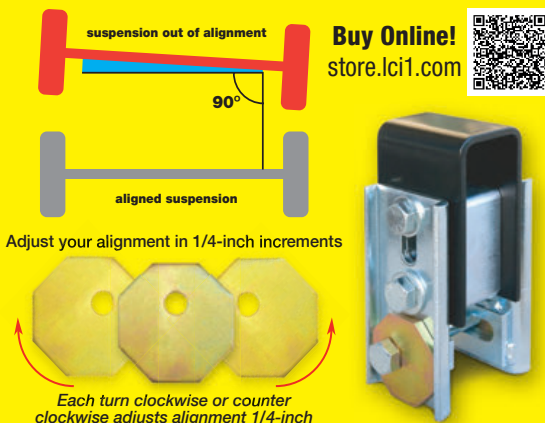
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QUIET HEAT | CONTINUOUS HOT WATER

Trailers and fifth-wheels can now be fitted with an Aqua-Hot hydronic system formerly reserved for Class A motorhomes

Self-containment is the key to making an RV as livable as a home, and two of the most important elements in that regard are the water heater and furnace. Commonly, supplying hot water to the faucets and shower — and keeping the interior warm — has been relegated to independent components. Hot water usually comes from a 6- or 10-gallon gas or gas/electric appliance, and heat is provided by a forced-air furnace. But there are limitations to both.

Standard water heaters do the job with little complaint, but don't plan on taking long showers. Most people find out the hard way that the hot-water stream is not unlimited — especially when trying to rinse shampoo out of long hair. Typical furnaces supply warm air, but most people experience large swings in room temperature between cycles, and in the middle of the night the fan and combustion chamber can sound like an airplane taking off from your patio.

For years, a number of Class A motorhome builders have circumvented the use of standard RV-issue hot-water tanks and furnaces with the use of hydronic water and comfort heating. Since these systems relied on diesel fuel to power the burner, they were reserved for diesel pushers, and usually only in the higher end of the market. Aqua-Hot is a major supplier of

hydronic systems, and the introduction of its LP-gas/electric counterpart to the diesel models is changing the paradigm when it comes to heating and hot water.

Now that diesel fuel is out of the equation with the Aqua-Hot 400LP heating system, trailer and fifth-wheel builders are able to take advantage of hydronics. The benefits of using hydronic components are dramatic. On the heating side, the warm air is moist enough to eliminate the use of a humidifier, which prevents cabinetry and other wood items from drying out, and, of course, the same for our skin. And the big point: Temperature stability and the distribution of heated air are much more even.

The system has two pumps, which can circulate heat to eight registers, four in each of two zones, controlled by dedicated thermostats. This type of flexibility makes the distribution of

heat extremely versatile and complete. For example, registers can be placed in the bedroom, bathroom and storage bay in a fifth-wheel. The other pump could service registers in the kitchen, living room and utility bay, and in places where the water manifold and water pump are located. The best news: It's quiet. In fact, it's so quiet that newbies will likely get out of bed in the middle of the night to make sure the warm air is actually flowing, although the fact that they are comfortable is all the confirmation they really need.

On the water side, a tankless system produces 90 gallons per hour of continuous hot water, on demand. Even those who lollygag in the shower will have a hard time running out of hot water.

The heart of the system is a metal box that measures 29½ x 18½ x 12 inches and houses a burner and an array of tubes and fittings, and weighs 184 pounds when the boiler tank is filled with a 50/50 mixture of propylene-glycol antifreeze and water (distilled, deionized or soft water is best). While the propylene-glycol-based antifreeze is safer than ethylene-glycol-based antifreeze used for automotive use, it's not the same stuff



(1) Rather than using standard issue heat ducting, the Aqua-Hot relies on a network of 5/8-inch PEX tubing that's routed to individual heat exchangers. (2) Typically, a heat exchanger is installed inside the utility bay. (3) Here the backside of the heat exchanger can be serviced from inside a neighboring compartment.



(4) Boiler tank is fitted in a prepared cabinet. Control panel is mounted above the main box. It provides all the diagnostic information for smoothing operation. **(5)** Access to this heat exchanger is through the floor of a cabinet structure. **(6)** Nice-looking heat exchanger grilles are used to blend in with cabinetry.



used for winterizing RV water systems. RV antifreeze is not able to transfer enough heat and has no rust inhibitors. Therefore, boiler-type propylene-glycol-based antifreeze must be used for proper operation of the system.

Tied to the boiler unit is an electronic control panel installed in close proximity that keeps tabs on critical functions via status lights. The control panel performs electronic diagnostics in the event of a power deficiency or malfunction. An interior switch plate, mounted in a convenient location inside the RV, turns on the burner and controls the hot-water function. Continuous hot water can be supplied only when the burner is activated using LP-gas.

Unlike a typical RV furnace that forces heated air through a network of ducting, the Aqua-Hot 400LP utilizes individual heat exchangers that are strategically placed and plumbed, in series, via PEX tubing with a 5/8-inch outside diameter (OD). Fans in the heat exchangers run on 12-volt DC power.

So here's what happens: The heat source is selected from the interior switch panel. Once the burner switch is on, the boiler tank heats the antifreeze and water to 190 degrees F. When one

or both of the zone thermostats call for heat, the heated antifreeze and water flows from the tank to the heat exchangers where internal fans blow the heated air into the interior of the RV. The cooled antifreeze-and-water solution returns to the tank where it is reheated.

When a faucet is opened, the water is heated on demand and remains continuous until the aforementioned 90-gallons-per-hour flow is exhausted. Since it's highly unlikely anyone will use up that much hot water in an hour, the supply effectively remains unlimited.

