Teaching an Old Dog New Tricks

By Michael Holland

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First time truck camper, Michael Holland, takes out a Four Wheel Camper Hawk and explores the underground worlds of Lassen Volcanic National Park and Lava Beds National Monument. Get ready to add a couple more must-see places to your bucket list. We sure did!

"Dad, what's this?" My daughter, Lilly, questioned.

"It's our home for the next week or so." I replied.

Lilly, her friend Eva, and I stood in front of Four Wheel Camper's (FWC) headquarters in Woodland, California. Not only were we standing but staring, maybe even gawking, at the beautiful truck and camper combination that we would experience for the next nine days. We couldn't wait!
My family spends countless days exploring the western United States, always searching for adventures along the way. For camping, we have used numerous ground tents and a few roof top tents. At times, we even camped outside on cots.

However, never had we experienced a camper with all the “at home goodies” mounted on a truck that would allow us to explore places far off-the-beaten-path. So, when Dan Welty, Vice President of Four Wheel Campers, asked me to test one of their camper models, I seized the opportunity.

“What's this switch for?” I asked Stan Kennedy, head of marketing for FWC.

“Oh, that's for the LED lights outside,” he replied. Stan was in the process of showing us the ins and outs of the Hawk model camper. Sure enough, the camper included all the bells and whistles that one would need while exploring the United States, Canada and the World.

They incorporated in the layout a sink, stove, furnace, shower, toilet, hot water system, comfortable beds and a dinette. After orientating, we thanked Stan for his time, threw our bags inside, and drove northward in pursuit of adventure, and a bit of comparative research.

As many travelers know, California is full of wonder, and people. Our goal was to find solitude and adventure in the most populous state of the U.S.A. I drove the AEV (American Expedition Vehicles) Ram Prospector 3500 truck northeast along the Feather River.

People “disappeared” – replaced by evergreens. The forests engulfed us with raw beauty and solitude. We enjoyed the smooth ride to our next destination – a spot on national forest land outside of Lassen National Park. Lucky for us, we found a campsite high in the mountains.
I popped the camper top and organized things in our new “home”. The girls investigated the camper, opening every drawer and cabinet. I cleared off the double bed, which sits over the cab of the truck, and prepped it for the girls sleeping quarters. The bed can be pulled out to a king bed if desired.

I opened the camper in a matter of minutes. I started the ceiling fan to pull in the cool mountain air. We played Spot It, a card game, in the dinette and enjoyed the views over Butt Valley Reservoir.

I prepared dinner. Afterward, I turned the dinette into a single, comfortable bed for me and told “scary” stories to the girls. Our first night in California closed when the western sunset created spectacular images.

The following morning, we closed the camper and headed toward the southeastern entrance to Lassen National Park. The truck and camper combination handled the dirt road (Werner Valley) without an issue. Overall, the truck and camper felt stable and able driving this semi-rough, dirt road.

We grabbed our packs and proceeded to hike from the Warner Valley Trailhead to Devil’s Kitchen. Minutes after leaving the trailhead, I heard the famous words: “Are we there yet?” With a smile on my face, I realized that I said the exact same words to my parents years ago.
The girls trudged ahead and found their grove 15-minutes or so into the hike. We passed the junction with the Pacific Crest Trail and continued to Devil’s Kitchen.

“Whoa, what’s that smell?” Eva asked.

“It smells like rotten eggs, Dad,” Lilly suggested.

Sure enough, Devil’s Kitchen proved its fame as an active geothermal area with bubbling and steaming water. The place reminded me of some parts of Yellowstone.

I marveled at the sights and sounds of the area; the girls held their noses. The stench overpowered us, so we decided to return. Once back at the camper, we enjoyed ice cream sandwiches. Yep, the freezer in the camper worked as expected!

We refueled in Chester, California, and headed west on Highway 36 through forests and clear cuts. We kept our eyes open for a dispersed site on national forest land. The major advantage of a truck and camper combination is the ability to access many hard to reach campsites. We found a perfect spot by a small lake and popped the top. Home for the night!

“Dad, I’m starving,” stated Lilly.

“How about some pancakes and bacon?” I asked.
The Hawk Model has truly everything I need to camp. Maybe a little extra too. But, the one thing I most appreciate about the camper is that it’s not too big and it fits all three of us fit inside at the same time.

We ate breakfast outside and watched the sun cross the northern California forest. With full stomachs, we packed, closed the top, and departed all in a matter of minutes. We turned onto Highway 89 and proceeded north through Lassen National Park.

The park features many natural wonders. Boiling mud pots? Check. Geysers? Check. Stunning high-alpine lakes? Check. After numerous stops for exploration, we stopped to prepare a little lunch and complete another activity for the girls to earn their Junior Ranger badges.

We didn’t pop the top. Effortlessly, I grabbed a few things out of the refrigerator and cupboards and prepared lunch. Time was not on our side, so I closed the camper’s door and we continued onward.

The road sliced through the forest. In the distance I noticed a few logging trucks. The amount of logging truck traffic increased as I followed the digital map on the LCD screen in the Ram truck. We aimed to swim and relax in a lake, a few more miles up the road.
“Ahhh, dad, where’s the lake?” Lilly asked.

“Yeah, Mr. Holland, where’s the water?” Eva inquired.

I responded; “Well, those are excellent questions girls. I don’t know.” There was no water in this lake. We were disappointed.

“Well, at least there are some nice cows grazing,” I joked.

