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On The Cover: The new Free Spirit SS Class B motorhome from Leisure Travel Vans offers comfortable livability while camping near California’s Lake Lopez. See the test on page 44. Photo by Chuck Campbell.

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Lake Weir, Circle 116 on Reader Service Card

RUNNING THE GAMUT



In the month prior to press time for this issue, I spent a lot of time living in motorhomes. That's fine with me; I'd rather work from a motorhome than be stuck in the office. My time evaluating coaches gave me the opportunity to compare the livability of rigs from opposite ends of the spectrum. Part of the month was spent living in a 40-foot pusher loaded with all the bells and whistles. From there I migrated to a 34-foot Class A with a floorplan I was eager to try out and then I spent time with the Leisure Travel Vans Free Spirit featured on page 36. Needless to say, the back-to-back-to-back experience was very insightful.

Obviously, the 40-footer left little to want. There was plenty of room to spread out, the bedroom was comfy, the bath had a luxuriously large shower, the kitchen was big enough to cook any type of meal and the living room had the space to invite over a number of guests for an evening musical jam session.

Take away some of the interior space, the solid wood cabinets, real tile floors and the higher line fixtures and a 34-foot gasser became my next abode. The three slides, one being almost a full wall, limited claustrophobia, but the décor was certainly not in the same league. The gasser didn't have the road manners of the diesel-pusher with its intense engine torque and road-hugging weight, but the most stout Ford chassis has come a long way in taming the harsh ride, especially under a coach that is heavier and loaded properly. The coach manufacturer did a good job with fit and finish so the interior was quiet and sans the creaks and rattles experienced in the past — even on the infamous concrete highways with expansion joints.

I enjoyed my time in the 34-footer, not really missing the luxury of the 40-footer or the more-than-double price tag. I still had room to spread out and from a practical standpoint, was able to be equally as comfortable albeit the eyeball aesthetics were certainly more Spartan.

So what happens when you move into a Class B after spending time in the above coaches? Well, for one, you have to lose the "stuff," which may not be a bad thing. There's still a place for two to sleep, although you'll need to cuddle, the bath provided the same amenities but with much less elbowroom, the kitchen had limited counter space, but all the necessary accoutrements and the living room shared space with the bedroom.

Every square inch counts, but functionally the Class B provides the same basic conveniences. Seems like a stretch in thinking, but the Class B segment is thriving, and Class A owners looking to downsize are a big part of the movement to travel in rigs that are more fuel efficient and easier to handle.

A friend recently asked me about downsizing to a Sprinter-based Class A from his tandem-axle diesel pusher. At first I was shocked that he wanted to make such a drastic change. After all, I said, "Where are you going to store the five barbecues?" Clearly, his interest in a smaller rig is representative of a growing number of hardcore enthusiasts looking to simplify their lives.

I'm reminded of a story shared by readers traveling in a pickup camper about a couple in a Prevost-based coach who parked next to them. The motorhome owner had a major electric failure making dinner preparation impossible. The camper owner invited the couple to his humble place for dinner and they all had a great evening.

It was an eye-opener for the luxury coach owner who quickly realized that the RV lifestyle and friendship are equally as rewarding, regardless of the type and size of motorhome.

I rest my case. ♦

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CAN YOU SOLVE THE AUGUST COVER MYSTERY?

That's the question we asked in our November 2012 issue, and here are some of the replies we received.

From the editor: After numerous inquiries from readers regarding the make and model of the motorhome featured on our August 2012 cover, we sent the question back, asking in the November 2012 issue for readers to submit their guesses. Of the 51 people who responded, 42 had the correct answer: a 1998 Alpine Coach manufactured by Western Recreational Vehicles in Yakima, Wash. Other guesses included an early model Foretravel, a Fleetwood Bounder and a Georgie Boy Landau.

Thank you to all of our readers who responded.

SEEING DOUBLE

We own one that is exactly the same as the August 2012 cover unit. It is a 1998 Alpine Coach made by Western RV. It is a 36-foot SDS. We have 120,000 miles on the rig and have upgraded everything from 1998 to 2012.

MARY ANN AND WARREN HYLAND | VIA EMAIL

AWESOME ALPINE

The coach on the cover is an early Western Recreational Vehicle Alpine Coach. It looks like a 36-foot mid-door model. The mid-door was a bit unusual for a diesel pusher, but it was popular. I own a 2005 mid-door double slide and I love it. Handling and performance on the Alpine is far superior to any similar coach on the market. Even though Western RV has gone out of business, there are several hundred active owners out there. I keep in touch through the Alpine Coach Association (www.alpinecoachassociation.com).

MATT MONIZ | VIA EMAIL

JUST LIKE OURS

The coach featured on the August 2012 cover is a 1998 Alpine Coach 36-foot mid-door single slide. When the issue came out I told my wife, "Look, a coach just like ours, except mid-door, right down to the paint colors." The engine is a Cummins 8.3-liter, with an Allison 3060MH, six-speed automatic transmission.

I've had my coach for more than seven years, put on more than 60,000 miles and could not be happier about

the performance and the dependability of the motorhome.

JEFF THREATT | VIA EMAIL

LOVE OUR SUNSTAR

We just purchased a 2013 Winnebago Sunstar 35B with a bath-and-a-half and bunk, and our neighbor dropped *MotorHome's* October 2012 issue at our door when they saw the cover. We loved the article about the Sunstar and couldn't agree more. We have two children and bought the Sunstar specifically because of the bunks, large water tank and extra bath.

It has lived up to our expectations and beyond. Although slightly long, the extra room for four people plus dogs gives us plenty of room to maneuver. The backup and side cameras are a godsend and I love the big refrigerator. We know we can't fit in smaller campgrounds or most national forests, but our living quarters and ease of set up and take down make it all worth it. This is our second coach, having only had our last one for a year to see if this is something we wanted to do. With the Sunstar 35B we are on the road as much as possible.

MARIETTE MARSH | TUCSON, ARIZ.

HAPPY CAMPERS

We've camped in various RVs and have stayed in many different RV parks, but after going to Marysvale, Utah, for the past eight years we finally found our favorite park: South-Forty RV Park. The owners, Terri and Jim Peterson, are great people, and the bathrooms are cleaner than any we have seen. The campfires with ice cream are fun, and Terri will go out of her way to make sure your stay is the best. It's easy to access all the trails and their store is convenient for ice, soda, T-shirts, etc. It's a must for riding the Paiute Trails in Marysvale.

**JOANNE AND TERRY HARSTAD
LAKE HAVASU CITY, ARIZ.**

MORE MIDWEST, PLEASE

Not all RVers are retired and financially well-to-do. We are in our late 50s and love to camp as often as our schedule allows. And not everyone lives on the West or East coast. We live in Nebraska and would like to see more articles

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about the Great Plains, as we can't afford to travel all over. We love the camping and technical articles, and it would be nice to visit your world, but time and finances do not allow it.

**GLEN AND JOYCE RODICK
BANCROFT, NEB.**

THANK YOU, THETFORD

I purchased a Sani-Con Box Mount Macerator in August 2011. On July 1, 2012, the pump stopped working. I had the unit checked by a technician and found that the motor had a short, which caused the fuse to blow when powered up. I called Thetford's service department and explained my problem. The unit had a one-year warranty, but I did not have any records of my proof of purchase showing the date of the purchase. I was pleasantly surprised after talking to the Thetford representative that my verbal claim was honored and I will receive a replacement pump under the warranty without any charge. Sincere thanks to Thetford for its excellent customer support.

SAYED HASHIMI | BIG RAPIDS, MICH.

PERFECT TIMING

I've been reading *MotorHome* for years and have noticed that most of the reader letters concerning extended warranties are negative. I am a Good Sam Life Member, and when I bought my Class A in 2008 I purchased a Good Sam Extended Service Plan (ESP). It was the smartest thing I could have done.

While in upstate New York, my power steps started making noise and were not retracting. Since I was going to be home in a couple of days, I called my local service center, Round the Clock Diesel in Plainfield, Conn., to set up an appointment. Then, while packing up to leave the campground, my freshwater pump started cycling and I saw water coming from the fill connection. I figured I'd get it fixed when I got back. On the way home the CHECK ENGINE light came on. When I got home, I took the coach in for service. Because two other dealers had whined about using service plans, I asked Chris at Round the Clock Diesel if he would work with Good Sam ESP on the repairs; he said no problem. During this time, my August 2012 issue of *MotorHome* arrived with the article, "Keep the Gears Turning," about changing the oil in the differential. Based on the article, I called Chris and asked him to change the

oil in the differential. Later he called me with bad news: a large piece of metal was found on the drain plug. He had to remove the rear axle to open and inspect the differential. All of the gears were damaged and the repair was going to be major.

Good Sam ESP had authorized repairs on the steps and the water check valve and was waiting for diagnosis on the CHECK ENGINE light. Chris called Good Sam to let it know about the axle and that the CHECK ENGINE light was the injection fuel pump. Good Sam sent an inspector the next day and approved the repairs for the axle and recommended that Cummins repair the fuel pump under the emissions warranty.

Good Sam ESP was a blessing. It paid \$4,500-plus in repairs and made it easy for the dealer to get the work done. As for Round the Clock Diesel, I cannot sing enough praise.

STEPHEN AHLCRONA | LEDYARD, CONN.

SUCCESSFUL TRADE

I recently traded my beloved 2004 Rexhall RexAir for a 2006 Sportscoach. I began my search online and found several coaches that seemed to fit my needs. From there, I began the communication process. It turned out two of the four coaches were at Camping World, one in Ft. Myers, Fla., and one in Indianapolis, Ind. It was at this point that I talked with Jeff (the manager), Scott, Jamison, Matt and Tony. A deal was struck with Camping World of Indianapolis, and my wife and I left to complete the transaction.

The folks at Camping World carried out all the agreed-upon processes and made numerous corrections to the coach in a friendly, professional manner. I am very happy with the motorhome and Camping World of Indianapolis. I hope all RVers who deal with them have the same pleasant experience.

JIM AND JUDY WALKER | FALCONER, N.Y.

QUESTION:

Do you rely on the Internet when searching for a new motorhome? If not, what is your main method of research?

Send your comments to *MotorHome*, 3300 Fernbrook Lane N #200, Minneapolis, MN 55447; or email letters@motorhomemagazine.com. ♦

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escapes

by LAURA MICHAELS

ROAD FOODIE | WHEELS & GEAR | NOTEWORTHY | CROSSROADS

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Home to the largest sand dune in North America, Idaho's Bruneau Dunes State Park could supply Mr. Sandman for life. Rising 470 feet above the small lakes of this popular park, the tallest dune stays put thanks to relatively constant wind activity and an ample source of sand that collects in the basin. It, along with another prominent dune, covers nearly 600 acres and offers a climbing challenge to visitors. (No vehicles are allowed on the dunes.) Idaho's largest public observatory also calls Bruneau Dunes home, and visitors can stargaze with the aid of one of several telescopes. Bird watching and fishing are other popular activities, and the park's 82 RV sites offer water and 50-amp electrical hookups. The campground is open year-round. For more information, call 208-366-7919 or visit www.parksandrecreation.idaho.gov.



PHOTO: IDAHO TOURISM



Oyster-licious



PHOTO: ANNE WEAVER

You either love them or hate them.

Oysters. Those gnarly-shelled bivalves generate strong reactions, from devotees waxing poetic about the best varieties to those who can't stomach the squishy, slightly slimy creatures. I was in the latter camp for years. I couldn't understand why people paid \$1 or more per oyster to eat them raw. Yuck!

However, I loved the idea of oysters. Big platters of ice artfully displaying oysters on the half-shell look so impressive. And oysters are great for the planet. These little filter feeders draw water over their gills, bringing plankton and other particles into their bodies where they're digested and the waste excreted. A single oyster can filter and clean 1.3 gallons of water per hour. Historically, native oysters filtered the entire volume of Chesapeake Bay every three or four days.

Additionally, oysters can be farmed without causing environmental damage. In fact, oyster farms actually clean up waterways. Oysters are a keystone species that create habitat for creatures like anemones, barnacles and hooked mussels that feed larger fish like striped bass. In fact, an oyster reef can increase the surface area of a flat sea bottom by as much as 50 times, increasing biodiversity.

But I wasn't convinced until I actually ate an oyster dish that tasted great. At Jimella & Nanci's Market Cafe in Ocean Park, Wash., the Italian baked oysters were rich, creamy, buttery and absolutely delicious. Chef Jimella Lucas convinced

PHOTO: ANNE WEAVER

Left: Chef Lucas' baked Italian oysters are buttery, creamy and richly delicious.

Right: At Taylor Seafood, they barbecue large Pacific oysters in the shell.

me to try her oysters on the half-shell, ice cold medium-sized mollusks served with lemon wedges and slightly spicy red sauce. According to Lucas, oysters must be impeccably fresh and she owns her own oyster bed at nearby Willapa Bay. The oysters tasted fresh and slightly briny, with a delicious tang of the sea. At last, I was an oyster convert.

Now I even carry an oyster knife in the motorhome. I order oysters in chilly months when waters are coldest and oysters are at their best. I don't buy oysters where they don't grow naturally. Oregon and Washington and the New England states all produce terrific oysters.

I've learned all oysters aren't the same. There are tiny, delicate oysters like the native Olympia oyster and giant, meaty ones like the Pacifics and everything in between. Like good wine, oysters reflect their *terroir*—the climate and the water's salinity, clarity, minerals, etc., that affect the oyster flavor and texture. I like medium-to-small oysters with a delicate flavor.

Here are a few of my favorite places for oysters:

88 Restaurant, Spruce Point Inn Resort & Spa, Boothbay Harbor, Maine, www.sprucepointinn.com. Its delicious Glidden Point oysters on the half shell are served with house-made cocktail sauce.

Island Creek Oyster Bar carries dozens of types of oysters. The oyster sampler lets you compare different varieties.



PHOTO: BOBBIE HASSELBRING

Depot Restaurant, Seaview, Wash., www.depotrestaurantdining.com. Its pan-fried oysters with fried artichokes are rich, crispy and delightful.

Frasers Gourmet Hideaway, Oak Harbor, Wash., www.frasersgh.com. Chef/owner Scott Fraser loves serving small, ice-cold Fanny Bay oysters with a spicy red sauce and fresh grated horseradish. He also makes oysters broiled in their own liquid with bacon and garlic butter.

Island Creek Oyster Bar, Boston, Mass., www.islandcreekoysterbar.com. With the oyster sampler, you can taste oysters like Wellfleet, Moonstone, Matunuck, East Beach Blond and Glidden Point.

Jimella & Nanci's Market Cafe, Long Beach, Wash., www.jimellaandnancis.com. Don't miss Jimella's Italian baked oysters.

Oysterville Sea Farms, Oysterville, Wash., www.willabay.com. It carries several varieties of local, fresh oysters.

The Place Restaurant & Bar, Friday Harbor, Wash., www.theplacefridayharbor.com. Its oysters on the half shell are deliciously briny. They also bake oysters with hazelnut butter that are rich and creamy.

Pelicano Restaurant, Ilwaco, Wash., www.pelicanorestaurant.com. Try chef/owner Jeff Manning's garlicky grilled oysters with asparagus and garlic aioli.

Taylor Shellfish Farms, Bow, Wash., (also in Seattle and Shelton), www.taylorshellfishfarms.com. The farms offer several varieties of oysters and other seafood.

Union Oyster House, Boston, Mass., www.unionoysterhouse.com. The oldest restaurant in continuous service in the nation serves local, delicate Blue Point Oysters. Its Oysters Rockefeller, made with spinach and cheese, is silky and decadent.

Until next month, happy eating!



NEW TECHNOLOGY FOR ROADTREK

A new Class B motorhome from **Roadtrek** is in production, and features technological advancements and environmentally friendly improvements.

The RS E-Trek is built on the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter chassis and incorporates the latest technology into Roadtrek's best-selling RS platform. The propane-free coach features a 250-watt solar charger and options such as an EFOY emission-free fuel cell generator and lithium ion batteries, giving owners full capability to dry camp for extended periods. The Sprinter van engine has Bluetec technology and biodiesel fuel capability. New interior styling puts captain's seats in the second row while the exterior features full-body paint. The E-Trek was built using e-certified materials that are manufactured using high levels of recycled content.

The Roadtrek E-Trek has a base MSRP of \$122,564 and can be ordered without the \$3,497 LP-gas generator.

