

# MOTORCYCLE CAMPERS A TO Z

How to Buy, Safely Tow and Enjoy a Lightweight Motorcycle Camper

Sample Edition

Dale Coyner

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SAMPLE EDITION: A full text-only edition of this publication is available. Please contact [Dale@OpenRoadOutfitters.com](mailto:Dale@OpenRoadOutfitters.com) for more information.

*For all who enjoy chasing the horizon, leaning in the curves  
and sitting around the campfire with friends.*

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## PREFACE

Thanks for picking up this copy of *Motorcycle Campers A to Z*. I hope you will find it useful as you consider joining us “moto campers”—riders who enjoy the convenience and comfort of pulling a motorcycle camper with our bikes.

I’ve written a lot of articles and a couple of books about motorcycle travel, but I can truly say I’ve enjoyed writing this one most of all. For more than twenty-five years, camping with a motorcycle has brought me the greatest share of memorable and enjoyable times in all the miles I’ve ridden on a bike.

I think you’ll discover, as I have, that motorcycle camping is a unique experience. You’ll regularly find yourself in places that RVs can’t go—oceanside sites too small for big rigs and whisper-quiet campgrounds where generators, TVs and AC units aren’t allowed (or desired). Motorcycle camping will introduce you to many others who enjoy the

simple pleasure of socializing around a fire instead of staring into smartphones. And it will make many of your journeys last longer simply because camping is more affordable.

Over time, without really thinking about it, the hobby of motorcycle camping became my business, [OpenRoadOutfitters.com](http://OpenRoadOutfitters.com). While it’s true that I sell motorcycle campers for a living, my aim throughout this book is to present the topic as impartially as I can.

Though written with motorcyclists in mind, most of the info in this book is useful to anyone contemplating a small camper: trike riders, small-car owners, and anyone else who would like to have extra storage or a small camper without the expense and bulk of a larger trailer.

So read through this book, get yourself a motorcycle camper, and let’s go camping.



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## INTRODUCTION

When was the first time you thought a motorcycle camper might be a good idea?

My introduction to motorcycle camping came through a group of riders in the mid-Atlantic who enjoyed riding out on weekends, pitching tents and touring the Appalachians. I did that, too, strapping a tent, sleeping bag and the rest of my camping gear over the backseat of a 600cc Yamaha Radian.

It was satisfying to carry just a little bit of gear and ride to the horizon on a Friday afternoon, knowing that friends, good food and fun were waiting for me at day's end. As I got older though, certain aspects of motorcycle camping started to wear thin, like the stiffness I felt after sleeping on the ground, struggling to get dressed in a cramped tent or getting up at night to pee (which becomes a regular thing as time passes).

The first motorcycle camper I saw belonged to a club member who would ride out, pop it up in a couple of minutes and then set up his chair and crack jokes while the rest of us stretched out our tents, fiddled with poles and tried to find a soft, level spot that wouldn't break our backs.

If it rained, we'd all gather under the large awning attached to his tent. At lights out, he'd step up into his off-the-ground sleeping quarters while we returned to our muddy, soaked tents. When we broke camp, he'd be

packed and saddled before most of us had our tents down.

After a season or two of that, I acquired a motorcycle camper.

### Purpose of This Book

If it sounds like I'm a real fan of motorcycle campers, well, I am. I've been towing trailers and campers behind motorcycles on and off for nearly thirty years (What? Thirty years?!), and I've enjoyed many miles of safe riding and towing.

My first experience as a motorcycle camper owner was probably like many others.' I bought my first camper (the one in the picture above) from a friend. After a brief twenty-minute tutorial in the parking lot, he pronounced me ready to trailer. We didn't talk much about loading it. Maintenance? Didn't come up. Installing the hitch was a real hoot. I nearly screwed up my bike's aluminum frame trying to force it on. My wiring was such a hack job, it was a matter of luck that my bike didn't develop serious electrical problems five miles down the road.

I've learned a lot since then. And I'd like to share what I know with you.

The purpose of *Motorcycle Campers A to Z* is to shortcut your learning curve so that you become a safe and enthusiastic motorcycle

camper owner in less time and at less expense and risk than I did.

I also want to offer you an authoritative source for information that is based on firsthand experience, not tall tales and Internet legends. Some aspects of motorcycle camping are as much art as science, so when we enter those topic areas where no one actually knows the right answer, I'll tell you.