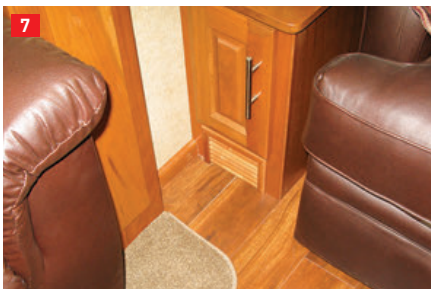
While the previously mentioned dimensions and weight suggest that the Aqua-Hot system will occupy a sizable amount of space, keep in mind that it replaces two fairly large components: the standard hot-water tank and the furnace. Beyond the swap for space, installation of the boiler requires a single-point location, and there are no vents required on the side walls of the RV. Unlike a standard water heater that uses a large (and not so pretty) access door on the exterior and, depending

on the unit, intake and exhaust vents or a large panel for the furnace, the Aqua-Hot vents and exhausts through the bottom. Normally, a compartment door to the boiler and control panel is provided, but when closed there is no unsightly hardware to break up the exterior look.

To install the Aqua-Hot, the space must be designed so that a special mounting plate can be bolted to the framework. This plate accepts the boiler housing and an exhaust pipe that is routed to the outside, underneath the RV. As part of this requirement, the plate must be installed so that the underside is exposed to the outside. Therefore, when installing in a fifth-wheel or travel trailer, special consideration must be given so that the plate will not be covered by underbelly material.

Once the boiler housing is bolted in place, the PEX tubing, propane supply line and electrical wiring are connected. Access to the components in the boiler housing is provided by a panel that can be removed for service.

To get an idea of how an actual in-



(7) Heat exchangers are strategically placed to provide the best distribution of warm air. **(8)** A common location for a heat exchanger is at the bottom of a cabinet drawer. **(9)** Switches for the system are installed in a central cabinet with other fifth-wheel controls.

QUIET HEAT, CONTINUOUS HOT WATER

stallation would work under real-world conditions, a 400LP system was integrated into a 2015 Forks Continental for our perusal. This is a luxury fifth-wheel, and heat distribution is critical when dealing with a 45-foot RV.

The designers and engineers decided on a two-zone system, controlling heat exchangers in the bedroom and bathroom with one thermostat and the galley and living room with the other. Heat exchangers were placed in cabinet structures at floor level in strategic locations with PEX tubing routed to each one.

Routing the PEX tubing is easier than working with traditional heat ducting, which is much larger and bulkier, because less space is required for runways. Heat exchangers were also installed in the main storage bay and utility center, to prevent freezing in cold weather. To achieve the same two-zone coverage with a standard RV furnace would require two systems, and that would suck up additional space for the



(10) PEX tubing is much easier to route than standard-type heat ducting. Here the tubing is easily threaded inside the frame cross members. **(11)** System must be exhausted to the outside of the fifth-wheel. This one is adjacent to the generator exhaust pipe. **(12)** Heat exchangers are compact and easy to handle. **(13)** Antifreeze-and-water mixture can be monitored — and replenished — via an expansion tank that is mounted near the boiler tank.



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(14) Brass tube is inserted into the end of the PEX tubing to provide rigidity for the clamps. **(15)** The PEX tubing is connected to the heat exchanger's rubber hose using a very strong clamp installed by a tool designed for this purpose. **(16)** Very specific instructions are provided for positioning the mounting plate that secures the boiler housing. **(17)** Boiler housing is heavy, so two installers carefully position it into a compartment in the front portion of the fifth-wheel.

installation and ducting.

Plumbing for the domestic hot-water system uses PEX tubing in sizes up to 3/8-inch OD, depending on the number of fixtures. There's not much difference between hooking up a standard hot-water tank and the Aqua-Hot, except that there is no longer a need for a winterizing bypass valve on the back of the unit because the system is tankless.

Although the Aqua-Hot 400LP is a fairly complex assembly of components,

regular maintenance of the system is not that complicated. It's suggested that the system is run monthly to ensure proper operation of the burner. This requires running all the heat zones until warm air is blowing out of the heat exchangers.

The only other "watch" is to keep an eye on the level of antifreeze and water in the expansion tank. When filling, it's important to release any air pockets, which is a simple procedure. The manual provides instructions for win-

terizing the system and getting it ready again for service when it warms up. A refractometer can be used to measure the proper amount of propylene glycol in the antifreeze solution.

Obviously, there is an upcharge for an Aqua-Hot system, but living with even, almost silent heat — and continuous hot water on demand — is pure bliss. 🚚

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Camper Keeper

Truck campers are great for getting to out-of-the-way places, but storing them can sometimes present a challenge. Most camper manufacturers don't recommend long-term storage of the camper on its jacks, as this can cause fatigue from camper movement. Torklift International has introduced an easy solution in its new Camper Packer product. The Camper Packer consists of two heavy-duty sawhorses rated at 6,000 pounds per pair and measures 50 inches from side-to-side when assembled. Made from pressure-treated lumber to withstand the elements, the Camper Packer is designed to handle the heavy load of a truck camper and folds down easily for compact storage when not in use.

MSRP: \$393.96

800-246-8132, www.torklift.com

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Nice Legs, Curt

Curt Manufacturing has developed fifth-wheel legs made specifically to fit Ford truck beds that contain the towing-prep package. With the development of Ford's add-on towing-prep package, designed to make fifth-wheel installations easier and smoother, Curt came out with its 16017 OEM-compatible fifth-wheel leg kits. The legs mount directly into the under-bed-mount locations and convert any Curt fifth-wheel hitch head to Ford's under-bed hitch platforms, including Curt's Q16, Q20, Q24 and E16 hitch heads. Curt's OEM-compatible fifth-wheel legs for Ford have a gross trailer weight capacity of up to 24,000 pounds and feature a durable carbide powder-coat finish for superior rust and scratch resistance.

MSRP: \$683.83

877-287-8634, www.curtmfg.com

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It's happened to just about all of us. You're walking around your tow rig and *bang!* — your shin crashes into the ball mount. RVers employ a lot of home remedies to prevent this from happening, and Gator Guards recently came out with a simple product to help. The Hitch Guard is a full-coverage, automotive-grade polymer cover for single-ball hitches. It stays soft from minus-70 to 150 degrees Fahrenheit, and its low-profile design allows for unrestricted use of trailers and equipment. Just slide the Hitch Guard onto the existing ball mount and secure the tie for instant shin protection and easy identification on those early mornings and late nights.

