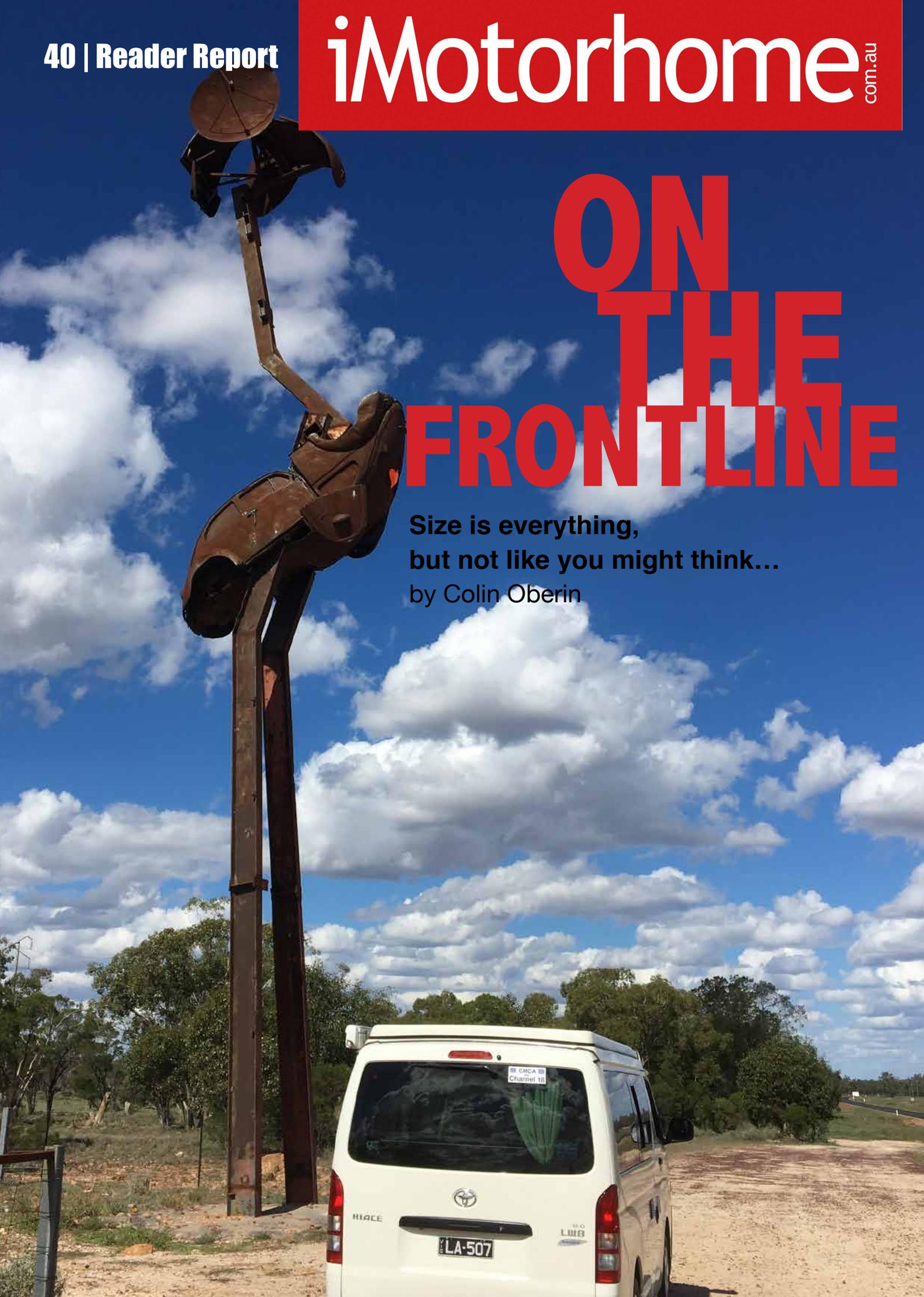


# ON THE FRONTLINE

Size is everything,  
but not like you might think...

by Colin Oberin



Being one of the last to arrive at the iMotorhome Vans from Snowy River get together last October I was able to check out the rigs already there as I cruised to my allocated site. I observed that my Toyota was clearly the smallest vehicle and was dwarfed by most of the rigs already in attendance. While I was pondering the many reasons why people buy such big rigs, perhaps others were wondering why anyone would buy such a little van as my Toyota HiAce?

The answer to that question is best seen as a natural progression from many happy years spent camping in tents, then a few years with a VW Kombi campervan and finally about 10 years with a camping trailer. I had always enjoyed both travelling and camping and what better way to combine the two following retirement than a motorhome or a camper van?

Campervans are still all about outdoor living, but with extra conveniences and a warm, dry and comfortable place to sleep...

I wanted a bit more comfort than my camper trailer provided but still wanted to feel that I was camping outdoors. After several visits to camping and caravan shows and much on-line research into buying an RV, I made a list of essential and preferred features for my new vehicle. During this process I found the extensive review of caravans, motorhomes and camper vans in the Hema Caravan and Motorhome Atlas most helpful. The tables listing the advantages and disadvantages of various types of caravans, motorhomes and camper vans were particularly useful. As they say in the Hema Atlas:

“Both caravans and motorhomes involve compromise: everyone would like them to be bigger on the inside and smaller on the outside”





### Down to Business

Homework complete it was time for me to get some practical experience. I knew what touring in a small van was like from my old Kombi days but would something bigger suit me better? I therefore booked a two-berth relocation van (about the size of iMotorhome's Project Polly), which came complete with shower and toilet. My brother in-law and I had 10 days to drive the vehicle from Melbourne to Cairns and it was plenty of time for a decent test. A day before departure my brother in-law came down with the flu and my wife wasn't keen to drive that far with her arthritis, so I rocked up alone to the Maui depot in Melbourne. On arrival I found the intended two-berth Ford Transit van booked by a paying customer and instead I was asked to relocate a six-berth Mercedes Benz motorhome to Cairns.