Roadtrek, 888-762-3873, www.roadtrek.com

MULTIMEDIA ENTERTAINMENT

A new all-in-one product from **ASA Electronics** provides motorhome owners with another option for taking entertainment on the road. The Jensen AWM968 stereo is a multimedia wall-mount entertainment center that lets RVers enjoy everything from radio tunes and CDs to streaming audio and DVDs.

The AWM968 stereo unit, which runs on 12-volt DC power, can receive streaming audio from any Bluetooth-enabled device and also lets users stream audio to their outdoor speakers — without having to enter the coach. It also features a DVD mechanism that withstands the bumps and jolts associated with travel, and is designed with blue backlit controls, a dimmable display, clock with sleep timer and alarm, and front audio and video input. When paired with a Jensen TV, a unified remote will operate the entire system. The AWM968 retails for \$349.99 and is available at www.jensenrvdirect.com.

ASA Electronics, 877-305-0445, www.asaelectronics.com



LIGHT THE WAY

Whether roadside or in the campground, see and be seen with a new LED light product from **LightModule**. Developed with the needs of RV owners in mind, the LMPro portable utility light uses a system of interchangeable electronic heads to transform from a road flare to an area light, flashlight or combo unit in a matter of seconds. The system provides a bright beam in a rugged, rechargeable, portable form and boasts up to 16 hours of continuous use per charge. The LMPro comes with a limited five-year warranty for the electronic head while the rechargeable battery pack has a one-year limited warranty.

Two RV-specific kits are available. The value kit contains one LMPro camping utility light head with three function modes (amber light lantern, area light, flashlight), a battery pack/handle, DC charge kit and case for \$389. The premium kit includes a flare head, area light/flashlight head and camping lantern head, along with three battery packs/handles, an AC charge kit and case for \$749.

LightModule, 888-900-7853, www.lightmodule.com



PHOTO: NPS/MARTHA SMITH

TRAIL UPGRADES FOR MESA VERDE

Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado has been selected to receive an Active Trails grant from the National Park Foundation (NPF), the official charity of America’s national parks. The grant provides Mesa Verde with funding to improve winter trails and purchase materials for winter ecology interpretive programs. Mesa Verde is joining with the San Juan Mountains Association and the San Juan/Four Corners Native Plant Society to offer free winter ecology hikes during the winter season.

Now in its fourth cycle, the Active Trails program promotes national parks as venues for community engagement, and encourages healthy living through various forms of recreation and volunteer service on land and water trails. Since 2008, the NPF has granted more than \$1.2 million through its Active Trails program and engaged more than 3,100 volunteers and 86 project partners who have contributed thousands of hours to help promote, refurbish or build national park trails. For more information and a list of hikes, visit www.nps.gov/meve.

News Briefs

National RV Communities (NRVC) is expanding its presence in Florida with the acquisition of RV resorts in Zephyrhills and Naples. Settler’s Rest RV Resort in Zephyrhills and Marco Naples Hitching Post in Naples were acquired in October 2012 and will be marketed using the Carefree RV Resorts brand name, which NRVC uses for all of its RV communities across the country, according to a news release.

Pennsylvania is the most recent state to adopt the official “RV Friendly” logo, which is designed to let travelers know which businesses can accommodate RVs. The bright yellow, round sign is designed for roadside businesses — such as fuel stations, restaurants, tourist attractions and camping facilities — to place on their existing highway gas-food-lodging logos indicating their ability to provide adequate space and resources for RVers. Businesses must meet certain requirements in order to be RV Friendly, such as having high canopies, an adequate turning radius and 12-foot-wide lanes.

The **Recreation Vehicle Dealers Association (RVDA)** honored motorhome brands built by six manufacturers with its Quality Circle Award last November. According to a press release, these brands/manufacturers received at least 15 dealer responses and scored 80 percent or more for overall dealer satisfaction in the association’s 19th Annual Dealer Satisfaction Index (DSI) survey. The motorized RV manufacturers/brands that received awards are (in alphabetical order by manufacturer): Forest River, Jayco/Entegra, Leisure Travel Vans/Triple E RV, Pleasure-Way, Tiffin Motorhomes and Winnebago/Itasca/ERA.

Travel Channel has signed a deal with Bret Michaels to host the new series “Rock My RV.” The eight half-hour episode series is slated to premiere this year. Michaels, a hands-on RV enthusiast, will lead a team of custom RV designers and fabricators who transform travelers’ ordinary RVs into outrageous mobile mansions. As a musician and TV star, Michaels travels in his own custom coach — outfitted with state-of-the-art electronics, Wi-Fi and custom gym, among other amenities. Michaels also spent his childhood taking road trips in his family’s Winnebago.



RV SHOWS

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FEB. 8-10

Progressive Insurance 28th Annual Richmond Camping RV Expo
Richmond, Va.
800-441-0013

FEB. 14-17

Progressive Insurance 59th Annual Kansas Sports, Boat & Travel Show
Valley Center, Kan.
763-383-4470

FEB. 15-17

Progressive Insurance 23rd Annual North Carolina RV & Camping Show
Charlotte, N.C.; 800-441-0013

FEB. 15-18

Progressive Insurance 18th Annual Atlantic City RV Show
Atlantic City, N.J.
800-441-0013

FEB. 22-24

Progressive Insurance South Carolina RV & Camping Show
Greenville, S.C.; 800-441-0013

FEB. 28 - MARCH 3

Progressive Insurance 56th Annual Colorado RV, Sports, Boat & Travel Show
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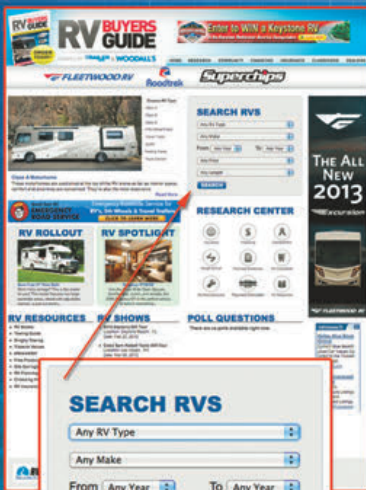
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HAROLD WARP'S PIONEER VILLAGE

At the northern edge of Minden, Neb., this display of authentic Americana stretches for 20 acres and covers more than 180 years of history. It boasts the world's oldest Buick (a 1905 beauty), the first Bell P-59 jet from 1942 and dozens of exhibits showcasing America's scientific achievements and inventions.

Harold Warp's Pioneer Village opened in 1953 and now contains more than 50,000 historical items. Among its 28 buildings are 12 preserved structures including a Pony Express relay station, the original Elm Creek stockade and an authentic pioneer sod house. Visitors can experience the one-room schoolhouse, old-time drugstore, cobbler shop and general store, and even ride the 1879 steam-operated carousel for a nickel.

Warp, who was born in 1903 and raised in a Nebraska sod house, became an inventor and founded Flex-O-Glass, a Chicago-based plastics firm that developed Jiffy Wrap and Jiffy Bags. A millionaire, Warp bought his hometown schoolhouse, church, railroad station and the original U.S. Government Land Office, and later created his pioneer village.

Harold Warp's Pioneer Village operates a campground with more than 50 full- or partial-hookup sites. The village is open year-round, seven days a week. Admission is \$13 for adults, \$7 for children.

For more information, call 800-445-4447 or visit www.pioneervillage.org



KENTUCKY HERITAGE

A visit to the Bluegrass State should include a stop at the Bluegrass Heritage Museum in Winchester, Ky. Since 2000, the three-story museum has been housed in the restored Guerrant Clinic building and offers a look inside the lives of the people and places of the historic Bluegrass Region. The museum's mission is to educate visitors about how the people of this region

influenced both Kentucky's and America's history.

The first floor of the museum offers changing exhibits as well as smaller stationary exhibits such as artifacts from the Winchester Fire Department, schools from Clark County, Lower Howard's Creek and Hollar's Grocery. Military enthusiasts and history buffs will likely spend the most time on the second floor in the Military History Room, absorbing information and viewing photos, artifacts and clothing from the American Revolutionary War and World War I and II. The Bell South Room, of course, gives background on the history of how communication impacted society with the development of the telephone. The top floor is dedicated to the Guerrant Clinic; this room was the operating room in the original clinic. Visitors will learn about the clinic's impact on the town, view photos and original medical equipment used at the clinic.

For more information, call 859-745-1358 or go online to www.bgheritage.com.

— Amanda Lepinski ♦

CAJUN PALMS RV RESORT

A HEAVENLY RV RESORT IN LOUISIANA

Have you ever wondered what the great RV park in the sky would look like after checking out of the last campground here on Earth? If so, it would only take one visit to Cajun Palms RV Resort near Breaux Bridge, La., to find the answer.

We recently learned of this “heaven on Earth” RV park while on an otherwise uneventful overnight stop in Texas during a cross-county trip. While setting up camp I asked our temporary neighbor, “Where are you from and where are you going?” It turned out he was a native Cajun from Louisiana, so the topic shifted to advice on where to find authentic Louisiana culture, which included local eats and great camping. With Cajun pride, he told us about his hometown, the quaint and historic Breaux Bridge, La., in the south-central St. Martin Parish and its unique Creole home-style eateries. Then, in his heavy Cajun accent, he described what was a “must-see” RV park, the Cajun Palms RV Resort nearby in Henderson, La. We were sold.

With a quick review of our travel schedule and the atlas, my wife, Cheryl, and I eagerly modified our trip route so we could see this highly touted RV park for ourselves.

After a leisurely three-week journey



PHOTO: CAJUN PALMS RV RESORT

A grand entrance welcomes guests to Cajun Palms RV Resort.

across the South and with ever-growing anticipation, we finally arrived in Henderson at the impressive front entrance of Cajun Palms. It was late afternoon on a beautiful Saturday in mid-April; just inside the arched gates a young, well-groomed concierge was standing post in a tiki-style hut ready to greet us. With the grace and precision of an elite Navy Blue Angels ground crew chief, he guided us into our RV check-in lane. He then walked up to the driver’s window, extended his hand, introduced himself by name, Brandon, and welcomed us to Cajun Palms. This was the finest welcome to an RV park that we had ever experienced in our long lives of RVing and only the first of many unexpected, pleasant experiences to come during our all too short visit to

this heavenly RV park.

We completed the check-in process and received our barcoded guest wristbands, which function like a cruise ship’s “sign and sail” card and lets guests charge food, drinks, supplies and LP-gas to their RV sites. Then we received a golf cart escort through the near capacity 40-acre park of 324 deluxe RV sites, 25 cabins and 12 chalets. The park’s design was well thought out, with the bulk of its facilities and guest activities centralized in a large circle and the RV sites and other accommodations dispersed to the outer edges.

As we slowly wound through the park, it was hard to keep our eyes on the road. People of all ages and walks of life were playing, cooking and parading around in custom golf carts while zydeco music



PHOTO: DENNIS AND CHERYL DENOI

could be heard from all directions. It was obvious this was the campground of our dreams as we pulled into our large, fully paved, pull-through site surrounded by well-groomed grass and small trees.

We set up camp in record time so we could join in on all of the excitement. We met our new and fun-loving neighbors who were watching a NASCAR race, barbecuing and otherwise having a great time outside their RVs. Then we headed straight for the park's main entertainment hub and Lee Roy's Tiki Bar.

It's obvious that Cajun Palms is a favorite of the locals from all over Louisiana and the South and is a repeat destination for most. The park has also become a camping tradition for many families since it opened in January 2008.

Cajun Palms offers extensive annual activities that include the usual holidays and some unique ones such as Mardi Gras, the Swamp Pop Festival, a zydeco festival, a luau, Christmas in July, Customer Appreciation Weekend and Old



A large, adults-only whirlpool is near one of two tiki bars.



A water-breathing dragon and waterslide entertain kids at the pool.

PHOTOS: DENNIS & CHERYL DENOI

West Days, to name a few. The park also hosts weekend activities for all ages.

After a once around the main entertainment complex, which includes a water park, kiddie pool, adult pool with swim-up tiki bar, beach volleyball court, covered horseshoe pit, playground, 18-hole mini golf, movie theater, video arcade, adult lounge with video poker, snack shack and more, we bellied up to the bar for a cold one. At this point our neighbors joined us to watch the end of the NASCAR race on one of the large flat-screen TVs over the bar. As it turned out, our new RV friends Lee and Megan were there with several

other friends and family members and occupied two RV sites and a cabin. Megan is the daughter of Tom Dempsey, the football star who set the NFL record for the longest field goal kick of 63 yards in 1970 as a New Orleans Saint.

While at the bar we met the founders and owners of Cajun Palms, Lee Venable and his wife, Stephanie. They frequently take the opportunity to visit with their many guests, the wide-eyed newcomers as well as the seasoned and extremely loyal regulars. We complimented Lee on

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his unique RV resort and then asked him how it all came about.

It was his lifelong dream, Lee said, to build and operate an RV resort. He proudly pointed out that Cajun Palms has earned the top ranking from the Good Sam RV Travel Guide & Campground Directory (formerly the Trailer Life Directory) — perfect 10s three years running.

Cajun Palms is near the equally famous Crawfish Town USA Restaurant & Fresh Market. In fact, it's as close as a phone call and a few minutes wait for your personal golf cart pickup and delivery service. You can even opt to have your order delivered right to your motorhome, poolside or another location within the park. This delivery service is also available from the Palms' snack shack. And don't forget, it can all be charged to your running tab via your wristband.

There is definitely a golf-cart culture in the park. If you don't own one, you can rent one at Cajun Palms or at AGS Golf Carts located across the street. Perhaps you'll even want to kick it up a notch to



Tricked-out golf carts like this one are common at Cajun Palms.

outdo all the other carts parading around the grounds.

When it comes to the individual RV sites, we didn't see a bad one in the park. We did see some sites designed to allow those traveling with two or more rigs to make camp with their patios all facing together. These are called double and triple sites. For the most discriminating and pampered guests, the park offers 12 executive sites that sit along a lavish greenbelt at the outer edge of the park, but still near all the park's conveniences. These supersized deluxe sites are fully paved and feature overhead shelters and



A view of Cajun Palms' 12 covered executive RV sites.

home-style fireplaces for starters.

During our stay, we were impressed with the park's facilities and its overall cleanliness. Even staff members were well-groomed and professional. We learned from Amanda Stelly, the general manager, that any time a staff member receives a compliment from a guest, the staff member's name is placed in a hat. Each month names are drawn and the winners receive gifts such as iPads, gift cards or trips, to name a few. The jubilant spirit of the park's guests is equally impressive. They

PHOTOS: DENNIS AND CHERYL DENOI

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were very outgoing, but still courteous to others as they took advantage of the park's facilities and activities.

We should point out Cajun Palms has two distinct modes of operation: one is pure Cajun fun and partying while the other is slow, quiet and laid back, with many sites empty and some resort activities reduced or closed. These quiet times are more likely during the off-season and weekdays during mid-season. On that note, this is a good time to place a warning: If you're an RVer who prefers to avoid a party atmosphere, consider a different park during Cajun Palms' busy times. This park has a well-trained, uniformed security team that does enforce rules, but it also takes pride in its spring break and Mardi Gras atmosphere.

A visit to Cajun Palms would not be complete without spending some time in the old town of Breaux Bridge, which is no more than five minutes away from the resort and 20 minutes from Lafayette.

Breaux Bridge dates back to 1771,



The namesake and landmark bridge welcomes visitors to Breaux Bridge.

when Firmin Breaux bought land from a wealthy New Orleans merchant who had acquired it as a French land grant. In 1799, Breaux built a footbridge across the Bayou Teche to help ease travel for his family and neighbors. When traveling directions were given, locals would say, "Go to Breaux's bridge ..." and the town eventually adopted that moniker as its name. Later, this simple footbridge evolved into a transportation bridge to accommodate wagon traffic, which allowed the town to develop and prosper on both sides of the bayou. More than 200



years after Breaux built his, a bridge still remains as one of the highlights of this historic town that proudly holds strong to its Cajun and French roots.

Breaux Bridge was also the first in the state of Louisiana to put crawfish on restaurant menus, and these innovative chefs are the creators of the famous crawfish étouffée. In 1959, the state legislature officially designated Breaux Bridge as "la capitale Mondiale de l'ecrevisse" or "the crawfish capital of the world." Since this designation, the Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival Association has hosted the annual crawfish festival, recognized as one of the state's finest festivals. This year's event is scheduled for May 3-5.

