

*The following article appeared in Truck Camper Magazine.*

*The journalist travelled to Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada to observe the quality construction of a Northern Lite Truck Camper.*

*His article gives a great insight into the high quality of the build process, the attention to detail and the personal pride in their job of the specialist team who make these campers the best in the business.*

*Since this article was written, the Northern Lite Factory was burnt to the ground and they have had to rebuild and start afresh. While the new factory is state of the art, the process remains the same and the art of making quality campers remains unchanged.*

*A most enlightening article and we must thank Truck Camper Magazine, one of North Americas leading RV publications, for their great story.*

Truck Camper Magazine visits Northern Lite in Kelowna, British Columbia to attend a camper shell wedding. It's time to raise your fiberglass and make a truck camper

Walking into the Northern Lite factory, we were very happy to see almost everyone we had met three years earlier at their desks and production stations. It's as if Northern Lite took a vote not to participate in the economic conditions of the past two years. Or maybe they hit pause on the economic reality button shortly after we left in 2007. Whatever the truth may be, Northern Lite was rocking.

When I started my first real job, I remember thinking how awful it was that I had to wear a white button down shirt and tie everyday. How lucky I was. Bruce Collins and Scott Campen have to wear respirator masks, gloves, booties, and hooded Tyvek jumpsuits before they can begin working with gel coat and fiberglass. These safety precautions are required for anyone who works with gel coat, fiberglass fibres, and resin. Fully suited, Bruce and Scott look like they're ready for a moonwalk.

The first layer to be applied to a mould is high gloss white gel coat. The gel coat is sprayed into the moulds with gel coat guns. Since the moulds are a deep orange, it's easy for Bruce and Scott to see where the white gel coat has been applied.



To allow these massive fiberglass moulds to be moved and rotated by Bruce and Scott, the moulds are secured to hinged mould stands. The stands also feature large caster wheels so the moulds can be rolled in and out of the fiberglass booth. Clearly these hinged mould stands are a critical part of Northern Lite's fiberglass process.



Even with the weight balanced hinges, it's a real challenge to get one of these heavy fiberglass moulds to rotate. Just to get a mould to budge, Bruce had to literally climb onto the back of a mould and use his body weight to start the mould turning. When the mould neared it's tipping point, he lowered himself down to receive the mould and put it into the proper position for gel coat or fiberglass application.

Although I had threatened to attend the pre-dawn appointment in my pyjamas, I managed to get properly dressed for the occasion. Of course being properly dressed should have meant wearing the protective gear Bruce and Scott had on. Once again, they looked like an anthrax response team or a couple of astronauts. I looked like a guy who was in the wrong place at the wrong time with my blue jeans, t-shirt, and sneakers. In a few minutes, I would understand why their protective attire was necessary.



With my sneakers sticking to the glass and resin on the floor, Scott started up the chopper gun and began spraying glass fibres and resin onto the gel coated mould. As Scott evenly covered the white gel coat, Bruce ran a roller over the fibreglass. Rolling the fibreglass removes air bubbles and helps to maintain a uniform thickness to the material.

About a minute into all of this, the intense resin fumes began to hit me. I needed to take my pictures and get out of there. A minute or two later, I waved goodbye to Bruce and Scott and went outside to breathe the fresh Canadian air. The things I do to get photographs for this magazine. Seriously.

As a Canadian truck camper company, Northern Lite takes it's insulation seriously. But how do you insulate a camper that's built from the outside in? The answer is simple; you install the insulation before the two camper shells are assembled.



Once a set of top and bottom camper shells have been gel coated and fibreglassed, a set of insulation panels are placed and pounded into the shells. These insulation panels are built in a room next door to the fibreglass shop by Bruce Nickason. Once the panels are completed, he suits up like Bruce and Scott and sprays the panels down with adhesive. The inside of the camper shells are also sprayed with this adhesive prior to pounding in the insulation.

Once the gel coat, fibreglass, and insulation panels have cured, it's time to separate the new fibreglass camper shell from the mould. To begin the separation process, the moulds are released from their stands and attached to a ceiling mounted electric hoist system. Then compressed air is pumped into small holes in the mould literally popping the fibreglass shell away from the mould.





