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Buying Part IV The Exterior



If you are a regular reader, you can tell from the picture above that a new coach has joined the stable. So we thought we would kill two birds with one stone by telling you about our new project coach and covering exterior inspection at the same time. The coach, a 1994 Barth 28 footer, is a Breakaway model with front door and GM diesel pushing from behind. We choose the coach after several months of looking, having considered a new gas puller as well as a short, high-end diesel pusher. The maverick in us keeps us attracted to atypical coaches, and the components are mainstream enough to modify without entering foreign territory. Thus, the Barth.

We discovered this coach on the way back from a shopping tour. As always, we went over, under, and around the coach completely after the lot was closed so that we could peruse the coach uninterrupted. While it does not make much difference where you start, all areas of the exterior need to be inspected. Beginning with the roof, we favor metal or fiberglass as opposed to rubber roofs. We have found over the years that rubber streaks the sides of the coach worse than either alternative. In addition, it is more easily damaged, and does not maintain a sanitary appearance. Advantages? It is cheaper for the manufacturer to install and can be repaired readily. As a roofer friend of ours says, "anyone with a paint roller and adhesive can install a rubber roof". Given the simplicity of installation, we remain mystified as to how poorly some rubber roofs are installed.

If examining a coach with a rubber roof, the rubber should be tightly glued with no apparent lifting. Problem areas are the radiused sides where you will frequently find the underlay so thin that it gives under hand pressure, and cannot safely be stepped on without inflicting damage. Some installations also show the rippling of careless application, as well as adhesive that extends well beyond the roofline. You may note that the rubber is badly deflected, and at times actually torn where the main awning is screwed through to the frame beneath. The fewer of these problems that are apparent, the better.

Fiberglass and metal roofs are more difficult to install. When poorly done, problems will be most apparent where the roof joins the caps and the sidewalls. Regardless of material, it should fit well without ripples or breaks. Joints should be inspected as well as all fittings which enter the roof such as vents, skylights, etc. The roof pictured below is one piece metal, which is well sealed and fitted at the side radiuses very well. When walked on, there is no sense of give or sponginess. While flat, there is no indication of standing water. Inspection of this roof included all joints and fittings, as well as the base of the Datron satellite dish, the air horns, and the TV antenna. Inspection of the ceiling inside also verified an absence of leaks.



The sides of this coach are riveted aluminum as with the past generation of Holiday Ramblers. Inspection, just as with fiberglass sides, looks for bulges or signs of deterioration. Sidewall delamination on this type of construction is virtually nonexistent in our experience. On fiberglass coaches, where it frequently occurs on some models, it is both difficult and expensive to repair. Naturally, one also looks for signs of accident damage such as panels out of line, paint that does not match, or obvious use of repair materials. Painted aluminum is less subjective to fade than fiberglass. However, if damaged, it is much more expensive to repair, often requiring replacement of an entire panel.



Outside inspection also requires examination of the tires including checking the dates on them (most tires carry a code designating the week and year of manufacture). The tires on this coach still had 80% of their original tread and were manufactured in 1997, suggesting that we did not have to worry about dry rot. The sidewalls also did not contain cracks and were inflated to the proper pressure. The spare tire dated back to the year of manufacture and will be replaced. Stainless steel valve extenders had been added to the stainless steel wheel liners making air pressure checks each morning a 5-minute job.

Next, window fit and seal were examined. This can be eyeballed from outside the coach, but seal really needs to be examined from inside the coach. We do not favor large sliding windows having found them to be more subject to rattles than smaller windows or awning style windows. We would have preferred awning style windows in the rear to assure air circulation when sleeping. However, sliders with awnings are second best, and that was the case here. Front door seal is particularly important on front-entry coaches given the proximity of the navigator to the door. A rattler or whistler here is really a bummer on a long trip. Relatively small windows, coupled with a tightly fitting door, keep noise level under control in this coach.