Our brief stay at Cajun Palms RV Resort was an enjoyable and guest-friendly experience, and we look forward to our next visit. Take it from us, seize every opportunity to meet your temporary RV neighbors and "Laissez les bon temps rouler!" Let the good times roll! ♦



Dennis and Cheryl DeNoi are freelance writers/photographers who are full-time RVers and proud owners of a rare 1983 Apollo Sceptre motorhome. Dennis is a retired Marine and police officer; Cheryl is a retired school principal.

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by RHONDA OSTERTAG



John Day River State Scenic Waterway runs through picturesque Cottonwood Canyon State Park.

OREGON'S PARK-A-YEAR INITIATIVE: A BONANZA FOR MOTORHOME TRAVELERS

During our nation's current hard times, dark messages of budget cuts and closures for parks fill the news. But in Oregon, a light still shines.

Oregon has maintained an excellent park system, but, perhaps because of that excellence, for 30 years Oregon parks had entered a deep sleep. That's why, in 2004, Oregon's then-governor Ted Kulongoski proposed a Park-a-Year initiative. The commitment held, and now eight new parks, with a ninth in the wings, grace the state, a treasure trove for local and visiting travelers.

This new roster adds to the state's natural, cultural, historical and recreational offerings. The recently opened and soon-to-open parks sit near travel hot spots, familiar routes and established park campgrounds; a couple boast campgrounds of their own. The parks celebrate farm and timber history, along with Lewis and Clark and the Nez Perce Native Americans. You'll find a 16-mile wild stretch of John Day River and a creek-threaded teeming coastal marsh. There are tiny properties and sweeping expanses.

At a time when vacation monies are stretched and

families need accessible outdoor places, Oregon's new parks have arrived just in time. Meet the Oregon eight — plus one.

L. L. "STUB" STEWART STATE PARK (2004)

Stub Stewart State Park, in the coastal mountains just 30 minutes west of Portland, Ore., is the flagship park of this ambitious undertaking. The nearly 1,700-acre park sits in a second-growth temperate Douglas fir rainforest and gives nod to the timber industry that long supported the state.

Its 20-plus-mile trail system sports logging-inspired names. You can visit the duckweed-coated Boomscooter frog pond and travel the likes of Matchcutter's Lane, Swing Donkey Trail, Skidder Row and Peavey Hook Bridleway. In this largely rolling terrain, trails serve hiker, equestrian and mountain biker. The paved Banks-Vernonia Linear State Trail, which strikes through the park, serves cyclists and nature walkers, as well. Serious mountain bikers will find an exclusive-use area for challenging rides.



Visitors to Stub Stewart State Park can enjoy the paved Banks-Vernonia trail.

Disc golf also entertains travelers while birders train their focus on hummingbirds, warblers, towhees, juncos, hawks and more. Elk and deer, too, may be spied. Because this is a temperate rain forest, you'll find periods of cool damp weather, a small price for the lush greenery.

Two full-service family campgrounds and an equestrian camp serve overnighters. Sites are 50 feet maximum. The park sits equidistant between Portland and the coast, so it serves as a fine travel base. From U.S. 26, 12 miles west of Hillsboro, turn north on Oregon 47, drive four miles, and turn right entering the park.

SUNSET BEACH STATE RECREATION AREA (2005)

With its opening tied to the Lewis and Clark bicentennial, this trailhead and beach access on the northern coast marks the sea terminus of the explorers' Fort to Sea Trail. The Discovery Corps wintered on the Oregon coast at Fort Clatsop, south



Hunt for sand dollars at Sunset Beach.

of Astoria, from 1805-1806, and in preparing for the return east made forays to the coast to salvage oil from a beached whale, to harvest salt for preserving and to hunt for food.

From the Sunset Beach Trailhead, the six-mile Fort to Sea Trail, part of Lewis and Clark National Historical Park, travels coastal plain, wind-battered shorepine forest, rural field and pasture, and hillside coastal fir-spruce forest before reaching the reconstructed fort. It passes coastal lakes and a historic church and cemetery where Oregon's first schoolteacher is buried beside his Clatsop Native American princess wife.

A second ADA trail across the Clatsop dune plain, leads to a beach overlook. Beach driving and combing, clamming and surf fishing further engage guests. Fort Stevens State Park, to the north, as well as private campgrounds from Seaside to Astoria, serves overnighters. The park has ample paved parking and a toilet facility.

From U.S. 101, 12.4 miles north of its junction with U.S. 26, turn west on Sunset Lane, continue about a mile more to enter the trailhead parking lot on the right. Beach drivers can continue forward onto the sand.

FORT YAMHILL STATE HERITAGE AREA (2006)

In the north-central Coast Range, on a historic Native American trail between the coast and the trade centers in the Willamette Valley, this park commemorates the military fort that kept peace between the settlers and the reservation Native Americans from 1856-1866.

This hilltop-vantage park has paved parking, toilet facilities and an interpretive trail touring the fort site. Signs identify

the lay of the fort's some 20 buildings and reveal the perspectives of officers, enlisted men and the Native Americans they protected and watched. Visitors learn about the tedium, isolation and hardship and about the reservation system, with its inherent flaws. Philip Sheridan of Civil War fame once resided here.

The park sits close to the confederated tribes' longhouse and powwow grounds and Spirit Mountain Casino, with camping at or near the casino and along the coast. Occasionally, in the summer, visitors can view re-enactments or witness archaeological digs at the park. Plans call for ghost structures to represent the fort. An officer's quarters is the lone surviving structure.

The park sits east off Oregon 22, one mile north of Oregon 18/22 at Valley Junction.

THOMPSON'S MILLS STATE HERITAGE SITE (2007)

In the heart of the Willamette Valley west of Interstate 5, this well-preserved flour mill salutes the farmer and milled product that sustained rural family life. On a diversion of the Calapooia River, this grain mill holds Oregon's oldest water rights. Self-guided tours of the grounds and guided tours of the mill and mill office explain the process, history and cultural significance



Thompson's Mill sits along a diversion of the Calapooia River.

of the community mill to the American fabric. Milling's heyday came at a time of daily fresh-baked bread, sack-cloth curtains and dresses, and family meals. But, the rise of cities, commercial bakeries and women in the workplace ultimately spelled the end for such mills.

Thompson's Mills is a worthwhile, picturesque stop for a couple of hours. Public and private campgrounds along I-5 serve motorhomers.

From the community of Shedd on Oregon 99E (south of Albany and west of I-5), go one mile east on Boston Mill Drive to the park. It has ample paved parking and toilet facilities.

CRISSEY FIELD STATE RECREATION SITE (2008)

On the southern coast, just over the California border, this gateway park welcomes

with its visitor center, beach access and Winchuck River estuarine habitat. The park occupies the site of the northernmost village and fishing grounds of the Tolowa tribe and traces its name to a pre-World War II lily grower. Crissey Field is a terminus for the 362-mile Oregon Coast Trail. Beach views stretch from Point St. George in California to Cape Sebastian in Oregon. Birding is popular and harbor seals and sea lions may animate the coastal water.

The park is west off U.S. 101, five miles south of Brookings, where public and private camping is available. There is ample RV parking.

IWETEMLAYKIN STATE HERITAGE SITE (2009)

In eastern Oregon's famous Wallowa Lake country, this park salutes the homeland of the Nez Perce tribe and occupies the open space adjacent to Old Chief Joseph's grave. Trails carry you across and over the rolling dry-grass terrain, past shaded waters. This is a quiet natural park for self-led discovery, a place of red fox and muledeer, dabbler and frog, big mountain vistas and wild western sunsets.

Developed camping is available at Wallowa Lake State Park and Joseph-



In eastern Oregon, Iwetemlaykin State Park is filled with ponderosa pine trees.

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vicinity private campgrounds. Rustic experiences can be had at U.S. Forest Service campgrounds.

Reach the park off Oregon 82 at the south end of Joseph, one mile north of Wallowa Lake.

BEAVER CREEK STATE NATURAL AREA (2010)

On Oregon’s popular central coast, south of Newport, this creek-threaded marsh attracts the kayaker, canoeist, fisher, birder and hiker on the upland trails. Marsh-trail use is limited to the driest months of summer. Nesting blue herons and ospreys, bald eagles, vultures, warblers, swallows, grosbeaks, cedar waxwings and more engage birders. Feeders at the visitor center expand the sightings.



Kayakers make their way down scenic Beaver Creek.

Roosevelt elk, deer, beaver and, on occasion, black bear and cougar can or have been spied. Mostly, though, it’s the peaceful two-mile paddle that engages visitors. In summer, South Beach State Park (to the north, which also has camping) offers guided kayak tours here, supplying full gear for the outing.

The boat launch is east off U.S. 101 on North Beaver Creek Road, across from the main Ona Beach State Park. The visitor center is one mile east of U.S. 101 on North Beaver Creek Road.

BATES STATE PARK (2011)

In the Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon, this park offers camping and a lineup of recreation on the site of a former timber mill and the company town it spawned. This new park still has a few rough edges, but its campground (28 sites, no hook-ups), covered picnic shelter, millpond and marked network of trails are open to explore. Interpretive boards (more to be added) introduce the timber mill and



Beaver Creek meanders alongside Beaver Creek Loop Trail.



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Bates Pond, Bates State Park, Ore.

OREGON'S PARK-A-YEAR INITIATIVE

industry and life in the company town. The mill operated from 1917-1975.

The park sits at the intersection of Middle Fork Lane (CR 20) and Oregon 7 (Journey Through Time Scenic Byway), one mile north of U.S. 26 at Austin Junction. Sumpter Dredge and Railroad are area historical destinations, Malheur National Forest adjoins the park, and bicycling is growing in popularity. The park is on the TransAmerica Bicycle Trail.

COTTONWOOD CANYON STATE PARK (2012-2013)

At this writing, in the arid high plain of north-central Oregon's John Day Country, the newest park is taking shape. It incorporates the old Murtha Ranch, spans both sides of the river and stretches in both directions from Cottonwood Bridge on Oregon 206. Its gargantuan size (8,000-plus acres) requires a time commitment that will stretch more than a decade. But, Chris Havel, Oregon Parks and Recreation



John Day Wild and Scenic River, Cottonwood Canyon State Park, John Day River State Scenic Waterway, Ore.

spokesman, places the projected opening after the initial phase of development, in late 2013.

The adjacent Bureau of Land Management boat launch is among the most popular in the state and boasts bass record-setting fishing. The landscapes are rugged, majestic, big and bold. Old ranch roads guide exploration along the river and in the canyon. This is a park to watch as it grows. Although areas will be developed for camping and day use, the wildness of the area will remain intact.

Reach the park on Oregon 206, 15 miles south of Wasco at Cottonwood Bridge.

Mark your map, get ready to explore and watch these parks burgeon into maturity. For more information, contact Oregon Parks and Recreation at 800-551-6949 or www.oregon.gov/OPRD/parks. ♦



Rhonda Ostertag, a freelance writer of guidebooks and articles and frequent contributor to *MotorHome*, travels and collaborates with her husband, photographer George Ostertag. The couple lives in Oregon when not on the road.



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SANTA CRUZ RIVER VALLEY HAS IT ALL

FIND ART, HISTORY, SHOPPING AND A MILD WINTER IN TUBAC, ARIZ.

by GERALD C. AND SHARON L. HAMMON

There aren't many places in the United States where you can have reasonably good weather any time of year. Or how about a destination where you can be comfortable in February, not fry in July and the humidity won't make you feel like you're snorkeling in your motorhome? That destination is the Santa Cruz River Valley in southern Arizona along Interstate 19 that runs from Tucson to the Mexican border at Nogales. And regardless of when you visit, you'll find opportunities to immerse yourself in history, indulge your wildest shopping desires, swing those golf clubs and sample an abundance of restaurants.

One of the true attractions of the I-19 corridor is that it's not purely a winter destination. Winters are comfortable; while snow may coat surrounding mountains, it rarely falls in the valley and the daytime

PHOTO: SAM HOWZIT



Above: A floral cross stands in the chapel at Tumacácori National Historic Park. Main: The sun casts a shadow over Tumacácori while the white dome of the church stands out against the sky.

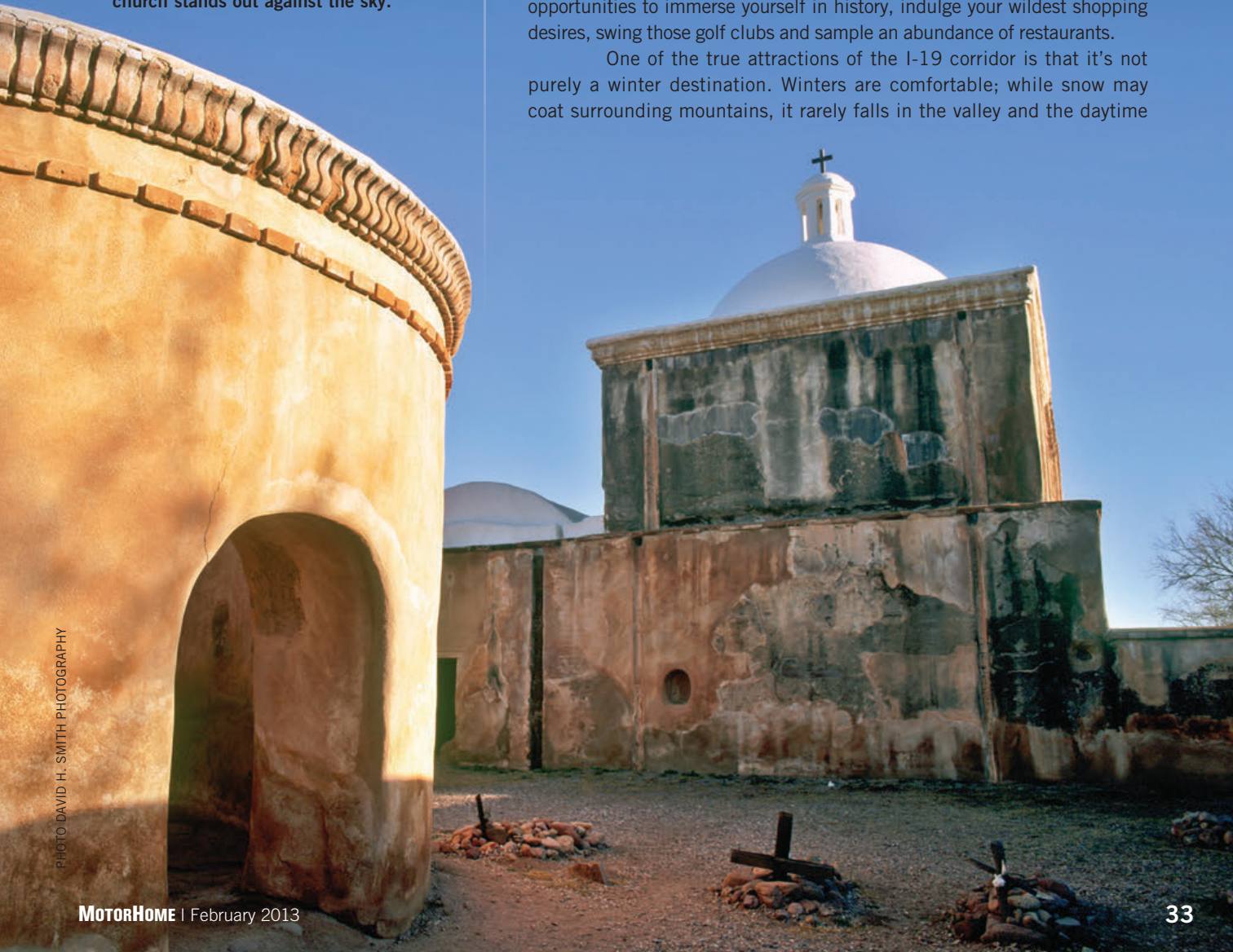


PHOTO DAVID H. SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY



One of Tubac Presidio Museum's many exhibits showcases the area's ranching history.

temperatures are moderate. Nighttime temperatures can drop below freezing. Summers are warm, but not nearly as hot as Phoenix, or even Tucson. The difference is the I-19 corridor gradually slopes upward to the south from Tucson until Nogales; you are close to 4,000 feet in elevation.

We appreciate destinations that tap

into the rich history of our land; Santa Cruz River Valley is such a destination.

