

Why 1970s GMC motorhomes have a cult-like following



A row of exotic 1970s GMC motorhomes owned by members of the GMC Cascaders club.

PHOTO: Alyn Edwards, Driving

These days, about 8,000 of these unusual road-trippers are still on the road



By [Alyn Edwards](#)
2015/06/23

Arnie and Florence Schwab look at each other and smirk when asked why they have four classic GMC motorhomes.

“It just happened,” Arnie Schwab shrugs.

They bought their first — a front-wheel drive, 40-year-old, 7.9 metre (26-foot) Palm Beach model — with Arnie, a well-known Vancouver-area auto upholsterer, intent on tearing apart the interior and redoing it. The rebuild was put on hold when he found another Palm Beach GMC Motorhome that didn’t need as much work.

“It was cheaper to buy the second one than the redo the first,” he explains while surveying a row of similar motorhomes at a club barbecue on his South Surrey acreage.



Florence and Arnie Schwab with one of the four classic GMC motorhomes they own.
Alyn Edwards, Driving

As often happens, his interest in the very unusual General Motors-built coaches led to other purchases. His third purchase was the first issue 1973 GMC motorhome originally purchased by the late Peter Toigo, whose family owns the B.C.-based White Spot Restaurant chain and the Vancouver Giants junior ice hockey team. Then, word-of-mouth led to the purchase of a second 1973 model.

Voila! A family fleet of four classic GMC motorhomes to cart the grandkids around.

The Schwabs aren’t alone in their enthusiasm for the 13,000 GMC motorhomes built between 1973 and 1978 by what then was the world’s largest vehicle manufacturer. An estimated 8,000 of these exotic stand-alone motorhomes are still on the road.

They have a cult-like following with clubs, motorhome meets, rolling rallies, companies specializing in replacement and restoration parts and devotees who wouldn't vacation in anything else.



The 1978 Palm Beach edition GMC motorhome owned by Arnie and Florence Schwab of South Surrey, B.C.

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“Most motorhomes get no notice in mobile home parks until a GMC pulls in. People just stop and stare,” says Kerrisdale owner Ken Walker who parks his model at Harrison Lake for use as a summer cottage. He drives it south to Arizona for winter months. The model was popularized by Mattel’s 1976 Barbie Star Traveler based on the GMC motorhome.

“GMC motorhomes were way ahead of their time,” says recent convert Gord Kemp while sitting at the kitchen nook in his seven-metre Birch Haven GMC, alongside his wife, Gloria, and fellow owners Mike and Arden Machin.

Kemp points out advanced features including front-wheel drive using a 265-horsepower Oldsmobile Toronado engine for power. No long driveshaft is necessary, so the floor is low and flat. Tandem rear wheels help with stability, and an independent air suspension with automatic levelling is standard so each side can remain flat when the motorhome is being driven. Inside, there’s a full bath and shower, a central vacuum system, kitchens with counter top blenders and a Nutone ice crusher.

“It is all original and was a good buy at \$16,000,” Kemp says. He found his GMC on Craigslist two years ago in Fort Collins, Colo., before he and a friend drove it back to Vancouver trouble free. Economy? Not so much. The big thirsty V8 engine drank \$600 worth of gasoline.



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The General Motors Truck and Coach Division of Pontiac, Michigan, unveiled the motorhome as their 'halo' vehicle for comfortable travel at the 1973 U.S. International Transportation Exhibition in Washington, D.C. The first public showing was almost exactly 42 years ago and it was a radical design for the era. The low profile aluminum and moulded fibreglass coach came in seven and 7.9 metre (23- or 26-foot) models with a variety of floor plans. GM dealers sold topline models for as much as \$35,000 – a huge sum in the day.

The spacious wide vehicles were suitable for many purposes outside of motorhomes. They included transit operations, ambulances, mobile medical clinics, training vehicles and service vans. Empty shells were supplied to other RV manufacturers for 'upfitting' the interiors, unique exterior treatments and model names.

Mike Machin's 7.9 (26 foot) 1977 GMC is an Eleganza II purchased in Yakima, Washington, for US\$10,000. He spent another \$50,000 rebuilding the motorhome before getting B.C. collector car plates and inexpensive insurance seeing as it's more than 25 years old.

Dwayne and Sharon Jacobson, who operate the Roadhouse Grille Restaurant in South Surrey, have two GMC motorhomes. Dwayne is president of the GMC Cascaders Club with 104 members in Alberta, B.C., Washington, Oregon and Idaho.



Barbie's 1976 Star Traveler is modeled after the GMC motorhomes of that era.
Alyn Edwards, Driving

The couple bought their first 7.9 metre (26-footer) in 2005 to transport their grandchildren to Disneyland. One of their four daughters took that motorhome over. They then bought their Kingsley model in Chicago for \$14,000 and drove it home. Only a battery cable needed replacement along the way. In 2012 they drove it across Canada to the tip of Newfoundland, then down to New Orleans and back, adding 14,500 miles on it.

"Club members meet every second month somewhere in the Pacific Northwest," Dwayne says. "We do fun trips including rolling rallies such as Route 66," he says.

"Our GMC motorhomes just keep on going, drawing attention wherever we go."

The big club event for 2016 is a rolling rally to Alaska. For more information, [check out the GMC Cascaders website](#).

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