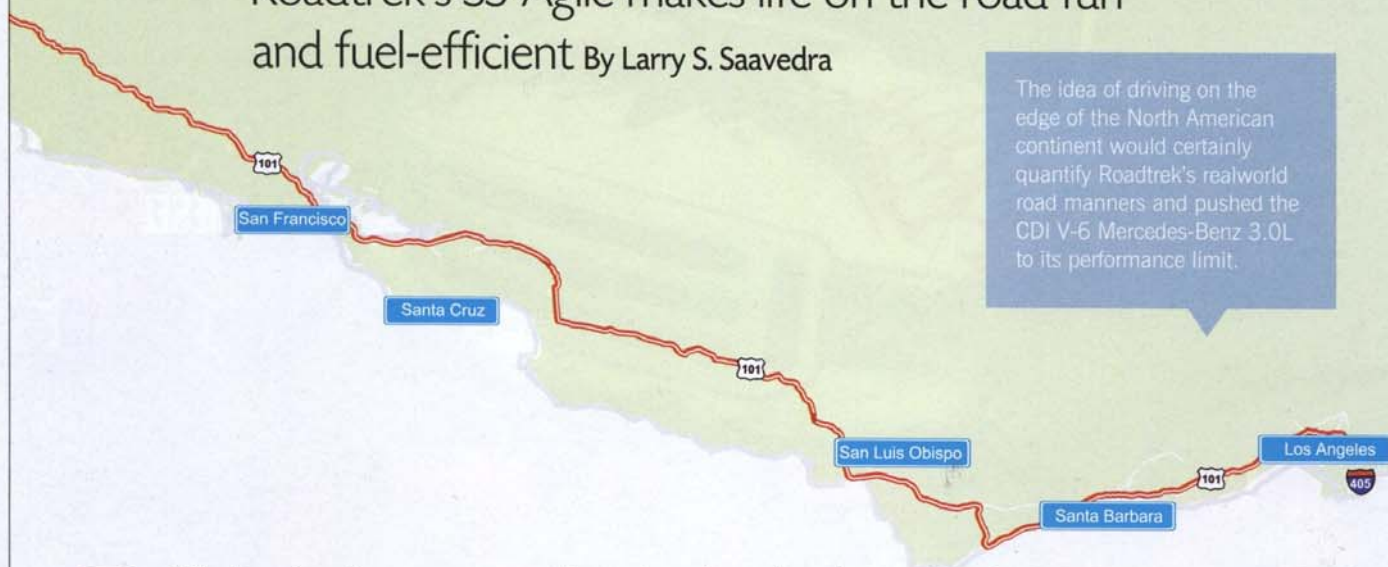


COASTAL EXPRESS

Roadtrek's SS-Agile makes life on the road fun and fuel-efficient By Larry S. Saavedra

The idea of driving on the edge of the North American continent would certainly quantify Roadtrek's realworld road manners and pushed the CDI V-6 Mercedes-Benz 3.0L to its performance limit.



Call it a Freudian slip or a lapse in critical thinking, but there I, was at McMahon's RV in Irvine, California, to test drive Roadtrek's new Sprinter 2500 SS-Agile when suddenly I began humming the theme to *Gilligan's Island*. You know, the '60s sitcom about the professor, Mary Ann, and the other castaways on a desert island, which is still airing in reruns.

Maybe it's a Boomer thing, but the weekly exploits of the SS *Minnow* was so engrained in my childhood that I couldn't resist drawing comparisons. Class B vans (conversions) like the Roadtrek 2500 Sprinter SS-Agile are in many ways like a small boat. In nautical terms,

everything onboard must have its place. In that regard, SS-Agile didn't disappoint me, and once its galley was buttoned up, it had the feel of a finely crafted schooner.

But that's where most of the maritime similarities ended and the coastal adventure with SS-Agile began.