In 1691, Jesuit Father Eusebio Kino traveled up the valley to a Native American village known today as Tumacácori. Near that village, Kino established a mission that ministered to the natives until the 1840s. In 1692, Kino traveled farther north, establishing a mission at the vil-

lage of Bac, just south of modern Tucson. Eventually, churches were built at both locations, but in 1767, the Spanish king, fearful of Jesuit intrigues, had expelled the Jesuits from Spain and its colonies. A few years later, missionaries of the Franciscan order took over the pioneering work of the Jesuits. The work of Father Kino and later of the Franciscans is commemorated in two churches, each constructed around 1800 by the Franciscans.

The better known is San Xavier del Bac, the White Dove of the Desert, which is on the San Xavier reservation just south of Tucson. It has been the subject of art and photography for years, and is still an active parish for the Tohono O'odham people. Visitors are welcome, but if services are taking place photography is not permitted in the church.

The other is the quiet and empty church at Tumacácori, which has been a National Historical Park since 1908. Neither San Xavier del Bac nor Tumacácori were ever fully completed. Both feature unfinished bell towers, which some

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believe were purposefully left incomplete because under Spanish rule no taxes would be paid on a building until it was complete.

Tumacácori is open year-round. The brooding church with haunting remnants of original painted decorations and remaining outbuildings along with a museum can be toured with the aid of a guidebook. A lovely garden calls to mind the gardens planted by the missionaries. We recommend joining a volunteer- or ranger-led tour.

At the town of Tubac, just north of Tumacácori at the edge of Coronado National Forest, you can meet another of the great historic figures from the Spanish era. Juan Bautista de Anza is honored as the founder of the great city of San Francisco, Calif., in 1775. However, much of his earlier life was spent as a warrior, protecting the thin threads of Christianity and Spanish civilization against a native population outraged by the brutality of priests and soldiers.



Above: San Xavier del Bac is known as the White Dove of the Desert. Right: A view of the gardens at Tumacácori.

After a rebellion by the natives, a presidio, or fort, was erected at Tubac. Anza was appointed commander in 1767, and it was from the presidio that Anza left to form his settlement along San Francisco Bay. The man Anza left in charge at Tubac



PHOTOS: GERALD C. HAMMON

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Vivid in color and unique in design, artwork is displayed in shops and along streets throughout Tubac.

wasn't up to the task of keeping the peace, and finally, the presidio was moved to Tucson, which offered better defenses. Tubac Presidio State Park, Arizona's first state park, showcases the history from the days of the Spanish presidio to modern times. The presidio itself rests in buried foundations that preserve the remaining adobe blocks; a staircase leads to an underground viewing area.

But there's more to the Tubac area than history — it's a shopper's paradise. Artists, many with international reputations, work here in iron, pottery, jewelry, oils and watercolors and just about any other medium you might imagine. In addition, Tubac's location close to the Mexican border allows importers to offer a wide variety of Mexican art and goods, a real benefit for RVers not wanting to travel in Mexico. In fact, you have to be careful or you might end up buying more than your motorhome's storage bays can hold.

Tubac artists have embraced Mexico's love of color, and their metalwork and pottery are almost outrageous in their brilliance. This color carries over to the clothing merchants as well, with their stunning collections of skirts, jackets, hats and accessories.

Several restaurants make their homes in Tubac and range from upscale dining opportunities to more casual options. As you'd expect, being near the border, a number specialize in Mexican cuisine, but others follow their own drumbeat. Elvira's used to be a prime Nogales, Mexico, destination. With the increase in security at the border, the owners moved Elvira's to Tubac where it continues to attract crowds.

In addition to the considerable attractions of Tubac, the area is appealing to golfers who will find several highly regarded courses clustered around the town of Green Valley. Legendary crooner Bing Crosby was among the founders of the Tubac Golf Course, and the courses at Rio Rico also attract golfers.

Birders will find Madera Canyon near Green Valley to be a world-class destina-

PHOTOS: GERALD C. HAMMON



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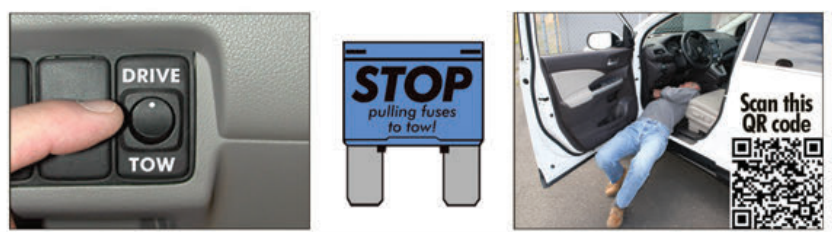


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tion boasting many resident species usually found farther south in Mexico. Other worthwhile birding habitats can be found at Patagonia-Sonoita Preserve and at Lake Patagonia State Park on State Route 82 going east from Nogales.

Along the northern stretch of I-19, you can retrace the footsteps of early miners. American settlers such as Charles D. Poston were attracted to the area by the possibility of silver, but until the last Apache war chief, Geronimo, surrendered in the 1880s, any such search was risky. Although there were pockets of silver in the hills surrounding the valley, copper ultimately became the mineral of choice. As you travel along I-19, you can see massive tailing piles from still-active open-pit copper mines to the west.

At the southern end of I-19 you can sample a bit of old Mexico. It's easy to walk throughout the tourist area of Nogales, Sonora. To us, it is quite similar to Tubac with all manner of shops and restaurants. Prices are mostly in dollars, not pesos. You

can drive, but parking on the Sonora side is problematic and lines getting back into the United States are lengthy and slow. If you cross the border, carry your passport or passport card with you, or you won't be able to re-enter the United States.

Other activities in the area include hiking, exploring ghost towns and sampling the products of some of Arizona's best wine-makers near the town of Elgin. RV parks ranging from basic to resort status can be

found in Nogales, Amado and Green Valley. In addition, there are numerous parks with all levels of amenities in Tucson at the north end of the I-19 corridor. Regardless of how long your stay lasts, we guarantee you won't regret a visit to Santa Cruz River Valley. ♦



Gerald Hammon, along with wife Sharon, enjoys sharing destinations, both well known and unknown, that combine history and scenic attraction. He is based in Arizona and invites you to share his journeys.

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As we turn the corner, the scene spreads out before us — mountains so high they're permanently capped with snow fields, wind-swept alpine valleys, azure blue skies with clouds designed by Maxfield Parrish. We've arrived in sky-high heaven.

Colorado is known for spectacular scenery and plenty of sun, which makes it perfect for a motorhome trip. But we didn't want to visit the usual hot spots like Vail, Telluride or Mesa Verde. We also didn't want to spend endless hours driving. Situated just 67 miles outside of Denver and home to Rocky Mountain National Park and Trail Ridge Road, one of the most breathtaking, sky-touching roads in the world, Grand County fits the bill.

It's nearly noon when we jump on the interstate and cruise to the college town of Boulder. We take Canyon Road (Highway 119) and, within moments, we're in canyon land on a gently winding road skirting Boulder Creek. The nearly vertical rock outcroppings are a climbers' playground and we spot several, barely visible as tiny, colorful dots, ascending the canyon walls.

We're in Roosevelt National Forest, a land of rock, pine

and cottonwood, on part of the Peak to Peak Scenic Byway that runs from Estes Park south to Black Hawk. The road climbs up and shortly we come upon a turnout for Boulder Falls. We take a short and steep hike up a natural stone stairway to an impressive torrent of water that cascades 70 feet into a shallow pool. The air temperature is in the 80s and the falls make a nice place to cool off.

ALPINE VILLAGES

Our first town is Nederland, an alpine village perched on Barker Reservoir at elevation 8,236 feet. This former mining/milling town was named after Dutch investors who owned the area's mine. It boasts a handful of interesting restaurants, including one featuring Kathmandu food, a fuel station, mining museum and the B&F Mountain Market where we stock up on groceries.

In the market's parking lot, an octagonal building with a "Carousel of Happiness" sign intrigues us. To our delight, it's an operating carousel on an original 1910 Charles Loeff frame and mechanism with animals — from swans to monkeys — hand carved by former Vietnam Marine Scott

COUNTY



A mother and daughter fish off a dock at Grand Lake, Colorado's deepest and largest natural lake.



At a high altitude, Rocky Mountain National Park offers the perfect habitat for elk and their presence often causes "elk jams" along the highway.



Young hikers cool off at Boulder Falls.



Trail Ridge Road in Rocky Mountain National Park offers plenty of turnouts to capture spectacular views.

Harrison. During the past 26 years, rehabbing the carousel became Harrison's passion and, judging from the long list of volunteers, a community project. We watch several giggling girls and one adult go 'round and 'round.

We take Highway 119 south and continue to climb, passing through alpine valleys surrounded by jaw-dropping mountains. As we gain elevation, groves of white-trunked aspen appear, their electric green leaves shimmering in the sunlight against cobalt blue skies.

There are plenty of campgrounds in the area, most are primitive with no services. About 20 miles outside of Nederland and a mile down a hard-pack gravel and dirt road, Golden Gate Canyon State Park offers RVers comfortable sites, including pull-throughs and electric hookups, beneath pines with mountain views. We pull into a shady spot and, as we listen to the wind rustle through aspen leaves, watch the sunset.

Back on the road early the next morning, we enter Arapaho National Forest,

and the road descends into Black Hawk, a former mining town (altitude 8,050 feet). The north end of town has Victorian-era homes, a few old brick buildings, and the remnants of an abandoned mill, but a few blocks farther, glitzy hotels and casinos cram the narrow canyon. Neon signs advertise \$5.99 prime rib and million dollar jackpots. We're not interested and roll through road construction that's straightening this beautiful, curving road so people can get to the casinos faster.

We merge onto Highway 70, passing Idaho Springs and the ruins of several old mines like the Argo. Peak to Peak Scenic Byway and the canyon lands were beautiful, but it's nice to go 55 MPH again. While we spotted few RVs on the scenic byway, Highway 70, with its wide lanes and faster pace, is thick with them. We turn onto Highway 40 toward Winter Park and soon climb again. As the terrain transitions into sloping, aspen-studded alpine meadows and patchy snow, evergreens become smaller and narrower.

We notice standing dead lodge pole

PHOTOS: ANNE WEAVER

piners on the steep hillsides. For several years, the mountain pine beetle has infested the West. In some areas, crews removed the dead trees; in others, the trees stand as a stark testament to natural cycles. The pests have recently moved on and the forests have begun to recover, but the damage still shows.

Up and up some more we go, finally reaching Berthoud Pass and Trailhead at a dizzying 11,307 feet and we cross the Continental Divide. This is where water on the east side flows toward the Atlantic Ocean and on the other, toward the Pacific Ocean. We begin a long, slow descent, with 15 MPH switchbacks, into the village of Winter Park.

In the winter, this upscale town is a mecca for skiers and snowboarders. In the summer, it transforms with activities like ATVing and road- and mountain-biking. We wanted to ascend the Zephyr Express tram to 10,700 feet and streak down on the bobsled-like track, but the Village at Winter Park Resort hasn't officially opened. Opening is based on previ-



This old cabin at Rocky Mountain National Park's Holzwarth Historic Site is one of the oldest former dude ranches in Colorado.

ous year snow levels, and despite the mild weather the place is a ghost town. We ease our disappointment at Carvers Bakery and Café, a from-scratch eatery that's been serving homemade bagels, cinnamon rolls and big breakfasts for 30 years.

Just a few miles down the road, we turn off at Granby Ranch (formerly SolVista Ski area) and jump aboard a chairlift for some stunning area views. The chairlift transports mountain bikers to the top where they can ride the ski trails and bomb down ski hills. For pedestrians like us, the ride is free, and you can ride round-trip or hike down.

This area is great for road biking, too, and we pass plenty of bikers on the road. We also pass Granby Lake and Stillwater Campground, an RV campground with electric, water, picnic tables, fire rings, a boat launch, commanding views of the lake, and, according to campers there, some of the best fishing in Colorado.

We pull into Grand Lake, a quaint, lakefront village filled with cafes, boutiques, candy and souvenir shops, and plenty of activities such as kayaking, horseback riding, and ATV rentals. We park the rig at the public beach and marina and meander through Kauffman House Museum, an old home and hotel that's filled with furniture and artifacts from the 1800s. Across the street at Headwaters Marina, we board a pontoon boat for a tour of the lake. While we ogle million dollar homes, Captain Rudy tells us that Grand Lake, the headwaters of the mighty Colorado River, was gouged out to a depth of 300 feet by glacial action and is the largest natural lake in the state.

We camp for the night at Winding

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River Resort, just a couple of miles out of town. This park, with full hookups, is like an RV dude ranch with activities ranging from horseback riding to nightly campfires and we find it a congenial place to pause.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK AND TRAIL RIDGE ROAD

The following day is free entrance to the park, so we hop into the motorhome and head a few miles north to Rocky Mountain National Park. This is our opportunity to see one of the most beautiful national parks in the country and to drive the infamous Trail Ridge Road. We're not a mile into the park when we spot cars pulled off the road. A mother moose and her baby are browsing in the willows. Another half mile, a huge moose stands next to the road and doesn't move when we leap out to snap photos.

We pull into Holzwarth Historic Site, one of the oldest former dude ranches in Grand County, and walk along the flat, half-mile trail reading the interpretive signs. We also pull out sandwiches and



A young camper shows lots of love for her horse at Winding River Resort.

enjoy the picnic area under shady pines near the parking lot.

After lunch, we check out Timber Creek, one of the RV-accessible campgrounds in the park. Beetle damage has forced rangers to cut the trees so there's no shade and no hookups, but the camp offers level sites, shower houses, picnic tables and fire rings. Like many campgrounds in national parks, RVs are limited to 30 feet.

After Timber Creek, tall snow mark-

ers appear and Trail Ridge Road, the highest continuous road in North America, climbs in earnest. Our ears pop with elevation gain and we round five 15 MPH hairpin turns. We pause briefly at Fairview Curve to admire the sweeping valley vistas below and the surrounding mountains crowned with permanent snowfields. We are truly in the heart of the Rockies.

We pass a small sign that tells us we're two miles above sea level. At an elevation of 10,758, Milner Pass is where you can stand on either side of the Continental Divide and we spot several Class C and B motorhomes in the parking area, but we avoid the crowds and continue upward.

We pause at a wide turnout, Medicine Bow Circle, and, when we step out to take photos, the wind practically knocks us down. We're above the tree line and, from this point on, the road is narrow and without guardrails and feels a little scary.

We pull off at the Alpine Visitor Center, at 11,796 feet, the highest visitor center in the national park system. Informative displays tell us the area can get 35

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feet of snow a year and it takes six weeks to open the road in spring. Temperatures stay below freezing eight months of the year and winds can reach 150 MPH. Today, it's gusting to 50 MPH, almost too hazardous for RV travel. (Rangers post wind warnings, so check before you go.)

There's a well-stocked gift shop, cafe and several alpine hiking trails. We brave the wind and march down the four-mile trail that heads back to Milner Pass and the

Continental Divide. The growing season in this harsh climate lasts only six to 12 weeks and we're charmed by miniature bouquets of blue forget-me-nots, pinkish dwarf clover and yellow buttercup-like alpine avens no more than the size of a half dollar. We haven't gone a half-mile before the cold wind and elevation have us panting and scurrying back to the motorhome.

We continue on, determined to complete Trail Ridge Road. There's a

wide turnout at 12,090 feet and we pull in when we spot a herd of a dozen elk, including a huge bull with a four-point rack, munching on tundra plants. We walk along the narrow road and snap several photos, the elk barely noticing our presence.

A bit farther on, we pass the road's highest point, 12,183 feet. There's no pullout here, but we know we've passed it because the road immediately begins to descend to Estes Park. We smile and give each other high fives. We've done it — experienced Grand County, one of the most beautiful and high altitude places in the U.S. and conquered Trail Ridge, the highest continuous road in North America. ♦



Bobbie Hasselbring is an award-winning travel and food writer and editor of www.realfoodtraveler.com, which covers authentic food and travel. Bobbie owns a 2003 Jayco Greyhawk SS Class C.



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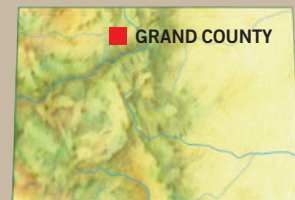
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FREE SPIRIT SS

LEISURE TRAVEL VANS LAUNCHES FIRST-EVER CLASS B CONVERSION WITH STREETSIDE SLIDE

by CHUCK AND TERESA CAMPBELL

Class B van conversions have always been a niche market within the motorhome industry. Despite their limited appeal, they have consistently attracted an ardent and diverse array of potential users, ranging from seniors looking to downsize from larger coaches to purpose-specific enthusiasts who like to use them for touring, sporting events, tailgating, golfing, cycling, surfing and yes, even camping.

