

Home on the Road

Story and Photos by Stuart Bourdon

When you tow with a Roadtrek 190-Versatile camper van, you can bring just about everything else, too

We usually test pickup trucks or sport-utility vehicles (SUVs), but every once in awhile we like to throw our readers a curve. As the saying goes, "Variety is the spice of life." Our search for interesting tow vehicles turned up something a little different this time — the 190-Versatile camper van from Roadtrek (888/762-3873; roadtrek.com). Its qualifications include a powerful engine, a stable chassis, a roomy interior with seating for six (it sleeps four), a long list of creature comforts and a tow rating of 6400 pounds.

Based on the Chevrolet Express 3500 extended-wheelbase van, the 190-Versatile has all the comforts of a motorhome without the enormous size. If you have driven a full-size van, pickup truck or SUV, you will find the operating experience almost identical.

TOWING POWER

Powered by a General Motors Vortec 6000 (6.0L) V-8 gasoline engine that produces 300 hp and 360 lb.-ft. of torque, the 190-Versatile had the guts to move its nearly 4 tons of weight and tow a boat, too. While not a giant of towing muscle, its acceleration when towing the 4660-pound Sea Ray 200 we used for this test averaged 28.0 seconds during the 0-to-60 mph runs. Our 40-to-60 mph runs averaged 14.6 seconds. Highway cruising speeds of 55 mph or 65 mph while towing were easily maintained with little pedal input.

We found it best to keep the transmission in third gear when towing on urban highways — not because the engine bogged down when the tranny was placed in fourth, but because it seemed to pull stronger and have quicker acceleration response when we cruised in third gear. Fourth gear is better for the long, flat hauls when you've turned on cruise control and there's no traffic to contend with.

One of the features that led us to test this camper van was the GM drivetrain, and in particular, the transmission with tow/haul mode. The four-speed automatic overdrive transmission performed smooth-

ly, as expected, and when switched to tow/haul, not only held gears longer (higher engine speeds) when climbing hills, but also helped keep roll-out under control when descending steep inclines. Hill-climbing performance was lackluster, though, as our speed had to be dropped into the 40 mph range (with the tranny in second gear) to chug up the steepest grade (6 percent) on our test course.

The van is not offered with a tachometer, so we had no way to monitor engine speed accurately. We had to resort to a more primitive method — turn the stereo off and listen to the engine. We could tell when the engine was climbing out of its power band — its energy seemed to drop off and the roar from under the hood began to sound more like a cry for help.

Non-towing acceleration in a vehicle of this size and weight isn't going to be lightning fast, either. However, we recorded an average of 13.2 seconds for 0-to-60 mph unloaded drags and 8.1 seconds for our "passing" (40-to-60) times without a trailer. If you're looking for more towing capacity, you can order an optional heavy-duty chassis that will boost the tow rating to 8400 pounds. The optional 4.10 axle gears will also help acceleration.

RIDE AND HANDLING

An independent front suspension (unequal A-arms and coil springs) and a live axle with leaf springs in the rear make up the suspension system of the Roadtrek 190-Versatile. We experienced no uncouth road manners from the vehicle, and found the 190-Versatile to exhibit favorable handling qualities during our towing examination.

Braking was steady, with just a hint of wiggle during



**Max. Tow Rating: 6400 lbs.
Rating as Tested: 6400 lbs.**



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panic stops when towing. We recorded an average 55-to-0 mph towing braking distance of 167.5 feet. Our average recorded non-towing braking distance was 102.0 feet. The Chevy 3500 Extended Van chassis is equipped with four-wheel ABS on four disc brakes. Also on board was GM's Dynamic Rear Proportioning system to help distribute braking power to the rear wheels when the vehicle is loaded.

Ride comfort was outstanding. The 190-Versatile delivered a pleasant journey on the open highway and city streets. There was no "wallowing" over bumps or uneven pavement and, just as important, no hard knocks when encountering road irregularities. In some vehicles, you can feel the "tug" of the boat in tow, but the substantial mass of the camper van kept the boat feeling "light." We hardly



■ Above: The Roadtrek 190-Versatile camper van provided a comfortable and stable driving experience during our tow test. Left: Medium-sized side mirrors and obstructed rearward visibility mean the driver must rely heavily on feedback from an outside observer when launching a boat.

Road Notes

- Home-like amenities make long-distance hauls easy
- Could use a little more power, or the optional 4.10 gears, for better towing acceleration
- Luscious ride quality, good overall handling
- Needs larger mirrors for towing

noticed it behind us as we hurtled down the highway.

