Guides / How to choose a camper van builder: a step-by-step check

HOW TO CHOOSE A CAMPER VAN BUILDER: A STEP-BY-STEP CHECK

THE SHORT ANSWER

Shortlist builders that work on your van, then check each in public records before you pay: your state's business registry, NHTSA's manufacturer and recall databases, and RVIA if it claims the seal. Get the warranty, deposit and refund terms, start date and delivery date in writing, and pay by card where you can. [2] [6] [13]

Last updated 25 November 2026

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Shortlist builders that work on your van, then check each one in public records before you pay anything.
- Look the business up in your state's registry and, if it builds new vans for sale, in NHTSA's vPIC manufacturer database and recall records.
- Get a written warranty before you pay: federal rules list nine things it must disclose, in one document.
- Verified US builders that publish a deposit ask $1,000 to $10,000 or a share of the price; get the refund terms in writing and pay by card where you can.
- Red flags: a name that does not match the registry, cash-only payment, blanks in the contract, and promises that never reach paper.

A custom van is a large purchase from a small business, often with a deposit months before delivery. These checks use free public records and your own questions; none of them takes more than an evening.

WHAT SHOULD YOU ASK A CAMPER VAN BUILDER?

Ask what it builds on, whether the van is included, what the base build leaves out, the deposit and refund terms, the start and delivery dates, the written warranty, and for past owners to call. Most builders publish only some of this. [2] [1]

California's Attorney General suggests asking any company for a business statement: what it does, how long it has been in business, its locations and owners, and, where it applies, prior work and references. [2] For a van builder, add the van, the deposit, the schedule and the warranty. Here is how often verified builders answer those on their own websites, before you even call:

WHAT VERIFIED BUILDERS PUBLISH

Of 662 verified builders, how many state each on their own site



Computed at build time from our checks of each builder's site; the bar runs to the full 662. [1]

So most of what matters is a question you have to ask, and an answer you should get in writing. Start your shortlist from the builders directory, filtered by your van, or ask us to match you.

HOW DO YOU CHECK A BUILDER IS A REGISTERED BUSINESS?

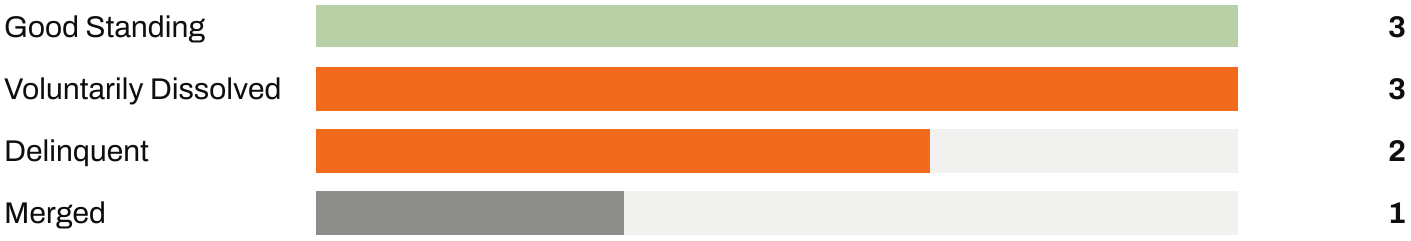
Search the builder in the business registry of the state it operates in, usually run by the Secretary of State. Check that the legal name matches the contract and that the status is active or in good standing. NASS links every state's registry. [3] [4]

A registry entry shows the business exists and is current with its filings; it does not vouch for its work. Colorado's Secretary of State says so plainly: its office acts as a filing registry and lacks the authority to certify whether a business is operating legally.[4] California's Attorney General adds the other checks: search for reviews and complaints, check any licenses or registrations the business must have, make sure it has a real physical address, and do not assume a company is legitimate because it has few complaints.[2]

Names are where people get caught. We searched Colorado's business entity data for names containing “VANWORKS” on 25 November 2026 and got 9 entities with similar names, several of them dissolved or delinquent.[5] The one that matches Vanworks's Loveland shop is VANWORKS, INC., in good standing. Match the exact legal name and city, not a similar one.

ONE REGISTRY SEARCH

Colorado entities named like "Vanworks", by status



Colorado Department of State data on the Colorado Information Marketplace, searched 25 November 2026.[5]

HOW DO YOU LOOK A BUILDER UP WITH NHTSA?

Search the company in NHTSA's vPIC manufacturer database. Federal rules require every motor vehicle manufacturer, including the final-stage manufacturers that complete motor homes, to file its name, address and vehicle types there within 30 days of starting. [6] [8]

The rule's own example of a description is “Motor homes” built by a “final-stage manufacturer,” and each manufacturer must keep its entry current within 30 days of a change.[6] A shop that alters a new van before its first retail sale is an alterer under federal rules: it must leave the van maker's certification label on and add its own, stating who altered the van, when, and that it still conforms to the federal standards affected.[7] A shop that converts a van you already own is in a different position, so a missing vPIC entry is a question to ask, not proof of anything. Here is what vPIC returned on 25 November 2026 for some verified builders in our directory:

BUILDER IN OUR DIRECTORY	SEARCHED	VPIC ENTRY	STATE	VEHICLE TYPES FILED
Storyteller Overland	“storyteller”	STORYTELLER OVERLAND LLC	Alabama	Multipurpose passenger vehicle
Remote Vans	“remote vans”	REMOTE VANS LLC	Ohio	Truck
Cascade Van	“cascade van”	CASCADE VAN, LLC	Oregon	Truck; multipurpose passenger vehicle
Grounded	“grounded”	GROUNDED RVS INC	Michigan	Truck
Blackthorn Campervans	“blackthorn”	BLACKTHORN VANS LLC.	Utah	Multipurpose passenger vehicle
Van America	“van america”	VAN AMERICA LLC	Utah	Truck; multipurpose passenger vehicle
Nomad RV's	“nomad rv”	NOMAD RVS	New Jersey	Multipurpose passenger vehicle

Each entry matched the builder's state in our records.[9][1] Search the legal name from the registry, and a short form of it, because vPIC names are the filer's own spelling. NHTSA's manufacturer help desk is listed on the vPIC home page.[8]

HOW DO YOU CHECK A BUILDER'S RECALLS?