Triple E Recreational Vehicles (aka Leisure Travel Vans) of Winkler, Manitoba, Canada, has been involved with van conversions for years, and has worked with the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter commercial platform for more than a decade. In its latest undertaking to produce a Class B with more interior space and improved user friendliness, the company created its first-ever Sprinter conversion with a streetside slideout, and distinctively named it the Free Spirit SS.

The Free Spirit SS is simple and straightforward, with an expandable living room zone up front using a driver's side slideout, mid-coach curbside galley, and a rear bathroom with full

stand-up enclosed shower, vanity and porcelain toilet. What is amazing here is how the manufacturer shoehorned abundant amenities often found in larger motorhomes into this compact, completely self-contained layout.

Leisure Travel Vans offers one Free Spirit SS floorplan with a slideout, but more may follow if the concept catches on. Our extensively outfitted test unit came with many standard appointments such as an 11,000-Btu roof air with heat pump, 600-watt inverter and on-demand water heater to name a few. With these and many others, the suggested base retail price for a Free Spirit SS is \$119,470.

With options, including a 2.5-kW LP-gas genset (\$3,250), removable front pedestal table (\$358), spare tire carrier (\$520) and factory pre-delivery inspection (PDI) thrown in (\$1,500), the retail on the test vehicle, less freight, added up to \$125,098.

ENGINEERING AND CONSTRUCTION

Leisure Travel Vans teamed with a German aerospace engineer for direction and guidance in its Free Spirit SS al-



PHOTOS: CHUCK CAMPBELL



Above: The cockpit of the Free Spirit SS boasts comfortable seating. Right: Corian countertops and lots of storage highlight the galley. Below: Dine at the pedestal table.



LEISURE TRAVEL VANS FREE SPIRIT SS

WHAT'S HOT

Slideout room in Class B floorplan, full dry bathroom, first-rate fuel mileage, superb fit and finish, excellent handling and performance, fun to drive

WHAT'S NOT

No light in rear cargo compartment, problem with fold-out bed, in-dash AM/FM device difficult to operate when driving, sharp corner of floor deck unsafely close to curbside stepwell

teration process. Because of its robust architecture and a strong powertrain originally developed for a long, rugged mercantile life, the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter 3500 chassis makes an ideal candidate as a multiuse, Class B recreational performer.

Conversions like this usually retain most of a van's existing cab, powertrain, suspension and outer steel shell. For the slideout, the company developed a 52-inch-wide by 69-inch-high by 34-inch-deep fiberglass room extension that adds additional residential square footage to the forward living area.

The slideout uses an electrically actuated rack-and-pinion system to move it in and out, and a smooth exterior face designed to blend seamlessly with the motorhome's existing outer shell. It is also equipped with a frameless window with adjustable louvered panes to enhance interior ventilation and keep out the rain.

For the interior floor deck, 1/2-inch plywood sheeting is laid in, while fiberglass batt insulation is installed throughout to help control temperature and enhance interior comfort. High-quality cabinetry and trim is then installed using 5/8-inch fir plywood cores.

Exterior touches that add to the coach's angular, aerodynamic appearance and functionality include molded, fiberglass ground effect fairings along the bottom edges of the body. These features also incorporate forward running boards with steps below driver and passenger doors. As for the generous streetside passenger entry, an electrically actuated step has been added for ease of ingress and egress.

POWERTRAIN AND PERFORMANCE

Dual rear wheel, Sprinter-based vans such as this unit are equipped with a scrappy Mercedes-Benz 3.0-liter BlueTEC V-6 diesel engine that offers up 188-horsepower and 325 lb-ft of torque, with the assistance of a five-speed automatic transmission. As a result, it is capable of excellent off-the-line acceleration, as evidenced by timed speed runs made during our test.

We clocked 0- to 60-MPH dashes averaging 19.4 seconds, with 10-second 40- to 60-MPH intervals. The latter result implied, and later proved to be, a graphic example of the unit's midrange acceleration and passing capabilities.

Our test hop up California's central coast proved enjoyable and informative with the new Free Spirit SS. First off, we

appreciated the well-configured though utilitarian front cabin of the Sprinter-based motorhome, with its comfortable high-back, manually adjustable Ultra-leather captain's seats.

Driving positions are easily tweaked to maximize individual comfort, and views of the dash's well-placed instrument pod with easily readable gauges kept us duly informed of most things going on under the hood. The coach's shift lever is uniquely mounted in the dash and to the driver's right, and is capable of being up or downshifted with the mere tap of a hand.

Driver and passenger are afforded excellent forward and lateral views of the highway and surroundings, thanks to the van's slant nose and seamless, one-piece windshield. Long hours behind the wheel slipped by imperceptibly thanks to the comfortable seating, adjustable wheel position, a relatively quiet powertrain and an absorbent suspension that impeccably smoothed out most highway wrinkles.

In the center of the dash is an AM/FM radio head with 7-inch navigation screen that also includes CD/DVD/and Bluetooth features. This appliance, though well intended, had controls that were rather small and difficult to operate while driv-

ing—even from the passenger's position.

We found the Free Spirit SS had car-like handling characteristics, which rendered it easily maneuverable under just about any circumstance we encountered. Driving this spirited, sleekly sculpted coach with its attractive, silver full-body paint was actually a lot of fun, with each of us logging and enjoying as much time as we could behind the wheel.

Whether navigating narrow urban streets, supermarket parking lots or tight campgrounds, we were able to carve our way through traffic clutter and obstacles of all types with the greatest of accuracy and confidence. The coach even parks conveniently in the average lot, though a little extra rear aisle overhang was noted.

Mountain roads didn't slow this rig down much either, as we were able to maintain a maximum of 62 MPH up 7 percent grades in third gear at 3,000 RPM with seemingly no effort whatsoever. Traversing the steep and often winding and precipitous state Highway 41 from Morro Bay to Atascadero challenged most aspects of the Sprinter's capabilities to the max. During this test leg, the unit performed flawlessly, true to its finely tuned German engineering.

About the only capacity this unit lacked was the ability to make tight U-turns. With a rather wide turning diameter of 54.6 feet, it behooved us to plan these maneuvers carefully to keep from coming up short at the end of the turn.

Besides plenty of go power, the Free Spirit SS demonstrated excellent braking ability under a wide range of circumstances. Added to this, the coach also possesses good engine compression holdback that came in handy while descending the steep and heavily traf-

ficked Cuesta Grade near San Luis Obispo, Calif. Manually downshifting to fourth gear with a sideways tap on the dash-mounted shifter, we maintained a brake-saving 62 MPH at 3,000 RPM.

Driving topography over the course of the test included considerable stretches of freeway, mountain roads and close quarter driving in suburbs and cluttered, touristy towns. Despite this challenging range of highways and byways, we still managed a respectable average fuel consumption of 17.4 MPG.

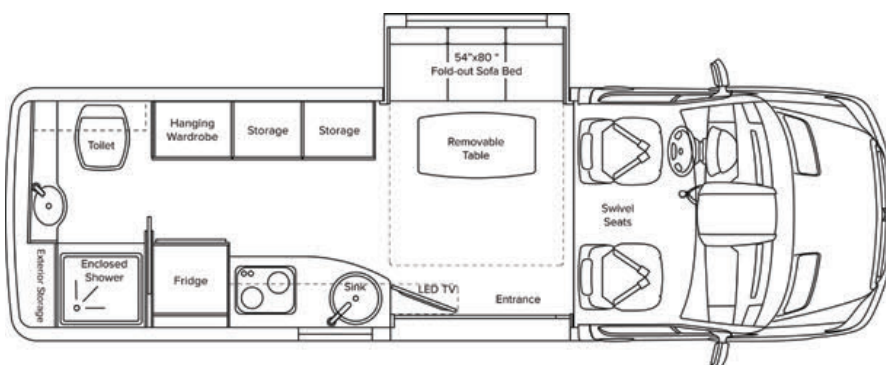
LIVABILITY

Usable residential space is at a premium in any Class B, although Leisure Travel Vans has done a remarkable job of converting the Free Spirit's tight interior footprint into a functional living area. Decor treatments and fabrics used in its transformation are distinctively Euro-modern, and at a level of quality often associated with higher-end Class A's and C's.

Solid, curved wood cabinetry is finished in a cool, White Chocolate veneer with walnut accents, while other features include soft-close drawers, and strategically placed brushed stainless pulls and retractable knobs. Above, the ceiling is finished with a padded, marine-grade vinyl headliner studded with dimmable, low-amp LED lighting fixtures.

Countertops in the galley and bathroom are decked with attractive, solid-surface Corian, while easily cleanable, faux hardwood vinyl lines the floor. A convertible sofa in the slideout module is upholstered in supple Ultraleather with memory foam padding, and the few windows available to the outside use metal mini-blinds or soft, cocoa-colored cloth curtains.

Efficiently packing a Class B for a



SPECIFICATIONS

PERFORMANCE

FUEL ECONOMY: 17.4 MPG

ACCELERATION:

0-60 MPH: 19.4 SEC

40-60 MPH: 10.0 SEC

CHASSIS

MANUFACTURER: MERCEDES-BENZ

MODEL: SPRINTER 3500

ENGINE: 3.0-L V-6 TURBODIESEL

SAE HP: 188 HP @ 3,800 RPM

TORQUE: 325 LB-FT @ 1,400-2,400 RPM

TRANSMISSION: 5-SPEED AUTOMATIC

AXLE RATIO: 4.18:1

TIRES: LT215/85R16

WHEELBASE: 170"

BRAKES, F/R: HYDRAULIC DISC WITH ABS

SUSPENSION, F/R: INDEPENDENT WITH MONO-LEAF SPRING AND STABILIZER/LEAF SPRING WITH STABILIZER BAR

FUEL CAP: 26.4 GAL

WARRANTY: 3 YRS/36,000 MILES

COACH

EXT LENGTH: 23' 3"

EXT WIDTH: 6' 9"

EXT HEIGHT: 9' 9"

INT WIDTH: 5' 10"

INT HEIGHT: 6' 3"

CONSTRUCTION: STEEL VAN SHELL, FIBERGLASS BATT INSULATION

FRESHWATER CAP: 36 GAL

BLACK-WATER CAP: 19 GAL

GRAY-WATER CAP: 42 GAL

WATER-HEATER: ON-DEMAND

LP-GAS CAP: 8.3 GAL

AIR CONDITIONER: 11,000 BTU

FURNACE: 16,000 BTU

REFRIGERATOR: 3.8 CU-FT

INVERTER: 600 WATT

BATTERY: (3): 1 12-VOLT CHASSIS, 2 6-VOLT COACH

GENERATOR: 2.5 KW LP-GAS

BASE MSRP: \$119,470

MSRP AS TESTED: \$125,098

WARRANTY: 2 YRS/24,000 MILES

WET WEIGHT

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

FRONT AXLE: 3,780 LBS

REAR AXLE: 5,602 LBS

TOTAL: 9,382 LBS

CHASSIS RATINGS

GAWR, F/R: 4,410/7,720 LBS

GVWR/GCWR: 11,030/15,250 LBS

ROCCC: 1,648 LBS

(DEDUCT WEIGHT OF PASSENGERS FOR NET CARGO CAPACITY)

GAWR: GROSS AXLE WEIGHT RATING

GVWR: GROSS VEHICLE WEIGHT RATING

GCWR: GROSS COMBINATION WEIGHT RATING

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

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road trip requires forethought and some serious prioritizing in regard to what goes and what stays. In the case of the Free Spirit SS, there was relatively more that went than stayed, thanks to an abundance of interior storage receptacles, and a rear exterior compartment that made our efforts considerably easier.

A large, mid-coach streetside bank of cupboards and drawers represents ample interior storage potential. This lengthy floor-to-ceiling structure is appointed with a 22-inch-wide by 54-inch-high by 15-inch-deep wardrobe closet, multiple drawers and several smaller cupboards. Overhead cabinets are also sited above the couch, while curbside, the galley is fitted with overhead cabinets, and a cupboard and drawers beneath the Corian counter.

Exterior cargo options are singularly represented by a double-door compartment in the rear of the coach that affords approximately 19 cubic feet of space. This shelved, rather shallow area varies in depth from 7 to 9 inches, but encompasses the entire height and width of the unit.

Although inherently limited, the rear compartment can accept an assortment of smaller and taller items such as toolboxes, folding chairs, golf clubs, electrical cords, hoses, etc. And considering the coach's wet weight of 9,382 pounds, it can carry a maximum combined load of passengers and cargo up to 1,648 pounds before exceeding its gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) of 11,030 pounds.

We packed light and tight, which included frozen dinners slid into the modest freezer of the 3.8-cubic-foot, three-way refrigerator. Plenty of canned goods were also stashed away in several cupboards for use on the two-burner gas stove with fold-down, tempered glass cover. Although there is limited counter space in the galley, the lidded stovetop and an insert for the deep, round stainless steel sink allow for a level workspace in excess of 6 square feet.

Once meals were prepared using the stove and microwave/convection oven, we dined on the unit's 23-by-54-inch portable pedestal table. We ate comfortably, though there wasn't a whole lot of extra surface space available.

Also included for an extra guest or two is a 16-by-24-inch, cocktail-size pedestal

table that is likewise collapsible and stows away with the main table in the rear street-side wardrobe closet. Outfitted with the above appointments and appliances, we cooked and ate remarkably well considering the constraints of the Class B's interior.

When dinner was finished, we rotated both cockpit captain's chairs rearward to create a relaxing and comfortable living room layout. This welcoming area made the perfect place to recount our daily progress and relax with a few books we had brought along. We also enjoyed a bit of background music from the coach's in-dash AM/FM/CD player. Later, we watched a DVD on the 22-inch, LED TV mounted on a swing-out arm above the curbside doorframe.

Sleeping arrangements in this unit are for two people only, and consists of the convertible sofa that folds out to a 54-by-80-inch bed. We unfortunately had a less than enjoyable experience with this fixture that resulted in a very uncomfortable night's sleep.

When folded out, the upper and lower segments of the couch that were supposed to meet evenly in the middle did not. As a result, the sleeping surface was more like a hammock than a bed, with a distinct dip in the middle.

Later, discussing this experience with the manufacturer, we were assured that our situation was an anomaly, and that all other couches in existing units conformed to specifications.

In a Class B of any size, a rear bathroom with standup enclosed shower, toilet with 19 inches of foot space, and a decent-size vanity are surprising and welcome amenities. For the duration of our stay in the unit, this residential feature added considerably to our personal comfort level.

Interior ventilation in the Free Spirit is quite good, thanks mainly to the cross flow of air between its louvered slideout windows and the curbside door opening measuring approximately 45 inches wide by 74 inches high. This generous portal also features a retractable metal screen that can be pulled snugly in place to allow added airflow, and enables increased viewing to the outside.

If Class B's are to your liking, the new Free Spirit SS from Leisure Travel



Top: The rear bathroom has a decent-size vanity and a standup enclosed shower. Above: A rear storage compartment accommodates taller items.

Vans may just be the ticket. With a turbo-diesel powered Mercedes-Benz 3500 van chassis, rakishly attractive exterior, Euro-based interior with extra slideout living space, and a full bathroom, there aren't too many places this coach won't be appreciated — in form as well as function. ♦



Chuck Campbell served 31 years as a sworn member of a state law enforcement agency before retiring. He is a frequent contributor to *MotorHome* and enjoys traveling in his Class C.