A Cruise Along the Pacific

My wife Janey and I set a course north following Highway 1, also known as Cabrillo Highway, State Route 1, and Pacific Coast Highway, depending on your location on it. By all calculations we'd be on the road for approximately seven days. Together, we planned a trip with brief stops in Santa Barbara, Morro

Bay, Cambria, Big Sur, Carmel, Santa Cruz, Half Moon Bay, and then in Marin County.

The trip back home to Southern California would bring us south on Highway 101 through Paso Robles for some wine tasting in the vineyards. Joining us were our two Labradors, Jersey and Jetta.

The main mission was to be self-reliant in the SS-Agile (MSRP of \$106,282 as tested) from Roadtrek Motorhomes of Kitchener, Ontario, Canada. While the first-generation SS-Agile was introduced in 2006, Chrysler revamped the Sprinter 2500 van chassis two years later.

The real strength of the SS-Agile was its fuel efficiency thanks to a Mercedes-Benz turbocharged diesel

engine that puts out 154 hp and 243 lb-ft of torque. We've tested other motorhomes featuring this exact engine and were impressed, so we wanted to see if we got anything close to the 20-plus mpg some Roadtrek owners claimed. Since it had a gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) of only 8,550 pounds, anything was possible. We'd see.

Before long it was down to business, and that meant taking copious notes of the interior amenities—from real cherrywood cabinetry that looked every bit high-tech to granite countertops. The fact that SS-Agile

could tow up to 5,000 pounds and had a cargo-carrying capacity of 2,500 pounds and a storage capacity of 47 cubic feet was impressive. On a personal note, all I wanted to know was if my golf clubs would fit.

Road Manners

The idea of driving on the edge of the North American continent would certainly quantify Roadtrek's real-world road manners and pushed the CDI V-6 Mercedes-Benz 3.0L to its performance limit.

While this new model from Roadtrek was officially referred to as the

Short Sprinter (144-inch wheelbase) and designed mostly for weekend trips for empty-nesters or small families, we envisioned more of a wandering journey with no stays lasting more than a day.

There would be no hotel accommodations, no dining out (well, maybe once), just a care-free adventure in a Class B that would have us evaluating all the standard and optional features SS-Agile could muster, including a sit-down or stand-up bathroom shower, a two-burner recessed stove, a stainless steel sink, a 19-inch flat-screen

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COASTAL EXPRESS



It seemed like all along the coast there was plenty to do, including sailing, kayaking, and just sightseeing.

TV, and an electric power sofa that reclined into a bed. The SS-Agile also features a four-year, 48,000-mile limited warranty.

To better illustrate the story, we'd compare this trip in an RV to that in a standard passenger car—with all the associated expenses that go with it. That was my wife's idea and a good one. (More on that later.)

Santa Barbara Coast

Before long we were nearing the Santa Barbara coastline. For those not familiar with the area, Santa Barbara is about two hours from Los Angeles and is blessed with some of the best beaches in California.

It was in Santa Barbara where I decided to pull off Highway 1 to give Roadtrek another inspection. Parked, it was refreshing to see such a euro-influenced van in the company of so many uninteresting domestic RV designs on the road, some terribly outdated and needlessly larger than life.

Roadtrek's conversion of the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter (by Daimler AG) was seamless; remarkable given the fact that Roadtrek started with a barren van and stayed mostly true to the original German influences. Other RV features included some mild exterior graphics, a top-mounted 110V A/C unit, a retractable awning, and an optional Continental spare tire kit out back.

While many elements were worth noting, the function-over-form features developed by Roadtrek were what got our attention. Like the external shower with hot and cold water, which came in handy after the dogs decided to take a swim in the ocean.

The hookups were at the driver's side, hidden in a lower rocker panel and including the LP-gas, cable, electric, and gray/black water disposal system with a 12V sewage macerator. Also in reach was the standard 30-amp power hookup that powered all the 110V features,

including the 11,000-Btu roof-mounted air conditioner.

