

Roadside access on Alligator Alley (I-75) west of Fort Lauderdale. The canals drain huge marsh areas and may be brimming with fish, particularly during low water periods.



Wheelin' and Reelin' Through the Glades

Alligator Alley is a scenic and convenient cross-state highway. It's also gateway to some fantastic fishing.

By Alan Sherman

Looking for something different to do this fall? Why not check out the canals along Alligator Alley? They are full of fish and often overlooked by folks racing out of Naples or Fort Lauderdale. Opened in 1968, Alligator Alley is the 80-mile two-lane, cross-Everglades highway built to take some of the traffic away from the overcrowded Tamiami Trail (US Hwy 41). In building the highway, dredged material was used. The dredged area filled with fresh water from the surrounding Everglades and creat-

ed miles of canals on both the south and north sides of the roadway with depths that can exceed 10 feet. As the water from the nearby flatlands flowed into the dredged canals, freshwater fish, alligators, and turtles ended up in the canals. Birds followed and so did a lot of wild animals like the Florida panther, wild boars, deer, raccoons, otters, bear, opossums, rats, and marsh rabbits.

Cooler months are in our future and this a great place to get out and see some of South Florida's nature and wildlife at its finest. The fresh waters of our Everglades offers great opportunities for birders, fishermen and nature lovers. Dozens of native and migratory birds live or vis-

it our Everglades every year. Alligators, freshwater turtles, otters, freshwater fish, and lots of different flowering plants can be viewed right from the shoreline. During the cooler months, lots of egrets, blue herons, night herons, snowy egrets, ospreys, an occasional bald eagle, rosette spoonbills, ravens, black birds, turkey vultures, buzzards, mallards, coots, anhingas and more can be spotted from land or boat. The remainder of the year some but not all the listed birds will be seen.

Alligators can be seen swimming slowly from one canal bank to another. Often the alligators will lie motionless on the banks with their mouths wide open as they try to cool down. As your boat is moving down the canal, the alligators will get up and rush for the water. Your first thought is that they are headed your way, but all that has happened is that you have scared the gator and it feels safer in the water where it can head for the bottom till you pass.

Snakes are common in and along our freshwater canals, including the water



Bass this size are caught by the dozens on a typical day in early summer, casting topwaters. Below: Mile Marker 35 rest stop, Broward County.



Hidden Gems DISCOVERY

ALLIGATOR ALLEY AND GLADES CANALS

WHAT YOU'LL FIND: Freshwater canals girding east-west portion of I-75 in the far southern Florida peninsula. Loaded with fish and frequented by all manner of Everglades wildlife.

WHERE TO GO: Along the 80-mile Alligator Alley you will find at least eight boat ramps, all free to use but not all maintained. My favorite is Everglades & Francis S. Taylor Wildlife Management Area-Alligator Alley and it is located at mile marker 35.3 on I-75. Here, four ramps can accommodate boats on a single axle trailer, and at least one ramp that can accommodate boats on a tandem axle trailer. Kayaks, canoes and airboats may also be launched. The Miami Canal and L-68A canal can be accessed from these boat ramps. There is plenty of parking and a full rest stop facility.

THERE ARE OTHER SPOTS along the Alley where you can get close to the water and the wildlife. Some of these rest stops have facilities but not all. There is a fee for using Alligator Alley and only one gas station: the Miccosukee Service Plaza at mile marker 49. To get to the station you must exit Alligator Alley and turn on to West State 84.

IF YOU ARE LOOKING TO RENT A BOAT or take an airboat ride, check out Holiday Park at 21940 Griffin Road, Fort Lauderdale, and Sawgrass Recreation Park at 1006 N. US Highway 27, also Fort Lauderdale. Both offer boat ramps, boat rentals and airboat rides, and have bathrooms and food.

moccasin, coral snake, eastern diamond-back and pygmy rattlesnake—all venomous. But we have many other snakes that are harmless, such as the eastern indigo, gator snake, Everglades rat snake, and Florida brown snake. All these snakes are helpful to the Glades, but non-native constrictors most certainly are not. Most notorious of the latter is the invasive Burmese python. In some areas of the Everglades, marsh rabbits, rats, mice, raccoons, opossums and other warm-blooded animals have all but disappeared due to the pythons.

