

Mobile Rik - How To Build A DIY Truck Camper

Podcast Episode 2

Hey there! I'm "Mobile Rik", and I'm very happy to welcome you to the second episode of my new podcast about my attempt to live MY version of "A Simple Life."

This episode is going to be focused on what's arguably been the most crucial component of this whole... what I like to think of as the "getting yourself off the grid by next weekend" operation. And I'm of course talking about my homemade truck camper, which sits on the back of my 2003 Tacoma Prerunner, and has been my primary residence since March of 2014, when I'm quite pleased to say I permanently unhooked myself from the municipal utility grid, moved all my belongings into my tiny house on the back of my truck, and headed off to explore the wilderness. Of course, since I own my truck, and my camper essentially rides around on that 35 sq ft of "wandering real estate", I don't need to bother with rent... even to campsites, as you might assume, because I always camp in the free ones. In fact to this day, I haven't paid a dime to any campsite anywhere. I imagine I might try one someday, but so far I haven't ever found one that's as good as the free ones I find!

So getting back to that crucial component that made it all possible... my homemade camper...

Oh and while I'm at it, lemme not forget to mention... This podcast is brought to you by BuildATruckCamper.com, where you can learn to build your own truck camper and get off the grid fast - for less than a paycheck and just a few days of construction.

Ok, so basically how this got started was that I came to realization around the beginning of 2013 that I really wanted to simplify my life. A lot. I was basically at the end of my rope with regards to this

whole financial hamster wheel thing we do. Because as an outdoorsy guy who only ever goes home to sleep, I was particularly frustrated by the part where I'm constantly needing to work jobs to pay for an apartment I never used, except to sleep. And here in the States there just aren't any other options for someone like that, to just rent, say, a bed. Of course, you could share a place, but I'm not into that — I need my own space. Now If I was in Japan, I'd be one of the first in line to try out those capsule apartments, like the capsule hotels you may have heard about, but these are actual micro-apartments... though the crazy thing is, they're still ridiculously expensive, just to rent what's basically a cabinet with bed and tv. And meanwhile here, in the "land of opportunity"... even that is not an option. So what to do about that?

So I think the way it happened was that I literally woke up one morning with this realization... that what I needed to do was to put a camper on my truck and move the heck away from it all. That seemed like a pretty good plan, and I do have some history with the wandering vagabond lifestyle, which I really enjoyed quite a lot.

But the previous times were with a backpack, and that got pretty tiring, so now a lot older, a camper seemed the way to go. So the trick was finding one for cheap. Of course, I looked on Craigslist for camper options. But for one... I really wanted something more than a simple bed cap, and I couldn't really afford anything above a few hundred bucks. And having an actual truck camper — rather than a camper van — was important to me, too, because I have a good truck and most of what I imagined doing was camping at fossil digs and rockhounding sites, which are always way off the beaten trail, so the off road capability was really important. Pulling a trailer has also never appealed to me, because they make parking and backing up a lot more of a hassle. So it didn't take too long to narrow things down to a truck camper.

And if I remember it right, it was sometime in the first few days of researching how to boondock — which if you're not familiar with that term, it means the same thing as “dry camping” without any kind of utility hookups, so you know, stocking up on water and generating your own electricity, basically living off the grid in a mobile home, but one you actually intend to drive around — I was reading some articles on a site called

CheapRVLiving.com and came across an article on how to make a simple truck camper out of wood. It basically talks about how easy it is to build a great little camper on the back of your truck if you keep it really simple, and you don't even need to worry about using expensive materials like aluminum and fiberglass, because ordinary lumber is not only really sturdy, but also insulates really well and doesn't conduct heat into your camper on hot days and out of your camper on cold days the way metals like aluminum do. And there was a really simple stick diagram of the framing plan and a parts list that was basically nothing more than some lumber, plywood, a bucket of screws, and some paint.

And all that was pretty exciting for me to find, because I definitely have some basic construction experience, especially with building stuff out of 2x4s and screws! I mean most people who have any kind of handy experience... they probably could do it, too. It's probably about the easiest thing there is beyond, like, making stuff out of paper and scissors, right?

So I did some quick estimates, and it totally boggled my mind — like I seriously didn't believe it, and thought I'd make a mistake — when I figured out that I could make my whole camper body, with a cabover section and a rear extension over the tailgate, with only about \$80 of lumber!

That number changed a bit as I tweaked the plans, but the end figure came pretty close to exactly that. And of course, even though I wound up paying retail for my lumber, it's easy to find lumber for cheap or even free. The price of your homemade camper goes up when you add in styrofoam insulation boards, which also help with the structural stiffness. Paint adds a bit more, because you need some good exterior paint, either oil based or acrylic, and then the decking screws add a bit more, but that's also stuff that's possible to find free or cheap at the Reuse store or yard sales.

