

The World's Best Slide on Truck Camper? It just may well be!

Words and pictures by Anthony "AJ" Wilson

When I read Northern Lite Australia's claim to have the world's best all weather, all purpose, fully self-contained Slide On Camper I was more than a little bemused with the claim. So I contacted Garry and Robyn of Truck Campers Australia, the Northern Lite Australian Distributor and asked about their camper. I was told the latest Australian Ultimate model was totally state of the art with standard features not available anywhere else. They said the details of the new camper were on their website and, if I was interested, I could come and see for myself.

A study of the list of features had me intrigued so I headed up to Nelson Bay to see for myself. After a quick look in the Australianising Factory (the Big Shed!) I was taken to see the latest edition Australian Ultimate Camper.

First impression was that it is a sleek good looking camper but I was looking forward to finding out why it was supposed to be the world's best. Up close the you instantly are aware that it is moulded fibreglass construction, the same as luxury boats, with a deep sheen. More importantly is the fact that there are no joined panels that would flex and eventually leak after travelling over rough terrain. In fact the corners of these campers are the strongest part of the construction, not the weakest like in most RV's where the constant flexing leads to weakening of the joints and eventually the silicone seals fail and you have water leaks, which can be very costly. These Truck Campers are made in two parts and then joined together with a large overlap using a strong stainless steel bracket.



Photo courtesy of Northern Lite Mfg, Kelowna

Northern Lite Campers are built in British Columbia, Canada where they have a good understanding of extreme weather conditions with summer temperatures reaching the mid to high 30s and winter the low minus 30s. So it's a safe bet the insulation is top of the tree. They use R6 foam insulation throughout the camper, R12 under the bedroom to keep the cold out. The rest of the floor area has a basement underneath for storage which has ducting for the heating. The fresh and grey water tanks, battery box and gas storage compartments are also insulated and the ducted air ensures an even temperature in all.

The Australian Ultimate camper sits on 4 remote controlled jacks. These jacks are the longest, strongest, galvanised top of the range jacks made by Happijac in the USA. The remote control allows you to lift all four legs at once or to adjust the jacks individually. The camper was loaded onto the vehicle, secured using Torklift Fastgun stainless steel turnbuckles (another standard inclusion with all Australian Ultimate models) and connected to the vehicle ready to drive away all within 5 minutes.

There is a ladder on the back for access to the roof and I climbed up to see what was there. Above the bedroom is a dual pane skylight; then the latest Winegard Rayzar antenna; two 100watt solar panels (sunpower cells) with shielding on the wiring to protect it from cockatoos etc.; a fantastic fan; an Aircommand Sparrow air conditioner with a water drainage system; an exhaust fan over the bathroom; a large fridge vent and two plumbing vents. You certainly could not have that on a pop top!



From upstairs we had a birds eye view of the Ultimate showing all the roof mounted accessories and the two awnings and annex.

The rear awning is electrically operated and opens out over 2 metres and it closes automatically if the wind gets up. It wasn't windy that day so I gave it a shake to see it work. The steps into the camper are equally as clever folding up to create easy access when the camper is on the ground then folding down for access when it is on the truck, complimented by a fold out entry assist handle. Behind the steps is a massive 8 foot basement with a slide out drawer which stores the entire annex rolled up, plus room for hoses and other gear. The tail lights are Australian, with the full set of blinkers, brake, tail and clearance lights and reversing lights.

The side awning is 10 foot (sorry, most RV's talk in feet and inches), cranks out in just a few seconds and can even be used while the camper is on the vehicle. A standard inclusion is a fully enclosed lightweight annex that takes around 15 minutes to put up but only a few minutes to pull down and it quickly stores in the large 8 foot basement. This annex has zip up plastic windows, fly screens and full privacy shades and an environmentally friendly floor (i.e does not kill the grass). There is a skirt that attaches to the camper so the annex can be fully enclosed. You can even choose to have one, two or three walls of the annex up, depending on your need for privacy or blocking the wind etc.



Inside the fully enclosed annex is the outside LED light; Power inlet : Portable solar inlet: power outlet; insulated battery box with 300 amp hour lithium battery; Fusion marine speakers; Refrigerator vent; Furnace vent; 2 x 9kg gas bottle compartment; Generator storage.

On the same side as the awning is the gas compartment with two 9kg bottles on a slide out tray with an auto changeover. This is an excellent idea so that if one bottle runs out it switches to the second bottle and your fridge continues running. The generator box easily fits a Honda 2 and above it is the battery storage. Underneath the awning are two external Fusion Speakers and beside these the 240 volt power inlet and a 240 volt outlet and an Anderson plug to attach the optional 120 watt portable solar panel.