The camper van handled the 240 pounds of tongue weight afforded by our test trailer boat well, but the tongue weight was a bit shy (in comparison to the overall weight of the boat and trailer) in our opinion. We would move the boat forward an inch or two on the trailer if we owned it. Although we experienced no sway tendencies, the trailer's tongue did bounce vigorously (even when the tow vehicle didn't) over bumps and dips in the road.

The 190-Versatile is taller than a stock van (8-plus feet

overall), but it didn't feel top-heavy during our driving exercises. Its water tanks (25 gallons fresh, 23 gallons gray and 10 gallons black) are below the floor and between the frame rails. The extra weight in the tanks helps keep the van's center of gravity low. Its floor has been dropped to create extra interior height so that the new roof section doesn't have to be sky high in order to accommodate tall people standing in the aisle. You don't have to "hunch over" to use the kitchen. Of course, in gusty winds, the Roadtrek would present a higher profile than a pickup, SUV or unmodified van.

COMFORTS AND CONVENIENCES

The overriding value of the Roadtrek 190-Versatile for the trailer boater is in its creature comforts on the road or in camp. For those who tow long distances or stay overnight at the water's edge, this vehicle is a good choice.

Cruising in comfort is easy. The camper van offers four comfortable bucket seats up

front, two full recliners for driver and front passenger, and two stationary buckets for the second-row passengers. The optional L-shaped rear lounge in our model (the 190-Versatile is available with a rear dinette as standard) can seat another pair of forward-facing passengers during travel.

When the sun goes down, the front recliners (swiveling captain's chairs) can be linked to the two stationary buckets to form two single beds. The L-shaped lounge converts to a double bed, bringing the Roadtrek 190-Versatile's sleeping capacity to four persons.

Want a snack while traveling to your watery destination? No need to look for fast food. It's quicker to walk to the kitchen and make a sandwich. The galley features a 3-cubic-foot refrigerator, two-burner stove, microwave oven, sink with single-lever faucet, countertop and vent fan.

Need to use the facilities? Don't bother with those nasty gas-station bathrooms. The Roadtrek offers a marine-style flush toilet inside a tall cabinet.

The camper van also features a stand-up shower. A hose and nozzle inside the toilet cabinet (with separate hot- and cold-water controls) can be pulled into the 30-inch wide center aisle. Doors at both ends of the aisle provide privacy, and a curtain-surround catches the excess spray. A drain in the floor takes the water away.

On the 190 models, a heat pump (AC and heater combined) with ducts to the front and rear bed areas is mounted on the roof for easy service access and external water drainage. During the day — or night for that matter — you can watch TV from the rear lounge or bed. The sliding TV shelf also allows viewing from the front seats. If you don't care for the "boob tube" on your time off, the TV cabinet can be used for additional storage.

In fact, storage is abundant. The designers of this vehicle used every available spare inch of interior space to create cabinets and storage bins. Easily accessible inside the locking exterior storage compartments incorporated into the running



■ Some of the interior amenities in our test unit included a flat-screen TV (optional) for the rear lounge, and a fully equipped (standard) galley mid-way through the camper van.




■ Left: A familiar and easy-to-operate Chevrolet van cockpit (with custom reclining, swivel bucket seats) heads up the Roadtrek 190-Versatile. Above: Two more bucket seats (these are stationary) in the second row allow for four passengers in the front cabin area of the camper van.

boards are a large-capacity auxiliary battery, an exterior shower and city water connection, permanently attached sewer hose (for easy and clean draining), wastewater release, freshwater drain and more storage space.

Large, tinted and frameless awning windows look good and provide outstanding ventilation without the worry of rain finding its way inside the camper van. Forward visibility is great due to the large windshield and upright seating, but rear and side views are somewhat obstructed by the van's interior cabinets. The side mirrors are generously sized, but for tow-

ing, we would prefer something a bit larger. The Roadtrek owner may want to invest in a good set of large towing mirrors.

CRUISING COMPANION

No more difficult to drive than any full-size pickup, SUV or van, Roadtrek camper vans are equipped with a list of standard features and available options as long as your arm. We have covered only the basic amenities and performance characteristics in this test, but if you're interested in diving deeper into one of its vehicles, take a look at the company's website, or visit your local Roadtrek dealer for a test drive. 