The fishermen will have a great time targeting largemouth bass in the 1- to 10-pound range or bigger. Peacock bass often feed alongside the largemouth bass and can exceed five pounds. Add to that action a bunch of panfish like crappie, bluegill, redear sunfish (a.k.a. shell-cracker), flier, longear sunfish, shadow bass, spotted sunfish (a.k.a. stumpknocker), warmouth, redbreast sunfish, catfish, American eel, mudfish and gar. Bait fishermen can target any of these species with worms, crickets, Missouri min-

nnows and shiners. The artificial fisherman will find that you need an arsenal of tackle to get many of these fish to strike when they are not hungry. Spin and baitcasters will throw soft plastic worms in sizes from 4 inches to 12 inches in length, an assortment of soft plastics that might include creatures that look like lizards, snakes, frogs and fish. If you are a fly rod enthusiast, try being on the water at daybreak when many of the fish are feeding near the surface. Streamer flies, poppers and sliders will all take fish in these canals. **FS**



Tackle Van Life

Searching for Hidden Gems? How about basing your exploration out of a mobile, self-contained fishing lodge?

By Blair Wickstrom, Publisher

Did you say Cracker Barrel?" "Yeah," Anthony Miller laughed. "Parking is a little less glamorous for us," he continued, "because we're not looking for idyllic campgrounds, we're looking for an overnight spot close by good fishing and a boat ramp. And even if we had the budget to stay in a campground every night, finding even primitive sites these days is tough. There's so much demand for RV sites today that it's almost impossible to just show up and find a spot."

But, as Anthony pointed out, the owner of a 19-foot van can find overnight

spots where larger RVs can't. "Even with my 14-foot boat I can fit easily into two parking spots," he said.

And from the looks of it, Anthony isn't alone. The small camper van, the Class B motorhome, is the hottest trend in recreational vehicles. Whether you're flipping through an RV magazine or scrolling on Instagram, Class B campers are everywhere.

The COVID-19 pandemic helped steer "never boaters" and "never campers" to an endless stream of how-to videos and thumb scrolling on social media in search of activities outside. And now they're hitting the roads and the waters—possibly

near you.

Boat and RV industry experts predicted an increase in demand, but nobody expected to see the kind of growth that the Class B market has had. According to industry officials with the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association (RVIA), sales were up 121% for March 2020 and up 46% for the year for the Class B motorhome.

What is a Class B motorhome?

A Class B motorhome, also called a camper van, is the smallest of the three types of motorhomes. The camper van movement is due in part to the new trend of high roof vans built using an automo-



High roof vans have opened the door, and road, to lots of new RV'ers.

tive van chassis from Ford, Ram and Mercedes Benz. This platform is comfortable, easy to drive and as functional for launching a boat as any truck or SUV. Many of these rigs are configured to sleep two persons, but with some creative tweaks (bunks, convertible dinettes, etc.) more passengers may be accommodated.

The maneuverability, versatility, price and ease of maintenance not only appeals to the younger first time RV buyer, but also to the seasoned RV'er who may be ready for simpler weekends in the woods. This is much like we're seeing in the boat world where people in their sixties are moving down from the large sportfish in-

The small camper van, the Class B motorhome, is the hottest trend in recreational vehicles.

boards to the smaller 30-foot plus center consoles, giving up some size, but not amenities.

Anthony Miller, from Ohio, has traveled to Florida in his 19-foot (144-inch wheelbase) diesel powered Mercedes Sprinter the last three years. He's fished

the southeast coast from January through March, pulling his 14-foot boat. He said that if money was no object, he'd own a 21-foot (170-inch wheelbase) diesel Sprinter and an 18-foot Hewes flats boat.

But for now, Anthony and his wife Sharon and new companion Gunner seem perfectly content in their 80-square foot mobile fishing home on wheels. "We built the van from scratch, literally: It was nearly totaled in a crash, so we got the van very cheap."

Like the Millers, a lot of people are taking the DIY route in building out their van. Others hire a professional van builder, for which there is a growing cottage



ABOVE: Electronics on a custom camper rival that of a sport-fish boat while incorporating intricate power systems with inverters, shore power and lithium battery banks.

ABOVE RIGHT: The garage, the space below the raised bed, is used for storage as well as access to your water and electronics.

RIGHT: A campervan built by Freedom Van Go in Jacksonville launches a skiff.



industry, mostly out west, but spreading across the country. A third option for those with neither time nor inclination to build or oversee a build, there are Class B RVs ready to drive off the showroom floor.

Jordan Beckler, owner of a Ram ProMaster (159-inch wheelbase) van, said he thought about building out his own van but in the end opted to go the route of a custom builder.

"Everything I read while researching the build process said that it would take between 400 and 500 man hours to fully build out a van," said Beckler, who lives in Vero Beach, Florida. "And in the end, I got a bill for 500 hours from my builder in New Jersey totaling \$40K."

Custom builders, such as Freedom Van-

Go out of Jacksonville, will build your van completely or they will step in for difficult parts of the build like the wiring or plumbing, or even a third option, they'll sell you premade modular systems that you can install.