The other side of the camper has the gas hot water system, the 130 litre freshwater tank inlet, the town water connection (complete with hose and pressure regulator) and access to the cassette toilet. I believe cassette toilets are a must with slide on campers. Having travelled in a motorhome with a black water tank I can remember the hassles in finding a dump point to empty the tank, and the hassles of actually emptying the tank. There are more problems if you have a slide on camper on the ground with a black water tank and the tank is full, you have to load it back on the truck just to take it to a dump point, if you can find one. (There are always plenty of dump points except when your tank is full.) The cassette toilets can be emptied into any toilet system if you use the right treatment such as Biomagic which is certified safe for all toilets including septic and composting systems.

All windows are dual pane (for insulation) acrylic (for lighter weight) and open outwards (keeps rain out while letting air in).

So far a very impressive slide on camper but I still was not convinced it was the world's best. So we ventured inside. The entrance door has an opaque glass window with the Northern Lite Canada Geese etched into the glass. The stainless steel door handle has a deadlock in addition to the normal lock and the door operates on a gas strut that opens the door and holds it open when required. The screen door can be attached to the main door or used separately.

Inside the camper was quite hot. It was a hot day and the camper was out in the sun. I suggested we open some windows but instead they turned on the air conditioner. I was puzzled as there was no 240 volt power connected but the air conditioner came to life and cooled the camper within a short time. Apparently the 27kg lightweight Aircommand Sparrow air conditioner only draws 1000 watts and runs on the 300 amp hour lithium battery and can run for a considerable time! This unit had the optional 300 amp hour Lithium Battery (LiFePo4) with the standard model having a 200 amp hour Lithium battery. The battery runs into a 3500 watt (optional - standard is 2500 watt) pure sine wave inverter which automatically detects if there is no external power connected and supplies 240 volt power to all outlets from the battery. Now I was totally impressed.

At the heart of the Northern Lite Australian Ultimate camper is the Redarc Battery Management System, the BMS1230S2 which operates as a DC to DC charger to charge the battery from the vehicle when it is running, an AC to DC charger for when 240 volt power is connected, a solar regulator, a battery monitor to tell you in great detail what's happening with your battery and a vehicle battery isolator to ensure that your vehicle battery is never flat. I had seen some of the early model Redarc systems but this was far advanced from those units. It has a 30 amp output which charges the house battery very fast and it has a lithium battery profile in addition to the AGM, Gel and flooded cell profiles. Truck Campers Australia say they will not sell a Northern Lite camper unless it is fitted with a Redarc BMS.



All this is mounted out of sight in the bottom of the huge rear wardrobe (above the battery) and is inconspicuous, except for the bank of 12 volt circuit breakers and the 12 volt disconnect switch and rear awning switch. Underneath the wardrobe is the gas heater which vents the gas outside and the heat inside. It operates from a thermostat control unit which switches on at the temperature selected. There is the mandatory fire extinguisher plus the gas and Co2 alarms.



Inside the rear robe. At the top is the Redarc BMS1230S2 remote monitor. A technically advanced system that is easy to operate. Below is the 12 volt cut off, Rear awning control and the 12 volt circuit breakers



The kitchen is compact yet somehow roomy. The Oven and grill has a 3 burner cooktop with a large glasstop cover and splashback. Above is a 12 volt externally vented range hood with a built in light and a monitor panel for water and power and a Sharp microwave oven (again this works off the battery) Underneath this a large stainless steel sink, a large cupboard with a good sized storage beside. A towel rail, spice rack plus 240 volt and 12 volt power outlets are standard.

A third tap beside the sink is connected to the 12 litre pressurised storage for the reverse osmosis water filtration system. Great for the many places where you can't get drinking water but the water supply is good enough for washing etc. I have been to many places where this is the case so having a constant supply of 99.9% pure water is one less thing to worry about.

The interior is finished in a sapele timber, also known as African Mahogany, which is a beautiful and highly sustainable hardwood. Closer inspection revealed that the doors and drawers were solid timber, made with dovetail joints and superbly finished. Even the gas struts and hinges were top quality.



