

HOW
TO

MAKE A CAMPER IN A WEEKEND

BY ANDY COCHRANE

FIVE YEARS AGO this fall I unceremoniously drove across the country, running away from a mid-20s crisis. Using my 2003 Subaru Forester as an escape pod, I topped out at 90 mph on the salt flats outside Salt Lake, saddling the underpowered four-cylinder with everything I owned while redlining from California to my parents' home in Minnesota.

The following weekend, in a state of drunken optimism, I converted my beloved hatchback to a tiny home on wheels. Surprisingly, my parents expressed little dismay. My dad even lent a hand, helping me pull out the rear seats and build plywood shelving. Five months later, when my Subaru bit the dust, I upgraded my vehicle to a Toyota Tacoma. My nomadic life chapter ended this August, some 195,000 miles and 1,000 gas sta-

tion coffees later. Due to a plethora of factors (and, ahem, COVID-19), I was ready for more routine.

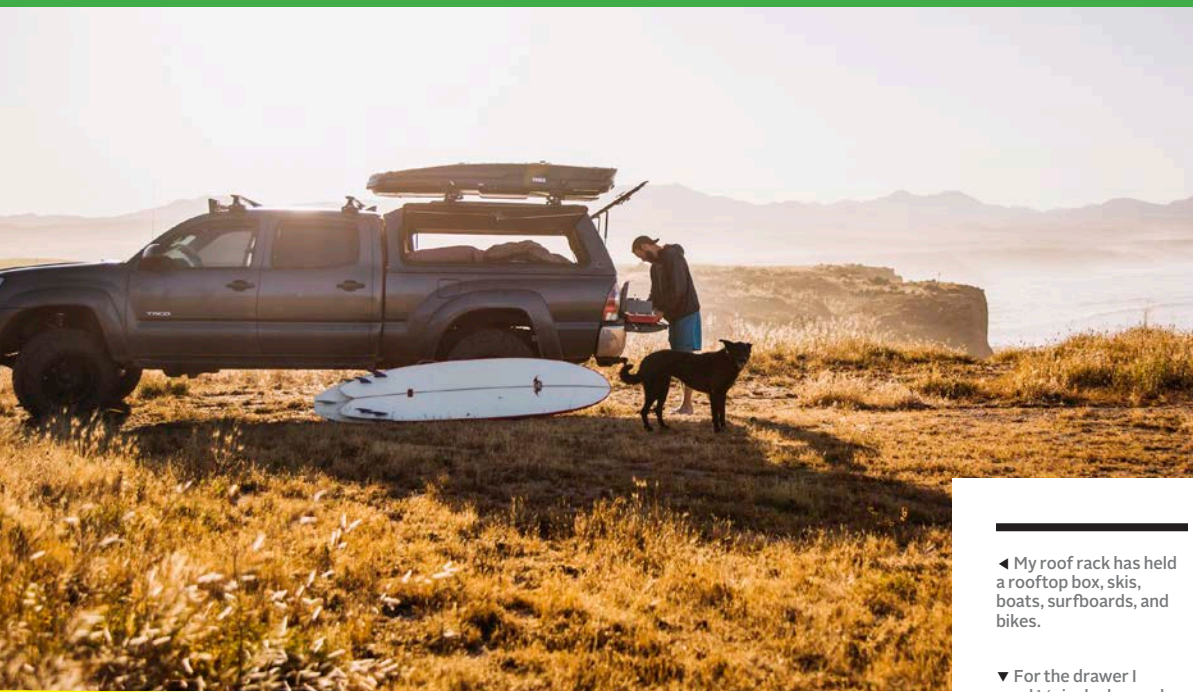
Inversely, for many of you, 2020 is a catalyst to get the hell out of dodge. In case you don't have the time to complete a full Sprinter van or skoolie modification, turning your vehicle into a makeshift RV could be your way to get off the beaten path while keeping the convenience of your own livable space, or just an easy way to travel safely during Covid.

While it's possible to live out of almost any vehicle, you'll likely be happier in something a bit larger—a pickup, van, SUV, or even a large hatchback with enough space for storage, a bed, and a simple kitchen. To get started, here's what you should consider to convert your vehicle into a basic camper, in as little as two days. —>

◀ The author camps near Mammoth Lakes, Calif., in spring 2019.