If you are entirely new to the idea of lightweight pop-up campers or you've just started exploring the topic, this guide offers you a thorough grounding in all aspects of trailering, whether you're pulling a cargo trailer or camper. You will be prepared to make a well-informed buying decision and make the proper changes to your bike that allow you to tow a camper safely. You'll have a solid grounding in how to handle, operate and maintain your camper.

You may be one of those riders who, like me, once said, "I will never pull one of those things behind my bike." Even if that's the case, I hope you are intrigued enough to keep reading. Your opinion may be based on myths and "I know a guy who knows a guy" stories. Perhaps by the conclusion of this book, you'll be ready to give the idea of motorcycle camping some new thought.

You can thank me later, when the rain pours down, the wind howls and you crawl into a comfortable, dry bed.

## What's Covered

To begin our examination of motorcycle campers, Chapter 1, *Is Motorcycle Camping For Me?*, tackles some fundamental questions. What does it feel like to tow a camper? What effect does towing have on a motorcycle? What are the potential drawbacks? Are motorcycle-towed campers safe to tow? Will

towing a camper void my warranty? Once you know the answers to these questions, you'll know whether a trailer is an idea worth pursuing or best left to another time.

### Camper, Trailer, Whatever

When I use the words "trailer" and "trailering," I'm speaking of the general practice of towing something with your bike; it can include cargo trailers as well as campers. Terms like "pop-up campers," "tent trailers," or "mini campers" all refer to campers that are suitable for two-wheel towing.

Starting with Chapter 2, you'll find the information you need to make a good buying decision. In *Campers From the Ground Up*, we'll examine prevalent designs, components and assembly methods involved in modern camper construction and learn how choices in each stage affect the utility and performance of a tent trailer.

Once you understand how trailers are constructed, you'll be better able to determine which one is right for you. Many considerations will guide your decision—application, size, frequency, style and budget. We'll discuss each of these in depth in Chapter 3, *Finding the Right Camper*. By the time you're finished with that chapter, you'll be equipped to compare the features and specs of different models, better able to make an informed buying decision.

Chapter 4, *Purchasing a New Camper*, helps you understand what to expect during the buying process. You'll learn where to find campers to look at, the terms of a typical deal and what to expect when your camper is

delivered. I'll also touch on import processes for Canadian residents.

Want to start with a used camper? A lot of riders do. They're out there, but you'll need to ask a lot of questions and evaluate every used-camper deal closely. Chapter 5, *Purchasing a Used Camper*, explains where to find consistently good deals on used campers, what questions to ask, what problems can be easily fixed and which deals you should walk away from.

After you've settled on the right trailer, it's time to get your bike ready to pull it. There are two primary tasks you need to accomplish. Chapter 6, *Motorcycle Hitch Installation*, covers what you'll need to know about finding and installing the right hitch for your bike, as well as what to do if a hitch isn't manufactured for your bike.

Because modern bikes are equipped with so many electrically powered features, it's more important than ever to following best practices when making modifications to your bike's wiring harness. Chapter 7, *Camper Wiring How-To*, documents how to properly connect the trailer's wiring to your bike to provide running lights and brake and turn signals. If your camper is equipped with electric brakes, the chapter covers where and how to install the brake controller.

The next two chapters may be the most important in the entire book. Motorcyclists reduce the risk of an accident by developing and practicing good riding habits, and the same benefit applies to riders who cultivate and practice safe trailering habits from the start.

Chapter 8, *Preparing for Your First Trip*, details how to tow a camper safely from your very first hook-up without totally cramping your riding style. You'll learn how to properly load your camper to achieve the right tongue weight on the hitch—a critical factor for

effective, safe trailer handling. You'll learn how to properly attach a trailer to your bike and how to adjust your riding style to minimize the risks associated with trailering.

When you've successfully completed your initial experiments, you'll feel comfortable enough to take your trailer *on the road*. Chapter 9 discusses what to expect when taking that first significant trip, including how to handle a variety of situations, such as towing in the rain, ascending and descending mountain ranges, cornering and more.

