

PART I: PLAN

Ouachita.

The Ouachita in October smells like wet leaf litter and somebody else's woodsmoke.

He borrowed the truck from his brother-in-law, who made him promise twice about the clutch.

Two nights. A rented tent, a cooler packed like everybody's first cooler, all ice and no food, and a forest road that went to shelf rock about four miles in, stacked up like bad shingles. He got out and walked it, which he had never done in his life.

He slept poorly. The cooler drained into the sandwiches. From two until daylight he was cold, because he had brought the wrong bag and had not known there was a right one.

None of that turned out to be the problem. The problem was that he wanted a third night and had to be at a desk on Monday.

At a gas station outside Mount Ida he wrote four things on the back of an envelope. Not a build list. A use list. How many nights a year. How far from the house. Who was coming with him. What he would actually spend.

He built off that envelope for two years and never bought a thing that was not on it.

CHAPTER 1

YOUR VISION

The chapter that saves the most money, and the one most guides skip.

"We're just not pacing the cage. I refuse to pace the cage. We lived in this construct of a cage that we put ourselves in our entire life. I don't want to be pacing in that cage waiting to die. I wanna be out doing something, helping people, discovering as much as we can."

Donald D., 2024 Ford F-350 + Four Wheel Camper

Most people build the rig before they decide the trip. They see a setup online, they like how it looks, they start bolting parts on, and somewhere around the third or fourth modification they realize they never asked the one question that should have come first: what am I actually using this for?

This chapter is that question. Answer it honestly and the rest of the book gets easier, because every later decision, platform, budget, build approach, what to buy used, is downstream of it. Skip it and you'll pay twice: once in money you didn't need to spend, and once in the rebuild when you finally figure out what you wanted. We put this chapter first on purpose, because almost every experienced builder we talked to circled back to the same regret without being asked. They didn't wish they'd bought a bigger winch. They wished they'd known what they were building for before they started.

The mirror test

Before you price a single part, sit with this honestly.

"They have to be really honest with themselves and look in the mirror long, loud and hard: what are you using it for? If the sole purpose of owning an overlanding rig is to look good and you have the money, go ahead and blow it. Just be honest about it."

Donald D.

There's no wrong answer. Some people want to cross continents. Some want a quiet lake on a Friday night and to be back for work Monday. Some genuinely want a good-looking truck in the driveway and the option to go far someday. All of those are fine. What's expensive is

wanting one thing and building for another.

Donald tells a story about a young guy who won a Jeep in an aftermarket company's annual giveaway, looked himself in the mirror, admitted it was a showpiece, and kept it that way on purpose. Five years, not a scratch on it. That guy made the right call, because he made it on purpose. The one who gets hurt is the guy (or gal) who tells himself he's building an expedition vehicle, spends like he's crossing the Darién Gap, and uses it for two campground weekends a year.

So the mirror test isn't "are your goals big enough." It's "are you being straight with yourself about what you'll really do." Write down the honest answer, not the impressive one.

If you don't know yet

The mirror test assumes you can answer it. If you're brand new, you might not be able to, and that's the most expensive place to guess. Building a whole rig to find out what you like is the slowest, priciest way to learn it. So find out cheaply first. Tag along on a friend's trips. Rent a rig for a weekend and see how it actually feels.

"For people who haven't done it, or want to get into it, renting something is a great choice."

Avian T., 2018 Toyota Sequoia

A weekend in someone else's rig teaches you more about what you actually want than months of reading, and it tells you the truth before you've spent anything. Avian himself got pulled in that way. He'd already bought the Sequoia as a family car when friends started taking him out on trails, and it was those trips, not the purchase, that made him start building. Borrow the experience before you buy the truck, then come back to the mirror and answer the question for real.

A dream is not a bucket list

Here's a distinction that saves you from building the wrong rig for the wrong reason.

"There's a difference between a dream and a bucket list. A bucket list is something you can do, all you have to do is find the motivation. The dream, I'd love to spend six months in the backcountry of Australia. I don't think I'll ever get to do it."

Donald D.