One of the first things to catch my eye was the huge 180 litre fridge freezer which is just massive for a slide on camper. I have always liked 3 way refrigerators and never believed some of the stories about them. They work exceptionally well on gas but require the fridge (hence the camper) to be fairly level. This is easy with the Northern Lite as the camper has electric jacks to do the job. The other problem with 3 way fridges has been caused by manufacturers who don't allow proper ventilation at the rear of the fridge. This is obviously not a problem with this camper as the fridge was set on the middle setting and the contents were really cold and it was, as I said, a very hot day.

The refrigerator has Automatic Energy Selection AES which chooses the best power selection available. It will select 240 volt (external power only) then gas if no 240 volt power available. It will only run on 12 volt if the vehicle engine is running with the 12 volt power coming direct from the vehicle alternator.

The entertainment system is equally impressive. One of the top Jensen stereos with multi media connectivity is again standard. The stereo is connected to a six speaker system with 2 speakers in the bedroom, 2 in the lounge/dinette and 2 outside under the awning. Speakers are switchable so you can have any combination or all speakers at the same time. The speakers are Fusion so the sound quality is very good. The stereo is connected to the 22" ultra high definition 12 volt TV via HDMI so you can watch TV with a proper sound system. The TV is on a swing out bracket that allows viewing from either the bed or the lounge areas and the bracket has a locking facility to secure the TV while travelling. The TV is connected to the very latest Winegard Rayzar antenna via a 12 volt signal booster and the antenna can be wound up and rotated from inside the camper.

The bedroom or 'cabover' is impressive for its size and storage. The full queen size bed has a mattress aerator underneath to assist with stopping condensation in colder weather especially when the gas furnace is used. The coil spring mattress is high end and this is complimented with a memory foam mattress topper finished off with a bedspread and pillows and shams that are matched to the interior upholstery. Beside the bed are good sized storage cupboards and a large deep 2nd wardrobe. A sliding privacy screen separates the bedroom from the rest of the camper. There are four LED lights plus two LED reading lights, a double 240 volt power outlet and a 12 volt outlet. Directly above the bed is a large dual pane skylight with a screen and/or blind option.



With the skylight open and the Fantastic fan turned on at the other end of the camper it draws a pleasant breeze over you on those hot nights that makes it much better for sleeping. The Fantastic fan has a thermostat control so that if it cools through the night, the fan will slow or stop and, if it rains, it closes automatically. The fan operates with a remote control so it can be adjusted from bed.

This camper had the U shaped dinette (there is a face to face option) with storage below the seats. The table is firm but can be moved in all directions as required and to allow easy access. The table can be removed making a lounge area, or a spare bed. Beneath the dinette area is a handy space for shoes. The entire ceiling is lined with marine carpet and all up there are 15 LED "warm" lights. The floor has a removable carpet that matches the bedroom step and dinette area. The carpet can be removed as there is a high grade vinyl floorcovering beneath which is more practical for outback and beaches.



I could not resist taking a photo of the props they had been using for an advertising feature. Even the wine has the Canada Geese on the label. I thought if those two little bears drank all that wine we would end up with a bear with a sore head.



***Fully Functional Bathroom.
Vent with fan; LED light; Mirrored cabinet; Shower and basin; Cassette toilet with swivel seat; Towel rail; Sliding mirrored door.***

The bathroom is very functional with a 12 volt exhaust vent, mirrored cupboard and towel rack behind the slide around shower curtain. The basin and shower connections are adequate and the toilet seat swivels out of the way when not in use. The sliding mirrored door has a travel lock. The bathroom was a bit small but it is hard to see how they could make it bigger without compromising the dinette/lounge area where you would expect to be spending more of your time.

These campers are designed for long term travel in Australia - an off road camper. To prove the point I was shown Garry and Robyn's own camper, which was 4 years old and had been used six to nine months of every year. The camper had been throughout the Kimberley region and Northern and Central Australia, so far every state except Tasmania. Some of the tracks it had been on I would not have thought possible. Their camper was in pristine condition and even the scratches on the sides and windows had been polished out. (I did find a few they missed).

As the new model Northern Lite Australian Ultimate campers had features updated, Garry and Robyn had also upgraded their own, using their own camper to thoroughly test updated features prior to them being included in the newer models, like the Anderson Mid Spec. vehicle connector and the associated wiring. Virtually all overseas RV's and most Australian RV's are not set up for extensive off road or self-sufficient camping. Truck Campers Australia use the Anderson Mid Spec Plug and socket as it contains 2 x Anderson Plugs, one for the fridge and one for the Redarc BMS, plus 8 other connectors for tail lights and cameras etc. Coupled with heavy gauge wire and the system works perfectly - the house battery is charged and the fridge works on 12 volt as it should.