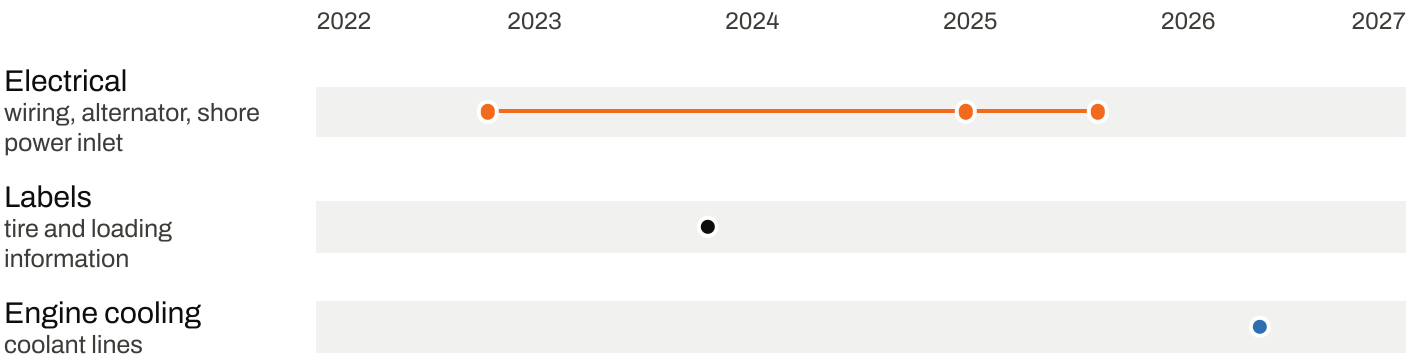
Search NHTSA's recall records by the builder's make, model and year. A recall shows a defect the maker has reported, not a bad builder; what matters is whether it was fixed on the van you are buying. [10]

For example, NHTSA's recall API returned these campaigns on 25 November 2026 for Storyteller Overland, a verified maker in our directory, across the models and years we searched: [10] [11] [12]

CAMPAIGN	REPORTED	COMPONENT	VEHICLES AND ISSUE, AS NHTSA SUMMARIZES IT
22V770000 [10]	13 October 2022	Electrical system: wiring	2022 to 2023 Mode LT; secondary alternator wiring may be improperly routed
23V695000 [10]	16 October 2023	Labels	2022 to 2023 Mode LT; tire and loading label may show the wrong tire size and pressure
24V966000 [11]	23 December 2024	Electrical system: alternator	2024 Beast, Classic, Stealth and Mystic Mode; an internal component may be improperly torqued
25V498000 [10]	1 August 2025	Electrical system	2023 Mode LT; exterior shore power inlet may be improperly tightened
26V274000 [12]	30 April 2026	Engine cooling: hoses	2023 Stealth, Classic and Beast Mode with AWD; coolant lines may be improperly routed

ONE MAKER'S RECALL RECORD

Storyteller Overland recall campaigns by report date



NHTSA recalls API, searched by make, model and year on 25 November 2026; models and years we did not search are not shown. [10] [11] [12]

A maker that files recalls is a maker in NHTSA's system that reports defects; that is the system working. Ask any builder how it handles a recall on a van it built, and for a used or stock van, whether each campaign has been completed on that VIN.

WHAT SHOULD THE WARRANTY SAY?

Get it in writing before you pay. Federal rules say a written warranty on a consumer product over $15 must disclose, in one document, nine things, from who is covered to how to claim, and that the seller must make the text available before the sale. [13] [14]

The nine disclosures in 16 CFR 701.3, in our words, make a good list of questions: [13]

1. Who the warranty covers, if it is limited to the first buyer.
2. What parts and work it covers, and what it excludes.
3. What the warrantor will do, and pay for, if something fails.
4. When it starts, if not on the purchase date, and how long it lasts.
5. Step by step, how to make a claim, and who does the work, with an address or phone number.
6. Any informal dispute settlement process.
7. Any limit on how long implied warranties last.

8. Any exclusion or limit on incidental or consequential damages.
9. A statement that you have specific legal rights, and other rights that vary by state.

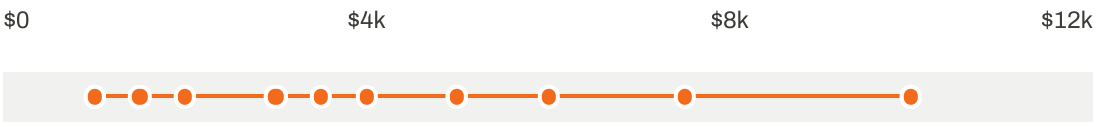
Whether those rules reach a particular conversion contract is a legal question; the list is still the right set of questions. Published terms vary: Sportsmobile warrants its conversions for 3 years or 36,000 miles and leaves appliances and the chassis to their own makers; Pleasure-Way, a Class B maker, offers five years or 60,000 miles.[19][20] Of 662 verified builders, 13 state a warranty term on their own site, and 1 says it does not guarantee or warranty anything.[1]

WHAT DEPOSIT IS NORMAL, AND HOW DO YOU PROTECT IT?