Your bucket list is the trips you can actually pull off in the next few years. Your dream is the bigger thing on the horizon that may or may not ever happen. Build for the bucket list, and let the dream inform the direction without dictating the spend. If your real next three years are weekend and weeklong trips within a day's drive, build the rig that nails those, even if the dream is a year on the Pan-American. You can grow into the dream later, or rent into it when it comes. Most overbuilding is just building for the dream and using it for the bucket list. Name both, separately, in writing, then build for the one you'll actually live.

Why this saves you money

When you haven't decided what you're doing, you buy capability as insurance. You don't know which situations you'll hit, so you prepare for all of them. That's how the bill gets out of hand.

Asked what people get wrong when they spec a build, Brian's first two words are "overdoing it," and his second answer is buying more than they need. Then he gets specific about what they're looking at instead.

"A lot of people are looking at the wrong things. They're like, I want it to be super durable and go everywhere and to have all this stuff and be super fancy. That's not really the important thing. The important thing is, is it waterproof? Is it comfy? Can you live out of it?"

Brian M., 2003 Nissan Xterra + self-built trailer

He's talking about trailers there, because that's what he builds, but the test travels. Brian builds his own instead of buying them, so he's priced every part of one. Andrew lived the full version of that. He bought the armor and shocks the videos told him to buy, not the ones his trips

needed, and it nearly cost him the thing he got into it for.

"We almost went financially bankrupt for nothing, because we were just chasing that next thing and keeping up with the Joneses."

Andrew J., 2016 Toyota Tacoma, Wicked Overland

Hear it too from someone who onboards new people for a living. Justin founded 207 Overland, which put on about thirty-six trips last year, and the first thing he names is how little you actually need.

"The biggest thing I see is intimidation. People think they need thousands of dollars of bolt-ons before they can just get out into the woods and go camping for the weekend. We made do with a twenty dollar Coleman stove from Walmart and a thirty dollar tent."

Justin F., 2016 Toyota Tundra, 207 Overland

There's a fair counterpoint, and Brian is the one who makes it. His solar is overkill for his trailer. His battery is overkill. The insulation is probably overkill. In his own words, almost everything about it is overkill, and his defense is four words long: it will last. So which is it? The line is whether you know why. Informed capacity is fine: if you've decided you want a bigger battery bank because you work from the rig, or more water because you go deep and stay long, and you can name the reason, spend it. Blind capacity is the waste, buying the biggest version of everything because you can't tell which situations you'll be in, so you cover them all. The fix for that isn't a smaller budget, it's a clear vision. Decide the mission and most of the "just in case" line items answer themselves.

The point is purpose, not less

It's easy to hear all this as "buy less," but that's not the rule, and getting it wrong the other way has its own cost. Two things are worth keeping even when you're cutting. The first is comfort that serves the people you bring.

"If it makes everybody's life easier, I'm all for it. I'm not here to be the boy scout starting a fire with flint and steel. But we also know how to survive without the comforts."

Andrew J.

A fridge, a real mattress, a shower for the kids: if that keeps your family wanting to come back, it's mission spending, not waste. The second is safety, the one place under-buying is the dangerous mistake.

"All the mods in the world don't matter if you don't know what you're doing or don't have some kind of safety protocol."

Avian T.

Avian says that because of a night spent buried in mud for ten hours with no cell service, back before he carried any satellite setup to call out with. So the rule isn't buy less. It's buy on purpose: cut the capability that serves your ego, keep the comfort that serves your people, and never skimp on the safety that brings them home.

Why this saves you the rebuild

The other tax on a fuzzy vision is the rebuild. You build it, you live with it, you discover what you actually needed, and you build it again. Nearly every builder we interviewed had done some version of this. Mike rebuilt his shower as he went, from a fibreglassed pan and a curtain on magnets to a semi-enclosed stall with its own water heater. Brian has built two trailers and is planning a third. Asked what he would change if he built his again, John answered:

"I would go with a six by six, so I could have a bigger habitat and a bigger habitat refrigerator."

John B., 1994 LMTV, Vikingr Overland

And Donald, looking back across a lifetime of rigs from a Jeep to an 80-series Land Cruiser to his current truck:

"I would have never wasted money on the TJ platform trying to make it into something that it is not. I would have kept my Ford

pickup trucks at home and made my first Expo rig a Land Cruiser."

Donald D.

