

R ycht, a remodeled 1977, 23' GMC Motorhome: Chuck Botts, cbotts@san.rr.com

Our involvement with the GMC Motorhome community started in 1998 during our second year of retirement - at the start of a 41 day RV Caravan tour of Alaska. We arrived at Dawson City, BC, a day early for the start the tour. We had a leisurely trip of 2,528 miles from San Diego, North via the beautiful west coast Route 1. We arrived in our Toyota Odyssey motorhome at mile 0 of the Alaskan highway, the starting point for the tour. While waiting, we walked around the RV park to see the other caravans that were assembling for their tours. There were RV's of all kinds and descriptions, from VW campers, fifth wheels to Proovosts. There, almost hidden between two large diesel pusher busses, was this shiny GMC Motorhome.

20 years ago, we had rented a GMC for a family weekend trip to the sports car races. I remembered it was a smooth riding vehicle that was easy to drive. We were told they were built to cruise on the Interstates at the speed limits and the one we rented did that with ease. I remembered that it drove more like a large luxury car than the other truck-based RV's we had rented over the years. It had front wheel drive from a luxury Olds Tornado car, resulting in a floor one step off the ground. We really liked the GMC, but with children, schools and only two weeks of vacation a year, our money had other places to go.

We wondered who would take a 21 year old RV on a 5,000 mile Alaskan experience?

We knocked on their door and introduced ourselves to talk to them about their GMC. It turned out that this was Bruce and Harriet Baughn's home. They were full-timers who had both lost their original mates after raising their families. Summers were spent visiting their families and friends and then traveling for the rest of the summer. Their winters were spent in Phoenix with the other snowbirds. Their tow car, which they had left home for this trip, was a restored MGB convertible.

In that we had common ground. I had restored a 1962 Lotus Élan convertible in '82 and drove it to work every day until I retired in '96. Rare? There were only 4,000 Lotus Élan made between 1962 to 1974 and only half of them came to the U.S. Yet, I could get any part, including the fiberglass body parts, by UPS in a few days. There was a whole network of people who had original and improvement parts. That was one thing about a cult vehicle, if something was weak, somebody had an improvement to fix or replace it. I had put over 100,000 miles on my Lo-

tus, which included some weekend slalom racing. I did preventive maintenance on it and it never let me down. I had the engine and transmission rebuilt by a professional Lotus racer to meet the new CA emission laws before I retired, which were later canceled.

Was something like this possible for the GMC Motorhome?

That is what the Baughn's had done. They had bought their GMC more than 10 years previously and had refreshed it. They had just done it again after 150,000 miles. He said he had more confidence in his GMC than any new vehicle in the RV park because he knew it, could fix it, or have it fixed, by most old time mechanics. Since it was made mostly from standard GMC parts, whose parts were available at NAPA stores all over the U.S. If not, he knew how to get speciality parts from the GMC Motorhome International's parts list or speciality dealers. He said he did his preventive maintenance to the GMC manuals, so he had had very little trouble over those 150,000 miles. He showed me the GMC Motorhome Parts list book, GMC maintenance manuals and GMCMI parts interchange list. All could be bought for less than \$300. He showed me his small tool kit and parts. It was no bigger than the one I carried for the Lotus and Toyota.

Three hours later, after they had told us all about their coach and the trips they enjoyed, we told them that we were really interested in a "one story RV." Our 22 ft class C had an overhead bed, and it was becoming more difficult for us to get up and down in the middle of the night. We liked the ability of a shorter RV to park on our driveway, maneuver, and stop along the way to experience the local points of interest. We had decided that traveling by RV is what we wanted to do in our retirement as long as our health held out. So, for our next vehicle, we were looking for something that we could travel in for the next 10 or more years. We also decided that we would not travel full time and would continue to winter at home in San Diego.

Around back and lined up among other large RV's was a 23 foot GMC. The GMC motorhome came in two sizes, 26' and 23'. The 23' would fit in our driveway parking area. Two old GMC's heading for Alaska with over 100 newer RV's. We also talked to them, Carl and Carole Ebeling. Both of them were school teachers. Their home was in Florida and they used their GMC for extensive travel during the summer. He joined us for discussion about their GMC. He, too, had refurbished his GMC for the Alaskan tour. They had more than 250,000 miles on theirs. More sto-

ries about the network for keeping these vehicles alive and on the road. He also was a pilot and talked about preventive maintenance on his airplane that was much older than his GMC. He had some preventive maintenance things to do before their scheduled start, so he excused himself from our discussion.

