Camper shell housing for the environmentally ill

Camper shells are used by several people with chemical and/or electrical sensitivities as moderate-cost portable housing for travel or long-term living.

Keywords: housing, camping, low cost, portable, emergency, low EMF, less toxic, healthy, electrical sensitivity, MCS, chemical sensitivity

What is a camper shell

A camper shell covers the bed of a pickup truck to provide low-cost shelter for one person (rarely two). It is like a simple, no-frills travel trailer without a bathroom, or a non-toxic tent on wheels.

Camper shells are used for travelling and some people live in them long-term while staying at campgrounds, public lands or next to a house that provides bathroom facilities.
2  Camper shell

The benefits are:

• less toxic than travel trailers
• low cost (if owning a pickup truck)
• portable

The drawbacks are:

• no heating or cooling
• little room
• confining in a rainy climate
• possible reaction to materials

Using a camper shell

People usually sleep on a cot inside the camper shell. Low-height cots are available to increase the headroom; it is more comfortable if it is possible to sit up on the cot.

Some people have removed the plastic truck bed liner if it still smells, or has become contaminated.

It is not realistic to have a portable toilet inside, unless it is the kind with single-use plastic bags. Some people use restrooms at campgrounds or other public restrooms.

Some people have installed simple 12 volt lighting inside, either powered by the truck or a small solar panel.

Cooking is done outside on portable stoves, either electric or propane. Propane stoves are cleaner burning than “white gas” Coleman fuel and much cheaper than butane. They are also quite tolerable if used in open air. Avoid single-use gas canisters as they tend to leak once the seal is broken.

Water can be transported in a plastic tank that can be filled when convenient. For drinking water it is best to use one-gallon (3.8 liter) glass bottles that can be filled at reverse-osmosis vending machines.

Size of pickup bed

There are generally two sizes of pickup beds to choose from. The compact version is a tight fit for a cot (see picture) while the full-size version is both longer and wider. It is possible to sleep two people in the full-size truck bed.
Where to buy

Camper shells are available used, mass-produced and custom-built. The used and mass-produced models are available from various sources, such as RV (caravan) camping dealers, on-line web sites and private sellers. Used models can be contaminated but many are not. They are not easily contaminated. New models are usually made of fiberglass and will need extensive off-gassing time.

*Custom built unpainted aluminum camper shell over a compact pickup bed, with low-height cot. Used year round.*
Custom built camper shells are available in steel and aluminum that is welded together. They cost about $1500-$2000 but are generally the most tolerable and can be ordered in various sizes and configurations. The most tolerable are those built of unpainted anodized aluminum or stainless steel.

Custom shells are available directly from the shops making them or through some RV/caravan dealers.

**Choosing a camper shell**

There are many models available. The basic choices are:

- size
- material
- window type
- door type

Place your cot in the truck bed and measure how much room you need to sit up before ordering.
The camper shells are available in acrylic plastic, fiberglass, aluminum and steel. The choice of material is very important and what will work best depends on the person's sensitivities. In general, the acrylic shells are unlikely to work and the fiberglass shells will need years of offgassing. If buying new, it is probably best to get unpainted anodized aluminum or stainless steel.

Various types of windows are available, some with mosquito netting. Consider what will work best in your climate (rain, insects). It can be helpful to have a sliding window that matches the window on the truck cap, so there is access between the two parts without having to go outside.

The most common door is a hinged lid over the truck’s tailgate. Another option is to remove the tailgate and have a more regular hinged door that covers the opening.

![Custom camper shell with hinged door.](image)

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This website has additional articles about portable/temporary housing, as well as other articles about MCS/EHS housing at [www.eiwellspring.org/saferhousing.html](http://www.eiwellspring.org/saferhousing.html).