A 2.5 KW Onan MicroLite propane generator was onboard and could be used when dry camping to run all the appliances. Worth noting were the sizeable 22 U.S. gallon capacity combined gray/black water tank, 21 U.S. gallon freshwater tank, and 6 U.S. gallon water heater system.

Small-Town Farms

After leaving Santa Barbara we headed due north on Highway 1 to Lompoc. Janey had read somewhere that Lompoc (pronounced Lom-poke) had these incredible wall murals that depicted the history of this area, painted by some very talented artists. So we drove down the center of town (population 49,000) and parked.

At this point in our trip, we couldn't have asked for a better RV. At only 19 feet 5 inches long and with a lively turning radius (45 feet curb to curb), SS-Agile drove like a



car. It fit in most parking lot spaces without much worry, and parallel parking was effortless.

While we didn't want to get too cocky with its good behavior, the SS-Agile held its own on the road thanks to four-wheel disc ABS and a 5-five automatic transmission with a manual shift override.

The SS-Agile was generally smooth and very comfortable thanks in part to the big captain's chairs up front. Sure, if you came into a corner too fast, it had the top-heavy feel of a vehicle that stands 9 feet 7 inches (with A/C unit).

In Lompoc we discovered a sleepy agricultural town that probably hadn't changed much since it was incorporated as a city in August 1888. Beyond the painted murals, Lompoc is best known for the seasonal flower fields and Vandenberg Air Force Base nearby. With a brisk walk around, we soaked up some sun and soon were on our way.

We passed the towns of Guadalupe, Nipomo, and Grover Beach in quick succession. They didn't look like much to the naked eye, but they were worth a visit. Produce is king along this stretch of the coastline and it showed. Everywhere we looked was a small produce stand selling fruit and vegetables at deep discounts. Farms butted up against towering cliffs that fell to the ocean below. It was amazing to see (and smell) the crops in full bloom.

Since SS-Agile was equipped with a Dometic 12V (3.8 cubic foot) refrigerator, it gave us the option of loading up with fresh produce for the trip.

After a relaxing drive farther up the coast, Janey and I arrived in Morro Bay just in time to enjoy their outdoor market. There were lots of interesting goods to admire, and the local street musicians made the stop in the little seaside town worthwhile.

Plan it correctly and you, too,

can find time to enjoy a stretch of beach in Morro Bay, the marine wildlife, and other sights in the area that draw millions of people each year. Be sure to check out Morro Rock, a famous ocean outcropping named by Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo when he first charted this coast during his 16th-century voyage of discovery.

Heading north, we soon made another stop, this one in Cambria, along one of the most photographed coastlines in the world. Cambria is an ocean community with some fine dining and excellent shopping.

Farther up Highway 1 we passed San Simeon, which is the site of Hearst Castle, started in 1919 when newspaper magnet William Randolph Hearst asked architect Julia Morgan to build "a little something" on a majestic hillside with ocean views. What became of that conversation is a 126-acre estate with pools, gardens, terraces, and 162 rooms for the Hearst family and many of Hollywood's stars.

From this point all the way to Big Sur, Highway 1 began to get twistier and the elevations changed dramatically. Cliffs dropped thousands of feet below the highway, into the Pacific, often without a guardrail.

While lots of RVs were on Highway 1, we didn't see many like this one. Which was a good thing. Most Class Bs don't actually look like a typical RV. The SS-Agile, for instance, looks more than a stylish van with an A/C unit on top, since most of its RV qualities are understated. Perhaps what gives it away are the graphics, but even those could be eliminated if you wanted to drive incognito.

Its van camper appearance also makes it convenient for those who live in an area that restricts RVs. The SS-Agile is so compact that it easily could fit in a standard driveway with room to spare.



Morro Rock in the background overlooking the quaint town of Morro Bay.

OCEAN VIEWS UNDER \$50

So you can't afford a million-dollar seaside villa? Well, you can still live the lifestyle if you know where to go. Here are 10 California coastal RV parks for under \$50 per night, most with complete hookups. Many offer beachside camping, but a few are within an easy stroll of the ocean. Space is limited during the summer. Big discounts are offered in the off-season. And if you just want to tent-camp, many of these offer accommodations for travelers on a budget.

