Guides / Van conversion: what it is, and builder vs kit vs DIY

VAN CONVERSION: WHAT IT IS, AND BUILDER VS KIT VS DIY

THE SHORT ANSWER

A van conversion turns an empty cargo van into a camper with a bed, galley, power, water and ventilation. You can get one three ways: pay a builder, install a DIY kit, or design and build it all yourself. Verified builders publish starting prices from $9,750 to $239,097; kits run $2,375 to $27,995 before the van; and one builder's checklist puts full DIY materials at $15,000 to $45,000. [1] [2]

Last updated 25 November 2026

KEY TAKEAWAYS

A van conversion turns an empty cargo van into a camper: bed, galley, power, water, ventilation, insulation and usually heat, fixed in place.

There are three routes: a builder (662 verified in our directory), a DIY kit (94 verified kit sellers) or a full DIY build with parts (444 verified parts makers).

Verified builders publish starting prices from $9,750 to $239,097; verified kit makers price kits at $2,375 to $27,995, before the van.

One builder's checklist puts DIY materials at $15,000 to $45,000 and the work at 3 to 12 months of weekends, plus the van.

> Washington inspects homemade and kit-assembled motor homes before titling them, and insurers ask what is permanently installed: check both before you pick a route.

The three routes trade money against time and risk. This page lays them side by side on cost, time, resale, registration and risk, with every number from our directory or a source you can open.

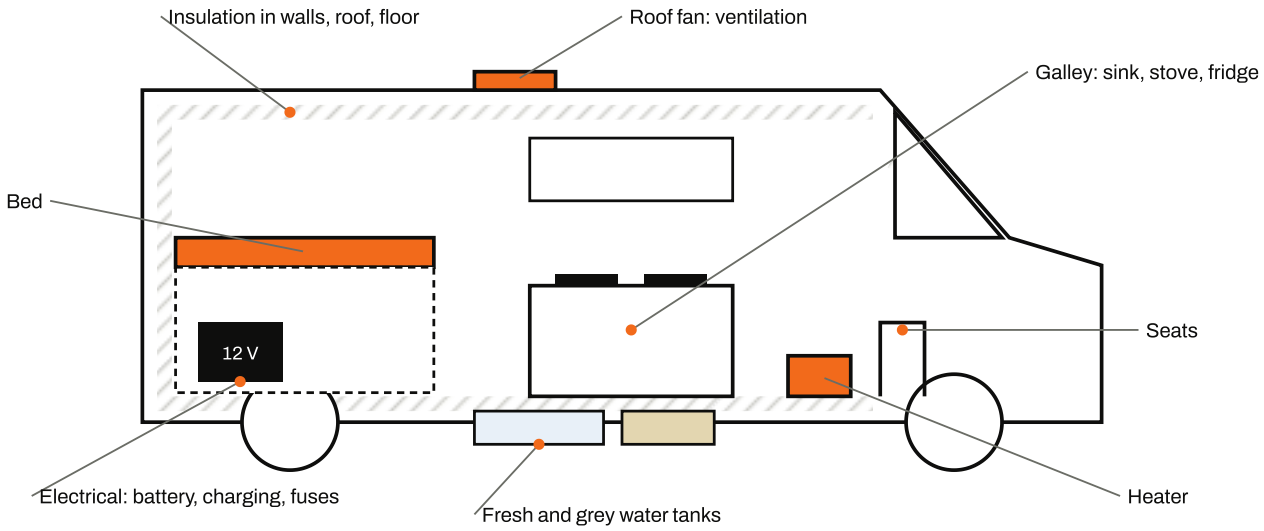
WHAT IS A VAN CONVERSION?

It is the work of turning a cargo van into a place to live and travel: a fixed bed, a galley, electrical power, water, ventilation, insulation and usually heat. Built by an RV maker to a floor plan, the result is sold as a Class B RV. [4]

Insurers and states define it by what is fixed in the van. Progressive, for its motorhome policy, asks for cooking, refrigeration, sleeping, self-contained heat or air conditioning, a drinkable water supply and a 110 to 125 volt electrical system, all permanently installed. [11] Washington licenses a converted van as a motor home if it meets the legal description of one and is used only for recreation. [9] Not every camper van has all of that; a weekend van with a bed and a cooler is a conversion too, just a smaller one.

WHAT A CONVERSION ADDS

An empty cargo van, and the systems a conversion puts in it



Drawn by vanlife.co. One common layout, not to scale; every system is a choice, and each one has its own guide in our DIY library.

In the US, “conversion van” is also used for passenger vans upgraded with seats and trim for driving rather than living in. This page is about camper conversions. Each system in the drawing has its own guide in our DIY library, starting with electrical, water, insulation and heat.

WHAT ARE THE THREE WAYS TO GET A CAMPER VAN?

Pay a builder to convert a van, buy a kit and install it yourself, or design and build every part yourself. The difference is who designs it, who builds it, and who answers for it when something fails.

THREE ROUTES

Who does each job

	Builder	DIY kit	Full DIY
Design the layout	The company	The company	You
Buy the van	Shared, or depends	You	You
Make cabinets and panels	The company	The company	You
Fit them in the van	The company	You	You
Electrical, water, heat	The company	Shared, or depends	You
Title and inspection	Shared, or depends	You	You
Fix the build if it fails	The company	Shared, or depends	You

A builder may supply the van or build on yours: of the 103 verified builders that publish a starting price, 10 include the van and 43 quote the conversion only.[1] A kit covers only what its maker lists, so the systems are often yours to add; ask before you buy. On a full DIY build every job is yours, including the paperwork.