Among verified US builders that publish one, fixed deposits run $1,000 to $10,000, and 2 ask a share of the price. Get the amount, what it buys and the refund terms in the contract, and pay by card where you can.[1][2]

PUBLISHED DEPOSITS, VERIFIED US BUILDERS

Fixed-amount deposits builders state on their own sites



Computed at build time from our checks of each builder's site.[1]

BUILDER	WHAT OUR CHECK OF ITS SITE RECORDED
AEONrv	Reservation needs a refundable $1,000 deposit
East Coast Vanlife	Requires a $1,000 booking deposit
Venturhaus Vans	A $1,000 non-refundable deposit secures a production slot
Boujee Builds - Van & RV Conversions	A $1500 deposit reserves a waitlist spot
Carrve Custom Vans	A $2,000 deposit secures a build slot
Skala Conversions	A $2,000 deposit holds a spot on the schedule
Activan Conversions	$3,000 deposit reserves a build slot
Jimco Trailer and RV	A $3,000 deposit secures a build slot
Groove Vans	A $3,500 deposit secures a build slot
Sportsmobile Southwest Inc	A $4000 deposit starts a project
Contravans	A $5,000 deposit books a build slot
Rossmonster Vans	The site calls itself a manufacturer with a nationwide dealer network and also takes custom van builds with a $5k deposit
SoCal Custom Vans	A $5,000 deposit secures a build slot
Thrive Crafted Vans	A $5,000 deposit holds a build slot
Custom Crafted Vans	A $6,000 deposit starts the design phase
Livable Vans	A $7,500 deposit secures a build slot
Paradigm Van Conversions	The home page says it is now booking Spring 2027 builds and elsewhere June 2027, with a $10,000 refundable deposit

BUILDER	WHAT OUR CHECK OF ITS SITE RECORDED
Sequoia + Salt	A $10,000 deposit secures a build slot
Tourig	A $10,000 deposit secures a build slot
Colorado Campervan	A 50% non-refundable deposit secures a slot
Woodpecker Crafts and Builds LLC	A 25% deposit holds a place on the schedule

California's Attorney General says to be wary of companies that require cash or check for big purchases, that paying by card or another method that lets you get your money back is generally safer, to get every promise in writing, including cancellation and refund policies, and not to sign anything with blank spaces to be filled in later.[2] If you pay by card and need to dispute the charge, the CFPB says to call the card company and send a written billing error notice within 60 days after the charge appeared on your statement; it also notes a different process may apply to goods or services that turn out to be defective.[15]

HOW LONG IS THE WAIT FOR A BUILD SLOT?

It depends on the builder and the season: 128 verified builders publish a lead or build time, from a few weeks to many months. Get the start date and the delivery date in the contract, and what happens if either slips.[1]

A published lead time is a snapshot; it moves month to month. Some builders quote the wait for a slot, some the build once the van is in the shop, and some both, so ask which. Every published lead time, builder by builder, is in how much a camper van costs, and the spread across builders is charted in van conversion: builder vs kit vs DIY.

DOES RVIA MEMBERSHIP MATTER?

It matters if you want the RVIA seal. Every unit from a member manufacturer must display it, and RVIA says most US public and private campgrounds require it. Membership is open

to companies actively manufacturing RVs. [18] [17]

RVIA says its inspectors make more than 2,000 unannounced inspections of member plants a year.[18] We found no public member search on RVIA's pages; its membership page lists memberservices@rvia.org as the contact.[17] 13 verified builder websites in our directory say RVIA; a claim on a website is a reason to look for the seal on the van, not proof of it. A DIY van cannot carry the seal: see can a DIY camper van be RVIA certified.

WHAT ARE THE RED FLAGS?

A name that does not match the registry, no physical shop, cash-only payment, blanks in the contract, a warranty you cannot read before paying, and promises that stay verbal. Each is a reason to stop and ask, and some are reasons to walk away. [2] [4] [14]

- The legal name or city does not match the registry, or the status is dissolved or delinquent. [4] [5]
- No physical address you can visit, or an address that searches as something else.[2]
- Cash, check or wire only for the deposit; no card.[2]
- Blank spaces in the contract “to be filled in later,” or refund terms missing.[2]
- The warranty text is not available until after you pay.[14]
- It says it manufactures new vans for sale but has no vPIC entry and cannot explain why; or the van maker's label on a finished van is missing.[6] [7]
- Claims the RVIA seal but the van does not carry it.

If something goes wrong, USAGov lists where to file a consumer complaint, starting with the company and then the state or federal agency that oversees it.[16]

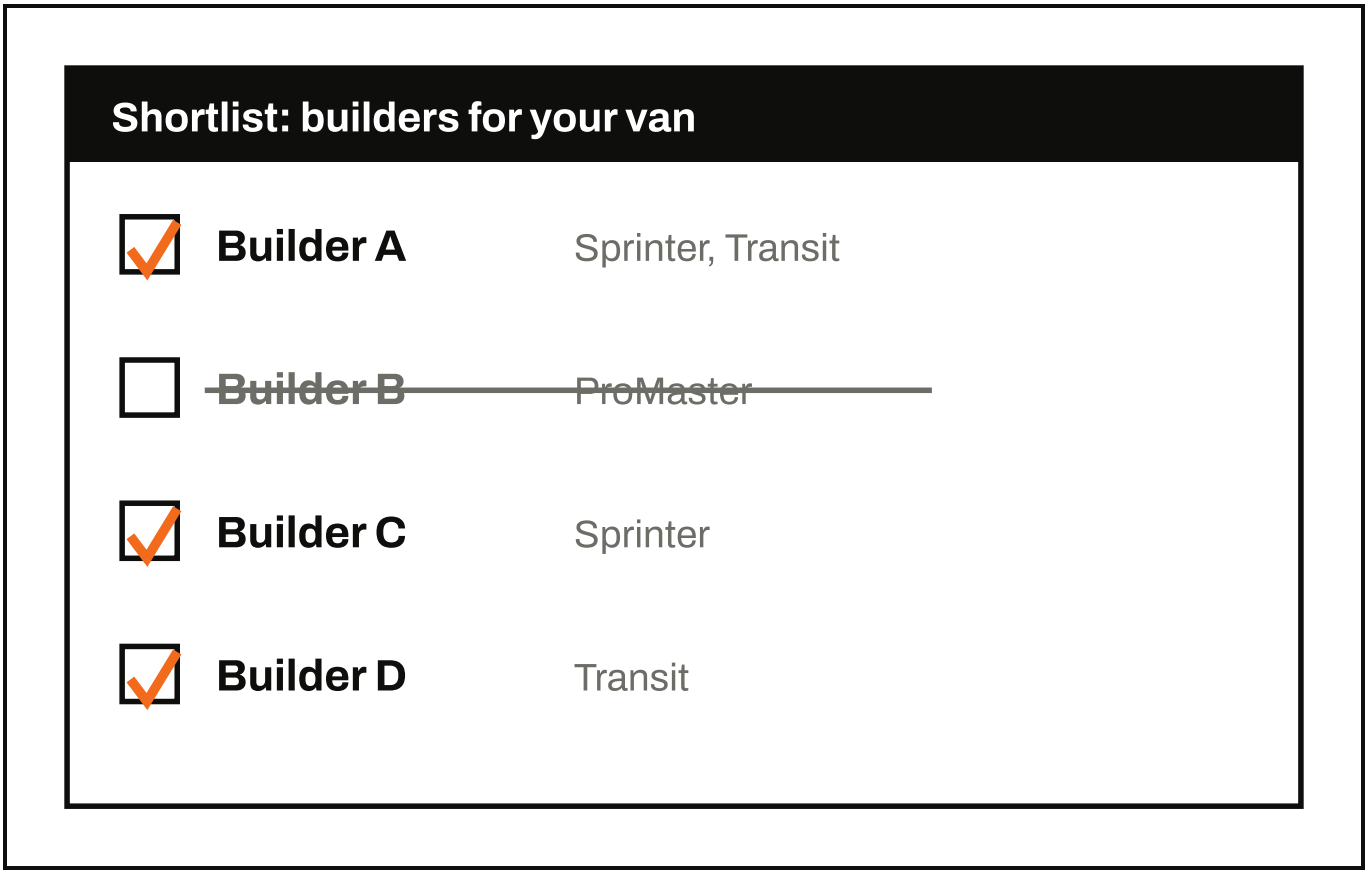
HOW TO CHOOSE A CAMPER VAN BUILDER, STEP BY STEP