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Jan. 9-13	Progressive Insurance Chicago Boat, Sports & RV Show	Chicago, IL
Jan 11-13	Progressive Insurance North Carolina RV & Camping Show	Greensboro, NC
Jan. 11-13	Progressive Insurance Washington Camping RV Expo	Chantilly, VA
Jan. 17-20	Progressive Insurance Mid-America RV Show	Kansas City, MO
Jan. 18-20	Progressive Insurance New Jersey RV & Camping Show	Edison, NJ
Feb. 7-10	Progressive Insurance Minneapolis/St. Paul RV, Vacation & Camping Show	Minneapolis, MN
Feb. 8-10	Progressive Insurance Richmond Camping RV Expo	Richmond, VA
Feb. 14-17	Progressive Insurance Kansas Sports, Boat & Travel Show	Valley Center, KS
Feb. 15-17	Progressive Insurance North Carolina RV & Camping Show	Charlotte, NC
Feb. 15-18	Progressive Insurance Atlantic City RV Show	Atlantic City, NJ
Feb. 22-24	Progressive Insurance South Carolina RV & Camping Show	Greenville, SC
Feb. 28 – Mar. 3	Progressive Insurance Colorado RV, Sports, Boat & Travel Show	Denver, CO
Mar. 8-10	Progressive Insurance Virginia RV Show	Hampton, VA
April 12-14	Progressive Insurance Rhode Island RV & Camping Show & Sale	Providence, RI
TBD	Progressive Insurance El Paso RV Show	El Paso, TX
May 8-11	Progressive Insurance Great Milwaukee RV Fair	West Allis, WI

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JACKED UP

HAVING THE RIGHT LEVELING JACK PADS HELPS SMOOTH OUT ROUGH SURFACES

by E. DON SMITH

To many motorhome owners, jack pads are simply a nuisance item they are forced to use at upscale RV resorts in order to protect the decorative concrete at these posh locations. Not only is the concrete stamped and stained, it is also perfectly level and the only purpose the jacks serve is to stabilize the motorhome.

There is another group of motorhome owners who value their jack pads and use them regularly, even without a mandate. They are camping in unimproved areas, state fairgrounds, dog show lots and fields at NASCAR and other racetracks. At these places, jack pads are important, and these motorhome owners would not consider leaving home without them. If you



This is what happens if you don't use a quality pad when parked on grass and the soil gets soaked during your stay. Not only are the jacks a mess, they can get stuck if the soil is soft enough.

PHOTOS: E. DON SMITH

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RAMBLE JACK PAD



These molded plastic pads from Ramble work well if you are using them on flat concrete or asphalt.

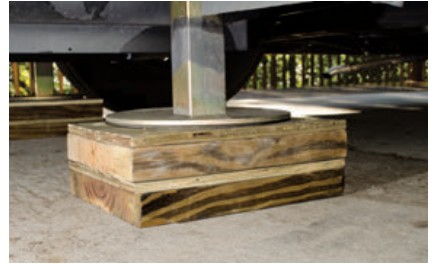
If you are going to use your jack pads on uneven surfaces, make sure you buy one of the thicker pads or they will deform or break like these did in our bending test.

BIGFOOT JACK PAD



The 2-inch-thick pad from Bigfoot was the only 2-inch-thick pad in our test and as you can see it shows no signs of bending. Many of the other manufacturers also produce 2-inch-thick pads and are worth considering if you expect to subject your pads to extreme conditions.

HOMEMADE JACK PAD



One advantage of the homemade pads is that you can get a lot of height out of them for a low cost. This prevents the jacks from extending as far and helps you get your coach level on uneven sites.

Our homemade jack pads also fared well in the bending test.

are one of these adventurous types who are not afraid to drop your jacks in uneven and unimproved locations, this article is for you.

When you search online or look in retail stores you will find a wide range of jack pads priced from as little as \$40 for a set of four, up to \$300 or more. When I began researching this topic, I could not imagine how the price could vary so much for what appears to be the same product. The truth is they are not all the same; there is a tremendous difference in the form and function of various jack pads.

The way you use your motorhome will dictate the type of pad you need and the cost.

To save money, some motorhome owners make their own jack pads. After all, anyone with a circular saw and a drill can fabricate a homemade set of pads in about an hour at a cost of less than \$40. With that in mind, what could possibly motivate anyone to spend \$100, \$200 or even \$300 for a set of four jack pads? That is just one of many questions we will answer as we point you toward the best jack pad for your coach.

First, we need to define what a

jack pad is and what it does before we compare the features and benefits. Jack pads are solid units (made of various materials) that are placed under your motorhome's jacks. The pads are designed to serve four functions: spread out the load of the jack foot onto a larger area to prevent that load from sinking into the subgrade; protect the subgrade (decorative concrete, paver stones, soft soil, sand, asphalt, etc.) from being damaged by the foot of the jack; provide additional lift to allow the coach to obtain a level position when parked on

HOSSPAD JACK PAD



The Hosspad is designed to bend and conform to difficult subgrades and showed no signs of stress after this test.

OFL JACK PAD



The OFL pads come in a handy carrying case to make storage easier.

Even though OFL's 1-inch-thick pad deformed under the load of a 32,000-pound coach in our bending test, it showed no signs of failure and could be used again. OFL also offers 2-inch-thick pads.

uneven ground; and provide an even surface for the motorhome jack foot to press against when parked on rocky or uneven subgrades.

There are several characteristics that help the jack pads perform these four functions. First, the pad should be strong enough to support the load of the motorhome and spread it out over the subgrade. If you always park on asphalt, concrete or hard-packed dry soil, then a jack pad will simply transfer the load to the subgrade with no deformation of the pad. If you park on grass, sand or very soft soil, however, and have a heavy motorhome, you can expect the pad to deflect under the load of the coach. In that case, a rigid and strong jack pad is needed.

Another factor that comes into play regarding stiffness of the pad and the condition of the subgrade is the total size of the jack pad. Naturally, a large jack pad offers a lot more surface area to spread out the weight of the coach, but it also allows for more deflection of the pad assuming the same thickness and material type. Many manufacturers offer different size pads in addition to different thicknesses. If you have a heavy 45-foot tag axle bus and intend on using it on soft soils, not only should you get a larger pad in terms of surface area, but you will also need a thicker pad to prevent it from bending if subjected to uneven or soft ground conditions. Many manufacturers offer thicknesses of 3/4-inch, 1 inch, 2 inches or more if needed. Of course the cost and weight goes up along with the thickness.

One of the most demanding uses of jack pads in the commercial world is for outriggers on construction equipment such as cranes, backhoes, utility trucks, etc. In these applications, where failure can result in the loss of human life, you will typically see 2-inch-thick (or more) pads with a large surface area used to prevent the outriggers from deflecting or settling into the ground and allowing the equipment to become unstable.

In order to simply protect decorative concrete or prevent the foot of the jack from scarring the asphalt, most any commercially sold jack pad will do the job. Even plastic kitchen cutting boards will

SUMMIT JACK PAD



The 1-inch-thick pad from Summit deformed in our bending test but it bounced back with no signs of damage.

DICA JACK PAD



The DICA pads come with a convenient carrying case to make storage easier.

The .71-inch-thick DICA pad deflected in our bending test so you may want to step up to the 1-inch-thick version if you anticipate high loads on uneven ground. The molded handle was our favorite of the group and makes retrieval quick and easy using an awning rod.

WAL-MART CUTTING BOARD



The cutting board may work well on flat concrete or asphalt but don't expect it to bridge difficult subgrade conditions or prevent the jack feet from sinking into soft soil or sand. From our tests these are best left in the kitchen.

were constructed out of pressure-treated 2-by-10-inch lumber cut to 12-inch lengths that were then laminated on top and bottom with half-inch pressure-treated plywood and screwed together with construction screws. For those of you who rely simply on pressure-treated lumber cut to length, you will find that as the lumber dries over time the boards will split. This can be eliminated by the use of plywood (also pressure-treated) top and bottom, and of course the plywood adds some thickness as well.

Thickness and rigidity are important aspects of a jack pad, but as pads get thicker and more rigid they will naturally become heavier, which not only makes them more difficult to store but also harder to load and unload. In our scores we rated each pad on weight and amount

work in this instance. If that is your only need, save your money for other things and buy the cheapest pads you can find.

The next desirable feature of jack

pads is to provide lift to help obtain a level coach on uneven ground. To achieve this function the thickest pads are by definition the best. Our homemade pads

Brand	Dimensions (in inches)	Total Area (in sq. inches)	Thickness (in inches)	Weight (in pounds)	Material	Color	Handle
Bigfoot	14 x 14	196	2	12	Ultra-high molecular weight polyethylene (UHMWPE)	Black	Rope
Bigfoot	15.5 x 15.5	240	1.55	11	UHMWPE	Orange	Rope
Cutting Block	18 x 12	216	0.34	2.5	Poly	White	Molded handle
Dica	14.5 x 14.5	225	0.71	4.8	Thermoplastic	Black	Tuffgrip handle
Dica	17.5 x 17.5	306	0.73	7.5	Thermoplastic	Black	Tuffgrip handle
Homemade	9.25 x 12	111	2.45	6	PT wood	Natural	Cutouts
Hosspad	11.5 x 11.5	132	1.16	5.1	Recycled rubber	Black	Rope
Hosspad	14.5 x 14.5	210	1.16	8	Recycled rubber	Black	Rope
OFL	16 x 16	256	1	8.5	Poly composite	Yellow	Steel cable
Ramble (sold at Camping World)	14.125 x 14.125	200	0.5	1.5	Polyethylene	Orange	Molded handle
Summit	15.75 x 15.75	248	1	7.9	UHMWPE	Black	Molded handle

of lift so you will have to balance these aspects against your needs and budget.

An ideal jack pad should be easy to clean and to place under the motorhome. Many of the jack pads we tested are made from a hard plastic material that is naturally impervious to water, dirt, mud, etc., making them ideal for use in these areas. One product (Hosspad) takes a different approach. It is made from recycled tires, which offers some unique advantages. For example, if you are setting up on rocky soil or crushed seashells, the rubber pad conforms to the uneven subgrade very well. The drawback is that the pad is somewhat heavy and not as stiff as some of the other pads we tested.

All of the products tested also have a molded handle, a cutout or a rope/cable to allow you to easily reach them under your motorhome and move them around. This feature makes retrieving them very easy with an awning rod and prevents you from having to get on your hands and knees and crawl under the coach to reach them. Two of the manufacturers (Dica and OFL) even include a convenient storage bag that can help prevent the pads from dragging dirt into the basement of your coach.

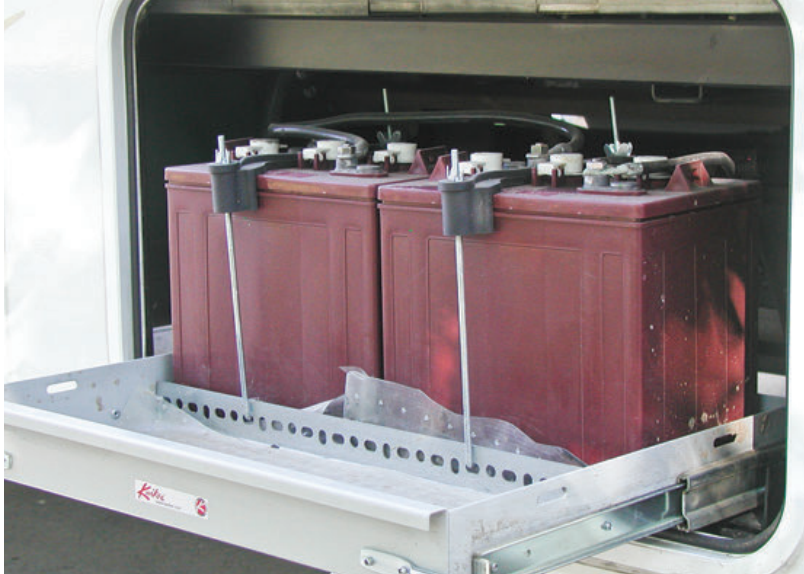
In most comparison tests here at *MotorHome*, we rate products on a variety of factors and then total them up for a winning score. However, for this test

the total scores are not meaningful since we can't possibly capture the intended use of the jack pad for every motorhome owner. So instead of giving a total score, we have simply ranked each product (including our own homemade pads) in each category, with 1 being "poor" and 5 being "best." You can look at the scores and compare them to your needs and pick the pad that most closely suits your needs. ♦



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

Price for 4	Notes	Performance Factors								Website
		Weight	Bend Testing	Lift	Cleanability	Handle	Surface Area	Cost	Conforms to difficult, uneven surface	
\$304	Lifetime guarantee, other sizes available up to 4 inches thick	1	5	5	5	4	3	1	1	www.outriggerpads.com
\$176	Lifetime guarantee, other sizes available up to 4 inches thick	1	4	5	5	4	4	3	1	www.outriggerpads.com
\$40		5	1	1	5	2	3	5	2	www.walmart.com
\$220	Other sizes available, lifetime guarantee	4	2	2	5	5	3	2	1	www.dicausa.com
\$300	Other sizes available, lifetime guarantee	3	2	2	5	5	5	1	1	www.dicausa.com
\$40	Homemade	3	5	5	1	1	1	5	1	N/A
\$100	Conforms to irregular ground surface, lifetime guarantee	4	1	3	3	3	1	4	5	www.outbackq.com
\$150	Conforms to irregular ground surface, lifetime guarantee	3	1	3	3	3	3	3	5	www.outbackq.com
\$163	Other sizes available, lifetime guarantee	2	3	2	5	3	4	3	1	www.outdoors-for-life.com
\$36		5	1	1	5	2	3	5	2	www.campingworld.com
\$228	Other sizes available, lifetime guarantee	3	3	2	5	2	4	2	1	www.rvstainless.com



UPGRADE BATTERY CAPACITY WITH A SIMPLE RETROFIT

by LARRY DOYLE

BOOST YOUR BATTERY BANK

Ever wish you could add more battery capacity to your Class C motorhome, just like you might find in the big Class A coaches? Here's an alternative that just might fit the bill without breaking the bank.

Last year I bought a used 2007 Jayco 31SS Class C motorhome equipped with an RV/marine deep-cycle 12-volt battery. The coach is well built and thoughtfully designed, but I need additional battery capacity to run my continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine while I sleep. The challenge was to install enough battery capacity to run the coach's heater and my CPAP machine all night without the need to run the onboard generator.

I went through the power requirement calculations and couldn't find a solution that would give me the required capacity to run the CPAP machine for eight hours each night in a single battery.

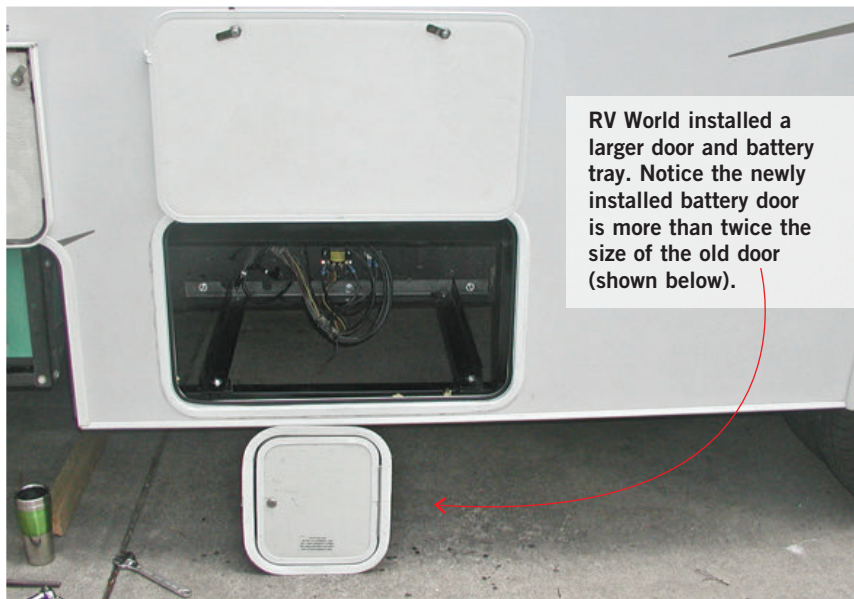
My Jayco came equipped with a single pullout tray with room for only one battery; I had to find a way to add more batteries. I searched online and found some RVers who solved the problem by placing additional batteries in other motorhome storage compartments. That solution came with three additional challenges: I would have to give up storage capacity in my coach, I would have to run long cables to other compartments, and if I used wet-cell batteries I would also

have to consider how to vent the batteries for safety. I chose to upgrade the battery capacity in the space already provided.

I went to a local RV repair shop, RV World in Fort Collins, Colo., and discussed the problem with one of the owners, Tyler Gesick. He recommended replacing the existing battery tray and door with a larger one. An RV World service technician first removed the existing battery tray and door for the house batteries and then installed a door wide enough to accommodate a pullout tray with sufficient capacity to hold four house batteries.

The cost for the door was \$50.

