Guides / Best van for van life: which van for which kind of van life

BEST VAN FOR VAN LIFE: WHICH VAN FOR WHICH KIND OF VAN LIFE

THE SHORT ANSWER

The best van for van life is the one that passes your own hard rule. Off-road: a Sprinter or Transit with all-wheel drive, since the ProMaster is front-wheel drive only. Lowest price: the ProMaster, from $46,370. A home garage: the Transit low roof. Living in it: any high roof, then the builder you trust.

Last updated 25 November 2026

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- There is no single best van: each kind of van life has one hard rule (garage height, standing room, all-wheel drive, floor length or price) that removes vans first.
- Off-road rules out the Ram ProMaster, which Ram builds with front-wheel drive only; the Sprinter and Transit both offer all-wheel drive.
- The ProMaster starts lowest on the makers' own sites, at $46,370; the cheapest AWD Sprinter is $63,090.
- Of the three full-size vans, only the Transit low roof is under 7 feet tall stock (82.7 inches, Ford).
- Builders decide it too: 303 checked builders name the Sprinter, 192 the Transit and 118 the ProMaster.

WHICH VAN FOR WHICH KIND OF VAN LIFE?

Start from how you will use it, not from a ranking. Each kind of van life has one hard rule; apply it to the makers' figures and only some vans survive:

KIND OF VAN LIFE	HARD RULE	VANS THAT PASS	FROM THE MAKERS' FIGURES
WEEKENDER	Fits a 7 ft (84 in) garage door stock	Transit; check: Transit AWD	Only the Transit low roof is under 84 in (82.7 in, Ford); the Sprinter standard roof is 100 in and the ProMaster standard roof around 92 in.
FULL-TIME	High roof with standing room	Sprinter, Sprinter AWD, Transit, ProMaster; check: Transit AWD	Sprinter 79 in, Transit 79.7 in, ProMaster 77 in (86 in super high). Mercedes lists AWD on the high roof; check Ford's build tool for AWD with the high roof.
OFF-ROAD	All-wheel drive offered	Sprinter AWD, Transit AWD	Mercedes offers AWD with the high output diesel; Ford offers Intelligent AWD; Ram says the ProMaster is front-wheel drive only.
FAMILY	A body with 13 ft or more of floor	Sprinter, Sprinter AWD, Transit, ProMaster; check: Transit AWD	Longest floors: Sprinter 189 in (170 extended, also offered with AWD), Transit 172.2 in (extended), ProMaster 13 ft (3500). Then check seats and payload for each person.
BUDGET	Lowest starting MSRP	ProMaster	ProMaster $46,370, Transit $48,400, Sprinter $49,630, Sprinter AWD $63,090, before destination.

Sources: Mercedes-Benz[1], Ford[2][3][4], Ram[5][6][8]. The same grid as a picture:

HARD RULE MET, BY THE MAKERS' FIGURES

	Sprinter	Spr AWD	Transit	Tr AWD	ProMaster
Weekender under 7 ft stock	○	○	●	?	○
Full-time high roof	●	●	●	?	●
Off-road AWD offered	○	●	○	●	○
Family 13 ft or more of floor	●	●	●	?	●
Budget lowest MSRP	○	○	○	○	●

● meets the rule ○ does not ? makers' pages do not settle it: check

Drawn by vanlife.co from the makers' figures in the table. The rules are ours; the passes are the makers' numbers. [1] [2] [5]

Weekender. A van that lives in a garage between trips has to fit under the header. Ford lists the Transit low roof at 82.7 inches tall; Mercedes-Benz lists the Sprinter standard roof at 100 inches and Ram puts the ProMaster standard roof at around 92. [2] [1] [5] If you do not need a garage, the shortest body that sleeps you is the weekend van; our small camper van guide covers the ProMaster City, minivans and pop tops.

Full-time. Standing room and floor. The high roofs give 79 inches inside the Sprinter, 79.7 in the Transit and 77 in the ProMaster, or 86 in its super high roof. [1] [2] [6] Length is the next choice: see 144 vs 170.

Off-road. All-wheel drive is the line. Mercedes-Benz offers it on the Sprinter with the high output diesel, Ford offers Intelligent AWD on the Transit, and Ram says the ProMaster is front-wheel drive only. [1] [3] [5] Tires and suspension come next: see tires and suspension.

Family. Floor length, then seats and payload. The longest floors the makers list are 189 inches on the Sprinter 170 extended, 172.2 on the Transit extended and 13 feet on the

ProMaster 3500.[146] Every person counts against payload: work it through in payload, and ask the builder how belted seats are anchored.

Budget. The ProMaster starts lowest: $46,370 for the 1500 low roof and $49,925 for the cheapest high roof, against $51,757 for the cheapest high roof Sprinter. Ford lists the Transit Cargo Van from $48,400 without naming the roof.[813] The van is the smaller part of the bill: see what a conversion costs.