MSRP: \$14.99/black;

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888-594-5335

www.gator-guards.com/hitchguard

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One Smart Plug

SmartPlug RV cordsets include a patented straight-blade pin-and-clip system that eliminates overheating at the RV's inlet connection. The SmartPlug pin-and-clip system provides approximately 20 times the metal-to-metal surface contact to efficiently transfer electricity, which makes this RV cordset much safer than the old twist-type system, according to the company. The SmartPlug inlet includes an internal thermostat that eliminates overheating, actually cutting power to the RV should the inlet temperature exceed 200 degrees Fahrenheit. RV power is automatically restored when the inlet cools down to about 120 degrees. The SmartPlug is available in 30- or 50-amp versions and is easily installed in the typical four-hole mounting pattern on your RV.

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Suspensions, Springs and Shock Absorbers

Towing heavy trailers and hauling large slide-in campers requires a stout, capable suspension system that can handle the weight without dragging the tail end or bottoming out. On the other hand, when these vehicles are driven unladen, a overly stiff suspension designed to carry a lot of weight can result in a harsh ride and uncomfortable passengers. The challenge is to find the right compromise for your specific application.

The suspension essentially includes all of the components that move when a vehicle goes over a bump, which includes axles, springs, shock absorbers and wheels. Wheels and tires substantially affect ride quality, as they can deflect and absorb bumps before they get to the springs and shocks. Tires that are overinflated, oversize and/or have load ratings far in excess of what is needed can cause a hard ride. Heavy, oversize wheels also increase unsprung weight and degrade ride quality. Visualize how shaking heavy barbells back and forth would toss your body around more than lighter barbells would. Heavy wheels and tires also act like flywheels and take extra power to accelerate and keep rolling, and more braking force to slow down.

It's best from a ride standpoint to select tires and wheels matched for the job and good quality aluminum wheels rather than heavier steel wheels to reduce weight. Place the loaded axles on a truck scale and then inflate the tires according to the manufacturer's load-inflation tables for their actual

loads. The pressures listed on the doorjamb are general and designed for "typical" conditions. Never underinflate tires to soften the ride; underinflation can lead to catastrophic failure.

Shock Absorbers

Original equipment (OE) shock absorbers are typically designed to provide a reasonable compromise between load control and a comfortable ride — but with an emphasis on low cost to the manufacturer, not long life. Therefore, OE shocks are generally not as feature-laden as premium aftermarket shocks. The OE internal settings are typically aimed at the average user, based on a lot of driving unloaded, and not for frequent heavy-duty towing.

Aftermarket shock absorbers are a good way to improve ride quality, especially if you are doing a lot of towing or hauling a camper, but it's important to understand what they can and can't do. Many think shocks absorbers hold up weight, and therefore, heavy-duty shocks will reduce suspension sag. Actually, the only shocks that hold up weight are air shocks, when they are inflated, and "coil-over" shocks, typically used on racecars. There are also some shocks, such as Monroe's Sensa-Trac line, that have small helper coil springs on the outside.

Air shocks or coil-over shocks can be of some help in a light-duty situation, where, for example, a small

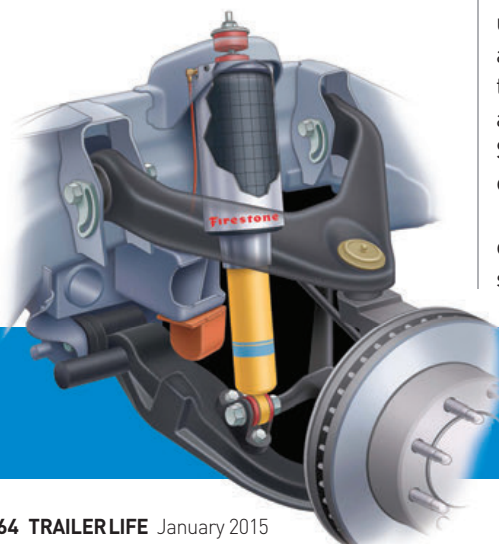
pop-up camping trailer causes the rear of a car or minivan to sag a little. However, shock absorber mounts on many vehicles are not designed to bear weight, so your specific vehicle should be checked for strength of mounts before purchasing air shocks.

Shock absorbers use hydraulic fluid that is forced through calibrated orifices to resist motion as the suspension moves up and down. This is called "damping." The purpose is to limit spring oscillation; otherwise, your vehicle would keep bouncing after it goes over a bump, much like a pogo stick.

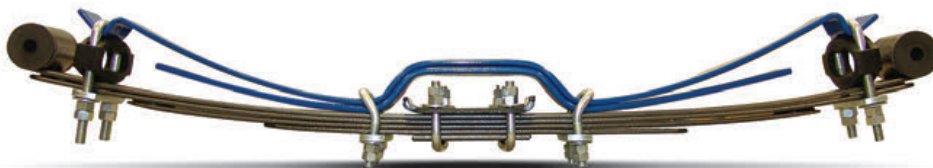
When the vehicle moves downward on the chassis, the shock-absorber action is called "compression." When the vehicle rises up after the springs are compressed, this is called "rebound." Compression and rebound modes in shock absorbers are controlled separately, and these settings can be used to customize the ride, as is common with aftermarket shocks.

Since so many variables are involved, choosing the right shock can involve some guesswork, particularly because manufacturers don't provide damping specifications. Some premium shocks are "tuned" to work well for RV applications. However, if you buy non-adjustable shocks, you still have to stick with the fixed settings built in, and ride quality will depend on the skill of the shock designers.

Another way to go is with adjustable shocks. For light trucks, Gabriel offers GasSLX adjustable shocks with three settings: regular, firm and extra firm. They are designed to deliver customizable comfort and ride control. Koni also makes adjustable shocks for a limited number of truck and motorhome applications. With these, you can tailor the ride quality — the power of tuning is in your hands. You can try different settings and find what feels best. Bilstein 5100 Series shocks are ride-height adjustable; that is, you can adjust them to match moderate suspension lifts for light trucks that have modified suspensions.