When it comes to choosing a chassis, the main three are the Ford Transit, the Ram ProMaster and the Mercedes Sprinter. All offer high roof configurations in different lengths while keeping the width the same. Mercedes and Ford have a little more head room while the Ram is a little wider. Towing capacity varies on the chassis size, but the Sprinter and Transit have a little more pulling power.

"People have to keep the overall weight of their builds in mind not to exceed the

gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) of the vehicle," explained Chad Perce of Freedom VanGo. "For instance the weight of one of our full builds on short wheel base Sprinter is between 7,300 and 7,500 pounds, well below the max GVWR of 8,550. Adding the tongue weight of skiff or bay boat to the GVWR doesn't factor into the equation unless you start to max out the GVWR. The towing capacity for that van is 5,000 pounds."

Lots of options, and questions to answer before starting your van life.

With full disclosure, I'm a fully committed soon-to-be camper van owner. I spend at least an hour a day scrolling social media and watching YouTube videos on every aspect of the build, and even van life after



OFF THE LOT



Right: The Do It Yourself (DIY) van is widely popular because of the lower build cost and the fact that when you start with a bare cargo van you can build exactly what you want. The downside is the estimated 500-man-hours required to build out a fan could be underestimated. The van on the left, the Winnebago Pocket, is a production model based on the trends of the custom and DIY campervan craze. The Pocket is expected to be at dealers in August.



DIY CUSTOM



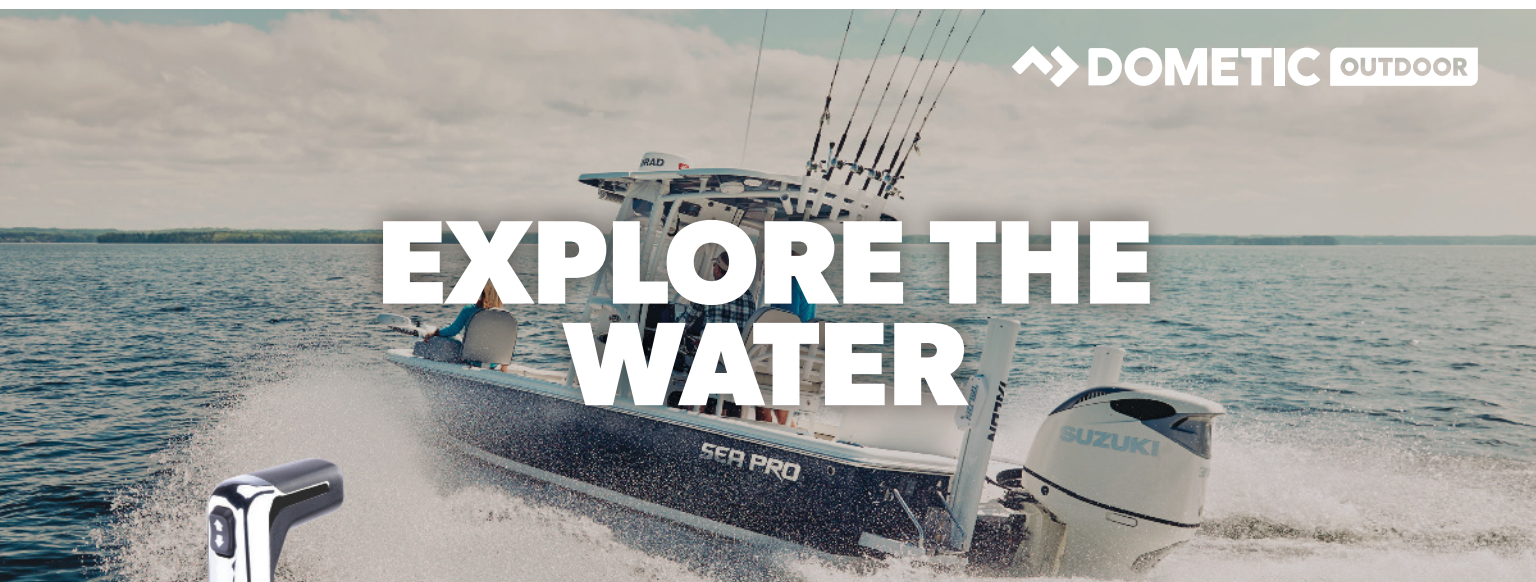
the build. Depending on the wind direction of the day I'm either going to be building out the van myself, hiring a professional or buying a finished van from a company like Winnebago.

Also changing by the day is the decision

on which chassis my wife and I go with. They all seem good. To compound the decision even further, they all come in multiple sizes. Since we're looking to use the van as a daily driver, and to occasionally pull our 19-foot center console, we've narrowed our

search to the Promaster 136-inch, the 148 Transit or the 144-Sprinter. We think.