With the fiberglass shell now loose inside the mould, the team uses the hoist system to raise the mould revealing a brand new fiberglass top shell. When the team separates a fiberglass bottom shell, the technique is reversed with the top camper shell raised out of the mould. Either way, it's a spectacular show and one that's unique to fiberglass camper construction. In an instant, you can almost see half a Northern Lite camper. It may not be magic, but it's really neat to watch.

Once the top and bottom fiberglass shells have been released from their moulds, the shells are wheeled outside through a tall garage door. There the top and bottom shells are placed side by side and prepared for marriage. Naturally the rough edges are removed from each shell with a hand saw before the ceremony.



With the rough edges removed, the back door opening is cut and another hoist is attached to the top fiberglass shell with suction cups. Once the suction cups are attached, the top fiberglass shell is raised about eight feet into the air. Then the bottom fiberglass shell is wheeled under the top shell and the two shells are carefully lined up. When the shells finally see eye to eye, the top shell is lowered down onto the bottom shell.

Do you, bottom camper shell, take this top camper shell, to be your lawful wedded truck camper, to go anywhere and camp anywhere, from coast to coast, for summer, for winter, for campgrounds, for boondocking, until the kids take the keys?



With tears in our eyes, mostly from the fibreglass dust in the air, we watched the two shells come together to form a complete Northern Lite fibreglass camper shell.

After the rice throwing and limos, it's time to party at the reception. Bringing the party music and ensuring the new marriage will take is Brad McAteer. As his stereo system pumps out the jams, Brad applies butyl tape, stainless steel screws, and belt moulding around the perimeter seam between the two camper shells. Before the camper leaves the factory, this seam will be tested for any imperfections using a Sealtech leak detection system. More on that later.



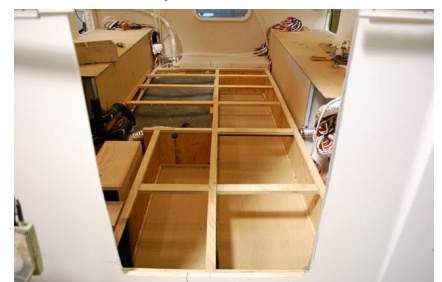
Brad also installs the jack brackets and a good number of the other external features. Here he's attaching a passenger side rear jack bracket. Note how the bracket wraps around the underside of the camper to lift the camper from the side and bottom.

Once Brad has completed another camper shell, it's brought to the production line. Here Nathan wheels over a completed shell from Brad's reception hall to the beginning of the line. The next time this camper sees daylight, it will be a finished Northern Lite.



Walking onto Northern Lite's dual production lines you may ask yourself, "Where did everybody go?". The answer is right in front of you, inside the campers. Where other truck camper manufacturers build truck campers from the basement up and then add the walls and a roof, Northern Lite starts with a completed exterior shell and moves in to assemble the interior. When it comes to the Northern Lite's production lines, it's an inside job.

Since Northern Lite campers are built shell first, they literally need their basements and floors built inside them. At the first station on the production line, we met Bob Holmes building the basement in a 10-2 CD Special Edition. We asked him to find us before installing the floor. In this photograph you can see the completed basement with holding tanks. Immediately after this photograph was taken, the basement was painted with water resistant black sealant and then covered over with the camper floor.



Once the floor was down, Bob installed the linoleum flooring.



Last February, we had the pleasure of working the Springfield RV Show with Keith Donkin, General Manager of Northern Lite. On display were two Northern Lite truck campers, a 10-2 CD Special Edition and the 9-6Q Classic Special Edition. The great majority of the show attendees were not there to see truck campers, but they would often stop to look at the Northern Lites which had their doors facing a busy corridor. What happened next was as predictable as it was funny.



At the bequest of their husbands, wives would walk half-heartedly into the Northern Lite Special Editions looking for any excuse to say, "not for me" and quickly move on. But then they would catch a glimpse of the South African Sapele wood cabinetry and they would start raving about how beautiful the Northern Lite interiors were. It became a game at the show to get the wives into the campers so they could "ohh" and "ahh" over the Sapele interiors.