Eight checks, in the order that costs least first. Do steps 1 to 5 for every builder on your shortlist and steps 6 to 8 for the one or two you are about to pay.

SKILL	STEPS	TOOLS
Beginner	**8**	A phone and a web browser The builder's legal name, city and state Your van's make, model, year and VIN, if you have one

01 Shortlist builders that work on your van

Pick three or more that build on your van and wheelbase from our directory, where each listing says which vans the builder works on. [1] Ask each for what California's Attorney General calls a business statement: what it does, how long it has been in business, its locations and owners, prior work and references. [2]



02 Look the business up in the state registry

Open the registry for the builder's state from the NASS list and search the legal name.[3] Check the exact name, the status, the city and the date formed. Remember Colorado's warning: the registry is a filing record and cannot certify that a business operates legally.[4]

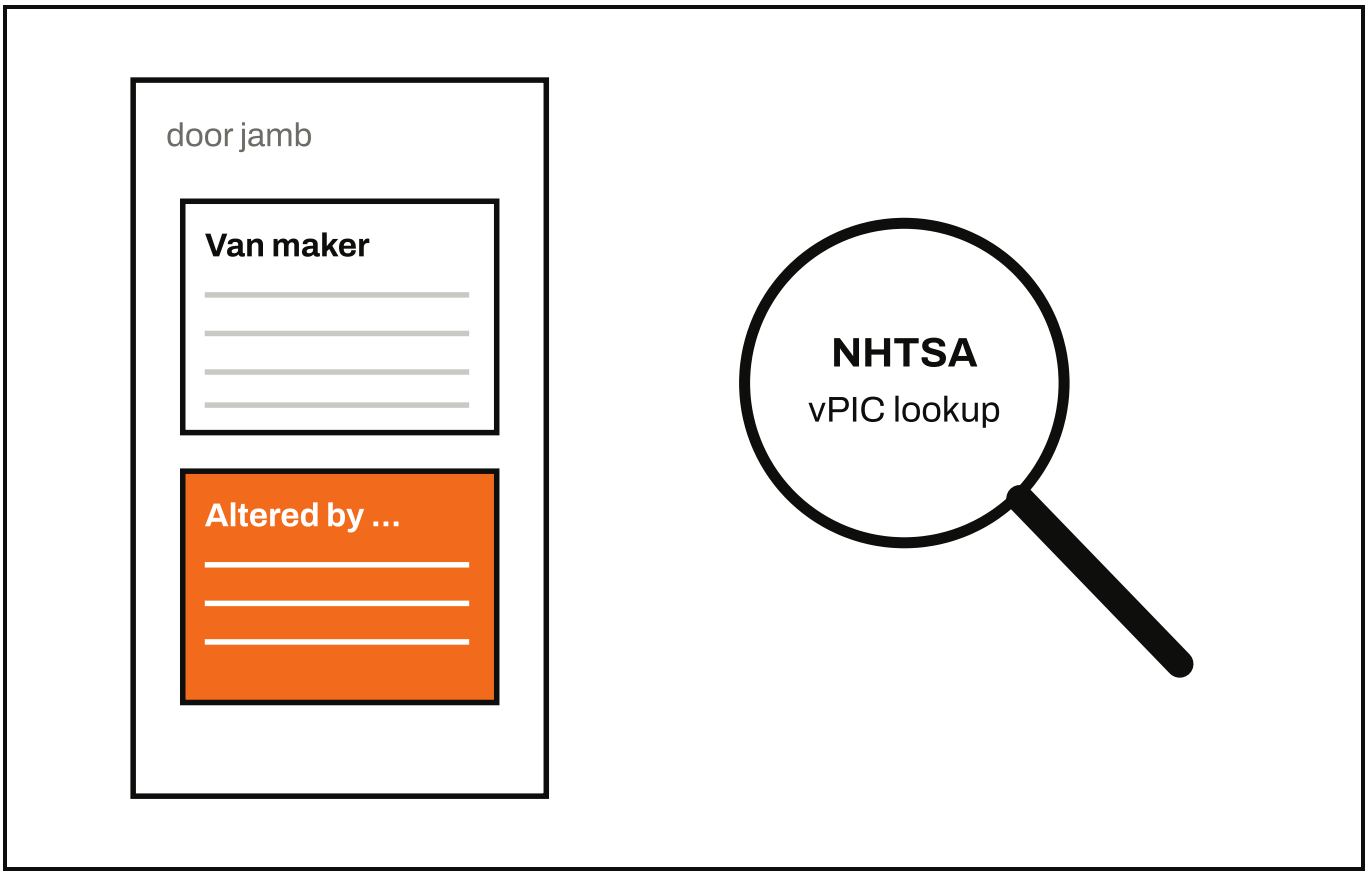
State business registry: search result

Entity name	must match the contract
Status	**Good Standing**
Formed	how long in business
Principal city	same town as the shop?
Registered agent	who receives legal papers

A filing record, not a licence to operate.

