

BUILD A STREET/OFF-ROAD VAN

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BUILDING A STREET/OFF-ROAD VAN
PAGE 8



**HOMEBUILT
BASICS:**
**HANDSAWS
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BUILD A STREET/OFF-ROAD



A 4x4 FACELIFT FOR A 2x4 VAN/By Ron Cogan

You've seen 'em cruising down the boulevard—those expensive looking high-roller vans with all the latest off-road goodies and full-time four-wheel drive. Most sport large, aggressive off-road meats and have a formidable stance that seems to yearn for the boonies. Yet, in what seems like a contradiction, many of these beasts also boast extensive custom paint and lots of chrome—prime potential victims of the unyielding brush and rocks encountered in a typical off-pavement excursion. So why the contradiction?

The appropriate term for this phenomenon is the *Macho Image*. The high-off-the-ground stance, ready-for-anything appeal, and total versatility of such a machine makes it a naturally impressive one, and vehicle owners identify with their machines. Unfortunately, after shelling out the extra thousands of dollars for four-wheel drive capability, adding every conceivable off-road accessory, and doing a top-notch exterior treatment,

a large percentage of these machines never see an off-road trail—the risk of damage is too great!

However, there's nothing wrong with street-driving a macho off-road vehicle—it's a natural if you're independently wealthy. But if you're tight-fisted with your bucks like the rest of us, then you might consider buying a stock van or truck and custom building it to your own specifications. Besides being an obvious waste of money, the extra weight and drag of full-time four-wheel drive will cost you dearly in fuel economy.

Aftermarket manufacturers (such as Rough Country and Off-Road Distributors) have really come through with viable suspension packages that enable two-wheel drive vans and trucks to tackle the outback. You can improve off-road handling with special off-road shock absorbers—typically double shocks in the front and singles in the rear—and add an extra 3 inches or so with spacer blocks and coils to accommodate

larger all-terrain tires. Once the stance and the off-road capabilities are taken care of, all you have to do is customize the vehicle to your particular needs.

With this basic philosophy in mind, we decided to transform a stock 1977 ChevyVan into a versatile on and off-road cruiser. The plan was a simple one: build a custom street machine for daily transportation that can also provide camping accommodations and tackle *light-duty* off-roading. (Light-duty is stressed because, again, nobody in their right mind will want to go all-out on exterior treatments only to see their custom paint fall prey to typical off-road hazards.)

The van was ordered with ¾-ton suspension, 350 4-bbl (and no catalytic converter), Turbo Hydra-matic transmission, locking rear axle, power steering, power brakes and other typical options. Prepping this basic vehicle for off-road use started with the addition of Off-Road Distributors' van suspension kit, a Bulldog Turbo 350 trans from Advanced Transmissions, Hooker headers and

AD VAN



1. After you've saved those thousands of dollars by not purchasing four-wheel drive, the money can be invested in accessories like the cab electronics in our project van.

2. Wood paneling was cut and installed by Secret City Vans along all wall areas; then all interior accessory lights were connected to wiring run previously, and secured to the paneling.

3. The cab compartment received its share of dressing up with tufted door and engine covers from K&M Products. Installation was handled by Van DeVille in Pomona, California.

4. Insulation should be the first thing installed in a custom interior package. Here we see efficient urethane foam being applied at Fleming Urethane.

5. The ceiling area was given a different treatment to lend a bit of character. After the plexiglass mirror was in place, the balance of the tufted vinyl panels was installed.

a Rapid Cool transmission cooler. Hitch Masters' custom drop-down trailer hitch enables the van to easily tow a full-time boonie crasher or boat. Bottom end action is taken care of by Keystone chrome flat-spokers and 10-15 B.F. Goodrich All-Terrain radials—real performers on-road or off.

Exterior modifications were kept to a minimum to avoid the all-too-common cluttered look, and only cosmetic and functional accessories were added. Since night-driving conditions in the outback often overtax stock lighting, an impressive display of KC Hilites auxiliary lights were added at appropriate points. Amber foglights

(continued on page 11)



STREET/OFF-ROAD

(continued from page 9)

were installed underneath the front bumper for street driving, while a pair of floods mounted to a pushbar and two sets of long-distance spots secured atop an overhead light rack take care of off-road needs. (The pushbar and light rack are from Pacific Off-Road Center and Olympic Auto Accessories.)

Another exterior modification is the Imaginary Glass hood scoop installed by Custom Auto Design. The molded scoop is a functional one that forces additional air flow into the engine compartment via a series of 1½-inch holes drilled through the hood area beneath the scoop. Increased interior air flow is achieved with a fiberglass T-Top from T-View that utilizes two removable plexiglass panels. The exterior decor is capped off with a superb black paint job with bold, multi-hue blue striping applied by Molly Designs.