The three routes on the five things that decide most choices. Copy the table and add your own column.

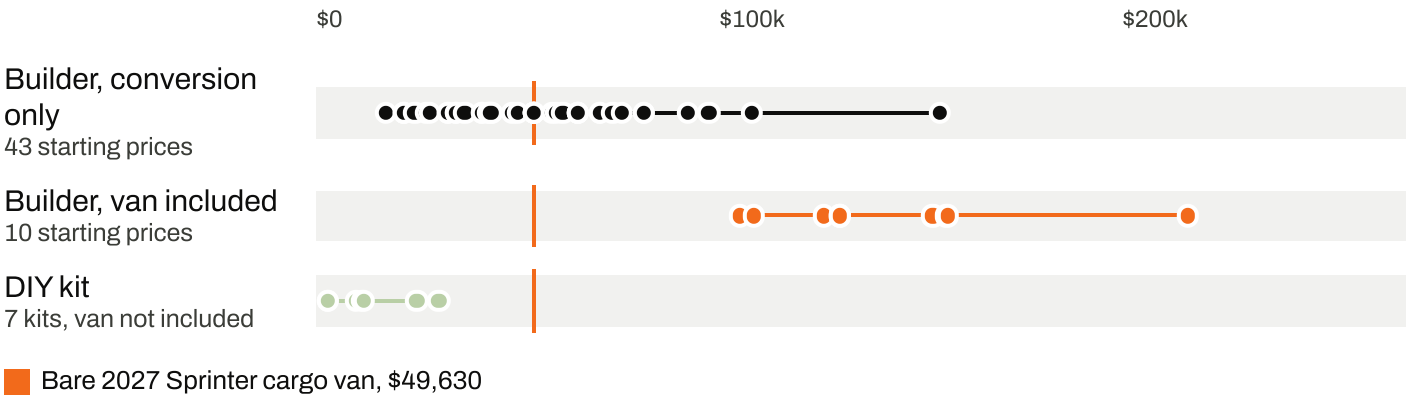
	PROFESSIONAL BUILDER	DIY KIT	FULL DIY
COST WE CAN SHOW	Starting prices $15,850 to $143,000 conversion only, $97,295 to $200,000 with the van, from 103 verified builders [1]	Kits $2,375 to $27,995 from 3 kit makers, before the van and anything the kit leaves out [1]	Materials typically $15,000 to $45,000, tools $2,000 to $5,000, plus 20% for surprises, plus the van [2]
TIME	83 builders publish a range: from a few weeks to more than six months [1]	Kit makers quote weeks to make or ship the kit; the install is your time [1]	3 to 12 months of weekends, 2 to 6 months full time [2]
RESALE	An RV maker's site says factory-built vans tend to keep their value; no independent figure found [8]	No figure found; keep the kit maker's paperwork and your receipts	The same owner story says custom conversions can be hard to value [8]
REGISTRATION	A shop that alters a new van before its first sale must add its own federal label; titling is still a state matter [10]	Washington inspects a motor home assembled from a kit by anyone but a licensed manufacturer [9]	Washington inspects homemade motor homes; other states differ [9]
RISK AND RECOURSE	A written warranty, if offered: 13 verified builders state one on their site; examples run 3 to 5 years [1] [5] [6] [7]	The kit maker's terms on its parts; the fitting is yours	The van maker's warranty on the van; the build is on you [5]

HOW MUCH DOES EACH ROUTE COST?

Builders' published starting prices run $9,750 to $239,097, kits $2,375 to $27,995, and a full DIY build costs the van plus $15,000 to $45,000 in materials by one builder's count. Always add the van before you compare. [1] [2]

EVERY PUBLISHED PRICE WE HOLD

Builder starting prices and kit prices on one scale



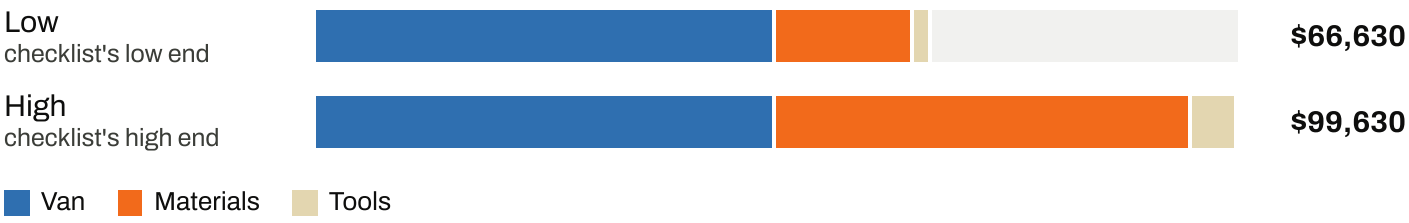
Computed from our directory at build time; each dot is one published price. [1] [3]

A starting price is the floor for the smallest build a shop offers. Prices that leave out the van are not comparable with prices that include it until you add the van: Mercedes-Benz lists the 2027 Sprinter cargo van from $49,630, before destination, and the high roof and longer bodies cost more. [3] A custom builder's own comparison puts its Class B spec conversions at $80,000 to $160,000 plus $55,000 to $70,000 for a new chassis. [4] Every price, builder by builder, is in how much a camper van costs.

