

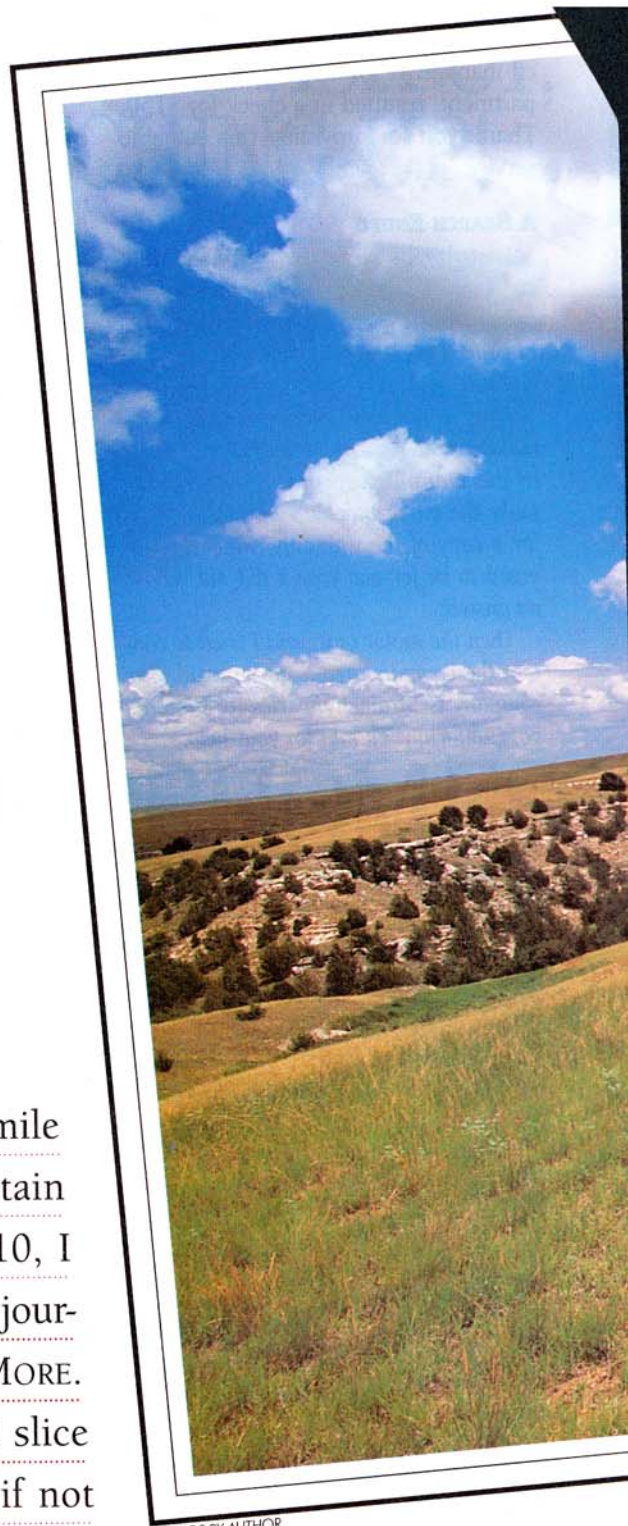
*Easy to drive, easy to stash,
this almost fully self-contained
van conversion from
Home & Park Motorhomes
makes a tidy traveling companion*

the Roadtrek Popular 210

TL TEST

DURING A three-week, 5500-mile odyssey across the Great Plains and mountain states at the wheel of a Roadtrek Popular 210, I was reminded of a placard on the desk of a journalism professor of mine. It read, LESS IS MORE. I remember how that old wordsmith could slice one of my articles in half and still salvage, if not improve, the story.

By Dave G. Houser



PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

In the present and more relevant context, it appears that Home & Park Motorhomes of Ontario, Canada, has worked the same sort of magic on its top-of-the-line 21-foot Class B model. Or, as another writer analogously observed, "They've packed 10 pounds into a 5-pound sack."