Firestone Level-Rite air shocks, shown here in a cutaway view, combine an air spring with a shock absorber for added load support.



Helper springs such as these from Hellwig can help level a sagging suspension and reduce bottoming out.

Springs

Suspension systems on vehicles used for towing generally have coil or leaf springs, or a combination of both. Leaf springs have traditionally been the spring of choice for heavy-duty applications. Some vehicles use torsion bars, which resist twisting forces to act like a spring, or use air springs alone or in combination with metal springs. Coil springs are generally used on lighter vehicles, and on front axles of heavier vehicles, although there are many exceptions. Coil springs are considered to provide a softer ride than leaf springs, but they can't reach the axle like leaf springs can, so they require additional suspension linkage or arms.

Both coil and leaf springs are designed and made with a specific rate, which in the United States is expressed as pounds per inch (i.e.: 500 lbs/inch). In Canada and other metric countries, this may be expressed as kilograms per centimeter (kg/cm). What this means is that, as you add load weight, the spring will deflect a given amount — for example, 1 inch for 500 pounds of added load.

Vehicle owners who find that their spring rates are either too stiff or too soft can change springs to match their needs, within limits. Some owners of heavy-duty pickups that have a harsh ride choose to install springs with a somewhat lower rate (softer) and add air springs for when the truck is loaded. On most trucks, springs are available for various loads and applications. For example, heavier front springs, which might be desired with a cabover camper, are often available with a snowplow option. Likewise, heavier rear springs may be available that go with various packages that handle specific gross axle weight ratings (GAWR) or gross vehicle weight ratings (GVWR). A good spring shop can tailor the spring rates to substantially improve ride quality.

For vehicles with leaf springs, extra

“helper” leaves are often available.

These typically consist of an extra leaf that is mounted above the existing top leaf. Trailer-hitch shops often have these in stock. A professional spring shop may add an extra leaf directly in the spring pack — for example, between the longest and next-longest leaves — which accomplishes the same goal as a bolt-on type of product but in a cleaner, more elegant manner.

Air bags (also called air springs) can be mounted at the axle on leaf-spring vehicles, and on some coil-sprung vehicles they can even be installed inside the existing springs. Kits are available for many applications from several manufacturers, and remote filling and compressor units are available so you don't have to get under

the vehicle to adjust the pressure.

Stiffer springs or air bags do not increase the GAWR or GVWR, so be sure the load is within the manufacturer's weight limits.

Lowering a vehicle reduces ground clearance and takes away suspension travel, which is needed to get compliance over bumps. Therefore, it's not recommended to lower the tow vehicle. Raising or “lifting” a vehicle also has drawbacks. It raises the center of gravity, which can reduce stability. Also, it may make the fifth-wheel hitch height too high and/or the trailer-to-bed clearance may be too close.

Changing vehicle ride height will change the driveshaft angles. You may feel more vibration, and the life of the U-joints may be shortened. If

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the driveshaft angle is more than 10 degrees, the joints will wear faster, and you want to avoid going above 15 degrees altogether. Remaining near stock height is usually the best all-around solution for towing.

Steering Dampers

Another good add-on device for solid-beam front axles and a few IFS-equipped vehicles, such as those found on many 4WD models, is a steering damper. These look similar to shock absorbers but are mounted horizontally near the center of the vehicle and parallel to the front axle. Steering dampers can prevent uncontrolled oscillations of the front wheels, which typically occur when the vehicle hits certain types of bumps such as railroad crossings. Steering dampers are widely sold in four-wheel-drive shops.

Sway Bars

Sway bars — or more correctly, antiroll bars — resist leaning to reduce the tendency of a vehicle to roll on its longitudinal axis in a turn or when changing lanes quickly. Most vehicles now have thicker, heavier-duty bars to reduce lean, especially trucks hauling slide-in campers. Aftermarket bars are available for many popular models, and installation is generally a simple bolt-on process that can be done by most DIYers. 🚚

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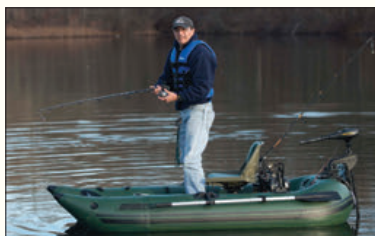


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Double Duty

DualLiner pickup-bed protection kits offer a precise fit after an easy 20-minute installation

DIFFICULTY

1 2 3 4 5

TIME TO COMPLETE

20 MINUTES

TOOLS NEEDED

PHILLIPS SCREWDRIVER,
SOCKET SET, DRILL MOTOR
AND BITS, RAZOR KNIFE

Pickups are not only the most popular type of tow vehicle, but now they've morphed into luxury vehicles. For many owners, their truck is the true heart and soul of the RVing-and-towing experience, but having plunked down more than \$60,000 for one of the upper-end models, some get queasy when it comes to utilizing the truck's business end — the bed — for anything other than a place to house the hitch. Unfortunately, since a pickup bed is so practical for hauling cargo, whether for RV use or everyday chores, it tends to get more than its share of random acts of violence. This leads to damage and dents and their associated ugliness, even with a spray-in bed liner.

One way to regain some of the original curb appeal of a clean, unbruised bed and to offer a little extra protection has always been to throw in a bed liner or a bed mat. A bed liner will offer full coverage but makes installing a fifth-wheel hitch more difficult and time consuming. Two of the biggest drawbacks of plastic bed liners are their inability to keep items from sliding all over the place and their tendency to "stretch" out over time and become unsightly.

As far as bed mats go, there really aren't too many issues with them,



(1) Before starting the installation of the new bed liner, all the hardware, such as tie-downs, must be removed. (2) The load-guard panel, located at the front of the truck bed, is snapped into place. Positioning this panel is easy, and the fit is precise.



aside from the fact that they supply coverage and protection to the bed floor but not the side walls. Oh, did we mention spray-in liners? The name-brand spray-in liners work exceptionally well, but when damage does occur, the "injuries" are highlighted.