Chapter 10, *Camper Care and Maintenance*, will help you keep your camper in safe and dependable operating condition for many years. You'll learn how to clean and treat the modern marine fabrics used on most camper tents. You'll learn how maintain and adjust the wheels, brakes and bearings on your trailer and discover the right way to store your camper over the winter.

*Motorcycle Campers A to Z* concludes with a series of appendices that contain additional information and resources to help you enjoy trailering. Appendix A provides a list of current US and Canadian motorcycle camper manufacturers and a list of hitch manufacturers. Appendix B offers handy computer and phone apps, Internet forums and books for further reading. Appendix C covers what you need to know about towing a motorcycle camper with a four-wheeler. Appendix D concludes with a brief summary of federal legal requirements for trailers.

## What's Not

While this title covers a lot of ground, there are a couple of topics I don't include. First, I don't offer an in-depth discussion of camping equipment or the day-to-day aspects of camp craft. I'll discuss things that apply uniquely to

motorcycle campers, like selecting a spot or setting up, but not generic equipment like camping stoves, sleeping pads, et cetera. For more info about the art of camping itself, pick up a copy of the definitive book on this topic, *Motorcycle Camping Made Easy*, by Bob Woofter.

Discussion of motorcycle campers is limited to tent trailers. I'm aware of a few teardrop and travel-trailer designs that motorcycle riders have been known to pull, but the weight and size of those far exceed what I consider a safe, suitable motorcycle camper.

Motorcycle camping is practiced throughout the world, and much of what you'll find in this title applies everywhere. However, the legalities of purchasing and licensing a camper are limited to practices in the US and Canada. If you live elsewhere, I'd recommend you look for motorcycle clubs or camping groups in your country to find a fellow rider who can guide you through the import process.

I discuss only North American-made products. Imported knock-off campers do exist; people buy them because they are temptingly cheap. I think it's wrong to copy designs from other manufacturers and then produce cheap copies. That's lazy, unfair and deceptive, so I won't talk about them or endorse them, even if they are a good deal. Copy-cat versions hurt manufacturers that provide good-paying jobs to local workers. And when you have trouble with that trailer (and you will), what kind of support do you think you can expect from a company like that?

Benjamin Franklin nailed it when he said, "The bitterness of poor quality remains long after the sweetness of low price is forgotten."

Well said, Mr. Franklin.

Now let's dive in.

## IS MOTORCYCLE CAMPING FOR ME?

Lately you've been thinking about pulling a camper with your motorcycle. There are many questions to consider, but the biggest is probably "What does a motorcycle camper add to my riding experience?"

### Camper Benefits

Motorcycle campers fix many of the aspects of camping that make the experience less fun as we get older. Finding just the right spot for a tent and setting it up is a pain. Fix: a motorcycle camper sets up on any modestly level surface; you won't have to pick up every rock and stick. Setup means opening the camper, raising a couple of telescoping poles and maybe snapping the tent around the base. No ground cloth needed, no confusing poles to mess with. Setup is done in just a few minutes. With some campers, setup is a matter of seconds.

There's no need to unpack your bike and stow your gear. Motorcycle campers can carry everything you need inside it and on top. You can also carry fun extra things like kayaks or bicycles. And your gear will be far more secure than when strapped to your bike in a couple of soft bags.

When it rains, and it will (especially if you go camping with me), you'll be high and dry in your bed instead of eyeing every floor seam to see where a leak will start. Many campers

feature inside seating and awnings that give you plenty of room to stretch out, regardless of the weather and in spite of the bugs. And that inevitable middle-of-the-night bathroom run is a lot easier when you step down from your bed instead of struggling to get up off the ground.

Breaking camp is much less of an ordeal. You won't spend time trying to remember how you fit everything on the bike. Repacking and folding the camper goes quickly, especially after you've done it a couple of times. In minutes, you can be packed and ready to get rolling.

Did I mention it's also a lot less expensive? Some campground prices have increased, but many regional and state parks offer very affordable camping spots. Free camping spots are not hard to find either. One fellow camper I know stops in at the local police or fire station and asks permission to set up in their parking lot, which he is often granted.

In short, taking a motorcycle camper along can make your travels more comfortable, convenient and affordable. You'll ride farther, more often, and have more fun. How could that be a bad thing?