To be sure, the Roadtrek Popular 210 stands out as an exemplary state-of-the-art Class B camping van conversion. Cleverly fitted within its confines are most amenities found in a Class C motorhome. The fact that there's little room left for more than two people raises an age-old question: What do you really want and need in a motorhome?

It's always a compromise when it comes to size/space versus economy, maneuverability and dual use. If you're the head of a large clan of campers, or if you plan to spend a great deal more time living in rather than driving it, a van camper probably isn't for you. But for couples or small families, and for those who plan to cover lots of ground and thus benefit in a big way from better fuel economy and handling, the Class B deserves serious consideration.

We were a twosome (plus a Labrador puppy) easing out of our rural New Mexico lane one predawn morning, bound for a family visit in Minnesota, plus a number of journalistic projects en route. It would prove a journey more than sufficient to familiarize ourselves with every aspect of the Roadtrek.

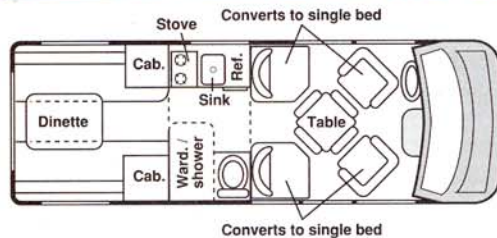
LIVABILITY

First impressions are important, particularly those that hold up over a long haul. That was the case with our instant admiration of the Popular 210's smooth lines, low profile and handsome appearance. Save, perhaps, the dated front-end design of the Chevy van, we never got tired of its functional good looks.

Our preliminary notions of ingenious design, good solid construction, high-grade components and quality finish were reinforced during the trip as well. This Roadtrek was designed and built with a great deal of careful thought and attention to detail.

Too bad we can't exude the same enthusiasm for GM's contribution to the package. Our test unit was based on Chevrolet's aging G30 extend-

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Roadtrek's Popular 210 is an excellent getaway vehicle for couples or small families.

ROADTREK 210

S P E C I F I C A T I O N S

PERFORMANCE

Fuel consumption*	15.3 mpg
Acceleration time	
0-60 mph	16.0 sec
40-60 mph	8.0 sec

*Fuel consumption recorded at 55 mph, 4000 feet elevation, predominantly flat highway, Ambient temperature 90 degrees F.

CHASSIS

Manufacturer	Chevrolet
Engine	5.7L V-8
Horsepower	190 @ 4000 rpm
Torque	300 lb-ft @ 2400 rpm
Transmission	4-spd auto
Axle ratio	4.10:1
Tire size	LT225/75R16
Load range	E, 3042 lb single & 80 psi cold
Wheelbase	146"
Brakes	Disc front/drum rear
Suspension	Coil front/leaf rear
Cooling system	HD
Fuel cap	33 gal

COACH

Ext length	20'7"
Ext width	6'8"
Ext height	8'4"
Int width	6'1/2"
Int height	6'1/2"
Frame construction	Steel

Insulation	Fiberglass
Freshwater cap	36 gal
Sink/shower holding cap	23 gal
Waste-water holding cap	12 gal
Hot-water cap	6 gal
Propane cap	7 gal
Furnace	16,000 BTU
Air-conditioner	7,500 BTU
Refrigerator	3 cu ft
Converter	32 amp
Batteries	100 amp-hr
Generator	2.8 kw
Base sugg retail price	\$47,385
Price as tested	\$52,208

WET WEIGHT

(Water, propane, fuel tanks full; no passengers or supplies)

Front axle	3,145 lb
Rear axle	4,095 lb
Right side	3,645 lb
Left side	3,595 lb
Total	7,240 lb

CHASSIS RATINGS

Front gawr	3,900 lb
Rear gawr	5,360 lb
Gvwr	8,600 lb

Owner may add up to 1360 pounds in weight of passengers and supplies to motorhome test coach without violating chassis maximum gvwr.

