

THE GMC MOTORHOME: STILL CRUISING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

FAMILY MOTOR
COACHING

Although production of this front-wheel-drive coach ended in 1978, the iconic motorhome is still alive and well 30 years later.



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GMC motorhome owners love it when someone stops them to ask about their coach. One of the first questions is usually, “What is it?” When told that it is a GMC, the second question is, “Didn’t they stop making them?”

GMC motorhomes were produced by General Motors Corporation from 1973 to 1978. During those years full-page ads for the coaches in National Geographic and other national magazines stated, “There are two fundamental reasons to buy any motorhome; drivability and livability.” The GMC was designed to supply both in abundance, and it still does.

In 1973 these coaches were state-of-the-art, with air suspension, aluminum aircraft structural bodywork, aircraft thermo-adhesives used to attach the body panel sheets, and, to top it off, a variety of interiors that were custom-built using the finest woods, fabrics, and finishes. Not built on a truck chassis the way many other coaches start out, the GMC motorhome featured a chassis designed, tested, and produced by General Motors exclusively for this innovative coach. The



forward-looking vehicles were built in two sizes 23 feet and 26 feet in overall length and at 8 feet wide they are a bit narrower than today's new coaches. Their compact dimensions make them the perfect size for touring, exploring, and venturing into tight situations while delivering a smooth ride with all the systems of a luxury coach. Add to that the sleek, aerodynamic styling that still turns heads and attracts attention, and the GMC motorhome is a winner.

Thirty years ago this month, GMC rolled out the last of its very special motorhomes. Of the 12,921 coaches originally produced, it is estimated that between 8,000 and 10,000 are registered and on the road today. When you see them, some are in original condition and showing their age, but many and the numbers are growing have been updated to meet the needs of today's RVing lifestyle. Why are so many of these coaches still alive and well? The answer remains the same as it was more than 30 years ago: drivability and livability.

GMC COACHES TODAY

The photos in this article (provided by various owners) give a few examples of what can be done in terms of upgrades, paint schemes, and graphics. Some beautifully upgraded coaches are the result of talented "do-it-yourselfers." And, of course, the professionals who specialize in retrofitting GMC Motorhomes are waiting to convert old GMCs to like-new condition.

Drivability. Imagine driving a large, modern sport utility vehicle or pickup truck. That's what you experience when behind the wheel of a GMC motorhome. The front-wheel drive and independent swing arm rear suspension together with the low overall height and low center of gravity combine to give the GMC coach almost car-like handling qualities. Under the hood is a powerful and reliable Oldsmobile 403-cubic-inch or 455-cubic-inch engine; either one provides plenty of horsepower to move the coach along smartly. The air suspension in the rear provides the comfort of a big bus, and the torsion bar front suspension gives the steering the accuracy of a modern ve-



hicle. With the addition of modern wheels and tires, cruising is effortless. The cockpit area is large and comfortable, and visibility for driver and passenger is panoramic. The dashboard can be upgraded to provide the driver with instant digital readouts for all systems.

Livability. GMC coaches are sleek and low to the ground. How low? It takes just two steps up to get you off the pavement and into the living area. The tandem rear wheel design provides more interior space than with dual wheels. The GMC motorhome was produced with a large variety of original interior layouts, so there may be a design that already meets your requirements and only needs to be freshened up with new upholstery, carpeting, and window treatments in today's colors. But if you want to go beyond that, just as in the housing market today, the coach interiors are being remodeled and upgraded both by the owners and by professional companies.

Enhanced wiring and convertor and inverter upgrades provide improved battery and electrical capability. With the installation of improved fluorescent lighting, satellite reception for television, and flat-screen TVs in multiple locations, as well as provisions for computers and modern stereo sound systems, the coach can be as comfortable as your home.

The galley areas can be refreshed with new countertop and backsplash materials such as Corian and granite; improved drop-in stoves with microwave-convection ovens; and larger, more modern refrigerators. Reworked cabinetry provides slide-out pantries and additional storage space. The interior living space can be changed, with comfortable armchairs for seating instead of the original dinette, and combined with a variety of table sizes and configurations, including built-in desks for computers. GMCs were the original party coaches, featured in magazine layouts showing tailgate gatherings. Some GMC owners still use their motorhomes as mobile party vehicles, replacing the traditional galley with an abbreviated version that provides a space to "plug in" the frosty drink maker and all the other appliances we love to use at home.



Onboard system livability upgrades include push-button waste disposal macerators and a variety of gauges to track LP-gas, fresh water, and waste water capacities. Many modern components developed for marine systems can be adapted to RV use in the GMCs. For those who like to “get away from it all,” battery-charging solar panels allow you to extend your time and enjoyment on the road. Small catalytic heaters with thermostatically controlled heat can replace the original furnaces to free up space for storage. And as with modern motorhomes, some GMC owners are increasing living space with the addition of slideouts.

Supportability. Some might be concerned about investing in a motorhome that has been out of production for more than a quarter of a century. Besides the age issue, where would one find parts, service, and

maintenance advice? This is another area where the GMC is different from other classic motorhome models. When General Motors ceased production of the GMC motorhome 30 years ago, many suppliers stepped into the breach with continued support for nearly every component on the coach. After so many successful years on the road, the GMC is a proven entity, with suppliers and restoration specialists who know how to keep these vehicles performing well, or to rework them to the preferences of today’s owner.