A full DIY build, priced the way one builder's checklist counts it, on a new Sprinter:

FULL DIY ON A NEW VAN

Van, materials and tools, low and high



Our sums of Mercedes-Benz's lowest listed Sprinter cargo van price and The Vansmith's material and tool ranges. [3] [2]

The same checklist says to add 20% for surprises. [2] A used van lowers the first block; a high roof, longer body or all-wheel drive raises it.

HOW LONG DOES EACH ROUTE TAKE?

A builder's published wait or build time runs from a few weeks to more than six months. A kit takes weeks to make or ship, then your weekends. A full DIY build typically takes 3 to 12 months of weekends. [1] [2]

PUBLISHED TIMES, VERIFIED BUILDERS

The longest figure in each builder's published time range



Computed at build time from 83 of the 128 verified builders that publish a lead time; the rest give no range we can read. [1]

US kit makers that publish a time quote the kit, not the build: VanLab USA, “Kits are made to order. Most are ready to ship about 3-4 weeks after you order.”; Virtus Vans, “Made to order. Please allow 4-6 weeks before shipping.”. [1] The fitting is your time on top.

For a full DIY build, The Vansmith's checklist says 3 to 12 months working weekends, or 2 to 6 months full time. [2] Our DIY build guide sets out the order the work goes in.

WHICH ROUTE HOLDS ITS VALUE?

We found no independent depreciation figure for camper vans by route. The one view we could open is an RV maker's: factory-built vans tend to retain value, while custom conversions vary so much in quality that they can be hard to value. [8]

That owner story sits on Thor Industries' site, so read it as a maker's view. It also says financing a manufactured camper van was the easier path for its owners. [8] What helps any route at resale is evidence: the builder's or kit maker's paperwork, receipts, wiring and plumbing

drawings, and photos taken before the walls closed. Insurers that cover self-built vans ask for the same documentation.[12] Lending is covered in how to finance a camper van.

HOW DO YOU REGISTER AND INSURE EACH ROUTE?

Titling is a state decision on every route, and some states inspect DIY and kit builds; Washington inspects both. Insurers set their own test: Progressive lists six systems that must be permanently installed.[9][11]

Builder. Federal rules call anyone who alters a certified vehicle before its first purchase (other than for resale) an alterer; the alterer must keep the van maker's label on and add its own label saying the vehicle as altered conforms to the federal standards affected.[10] Some builders are also RV Industry Association members, whose units carry the seal that most campgrounds, RVIA says, require: 13 verified builder websites in our directory say RVIA.[13][1]

DIY kit. Washington requires a State Patrol inspection when a motor home is assembled from a conversion kit by someone other than a licensed motor home manufacturer.[9]

Full DIY. Washington requires the same inspection when a motor home is homemade.[9] A DIY van cannot carry the RVIA seal; our RVIA guide explains why and what to do instead.

Insurance follows what is installed, not who installed it. Roamly says most DIY conversions qualify for Class B motorhome insurance once they have a permanent kitchen and sleeping area, with documentation, and that self-built campervan insurance typically costs $500 to $1,600 a year.[12] State by state, the details are in how to register a van as an RV, and cover in camper van insurance.

WHAT CAN GO WRONG ON EACH ROUTE?

With a builder, the risks are the contract, the deposit and the warranty. With a kit, it is what the kit leaves out. With full DIY, it is the safety-critical systems and your time. Each has a fix you can check before you start.

Builder. Warranties vary by company: Sportsmobile and Outside Van cover the conversion for 3 years or 36,000 miles, and Pleasure-Way, a Class B maker, five years or 60,000 miles.

[5][6][7] Of 662 verified builders, 13 state a warranty term on their own site.[1] Get it in writing; our step-by-step on how to choose a van builder covers registry and NHTSA lookups, deposits and red flags.

DIY kit. A kit covers only what its maker lists; ask whether electrical, water, heat and ventilation are in it. Browse DIY conversion kit makers.

Full DIY. The electrical, propane and heater systems are where mistakes hurt people. Follow the manuals, fit a carbon monoxide alarm, and use a licensed professional where a manual or code says to: see van electrical, propane and CO detectors, and the parts makers we checked.

HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR VAN CONVERSION ROUTE, STEP BY STEP

Six decisions, in the order that saves the most money. None of them needs a tool; all of them need a pen and an honest answer.

SKILL	STEPS
Beginner	**6**

01 Write down how you will use the van

List how many nights a year you will sleep in it, how many people, the coldest and hottest trips, how many days off grid in a row, whether you will work from it and what gear must fit. These answers decide which systems you need, and so the size of the job. A weekend van without water or heat is a far smaller build than a four-season home.