Bed liners and bed mats have the disadvantage of retaining moisture between the liner and the pickup bed, and that can aggravate any corrosion in the bed. Spray-in liners don't leave the air space, so they don't cause

this type of bed damage. Corrosion is more of a problem if you live in a very wet climate and in places where the paint on the bed has been damaged.

To heal most of these associated ailments, an American-made product by the name of DualLiner was created. DualLiner is a special type of bed liner that fits smartly and takes advantage of some of the truck bed's existing holes and hardware. It uses a handful of plastic pushpins (often referred to as Christmas tree or pine-tree pins)



NEW LIFE » Most truck beds take a beating; adding a form-fitting DualLiner covers up unsightly dents and scratches, greatly improving exterior aesthetics.



to fasten down a series of interlocking, ultra-tough plastic panels, combined with the use of a durable and form-fitted rubber bed mat. In each Dual-Liner kit, you'll find four model-specific molded panels, which cover the front load-guard panel, the tailgate and the two opposing side walls.

The DualLiner is designed to fit precisely and requires minimal effort to install the panels and drill a few holes, meeting the claimed 20-minute install time. Before installing the bed liner, a little bit of prep work will save you a lot of hassle. It's best to do this on a warmer day — above 50 degrees

(3) A Phillips screwdriver is used as an alignment tool in the front corner of the bed. Doing so provides a clear path for installing the pine-tree pins. (4) The bed mat is placed between the wheel wells. The nonskid surface keeps gear from sliding around. (5) Quarter-inch holes are drilled for installing the pine-tree pins.

Fahrenheit — to allow the unrolled bed mat to relax. If there are any tie-downs, as was the case with the 2005 Dodge Ram test truck, remove them first, along with the necessary tailgate hardware. This will save lots of back-and-forth trips later.

The first step is to snap the new panel onto the truck's load guard, located at the front of the bed; the process is easy, and the fit is precise. Next

step is to pick a side-wall piece and tuck it into place under the truck's side rail; at this point the assumption is that you already removed the tie-downs. As the side walls are being positioned, use a Phillips screwdriver as an alignment tool in the front corner where the panels overlap and firmly press one of the pine-tree pins into place.

It may be necessary to do some minor trimming of the side-wall

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pieces. I like to use tin snips and/or a razor knife. From here, using the same screwdriver, align the tie-down anchor holes and start all four screws, making sure to leave them loose until they have all been started. This process is repeated before placing the bed mat.

The bed mat has a nonskid surface that helps keep cargo from sliding. It's best to get some help to lift the mat into the bed, pulling it as far forward as possible, with the ribbed side facing up, and tucking the sides into the channels, one side at a time. Once the bed mat has been properly positioned into the channels on both sides, the remaining tailgate panel can be positioned and bolted into place. It's also necessary to use a supplied nylon spacer with each of the tailgate bolts.

After all the original bolts have been replaced, four 1/4-inch holes will need to be drilled. Into these holes go the pine-tree pins after coating them with rust-preventing gel that comes



(6) Pine-tree pins are coated with rust-preventing gel that's provided with the DualLiner kit. Pushing firmly using a twisting motion drives the pins into the bed. No tools are necessary. (7) Once installed, the DualLiner makes the bed look new.



with the kit. It's necessary to push firmly on the pins while twisting them into the holes. The twisting motion spreads the gel around evenly.

Wow, what a difference! The DualLiner looks good and has amazing fit, finish and function. The bed on the test truck now has an almost completely refreshed look as well as additional protection. DualLiner far exceeded our expectations, and it's an ideal setup for RVers because it can be cut easily with

a razor knife to allow for a fifth-wheel hitch. It can also be used as the base mat for a camper while retaining side-wall coverage.

The DualLiner installed with no problem directly over a previously sprayed-in liner. The kit for the test truck retails for \$460 but was offered online for \$384. 🚚

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TIRE WEAR AGAIN...

Q In October 2014's RV Clinic, I read "Trailer Axle Alignment," about premature tire wear and axle problems, with special interest. We have a lot of experience with trailers, having owned three fifth-wheels, and our latest is a 2012 Keystone Laredo. With our first two units, we never had to replace the tires prematurely.

Our Laredo had gone maybe 8,000 miles when the tires had to be replaced. The rear tires are both bald on the inside (see photo), and the front tires have even but premature wear. As you can appreciate, we can't put new tires on every few thousand miles. We advised Keystone of the problem, and they simply said that the warranty was over and to take it to an RV dealer. This we did; the dealer advised us that they couldn't find any problem and gave us a bill for \$400. Oh, they did say maybe we didn't have the correct tire pressure or that it was overloaded. Not true; we know better.

We then contacted Al-Ko Kober, the axle manufacturer, and spoke to Cory, who was extremely pleasant and helpful. He asked us to check the camber, and we discovered, according to our calculations, there was approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ inch or less. Apparently, the camber should be $\frac{1}{2}$ inch or more. So we spent more money and ordered two new axles, and we have arranged for a garage to have them installed.

The question is, will this solve the problem, or are we just wasting more money?

Roy Sine, Belleville, Ontario

A Roy, that photo of your tire speaks volumes. With both tires from that axle a matched set for wear, it's clear there is an alignment problem. The wear can also

be caused by overloading or an undersized axle for the application, because the weight of the trailer can force the center of the axle down just a little, which pushes the bottoms of the tires out, resulting in uneven tire loading and inner-edge tread wear.

If you haven't done so already, it may not hurt to run the loaded trailer over a scale to check the axle weight and compare it to the trailer's gross axle weight rating (GAWR). If the tires were simply underinflated but running on properly aligned axles, the tread wear would be more consistent, so that's an unlikely cause.