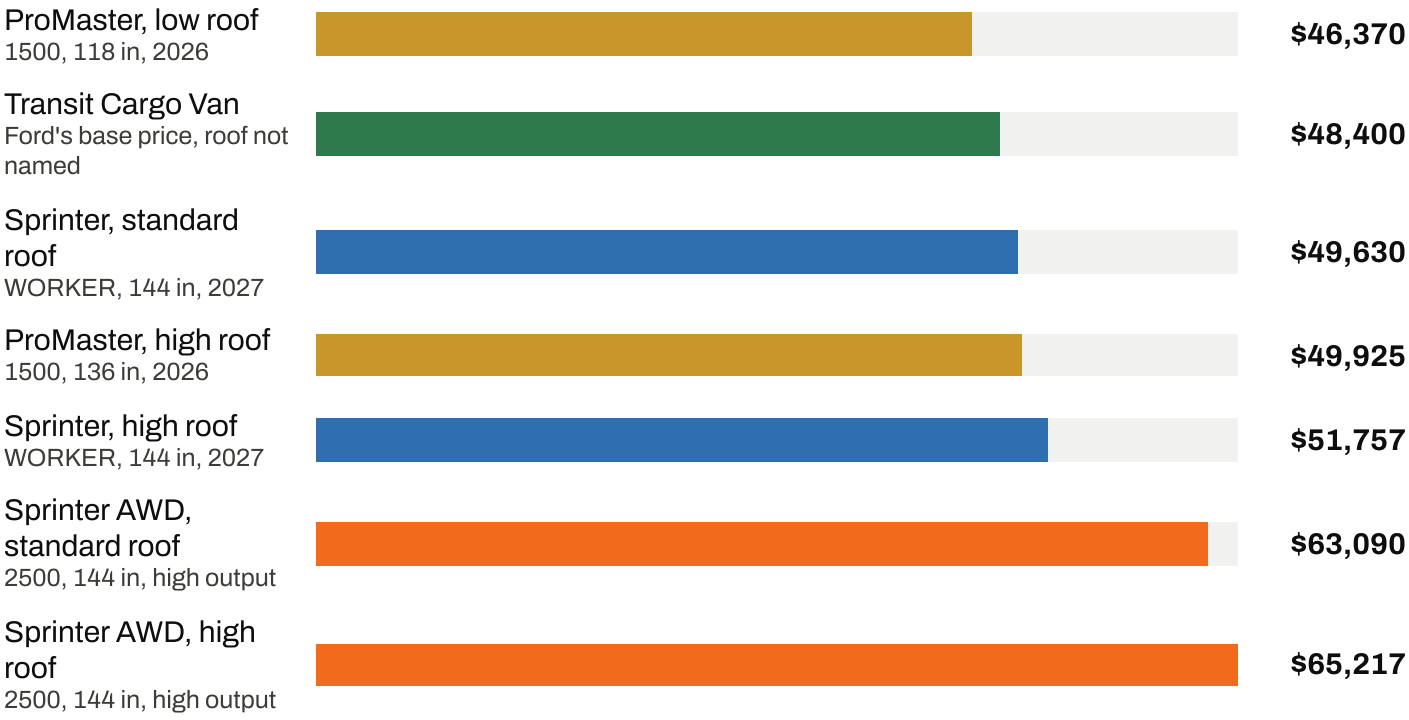
WHAT DOES EACH VAN GIVE YOU, BY THE MAKERS' FIGURES?

The figures that decide a van life choice, read from each maker. For the full side-by-side, with towing, engines and builder prices, see Sprinter vs Transit vs ProMaster.

Starting prices, cheapest version first, before destination:

STARTING MSRP

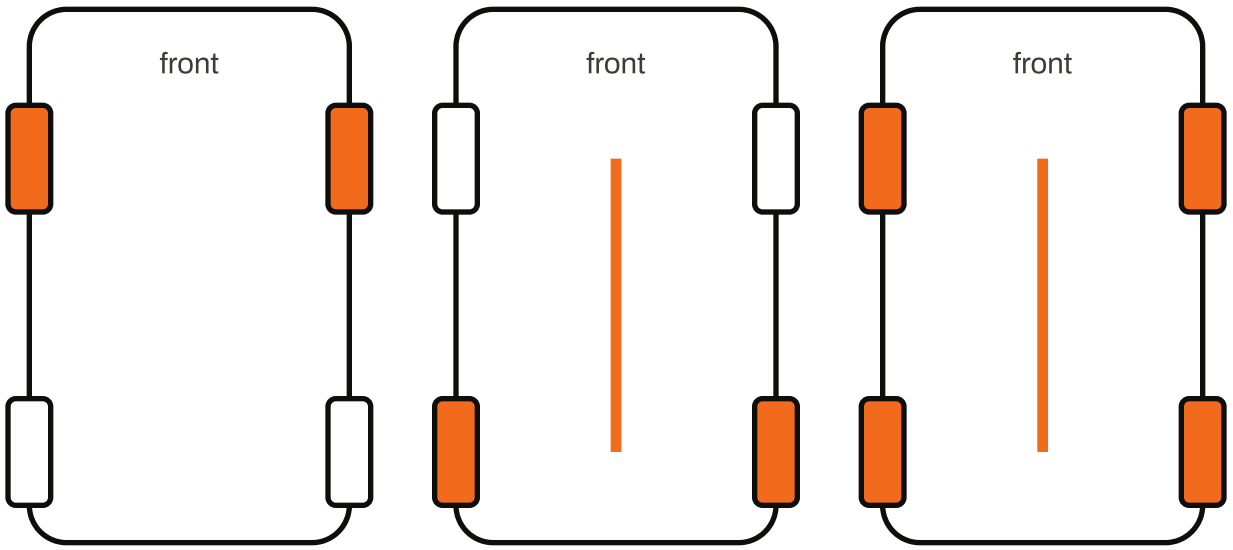
What each van starts at, by roof and drive



