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the sky's the limit. Fiberglass roof caps that extend interior space vertically up to standing room have lost much popularity lately to re-bodied vehicles. Built on the same cut-off chassis (the van body stops behind the seats) as the traditional mini motor homes, these latest generation RVs (like Trans Van) are true multi-purpose vehicles that can be driven as daily transportation or used for fun. They could signal real trouble for mini motorhomes.

'Minis' have been very hot for the last couple of years. Like pickup campers, they overhang the cab with a sleeping area. From there, it's rearward to at least the length of a basic van, and often much longer; 23 feet isn't unusual. Minis offer many of the amenities of fullsize motorhomes, and as costs have risen over the years, they've offered a practical alternative. Now re-bodied vans are taking on the minis, much as they took on the big guys.

Those big guys are where it all began . . . the land yachts of an era going by all too quickly. Typically mid-twenties feet long the motor home is the ultimate RV, roomy, fully equipped, and expensive to own and operate. That will likely prove their downfall. While top of the line units will no doubt continue to exist for those who can afford them, sadly, the rest of us will have to move our sights to a more modern alternative (see 'Future of the RV').

Say what you will about Southern California, it's smoggy, tacky, showy, and about to fall into the ocean, I can't think of anyplace I like better in the whole world. It's warm, it's fun, and it is beautiful, especially along the coast. Where better to spend our last night near L.A. than in Malibu, overlooking the water.

Parked with Trans Van's large side window facing the moon and stars and surf (wow . . .) we were just about settled when nature called. That hadn't been a problem before, having spent much of our time in transit, or at motels; but it was quickly on its way to becoming one. A quick check showed no public rest rooms open at the beach, nor anything else for that matter. Nature not wanting "no" for an answer, we packed up and headed south, winding up several miles away at Southern California's 24 hour a day answer to Roloids, a Jack In The Box (may I have your

order please . . .).

Moral of the story? When it says 'all the comforts of home' don't take anything for granted, Jack In The Box isn't everywhere y'know.

The design of recreational vehicles is pretty well defined. Since volume of anyone design is fairly small, the cost of tooling for many custom parts is prohibitive. Manufacturers are limited to standard van and truck chassis produced by the auto companies, along with off-the-shelf interior components. It's by no means an ideal situation, and to the designers credit that they've produced as wide a choice as they have.

The big news in exterior design are materials, large, smooth molded plastic panels, and aerodynamics. Pioneered by Airstream and GMC (with their excellent, but ill-fated motor home) back when it didn't matter, manufacturers are finally realizing that much of their 8-10 MPG fuel economy problem is because most RVs are about as slippery as a



parachute. A little improvement makes a big difference.

Inside, the news is even better. As RVs get smaller, their interiors are getting lighter and more efficient. Recent developments include full bathrooms with a small tub, fullsize refrigerators, built-in vacuum cleaners, and microwave ovens. These days, designers are borrowing more from the auto and aircraft industries, and less from mobile homes. That also means interiors will be better put together and more reliable. That will benefit everyone.

Well, it's almost over. Almost time to head home. One more stop to watch the sun go into the water while enjoying wine and cheese (and surfers) on the Monterey peninsula, dinner in Sausalito, a look around San Francisco, and then on the road.

At almost every stop, other RV owners cruise over for a look at the Trans Van. Some sneak a peek, others ask for a look, and then there

are those who just climb in. The routine is always the same, "Yes, it gets pretty good gas mileage, there's plenty of room, but I'd recommend the longer model with a bathroom, it rides well, though sleeping in certain places will make you seasick in no time flat at 55 miles an hour, no, nothing falls apart, yes, that's all it costs, and NO, I wouldn't like to trade"

The Future

As you sit reading this, right in the middle of the fuel crunch, there are those not only unsure of what the future of RVs will hold, but whether there'll be one at all. With sales way down, plant closings, layoffs, and dealers wailing, it's not hard to wonder how, and how long, the RV industry can survive this up/down, on again/off again course.

Be it ever so humble, boy, am I glad to be home. While I was gone, they threw the switch, and it's spring in Michigan. Things are green, it's getting warm, and my apartment's a mess (spring cleaning time).

Unload, wash, brush, vacuum, remove the wedge from the door that wouldn't stay closed, and return the Trans Van to Champion, not much the worse for wear. Jump into a car, and off on the last hour drive of the trip. Exhausted again, I wish I could swing around onto the bed. Damn, I think I understand.

The RV will survive, because we're hooked. Americans love mobility, and the powerful extension of that offered by RVs is too good to give up. There will be changes, however.

What we're seeing in the RV industry is not unlike the early days of the car business. Styles change, and disasters come and go constantly. Fortunes of manufacturers and dealers that best anticipate those trends will rise; those that don't will be absorbed, or disappear completely. The strong that do survive will be more stable, competent companies; each holding a greater portion of the market. This centralization will result in larger budgets than ever before for design, development, and tooling, making tomorrow's RVs better than ever.

The doomsayers are wrong. The future of recreational vehicles is anything but bleak . . . There are sure to be new looks, new names and new faces, and they'll solve a constant flow of new problems; but RVs are very much here to stay. ■