I'm guessing you've heard the expression "Never ask a barber if you need a haircut." While it's clearly in the axle company's best financial interests to sell you a new axle, it's also possible to have a certain amount of alignment adjustment done to those axles for a fraction of the cost of a new part. The trick is locating a shop with the equipment and know-how to make the adjustments. Locally, we have a chassis and alignment shop that caters to the commercial truck and larger-vehicle trade that does wonders with solid trailer axles, both leaf-spring and rubber torsion such as the Al-Ko model you have. You'll need to do some research on the Internet and make some phone calls, but you should be able to find someone to talk to about your needs. It's possible that, in the end, you'll wind up using the new axles, but it's worth investigating the adjustment first. — **Jeff Johnston**



ELECTRIC BLANKET SURPRISE

Q My wife and I just returned from four nights of dry camping (no hookups) with our fifth-wheel trailer. On cool fall nights, we use an electric blanket to take the chill out of the bed. For the second time within a year, our electric blanket got so hot in a 20-minute preheat that I couldn't hold my hand on the sheets. The first time we just thought the electric blanket went bad, but when it happened the second time,

we realized we were using our Honda 2000 generator as a power source both times. Is there a different wave of power from generators that may be cooking our electric blanket that shorepower does not have?

Patrick Bullard, Boring, Oregon

A I'd pin the blame on the blanket, Patrick. The Honda 2000 produces a fine-quality, stable power supply that's good for appliances of all types.

Your electric blanket, unless it has a very complex heat-adjustment circuit, is a simple heating element that should run well on even the "dirtiest" power supply. On the Honda, it should be fine. Check the blanket and replace it as needed. — **J.J.**

FUELING AND PROPANE SAFETY REVISITED

Q This is a frequent subject and was brought up again in the November 2014 RV Clinic ("Fueling and Propane Safety"). However, I have never seen a response that stated to wait until you have pulled away from the pumps before relighting the refrigerator. I personally see little or no danger in a trailer since there is a distance

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 19 years and has been an RV enthusiast, mechanic and writer since he could hold a wrench.

between the fueling nozzle and the refrigerator. If you're worried about the fumes from the vehicle on the other side of the island, then relighting the refrigerator is not any different than keeping it lit.

Chuck Mosher

Falling Waters, West Virginia

A You're right, Chuck, we don't often specify that people should pull away from the pumps before relighting the refrigerator. But this practice should also be followed for a trailer that seems to have its ignition sources a fair distance from the pumps. It's a very small price to pay in inconvenience when you consider the safety risks involved with not doing so. — **J.J.**

BATTERY-DISCONNECT SWITCH

Q We have a 2014 travel trailer that has a battery-disconnect switch. When I pull the switch out, the battery is in use. Pushing it in disconnects it. My question is, do I keep the switch in when plugging it in at a campsite or when plugging it in when parked at my home? It may be a dumb question but, as they say, the dumbest one is the one you don't ask.

Art Lazarz, via email

A It's not a dumb question, Art. The battery serves more than one purpose. Besides providing power when needed, the battery serves to stabilize the voltage in the 12-volt DC circuits and "smooths out" the "rough" direct current that the rectifiers in the power converter produce. This helps to protect sensitive electronic circuit boards in the refrigerator/freezer and audio devices, etc.

Therefore, you'll need to have the battery in the 12-volt DC circuit whenever it is powered up. If you have a "smart" power converter, which has a multistage battery-charging regimen, the battery should be fine; just check the water level regularly and refill with distilled water if the caps are removable. However, if the converter has only a single-stage charging circuit, leaving the battery connected for long periods,

such as during storage, will lead to overcharging and eventual damage. It will also use a lot of water, and often the batteries are ruined due to water depletion. — **Ken Freund**

SHORT-BED TOWING

Q I have a 27-foot travel trailer and a 28-foot fifth-wheel trailer. I would like to know your thoughts on towing these trailers with a regular cab, short-box (6½-foot bed) 4x4 truck. Towing

weight is not an issue, as the truck will have a V-8 with high towing capacity, but I wonder if the truck will be all right hauling these trailers. I'm also wondering if trailer sway is worse with short-bed, regular cab trucks.

Mike Bolger, via email

A Many people tow with short-bed pickups, but there are several issues here. In general, the shorter the wheelbase of the tow vehicle, the less stable it will be when towing, all other



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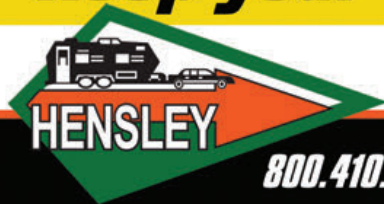
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things being equal. Certainly, there are other factors, such as the inherent stability of the trailer, the stiffness of the suspension and tire sidewalls, and road and wind conditions, etc.

Travel trailers are much more prone to sway than fifth-wheels. You should make sure the trailers are well balanced with proper weight distribution and use a weight-distributing hitch and antisway control when towing a travel trailer. Of course, fifth-wheel trailers have cab clearance problems when making sharp turns with a short-bed, so you'll need a sliding hitch and will need to remember this when towing.

Remember, too, that the weight of the trailer is extremely important when making a proper tow vehicle and trailer matchup. You mentioned the lengths of your trailers but nothing about their weights or the projected tow rating of the truck you have in mind. Keep all these figures in your calculations when selecting the best tow vehicle for your needs. — K.F.

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TRAILER BRAKE WIRING

Q I have a 2014 Toyota 4Runner four-wheel-drive SR5 with a trailer weight rating of 5,000 pounds. I want to buy a new 19-foot 2-inch Airstream Bambi International Serenity that has a GVWR of 4,500 pounds.

The Toyota came with a trailer-brake jumper harness with four wire connections, and I purchased an NPN-wiring controller from a Toyota dealer for \$200. Now the dealer states they will not be able to plug the harness into the controller due to a wiring-harness change in the 2014 4Runner. As they can do only plug-and-play installations, they will not cut off the incompatible plugs and hardwire the pieces together for legal reasons.

Is there any reason an independent towing shop should not do this? U-Haul says with their own parts they can safely perform the installation. Also, is there any other safety equipment, such as anti-sway bars, I should install?

Eric R. Eltinge, Trabuco Canyon, California

A If the dealer sold you the \$200 part then told you it won't work on the truck for which they sold it to you, it seems like they owe you a refund or should exchange that incorrect part for the right one.