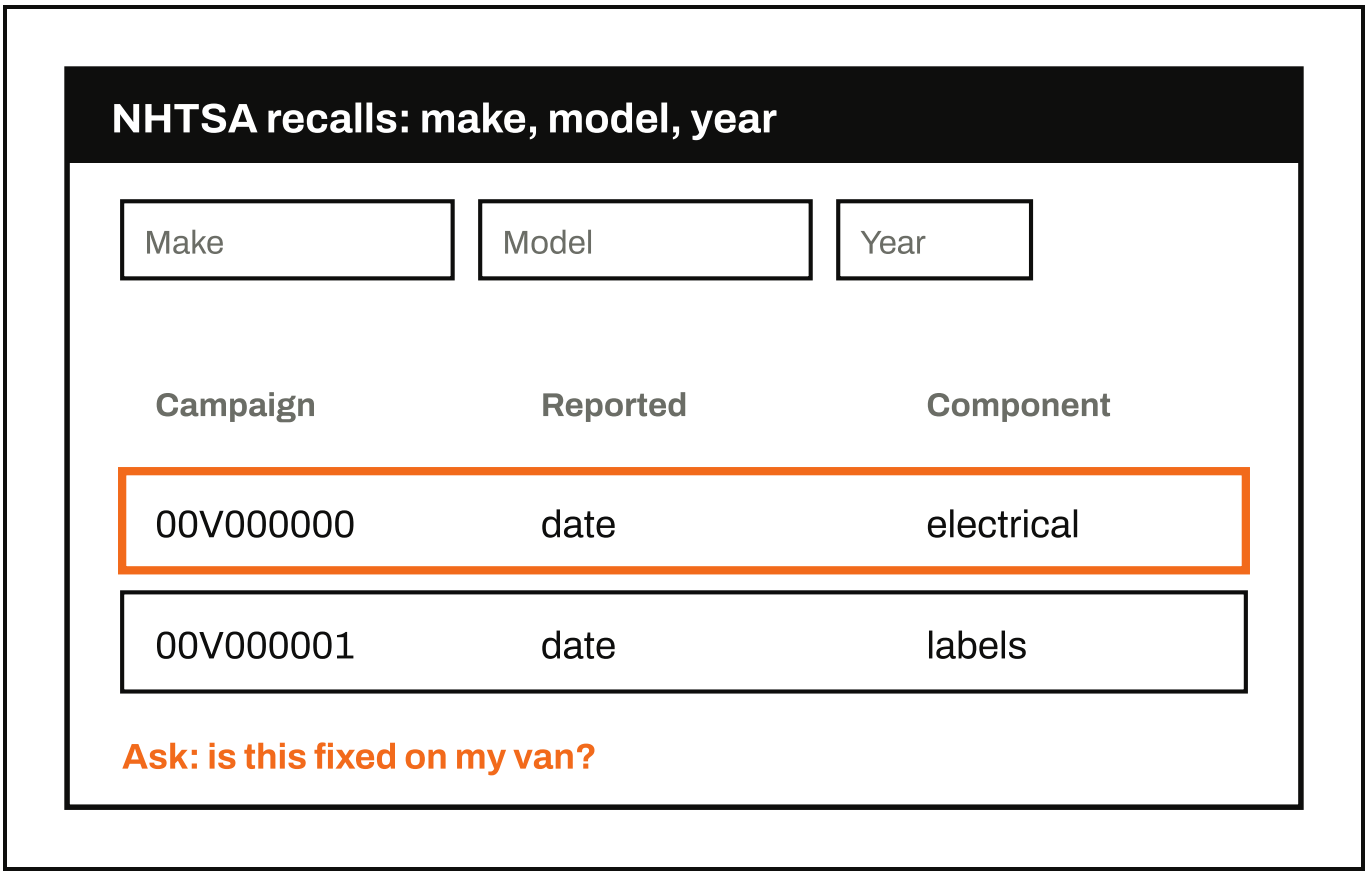
03 Search the company in NHTSA's vPIC database

If the builder sells new converted vans, search its name in vPIC; manufacturers must file there within 30 days of starting.[8][6] On a finished van, look in the door jamb for the van maker's label plus the builder's own alterer label.[7]