Gawr: gross axle weight rating
Gvwr: gross vehicle weight rating

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ed-van chassis, powered by a 5.7-liter (350-cid) V-8. This is the only chassis available with the Popular 210. Fortunately, that will change with a redesign of the G30 for the 1996 model year.

Our functional complaints concern sway and body roll, to be discussed in detail later, and poor interior cab finish where plastic trim came loose and mysterious screws, washers and other bits kept turning up. While we were impressed with Home & Park's coachwork and more than satisfied with the unit's overall performance, a new chassis from GM can only make this a better vehicle.

The white exterior of our test unit was nicely accented by electric-blue striping, optional matching flared running boards/fender skirts and blue crushed-velour interior. White is the sole exterior color offered, but there is a choice between blue or plum-colored upholstery. Interior appointments are tastefully color-coordinated. The ceiling is thickly padded with white vinyl, and all cabinetry is finished in rich oak paneling.

Home & Park sticks to a single, albeit versatile and well-proven, floorplan for its Popular 210. It features the company's patented three-section floorplan with forward seating for four (which converts into two single beds), a mid-section galley/bath/wardrobe and a rear dinette/bedroom. With patented folding doors demarcating each section and easy-to-draw curtains all around, including a set for the rooftop skylights, this unit affords maximum privacy.

Swing-out side doors provide primary access to the conversion. You can climb aboard through a pair of rear doors as well, but not without a struggle if either the bed or the dinette table is in place. We left the spacious and comfortable 6-foot 4-inch x 6-foot 1-inch main bed in place for most of our journey and used the optional cloverleaf table extensively for cocktails and dining. The two captain's seats swivel to face the floor-mounted table and the two lounge chairs. The 22 x 22-inch table features adjustable wings that extend it to 32 x 32 inches in full cloverleaf mode.

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It didn't take us long to become proficient at cooking meals in the cozy galley and setting up the forward section for dining. Meal service was easier using the rear dinette, but, for our purposes, it was better to leave the bed down while traveling. It served as a perfect platform for our pup's travel cage, which he soon accepted as home while we were under way.

Situated streetside, the galley features a two-burner Wedgewood range, a 3-cubic-foot refrigerator and an eye-level Panasonic microwave. A fitted cutting board serves as limited counter space. Galley storage is bountiful. The cupboards and drawers can accommodate the largest of dining utensils. There is even a small spice cabinet above the range.

Including compartments concealed within the running boards, this unit provides more than 100 cubic feet of storage space throughout. Effective space utilization starts when Home & Park cuts out the chassis floor and replaces it with a dropped-floor structure. This not only increases interior height to 6 feet 1 inch while maintaining a low exterior profile, it strengthens the frame and lowers the van's center of gravity, which improves handling. The dropped floor also houses specially molded water tanks and plumbing, freeing up storage space elsewhere.

Pilot and co-pilot for this test were 6 feet 3 inches, 200 pounds and 5 feet 6 inches, 140 pounds, respectively, the size advantage going to co-pilot Jan. She moved about the rig with ease, while I had to duck and gauge my moves with care, especially when the two of us met in the aisle, but this is standard procedure with any van conversion.

Across the aisle from the galley is a unique bath. A pair of oak doors conceals three closets that house a Thetford marine-type toilet, a multishelved pantry/wardrobe and an optional wardrobe/shower. The pantry/wardrobe, located adjacent to the toilet, proved to be a most useful and convenient storage area and, since our test vehicle wasn't fitted with the optional shower, we used the space allowed for it as

a wardrobe for our hanging clothes.

Unlike the cramped and marginally comfortable beds in some van conversions, the 210's 5-inch-thick foam-mattress bed is superb, comfortable and more than roomy enough for a tall person. Here and throughout the vehicle a number of fluorescent fixtures provide excellent, energy-efficient lighting. A TV shelf that both swivels and pivots is positioned at the upper streetside corner of the dinette/bedroom, an ideal location for either meal or bedtime viewing.