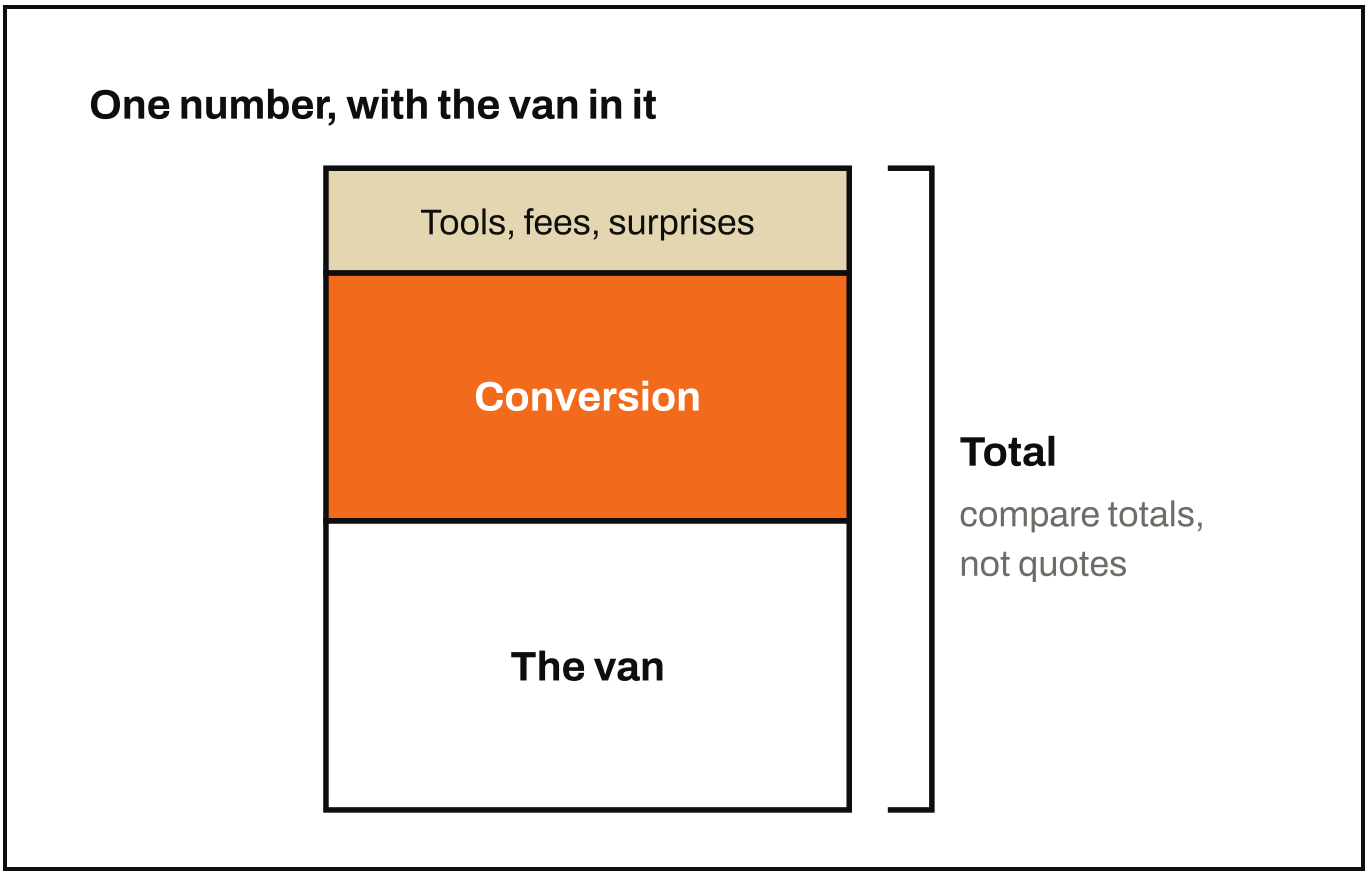
How will you use it?

- [x] Nights a year in the van
- [ ] How many people sleep in it
- [ ] Coldest and hottest trips
- [ ] Days off grid in a row
- [ ] Work from the van?
- [ ] Must fit: bikes, boards, dog