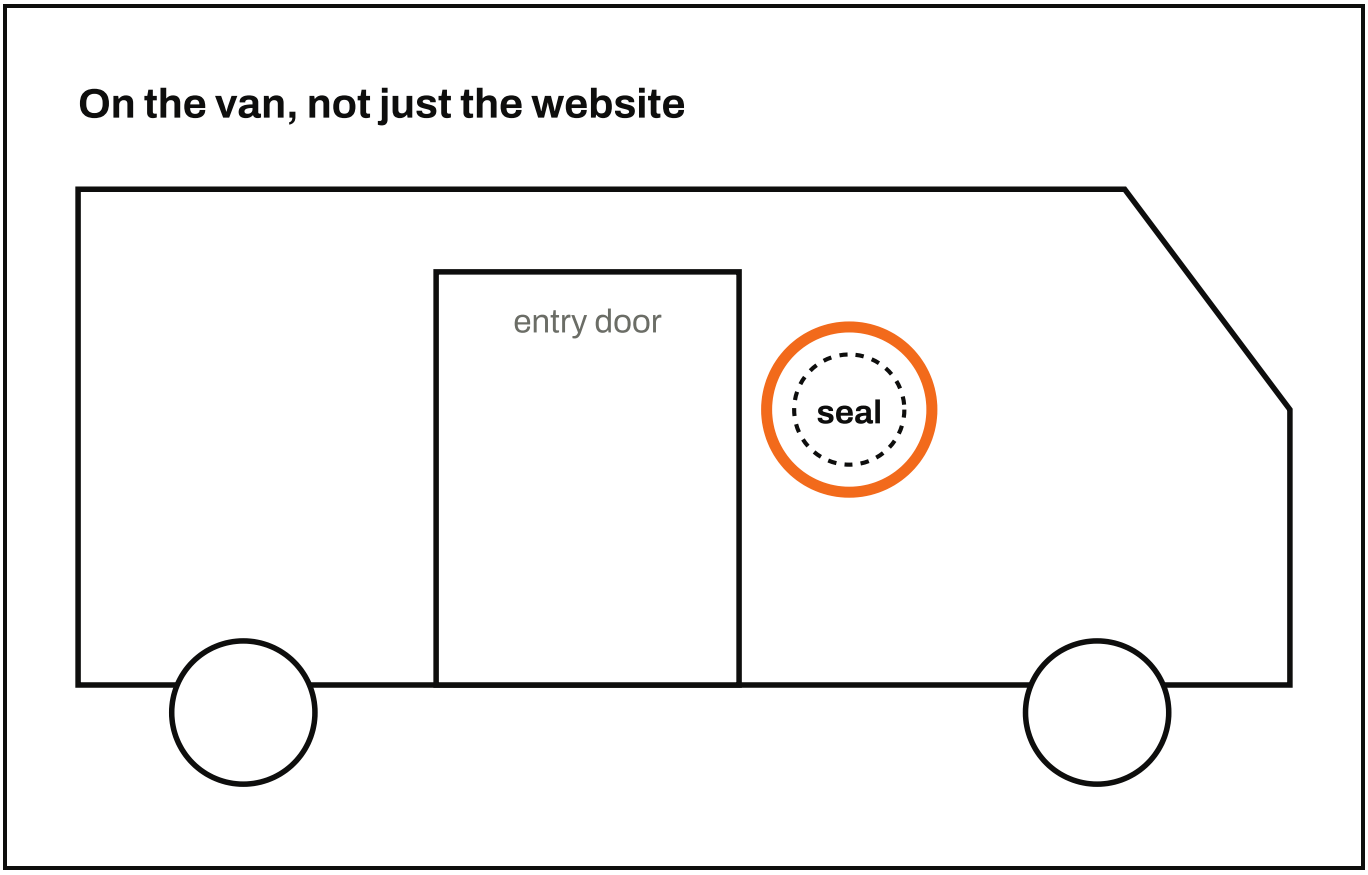
04 Check recalls for the builder's models

Search NHTSA's recall records by the builder's make, model and year, as in the example above.[10] For a stock or used van, ask whether each campaign has been completed on that VIN; for a new build, ask how the builder handles a recall.



05 Confirm the RVIA seal, if the builder claims it

Every unit from a member manufacturer must display the seal, so look for it on a finished van, not just the website.[18] If in doubt, ask RVIA's member services.[17]



06 Get the written warranty before you pay

Ask for the text before paying anything; for consumer products the seller must make it available before the sale.[14] Check it against the nine disclosures above.[13]