Although we never slept on the single beds up front, we did go through the requisite 10-minute, first-time struggle to set them up for a tryout. The beds are compact, fine for kids or small adults.

RV SYSTEMS

Our Popular 210 was loaded with almost every available option, including three I don't think we could have done without: an Onan MicroLite (2.8-kw) AC generator, a 7500-BTU air conditioner and a 6-gallon water heater. All three systems functioned flawlessly and added immeasurably to our comfort during a trip that coincided with record heat. We didn't need the 16,000-BTU furnace, but it should do a good job, given the 210's compact size.

We put the unit's ventilation system to the test, and it passed with an A-plus. Jalousie windows on both sides flip up to allow air in and keep most rain out. When coupled with optional screens, cleverly designed to zip shut once you've opened the windows, you have no bug worries either. An optional 12-volt DC power roof vent further aids air circulation.

The 210's fresh- and waste-water capacities allowed us to go three or four days without having to dump or fill. The freshwater-fill connection is hidden away in the passenger door's step well to reduce clutter and deter tampering. Roadtrek semipermanently fastens the dump hose to the valve assembly, which eases the dumping and cleanup chores.

Our test vehicle featured another useful option, the Fiamma F45 Ele-

gance awning. Easy to crank open, this color-coordinated blue-and-white canopy was well-bolstered by double-pivoted support arms that latched onto stainless-steel fittings on the curbside of the van.

PERFORMANCE & HANDLING

Our journey ran the gamut of conditions, from desert dust to torrential downpours, and the gamut of terrain, from endless prairie to high-mountain passes. We were unmindful of the rig's inherent interior-space constraints as we sprinted across a rainswept North Dakota prairie or scooted around tight corners in Colorado Springs' Garden of the Gods; the Popular 210 proved equal to it all.

Performance of the 190-hp engine was surprisingly brisk. Fully loaded for travel, the rig weighed in at nearly 8000 pounds. Even at that, we could have taken on a couple of NFL linemen before topping the vehicle's 8600-pound gross vehicle weight rating (gvwr). Unloaded, the base (wet) weight of the rig was 7240 pounds.

Acceleration tests revealed 0- to 60-mph times in the 16-second range, while 40- to 60-mph readings were a respectable 8 seconds. As impressive as the acceleration figures were, we were even more astounded by the Popular 210's fuel mileage. We averaged 15.3 mpg for the entire 5570-mile trip! Spot checks indicated 10-12 mpg for city driving and up to 17 mpg on the highway.

Most freeway grades were topped at the set speed, but steep backcountry roads in the 4- to 6-percent range slowed us to 45 mph, at worst, when the curves and traffic held us back and prevented a run at the hill.

Easy to drive and comfortable for long stretches, thanks in part to the superb captain's seats, the 210 handles well under most circumstances. It does tend to display some crosswind sway, as do many motorhomes of all sizes, and under moderate-to-hard cornering, somewhat more body roll than we might expect. A more relaxed driving style might reduce the body-roll tendencies.

Addressing our concerns, Home & Park Project Engineer Chris Brenner

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suggested an owner could replace the G30 van's standard front antisway bar with a heavier GM bar or an aftermarket bar, and he'd look at equipping the rear with an optional stabilizer bar. Well and good, but we think these are modifications that GM and/or Home & Park should consider making at the factory.

The Roadtrek Popular 210 does a great job as a low-profile van conversion. Bearing its compact size in mind, it provides all the amenities a buyer would expect of a very compact motorhome, and it does so in a well-built, top-quality package.

Still, there's the budget to consider. We puzzled over some way to justify a price tag that, on our test model, came to \$52,208—a lot of money for such a small rig. Then it came to me: I went back to my old professor's favorite slogan, because what we have here is a situation in which less is really more. **TL**

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