Mercedes-Benz lineup panels, Ram's vehicle data and Ford's overview. Ford's AWD price could not be read.[183]

Drive is the biggest fork. Ram says front-wheel drive is deliberate, for a lower load floor (21 inches) and a tighter turn; the Sprinter and Transit drive the rear wheels, with all-wheel drive available.[5][1][3]

DRIVEN WHEELS, SEEN FROM ABOVE



Front-wheel drive
ProMaster

Rear-wheel drive
Sprinter, Transit

All-wheel drive
Sprinter AWD, Transit AWD

Drawn by vanlife.co from the makers' drive listings; not to scale.[5][1][3]

All-wheel drive has costs on paper. On the Sprinter 144 high roof 2500, Mercedes-Benz lists 4,134 pounds of payload with rear-wheel drive and 3,781 with AWD, and 107 against 111 inches of overall height.[1] Ford's 2026 spec sheet gives the EcoBoost Transit 6,900 pounds of towing with rear-wheel drive and 6,700 with AWD.[4]

Fuel is the other fork. The Sprinter is a diesel with a 24.5 gallon tank; Ford rates the Transit's V6 engines for regular unleaded or E85, with a 25 gallon tank or an optional 31; Ram's FAQ gives the ProMaster its 3.6 liter Pentastar V6 and a 24 gallon tank.[1][4][5] You will not find EPA mileage to compare: fueleconomy.gov says vans over 8,500 pounds gross vehicle weight are heavy-duty and not tested, and Mercedes-Benz lists a 9,050 pound GVWR for the base Sprinter.[9][1]

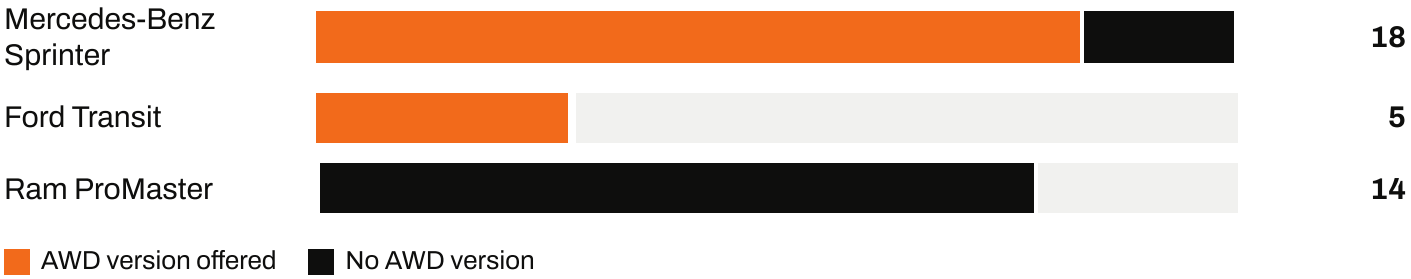
HOW MANY BUILDERS AND FINISHED MODELS USE EACH VAN?

The Sprinter has the most, then the Transit and the ProMaster. Of the 355 checked builders that name their vans, 303 name the Sprinter, 192 the Transit and 118 the ProMaster; 5 name an AWD or 4x4 Sprinter build and 1 an AWD Transit build in their build names or price lines.[10]

VAN	CHECKED BUILDERS	ON THIS VAN ONLY	NAME AN AWD OR 4X4 BUILD	PRODUCTION CAMPER V
Mercedes-Benz Sprinter	**303**	**141**	**5**	**18**
Ford Transit	**192**	**35**	**1**	**5**
Ram ProMaster	**118**	**13**	**0**	**14**

PRODUCTION CAMPER VANS

Finished models on each van, with and without an AWD version



Computed from our model data at build time.[11]

Counts describe the builders and models we have checked so far, not the whole market. Browse each list: Sprinter, Transit and ProMaster builders, the finished camper vans, and the expedition builders for heavier off-road rigs.

HOW DO YOU SCORE THE VANS FOR YOURSELF?

With weights you set and the makers' figures. Copy this worksheet, give each row a weight from 0 to 3, score each van 0 to 3, multiply and add. The figures are filled in; the scores are yours.

