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On the road in a luxury home away from home

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PHILIP MARCHAND
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Of all the Hollywood road movies — *Easy Rider* with Captain America and Billy on their custom-built choppers, *Thelma and Louise* in a '66 Thunderbird — only one celebrates a senior citizen in a motor home. In *About Schmidt* (2002), retired insurance company actuary Warren Schmidt, played by Jack Nicholson, hits the road in a Winnebago Adventurer.



DAVID PENHALE FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Jeff Haanemayer, chairman of Roadtrek Motorhomes, says the 19 1/2-foot length of his motor home is one of its main attractions.

One tip for any future Warren Schmidts: In movieland, you don't need to worry about fuel economy or where to park your monster motor home, but in real life, if you're travelling solo, you might consider something smaller than that 35-foot Winnebago. You might consider a 19 1/2-foot Roadtrek SS ("Short Sprinter"), a downsized luxury motor homemade in Kitchener.

I talked to a Mr. Tsuyuki (who didn't want to give his first name), an 81-year-old charter member of Roadtrek International, an association of Roadtrek owners.

In his youth, Tsuyuki drove a sports car. Then he married and had a family. Still committed to the open road, he bought a tent and went camping. That ended when his tent was flooded during a heavy rainstorm. He bought a pickup and camper next, which was fine — except that the camper had a tendency to fishtail. Finally, in 1973, he bought his first "old folk's car," a Winnebago.

When his children grew up and left home, he switched to Roadtreks. By now, he's been through four Roadtreks — he trades them in when they've racked up 100,000 kilometres. This is the vehicle he will drive until he drives no longer, he tells me, a vehicle he can drive into Chicago, say, and park virtually anywhere.

He can park it in a national park, or in the "swanky" parking lot of the Hilton Head hotel in South Carolina, to name two places off limits to standard motor homes. He can park it among the behemoths in a Wal-Mart parking lot (Wal-Mart offers free overnight parking to motor homes, unless the store is in an area where a bylaw prohibits it.)

"It's an easy life," he says. "If you don't like a place, you can just move on." Could Captain America put it better?

In Kitchener, I visit the plant where the Roadtreks are assembled. It's a bright, airy space where even the rattle of power tools somehow seems tranquil. A banner near the ceiling proclaims, "Roadtrek: The Motor Home That Drives like a Van!"

Roadtrek Motorhomes chairman Jeff Hanemaayer takes me to a half-finished Roadtrek SS (Short Sprinter) Ideal with all the bells and whistles: microwave, fridge, even a home-theatre system, and a rear "slide out" that offers an extra three feet of living space when the vehicle is parked.

"We basically use the same type of van that a plumber or FedEx would use," Hanemaayer comments. "For most of our 36-year history, we built on what was known as a Dodge maxivan — but the old platforms have changed. Today we build about 60 per cent on the basis of the Chevy Express Van; 40 per cent are the Sprinter vans designed and built by Mercedes-Benz."

Base price for this vehicle is \$104,000. And if that seems high, consider what a cottage goes for these days.

Hanemaayer cites fuel economy — Tsuyuki says he gets 16.7 L/100 km (17 mpg) — and ease of parking as selling points for his vehicles. "People buy our product because it's small," he says.

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"They buy it because it's something that they can use as another vehicle in the family, especially our smaller models. The wife can drive it, per se."

He says 90 per cent of his customers are over 50, and 70 per cent are over 60. "People want an RV as long as they possibly can," he says. "They often end up with our vehicle. It's the last step."

This may explain why Tsuyuki is an ardent Roadtrek fan. Trekkies honk their horns when they pass each other on the highway. They chat over CB radios — the channel is listed in a Roadtrek club newsletter. "You say, 'Hi, where you going?'" Tsuyuki tells me. "'Yeah, okay, let's stop at the restaurant and have a bite.'" They are members of a fellowship.

Rallies are the highlight of the Roadtrek international year. Tsuyuki and his wife, who make one big trip a year, attended seven such rallies in their journey across Canada from Prince Edward Island to Vancouver Island last year, beginning with a mussel and lobster barbecue. Other destinations have included lesser known tourist paradises, such as Fergus, Ont. "They have a local theatre there, and they said, 'Hey, we'll give you a deal on the theatre,'" Tsuyuki recalls. "We packed the whole theatre."

Rural Canada loves motor homes. Local merchants offer coupons. Artisans sell handicrafts at flea markets. Buses take rally members on tours.

"We had a rally at Goderich, Ont. once," Tsuyuki recalls. "We thought, 'What do they have in Goderich?' Well, there's a salt mine, and all kinds of train rides, a lot of things you never dreamed of. You learn quite a bit of history this way."

No local celebration is too small-time for Roadtrekkers. "We go to pumpkin festivals and apple festivals and rhubarb festivals," Tsuyuki comments. "We go to corn roasts, all these things."

The Family Motor Coach Association, based in Cincinnati, the people Tsuyuki calls the "head honchos," makes all this possible by offering insurance and paying deposits for the use of local fairgrounds.

Meanwhile, Hanemaayer, 45, keeps those Roadtreks coming. It's a family business. In 1974 the father, Jac Hanemaayer, unwilling to be a "weekend bus driver" behind the wheel of a big motor home, designed a van with all the motor home amenities, and asked Home & Park Vehicles Ltd. to build it. The finished product was so good, he acquired the company.

"Dad bought the company more out of a personal interest standpoint, than as a business proposition," Hanemaayer comments. On the brochure, father and son pose with a Roadtrek. They are dressed smartly in polo shirts and summer slacks. Jeff radiates an agelessness reminiscent of Pat Boone in his prime.

"I've been running the company since I was 21," he comments. "We have a full engineering team, but I'm heavily involved in the process — not the nitty-gritty detail level, but on most of the things that really impact customer use, I still make the final decision."

Busy as he is, Hanemaayer finds time to hit the road. On a recent trip, he had extra passengers and had to rent one of the big ones, a 34-foot motor home. "We went to a restaurant that was out in the country at the bottom of a long lane," he recalls. "We drove all the way down the road to the end. No place to turn around. I had to back up the motor home in the dark."

The incident violates the basic premise of the motor home. Adventure without the hassles. If Captain America and Billy were still around, they'd be in their 70s, and they'd be out there somewhere, driving an RV.

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