In any case, that original-equipment four-wire plug has only running-light, turn-signal and brake-light connections. Unless your truck has some type of factory-supplied wiring harness that already exists, albeit not yet connected, you'll need to have a shop add a battery-charging line and a brake-control line when wiring the standard Bargman-style seven-pin connector. That's the only way your new Airstream can have its brakes activated and the battery charged while driving. The U-Haul shop should be able to take care of this with ease, and there's no reason a qualified shop can't cut into the OEM wiring harness as needed to do the job.

Regarding other equipment, a weight-distributing hitch is a must for a setup like yours. Several lighter-capacity models are available that can easily take care of your trailer and tow rig. Add a sway control if needed. — J.J.

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ADVERTISERS' INDEX

RS#	ADVERTISER	PAGE#
101	B&W Trailer Hitches	61
102	BD Brake	38
103	Blue Ox	25
	Camping World	39-41
	Classifieds	80-81
104	Connect Hearing	75
106	DISH Network	47
107	DRV	60
105	Desert Gardens RV Park	33
108	Dual Liner	7
109	Escape Trailer	32
112	GMC Sierra	2-3
111	Geico	67
	Good Sam Ext Service Plan	30
	Good Sam Roadside Assistance	71
	Good Sam Travel Assist	51
	Good Sam Visa	19
113	Grand Design RV	5
	Harbor Freight Tools	63
114	Heartland Rec Vehicles, LLC	15
115	Hensley Manufacturing Inc.	66
116	Hensley Manufacturing Inc.	74
117	Highland Ridge RV, Inc.	73
110	Husky.....	9
125	iBall Hitch Cam.....	27
118	King Controls	52
119	Lance Campers	10
120	Lippert Components.....	21
121	Lippert Components	55
122	Lin'N Lite RV	52
123	Maxxis International	44-45
130	Monochem	26
124	Northwood Mfg.	69
	Phoenix USA Inc.	84
127	Progress Manufacturing, Inc.	20
128	Progressive Insurance	83
	RV Buyer's Guide	74
129	RVRoof.com	53
136	RVawningsmart	27
	RV Marketplace	78-79
131	Sea Eagle	66
	The Rally	56-57
137	Torklift International	70
132	Toy-Tote	53
133	Transfer Flow Inc.	75
134	Truck System Technologies.....	26
135	Yara NA / Odorlos	65

EDITORIAL PRODUCT INDEX

RS#	ADVERTISER	PAGE#
142	Curt Manufacturing.....	62
143	Gator-Guards.....	62
140	Highland Ridge	42
145	Riverside White Water Retro 150 ..	54
144	SmartPlug	62
141	Torklift.....	62
146	Winnebago Era	48

While every effort is made to maintain accuracy and completeness, last-minute changes may occasionally result in omissions or errors.

REMOVING SAP

Q What is the best way to remove pine pitch from your RV? We parked under a pine tree and didn't realize what a mess we were in for.

Marvin Fessemott, Elkton, Florida

A When removing sap from a rubber roof, avoid petroleum-based chemicals. If it is just a few spots, you can put ice on them and peel the sap right off. For larger areas, you can use rubbing alcohol and a cloth. Let it soak in and wipe it off. Hand-sanitizing gel (which contains alcohol) works well because it doesn't evaporate as fast, but it's more expensive.

For removing sap from fiberglass or aluminum, use mineral spirits on a dampened soft cloth. For small areas, WD-40 can be sprayed on the sap, then let it sit for a while and wipe with a soft cloth. Use the least amount of pressure possible to reduce the risk of scratching the finish. After removal, wash the surfaces and apply polish or wax to the affected areas. Test the method in an inconspicuous place before applying to a visible area. — **K.F.**

SLIDEOUT NOT SEALING

Q We have a 2005 Forest River Cherokee Grey Wolf 27LR with a super slideout with electric controls. The top left corner of the slideout room is not completely sealing off. I can't really take it to a shop, as we are living in it.

Janie Wilson, via email

A As slideouts get older and experience lots of use, they are prone to develop misalignment and leak problems. The trailer needs to be level with no twisting forces. First, you need to carefully examine the slideout when it is in, as it comes out and when it is fully extended, while an assistant operates the control. Determine if the unit fits properly when stowed or if it looks crooked or distorted. You'll need to carefully watch the seals, and you'll need a stepladder for the upper portions. Are they dried out and nonflexible, twisted, damaged or missing? What you find will determine what needs to be done. Seals can be obtained from

RV dealers or ordered online, starting with a Google search. If the slideouts are misaligned, they will need to be realigned properly. — **K.F.**

RADIATOR FAN CYCLING

Q We have a 2002 Ford 7.3-liter F-250 Power Stroke turbo diesel with 170,000 miles on it. It has been serviced according to Ford specifications and then some, as it was towing our home away from home around the country. In the early years, we'd occasionally hear a fan cycle on with no apparent pattern. Now it happens regularly and always when the weather is 85 degrees or higher, even while towing on flat ground. After cycling for a couple of minutes, it will stop for some undetermined time and then start all over again.

It's been in to the dealer several times — the fan clutch was replaced and the A/C unit serviced, to no avail. The radiator was inspected, and it was partially clogged. It was rodded out, and all is well now in radiator land, but the fan has gone back to cycling in warm weather. When the cycling happens, the gauge shows no RPM change, and no lugging of the engine can be detected.

Noel Merkley, via email

A Your truck uses a conventional thermostatically controlled viscous fan clutch. There is a bimetal thermostat coiled spring on the front of the unit, which detects air temperature flowing over it as the air goes through the radiator. The sensitivity of the fan's thermostat and the temperature of the air flowing over it vary considerably. Some cycling is normal in warm and hot weather and when climbing hills. If you feel it is excessive, I suspect the fan clutch that was installed may not be correct for your truck. Using the VIN, have the dealer check for the proper clutch for your truck. — **K.F.**

HAVE A QUESTION? » Email our experts at RVclinic@trailerlife.com or write to RV Clinic, 2750 Park View Court, Suite 240, Oxnard, California 93036. Please include your hometown. No phone calls, please.