ALBION RIVER CAMPGROUND

LOCATION: Albion

PEAK RATES: Starting from \$25

FINER POINTS:

Ocean fishing, abalone diving, and kayaking

www.albionrivercampground.com

BODEGA BAY RV PARK

LOCATION: Bodega Bay

PEAK RATES: Starting from \$28

FINER POINTS:

Many motion pictures and TV shows were filmed here.

www.bodegabayrvpark.com

DOCKWEILER BEACH RV PARK

LOCATION: Playa del Rey

PEAK RATES: Starting from \$41

FINER POINTS:

So close to the sand you might get wet.

www.beaches.co.la.ca.us

KAMP KLAMATH

LOCATION: Klamath

PEAK RATES: Starting from \$28

FINER POINTS:

Closest campground to where the Klamath River meets the Pacific

www.kampklamath.com

LE SAGE RIVIERA

LOCATION: Grover Beach

PEAK RATES: Starting from \$32

FINER POINTS: It's only 900

feet to the sand.

www.lesageriviera.com

MALIBU BEACH RV PARK

LOCATION: Malibu

PEAK RATES: Starting from \$41

FINER POINTS:

Great place to watch for celebrities. www.maliburv.com

SEACLIFF CENTER RV PARK

LOCATION: Aptos

PEAK RATES: Starting from \$40

FINER POINTS:

A real classic, built in the 1940s

www.seacliffrvpark.com

SHORELINE RV PARK

LOCATION: Eureka

PEAK RATES: Starting from \$35

FINER POINTS:

California's top producer of fresh oysters!

www.shorelinervpark.com

Big Sur

In California, wildfires happen when annual rainfalls don't materialize and timber gets dry. Big Sur's Basin Complex fire in 2008 was a prime example of what happens when lightning strikes a drought-plagued forest.

While Big Sur is a sparsely populated region of central California, it is home to some of the state's oldest redwood trees and has abundant marine life. The Santa Lucia Mountains rise abruptly from the Pacific Ocean, and Big Sur offers incredible views and pristine beaches. Out of consideration for the ample marine life that inhabits this part of the coast, beaches here are not particularly dog-friendly.

We had read about the fire before our trip, but it did not affect the Big Sur Campgrounds & Cabins where we stayed. A spot with electricity, water, and access to the dump and recycle stations was \$58 per night.

In a way, we were thankful we had taken this trip in a diesel-powered RV, given that many turbodiesels like this one perform better and pollute less than their gas-powered counterparts. When you're in areas of such beauty, being environmentally aware is always a good thing.

The First Night

On the first night in SS-Agile I realized why Roadtrek designed certain features the way it had. Everything was finished to maximize the living space, including the way the bathroom door opened to reveal the shower and toilet.

On the downside, the bifold door lacked upper-end hardware, and keeping it latched was irritating. But that was a minor inconvenience better left to Roadtrek's engineering department to improve.



After a relaxing drive up the coast from Guadalupe, Nipomo, and Grover Beach, we arrived in Morro Bay just in time to enjoy their outdoor market.



The small size of the Class B makes it ideal for small campgrounds. With its onboard generator that powered all the features and the retractable awning, we had everything we needed for dry camping.

There was a lot of standing room (6 feet 3 inches), but, as with living in any small space, you had to be organized and tidy.

A few things worth noting: My wife pointed out that the sheets we had brought along fit "nice and tight" on the sofa bed. The bed was as comfortable as any quality hotel mattress, and with the privacy curtains open it was like sleeping under the stars in your own bed.

The Big Sur Campgrounds & Cabins was a family-friendly place and has become an destination for many international tourists. Foreign guests nearly outnumbered Americans. Asking around, it appeared that the weak U.S. dollar had made travel to this country more affordable than ever. And we learned that Europeans take three- or four-week vacations every year, unlike Americans, who maybe take a week or two.