JOHNIE GALL



◀ My roof rack has held a rooftop box, skis, boats, surfboards, and bikes.

▼ For the drawer I used 1/2-inch plywood because it's strong enough to hold supplies, without adding unnecessary weight. I made it 6 inches high to have enough room to store items without rubbing on the top. The drawer was 6 feet long and roughly 3 1/2 feet wide, and I added a few internal dividers for better organization. The last component was a top piece of plywood placed to cover the drawer and be the base of my bed.

Roof Racks For additional storage, mounting points for solar, and the ability to transport bulky toys like kayaks and bikes, install a roof rack. If your car doesn't have a built-in version, Thule and Yakima offer racks that attach to door frames, which work great for smaller vehicles. Trucks and SUVs often have built-in mounting points for burly racks, like the FrontRunner Slimline (\$1,205). If your vehicle happens to have neither (for instance, the cap on a pickup), create the foundation for any rack by drilling holes for, installing, and caulking bolt-on roof tracks to the top of a car. This is always a bit nerve-racking, but if you take your time to measure correctly and seal it well, the risk is fairly low. Because the roof is out of sight, I used a Sharpie and paper jig to figure out the best location for the holes

before I picked up the drill.

Storage Smart storage helps you keep your gear organized and reduces the chance of digging around your entire vehicle for an errant shoe, hat, or mug. Solutions vary significantly by vehicle and often

require custom shapes, due to the irregular geometries of vehicle interiors. The easiest option is a rooftop box, such as a Thule Motion XT (\$730)—they're simple, affordable, and easy to remove when not in use. But often you'll want more space than



that, and want to keep some gear close at hand.

For hatchbacks, pickups, minivans, wagons, and SUVs, I'm partial to a basic bed platform with a long drawer underneath. A simple platform can be built on top of seats that are laid flat or removed. This design creates a convenient place to sleep, while optimizing for storage—and can be taken out when not in use. For my Subaru and subsequent Tacoma build, I stuck to cheap, accessible, and durable materials: 1/2-inch plywood, 2x4s, and 1-inch screws to bolt the frame together. Using heavy-duty 5-foot sliders, I built a 6-inch-high drawer,

perfect as a small kitchen and pantry. Instead of using screws to attach your bed to the floor or sides of your vehicle, consider ratchet straps or kayak tie-downs. This is often all it takes to secure the platform, while avoiding permanent marks and making it much easier to remove, too. Many vehicles have small D-rings on the floor, which make for great attachment points.

Kitchen To eat healthier and spend less money while traveling, you'll want a system to store food, cook, and clean with minimal hassle. The actual stove is the easy part—a double-burner camp stove,