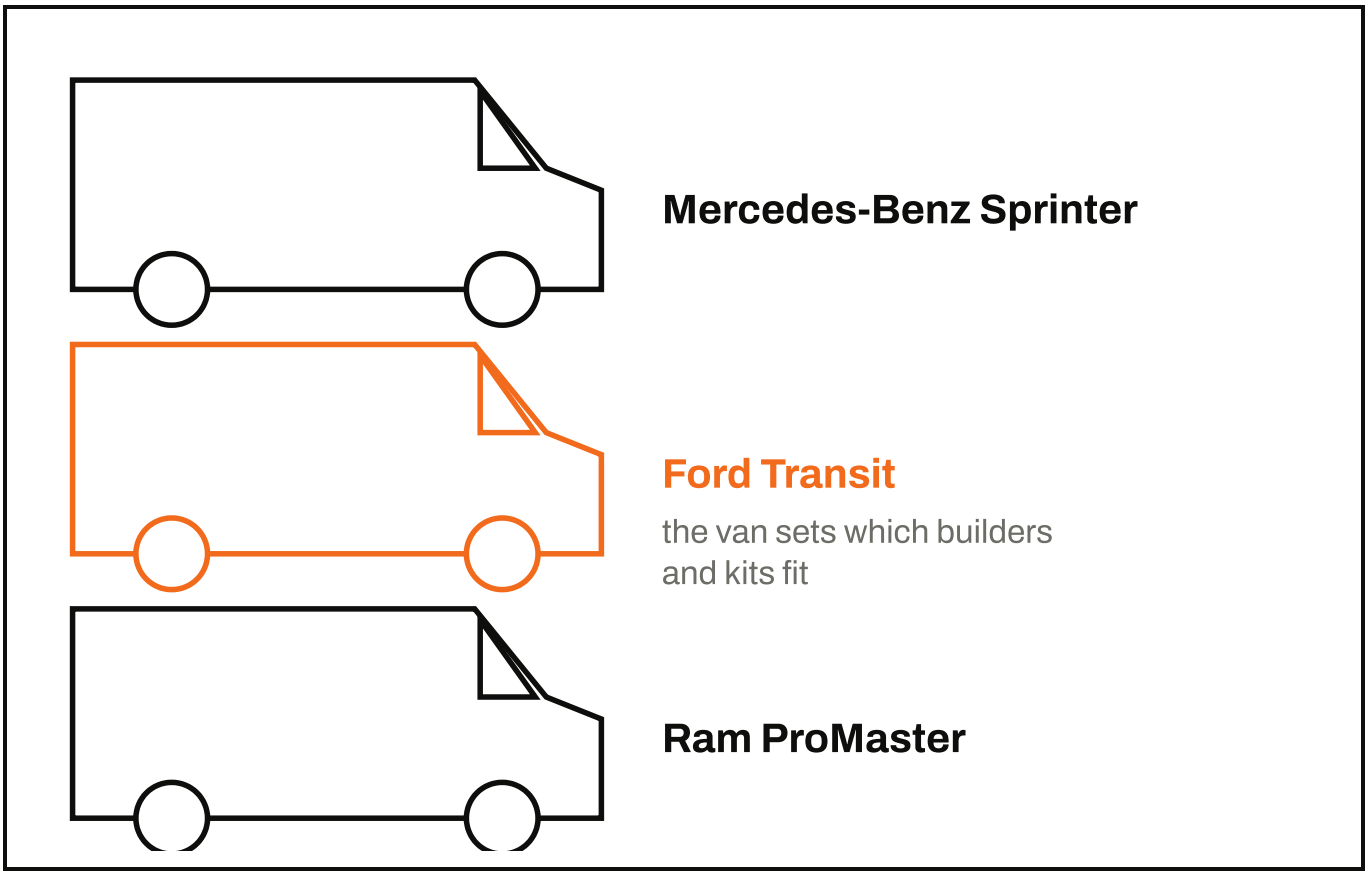
02 Set one budget that includes the van

Add the van, the conversion, and tools and fees into one number. Compare totals, not quotes: 43 of the 103 published builder prices we hold leave the van out.[1] For DIY, The Vansmith adds 20% for surprises.[2] See the cost guide for every published price.