The couple with the 26 footer made two suggestions of what to do before we decided to take the plunge and refurbish a GMC. First, learn as much as you can and get as much club and vendor information as we could, to see what is available. He gave us some leads that we could follow when we returned home. The second thing was to go to the nearest GMC club meeting and talk to the owners. With a twenty year old coach, we would see the range from well worn, seldom used, to well maintained, and some completely remodeled. He said to find out exactly what you think you want before you commit yourself. He said that he would have saved \$5,000 if he had spent more time finding out what was available and selecting the nearest thing to what he wanted. Instead he bought one and then did many modifications to get it closer to what he really wanted. Both of those recommendations proved to be right on.

When we returned from our tour, we stopped in at various RV shows so we could see what was available, both new and used. We started a list of what our ideal RV should be. We had traveled over 70,000 miles in our Toyota, RV. We had progressed from tenting to pop ups, to trailers to rented RV's so we had a good idea of what we wanted for the way we traveled and what extras we didn't need. We had learned to travel light. Every town has stores and services, so there is no need to carry a lot of stuff like our boating friends did when they traveled on the ocean. We vacuum packed our cold weather emergency clothes so they take very little room. We only keep enough food aboard for a couple of rainy days. If we needed something, we could buy it or rent it along the way. If it was big and bulky and we no longer needed it for the trip, we shipped it home. We grew to enjoy traveling light.

The next step was to decide what type of RV we wanted. Self contained RV's came in four major groups. We had already eliminated the top heavy campers on pickups. The smallest RV's are class B, which are converted vans where seating was restricted to either the driving chairs or sitting straight up at a dinette. The beds were converted from the dinette so that both of us would have to either be up or in bed. We rented one once and it was not our lifestyle so we passed on those. We did learn that the better ones started at \$65,000 and went up from there.

The next group was the class C with a truck's van front end and RV attached for living quarters. Most of these shorter ones were the same split level bed arrangement as our Toyota, so those were out. Most of the current RV 's with a rear bed that I could fit my 6' 3" frame in started at 27 feet and went up. Most were longer than what we wanted, and would not fit on our driveway.

We had talked to many RV owners in our travels and found that somewhere between 24 to 25 feet was the threshold for needing a tow car. We decided that a tow car was a travel complexity we didn't want. We had learned to use our 22 foot unit as our touring vehicle and parked it in all kinds of small places, even on the street with parking meters. It was still shorter than some of the big four door pickup trucks used to tow fifth wheel trailers. Sometimes we had to park further away and walk in, but that was a minor compared to added complexity of towing. Our method of travel was to progressively stop along the way to sightsee and not back-track. People who park multiple days or weeks while traveling usually have tow vehicles and travel around their parked RV. This is the usual travel method of fifth wheelers too. We decided that we would rent a car if it was needed rather than tow. With a big motor, we could always add a tow vehicle later if we wanted.

That left Class A RV's, which includes buses, truck underbodies and the GMC's, some with front motors and others with rear motors. We limited our search to shorter front engine gasoline type motor homes. There was one 24' Safari that had the double bed that came down from the ceiling, but I was too tall to stand under it when it was up. Also, either both were in bed or up because there was little room when the bed was down. We drove one front gas engine wide body that was 24 feet long. It weighed so much that our little Toyota would go up hills faster. In our test drive going up the hills, it also roared so much inside that we could not hear each other yelling across the space between the seats. The ones we tested were not pleasant to drive. Wide bodies have limitations on narrow back roads, or at narrow road constructions. Slide outs were new and only came in the largest RV's.

We did find one unique RV that was sold direct from the factory that had an interior more like what we wanted. It was a converted Chevy 350 Aluminum bodied delivery van, similar to those used by Fed Express. It was sold as a luxury cruiser for two, was only 23 feet long and had a long bed across the back. It also started at \$75,000 and progressed up to \$85,000 with more "desirable" luxury equipment than we wanted. It was not exactly what we wanted but it proved that a luxury

cruiser for two could be done in 23'. That was the nearest solution to what we were interested in, but it was still a truck, and an under powered one at that.

Our V6 Toyota would drop out of overdrive on the level at 63 mph with no headwinds, so crossing the western Plains states at higher altitudes was slower than we desired. Once we hit big headwinds when could not get over 45 mph in second gear. We made up our minds that we wanted the largest and most powerful gasoline powered motor home to go up the western freeway grades with the least amount of slowdown. We had traveled up many long freeway 6% grades in our Toyota in lower gears, and that didn't appealed to me for our ideal retirement vehicle.