CRITERION	WEIGHT (0 TO 3)	SPRINTER	TRANSIT	PROMASTER
STANDING HEIGHT, HIGH ROOF	____	79 in Score ___	79.7 in (81.5 on Ford's 2026 sheet) Score ___	77 in; super high 86 in Score ___
LONGEST CARGO FLOOR	____	189 in (170 extended) Score ___	172.2 in (extended) Score ___	13 ft (3500) Score ___
DRIVE	____	RWD; AWD with the high output diesel Score ___	RWD; AWD available Score ___	FWD only Score ___
FUEL	____	Diesel Score ___	Regular unleaded or E85 Score ___	Gasoline V6 Score ___
MAX PAYLOAD	____	Up to 6,812 lb (4500) Score ___	Up to 5,103 lb Score ___	Up to 4,750 lb Score ___
STARTING MSRP	____	$49,630 Score ___	$48,400 Score ___	$46,370 Score ___
UNDER 7 FT TALL STOCK	____	No: 100 in standard roof Score ___	Yes: 82.7 in low roof Score ___	No: around 92 in Score ___
CHECKED BUILDERS	____	303 Score ___	192 Score ___	118 Score ___
BUILDERS NEAR YOU (COUNT THEM)	____	Score ___	Score ___	Score ___
YOUR OWN CRITERION	____	Score ___	Score ___	Score ___

CRITERION	WEIGHT (0 TO 3)	SPRINTER	TRANSIT	PROMASTER
TOTAL (WEIGHT X SCORE, ADDED)		____	____	____

Figures as in our comparison guide: Mercedes-Benz[1], Ford[2][3][4], Ram[5][6][7][8]; builder counts from our directory.[10] Score the AWD versions as separate columns if off-road matters to you.

HOW TO CHOOSE A BASE VAN FOR VAN LIFE, STEP BY STEP

Six steps from how you will use the van to the one you buy. Have a tape measure, the worksheet above and the makers' spec pages open.