And then there's the question surrounding Ford's new all-electric E-Transit van and what that could mean to the van-life crowd already powering much of their



DOMETIC OUTDOOR

EXPLORE THE WATER



DOMETIC XTREME™ CABLES AND CONTROLS

Easy installation results in easy steering.

The ergonomics and features of our controls are the most advanced available and are suitable for most types of boats with single engine applications. Our Xtreme™ Control Cables can be used in any boat. They are by far the best choice for long runs, twin stations or other difficult routings with multiple cable bends.

Explore all of our control options at dometic.com

four-wheel homes with solar and batteries.

I test drove all three as empty cargo vans. The Mercedes, with a 4-cylinder twin turbo diesel, had the most comfort features in the cab and cost \$54K. The 148-Transit with 3 liter 6 cylinder drove very smooth and came in about \$8K less. And the Pro-master-136, the smallest of the three, was

the key is starting with a budget and a good understanding of how you want to use the vehicle. Chad said that the questions you should be asking yourself are: What do you need this vehicle to do? What are your towing needs? Power needs? How much time and work are you willing to put into a vehicle?



Anthony Miller launches his 14-skiiff with his DIY van. Here he lands a nice red while fishing the flats of Flamingo, in Everglades National Park.

powered by a 3.6 liter 6 cylinder and came in around \$38K.

In most cases if you're building your van, you'll be buying the van, and as we've already talked about demand far exceeds supply so you'll probably be shopping all over North America because odds are the dealer near you won't have one for you to buy on the lot. A useful website www.vandom.co allows you to quickly search the country for new and used vans.

Because of the high demand and limited supply of new vans on the market due to a shortage of the processing chip, there isn't much difference in price between a low mile used van and a new one. After looking at several used vans in my area I've all but ruled them out. For just \$3 thousand more I'm able to get a new 2021 versus a low mile 2019.

But, simply test driving an empty chassis is only going to answer some of your questions. To make sure you get the right campervan, custom or off the shelf, you need to go thru the same process you'd do before buying a new boat.

Perce with Freedom VanGo emphasized

This was a lot of the same advice I've given others regarding the boat buying process for years, and the advice we give via our Best Boat television show: "It's not the Best Boat, it's the best boat for you."

One of the best ways to know if something is right is to try it first, or rent it, before buying.

This is how I met Jordan, through www.outdoorsy.com, the Air B-n-B of the camper world. There's also www.rvshare.com which we've used before, too. My wife and I determined that our goal was to spend two nights and three days of research: testing systems, measuring things and basically going over the layout. It was almost as important to find what we didn't like as what we did like.

After months of following dozens of custom van companies, and even more celebrated van-lifers on social media, my wife finally put her foot down and I had to choose. The head whipping swings from week to week were beginning to take their toll on her. I could sense her enthusiasm level of traveling in a showerless van waver- ing. So... even though I'd love to show off

my DIY van, I'm not ready to give up week-ends and nights for the next six months, or more, to build it. So that left two options, build a custom van or buy one already done.

And since the layout we were looking for was more in line with the DIY crowd and custom builders it looked like the custom builder route was the direction we were headed.

That was until we heard about Winnebago's new Solis Pocket, a Class B van built on the 136-Ram chassis. The Pocket was set to debut in August 2021. At press time, it was not yet available to climb in and give it a shakedown. Preliminary website videos and photos suggested that Winnebago has been paying attention to the DIY and custom van craze. Many of the features we liked in the custom vans were incorporated in their new Pocket.

The Pocket's open layout, created largely by foregoing a full standup shower, is a first for Winnebago. As is common practice with many DIY camper vans, owners can create a make-shift shower by hanging a shower rod between the two rear doors while half open. From there it's as easy as hanging a curtain and a quick disconnect shower hose. An inexpensive instant water heater is used quite a bit, too. Remember it's called a camper van.

Another feature the Pocket took from the legion of remote workers out there living the van life was adjustable seating and storage options. Also included is a high platform Murphy+ bed which provides plenty of storage below for tackle, coolers, rods, etc.

Buying a production camper van does have some drawbacks, primarily in the case of being able to make custom changes, as with the air conditioner. The Pocket AC will only run via 30-amp shore power, a limiting factor for "off the grid" camping during Florida's notoriously hot summers. A self-contained system runs about \$20,000, which includes four lithium batteries, inverter, breakers, solar panels and power management system.

With a custom van, your options are unlimited. But, you'll likely pay more, and be obligated to wade deeper into the building process. As you can tell the wind is shifting once again. But, I keep thinking about Anthony and his stories of living in his van, following the bite from Daytona to Mosquito Lagoon, to Flamingo to the Keys. Van life. [FS](#)