

---

## GMC motorhome: remembering a classic

*Written by Todd Moning*

Mirror, mirror on the wall, which is the fairest motorhome of all?

There is no undisputed answer to this question, of course. But if a GMC motorhome owner were standing before the mirror, perhaps an outline would slowly materialize, like an Etch A Sketch drawing ...

The low roofline and low floor height ... tandem rear wheels ... angled windshield, panoramic view, aerodynamic styling.

The image is unmistakable. It's the motorhome that, advertisements used to say, "doesn't look like a box or ride like a truck." It's the one that Mattel modeled toys after, the vehicle that spurred the formation of 20 FMCA chapters: the GMC motorhome.

The '70s front-wheel-drive classic with the low-profile design went out of production 25 years ago, though it hardly retired from the road. An estimated 8,000 GMCs are still rolling, many of them owned by FMCA members.



### Ahead of its time

"Somebody asked me in 1974 why I bought my GMC and I said I liked the looks of it," said Ralph Luby, F31157, founder of FMCA's GMC Motorhomes International chapter. "Plus, the ride is probably closer to an automobile than any other motorhome."

The original GMC came standard with a 265-horsepower GM 455-cubic-inch V-8 engine and a three-speed automatic transmission. The vehicle was built by General Motors Corp.'s GMC Truck and Coach Division in Pontiac, Mich. Interiors were installed by an outside firm in 1973 and 1974, and at the GMC plant from 1975 to 1978.

More than 30 floor plans were offered in two models: a 23-footer and a 26-footer. The original GMC design had no designated bedroom areas; all beds were converted from seating areas when needed. Retail price: \$35,000 to more than \$40,000 by 1978.

### Pleasure to drive

Owners still rave about the GMC's stable ride, derived from a self-leveling air-ride rear suspension and a torsion bar independent front suspension. A six-wheel braking system -- disc brakes on the front and drum brakes on all four rear wheels -- further enhanced drivability.

They also tout the GMC's unique appearance and subtle but beneficial design characteristics. For instance, the low roofline allowed maximum ground clearance when driving. Lack of drive shafts and axles under the coach permitted a low floor height, and the resulting low center of gravity gave the vehicle a carlike driving quality. Owners also value the easy entry and exit and ample interior headroom.



“It’s aerodynamic, said George McLeod, F135607, a member of FMCA’s GMC Great Lakers chapter. “It was designed ahead of its time 25 years ago and it still looks modern compared to the boxy motorhomes of today.”

He and his wife, Barbara, bought a 26-foot 1977 GMC Palm Beach in 1990. It had 60,000 miles on it and cost about \$19,000, George said. The McLeods have driven it about 100,000 miles and haven’t looked back.

The low-profile design appeals to them, he said. “It’s only a step from ground to floor. We don’t have to climb up a bunch of stairs to get into the motorhome.”

### **Production halts**

Over the years, various companies have tried to capture the GMC market by producing similar motor coaches, without sustained success. Perhaps it’s because the engine, transmission and front drive axle used in the original GMC are no longer available.

“Often, companies look only at the attractiveness [when trying to emulate GMC features],” said Bill Bryant, F65627, a GMC motorhome historian. “It’s really the total package of unique mechanical attributes plus attractive design that set the GMC apart.”

The GMC, with its extra-wide chassis and track, was designed from the ground up to be a motorhome. But it was powered by the same 455-cubic-inch engine as the Oldsmobile Toronado car and used the same transmission and front drive axle as the Toronado and Cadillac Eldorado.

Approximately 2,000 GMC motorhomes were made annually between 1973 and 1978. Total production: approximately 13,000 units.

In 1978, beset by the energy crisis and new fuel economy standards, GM decided to downsize its automotive line and also concentrate on producing light trucks. Thus, the drivetrain components needed for the GMC motorhome line were no longer available, and it was discontinued in the 1978 model year.

### **Popularity soars**

Interest in GMCs, however, never waned. Owners continued to modify them for long trips and to improve any perceived shortcomings. Regional and national owners associations sprouted, forming a network for sharing information about parts, engines, upgrades, maintenance, and modification projects.

FMCA recognizes 20 chapters dedicated to GMCs. These enthusiastic groups hold rallies and conventions in the United States and Canada, creating a venue for technical seminars and information exchange.

The GMC’s appearances in popular culture also attest to the vehicle’s enduring appeal. A GMC appeared as an armored personnel carrier in movie *Stripes* and as a high-tech platform for tornado tracking equipment in *Twister*.

It's timeless design inspired Mattel to produce die-cast versions of the GMC motorhome in its Hot Wheels line. According to Bill Bryant, who collects GMC motorhome memorabilia, 50 different GMC Hot Wheels have been made, with new versions still being released. In a promotion in 1977, Mattel released three toy GMC versions in a Barbie Doll Star Traveler promotion.

### **They love their GMC**

Production of new GMC motorhomes may have long ceased, but their evolution has not. "The GMCs coming to our conventions these days look much newer than they did when the GMC Motorhomes International chapter first started in 1982," said Ralph Luby. "Members have made their coaches longer, added a slideout and made all types of interior changes."

Luby currently owns a 1978 GMC Palm Beach, which he purchased new and has driven 118,000 miles. To this unit, he has made only a few minor changes, including installing a three-way refrigerator and replacing the stove with a microwave. "It still has the original carpet, shades and upholstery."

George and Barbara McLeod have made no major modifications to their Palm Beach, which has a rear dinette that converts to bed. "We've always tried to keep it original," George said. "We change only what needs to be changed to keep it modern, like tires and brakes."

Modified or not, the GMC motorhome's reputation for quality and originality continues, and that's something owners take pride in.