SKILL
Beginner

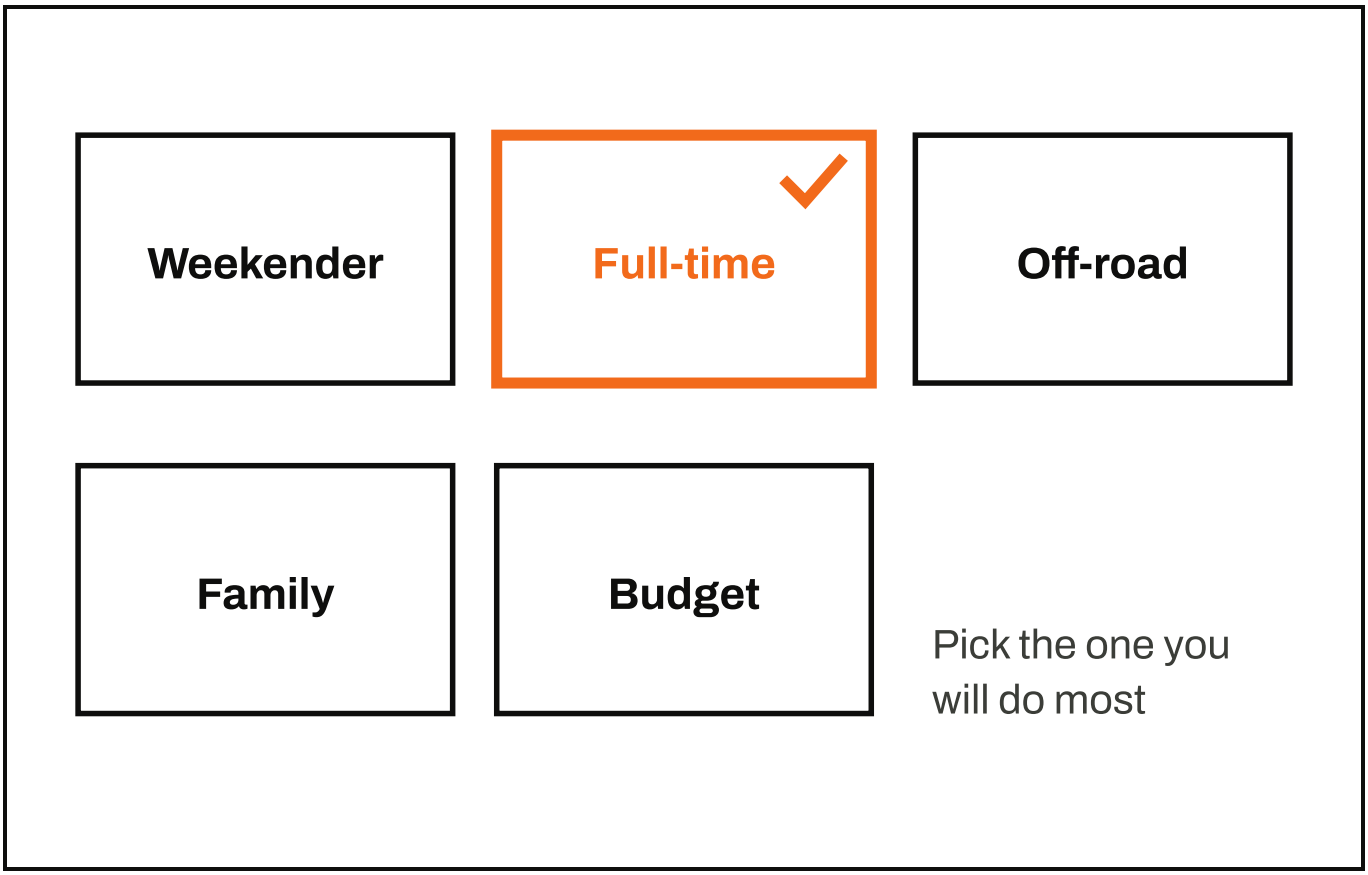
STEPS
6

TOOLS

- Tape measure
- The worksheet above, printed or copied
- The makers' spec pages for the versions you are considering

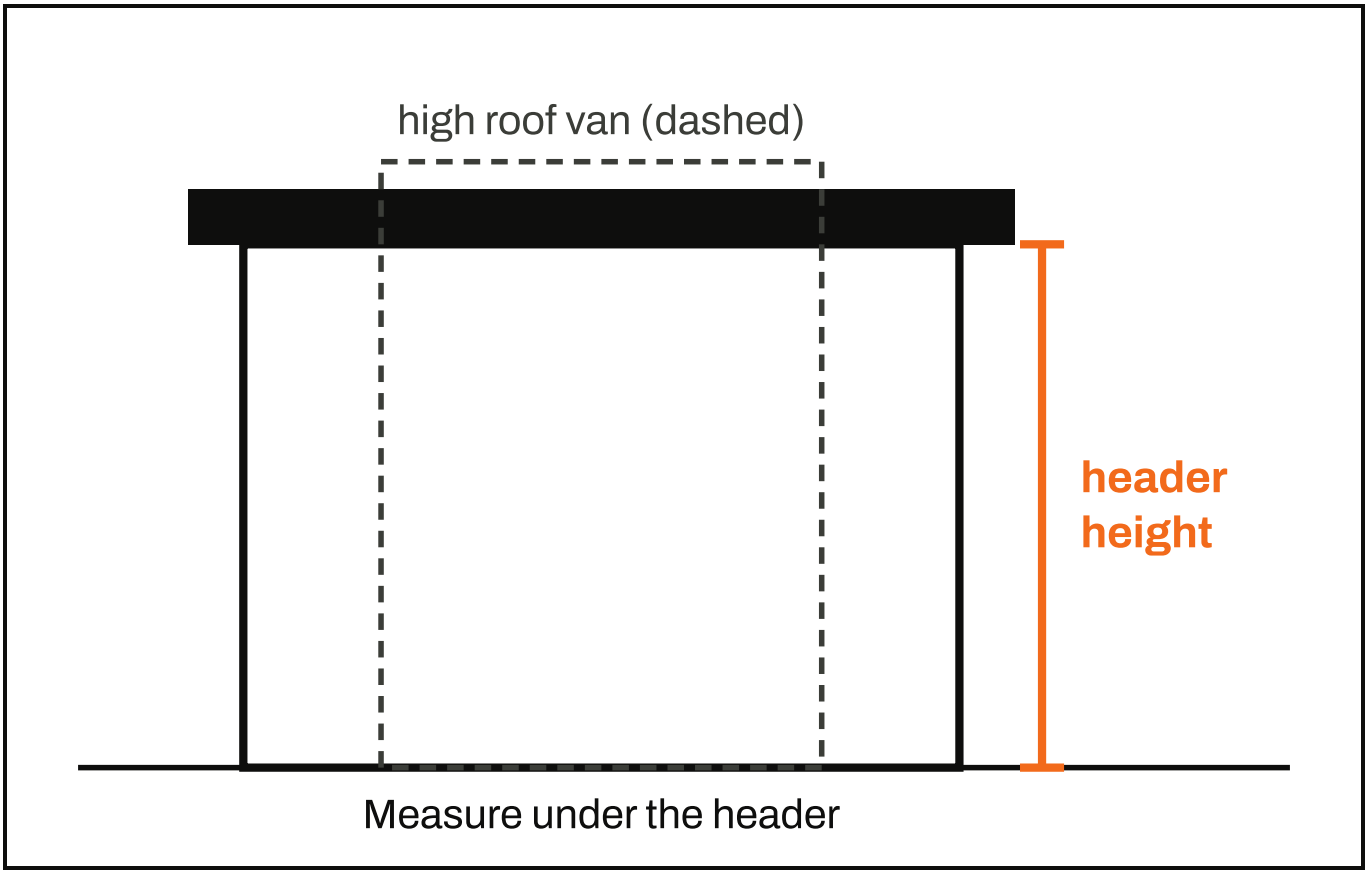
01 Name the kind of van life you will do most

Pick one: weekender, full-time, off-road, family or budget. Each has one hard rule that removes vans before anything else: a garage door, standing room, all-wheel drive, floor length or price. The table above lists them.