***The Anderson Mid Spec Connectors.
You might say it is the 'Ultimate' wiring solution.***

Really liked:

Brilliant electrical system; Large fridge freezer; Comfortable full queen size north south bed; 2 awnings and annex; Moulded fibreglass construction for off road; Size to weight ratio; Comes complete - everything is standard, nothing more to buy.

Could be better:

Bathroom is a bit small; Interior only available in timber finish.

Summary.

The term 'Slide On Camper' is very inaccurate. These campers do not slide on and they are a lot bigger than you would have imagined. In fact they are large enough for 2 people to travel for long periods in great comfort and have the added bonus of being able to tow good sized boat or trailer. While they are too big for the average family dual cab ute there are many options such as lazy axles (Truck Campers Australia's own vehicle is a Nissan Navara with a lazy axle), American trucks and many other small trucks available in Australia.

They are a very viable alternative, especially for people who don't want to tow a caravan or 5th wheeler or drive a large motorhome. Such vehicles are hard to park and nearly impossible to take off-road thus limiting the places you can go. While the Northern Lite Ultimate may lack some of the space inside of the larger RV's it exceeds most in features and functionality and the price was far less than I expected.

All of the inclusions are high end and have been extensively road tested, with Garry and Robyn having travelled extensively throughout Australia over the past 10 years and still doing so. It was hard to think of anything you would need that was not already included.



The owner of this new Northern Lite Ultimate camper loaded it onto his new Ford Truck and headed home to Western Australia, but not before he spent two full days becoming familiarised with all aspects of the camper. Most Truck Campers Australia customers stay in touch with Garry and Robyn on a regular basis and those that can get together for an annual safari. A real family business with 24/7 phone backup service, which is somewhat unique these days.

Now the answer to the question. Is it the world's best slide on camper? Well, it's certainly the most complete self sustained off road slide on I have seen in Australia, and there are not many I have not seen. There are many other slide on campers that are bigger (even Northern Lite have a bigger brother to this one), with more room inside, but these require larger trucks to carry the weight and are perhaps impractical in many areas in Australia. There are also many smaller units on the market, lighter and able to be fitted to more vehicles and certainly cheaper. However they do lack the space to travel comfortably and are missing all or most of the facilities needed for longer term travel.

It is impossible to categorically state it is the world's best - but it is certainly up there.

SPECIFICATIONS

<i>Manufacturer</i>	Northern Lite Manufacturing, Kelowna, Canada
<i>Model</i>	8-11 SE Australian Ultimate Edition
<i>Tare Weight</i>	1450 kg wet weight - all inclusive
<i>Dimensions</i>	
<i>External Length</i>	16' - 4.85m
<i>External Width</i>	8' 2" - 2.48m
<i>External Height</i>	9' - 2.44m
<i>Internal Height</i>	6'4" - 1.93m
<i>Bed Size</i>	5' x 6'8" - 1.52m x 2.03m
<i>Equipment</i>	
<i>Battery Management</i>	Redarc BMS 1230S2
<i>Jacks</i>	Happijac remote 4800
<i>Battery</i>	200 amp hour Lithium (LiFePo4)
<i>Turnbuckles</i>	Torklift Fastguns
<i>Inverter</i>	Cotek 2500 pure sine wave
<i>Fridge/Freezer</i>	Dometic 180 litre 4605 AES
<i>Solar</i>	2 x 100 watt roof mounted 1 x 100 watt portable
<i>Air Conditioner</i>	Air Command Sparrow
<i>Vents</i>	Fantastic 7350 with remote Bathroom 12 volt fan
<i>Cooktop/Oven/Grill</i>	Atwood Wedgewood
<i>Microwave</i>	Sharp 800 watt
<i>Lighting</i>	16 warm LEDs
<i>Heater</i>	Atwood 18000 BTU
<i>Hot Water</i>	Atwood 23 litre
<i>Toilet</i>	Thetford Cassette
<i>Fresh Water Tank</i>	130 litres
<i>Drinking Water</i>	Reverse Osmosis Filter System
<i>Grey Tank</i>	90 Litres
<i>Gas Cylinders</i>	2 x 9kg auto change over
<i>Shower</i>	Inside and Outside
<i>Entertainment</i>	Jensen Stereo with 6 speakers
<i>TV</i>	12 volt High definition LED
<i>Antenna</i>	Winegard Rayzar with 12 volt booster
<i>Awnings</i>	Electric rear 10' side with annex