The trip was very enjoyable, but what I learnt over the 10 day trip was that I didn't use the

on-board shower once as I was happy to use the camp ground facilities as I had always done. All cooking had to be done inside and not outside as I prefer, and I only used the on-board toilet once in an emergency following a dodgy take-away lunch. While the big van was a pleasure to drive on the open road I found it unwieldy in the towns and too tall for underground car parking. I also realised that such a rig really had only one purpose whereas my wife and I are looking to down size and so wanted to be able to use my new vehicle like a second car around the city which we could park in our carport when not on tour.

Had I been planning to travel and live in the rig for months at a time I would have looked for something bigger and with on-board facilities, but for me to trip about for a few weeks at a time, a small campervan was the logical choice. Having lived with my HiAce since June 2015 I am de-lighted to say it was the right choice – for me.

### Options

After deciding on a smaller campervan with no on-board facilities I looked at various second hand and new options. The fact that Toyota vehicles are renowned as being bullet proof; that there are Toyota dealers dotted all around Australia and that most country mechanics can fix a Toyota all led me to settle on a Toyota HiAce as the basis for my campervan. Also, by choosing a pop-top rather than a hi-top I can drive into any underground car park with 2.1 m minimum clearance, which is most of them. Having settled on a Toyota HiAce-based vehicle, finding the right camper conversion for my needs was just a case of checking various companies' workmanship, layout options, equipment and prices.

After much research I settled on the Frontline Freedom layout. This lay-out has a swing-out stove that allows outside cooking. The stove unit is removable when not travelling, leaving quite a big floor area for load carrying, which is accessible via the sliding door. The rear single beds double as couches in day time and can be converted into a double bed at night. One disadvantage of this layout is that the camper can only carry two people. If you want to carry four people in such a van, single bed layouts are not an option. There is storage under the couches and also an upright cupboard immediately behind the driver. The fridge, which is located under the sink and directly opposite the sliding door, is an 80-litre 12/240 volt unit that is bigger than the 60 litre models some other companies use.

The single bed layout means I can carry things like this kayak without the need for roof racks or a trailer.





The single beds also mean I can use the HiAce to carry other bulky goods, and is very handy when visiting Bunnings!

### Reservations?

My two main reservations about buying the Frontline camper were firstly that the stove runs on methylated spirits rather than LPG and secondly, Frontline is in Sydney whereas I am in Melbourne. Extensive Google searches reassured me on both counts. It's true that the spirit stove is slightly slower than gas (that's an understatement! - Ed), but I'm never in a hurry when camping. Methylated spirits is cheap and easy to find in any supermarket or hardware store so you're unlikely to run out and you don't lose the storage space taken up by an external LPG locker.

Frontline reassured me that they would deliver the van in Melbourne at no additional cost and they did just that. After a few months I noticed the pop-top wasn't fitting properly when lowered. I emailed some photos to Frontline and they offered to check when they

were next in Melbourne. Peter Farrugia, one of the founders of Frontline, did this personally and decided that the scissor arms needed replacement. Peter apologised that they didn't have the equipment to do this in Melbourne but offered to replace the arms free of charge when I was next in Sydney. I had already planned a trip to Bathurst, Orange and the Blue Mountains, so I just added Sydney to the itinerary and the arms were replaced in a couple of hours. The pop-top has been easy to raise and lower ever since.

The Frontline camper has large fly screens in the pop-top that facilitate airflow on hot days. The Fiamma awning, LED reading lights over the stove and beds, and an auxiliary battery so you don't run down the vehicle battery when parked, are all standard. Frontline claim two days us-age before the auxiliary battery needs recharging (by driving or plugging into 240 volt power), but I have found that by turning the fridge off at night the battery can last about

four days and is quickly recharged once I start driving again. The 48-litre water tank is larger than some other companies install in their small campervans, but there is no grey water tank, so I carry a screw top plastic water container that I can use as an external grey water tank.

### Vehicle Choices

I chose the automatic petrol version HiAce over the diesel option, but that was a close call and I could easily have gone the other way. Op-tional extras fitted include a front bull bar, rear step/tow bar, VHF/UHF radio and a Porta Potti, which Frontline installed under one of the couches but I have never had occasion to use.

Having now done nearly 20,000 kms in my HiAce including five one or two-week trips, and in between using the vehicle like a second car around the city, I have found it comfortable, easy to drive and, not surprisingly, totally reliable. The petrol engine is not a speedster but has more than enough power to move the van along at highway speeds without struggling excessively when climbing hills.

Overall I'm very happy with my decision to buy a Toyota HiAce-based campervan from Frontline. The workmanship and service from Frontline have been first class and the size and flexibility of my HiAce have allowed it to replace my ageing station wagon as the second vehicle in our household. 

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## PROS...

- Easy to drive
- Quick easy set-up
- Removable/ swing out kitchen allows cooking outside
- Well placed interior lights
- Economical to purchase and run
- Low height allows access to most car parks
- Toyota reliability and good re-sale value
- Can be used as a second car about town

## CONS...

- No walk-thru from driver's cabin
- Two occupants max
- Limited storage (but plenty of floor space)
- Blunt nose attracts insects committing suicide
- Not fully self-contained as required by some sites

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