Shin-high grasses were all that remained of this lake. Finding a campsite was easy. We drove “into the lake” to set camp. The landscape was distinctive. Dormant volcanoes surrounded us as well as lava rocks and towering evergreens.
Within a matter of an hour or so, we found ourselves at the “bottom of a sea of stars”. Billions of stars flickered overhead. We took some night photographs and stood in awe of our surroundings. Well, minus the water.

The next morning, we said goodbye to the cows grazing on their breakfast grasses and drove toward the northeast. The landscape remained consumed by the vast forests. An occasional logging truck comprised the only other traffic.

We spotted the towering Mount Shasta to our west and turned off Highway 89 to head north. The narrow highway was only somewhat maintained, so I kept my eyes open for the next pothole.

The forest became less dense and soon enough the road wound its way to ancient lava beds. The busyness of California had indeed dissipated. We hadn't seen a soul in hours. The girls spotted a lava tube sign, so we stopped to investigate.

One main advantage to the truck and camper combination is the ability to park in a normal parking lot space. Not a huge concern on this day, but a factor when stopping in some towns for supplies.

We grabbed our water bottles and headlamps to explore on foot. We hiked through the large opening of the lava tube. The temperature quickly dropped.
“Look, there’s ice,” I said while pointing.

We gathered by a patch of ice, deep inside the lava tube. Water dripped from the rocks above, pooled, and then froze due the lack of sunlight and the temperature at a depth of 60-feet underground. We returned to the vehicle, now even more excited to visit our next destination – Lava Beds National Monument.

A small sign alongside a dirt road signified that we had entered the monument. We found no visitor center or entrance station. We had entered the monument from the south on a dirt road labeled on the map, “Volcanic Legacy Scenic Byway.” The dirt road was in fairly good shape, so driving it was peaceful and quiet.
Lava Beds National Monument sits at the southern end of the “volcano highway” that stretches north to Washington State. Volcanoes covering this dry, arid landscape erupted thousands of years ago from California north to Washington. Today, the volcanoes are inactive but the lava tubes and caves remain accessible.

These lava tubes and caves formed when the Medicine Lake shield volcano erupted numerous times over the past 500,000 years. The flowing lava cooled, leaving holes, caves, and tunnels, perfect for us to explore. The monument features 700 lava caves and tubes.
We pulled over at the first turnout to explore on foot. Within minutes, we stared into a hole in the Earth’s crust with a ladder jutting out – “inviting” us to explore. We descended.

With our headlamps turned on, we immediately felt the chill; we were grateful that we brought sweatshirts with us. I hiked around the corner and quickly turned off my headlamp.
It was dark. I mean really dark! I couldn't see my hand in front of my face.

I rejoined the girls, and we continued. The girls were tired and didn't feel like hiking any longer. They took naps sitting the truck while I drove deeper into the forest. I stopped and challenged the girls to explore a few more lava tubes and caves before evening. We spent
roughly six hours exploring underground in this amazing monument! We overnighted at the park's campground.

During this experience I grew accustomed to the convenience of the truck and camper combination. I cooked the girls dinner and talked with a gentleman who stopped to find out more about the specifics of the camper. Whenever we encountered people on this trip, they inquired about the setup.

The following day we drove eastward. The highway wound its way through vast countrysides and openness. Not urban California. We refueled and resupplied in the town of Alturas, California. Then we crossed the border on Highway 447 headed to Gerlach, Nevada.

The amazing thing for me was how smooth the truck and camper combination performed on the highway. I felt no swaying or jarring. I could hear the diesel motor but otherwise, the ride was smooth, peaceful, and enjoyable.

Everyone knows Gerlach, Nevada, right? Gerlach is located on the southern boundary of the Black Rock Desert. This enormous desert and playa hosts the Burning Man Festival every September. Thousands gather to party and celebrate. However, on this day, three weeks before the festival, the town was quiet and reserved. I was baffled at how this small town, population 200, could host such an enormous event.

We turned off a dirt road and continued along the eastern shore of the playa. The truck and camper absorbed the bumps as we drove north. The Black Rock Desert is famous for its 200 square mile playa—one of the largest and flattest surfaces on the planet.

As the road curved and dipped, I spotted some green. Yes, green. Green in the desert means water. And water means springs, lakes, rivers, or hot springs.
Years ago, railroad workers mistakenly dug too deep as they prepped the ground for the railway. Unfortunately or fortunately, they “hit” a natural spring, which caused water to come to the surface and fill the depressions and holes. Today, one of the largest hot springs remains. Skipping images...

The girls and I changed into our suits and dipped our toes in the water. Yep, the water was roughly 102 to 110 degrees. Even though it was summer, it felt tremendously good to soak while watching the
setting sun. After 30-minutes or so, with our skin all wrinkled, we dried off and then drove onto the playa to find a place to camp.

Once site-situated, the girls immediately ran on the playa. They jumped and frolicked. They posed for each other's pictures and immersed themselves in this dramatic landscape.

I popped the top. While enjoying a beer, I savored the immense, unforgettable landscape of Nevada. All three of us stayed outside until the stars flickered again. Without light pollution; the stars shine brightly.

It was late, and we decided it was time to sleep. We closed the door of the camper, slept soundly, and dreamed of what we had
Adventure vehicles come in many different shapes and sizes. I’m partial to my Toyota Land Cruiser. Honestly, that is all I know. However, the truck and FWC setup is phenomenal.

The truck allows access to many off the beaten track places, while the camper provides the necessary accommodations and features. As we drove south off the playa, I thought of our next destination. With this truck and camper combination, the possibilities are limitless. Onward.

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