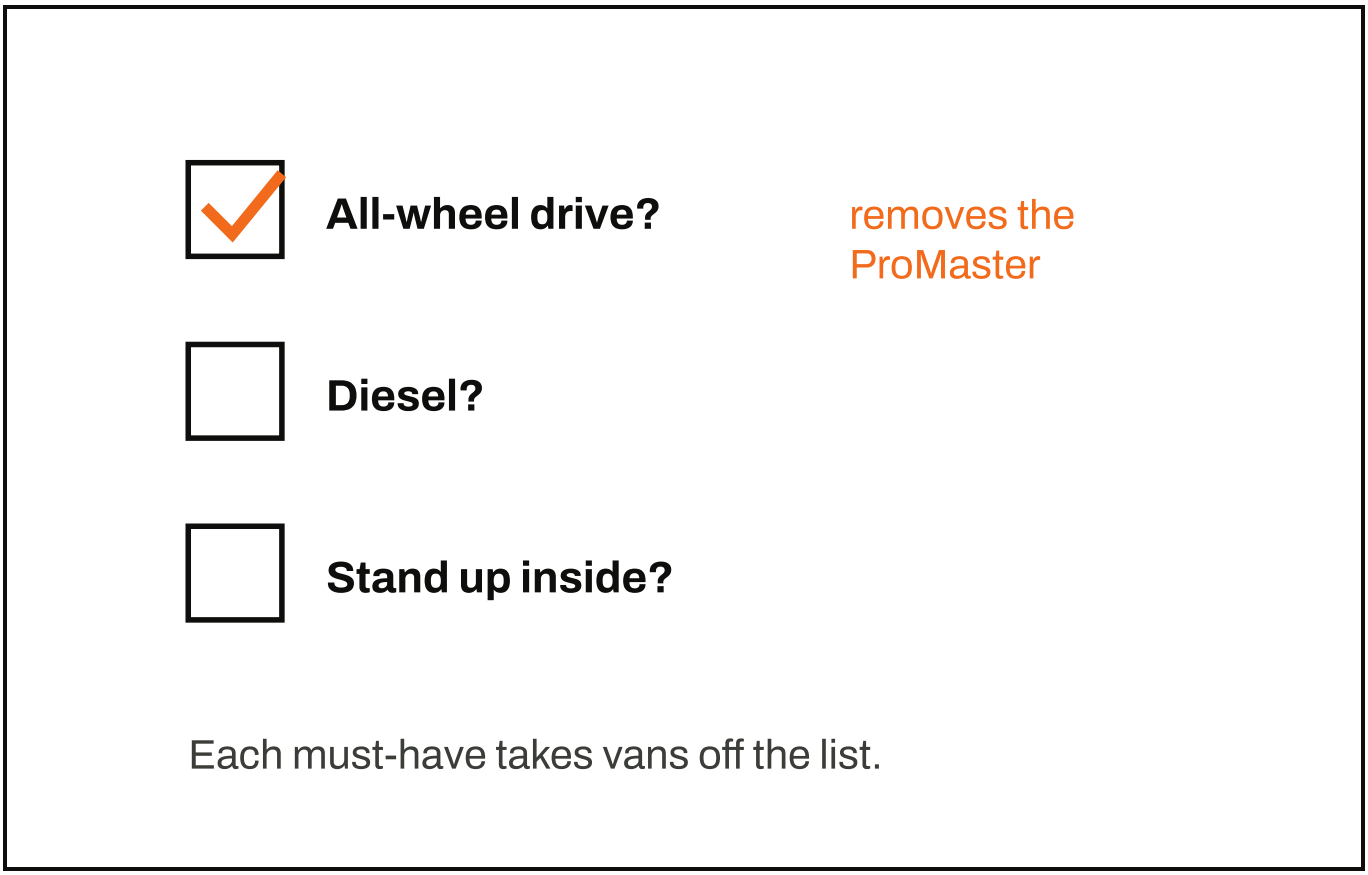
02 Measure where the van will live

Measure the clearance under your garage header, the length of your driveway or usual street space, and any parking structure you use. Compare with the makers' heights: the Transit low roof is 82.7 inches, the Sprinter high roof 107 (111 with AWD).[2][1] For small vans and pop tops, see vans you can stand up in.



03 Set your must-haves

Decide on drive, fuel and roof before you compare anything else. All-wheel drive rules out the ProMaster, which Ram builds with front-wheel drive only; diesel means the Sprinter; standing room means a high roof on any of the three.[5][1][3]