In addition to the commercial assistance available, there is another support network whose size and breadth may be unique to the GMC motorhome. That is the network of organizations and clubs, including FMCA chapters, and other enthusiast groups and individuals whose function it is to foster the continued use and enjoyment of the coaches. Through an extensive schedule of conventions and rallies, GMC owners join not only to socialize and enjoy their coaches, but also to receive technical information about repairs, replacements, and upgrades. With the advent of the Internet, the body of information about all aspects of the GMC motorhome is expanding continually. Do a Web search on Google using the words “GMC Motorhome.” The result is an amazing return of tens of thousands of sites.

Each year, FMCA’s GMC Motorhomes International chapter publishes and distributes





The GMC Parts Interchange Index. This assists owners and suppliers alike in easily identifying replacement or upgraded parts. A few years ago, Roger Black of Burns, Tennessee, proposed an idea to fellow GMC owners: creating a list of people who were willing to assist other GMCers with mechanical or other difficulties they might encounter while traveling. Today, the result of that suggestion is the GMC Motorhome Assist List, better known as the Black List, which currently includes more than 530 GMC owners from every U.S. state, every province in Canada, and several countries overseas. These enthusiasts are willing to offer help ranging from roadside assistance to recommendations of where to take your coach for reliable work, to just plain open invitations to come and visit with someone who “talks GMC.” The Black List is available online and is free of charge to members of the GMC community.

Durability. The number of 30-plus-year-old GMC motorhomes still on the road is a testament to their durability. Our local FMCA chapter includes more than a handful of original owners who bought their coaches new and have driven them in excess of 300,000 miles to destinations, not just in the United States, but to remote places all over the Western Hemisphere. Some of the roads they have traveled would be a challenge to a modern four-wheel-drive vehicle, but the intrepid GMC has done it.

How have they lasted? Taking a cue from the aerospace industry, the GMC’s body construction consisted of a rigid frame made of welded aluminum extrusions. The body frame was mounted on the chassis’ steel ladder frame using body isolators. The body panels are fiber-reinforced plastic (fiberglass) below the waistline frame extrusion and at the ends. The upper side body and roof panels between the ends are sheet aluminum. The skin was bonded to the ribs with adhesive rather than rivets, helping to maintain a smooth exterior surface and to prevent the leaks, rust, and rot that other older coaches are prone to.

As with other classic vehicles, a GMC Motorhome Registry has been established by David Greenberg of the GMC Sunshine Statesmen, an FMCA chapter. The purpose of the registry is to determine how many GMCs are still on the road and to track where they are today, because they truly can be found all over the world. Mr. Greenberg, who is also the founder of the GMC Eastern States chapter, bought a GMC Palm Beach coach with 480,000 miles on it in 1993. When he sold it last year, this legendary vehicle had more than 645,000 miles on it, and with its second rebuilt engine, it is still going strong.



Conversion Costs. Estimates for upgrading a coach can range from \$10,000 to \$100,000 depending on your pocketbook and what you want to achieve. An investment in the \$10,000 to \$20,000 range can result in a coach that is fresh and has roadworthy reliability at a price that is within a reasonable budget for most RV owners.

A rough estimate of costs is as follows: a new or rebuilt engine, \$7,000; exterior paint, \$6,000; moderate interior improvements, \$5,000 to \$10,000. Of course, the overall cost can be much higher if the owner wants a completely remanufactured coach. A remanufactured coach would include the above plus all new wiring, suspension, transmission, steering, generator, and an interior custom-designed to the owner's needs, for a cost approaching \$100,000. These costs are still considerably less than many new motorhomes regardless of the size or style.

And something else to consider: a GMC coach may be less expensive to maintain and insure than a new motorhome. And speaking of insurance, even though the coach may be 30 years old, most insurance companies are willing to provide coverage. For those coaches that have been upgraded, owners can obtain a certified appraisal. Using that appraisal, the owner and the insurance

carrier can come up with an “agreed-upon value” and ensure that the coach is covered for its true value, rather than just the book value.

Where To Find Out More. A good place to start is right here in Family Motor Coaching magazine. Each January and August, the magazine publishes FMCA’s Chapter Directory, which lists all active FMCA chapters. A quick look at those starting with the word “GMC” provides information about a chapter in your area and contact information. If you don’t have the January or August issue handy, you can find the same information by visiting www.fmca.com/chapters.

More good starting places are the chapter Web sites of GMC Motorhomes International (www.gmcmi.com), GMC Eastern States (www.gmceast.com), and GMC Western States (www.gmcws.org). Each of these groups has links to upcoming events, classified ads with coaches for sale, and commercial services. These Web sites, and especially those of the local/regional GMC motorhome chapters and other groups, also have forums where GMC owners share a wealth of information. Sites such as www.gmcmotorhomeinfo.com and www.gmcers.org will lead you to many informative places to find out about GMC motorhome ownership. As you explore the world of the GMC motorhome, you’ll find many pictures and stories posted by individual owners who will tell you all about their adventures in finding, restoring, and enjoying their coaches. Many of these stories include information about what work was done, who the suppliers were, and even a detailed breakdown of costs.

Take our advice and consider a GMC for your next coach. Visit several of the Web sites listed in the article. Make contact with people who own one. The GMC motorhome network is very integrated. If you see a coach advertised for sale, more than likely someone in a local GMC organization in your area knows the owner and the history of the coach. They will be glad to meet a prospective GMCer and help you find the GMC motorhome you want.

Looking To The Future. The iconic GMC motorhome is recognized as a unique vehicle wherever it goes. Distinctive looking, with tandem rear wheels and graceful curved body styling, GMC coaches truly were ahead of their time, and their design remains timeless today. They were built to last, and they have. For those who want to own a superior coach at what may be a very reasonable cost, the GMC is the motorhome of choice. With all the new automotive technology continually being developed and available, there is no reason to expect the GMC motorhome to stop evolving. These coaches were made to drive!

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