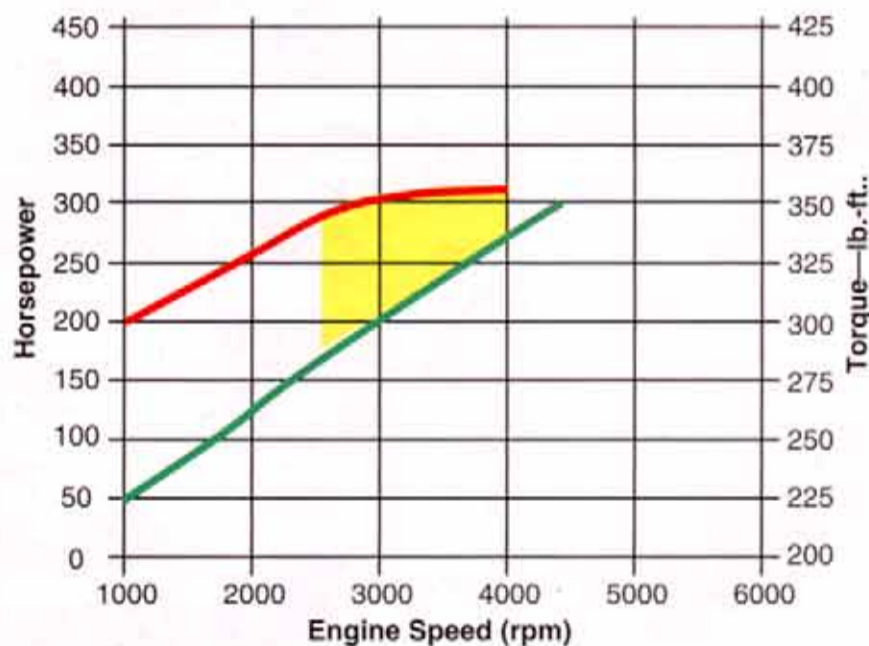
SPECIFICATIONS

Roadtrek 190-Versatile camper van

PRICE		STEERING SYSTEM	
Base Price	\$59,787	Type	Power-assisted, recirculating-ball type
Price as Tested	\$66,462	Turning Circle	48.6'
ENGINE		Wheels	16" aluminum (optional)
Displacement/Type	6.0L/GM Vortec V8	Tires	LT245/75R16E
Net Torque	360 lb.-ft. @ 4000 rpm	DIMENSIONS	
Net Horsepower	300 hp @ 4400 rpm	Wheelbase	115.0"
Fuel System	Sequential fuel injection	Track (front/rear)	67.8"/67.8"
Fuel Capacity	31 gals.	Overall Length	20' 5"
Fuel Requirement	87 octane unleaded	Overall Width (w/o mirrors)	6' 7"
DRIVETRAIN		Overall Height	8' 4"
Transmission	4-speed OD automatic w/tow-haul mode	Curb Weight (public scale)	7820 lbs.
Axle Gears	3.73:1	TOW PACKAGE	
BODY/CHASSIS		Max. Tow Rating	6400 lbs.
Body/Frame	Body on ladder-style frame	Max. Tongue Weight	500 lbs. deadweight; 1000 lbs. weight-distributing
GVWR	9600 lbs.	Hitch	Class IV receiver
GCWR	14,000 lbs.	TRAILER/BOAT DATA	
SUSPENSION SYSTEM		Trailer	Trail-Rite tandem-axle, single front disc brakes 5000 lb. GVWR
Front	IFS (A-arms, coil springs), shock absorbers, stabilizer bars	Boat	Sea Ray 200 BR
Rear	Solid rear axle, leaf springs, shock absorbers	Trailer/Boat Weight (public scale)	4660 lbs.
BRAKE SYSTEM		Tongue Weight	240 lbs.
Front	12.5" discs (245.5 sq. in. swept area)	<i>The Roadtrek 190-Versatile camper van was loaned courtesy McMahon's RV (949/653-6711) of Irvine, California. Thanks to Newport Boats (909/371-8996) of Corona, California, for the use of the Sea Ray 200 for this tow-vehicle test.</i>	
Rear	13.0" discs (236.5 sq. in. swept area)		
Assist	Hydroboost, 4-wheel ABS, Dynamic Rear Proportioning		

GM Vortec 6000 V-8

■ HORSEPOWER ■ TORQUE
■ POWER RANGE



TEST RESULTS

ACCELERATION (seconds)		FUEL ECONOMY (mpg)	
0-60 mph (non-towing)	13.2	EPA Mileage	N/A
0-60 mph (towing)	28.0	Overall Non-towing	13.1
40-60 mph (non-towing)	8.1	Overall Towing	10.2
40-60 mph (towing)	14.6	LAUNCH RAMP TEST	
BRAKING (feet)		Rating	Fair
55-0 mph (non-towing)	102		
55-0 mph (towing)	167		