

RV comfort in a van body

Roadtrek — the Rolls-Royce of camper vans — offers versatility and better gas mileage

BY MARK RICHARDSON
STAFF WRITER

MEAT COVE, N.S. — This is the northern end of Cape Breton's coastal road, a bumpy, winding stretch of gravel that finally curls into a loop near the cliffside field that serves as a campground.

Most of the summer's travellers were far south of here in the national park. Their big RVs couldn't manage the dirt road and they were staying near the park's amenities with their own kind.

It was their loss. The empty sea is beautiful and the peace of the area brings tranquility to the weary. Few brave the road to make it this far north, where the sea stretches unin-

terrupted over the horizon to Newfoundland.

Yet in the field, in pride of place under a flagpole with the best view in the province, Barry and Marlene Lloyd sat back under the awning of their motorhome and drank it all in.

Their motorhome is a Roadtrek, a remarkable camper van built in Kitchener that has become the best-selling Class B vehicle in North America.

"I can't tell you how much I love my Roadtrek," said Marlene Lloyd. "You can go anywhere in them."

To prove her point, the Loyds described the route that brought them from their home near Windsor to this lonely point of land: along Québec's north shore into Labrador, 600 km of gravel to Goose Bay, a ferry to Newfoundland and, finally, Nova Scotia.

It's the Roadtrek's versatility that helps it sell so well, combined with the high quality of its finish. I drove a Roadtrek last summer to the Maritimes and found it unfazed by any road.

Two or three times a day, parked

in a campground or just a shopping mall, owners of other RVs would come over and ask if the company's reputation as the Rolls-Royce of camper vans was deserved.

They'd poke their heads in the doorway and look through the little kitchen and beyond my kids' mess to the queen-size bed at the back, and mutter about the surprising space. Sometimes, I'd demonstrate how the kitchen turns into a self-contained shower or washroom, or how the front seats swivel around to create a little dining area.

Always, they'd stumble for the one question they really wanted to ask, bracing for the courage to hear my answer: "What's your gas mileage?" And always, when I'd tell them I was getting 14 miles to the U.S. gallon (about 17 L/100 km), they'd wince and shake their heads.

"You know what that thing gets?" asked an ashen-faced Pennsylvanian named Spartacus, pointing at his bus-sized motorhome next to our campsite. "Seven miles to the gallon, if I'm lucky. Four if I'm in the mountains. I have to travel with oth-



CAMPING IN STYLE: Barry and Marlene Lloyd of Windsor enjoy the view from a remote part of Cape Breton last summer.

MARK RICHARDSON/TORONTO STAR

er people — I can't afford the gas on my own."

The Roadtrek may save its owners money at the pumps, but it makes up for it at the dealer's. The cheapest of its six models, the 170 Popular on a Dodge chassis, retails for \$63,075; the most expensive, the 200 Versatile that sleeps four, starts at \$77,325. Options such as additional generators, air conditioners and sunrooms can add thousands to the price.

"We've never claimed to be cheap," says Roadtrek chairperson Jeff Hanemaayer, "but we do claim to be the best."

It's an expensive manufacturing challenge to cram a lot of living area into a small package, which is what the various Roadtreks do well. The ceiling is raised and the floor lowered to allow walking around without having to stoop, and the central corridor is wide enough for two people to walk past each other.

It starts to get cramped with young kids running amok between the convertible bedroom/lounge area and the doorway, but most Roadtrek owners are retirees, enjoying their pensions and free time. For them, the camper van is easier to drive than a larger motorhome.

Unlike most RVs, there are no bits hanging off the top or sides of a Roadtrek: the air conditioner is contained within the roof, the stove exhaust fan is inside the body, the spacious water tanks and sump hoses are hidden underneath.

It's a respectable vehicle for ev-

eryday driving and, indeed, many owners justify the cost of a Class B motorhome by using it as a second vehicle — a large minivan — instead of the dedicated vacation travel of a larger Class C.

In fact, it's a very comfortable vehicle to drive: responsive and well-mannered, without the truck-like feel of an RV.

'I can't tell you how much I love my Roadtrek. You can go anywhere in them'

—MARLENE LLOYD
Windsor

Marlene Lloyd told me she's quick to suffer from driving nausea, but her Roadtrek has never made her feel unwell — just so long as she's doing the driving.

"I'm not allowed to drive it," said Barry. "She makes me sit in the passenger seat and read the maps. She calls me her navigator."

They were to stay in Meat Cove for just a couple of nights, joining up with some other vacationers before heading home. But they were already planning their next trip.

"In 2002, we want to drive all the way from Alaska to Mexico," said Barry. "And when we get to Mexico, who knows? Maybe we'll just keep on heading south until the road stops."

Even then, they might just keep going, looking for another perfect campground.



QUALITY CHECK: A Roadtrek 190 gets its final inspection at the Kitchener factory. Company chairperson Jeff Hanemaayer, right, talks with quality assurance technician Dan Anger.