The more we looked, the more we leaned towards a 23' GMC with the biggest motor. We went to a couple of GMC club rallies and talked to most of the owners. The standard GMC layouts we saw made concession to sleep four or more adults and were totally self contained for dry camping, neither of which we planned to do. The more we looked, the more we leaned towards some major remodeling and eliminating those things that we didn't need. We looked at different RV's and live-aboard small yachts, and started to list our desires as well as those luxury things we would pass on.

We looked at this remodeled RV as a travel expense rather than an investment. Any vehicle we chose and used for 10 years would be worth maybe 10 to 20% of its initial cost. An RV is not an investment that will grow in value over time. We could buy a fine used GMC and accept the standard interior with its limitations, or we could bite the bullet and do it our way. The more we looked at accepting an existing GMC interior, the more we talked ourselves into completely remodeling it our way. Finally, we agreed that we would look into taking a 23' GMC, gut it and start all over, keeping only the side wet bathroom module to keep the waste water tank within the wheelbase.

After we had a general idea of what we wanted to do, we contacted different renovation specialist on what they could do. Since we were still in the "what if, can we do this" definition stage, we needed somebody we could work with to help define what could be done and then do the entire job. Doing it long distance did not look like the best solution so we talked to some members of the GMC Pacific Cruisers club for their recommendations. All recommendations led to Sy Gregorich who was only 20 minutes from our home. His Style Line business specialized in vehicle modifications for handicaps and he had completely redone his own 26' GMC's as

well as different degrees of modifications on 13 other GMC's. As a hobby, he had built over 30 award winning hot street rods that had he sold. Sy worked with Bob Lamey, who was Southern California's approved Cinnabar GMC mechanical service person. I just had been asked back to work as a consultant to design another disposable infusion pump for IV therapy. After talking to Sy and Bob, it was agreed to have the entire task subcontracted between the two of them.

We started with the inside first. Working with Sy, some major ideas evolved to defined our GMC mobile "Yacht". We would stay with a 23' GMC so we could park it on the concrete pad we had put next to our driveway. Sy had a '77, 23' with the largest motor, and the interior had already been gutted. It had 87,000 miles on the odometer, which turned out to be more like 187,000 or maybe even 287,000 miles when Bob Lamey got to replacing worn running gear. Sy was trying to persuade his wife to change to lighter 23' for more performance, but she wanted to keep her beautiful remodeled 26'. Bird in hand. We bought his 23' project vehicle.

We incorporated using the driver and passenger seats as captain chairs, our only chairs in the coach. We placed two different pop in tables between the chairs. One was small and low for traveling, the other was standard table height for eating and playing cards when the chairs were pointed towards each other. This position could also be used to work on the computer while the other person read or slept. The chairs would pivot on standard RV pivots rather than the GMC eccentric pivots so that the feet of the copilot would not dangle in the air when the chair was turned to face the rear to read or watch television. A "tool chest" was added on the passenger side to fill the gap between the first step and the top of the engine platform next to the entrance door. This provided more foot room platform for the copilot. We replaced the non-existing GMC chairs with Villa Captain chairs covered in fabric to provide the best of chairs for both driving and relaxing. Those worn cloth chairs were replaced at our 100,000 mile refurbishments with ultra vinyl recliner captain chairs with electric foot rests. To enable the pilot's chair to pivot around on a standard pivot stand, a removable steering wheel was incorporated. With a longer slide distance, the removable steering wheel also enabled the driver's chair to lay down to the full relaxed position when it was facing the rear.

We wanted a coach with an open feeling which was achieved with wide aisle so we could pass each other, no cabinets over the front windows and a hanging locker behind the couch back, which was under the large side window. This arrangement

provided us with 25 foot of continuous wrap around windows for viewing from our elevated chairs. This also provided a 9 foot long counter top that had a dual sink in the center. It went from the entrance door to the extra long air bed in the rear. That left the passenger side wide open to the rear. All cabinetry surfaces would be either almond colored Formica or matching vinyl on curved corners giving a uniform light color that was easy to clean. Our Toyota had dark wood cabinets with many character grooves that collected dust. Nice looking but impracticable for an RV.