The blackened landscape up the road was clear evidence that fire had swept through the area, but the small town of Big Sur is alive and doing well. In fact, the restaurant that was only a few hundred yards from the campgrounds offered a picturesque retreat like no other: an eclectic grouping of chairs literally lounging in a bubbling creek, ideal for sipping a lattè in the morning and just listening to

the sounds of nature.

That's what you do in Big Sur after all—chill out and turn off your Blackberry.

Carmel-By-The-Sea

Of all the stops we made, nothing compared to Carmel. Clint Eastwood was mayor here not so long ago, and this seaside village offered all the trappings of Hollywood's elite without the stuffiness.

Carmel's main beach, which stretches below the famed Pebble Beach Golf Links, rivals that of the finest resorts with its white sand and striking coastline hemmed in by million-dollar cottages of all shapes and sizes. Tourists were there from every part of the world, basking in the sun's warmth. Dogs were not only welcomed here, they were spoiled by the tourists that strolled along the sands.

While in Carmel, we stayed about 20 minutes east of town at Saddle Mountain RV Park. It certainly wasn't the Ritz, but the campgrounds was secluded.

Half Moon Bay

The following morning we were up early and continued north on Highway 1. Although we would stay only a night there, Pelican Point RV Park in Half Moon Bay was banked

above the surf, and we looked forward to the visit.

Aside from its location, the RV park wasn't very unique. It could have been much more appealing if some attention had been paid to the weathered concrete RV pads and the surrounding landscaping.

It's located about an hour south of San Francisco, just off Highway 1, and is about 3 miles south of downtown Half Moon Bay. The park had a solid history since the '70s but has changed ownership several times, we were told. We found it welcoming though, even if the general condition of the park and the environment made you feel more like you were camping at a drive-in theater rather than a coastal RV park, albeit a nice drive-in theater close to the water's edge.

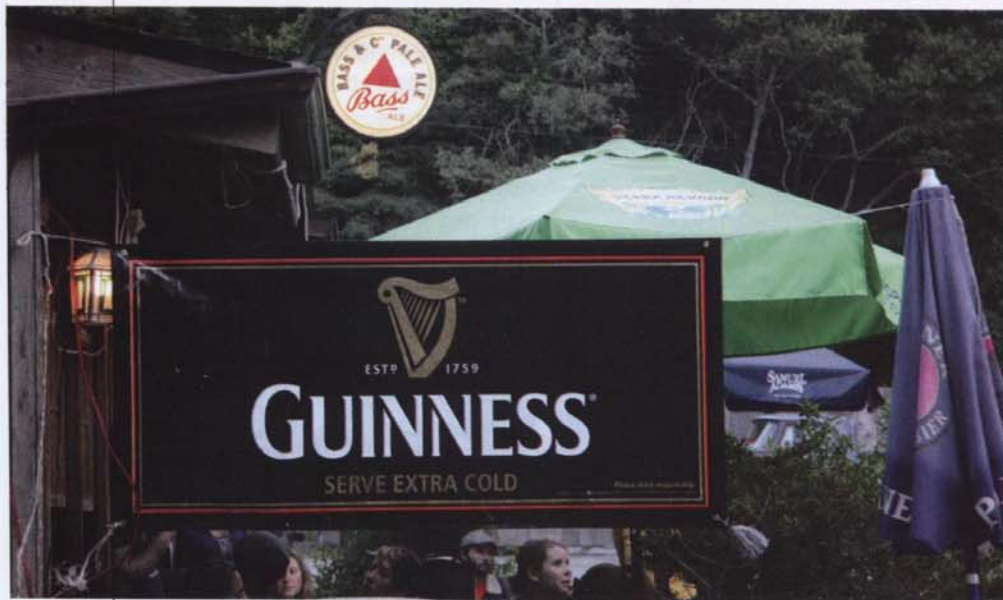
What made up for some featureless aspects of the park were the paved walking trails that connected you to a remote beach and nearby Ritz Carlton Hotel. The beach itself was accessible by a short flight of stairs. Dogs were permitted on the beach, and ours took advantage of the situation without any reservations. This was not a swimming beach, and due to the rough waters, just getting in could be disconcerting for some.