SIMON WILSON PHOTO FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Family, friends and the great outdoors

Many questions must be answered before choosing the right RV for your family

BY HOWARD ELMER
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

It's that time of the year when travellers' thoughts turn to recreational vehicles — not boats or sunny escapes.

In light of world events since Sept. 11, families are expected to take a fresh look at the recreational vehicle lifestyle at the Toronto RV Show and Sale.

RVs are a practical, comfortable way of enjoying the outdoors, family and friends and that seems to be driving a brisk RV market.

The annual Toronto show offers RV purchase, rental options and also features seminars on safety, maintenance and even cooking demonstrations.

RVs come in all shapes and sizes. So, if you're thinking of heading out to the show for the first time, you'll want to know the basics.

■ Class A: These motorhomes are characterized as having a bus style chassis and shape.

The lower-end Class As are mostly gasoline-powered front-engined, while the more expensive ones are known as "diesel pushers." The diesel engine is in the rear of the coach.

Luxury models can easily eclipse the half-million-dollar mark. At the lowest end, the price of admission is around \$65,000.

■ Class B: These conversions use a modified van body and provide basic amenities in a very compact space. This RV is most likely to double as a second car. These units can easily cost upwards of \$50,000 and beyond, depending on options.

■ Class C: Most of them are built on a cutaway chassis that comes complete

with a manufactured cab.

Easily recognizable by the bed-over-cab design, these units are almost always gas powered. They often sleep up to eight and are a favourite among families. Features and luxury options create a price range of \$60,000 to well over \$100,000.

■ Truck-campers: Slide-in campers are available to fit nearly any pickup, from six-foot pop-up versions to 11-foot units with slideout rooms.

These units are compact, but if you already own a pickup truck (or if you need to tow your boat, ATV or horse trailer), then this may be the right unit for you. Prices range from a couple of thousand dollars to more than \$20,000.

■ Folding campers: These trailers are relatively inexpensive, yet they offer a

pair of double beds, a dinette and basic cooking facilities.

A clue to your type of camping is the activities you pursue. Do you fish in remote locations or do you consider 36 holes of golf a day of roughing it?

They are light, easy to tow and can be set up quickly. These units can be very plain or can be accessorized with water heaters, air conditioners, slide-out rooms and even refrigerators. The

prices range from about \$7,000 to more than \$20,000.

■ Travel trailers: From six-foot mini-trailers to 40-foot luxury condos-on-wheels, there is something for everyone in this market.

If you've decided to tow your RV, then there are hundreds of choices available. Prices vary as widely as weights in this segment — from under \$10,000 to more than \$100,000.

■ Fifth-wheel trailers: With more than half of all new vehicle sales in Canada being pickup trucks, this RV segment deserves special mention.

These travel trailers utilize a "fifth wheel" hitch (fixed over the rear axle in the bed of the truck) instead of the more traditional bumper hitch.

RV shows provide the opportunity to pick up information on different

destinations, campgrounds and RV clubs. Finance people and insurance carriers will be in attendance, rounding up a one-stop chance to put together a package that suits you.

Of course, to do that you need to define what kind of camping you and your family enjoy.

A clue to your type of camping is the activities you pursue. Do you fish in remote locations or do you consider 36 holes of golf a day of roughing it? Age and family size are important: younger families have different wants than empty-nesters.

Then there is time. How much do you have? Just weekends or will you travel for extended periods?

Answer these questions and the type of RV you need will present itself.

Another good idea is a first-hand look at an RV park and the type of amenities offered.

And talk to RV owners — most love to talk about their lifestyle and their units.

Budgets are important. Before the show, establish how much you'll spend. With 150 exhibitors and thousands of models, a budget will help keep you on track.

Keep in mind that an RV has annual insurance and maintenance costs, and possibly storage charges as well. Include these in your calculations.

One common question is whether you need a motorized RV or not.

Consider whether your vehicle can tow the size of RV you want to purchase.

How many kilometres will you be doing?

Can you use the RV as a second vehicle?

What about maintenance, insurance and depreciation?

About 13 per cent of Canadian households own some type of RV. Of those, 6 per cent own towable trailers, 5 per cent have folding tent campers and just 1 per cent opted for motorized RVs.

Whichever RV you decide to buy, it comes with its own lifestyle. Gather up your family, hit the road and enjoy the journey.

Recreational vehicle types

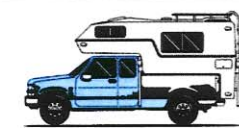
For a couple of thousand dollars, you can enter the mobile camping world by purchasing a slide-in camper for a pickup truck, or you could spend more than \$500,000 and pamper yourself with a luxury Class A RV and all its amenities.



Fold-down camping trailer



Travel trailer



Truck camper



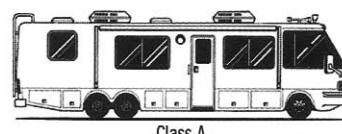
Fifth wheel



Class C



Class B



Class A

SOURCE: Howard Elmer

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