I ordered a Kwikkee locking pullout tray from Power Gear/Kwikkee Products for \$140. These trays are built-to-order and the lead time was four weeks. It turned out I needed that much time to design and build the support structure for the tray. The support brackets would have to accommodate four batteries and the tray, all of which weighed 240 pounds at full load. To support the outside end, I welded together 2-inch, 14-gauge square stock with angle tabs to attach to the frame extension that supports the motor-



RV World installed a larger door and battery tray. Notice the newly installed battery door is more than twice the size of the old door (shown below).

PHOTOS: LARRY DOYLE

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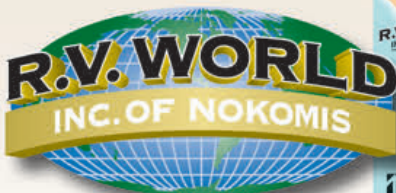
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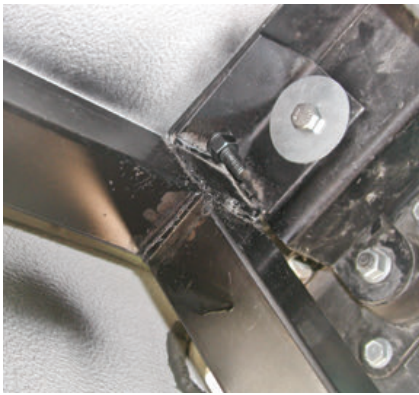
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The author attached the battery frame to the motorhome body frame using 14-gauge square stock.

home floor.

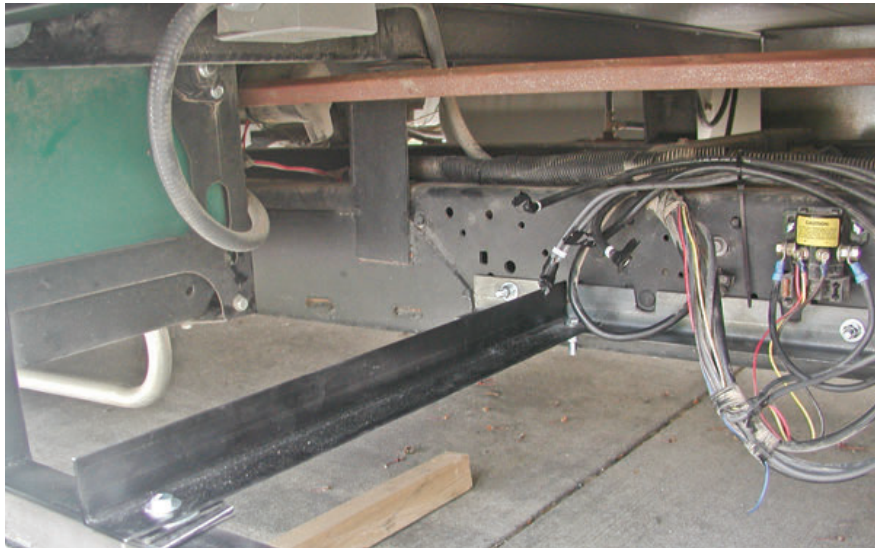
I added a 2-inch angle iron bracket to the front and bolted two 2-inch angle iron brackets between the frame and the structure I built to hang from the floor frame. The metal for the frame and supports cost me \$120 and the fastening hardware came to \$50.

It was necessary to shim under the angle iron coming from the coach's frame as I had been a little off on my measurements, and I wanted a level pullout tray. The tray was then bolted to the 2-inch angle iron.

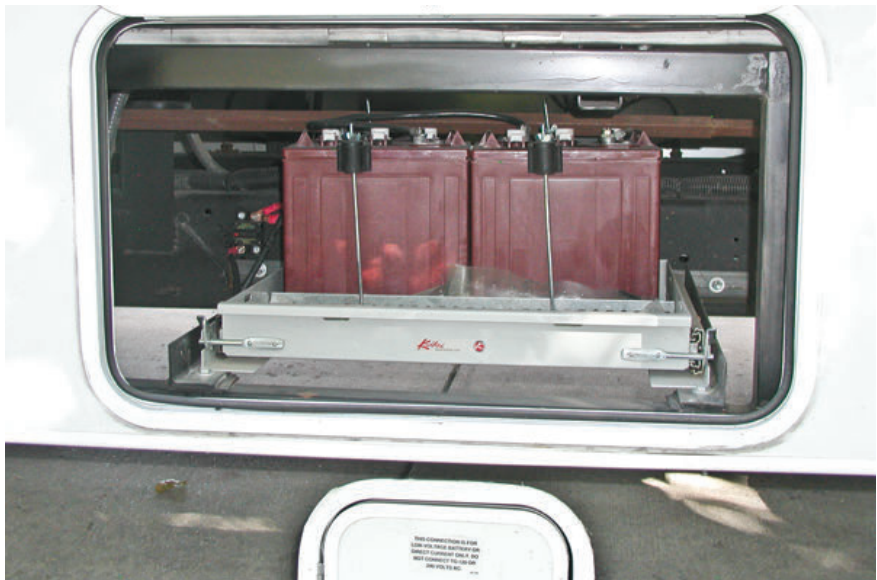


Two angle brackets were welded to the battery tray frame to provide an attachment to the body support that extends from the motorhome chassis.

For batteries, I chose a pair of Trojan T105 (\$335) 6-volt golf cart batteries. With two batteries I have 220 amp hours of power. The tray is large enough to install another set of batteries, so if I find I need additional capacity in the future I can add two more batteries and double my capacity.



The completed frame with tray support rails is ready for the tray installation.



The newly installed battery tray holds a pair of Trojan 6-volt golf cart batteries.

I did encounter a few problems on this project. After trying to attach a wire to the incorrect terminal of the batteries, I blew my 400-watt inverter. I searched for a direct replacement but found the model was no longer made. I contacted Jayco and was told the company is now installing the Xantrex PRO Inverter XM 1000 (1,000-watt inverter) so I ordered one online. I then found that the only plug powered by the inverter was the one by the TV. Because I needed a plug next to the bed that would be powered from the inverter to run my CPAP, I installed another outlet and split

the AC line coming out of the inverter.

With the new inverter, Xantrex recommended a 150-amp fuse between the battery and the coach. Fuses can be challenging. If you blow one and don't have a spare you are dead in the water. I opted for a 150-amp DC circuit breaker (\$44) mounted on the frame instead of the fuse. It gives me a visible way to see if anything has blown, I don't have to buy and stock additional fuses, and if something happens on the road I can fix the problem and reset the circuit breaker.

For battery tie-downs, I used some



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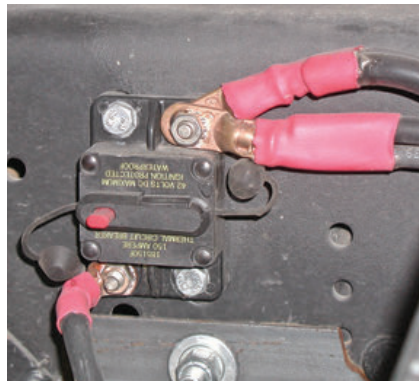


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A 150-amp DC circuit breaker was installed to protect the motorhome's entire DC system. This was installed instead of a 150-amp fuse.

rubber clamps with hooks to the back of the tray and to an angle iron that I attached to the tray. I will probably rework these tie-downs into a plastic frame that mounts to the top of the batteries and hooks to the frame as I had a little movement during a recent trip.

RV World was willing to let me do

what I could handle and they did the rest. I welded the outboard frame and cut and installed the interior angle iron brackets. I also installed the new inverter (under the bed) and the AC outlet on the bed pedestal. This undoubtedly saved me several hundred dollars.

RV World installed the door, removed the old battery box and did the final electrical connection for the circuit breaker and battery cables (\$40) to allow easy pull out of the tray. The total project cost was \$1,276, with most of that (\$1,066) coming from hardware. Labor was only \$210 and I could have saved \$287 had I not blown the inverter.

Now I can run the heater and CPAP all night without using the generator. We just returned from a 3,700-mile trip and everything worked very well. ♦



Larry Doyle recently retired from the computer technology field and is now a freelance writer and inventor. He and his wife, Susie, enjoy exploring in their 2007 Jayco 31SS Class C motorhome.

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TEMPERATURE-CONTROLLED ELECTRONICS

Our Monaco Class A has the TV and home theater components, as well as the DirecTV satellite receiver, in a compartment over the driver's dash. With this area located against the roof and front windshield, the temperature inside can exceed 122 degrees Fahrenheit. Since we listen to music via the DirecTV satellite while driving, and the components won't work if the compartment's temperature is more than 122 degrees, we solved the problem by removing the tinted glass on the hinged front door of the compartment and replacing it with a decorative sheet-metal grille from Lowe's. The glass was used as a template for cutting the grille to size. We used clear silicone to install the grille in place of the glass. Finally, to help move the air, we installed an on/off switch for a small personal-size fan and placed it in the compartment.

KAREN AND COLLINS FRIEDEL | ELGIN, ILL.

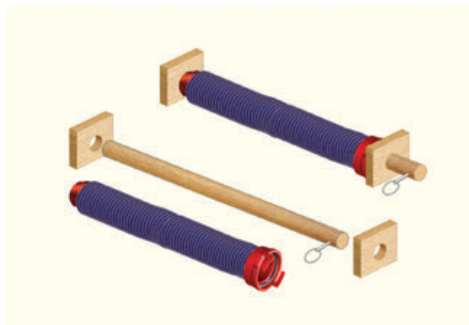
COMPACT STORAGE SOLUTION

I carry 40 feet of sewer hose, which is cut into four 8- to 12-foot-long pieces, with each section fitted with connectors. This allows me

to hook up easily in almost any RV park, no matter where the drain is located. My problem was how to store 40 feet of uncompacted hose in a storage bay. Since the undercarriage of my coach wouldn't accommodate a sewer hose storage cylinder, I designed my own storage bars.

I cut a 1¹/₄-inch-thick dowel into a 2¹/₂-foot length and cut a piece of 1-by-4 board into two squares. I screwed the first square to one end of the dowel and then drilled a 1³/₈-inch hole in the center of the second square. When I need to store the sewer hose, I compact a section onto the dowel and then push the second square over the end of the dowel. I insert a small, cotterless hitch pin in a hole in the dowel to hold the hose tight. I made four of these bars to provide compact and stackable storage for my sewer hose sections.

BARRY PEBBLES | PENSACOLA, FLA. ♦



STORAGE THAT CAN HANG

We found our camper van did not have a place to put our stuff when we settled in for the night. Using some fabric that was very similar to the upholstery in the motorhome, I made a couple of these hanging storage bags. There is space to hold toiletries, a book, a water bottle and a pair of eyeglasses. The entire bag is attached with little upholstery screws into the fabric panel that runs along the underside of the cabinets in the back of the motorhome.

**RHONDA VAN HEYST
EDMONTON, ALBERTA, CANADA**

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

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

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HANDS-ON | by BOB LIVINGSTON

DISH POINTING MADE EASY

Winegard's Carryout Anser hybrid portable antenna is almost automatic and makes quick work of finding the right satellite

Owners who subscribe to satellite TV for their motorhomes must rely on a dish antenna to bring in the signal. While many motorhomes are fitted with rooftop dishes, those who frequent campgrounds where trees and heavy vegetation grace the landscape know that receiving a signal is not always possible. The alternative for frustrated satellite signal seekers, and those who don't have a rooftop dish, is a portable system. Winegard, a popular manufacturer of antenna products for RVs, has introduced the Carryout Anser to make portable dish setup almost automatic and less expensive.

While portability has its benefits, setting up a dish that seeks the satellite automatically is much more convenient than using standard hardware requiring manual pointing. Winegard splits the difference with its new Anser, calling it a hybrid automatic portable satellite antenna, and it can be purchased for \$399.

The Anser is uniquely designed, looking like a globe with the top lopped off. It weighs only 16 pounds and can be transported by the built-in handle, but it's on the bulky side so it may be challenging to find an adequate storage compartment in some rigs. Nevertheless, it employs a number of features that make it practical as a tag-along antenna, even if the motorhome is fitted with a rooftop dish.

Foremost in the benefits column, the Anser can be placed up to 25 feet from the motorhome. That makes it fairly easy to find an open view of the southern sky, unless you're parked in the jungle. It can be set on the ground, picnic table or mounted on an adjustable tripod mount (TR-1518) sold by Winegard. The tripod makes it easy to keep the dish out of standing water, which can damage the unit. It can only take winds up to 35 MPH, so the tripod anchor improves the odds the dish won't shift and lose the signal.

Compatible satellites for the Anser allow Dish and Bell service subscribers to receive HD service while DirecTV is limited to standard programming. Since the Carryout Anser has a larger



PHOTOS: BOB LIVINGSTON

reflector, Dish HD programming can be received from a single satellite rather than toggle between three, which is common with many automatic antennas. Locking onto a single satellite also makes it easier to find an unobstructed view to the sky.

Operation is simple. Once the elevation is determined, the top part of the dish is rotated to line up with the proper number embossed on the side and locked in place. The user connects the Anser to the receiver (most motorhomes have portable satellite connections outside or in a storage compartment). The power cable is plugged into 12-volt DC power and the dish automatically orients to the proper azimuth. The power cable is then unplugged and TV is ready to be watched. Both provided cables are 25 feet, but a 50-foot power cable is available. In some cases, the receiver might have to be programmed, but that's an intuitive process.

We hooked the Anser up to a DirecTV receiver and the dish found the satellite in a couple of minutes. Once locked in, the signal continued to feed the receiver for the duration of our trip. At one point, we strung a second coax (two outputs provided) to our friends next door to connect to their receiver.

Sure beats fumbling with manual dish antennas.
Winegard, 800-288-8094, www.winegard.com ♦

Labor Pains

ATTEMPTING TO GET REIMBURSED FOR REPAIR CHARGES, TWO READERS ASKED HOT LINE TO GET INVOLVED. THEY WROTE:

Last year we experienced minor damage to the rear passenger side of our Tiffin Allegro Bay coach. The accident happened as I was making a turn in a difficult location and the rear swung approximately 3 feet and contacted a 3-foot-high platform. I promptly contacted my GMAC insurance and was assigned a claim number through agent Amy Sams. She instructed me to get an estimate at an RV repair shop of my choice and have the shop contact her.

I selected Ansley RV in Duncansville, Pa., which is located 50 miles from our home. The repair estimate from Ansley RV was \$7,257.80. I emailed the estimate to Sams and promptly received a check from GMAC in the amount of \$5,124.38 — \$2,133.42 lower than the estimate.

I contacted Ansley RV and talked with the shop manager about the discrepancy, noting that my \$500 deductible would not make up the difference. He told me that they were prepared, if possible, to perform the repairs on the lesser amount with the understanding that if unforeseen or extensive repairs were required beyond the approved amount, Ansley RV would advise GMAC of any additional charges and GMAC would approve and pay the additional charges. Parts were ordered and the repair date was confirmed.

The following month, I received a call from Ansley RV telling me that GMAC had refused to pay Ansley RV's established labor rate and as such Ansley RV could not repair the coach. With parts already on order, and having the difficulty of finding another acceptable repair shop, I told Ansley RV to go ahead and bill the additional labor cost to me. This additional charge was \$888.

We are asking Hot Line's assistance in having GMAC reimburse us for the labor charges of \$888.

**MARYLEE AND JIM OSIPOV
JOHNSTOWN, PA.**



On average, standard labor rates across the country range from \$80 to \$100 per hour. At \$115 per hour, Ansley RV's labor rate was definitely on the high side. We sent the Osipovs' request for reimbursement to GMAC Insurance Co., and a company representative responded to the Osipovs as follows:

This letter will follow up our telephone conversations wherein we discussed the situation with your shop's labor rates, and I offered to compromise and split the difference with you. Enclosed please find a check in the amount of \$444 to represent this offer.

Although you certainly have the right to have your vehicle repaired at your shop of choice, we are not necessarily bound to pay the shop's requested labor rate. In this instance, your shop was charging \$115/hour, whereas we have verification that other shops in the area charge \$85 to \$90/hour. Our revised appraisal allowed for \$95/hour, which is more than fair.

Our notes indicate that we did discuss this with your shop and at no time did they tell us that they would be looking to you to pay the difference. Furthermore, our notes show that your claim representative, Amy Sams, did contact you to advise of the revised estimate and that the check was being issued. At no time did we receive contact from you or the shop stating that the shop was looking to you to pay the difference.