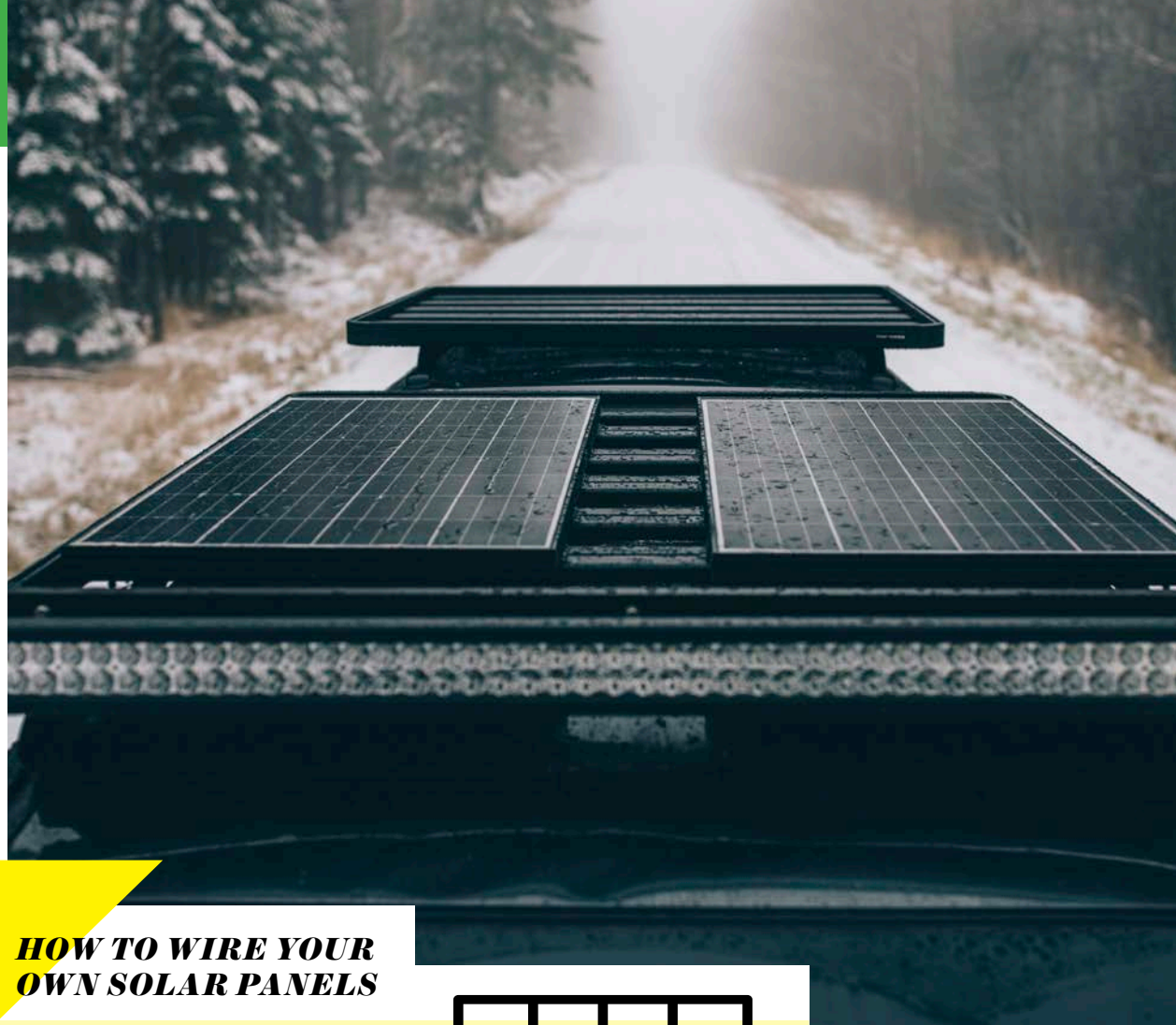
▲ For under \$30, a propane adapter is an easy upgrade for cooking convenience. It allows you to ditch the tiny camping canister and tie the stove directly into a larger propane tank (5 pounds or more). The pliable rubber tubing also allows you to move the propane tank to a stable place that's out of the way—a major plus in small spaces.

like the Camp Chef Everest (\$148), is all you need. Attach this to a 10-pound propane tank, which will often last a few months' worth of meals on the road.

For short trips, a cooler and ice will do the trick, but for excursions a week or more, investing in a portable electric cooler or fridge makes more sense—Dometic's CFX3 line (starting at \$900) is a great option with plenty of sizes to accommodate your vehicle and how much you want to carry. Many fridges plug directly into car cigarette lighters and fit in the backseat. Also, consider a rear awning to hide under when it is raining or for shade in the sun.

JOHNIE GALL (TOP LEFT); ANDY COCHRANE (DRAWER)

ANDY COCHRANE



Solar If you plan to stay off-grid for a week or longer, solar panels can provide enough juice to power a portable fridge, charge laptops, and run LED lights for the entire trip, provided you don't park in the shade or run into a bout of rainy weather. I employed two 100-watt panels to run my portable fridge and charge my laptop. If your car has a roof rack, you can attach the panels with zip ties or parachute cord. The best plug-and-play solution is a battery from Goal Zero and MC4 cables to connect the panels (\$1,900 for panels, battery, and cables). Having a separate battery allows you to run LED lights for the interior of your vehicle without draining your car battery.

Tires The most important part of an adventure vehicle is the tires. They dictate your handling, traction, and safety, and prevent heaps of wasted vacation time waiting for AAA.