Since this van was to be a combo cruiser, designed to fulfill a variety of needs, a complete custom interior

(continued on page 12)



1. Next came K&M reclining high-backs for driver and passenger comfort.

2. Since stock steering wheels are grossly oversized, the Chevy's was replaced with a Grant GT wheel.

3. A Clarion Hi-Way Fidelity System supplies the impressive sounds.

4. Clarion's MIKE CB system utilizes all-in-the-mike controls for ease of operation, plus a flashy digital display.

5. The "guts" of the MIKE system are also mounted out of sight as a theft deterrent.

6. The Chevy's stock instrument cluster was removed and replaced with a Redline 5000 dash from RLS Industries.

7. Digital calendar/clock and inside/outside thermometer add real class.

8. For off-road handling and high stance, Off-Road Distributors installed dual Mickey Thompson gas shocks up front.

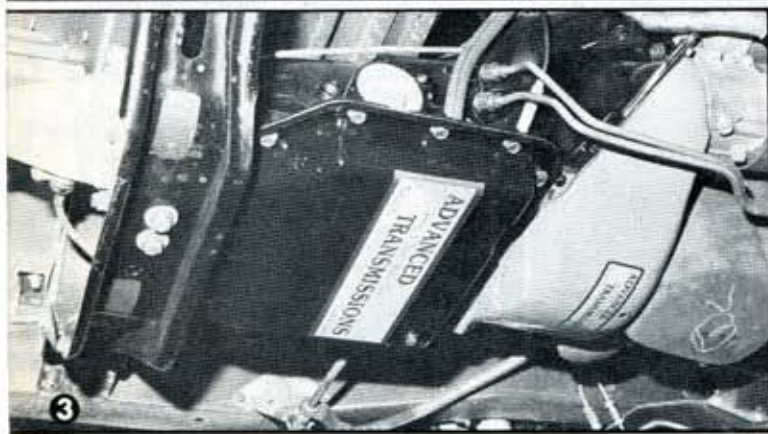
STREET/OFF-ROAD

(continued from page 11)

was added by Secret City Vans after insulating the walls, ceiling and floor with urethane foam at Fleming Urethane. Driver and passenger comfort is afforded by a pair of K&M reclining high-backs in the front and a Custom Fit convertible sofa bed in the rear. Secret City also added custom cabinetry that houses a 12-volt A&E Mobileaire fridge, Coleman catalytic heater and Hitachi television for camping convenience. Other interior bits and pieces include a Grant GT steering wheel, Xantech mood and aircraft lights, blue shag, dark paneling and a combination button-tucked/mirrored ceiling.

Unlike hard-core off-roaders, who tend to keep frills to a minimum (remember we're building a *custom* machine), we opted for an extensive array of cab electronics to finish the project off. This includes a Redline 5000 dash cluster from RLS Industries with Stewart-Warner gauges, Digital thermometer and clock/calendar from Magnaphase Industries and a digital MIKE CB system and Hi-Way Fidelity System from Clarion. This system utilizes their AM/FM/cassette

(continued on page 15)



1. Additional engine cooling capabilities were added in the form of an Imaginary Glass hood scoop.

2. Superior towing ability was provided with a custom frame-welded receiver hitch from Hitch Masters.

3. A Bulldog Turbo 350 trans from Advanced Transmissions takes the slack out.

4. A Rapid Cool transmission cooler helps keep trans oil temperature down.

5. Off-Road Distributors added 3-inch spacer blocks at the rear springs for increased rear end height.

6. K.C. floodlamps are mounted on a front end pushbar—a practical addition.



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(continued from page 12)

deck, graphic equalizer booster and two pairs of Six Pack speakers for impressive sounds. Four amber rocker switches from KC provide the final highlights at the center of the dashboard.

The finished product is exactly what it was conceived to be—an impressive high-rollin' street cruiser that can double as a light-duty, weekend boonie machine. It's ideal for camping, trailering and just about any assignment you'd want to throw at it—and fun to drive, to boot (you'll hear more about this in a future drive test).

So if you're thinking of dropping the cash for a four-wheel drive setup, and a macho high-roller van is what you're after, take a good look at what your real requirements are. If four-wheel drive is merely a tool by which the "high-roller" look is to be achieved, and you really don't anticipate any heavy-duty boonie crashing, then consider our alternative. The money you save by not adding four-wheel drive is substantial and can go a long way toward outfitting a van with the exterior and interior accessories you desire. And that's the best approach we can think of when you're building on a budget. ●



1. Finally, a trick T-Top from T-View was added to provide increased cab compartment ventilation, as well as a distinctive, classy roofline for the van.

2. The van's spacious interior boasts many components designed for both appearance and camping convenience, including a catalytic heater, sofa bed and the under-bed storage area shown here.

3. The last touch added was an extensive graphic paint job by Molly Designs. The end result of our project is a versatile, high-roller van that is neither too wild nor too tame. This van is ready to provide both comfortable cruisin' and mild off-road rompin', at a fraction of what a comparable 4x4 setup would run.