04 Weight and score the vans in the worksheet

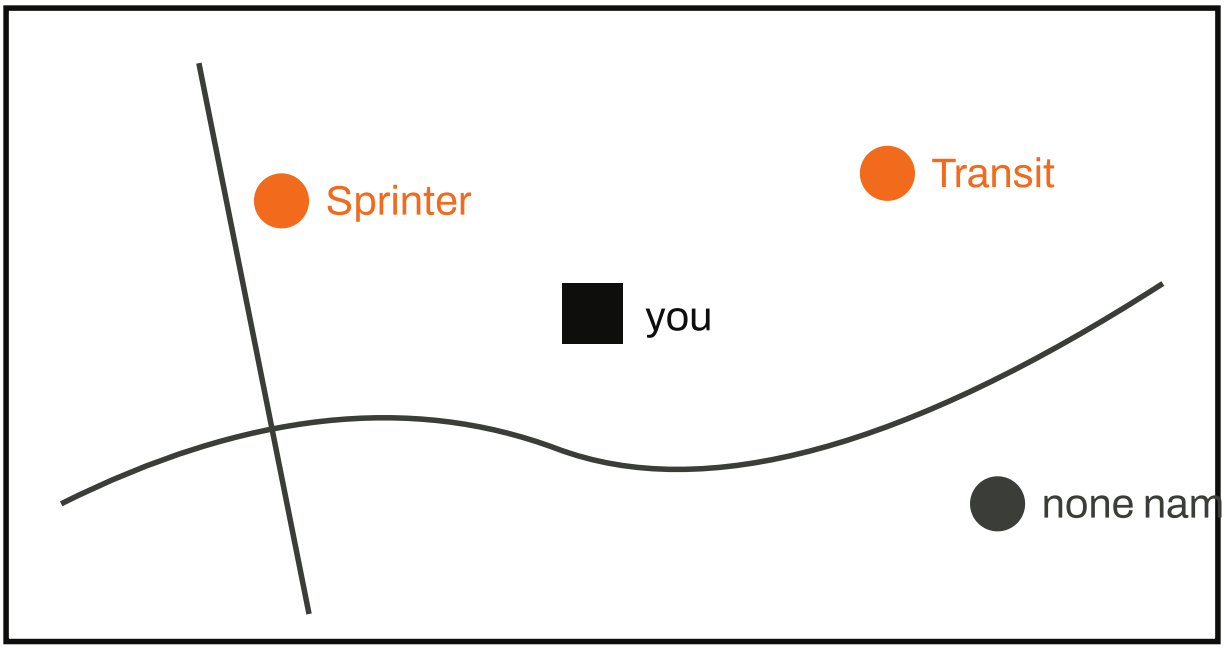
Give each criterion a weight from 0 (does not matter) to 3 (decides it), then score each van 0 to 3 from the maker figures in the worksheet. Multiply weight by score and add each column. The highest total is your van; a close result means the builder should decide.

Criterion	Wt	Van A	Van B	Van C
Height	3	2 = 6		
Total				

weight x score, then add each column

05 Check who builds on that van near you

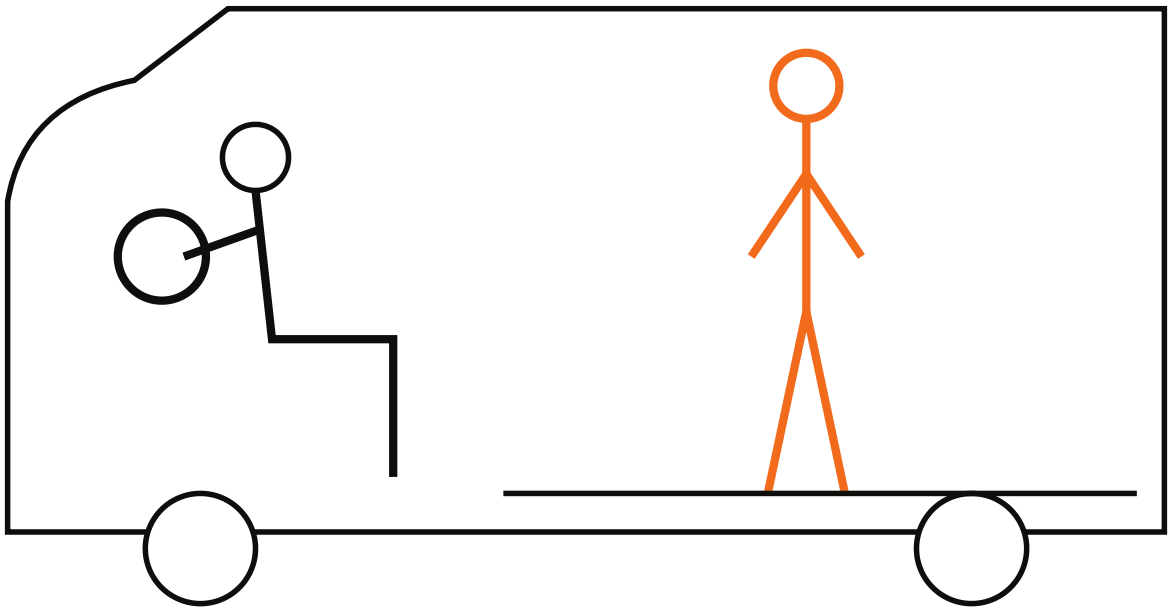
A van no builder near you works on is a DIY van. Of the 355 checked builders that name their vans, 303 name the Sprinter, 192 name the Transit, 118 name the ProMaster.[10] Open the map and each builder's page to see which vans it names.