And the lumber construction -- it's not as heavy as you'd think! I think one of the first reactions from people is you expect lumber would be heavy, but my camper is actually lighter than most commercial campers, and that's probably because I kept the interior sparse and didn't add a whole bunch of wooden furniture and cabinets inside. And where it's great is that it's extremely sturdy. Even the cabover section, which is a pure cantilever, I can hang off the end and bounce, and it doesn't move at all — in fact I

almost dislocated my arm when it didn't actually bounce the way I expected it to!

But back to the weight issue, there's another thing that really helps the weight issue — as well as the aerodynamics in a huge way — and that's the fact that I made it to be a popup design. When I'm driving it's just a little over 4 feet high inside, but when I'm camping I can raise the roof to be just under 8 feet high, like in your house. So it's a lot more aerodynamic than a full-height camper, and I get great fuel-efficiency. And construction-wise, by making it a lot shorter, I also eliminate a few feet of wood all the way around, which probably amounts to about 150 pounds or more of weight savings. Which also impacts fuel economy as well. Unlike most campers getting 5 to 10 mpg, I actually average around 20 mpg. In fact just yesterday I just drove two hours up a mountain from Wickenburg to Prescott, AZ, 2300 ft higher elevation, and averaged 20 mpg. So it's not a foregone conclusion that you're going to get really crappy fuel efficiency. You just need to factor that into your design and if it's really important to you to save fuel, learn how to drive to save fuel. (It's relevant to point out that HALF of the credit for my good fuel efficiency goes to the fact that I'm also a fuel efficiency expert and know the best way to drive to save fuel — I mean, before I put the camper on, I could get 27 mpg out of it, and there was a time when I had made aerodynamic modifications and could actually get 32 mpg. So it's not like I didn't take a big hit by adding the camper, but with smart driving I can still manage to get decent efficiency.)

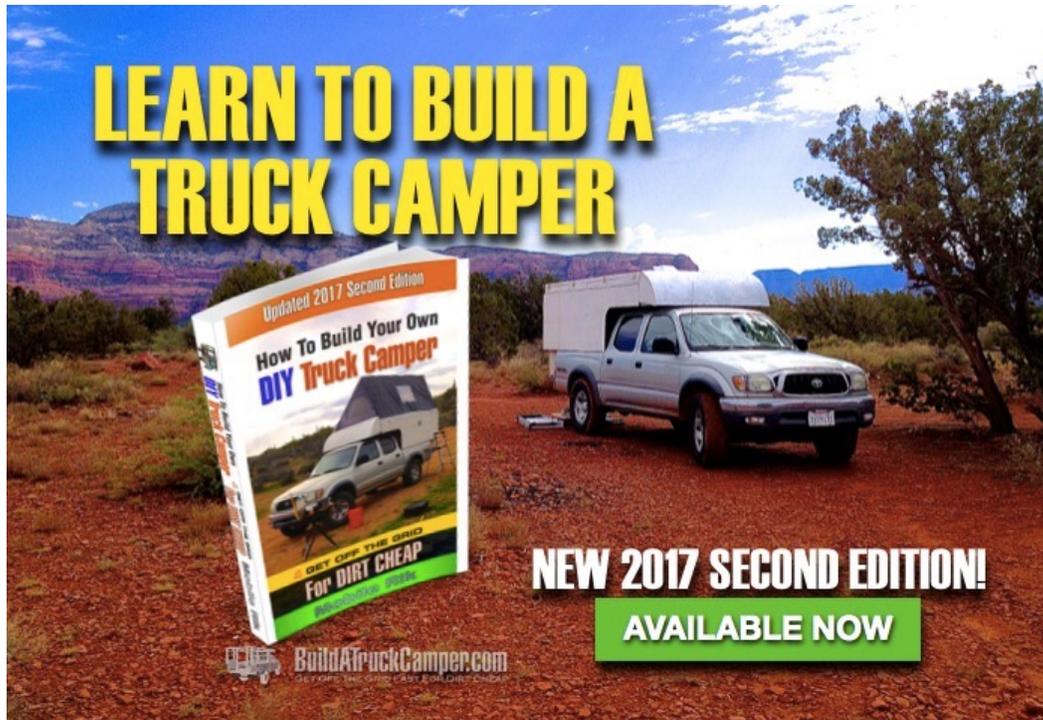
So anyway, getting back to construction. First, if you think you might want to try building your own camper, realize that you don't need to get fancy. You actually can build it entirely out of wood. You don't need to have fiberglass and aluminum sheeting. While they certainly can help, you don't *need* them, even if other people (or the people in your head) try to convince you that wood won't work. They're just wrong. Almost all commercial campers are made of wood on the inside framing. They do it for the same reasons you should consider it — because it's cheap and easy to work with. As for the outside weatherproofing, commercial campers use fiberglass and aluminum mainly because it looks nice and that's what customers think they need. Of course, it definitely does look nice, so if you

have the dough, go for it... but you don't *need* it. Exterior paint works just fine — you'll just need to remember to repaint it every year or two.