The man who's primarily responsible for the cabinetry that makes the ladies swoon is Arlie Bartholomew. As he worked, I watched Arlie make tiny adjustments that no one would ever notice unless he pointed out exactly what he had done. This obsessive attention to detail results in a very high fit and finish to Northern Lite's cabinetry. If you have doubts, just stand around a Northern Lite Special Edition at an RV show for a while. Arlie's Special Edition Sapele cabinetry wins the ladies, every time.



Brian Koffler is responsible for assembling the wiring harnesses and plumbing systems. Here he's holding part of a PEX plumbing assembly for a 10-2 CD Special Edition. PEX is a water supply piping system that is highly resistant to scale, chlorine, and corrosion. It's used in many brands of truck campers and is favoured for its light weight and durability.

As the camper moulds mature, they can develop blemishes that result in minor inconsistencies on the exterior of the camper shells called mould marks. One significant advantage of moulded fibreglass construction is that these marks are easy to spot with a trained eye and can be buffed out. In this photograph, Nathan Rieger is removing a mould mark. When he's done, the marks will be completely gone and the camper shell will have one of the brightest white exteriors available on any RV.





We never seem to resist taking a picture of a camper getting it's front decal. Of course in Canada it's pronounced, "Deh-Cull" as opposed to "Dee-Cal" as we say it in the States. No matter how you say it, it's fun to see a logo decal placed on a camper. In this photograph, Darlene Herring puts the large Northern Lite logo on a new camper.

Sometimes we see things a camper manufacturer is doing and ask ourselves, "Why isn't every camper manufacturer doing that?". One clear example we've seen on this tour is the increasing use of portable scales to weigh each camper as they leave the production line.

Once each camper is weighed, the dry weight with options is posted inside the camper. For the consumer, this dry with options weight is an accurate dry weight to plug into our Buyers Guide wet weight calculations. Every truck camper manufacturer on the planet should be doing this.



To observe the camper weigh routine, we asked Reg Sieben to weigh a camper that had recently graduated from the production line. The camper was a 10-2 RR and the inside posted weight had already been completed. When Reg set up the scale, we stepped on the scale to see if it was accurate. It was.



Once the camper was lowered, the scale read 2,993.5 pounds. The inside posted weight was 3,004 pounds. While we were initially disappointed that these numbers didn't agree, we were happy that the 10.5 pound difference was in the right direction. Maybe the last time the camper was weighed someone left a few tools inside. What matters is that Northern Lite is giving you the weight of the camper in front of you, with options.

Another practice that should be standard is the use of Sealtech systems. A Sealtech system can find even the smallest breaks in a camper's seals before a camper leaves the factory and long before that seal break has the opportunity to cause a damaging leak.



Broken seals and the water leaks they cause are the number one threat to your truck camper's longevity. It doesn't matter if you have a wood framed, aluminium framed, or moulded fibreglass camper, broken seals will eventually lead to leaks and cause catastrophic damage to your camper.

Not inspecting and maintaining your camper seals is like not changing the oil and filters in your car. In a few years, you'll be lucky to have a car that runs, or a camper that doesn't have a serious leak. This is why we harp on maintaining your seals and published the easy to follow article in our Newbie section, "Maintaining Camper Seals".



Sealtech systems work by drawing outside air into a camper through a roof vent and creating a positive interior pressure. With every camper window tightly shut and the entrance door closed, the positive interior air pressure escapes through any imperfection in the camper's external seals. Soapy water is then sprayed onto the exterior seals. If there's a break in a seal, the break will immediately show up as bubbles in the exact place where the break is. Once a seal break is found, it's a quick fix that will save your camper.



Every Northern Lite truck camper undergoes a Sealtech test before leaving the factory. During our visit, we observed Nathan install the Sealtech system, spray down the seals, and make a couple of minor seal repairs. What this means is that Northern Lite can ship these campers with full confidence that there is no break in the seals. Once the camper is in your possession, it's up to you to maintain those seals. If you do, your camper should last for many years in excellent condition.

While almost every other camper manufacturer has changed models, materials, and construction methods over the past three years, Northern Lite has stayed focused on what they do and how they do it. Perhaps it's this unwavering commitment to building a very specific type of truck camper in a very specific way that has steeled their company from the challenging economy. Whatever the reason may be, Northern Lite was running at full speed to meet demand. Go Northern Lite.