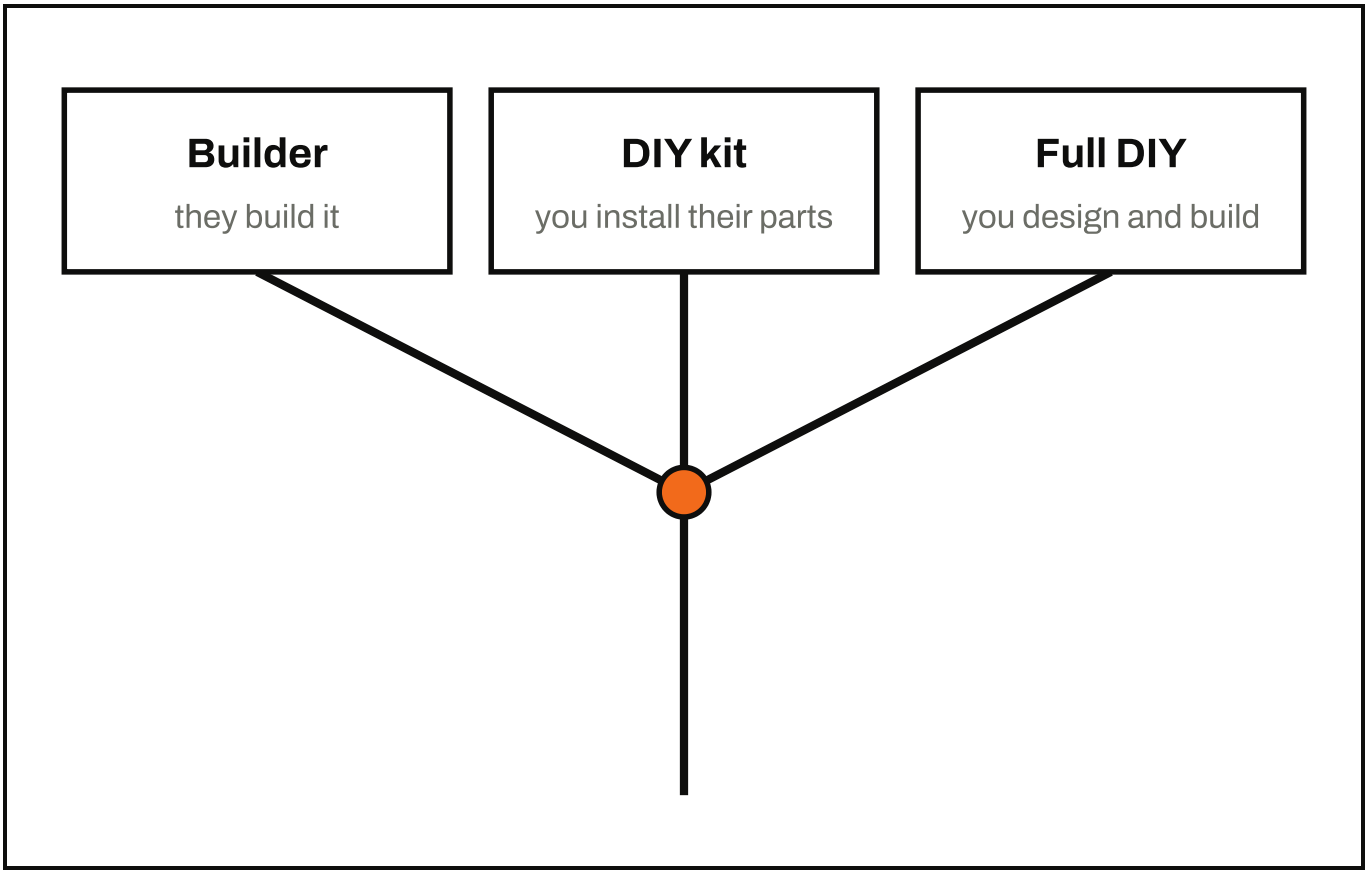
03 Pick the van before the route

The Sprinter, Transit and ProMaster differ in size, drive and price, and every builder and kit is made for particular vans. Start with Sprinter vs Transit vs ProMaster and, for a Sprinter, 144 vs 170.



04 Choose builder, kit or full DIY

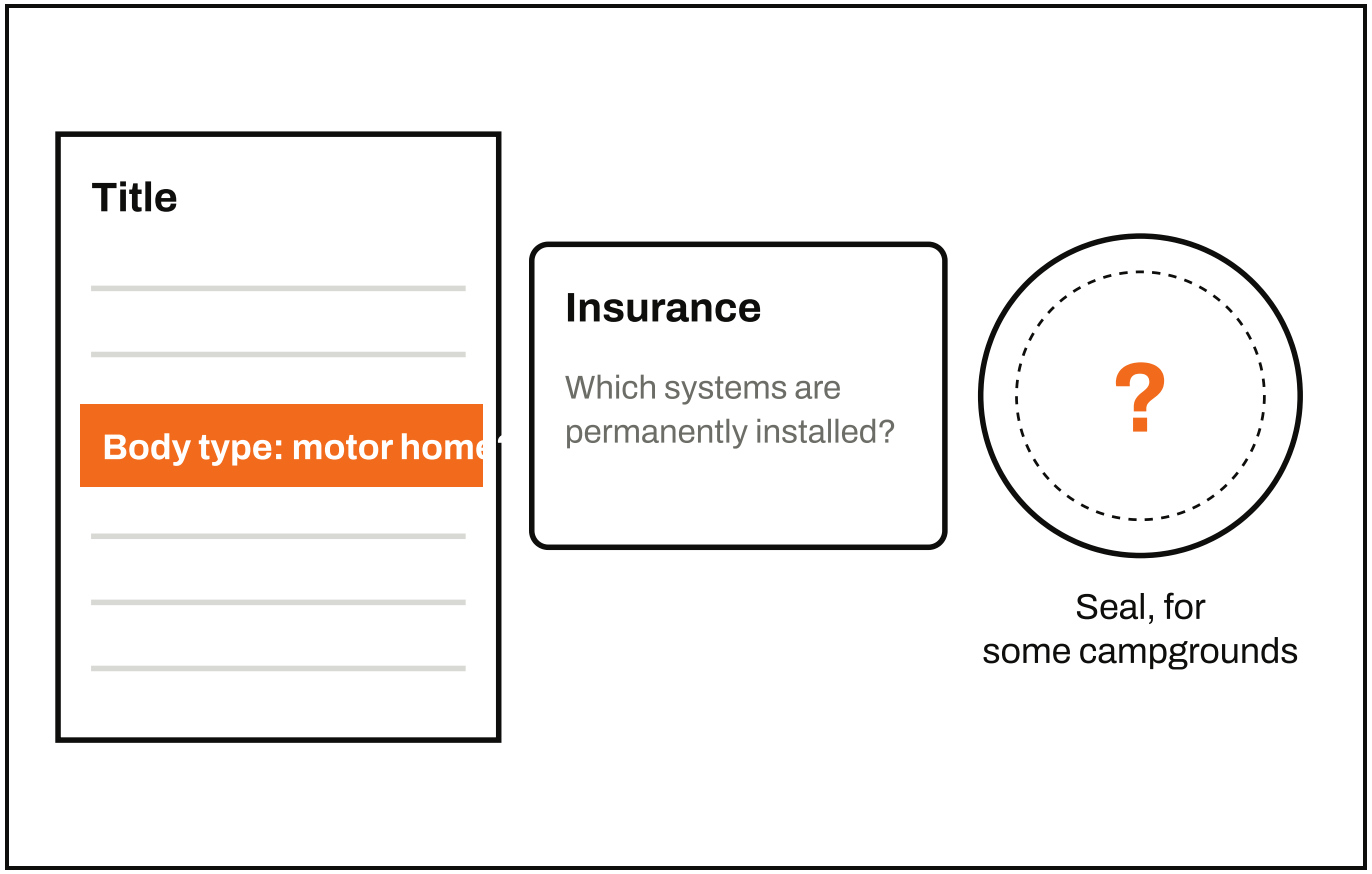
Use the comparison table above and be honest about two things: how many weekends you really have, and whether you can do the electrical, propane and heater work to the manuals. If not, a builder, or a kit plus a professional for those systems, is the safer route. Class B vs custom vs DIY adds the factory option.