You will iterate. That's not a failure, it's how building works. The point of getting your vision clear first is to make the iteration cheap, to skip a lap or two of the build-live-rebuild cycle that everyone before you paid full price for. Nobody's telling you to get it perfect on the first try. They're telling you that the more honest you are up front, the fewer expensive laps you'll run.

Sidebar: The able-body window

Vision isn't only what you'll do. It's when. The trips that ask the most of your body have an expiration date, and it comes sooner than most people plan for. Donald and his wife are 72 and 70, and he talks about the clock openly: they went full-time because they were still healthy enough to get up and down step ladders, and the island-to-island hike they want in Scotland is scheduled for while they can still, in his words, "function as hikers." He calls the current rig the last hurrah and gives it about ten years. If your dream involves real physical effort, don't file it under "someday." Someday has a clock.

You don't have to turn it into a thing

One more piece of vision, because it quietly drives a lot of overbuilding: decide how big a role this plays in your life, and give yourself permission to keep it small. There's pressure to professionalize the hobby, to build the channel, film the trips, turn the rig into content or the skills into a side business. Some people want that, and it's a real vision worth building toward. But it's a choice, not a requirement.

Grant makes that choice from the position most people would find hardest to walk away from. His channel has a hundred and ten thousand subscribers and a paying sponsor, and he still calls it a side project.

"I don't want my passion to be a job. I can see how it can really quickly get out of hand. I know people that are, I knew them before, and I know them now. And they're completely different people when they've fully committed to being an influencer."

Grant W., 2017 Toyota Tacoma

He's turned money down to keep it that way, and he's come close to shutting the channel off entirely. Not because it failed, but because he'd started feeling he owed those hundred and ten thousand people a video nobody had asked him for.

Sidebar: You don't have to be a content creator to be an overlander

Donald has had articles and photographs published, and two magazine editors have asked him for more. He's also turned work down twice, and both times for the same reason. He tried scouting trails for a mapping app and quit after a couple of months because running the same trails over and over "is not exploring." He gets asked to restore other people's model railroads and won't take a queue of them, because the moment there are fifty jobs backed up behind him, it stops being a hobby.

Andrew is the other side of the same coin: he runs an overlanding channel, and keeps it deliberately small, filming mostly so his son can look back on it one day, not to chase subscribers.

If sharing the trips is part of your vision, great, build for it. If it isn't, you're not behind. The rig exists for the experience, not the audience.

Clarity, not expertise

You might be thinking the people in this chapter know things you don't, and the clarity comes from experience you haven't earned yet. Mike, who built remotely operated submersibles from the ground up as a commercial diver and later turned an empty cargo shell into his own camper, would push back on that.

"Expertise, there is no expertise in this. Being able to be versatile, that's it. You gotta learn how to make stuff work. So nobody's really an expert."

Mike C., 2018 Toyota Tundra + cargo trailer conversion

Vision isn't a skill you have to develop, it's a decision you have to make. You don't need ten years of trips to know whether you want quiet weekends near home or months on the road. You already know. The work of this chapter is admitting it, in plain terms, before the build talks you into something else.

Do this before you spend a dollar

Write down your answers to these. Plain words, honest ones, not the version you'd post.

1. What does the next three years actually look like? Weekends near home, weeklong regional trips, long expeditions, full-time, or some mix? Be specific about how often.
2. What's the dream, separately? The big one out on the horizon. Name it, then set it aside.
3. Who's coming? Just you, a partner, kids, a dog? Each of those changes the rig more than any single part will.
4. What's the honest purpose? Capability you'll use, comfort you'll live in, looks you'll enjoy, or some blend? No wrong answer, just a true one.
5. What's the clock? Is there a window, your health, a kid leaving home, a job change, that should move some trips earlier?

And if you can't answer these yet because you genuinely haven't done it, that's fine. Go rent or borrow a few trips first, then come back to the page. Keep that page. Everything in Part I builds on it. The next chapter is about choosing your platform, and you'll notice the answer gets clearer once you already know what you're using it for.

"People buy more than they need or not enough, and they don't necessarily think through all the situations because they haven't been in them."

Brian M.

That's exactly why you write the vision down first. You can't have been in every situation yet. But you can decide, on purpose, which ones you're building for.

KEEP GOING

That was one chapter of twenty-four. The rest of the guide is on its way,
and the tools that go with it are already up.

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