**HOLLY WILSON | CLAIM MANAGER
NATIONAL GENERAL ASSURANCE CO.,
A GMAC INSURANCE COMPANY
WINSTON-SALEM, N.C.**

GENSET UPSET

Attempting to obtain a refund for expenses he believed were the responsibility of a manufacturer, a reader asked Hot Line to get involved. He explained:

My 2006 Monaco Cayman motorhome had a problem with the Onan 5500 generator. The generator would not start and was leaking oil. When I tried

to remove the dipstick, it wouldn't come out. I took the coach to a local Onan shop, Cummins Cal Pacific in Ventura, Calif., for repairs. The service technician at Cal Pacific investigated the problem and found that the dipstick tube was cracked and the dipstick had taken a wrong turn, which caused major damage to the internal components of the generator.

My Monaco Extended Care extended warranty covered most of the \$3,412.90 repair bill, minus shipping costs and my deductible (\$451). I contacted the corporate office of Cummins Cal Pacific and requested reimbursement for the \$451. The customer service representative I spoke with said he understood my problem but Onan would not reimburse me because my extended warranty had covered all the parts.

The generator only had 157 hours on it when this happened. I know this generator is out of warranty, but it is like brand new and this seems to me to be an engineering problem. Anything Hot Line can do to help me would be appreciated.
MIKE PARKER | SIMI VALLEY, CALIF.

Even though it seemed highly unlikely that the manufacturer would pay for Parker's shipping charges or deductible, especially given that the generator was out of warranty, we forwarded his complaint to Cummins Cal Pacific LLC in Irvine, Calif. Soon after, we received a follow-up letter from Parker that filled us in on the outcome of his case. He wrote:

I want to thank Hot Line for its help in getting the above situation resolved with great satisfaction. I spoke with Dan Elliott at Cummins Cal Pacific of Ventura and he offered to cover the shipping costs (\$251) for parts and also agreed to cover \$100 of my \$200 deductible. I was extremely pleased with the conversation I had with Elliott and I would recommend Cummins Cal Pacific even if we had not resolved this matter. They do great work and really appreciate their customers concerns. ♦

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

Front End Alignment

We own a 2000 American Eagle 40-foot diesel-pusher motorhome. I recently replaced all six tires with new Goodyear tires. I have no issues with abnormal or uneven wear and no steering issues. Should this coach have a front-end alignment because of the new tires and to help protect my investment? How often should this type of motorhome have an alignment?

JOHN ARCH | VIA EMAIL

Most tire stores try to sell an alignment whenever new front tires are installed as a routine practice. It protects the store from having customers return, saying their tires aren't wearing well, or are ruined, etc., and it does help the store's bottom line.

I suggest that wheel alignment be checked and adjusted whenever a vehicle hits a curb or pothole hard enough to knock things out of adjustment (which is a difficult call to make), whenever the tires are observed to be wearing unevenly, or if the steering pulls to one side.

Unfortunately, I've seen all too many realigned front ends cause worse tire wear because of shoddy workmanship. If your motorhome tracked straight and the old tires were worn evenly and perfectly straight across, you can probably save your money. Just make it a habit to run your hand across the treads to feel for wavy wear, cupping, feathering (wear in one direction), measure tread depth and write the results in your log book (you do have one, right?).

SOOTY MESS

I have a 2005 Newmar Kountry Star 37.5-foot motorhome on a Workhorse W22 chassis powered by a GM 8.1-liter Vortec gas engine with 23,000 miles. I tow a white Jeep Liberty and always end up with dark soot on the Jeep and rear of the coach from the dual exhaust. I have noticed blue smoke when coasting down long hills following a steep climb at high RPM. Inside the exhaust pipes it looks black, like a diesel. The engine runs great, no warning lights come on, I installed a new air filter, it only burns 1 quart of oil in 2,500 miles, it has lots of power and I get about 6.5 MPG at 65 MPH. I could use some help. Thanks.

DON ELGIN | BROKEN ARROW, OKLA.

I SUGGEST THAT WHEEL ALIGNMENT BE CHECKED AND ADJUSTED WHENEVER A VEHICLE HITS A CURB OR POTHOLE HARD ENOUGH TO KNOCK THINGS OUT OF ADJUSTMENT

(WHICH IS A DIFFICULT CALL TO MAKE), WHENEVER THE TIRES ARE OBSERVED TO BE WEARING UNEVENLY, OR IF THE STEERING PULLS TO ONE SIDE.

The blue smoke when descending hills comes from oil that gets sucked past the valve guides and seals when there is high intake manifold vacuum and then gets burned in the combustion chambers. The fact that it's only using a quart of oil every 2,500 miles indicates the engine is quite sound, and the majority of the soot is coming from fuel burning.

When an engine is under heavy load the air-fuel mixture goes rich. Normally this is burned up in the catalytic converters, which makes them quite hot. I suggest that you have the fuel mixture tested while under load. The best way is with a five-gas exhaust gas analyzer on a chassis dynamometer. A scan tool can also check fuel trim, which will indicate if things are normal. Also consider directing the exhaust tips out to the sides at 90 degrees to the direction of travel.

BATTERY DISCONNECT SWITCHES

I have a motorhome that I store for the summer months and try to start every 30 days to keep the battery up. The other day it wouldn't start as the engine battery was dead. It did start using the switch on the dash that kicks in the coach batteries to assist, but I did not want to run around and burn up high-priced gas to charge the battery, so I elected to pull the engine battery and have it charged.

The battery checked out OK (I bought it about five months ago at a NAPA store). I asked at the NAPA store if there was any kind of switch I could put on the battery to disconnect it. I discovered that NAPA has about five different battery switches.

I purchased a Compact Battery Switch for less than \$10. This 4-inch-long device fastens onto a battery terminal just like the battery cable does, while the other end has a fitting for the battery cable. In the middle is a plastic knob that turns the power off and on. A nice feature of the device is that the knob screws completely off to deter theft. I have a dinghy vehicle that is not one of the popular models for thieves, but if I had a car that was in that category, I would also consider installing



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a battery switch.
CHARLEY WILLIAMSON
MINNETONKA, MINN.

Thanks for writing, Charley. I have these disconnects on all my vintage vehicles, too. They are inexpensive, fairly simple and usually effective, although I've had problems with corrosion and intermittent connections, which required me to get out and fiddle with them. You also have to be careful that you don't lose the insert (or the knob) when the knob is removed on some.

TOWING A 4X4 CONVERSION VAN

I have a 2012 Chevrolet Express G3500 Duramax diesel van. It has a Quigley 4x4 conversion and I am using a Blue Ox tow bar. I would like to safely tow it behind my Prevest Liberty coach. Are there any fuses to pull, or do I just put the transmission and transfer case in NEUTRAL and leave the key in the ON position? When

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I did this it became very erratic in the way it towed and did not track straight.

LOUIS LEONOR | VIA EMAIL

This may be a big problem. Since these were not originally a 4x4, they were not factory approved for towing and there is no instruction for doing so. Normally the transmission on an approved 4x4 is left in PARK and the transfer case in NEUTRAL, with the front hubs freewheeling. The steering geometry of the front axle determines much of how it tracks.

You need to contact Quigley and ask for recommendations for towing, fuse removal, etc. You might also have an alignment specialist look at it. It may need more caster to track properly. Some shops familiar with 4x4 vehicle dinghy towing also dial in a bit more toe-in than recommended for a vehicle that's not dinghy towed, as this can also help towing stability.

POSSESSED BY DEMONS?

We have a brand-new Thor Motor Coach Tuscany motorhome. The radio comes on by itself, not to music, just static and when this happens the stairs also retract.

While we were on vacation recently, my husband was watching cable TV (as the satellite unit doesn't work either) when all of a sudden the radio came on, the TV changed channels and the stairs retracted. Thor Motor Coach sent a mobile RV tech to our campsite, but the only thing he found was a relay that wasn't seated properly. We came home early from vacation. I had just stepped on the stair when the radio came on, the stair

started to retract and, had I not been holding on to the grab bar, would have fallen. We believe we have a lemon. Any thoughts on what you think it could be.

**RON AND JANE DOSTER
LANCASTER, N.Y.**

You didn't mention what relay was ajar, but I assume it didn't have any apparent effect. I see a possible common thread here to a very odd problem. Have the radio's station presets been set? (If not, that would explain static instead of music.) I suspect that the ignition circuit is getting powered up somehow. Either current is feeding back from the steps through the feed wire from the ignition circuit (most likely, and perhaps due to a bad ground), or power is getting to the radio and back-feeding the same circuit (less likely).

DINGHY BATTERY TIP TWO

This is in regard to "Dinghy Battery Tip" in the December 2012 issue. I have a 1995 Bouncer that was having a moderate drain caused by various components when I wasn't able to plug in. It drove me nuts until the light in my head switched on. I simply went to Harbor Freight and bought a \$12.99 solar panel, plugged it into the lighter outlet and I haven't had a dead battery since. It's a cheap and easy fix.

CLYDE RINGSTAD | REDMOND, ORE.

This won't work when you are towing, because the current demands are too great for this small solar panel to handle. However, it can be helpful when the motorhome is parked. Just don't forget coach- and engine-starting batteries need

to be maintained, and that if there is any significant parasitic current drain, the panel won't be able to keep up with it. If the panel gets covered with dirt or snow, or it's cloudy, it also won't work.

INTERMITTENT FAILURE TO START

I have a 1996 Fleetwood Bouncer motorhome powered by a 7.5-liter Ford V-8. I have never had a problem with starting it until this year. It starts fine sometimes and only cranks over other times. When it wants to, it starts on the first crank and runs fine. I have checked all the fuses and all have power to both sides with the ignition on. One 20-amp fuse loses power when I crank the engine. The others are fine. Without a schematic, I am assuming the one losing power is the heat and air fuse. I would like some idea as to what to look for before I take it to a shop and have them throw parts at it. I need your help, please. Thank you in advance.

JIM HALL | HORSESHOE BEND, ARK.

It's very likely not getting spark when it doesn't start. Get a spark checker from Harbor Freight or an auto parts store. If it's getting good spark when cranking, but won't start, it's likely not getting a proper fuel mixture.

STALLING FORD

We have a 2012 Tiffin Allegro Open Road with a Ford gas engine. Right after we purchased this coach, on our maiden trip going down a hill and then up at a fairly steep hill, the motorhome shut down. Nothing! We were in low and pushing up the hill. I took it back to the dealer, then to Ford, but no one knew what to do. The next time it happened we were on the highway in cruise doing 60 to 65 MPH. The transmission had downshifted to low while going up a long incline. I talked to Bob Tiffin and he suggested we replace the crankshaft position sensor, which Ford did, but they do not think this is my problem. I am afraid to get on the highway and try it. Any thoughts or suggestions?

NEIL GERSTEIN | BALLWIN, MO.

The crank position sensor is an item that's been known to cause stalling. But when you say "Nothing" do you mean the electrical system was dead and the en-

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gine would not crank, or did it start right back up? If the engine does not crank for a while, the crank sensor is not the problem. Since both failures occurred when downshifting, the abrupt movement of the engine may have caused a loose electrical plug or connection to lose contact. Therefore I suggest having a technician wiggle and check all the connections in the engine bay while the engine is idling in PARK. Somebody is going to have to test drive it, either you or a technician. I suggest driving back and forth on a straight road with little traffic and good pull-off areas, until you are confident it's fixed.

BUBBLING BATTERY

This is in regard to "Battery Exploded" from Bobby Ratliff in the September 2012 issue. Your reply stated, "Weak or old batteries, particularly with faulty cells, tend to outgas even more." About a year ago, I purchased and installed four 6-volt golf cart batteries made by a well-known manufacturer. Three of these gas as expected, a slight mist, but the fourth one literally bubbles over constantly. These are watered as specified by the manufacturer. Twice I inquired to its customer service department, the reply is that is normal. Could this be a faulty cell?

HAROLD WATSON | PONCA CITY, OKLA.

Definitely, Harold. I would suspect one bad cell or more. Test them with a hydrometer and look for significant variations between cells. They can also be load tested. A bad battery will show right up compared to the others.

DEEP DRAW

We have a 2002 Rexhall Rex Air 36-foot motorhome. The deep-cycle coach batteries have some sort of drain on them, even when we are plugged into a shoreline. We've tried disconnecting them via the switch, and leaving them connected with the same results. We have had service departments check it out and they find no drain. What is going on?

JOHN THOMPSON | DALLAS, TEXAS

Seems like it may be the batteries. Rather than using the switch, try disconnecting the batteries by removing a negative battery cable from each one. Make sure the

terminals and tops of the batteries are clean and dry. Fully charge each battery with a battery charger, and then test each cell with a hydrometer. With the batteries completely disconnected, hydrometer test them every few days. If they don't discharge rapidly, the problem is in the circuit. However, if they still go down, the batteries with the bad cell readings are defective and should be replaced.

ETHANOL ANGST

Recently I read two articles about ethanol, the E85 gasoline that should be in fuel stations by June. One article stated, "water formation can create formic acid and corrode metals, plastics and rubber." The other article discusses when E85 is used in pre-2000 vehicles there are problems with fuel hoses and carburetor parts. This concerns me because I have a 1997 Lazy Daze that has taken my wife and I across 48 states. As I am sure the problems mentioned will affect my Class C motorhome. I would like to know what should be done to prevent these problems for those of us who own and love our pre-2000 gas-powered motorhomes.

JIM BREMNER | LONG BEACH, CALIF.

I am quite familiar with the problems ethanol can cause, as I am rebuilding the fuel system in one of my vehicles, including the electric pump, and the gas tank is out being chemically cleaned to remove the corrosion as I write this.

The fuel to which the articles referred is E15, which is gasoline mixed with 15 percent ethanol. Although the EPA has approved the introduction and sale of E15, it will only be sold for later-model vehicles that supposedly can run on it.

The present E10 blends sold in California that you have been using will continue to be offered for older vehicles like yours. E85 gasoline already has limited availability in your area, but your engine will not run on it. It's designed for so-called flex-fuel vehicles, which can run on anything from straight gasoline to fuel containing 85 percent ethanol (which is E85). ♦

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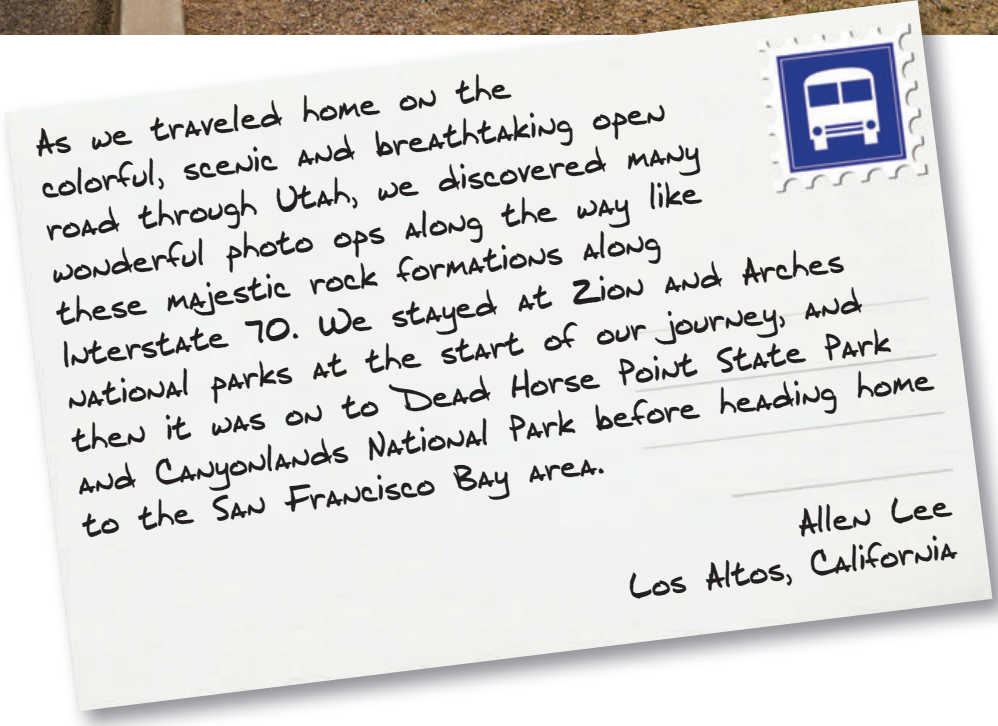


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