05 Check title, insurance and campground rules

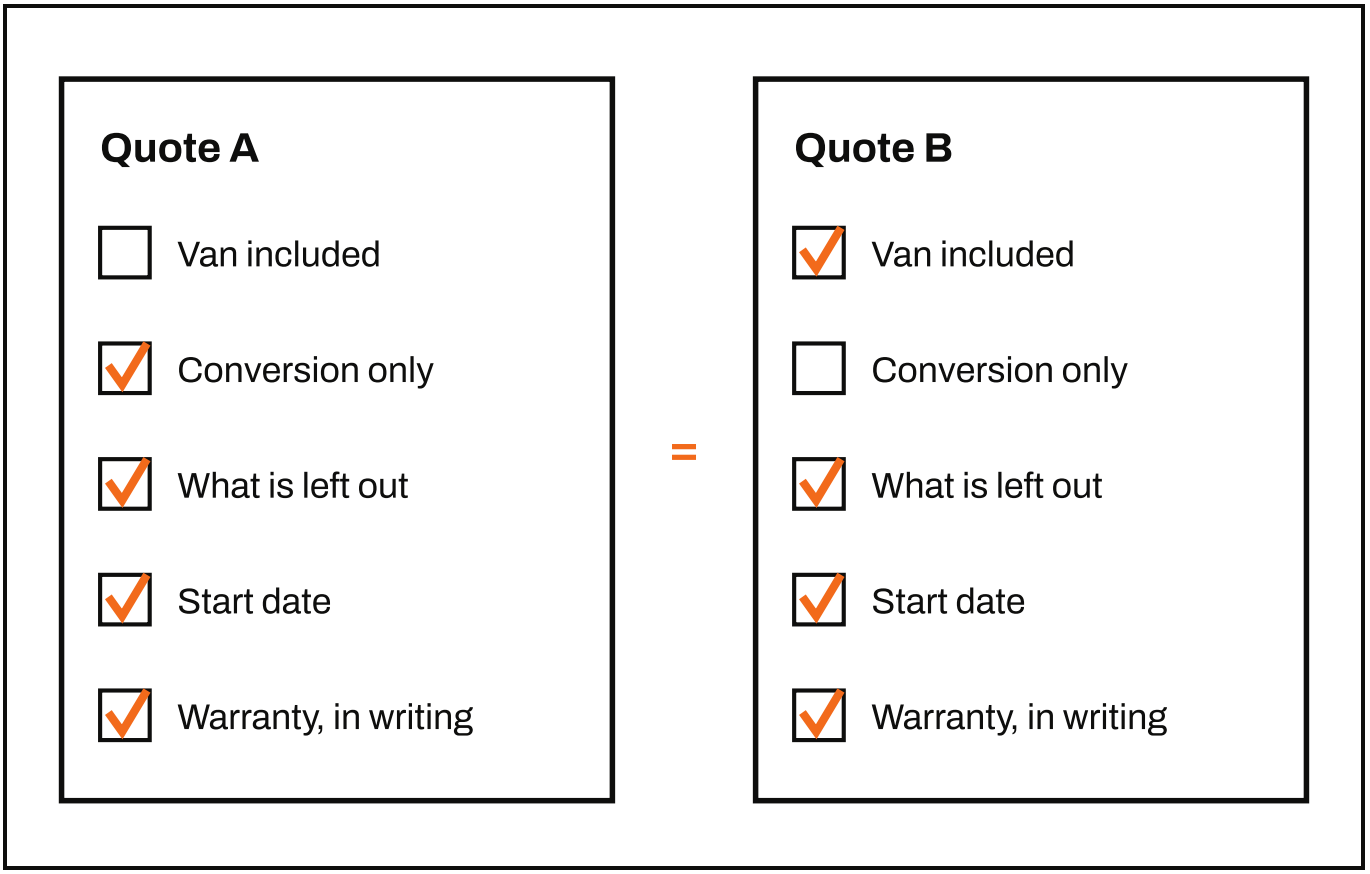
Ask your state how it titles a converted van and whether it inspects homemade or kit-built motor homes, as Washington does.[9] Ask an insurer what must be permanently installed.[11] If you use private campgrounds, ask whether they require the RVIA seal, which a DIY van cannot carry.[13]

Caution. Rules differ by state and change; this is general information, not legal advice. Confirm with your DMV.



06 Get written quotes or a written build plan

For a builder, get written quotes that each say whether the van is included, what is left out, the start date and the warranty, then vet the builder or ask us to match you. For a kit or DIY build, write the systems, the parts list and the order of work before you buy anything: the DIY build guide has the order.

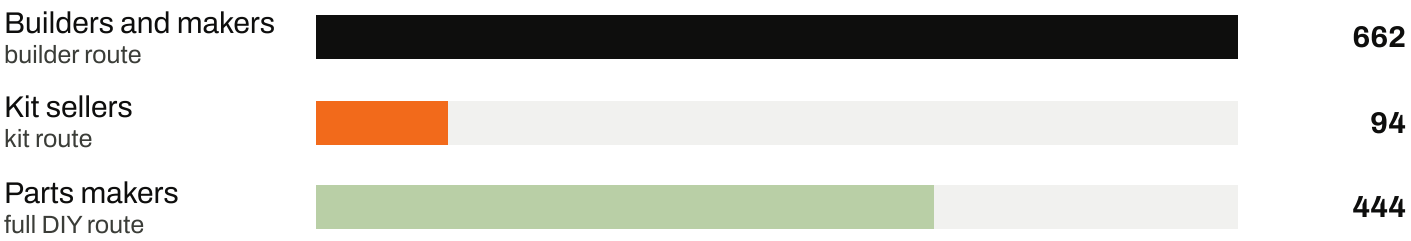


WHERE DO YOU FIND BUILDERS, KITS AND PARTS?