All cooking, heating and cooling would be by electrical power provided at RV parks or our onboard generator. Cooking inside the coach would be by the full sized combination convection microwave oven. All cooking would be by deep electric skillet and George Forman Grill, plugged in outside the coach (no stovetop). We use a small 4 cup electric coffee pot, stored in a bottom cabinet. This not only cleared the counter top, but eliminated the need for an overhead exhaust fan and kept grease off the cloth headliner. The only need for LP would be the 3 way refrigerator during travel. That reduced the size of the LP bottle to a 5 gal. unit that would fit in the rear storage compartment along with the rolled up power cord, water hose, and TV cable. The dual Therm A/C heater wire would be our thermostatic controlled heating. We learned that the fan blew all the time, heat on or off, so we upgraded to a thermostatically controlled ceramic heater that could be placed on the floor. That heater will warm the coach from outside temperatures of 30 F within a half hour when we dry camped. It is stored next to our coffee pot.

Using only one set of chairs and all modern electric power accessories eliminated gas heaters & their hot air ducts, large gas bottles, gas stove and oven, and cooking exhaust fans. In addition, the replacement of a hanging closet with our hanging clothes locker behind the coach resulted in our 23' having more usable room and storage than a standard 26. We also incorporated every storage idea we had found on small yachts. We decided to make the interior design based on "modern art Deco" of the 20 thru 30's"

Together, we created a "project requirements document" so that the total task would be defined. At the beginning, there were many TBD [to be determined] items that were defined before their needs for answers arose. All work was on a time and material basis and billed weekly. The final document evolved to 9 pages of detailed agreements of tasks and configurations.

We bought our gutted coach in December of 1998 and had the interior and mechanical work complete by June 1999. We drove to Florida to pick up our grandsons for their first RV trip north along the east coast. The outside was finished by April 2000, ready for our next trip. We taken it back to a GMC specialist to refurbish it and incorporate improvements every 50,000 miles.

Update in 2012

Looking back after 14 years and more than 130,000 miles of travel in our GMC, we both agreed that it was the right decision to remodel a 23' GMC. We took pictures of where we went and wrote up our travels so that we now have over 12 linear feet of picture albums that have both our journal write ups and pictures of each of our major trips. Although we had not planned doing this during our remodel, we gathered up our two grandsons, ages 9 & 12 that first trip, and later on, when they got out of school and dropped them off to go back to school. They enjoyed traveling with us, so that lasted until they got old enough to get summer jobs to earn their own money for their current desires.

People would often ask how in the world we could travel with two energetic boys in such a small coach. I had written up ten rules with the understanding that if they broke the rules, they would be flown home at the next town that had an airport. No rules were ever broken during our trips. They would read a book, play games on game boy, play on the portable computer or sleep as we drove. They were brought up to never fight between themselves. We all enjoyed our trips together. We often stopped and went into stores to stretch our legs, buy lunch or pick out dinner. Each would pick out a pint of ice cream every day for their going to bed late night snack. They were and still are thin.

On our first trip we joined their family at Orlando to spend a week with them and their parents at Disney World, and in the many water parks. I set up a three man tent so they could sleep by themselves. The oldest said, "Tell me again, Grandpa, what the advantage is to sleeping in a tent without screens to keep out bugs, no lights, no bathroom, nor electrical connection for the computer, and no A/C." It was 105 F so no A/C was not a good option. I told him if they didn't want to sleep outside in the tent, than the tallest would have to sleep on the floor on an air mattress, and he said fine, 'Just don't step on me'. He later joined the Marines after graduating from high school. The youngest grandson slept on the 6' long coach.

We would arrive at a campsite and they would do the hook ups before taking their bikes to ride off to inspect the site and meet other people. We provided each with a small radio phone and we would call them when dinner was ready. We tried to stay at RV parks that had a swimming pool or beach, so that we could cool off in the warm summers evenings. Sometimes we had campfires to roast marshmallows.

They are both married now and are 6'5" and 6'4" tall. We all had a grand time traveling around the US and Canada together.

I gave them copies of our travel books so they could each remember our trips. They both used them in school for reports.



9 foot counter, 37" flat screen TV, stereo speakers for 12 disk CD player, three way freezer & refrigerator, sliding door on bathroom, Deco styling, leatherette & vinyl



Slide out pantry and room divider, and a big storage drawer underneath bed.



Dual captain chairs with electric foot rest, eating/card playing pop in table, light



Clothes locker behind couch back, 18 " hanging space, dual storage drawers. We put in safety belts and a pop in table (not shown) for when the grandsons traveled with us.

9/2012, I'm in the process of tuning a "Mileage shop" HHO fuel cell, which in other big engines motorhomes (454 Chevy and 460 Ford) have yielded a 45% increase in gas mileage. In our case, that would increase our gas mileage from 9.7 to 14 mpg at 65 to 70 mph; the same mpg as the new German turbo V6 diesel 24' motorhomes claim; but in our case, still going up 6% freeway grades in high gear on cruise control at 65 mph.