Even on a small diesel such as this, access to the engine checks and the genset are important. The rear louver gives easy access to oil and transmission dipsticks, as well as coolant level. Everything else is under the bed, which approximates the ease of lifting the doghouse in most gas coaches. The genset rides in the front behind a large louvered panel. Access is excellent. Serviceability on gas coaches needs to be checked for these same requirements. Inspecting these areas before having to learn them by flashlight on a midnight run is clearly desirable.



A great many coaches have plenty of hatch space that is unusable due to layout. Hatches also may fit poorly or have Niagara-like leaks. As you can see on the Barth, hatches are well placed with easy access to batteries and LP., as well as dump valves and electric. Note in particular that in addition to having adequate batteries for occasional boondocking, there also is space to easily service the batteries. As batteries are the perennial problem-children of motorhomes, the surest way to avoid servicing them is to make access difficult. You will also note ease of access to the LP tank. Your local bulk dealer will appreciate not having to belly crawl to shut off the LP prior to filling.



Next, all exterior safety equipment including, mirrors, lights, and wipers are checked. The fire extinguisher pictured is one of two twenty pounders that are added before the first trip in addition to the 10 pounder that comes with the coach. We mount one twenty pounder in an outside compartment, one twenty pounder in the closet closest to the bed, and the ten pounder up front near the navigator. If you have ever seen a burned out coach, you readily appreciate how little is left after a fire. Mirrors on many coaches look good, but are mounted in such a manner that vision is partially blocked. Sometimes, a small fisheye mirror added on makes for less tension in traffic.



Awnings and auxiliary systems are best checked during the exterior inspection. We have not found a significant difference between brands of awnings over the years and have owned at least one example of all but the electrically powered models new on the scene. The metal wrapper on the high-enders looks nice, however, we have not experienced undue problems related to wear on awnings that did not have it. Examine the awnings by opening them and looking for wear or tears. Fabric replacement is not a particularly difficult nor expensive job. Hardware problems may be more difficult for the do-it-yourselfer. Don't forget to check the ladder on the rear of the coach and make sure that the TV antenna can be raised. Air horns should honk, CB antennas should stand straight up, and spotlights should spot.

Make sure everything works before you leave the lot, have a written repair order in hand before handing over the bucks, or pay for it yourself after the sale. If something is not repaired at the time of the sale, the person sitting across the table from you should give you what is called a "Due On Deal", which is simply a written order for the work that is to be completed at the dealer's expense after the sale. It usually requires the signature of the sales manager and requires you to have the work done at the dealer's within 30 days after the sale. If it isn't in writing, in most states you will have a difficult time taking legal action after the sale. We have worked with dealers who have let us take the coach for a weekend and bring it back in on Monday. We do the PDI (pre-delivery inspection) ourselves, and they make the repairs. However, this can be messy unless you know the dealer well, and we do not recommend it.

Finally, here's the part you don't want to do, but must. Crawl under the coach at least in the front, back, and middle. Lie on your back, and relax. With a flashlight in hand, look for anything out of place. What you are looking for here are leaking fluids, loose connections, things hanging down, loose shocks or sway bars, and anything else that might go bump in the night. On this coach we found the engine and transmission were spotless. No signs of leaks. However, what caught our eye was a rear brake caliper covered in something oily. A touch and a smell told us quickly that we had at least a leaking seal, and possibly a bearing gone south. Everything else looked pretty good.

This meant that we included in our PDI a request that the seal and/or bearing be repaired before we would take delivery on the coach. We also requested that the technician remove the cover on rear end and visually inspect the components to be sure that the rear end hadn't been run dry. Why was this important? If repairs like this are not agreed upon in writing before the coach leaves the lot, we pay the ticket, not the dealer. We went back under the coach before we closed the deal to make sure these things were done.

Where does this leave us? So far, so good. Everything that had been replaced carried a label with the date. All cables and wires inside were labeled, and the coach had the feel of having been owned by a compulsive sort, which is what the dealer had claimed. In addition, the manufacturer had included the entire factory wiring diagram, and we had coach weights from A-Weigh-We-Go. What did we discover after the purchase? Had to tighten the nut holding one mirror in place. While the specific construction varies by coach, the steps we go through are similar regardless of manufacturer. Follow along as we provide periodic updates.

The staff @ MRO