In our directory, which lists only businesses whose own websites we have checked: 662 verified builders, 94 verified kit sellers and 444 verified parts makers, counted at build time. [1]

OUR DIRECTORY

Verified businesses for each route



Computed from our directory at build time; a business that builds vans and sells kits counts in both groups. [1]

Camper van builders, by state and by van, with prices and lead times where they publish them.

DIY conversion kits and parts makers.

The DIY library, system by system.

Not sure? Tell us what you want and get matched with builders that fit.

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

QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

What is a van conversion?

Turning an empty cargo van into a camper you can sleep, cook and live in: a bed, a galley, electrical power, water, ventilation, insulation and usually heat, fixed in place. A finished one is often called a camper van or, when an RV maker builds it to a floor plan, a Class B RV.

How much does a van conversion cost?

It depends on the route. Verified builders in our directory publish starting prices from $9,750 to $239,097, some with the van and some without. Kits from verified kit makers run $2,375 to $27,995 before the van. One builder's DIY checklist puts materials at $15,000 to $45,000, plus the van.

Is it cheaper to convert a van yourself?

In money, usually; in time, no. A full DIY build costs the van, materials and tools, and one builder's checklist says to budget 20% extra for surprises. It typically takes 3 to 12 months of weekends, against a few weeks to several months in a builder's shop.

How long does a camper van conversion take?

At a builder, the 83 verified builders that publish a time range quote anything from a few weeks to more than six months. A DIY build typically takes 3 to 12 months working weekends, or 2 to 6 months full time, per The Vansmith's checklist.

Do converted vans hold their value?

We could not open an independent depreciation figure. An owner story on Thor Industries' site says factory-built camper vans tend to retain their value relatively well, and that conversion quality varies so much that custom vans can be hard to value. Keep receipts and photos either way.

Do I have to register a converted van as an RV?

Titling is a state matter and rules differ. Washington, for example, requires a State Patrol inspection when a motor home is homemade or assembled from a conversion kit by someone other than a licensed manufacturer. Our register-van-as-rv guide compares six states.

Can I insure a DIY van conversion?

Yes, with an insurer that covers self-built vans. Progressive lists six systems that must be permanently installed for its motorhome policy. Roamly says most DIY conversions qualify once they have a permanent kitchen and sleeping area, and puts typical cost at $500 to $1,600 a year.

Is a van conversion kit worth it?

A kit saves the design and the carpentry, not the van, the systems or the fitting. Verified kit makers publish kits from $2,375 to $27,995. In Washington, a motor home assembled from a kit by someone other than a licensed manufacturer needs a State Patrol inspection, same as a homemade one.

SOURCES

Counts and prices are computed at build time from our directory of businesses whose own websites we checked, latest check 24 November 2026; only verified listings are used, and only prices published in US dollars. Time ranges are the first "weeks" or "months" range in each builder's own lead time statement; some describe the wait for a slot and some the build itself, so read the chart as a spread, not a promise. Everything else is from the pages listed, read 25 November 2026. This is general information, not legal or financial advice.

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

The Vansmith, Ultimate Van Conversion Checklist (a Colorado builder's published checklist) (https://thevansmith.com/blogs/your-van-build/van-build-checklist-everything-you-need-before-you-start). Read 25 November 2026

Mercedes-Benz Vans, 2027 Sprinter Cargo Van (starting MSRP) (https://www.mbvans.com/en/sprinter/cargo-van). Read 25 November 2026

Sportsmobile, What Is a Class B RV? (a custom builder's view) (https://sportsmobile.com/what-is-a-class-b-rv/). Read 25 November 2026

Sportsmobile, Quality and warranty FAQ (https://sportsmobile.com/quality/). Read 25 November 2026

Outside Van, Custom vans (warranty) (https://outsidevan.com/custom-vans/). Read 25 November 2026

Pleasure-Way Industries, Warranty (https://pleasureway.com/warranty/). Read 25 November 2026

Thor Industries, To Build or To Buy? (an owner story on an RV maker's site) (https://www.thorindustries.com/stories/buy-build-class-b-campervan). Read 25 November 2026

Washington State Department of Licensing, Registering motorhomes (https://dol.wa.gov/vehicles-and-boats/vehicles/vehicle-registration/register-other-vehicles-and-other-services/registering-motorhomes). Read 25 November 2026

49 CFR Part 567, Certification: 567.3 (alterer) and 567.7 (persons who alter certified vehicles), eCFR, up to date as of 23 November 2026 (https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-49/subtitle-B/chapter-V/part-567). Read 25 November 2026

Progressive, How to insure your DIY campervan (https://www.progressive.com/answers/diy-camper-van-insurance/). Read 25 November 2026

Roamly, How to Insure a Self-Built Campervan (https://www.roamly.com/learning-center/how-to-insure-self-built-campervan). Read 25 November 2026

RV Industry Association, Standards & Regulations (the seal and campgrounds) (https://www.rvia.org/standards-regulations). Read 25 November 2026