### Camper Consequences

To be fair, let's also consider the possible drawbacks of towing a camper. Towing any trailer or camper requires that you pay more

attention to your riding. Some people boast about riding ninety mph while towing their trailer. That's crazy talk! You have to respect the additional weight attached to your bike and fully understand the impact it has on stopping distance and your ability to maneuver. If you are a ten-tenths knee-dragger who refuses to modify your riding style when towing, do all of us a favor—don't buy any trailer or camper. Towing is not for you.

Towing a camper can affect your gas mileage. It requires some maintenance. You need a place to store it. And because it is a mechanical item, it does introduce the possibility that something can happen to the camper while you're traveling, like a flat, that could affect your travel plans.

## Minimizing Camper Risks

I understand what people mean when they ask, "Is towing a camper safe?" but I think that's the wrong question. What is *safe*? Is motorcycling safe? It depends. *Safe* just describes the level of risk we're willing to accept to enjoy an activity. That limit is different for every rider. Towing a camper with a motorcycle adds some risk to the act of riding. Whether it exceeds your acceptable limit is something you'll have to decide.

The good news is there are many ways to minimize the added risk. Smart riders wear good riding gear and practice their riding techniques. They ride responsibly on the road. Similarly, camper owners can limit the risks by choosing the right camper for their bike and their needs, learning and practicing good towing habits and maintaining their bike and camper. Subsequent chapters of this book aim to help you cover all those bases.

## Feel of a Camper

Here's a question I'm asked all the time: "What does it feel like to tow a camper?" The answer depends on many factors, such as the size of your bike; the size, weight and construction of the trailer; how much the trailer is carrying; how it's loaded; what type of road you're on; weather conditions, et cetera. It also depends on your experience level and your confidence about handling your bike. I can describe the experience in words, but you'll just have to feel it for yourself.

A trailer affects your bike differently from start to stop, providing input to the bike's suspension at the hitch ball on the back of your bike. At take-off, you'll notice the bike takes a little more throttle to start moving and a little longer release of the clutch. Once you master this difference, taking off with a camper will seem little different than without it. At speed and on relatively flat, straight roads (interstates and improved primary roads), a properly loaded trailer will have little effect on the bike. It will track straight, without the side-to-side movement known as wagging.

A trailer will have some effect on your bike in the twisties. As the bike tracks through curves, the trailer will follow the same track, but a fraction of a second behind. As you exit the apex of a curve, the trailer is just hitting it. In the twisties, you'll typically feel a trailer most in the side-to-side transition in high-speed sweeping curves. This creates the most movement in the trailer, a whip effect. Sometimes you will feel this as an unexpected tug on the back of the bike as the trailer suddenly switches direction. It's not enough to upset the bike, but it is an input that occurs when you are not expecting it.

I've found that the best way to remedy this is to simply dial back the throttle by a few

miles per hour. That decreases the whip effect and gives you more margin for error should you need to maneuver quickly to avoid gravel or other road obstacles.

Most riders will tell you, and I agree, that a trailer has the greatest effect on the bike under braking, especially heavy braking. When towing, your bike's brakes are responsible for slowing both the bike and the trailer. For this reason, the first safety rule in trailering is to allow extra following distance to help you avoid emergency braking situations.

## Personal Experience

In my personal experience, I've pulled campers with touring bikes like the BMW R1150RT, Harley Electra Glide, Honda ST-1300 and an Indian Chief. I often follow primary and secondary state roads rather than interstate. I ride more conservatively when pulling a camper, but I've never felt like trailering took the joy out of riding. I lean as much towing a camper as without, though I hit the apex of curves softer when towing.

Here's a link to a YouTube video I posted that shows what it looks like to tow a camper with a bike. That's me on a Honda ST-1300. Link: <https://youtu.be/Eekf-bfJHX0>

If you choose the right-size camper for your bike, install a good hitch, and collect a few towing tips, riding with a camper won't feel a whole lot different from riding without.

Like I say in the video, "Does it look like I'm having a bad time?"

## Motorcycle Warranties

Does adding a hitch or pulling a trailer void my warranty? While some dealers, and even some manufacturers, will tell you it does, the Magnuson-Moss Warranty Act of 1974

prevents manufacturers from voiding your warranty for installing aftermarket parts. Unless your camper can be shown to be a direct cause of a problem with your bike, a manufacturer can't legally deny a warranty repair.