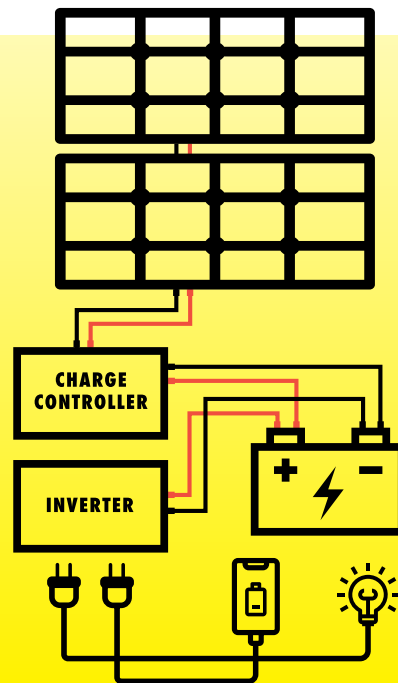
Pick your tire based on where you'll be driving. I'm partial to all-terrain tires like the BF Goodrich All-Terrain T/A KO2 (from \$162) because they excel on dirt roads and log highway miles without obscene road noise. Many road-trippers would be better served with all-weather tires, such as the Michelin Defender LTX (from \$146), which have less rolling resistance on asphalt.

HOW TO WIRE YOUR OWN SOLAR PANELS

Brands like Goal Zero offer plug-and-play products that make setup simple. Just buy a battery with built-in inverter and charge controller, and use standard MC4 cables to plug in your panels.

But wiring it yourself is not terribly difficult. Start by daisy chaining the panels together—each has a positive and negative cable, and polarity is denoted on both the male and female connections—and bringing them to the charge controller, which usually has a screen to show how much power they're pulling in. Wire that

to a deep-cycle battery and finally to an inverter, for plugging in common electronics. Keep the charge controller, battery, and inverter all fairly close (roughly 5 feet) to avoid wasting power. Insulate the battery, especially if you'll be in places that will be very hot or very cold—I used Reflectix reflective insulation. Lastly, install a direct connection for internal LED lights and a switch for easy access. For those living in a van or larger vehicle, a direct connection to a fridge or other small appliance makes sense as well.



ANDY COCHRANE

◀ After considering the climates I'd be in and how long I'd be off-grid, I decided 200 watts of panels would be enough.

▼ If you'll be including lots of dirt roads in your travel, a better suspension is a worthy upgrade.

For those living at northern latitudes and needing a good snow tire, get the Michelin Pilot Alpin PA4 (from \$230). Use them only during winter, to avoid unnecessary wear. Those who live in regions with extreme heat should consider the Michelin Pilot Super Sport (from \$191), which are made from a blend of rubbers designed for higher temperatures. A cheaper tire for long,

non-winter road trips is Firestone Destination LE2 (from \$105), which helps with MPG.

Suspension If you're headed on a big adventure that might lure you down a long dirt road, a higher clearance, larger payload, and smoother ride on rough terrain are major advantages.

Do not, under any circumstances, lift your vehicle with blocks. Blocks will tank your vehicle's handling and make it more liable to roll over. And frankly, you're not in high school anymore. If you're looking for a solution to support the added weight you're hauling, consider a set of rear air-

bags (about \$500). Instead of installing an entirely new set of coils and leaf springs, airbags attach to the leaves you already have, with either bolts or a simple weld. This small addition will counterbalance the added load from the bed, kitchen, and gear you opt to bring along.

Weight Weight limits are set by manufacturers to make sure your vehicle is handling correctly, and are often much lower than you might guess. The payload of some sedans is just 500 pounds, much less than the average weight of five adults. Most minivans are around 1,000 pounds. SUVs and pickups can have double or triple the payload, depending on the make and model. My Tacoma, a midsize truck with a modest stock suspension (four rear leaves), had a 1,500-pound payload before I opted to upgrade. I once drove onto a truck scale and realized I was carrying north of 3,000 pounds of gear.

To compensate for all the added stress on the vehicle, I installed Bilstein coilovers (\$730) and Total Chaos control arms (\$800) in the front and upgraded the rear suspension to 10 leaf springs with Firestone airbags (\$290). This combo worked wonders, allowing me to tow considerably more gear without sacrificing handling or totally bottoming out my rig. **EM**