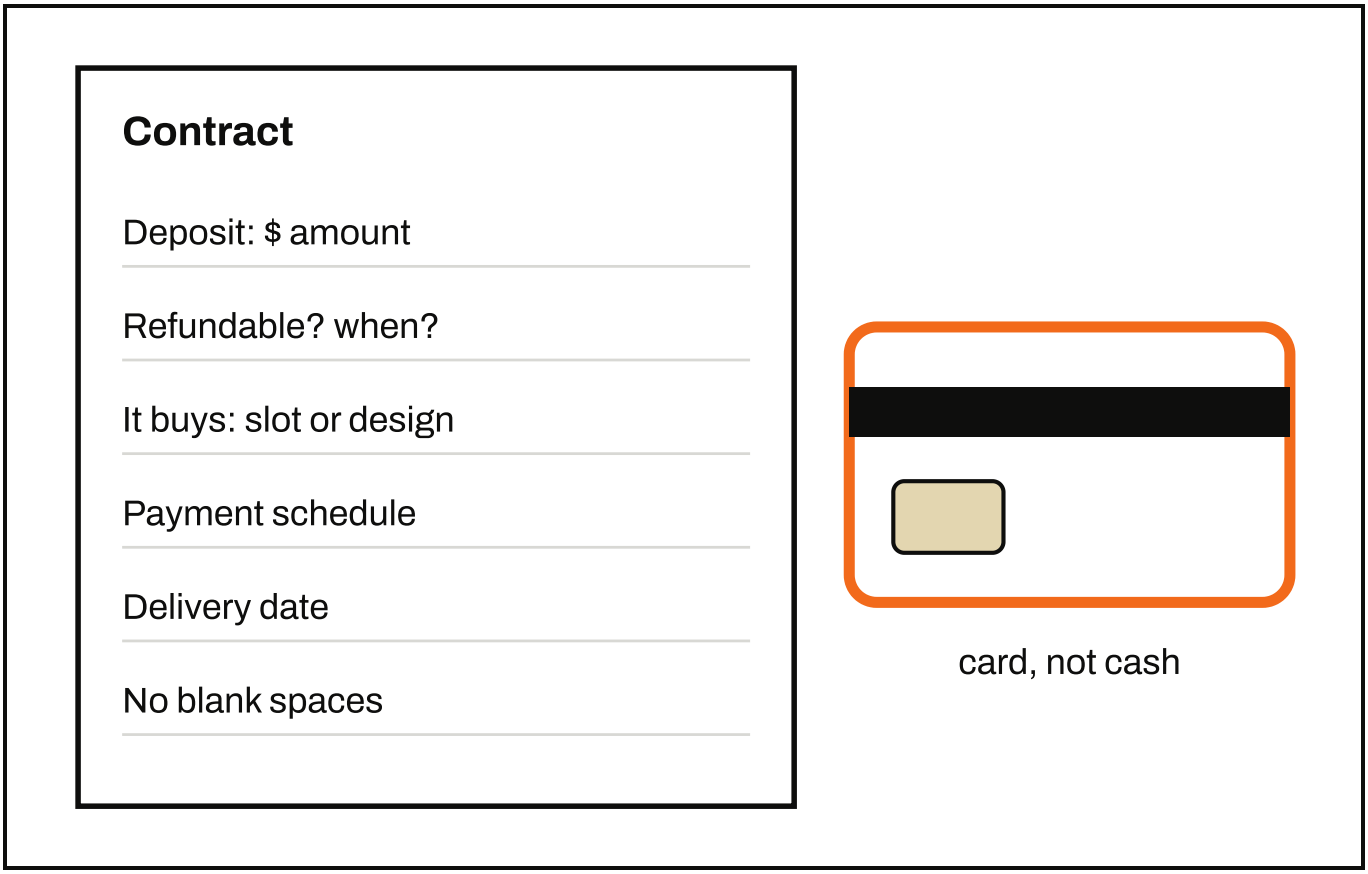
Written warranty, before you pay

1. Who it covers
2. What is covered, what is not
3. What they will do
4. When it starts, how long
5. How to claim, and who
6. Dispute process, if any
7. Implied warranty limits
8. Damages limits
9. Your state rights

07 Read the contract and pay the deposit by card

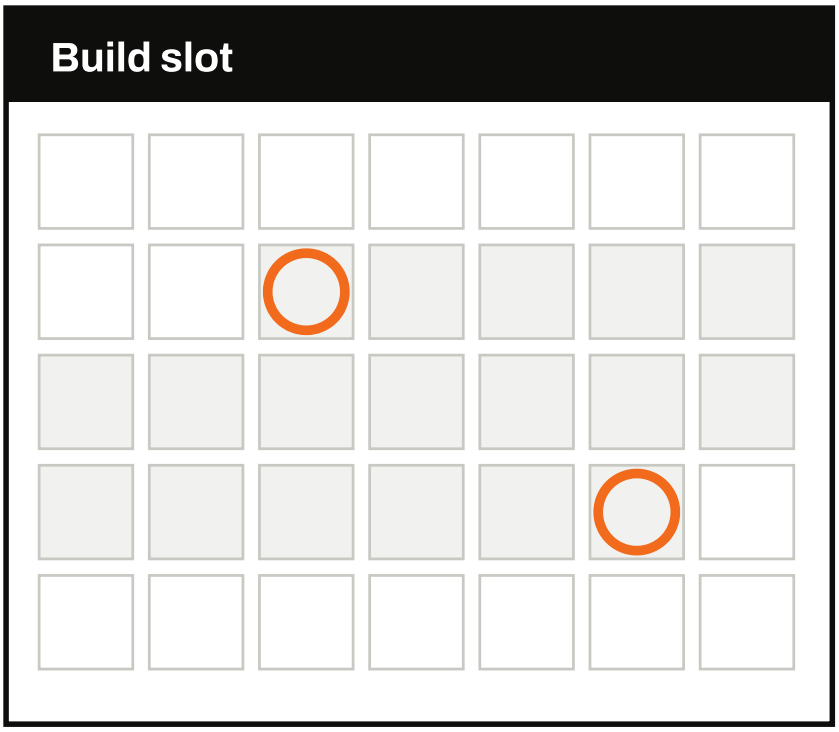
The contract should state the deposit, whether and when it is refundable, what it buys, the payment schedule and the delivery date, with no blanks.[2] Pay by card where the builder accepts it. To dispute a charge, the CFPB says to send a written notice within 60 days after it appeared on your statement.[15]

Caution. This is general consumer information, not legal advice. For a large contract, have it read by a lawyer in your state.



08 Fix the build slot, the dates and the handover

Get the start date and the delivery date in writing, and ask what happens if either slips.[2] At handover, inspect the van against the contract, ask for wiring and plumbing drawings and photos taken before the walls closed, and check the labels in the door jamb before the final payment.[7]



THE BUILDER CHECKLIST

One row per check, with where to look, a good answer and the red flag. Copy the table, or download it as a spreadsheet file, and fill in the last column for each builder on your shortlist.

DOWNLOAD THE CHECKLIST (CSV)

CHECK	WHERE TO LOOK	GOOD ANSWER	RED FLAG	DONE
Builds on your van	Builder's site; our directory	Names your van and wheelbase	Will build on anything, no examples	☐
Legal name and status	Your state's business registry	Same name as the contract; active or good standing	Name not found, dissolved or delinquent	☐
Physical shop	Visit, or search the address	A shop you can visit	No address, or an address that is not a shop	☐
Complaints	Web search; BBB; state attorney general	Few complaints, answered	Pattern of unfinished builds or kept deposits	☐
NHTSA manufacturer entry	NHTSA vPIC Get Manufacturer Details	Entry with its name and state, if it builds new vans for sale	Claims to manufacture but has no entry: ask why	☐
Alterer label	Door jamb of a finished van	Van maker's label plus the builder's own	Van maker's label removed or covered	☐
Recalls	NHTSA recalls by make, model, year	Recalls, if any, fixed on your van	Open recall on the van you are buying	☐
RVIA seal, if claimed	The van itself; RVIA	Seal on the unit	Claimed on the website, not on the van	☐
Written warranty	Ask before you pay	One document with the nine disclosures	Verbal only, or not available until after sale	☐
Deposit terms	The contract	Amount, refund terms and what it buys, in writing	Cash or wire only; refund terms missing	☐

CHECK	WHERE TO LOOK	GOOD ANSWER	RED FLAG	DONE
Payment schedule	The contract	Payments tied to stages you can see	Most of the price up front	☐
Start and delivery dates	The contract	Both dates written down	Only "we'll be in touch"	☐
Scope and exclusions	Quote and contract	Itemised; says if the van is included	One lump sum, blanks to fill in later	☐
References	Two or three past owners	Owners you can call	None offered	☐

Next: compare prices in how much a camper van costs, weigh a builder against a kit or a full DIY build with parts makers in van conversion: builder vs kit vs DIY, read Class B vs custom, browse the DIY library, or get matched with builders.