List builders you could use, and their vans

06 Drive the finalists and stand up inside

Drive each van you are still considering on roads like yours, and stand where the galley would go. Then ask two builders to quote the same layout on each, and compare on the same basis with what a conversion costs.



Drive it, then stand where the galley goes

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO NEXT?

Narrow it to one van and one or two builders, then price the whole thing.

Pick the length. Sprinter owners choose between 144 and 170.

Choose who builds it. A builder, a kit or DIY: see Class B vs custom vs DIY, DIY kits and the DIY library.

Price it. Conversion cost and financing.

Get matched. Tell us the van and the kind of van life and we will point you to builders who work on it.

The live version of this guide, with every source linked: vanlife.co/guides/best-van-for-van-life. Builders, kits and parts makers we checked: vanlife.co/builders.

QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

What is the best van for van life?

The one that passes your hard rule. For off-road that is a Sprinter AWD or Transit AWD; for the lowest price, the ProMaster; for a home garage, the Transit low roof; for full-time standing room, any of the three high roofs. Fill in the worksheet with your own weights.

Which van is cheapest to buy for a conversion?

On the makers' own sites the Ram ProMaster starts lowest, at $46,370 for the 1500 low roof and $49,925 for the cheapest high roof. Ford lists the Transit Cargo Van from $48,400 and Mercedes-Benz the Sprinter from $49,630, before destination.

Which van is best for off-road van life?

One with all-wheel drive: the Sprinter, which Mercedes-Benz offers with AWD on the high output diesel from $63,090, or the Transit with Ford's Intelligent AWD. Ram says the ProMaster is front-wheel drive only. Tires and suspension matter as much; see our guides on both.

Is the Sprinter worth the extra money?

It depends on whether you need what only it offers: a diesel engine and the longest cargo floor, 189 inches on the 170 extended. A 144 high roof Sprinter starts at $51,757, against $49,925 for the cheapest high roof ProMaster.

What gas mileage do Sprinter, Transit and ProMaster vans get?

There is no EPA rating to compare for most of them. Fueleconomy.gov says vans over 8,500 pounds gross vehicle weight are heavy-duty and not tested; Mercedes-Benz lists a 9,050 pound GVWR for the base Sprinter. Ask owners or builders for real figures on the version you want.

Does all-wheel drive cost payload?

On the Sprinter, yes. Mercedes-Benz lists 4,134 pounds of payload for the 144 high roof 2500 with rear-wheel drive and 3,781 with AWD, and the AWD van stands 111 inches tall instead of 107.

How many builders work on each van?

Of the 355 checked builders that name their vans, 303 work on the Sprinter, 192 work on the Transit, 118 work on the ProMaster. Many work on more than one, so ask which van most of their recent builds used.

SOURCES

Specifications and prices come from each maker's own US pages, read on 25 November 2026, except Ford's, which refused our tools that day and are as read on 23 November 2026. Prices exclude destination. The hard rules are ours; whether a van passes is read straight from the makers' figures, and where their pages do not settle it the grid says check. Builder and model counts are computed

from our data at build time: a builder counts for a van only when its own site names it. We have not driven these vans and nobody paid to be listed.

Mercedes-Benz Vans USA, 2027 Sprinter Cargo Van: lineup, prices and specification panels (https://www.mbvans.com/en/sprinter/cargo-van). Read 25 November 2026

Ford, 2027 Transit Cargo Van (https://www.ford.com/trucks/transit-passenger-van-wagon/models/cargo-van/). Read 23 November 2026; Ford's site refused our tools on 25 November 2026, so these figures were not rechecked

Ford, 2027 Transit overview (https://www.ford.com/trucks/transit-passenger-van-wagon/). Read 23 November 2026; Ford's site refused our tools on 25 November 2026, so these figures were not rechecked

Ford, 2026 Transit technical specifications (https://www.fromtheroad.ford.com/us/en/articles/2026/whats-new-2026-ford-transit). Read 23 November 2026; Ford's site refused our tools on 25 November 2026, so these figures were not rechecked

Ram, 2026 Ram ProMaster FAQ (drive, payload, load floor, heights) (https://www.ramtrucks.com/ram-promaster/faq.html). Read 25 November 2026

Ram, 2026 Ram ProMaster design (roof heights) (https://www.ramtrucks.com/ram-promaster/design.html). Read 25 November 2026

Ram, 2026 Ram ProMaster capability (payload, towing) (https://www.ramtrucks.com/ram-promaster/capability.html). Read 25 November 2026

Ram, vehicle data behind ramtrucks.com (model list and MSRP by version) (https://www.ramtrucks.com/services/vehicleData.getVehicle.prod.ramtrucks.js). Read 25 November 2026

US DOE and EPA, fueleconomy.gov: Why don't you have ratings for large vans, pickup trucks and SUVs? (https://www.fueleconomy.gov/feg/info.shtml). Read 25 November 2026

Vanlife builder directory: the vans each checked builder names on its own website (https://vanlife.co/builders). Computed from our data on 25 November 2026

Vanlife camper van models: chassis and drivetrain read from each maker's own site (https://vanlife.co/camper-vans). Computed from our data on 25 November 2026