For golfers, there were two cham-

COASTAL EXPRESS



TOP LEFT: Several kite surfers in the same area turned a normal coastal scene into something magical. **RIGHT:** In Santa Cruz the wind is just right for kite surfing. It's a dangerous sport, but looked incredibly fun.



When the sun goes down in Big Sur, you can either roast marshmallows or have a micro-brew at the pub.

pionship 18-hole courses next door at Half Moon Bay Golf Course, both Par 72 with stunning views of the Pacific. I'd recommend afternoon play because of low-lying fog and the cold that blankets the area in the morning.

We did get a good night's rest at Pelican Point and, for what it's worth, would go back—although

we'd bring warmer jackets.

San Francisco Bay

I can see why Tony Bennett wrote such a beautiful song about San Francisco. It is an absolutely amazing city. To get to Marin we decided to continue on Highway 1, which took us through the heart of San Francisco via 19th to the 101 and

over the Golden Gate Bridge into Sausalito.

This area is typically not the place one would think of to take an RV if you're worried about traffic jams with narrow, frightfully steep streets. Marin, with its small streets, was no picnic either. But traveling with this type of vehicle has its advantages over a larger Class C, and we found ourselves more interested in the sights than thinking about the perils of the road.

Our time in San Francisco was brief, but it provided us with clues to the real-world capabilities of this Class B. Was it just an RV to be used occasionally, or could it be an all-around transport for moms looking for a roomy passenger van or for professionals who spend lots of time on the road and want a portable office?

The answer is probably yes on all accounts.



SPECIFICATIONS

MANUFACTURER: Roadtrek Motorhomes
MODEL: SS-Agile
BASE MSRP: \$89,440
CHASSIS: '08 Dodge Sprinter 2500
 Wheelbase: 144 in
ENGINE: 3.0L V-6 Mercedes turbodiesel
HORSEPOWER: 154
TORQUE: 280 lb-ft
TOWING CAPACITY: 5,000 lb
OVERALL LENGTH: 19 ft 5 in
 Overall Height (with A/C): 9 ft 7 in
aisle width: 28 in

Marin County

It's been hailed as one of the wealthiest regions in the U.S., so it seemed fitting that we ended our journey north in Marin, after logging hundreds of miles in a Sprinter from Roadtrek. While Marin's residents probably would have preferred a three-pointed Mercedes star instead of the Dodge logo emblazoned on the front and rear, the Roadtrek SS-Agile didn't have to dig too deep to find fans in a place accustomed to high-end vehicles that can cost much more.

BELOW LEFT: If you're claustrophobic you could get freaked out about the tight quarters. But the shower and bathroom were very functional. **RIGHT:** The interior is like a small boat, everything has its place.



The drive from Southern California to Marin County really made an impression on us. Not only did it give my wife and me lessons in the coastal characteristics of California, but it also put the van camper into perspective in other ways.

For instance, driving a clean-burning diesel that got, by our own calculations, a respectable 17.8 to 18.5 mpg was good news.

Based on our standards of travel, if we had taken this route by car and dined out regularly, we could have easily spent \$60 a day for two people. Instead, my wife and I planned the meals (pur-

chased prior to this trip) at a cost of only \$20 per day, saving more than \$200 on food for the trip. The on-board refrigerator, small freezer, and microwave made meal planning a snap.

A similar trip with hotel stays would cost you about \$140 per night (dog fees not included). Over six nights, that's \$840. Compare that to the approximate \$350 we spent staying in RV parks, and you see the advantage to living this kind of life.

What more is there to say? The SS-Agile is definitely an investment that could pay for itself over time. **RV**