The live version of this guide, with every source linked: vanlife.co/guides/how-to-choose-a-van-builder. Builders, kits and parts makers we checked: vanlife.co/builders.

QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

How do I know if a camper van builder is legitimate?

Check public records before you pay: the business in your state's registry, the company in NHTSA's vPIC manufacturer database if it builds new vans for sale, its recalls, and complaints. Visit the shop, call past owners, and get every promise in writing. No single check proves it; together they show a lot.

What questions should I ask a van builder?

Do you build on my van, and how many have you built? Is the van included? What does the base build leave out? What is the deposit, is it refundable, and what does it buy? When would you start and finish? What does the written warranty cover, and for how long? Can I talk to past owners?

How much deposit does a van builder ask for?

It varies. 21 verified US builders in our directory publish a deposit on their site: fixed amounts from $1,000 to $10,000, and 2 as a share of the price. 2 say it is non-refundable and 2 that it is refundable. Get the terms in writing.

Should I pay a van builder deposit by credit card?

Where the builder accepts it, a card gives you a dispute route. California's Attorney General calls card payment generally safer than cash or check for big purchases. The CFPB says to send a written billing error notice within 60 days after the charge appears on your statement.

Does a van builder need to be registered with NHTSA?

Federal rules require each motor vehicle manufacturer, including final-stage manufacturers, to file its name, address and vehicle types with NHTSA within 30 days of starting. A shop that only converts vans customers already own may not be a manufacturer at all, so ask; a missing entry is a question, not proof.

What should a camper van warranty include?

Federal rules list nine things a written consumer product warranty must disclose in one document: who it covers, what it covers and excludes, what the warrantor will do, when it starts and how long it lasts, how to claim, any dispute process, limits on implied warranties and damages, and your state rights.

How long is the wait for a custom van build?

It depends on the builder and the month. 128 of 662 verified builders publish a lead or build time, from a few weeks to many months. Get the start date and the delivery date in the contract, and ask what happens if either slips.

Does it matter if a builder is RVIA certified?

It matters if you want the seal: RVIA says most US campgrounds require it, and every unit from a member manufacturer must carry it. Membership is for companies actively manufacturing RVs. If a builder claims it, look for the seal on the van itself.

SOURCES

Counts and deposit terms come from our checks of each builder's own website, latest 24 November 2026, computed at build time; the deposit wording is our check's summary, not a quote from the builder, and only verified listings are used. The registry, vPIC and recall examples are searches we ran on 25 November 2026 and show what those records said that day, not a judgment of any builder. Federal rules are quoted from eCFR. We could not open the FTC's consumer pages from our environment, so none are cited. This is general consumer information, not legal advice.

vanlife.co builder directory: records from checks of each builder's own website (https://vanlife.co/builders). Read 25 November 2026. The underlying checks of each builder's site were made on 23 and 24 November 2026

California Attorney General, Checking A Company's Background (https://oag.ca.gov/consumers/general/checking_business_bkgrd10). Read 25 November 2026

National Association of Secretaries of State, Corporate Registration (links to every state's business registry) (https://www.nass.org/business-services/corporate-registration).

Read 25 November 2026

Colorado Secretary of State, Business Database Search (https://www.coloradosos.gov/biz/BusinessEntityCriteriaExt.do). Read 25 November 2026

Colorado Information Marketplace, Business Entities in Colorado (Colorado Department of State data; search for "VANWORKS") (https://data.colorado.gov/Business/Business-Entities-in-Colorado/4ykn-tg5h). Read 25 November 2026

49 CFR Part 566, Manufacturer Identification (eCFR, up to date as of 23 November 2026) (https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-49/subtitle-B/chapter-V/part-566). Read 25 November 2026

49 CFR Part 567, Certification: 567.3 (alterer) and 567.7 (persons who alter certified vehicles) (eCFR) (https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-49/subtitle-B/chapter-V/part-567). Read 25 November 2026

NHTSA, Product Information Catalog and Vehicle Listing (vPIC), home and API (https://vpic.nhtsa.dot.gov/). Read 25 November 2026

NHTSA vPIC API, Get Manufacturer Details (searches by name, run 25 November 2026) (https://vpic.nhtsa.dot.gov/api/vehicles/GetManufacturerDetails/storyteller?format=json). Read 25 November 2026

NHTSA recalls API: Storyteller Overland, Mode LT, model year 2023 (https://api.nhtsa.gov/recalls/recallsByVehicle?make=STORYTELLER%20OVERLAND&model=MODE%20LT&modelYear=2023). Read 25 November 2026

NHTSA recalls API: Storyteller Overland, Classic, model year 2024 (https://api.nhtsa.gov/recalls/recallsByVehicle?make=STORYTELLER%20OVERLAND&model=CLASSIC&modelYear=2024). Read 25 November 2026

NHTSA recalls API: Storyteller Overland, Classic, model year 2023 (https://api.nhtsa.gov/recalls/recallsByVehicle?make=STORYTELLER%20OVERLAND&model=CLASSIC&modelYear=2023). Read 25 November 2026

16 CFR 701.3, Written warranty terms (eCFR, up to date as of 18 November 2026) (https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-16/chapter-I/subchapter-G/part-701). Read 25 November 2026

16 CFR 702.3, Pre-sale availability of written warranty terms (eCFR) (https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-16/chapter-I/subchapter-G/part-702). Read 25 November 2026

Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, How do I dispute a charge on my credit card bill (https://www.consumerfinance.gov/ask-cfpb/how-do-i-dispute-a-charge-on-my-credit-card-bill-en-61/). Read 25 November 2026

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Pleasure-Way Industries, Warranty (a Class B maker's published warranty) (https://pleasureway.com/warranty/). Read 25 November 2026