

CYCLE CARAVANNING



With 50mph winds the Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert can challenge any tent. So why not try a caravan? Paul Elkins reports how his bicycle 'camper', as described in his letter in Issue 22, performed on the playa...

Five years ago *Velo Vision* was kind enough to dedicate two pages to a whimsical idea of mine as I pondered the possibilities of a pedal-powered enclosed camper. The idea was spawned after reading an article some years back by the computer geek nomad Steve Roberts. Steve travelled around America for 14 years and kept afloat by submitting magazine stories about his adventures on his recumbent bicycle and trailer which he aptly named the Behemoth. It weighed 350 pounds!

Steve described in agonizing detail his discomfort while slowly pedalling this mass up a long and gruelling mountain pass in a raging downpour. It sounded at one point like he was seriously contemplating pushing the beast over the cliff and just sticking out his thumb! I often wondered if an enclosed tricycle could have served him better for those extreme situations. Besides keeping him out of foul weather it could have served as a kitchen and sleeping quarters.

My dreams were fun to share, but the reality is I lead a pretty typical life, with a sweet girlfriend, a good job, a home and two dogs that give me unconditional love. I have roots people, deep roots! Selling all my earthly possessions in pursuit of an adventurous existence has always been a dream, and writing the article five years ago helped ease the fact that this may never be a reality.

That was until January of this year, when I finally found a reason to build the camper and live the nomadic life (or something like it, anyway).

My inspiration was Burning Man, an extreme desert campout which attracts over 35 000 artists, adventurers and creative exhibitionists from all over the world, who bask in self-expression for a week before torching 'The Man'. The theme for 2006 was 'Hopes and Fears of the Future.'

ABOVE: Back after Burning Man, Paul Elkins relaxes in the camper, a mobile home from home.

BELOW: The wind turbine generator turned out to be not compatible with the camper electrics - but solar panels provide power instead.





DESIGN ANEW

After reviewing my old drawings, the enclosed tricycle idea was eventually thrown out. Detaching the power train from the camper instead gave me the ability to park the camper and travel unimpeded.

I had to come up with a design that would handle the bizarre desert environment. My biggest fear was the strong winds, which at times exceed 50 mph. I didn't want to be literally blown away, so I went with a half Quonset hut design and had the heavy items stored on the curved side of the camper for ballast when the winds kicked up.

The camper base and floor are of wood, and the frame is made from a recycled aluminium satellite antenna. The frame was covered with 1/4" fluted plastic attached with pop rivets. The door swings up to serve as a sun block, and the sidewalls open for cross ventilation.

The floor is hinged so that the bed cushion can transform into a recliner. This way I can comfortably lounge inside when the weather turns nasty. Cabinets were made for clothes and food storage, and below floor level is a storage area for the sleeping bag. Two plastic three-drawer units house all of my miscellaneous belongings, and I even found room for a book/magazine and spice rack.

For power, I have a small 12V battery with a solar panel for recharging. This powers the lights, fan and MP3-player speakers. I even attempted to make a wind generator from a bicycle dynamo but once I got there someone told me it was an alternator, not a generator, and several diodes would've been needed to make the thing work. Oh well, the prop spinning in the wind still made for a great visual.

A shielded butane cook stove doubles as a heater for the cold nights. A nifty solar food dehydrator was also built into the side of the camper, but I forgot to bring fruit, so it was never tried out. A pee funnel was also mounted on the exterior wall just in case the porta-potties were too far away: the line fed into a sealed milk jug mounted inside. And last but

not least, the exterior solar shower also funnelled hot water into, you guessed it, the kitchen sink.

There was lots of toying with other forms of energy too, such as paper and solar cook-stoves and a super-efficient candle water heater. These were fun ideas to explore in my shop, but I opted to stay with more proven and reliable energy sources.

ON THE ROAD

Anyway, after six months of tinkering, the time finally came to put the tools down. One shaky test-run was all that time allowed before loading my condensed home on top of my pickup and away I went on the 700-mile journey to the remote Nevada desert.

While driving there, I tried to think of a name for the creation riding in back. Names are big on the playa and a little sign mounted above the camper door was waiting for its title. It had to be something unique, something true...

I eventually made it to the lakebed. It was a cacophony of tents, people, activity and blinding dust. After unloading the camper I hitched it up to the bike and set out to the centre of the large horseshoe encampment for some solitude and a chance to break her in. This vast area is set aside for the sporadic art installations that vary in size and subject matter. One place will have a sculpture of people swimming on the playa, or there are places you crawl around on or walk through a maze of fabric or maybe you enter rooms that require 3-D glasses. It's a week of sensory overload. You will see people riding their bicycles from one installation to another.