Sure, if you decide to pull a boat with your bike and you burn up the bike's primary and clutch, you deserve a repair bill. But the campers we're talking about in this book won't cause that kind of wear on your bike. If your dealer or your manufacturer gives you a hard time, you have legal rights to pursue. But the better choice might be to find a dealer and a manufacturer who won't hassle you about your choices.

## Wear and Tear

The greatest effect a camper has on the mechanical elements of your bike are consumables like brakes and tires. The tongue weight of the trailer, plus the added traction required when starting and stopping, cause accelerated wear of tire tread and brake pads. It follows that pulling a heavy camper up and down mountain ranges will wear your tires and brakes more than pulling the same trailer coast-to-coast on I-40. Aside from tires and brakes, a right-sized tent trailer, properly loaded, and maintained, will not wear out your bike prematurely. The right trailer will not increase operating temperature, nor will it decrease the life expectancy of the bike's driveline components (shaft, belt, or chain).

## Gas Mileage

Towing a camper will affect your gas mileage. In my experience, an aerodynamic camper will cost you about five miles per gallon if you stick to speeds of fifty-five to sixty. Traveling

at higher speeds, pulling a heavier trailer or a boxy trailer with more drag, and climbing steep grades with a trailer will cost you more in fuel economy. I don't think it's a big deal, but when you're accustomed to getting two hundred, three hundred, or more miles out of a tank of gas, you need to recalibrate your thinking about gas stops when you're towing.

Think of it this way—a bike and a camper will always get better mileage and cost less to maintain or repair than any RV.

## The Right Bike

What's the right kind of bike to pull a camper? While you'll typically see tent trailers being pulled by larger touring bikes, that doesn't mean pop-up campers are only suited for Gold Wings or Electra Glides. In the original guide to motorcycle trailering, *Pulling Your Tail*, Bill Brobst recommended keeping the loaded weight of a trailer to 60 percent or less than the weight of your motorcycle. That means an 850-pound Wing or Electra Glide could accommodate a trailer weighing up to 510 pounds, according to his rule of thumb. I prefer to be more conservative than that, keeping my loaded trailer weight to less than 50 percent of the bike's weight. If I had to exceed 50 percent of the bike's weight, I'd pull the trailer with a trike.

So what about small bikes, between 500 and 900cc? Smaller bikes have enough power to pull a smaller camper, but the bike's weight and braking power are often limiting factors. Many smaller bikes are equipped with only a single disc brake up front, which leaves them without the necessary braking power to make safe stops. And following the 50 percent rule, they're often too light too. Small bikes are better off with a lightweight cargo trailer.

## The Right Camper

I've referred to the "right camper" a few times now. What's the "right camper?" While that's a question I can't answer for you, I think you'll arrive at the right conclusion as you go through the rest of this book. Obviously, an important factor is finding a camper that's not too big for your bike, but the right camper is much more than that. It also means the camper is made of quality materials, is well-designed, has the features you want and is a price you can afford. As we continue, we'll learn how to compare campers to help you find just the right one.

So is motorcycle camping for you? Only you know the answer, so let's put it this way: If you still have a good feeling about the idea, or you're ready to run out right now and get a camper, you are a good candidate to join us around the fire.

**Like what you've ready so far? Want to learn more?**

**Get the whole scoop, for free!**

**Contact [Dale@OpenRoadOutfitters.com](mailto:Dale@OpenRoadOutfitters.com) for the complex text-only edition of this book.**

**A full-color print edition (with pretty pictures) will be available in Spring 2018.**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dale Coyner is a respected motorsports author and feature writer. He has written multiple motorcycle travel books, including the widely acclaimed *Motorcycle Journeys Through North America*, *Motorcycle Journeys Through the Appalachians* and *The Essential Guide to Motorcycle Travel*. He is a contributing author to the popular *AMA Ride Guide to America*. In addition, Dale has published dozens of articles on technical and motorsports topics in regional and national publications, including *Rider* and *Motorcycle Consumer News*.

He is the owner of Open Road Outfitters, located in Fort Myers, Florida. Open Road Outfitters ([www.openroadoutfitters.com](http://www.openroadoutfitters.com)) specializes in US-made motorcycle campers, cargo trailer and accessories, including motorcycle hitches and trailer wiring products.

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