Cozy Cocoon

We bought two large matching sleeping bags and zipped them together to cover our RV's king-size bed. We also sewed the bottom end of two double-size sheets together, which serves as a liner. This cozy sleeping arrangement keeps drafts out and keeps us warm without having to run the furnace at night.

Leo Hoffman
Martinsville, Virginia



QUICK FIX

Quick Paint Touch-Up

My travel trailer takes an occasional hit from road debris that results in small chips in the finish. Rather than spending lots of time sanding, masking, priming and then spraying, I found that a small dab of appliance touch-up paint makes an excellent, durable repair in a fraction of the time. I use white Rust-Oleum Appliance Touch-Up (it also comes in black, almond and biscuit), and it dries in about 10 minutes. It contains several potent chemicals, so be sure to use it in an area with plenty of ventilation. You can find it at most home-improvement stores.

Jeff Adams, Santee, California



Hang-Tight Shower Bar

Lowe's stocks 1- x 4-inch and 1- x 6-inch PVC lumber, which makes me a very happy camper. My first project was building a mount for a full-size grab bar in my trailer's shower. I bolted the bar to the PVC board with $\frac{1}{4}$ - x $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch stainless-steel bolts, countersinking the back of the board $\frac{3}{4}$ - x $\frac{3}{16}$ -inch deep to receive a $\frac{7}{16}$ -inch socket for the nuts. I used a light touch with a Speedbor bit, and PVC lumber can be cut through like warm butter.

I found two studs in the shower that I could screw the board into, again using stainless-steel hardware and countersinking for the screw heads. Prior to mounting on the wall, do a dry run just to make sure the studs are really where you think they are. Then use a generous bead of silicone caulk around the perimeter of the back of the board and screw it to the studs. Follow up by caulking the outside of the board where it meets the wall, over the screws and around the escutcheons to prevent leakage into the wall.

This bar is solid as a rock!

Mark Jewell, Cedar Creek, Texas

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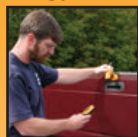
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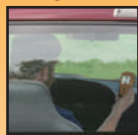
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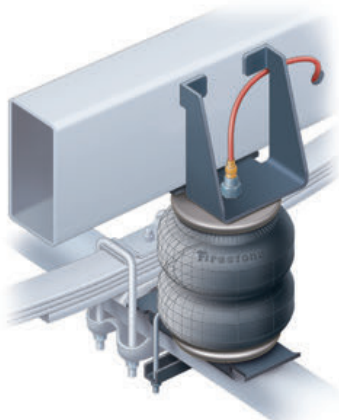
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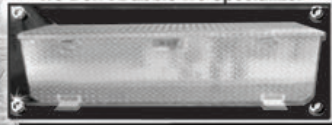
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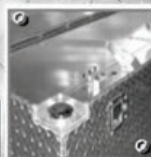
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Winter Reprieve

Snowbirds flock to the desert town of Palm Springs, California, for the sun, and stay for the fun, festivals and living-history air museum



Sunrise puts a warm glow on this winter playground. Still, heavy clouds hang over the San Jacinto Mountains to the west. Otherwise, the sky over the Coachella Valley shows this to be another perfect day — as is almost every day here in the Southern California desert.

Snow is falling in those mountains at 8,516 feet, the high end of the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway. That's the beauty of winter in this place: if you want to be in the snow, you just take a 15-minute tram ride. But most folks are here to get out of it. They come to luxuriate in the warm sun at the pool or on the golf links.

I have been watching this storm for a couple of days. Between swirling graphics on the Weather Channel and updates on my iPad, I half expected to wake up to rain. But that's another accommodation of this desert valley — rain clouds have a tough time getting over those mountains with anything wet left in them.

This valley is made up of nine cities, known as Greater Palm Springs, from nostalgic Palm Springs on the west end to Coachella on the east end. Close to Coachella is Indio — the city of festivals — known for the Stagecoach Country Music Festival and the Coachella Music and Arts Festival. The Greater Palm Springs area is the premier snowbird destination in California.

As you would expect, the region has more swimming pools and acreage devoted to golf courses than anywhere in California. So where does the water come from to support 100 golf courses and an uncounted number of pools in this desert community of nearly half a million people?

Most of it is underneath them in a huge aquifer, a groundwater basin that contains 1.7 billion cubic feet of water. They pump it from 1,200 feet beneath the surface and distribute it around the valley in a network of pipes that, if spread out in a straight line, would reach from here to Chicago. Recycled water is used on many golf courses and landscaping projects. Water for farming around Indio comes from the Colorado River.

Beautiful weather and movie stars combined to put



(Top) The pilot makes a preflight check of a Navy T-28 Trojan prior to takeoff at Palm Springs International Airport. (Above) The Palm Springs Air Museum displays the vintage World War II Navy F4U Corsair 301 — both in art form and the actual aircraft.

Palm Springs on the map. It's a two-hour freeway drive to get here from Hollywood or Beverly Hills. Bob Hope was perhaps the most famous winter resident. Although he and his wife are both gone now, their daughter still stays here.

The adjoining cities of Rancho Mirage and Palm Springs are unique in that many of their streets are named for residents who were Hollywood celebrities, or in the case of Gerald Ford, a U.S. president. Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra and Dinah Shore are a few of them. The streets are all "Drives," except the one named for Gene Autry, the singing cowboy from two generations ago. His street is the Gene Autry Trail.

I was on North Gene Autry Trail when I visited the Palm Springs Air Museum. It backs up against the municipal airport, giving the planes in the museum access to the runways. This is one of the world's largest collections of flyable World War II aircraft, and there are no ropes surrounding the planes to keep us from peeking into cockpits. A Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress is open, so we walk through it.

During my visit, a single-engine Navy trainer, a T-28 Trojan, was pushed out of its display space. A pilot and a passenger climbed in, taxied out to the runway and took off — pretty neat for a plane that was new in the 1950s. They made a couple of low passes. That piston engine creates a unique sound. If you are older than 50, you would probably recognize it.

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