Any way, at a comfortable distance from the crowd I stopped and looked around. This was it, no more planning,



ABOVE: The 'bubble' lifts up to access storage under the head end of the mattress.

ABOVE LEFT: The kitchen area, with everything at hand for meals on the go.

BELOW: Shelter from wind, sun and dust at Burning Man, and a never-failing conversation starter...





FAR LEFT: An end view shows the bed configuration and, top left, the magazine storage area.

LEFT: Beyond the bed is a coolbox and clothes storage bin

building or packing. After six months the dream finally turned into reality. I was smiling big.

I was also feeling a bit woozy. From all the activity I'd forgotten to eat. The bed was transformed into the recliner position and the table extension was attached. I kicked on the stove and a can of soup was plopped in the cooking pot. It was interesting manoeuvring around in this little space not much larger than myself. But everything was at arms reach from where I sat. It felt solid and personal. That was it. 'The Personal Pod!' No, that wasn't it. 'Paul's' Personal Pod!' Nope.

PERSONAL PODDING

After a day or two I was finally getting a routine.

I spent many hours reading, fixing interesting meals in the little kitchen and watching the world go by. Many folks would stop by to say hello, poke their head around the interior, and ask a few questions, like "How much does it weigh?"

"I never weighed it."

"If you sleep in this thing where does your head go?"

"In the bubble, that way I can look up at night and check out the stars." I loved watching their facial expressions, as they'd try to grapple with my zany concept.

"Cooolool, can I take a picture?"

One fellow pulled up on his bicycle with a unique trailer in tow. It was a simple long frame made of electrical conduit with three large plastic storage bins sitting below and a foam bed fixed on top. A light PVC plastic frame surrounded the bed. Attached to the PVC, colourful flowing fabric. He was one of about 13 in a group each having the same construction but with different colour schemes in their fabric.

Another amazing rig came by. This was a masterfully thought out home-built Quadra-cycle four-wheeler. A sunshade/platform was built over the occupants and on top of the platform was a tent serving as the couple's home for a week.

It amazes me how much energy and creative thought the people of the playa put out. Decorated bicycles, tall tricycles, pedal powered sofas, I even saw a 1971 Honda Civic converted to pedal power.

AGAINST THE WIND

Touring around the playa proved interesting as I was hauling a bit of stuff. Going against the wind was probably most difficult because the front of the camper was a big flat wall.

Then there were these times when the concept really

paid off, like the time I was pedalling about when a massive dust storm whipped up unexpectedly. I casually steered the camper into the appropriate position, let down the support legs, jumped in and closed the hatch. I kicked back the recliner, made a snack, poured myself a tall glass of ice tea and watched the proceedings through my window while David Grey played in the background. It wasn't long before I was watching some guy sprinting in hot pursuit of his tent. He reminded me of Steve Roberts in a way; not quite prepared for the wrath of the Gods. With a smug grin I raised my glass.

The current camper does have a few design faults. To lie down requires a rather contorted move, and when lying down, my head and feet touch the walls. Adding three more inches to the overall length would have been nice but hey, I'm a minimalist!

One guy I met said he'd pedalled all the way from San Francisco, California, and was amazed to bump into me. He'd been envisioning something similar for a long time. We talked about my camper and a version that would be more apt for touring. We planned a miniature teardrop shape: rounding out the front end and lowering the camper would help in front and side winds and narrowing the width would be more suited for street manoeuvring. To keep weight down an all-aluminium frame could replace wood and the current heavy wheelbarrel wheels should be swapped with 20" bicycle wheels.

The time went too fast and after a week of living in my little camper I was feeling a bit sad to pack up and say farewell to my newfound friends. I never did decide on a name for the camper, but a name was figured out for me. One day a fellow riding by on his bike, obviously intoxicated, shouted out "Hey, it's Turtle Man!"

I liked it. Turtle Man; slow on the move yet, upon a moment's notice, able to climb into his shell and stave off the evils of Mother Nature. Turtle Man. Yep; leave it to some drunk for inspiration. I love this place!

Paul Elkins

For more on Burning Man, see www.burningman.com

BELOW: The next version of the camper? It'll be lighter, faster and more suitable for touring.



ABOVE: Test towing before heading off to Burning Man. Paul hasn't weighed the camper but it rolls well behind the bike - except in headwinds!