Another topic... beyond what to make it out of, you'll have the question of what kind of design do you want to use? I already mentioned that I made mine with a popup design, and that has a lot of huge benefits for fuel economy and at the same time, it's still high enough inside that I can sit upright on the bench seat. I honestly don't even use the popup much. It's perfectly livable inside, and even though I can't stand up all the way when the top is down, it's not even like I miss it, because ... really the space is so small that it's not like you have any place to walk around, so you're sitting down all the time anyway. And like I said, I camp to enjoy nature and I spend almost all my time outside, just as I did when I had an apartment, and I really only use the camper to sleep and sometimes get out of the rain, so as far as I'm concerned, for me a 4 foot high camper is perfect for me, even if the roof didn't lift.

Another design you might be thinking about is a slide in truck camper that allows you to leave the camper behind on jacks when you go to town or are out doing truck stuff. That would be a really convenient trick, but I chose to keep things simple by making mine bolt straight onto the truck's bed rails. If you want to do a slide-in type camper, it's quite a bit more involved and expensive. For one thing, you need jacks, which run at least \$300 per set, which is more than I spent on my entire camper. And then construction-wise, compared to my bolt-on camper, a slide in design also has a bottom in addition to the top — a floor box which hangs from the upper portion — which needs to be sturdy enough to support anything inside when it's left behind on jacks and everything above if you set it down on sawhorses for storage. At the most frugal it'll probably add in the area \$100 and 100 lbs to your plans. And then you'll also need a way to tie it down so your "slide on" doesn't become a "slide off" camper, and beyond that, you basically want it to stay put when you go around corners and drive off road. The standard tie-down method is with a class of hardware called turnbuckles, which can cost anywhere from \$20 for something cheap to \$200 and up for premium stuff, PLUS you need something to attach the turnbuckles to, which could just mean hooking the turnbuckles around the bumper and the frame, but many people opt for the

expensive upgrades from Torklift that help get the attachment points closer to the camper for a more rigid connection.



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Probably the one biggest thing I did that helped my do it so quick, was this — I kept it simple and used a flexible plan that could be altered down the road. By doing that, I allowed myself to not be under so much time pressure to get everything right on the first version. For example... If I ever wanted to turn it into a full-height camper, all I would have to do is extend the walls upwards by adding framing above the current walls. If I wanted to extend it backwards, I could just remove the back wall, extend the rails further out the back, and screw in the back wall. I could easily add windows or slide-out like shelves, by sawing out holes for them. The fact that I used wood for the construction makes it so easy that I seriously could just buy some wood and make modifications right in the Home Depot parking lot if necessary. And it also helps that I kept it constructed really simply, without a dozen layers of paneling and different sized hardboard sticks with angled cuts and fancy joints that need to set in

clamps overnight to cure. I can literally just unscrew a board, saw a replacement board, and screw it into place. So not only does it save you time and effort in the beginning — it's also extremely easy to maintain down the road if something goes wrong or if you'd like to do an impromptu upgrade.

The one decision you probably need to make early is if you intend to upgrade to a slide-in, because a slide-in needs to be a certain width wider than the truck body to accommodate jacks. My camper is built with the walls flush with the side of the truck, and it would be quite a hassle to make it wider. But here's the thing — If I were ever to decide that it was worth the aerodynamic hit and extra cost to be able to remove it once in a while.... My basic camper shell cost less than \$250, so it's really not a big deal to start over! Time-wise, it may even be faster to build new slide-in from scratch than convert my current one. (Probably not, but it's something to think about.)

Anyway, it's impossible to get into too many details in a radio show, so to get more info on building your own truck camper, make sure you visit the sponsoring site: BuildATruckCamper.com.

Of course, my main purpose, which I hope I may have accomplished, is to inspire you... to realize that building a truck camper doesn't have to be as difficult as you'd think, and whether you've never held a power tool in your entire life, or you're an accomplished builder with really ambitious plans for a handcrafted design, you can move yourself much much closer to that moment when you're actually camping in your homemade camper by realizing that it likely doesn't need to be anywhere as complicated as it seems in your head when you first thought about it. And by systematically going through each feature looking for ways to simplify them to the bare essentials that you actually need, maybe even eliminating features altogether, or at least postponing them until, let's say, AFTER you're already camping and can get a better feel for what you actually need vs. what you only *imagined* you need but can in fact do perfectly fine without... then maybe you could be camping metaphorically or even literally "by next weekend".

Again, I'm Mobile Rik, and you can find my site by going to MobileRik.com, and I'd love it if you joined my mailing list, which you can do by clicking the animation in the sidebar. Take care, and happy camping!



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