

Chapter 1.

Off the grid

Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.

—*Leonardo DaVinci*

Before World War II, we lived completely off the grid. Our home was an uninsulated 20- x 20-foot tarpaper shack along the Minnesota-Ontario border. As soon as I was old enough, my job was to carry the water from a neighborhood well, split and carry in the wood, and carry out the garbage and waste water. There was a path instead of a bath, and we used that outdoor toilet even when the temperature dropped to 50 degrees below zero. Light at night came from candles or from a kerosene lantern.

This was during the Great Depression but my sister and I never once felt deprived because we were more fortunate than many of our neighbors. My father was part owner of a small grocery store so we had plenty to eat, and he owned a 1934 Chevrolet sedan and a one-cylinder motorboat. This put us into the middle class.

So then, are electricity, indoor plumbing, central heating, and hot and cold water absolute necessities? Of course not, as any serious camper will confirm. On the other hand, I am not advocating a *permanent* return to the “simple life” although in chapter 3, I will talk about one couple who did just that.

At the present time, even some millionaires live off the grid while traveling, as evidenced by luxurious travel trailers, all terrain specialty vehicles, and motor homes costing hundreds of thousands of dollars. However, in the context of this book, “off the grid” refers to either a small truck or bus, or to small trailers that do not require an exterior 110-volt electrical connection and can be pulled by a small pickup or a mid-sized SUV.

Although considerable attention will be given to enclosed cargo trailers that are converted to travel trailers, there are other light-weight alternatives. One of them is a fiberglass egg. When you first see one of these jellybeans rolling down the Interstate, you may say to yourself, “Oh, how cute!” I refer to the Scamp 13 from Backus, Minnesota, and the Casita 13, currently manufactured in Rice, Texas. It is no coincidence that they look identical.



Back in 1971, the only one made was the Scamp. Details of what happened later are somewhat foggy but what is known is that in 1983 a Scamp employee quit, moved to Kerens, Texas, and started producing an identical trailer which he called a Casita. For some reason—perhaps advertising—Casita now outsells Scamp even though many of us think the Scamp is a slightly better trailer. In either case, and unlike other trailer owners, the Scamp and Casita people name their trailers. Some of these trailers currently on the road are named *Nest Egg*, *Eggscaliber*, *Eggstream*, *T42*, *Inn EggsIsle*, *Cadilegg*, *No Yolk*, *Snuggy Buggy*, *The Albino Twinkie*, *The Coconut Cottage*, *Cream Puff*, *Pea Pod*, *Muy Poco*, *Cuckoo’s Nest*, and *Backroads Bunkhouse*.

About two years ago I decided to buy a Scamp 13 and use it to get away from time to time in order to do some serious writing. Since there was a ten-month wait to order a new one, I searched for a late-model used Scamp. The only one available in the Pacific Northwest was for sale by a man in his eighties. He had ordered it a year earlier, paying list price plus \$800 freight. However, between the time he ordered it, and when it was finally delivered, his arthritis had gotten worse—so much so that he was unable to get

down on his knees to handle the discharge pipes from the holding tank. His asking price for this still-new trailer was the same as he paid except for the freight.

“But it’s last year’s model,” I protested, “so it should sell for less, no?”

“The reason I want the same as I paid,” he said, “is *because I can get it.*”

Right. Others who preferred not to wait were also showing interest so I counted out a stack of \$100 bills, titled it in the name of a limited liability company (LLC) from New Mexico, and named it *Poca Casa*.

Pros and cons of the Scamps and Casitas

Although what follows refers only to the Scamps, keep in mind that the Casita is virtually identical.

Pros:

Light in weight, as shown in the table below. The weights shown are figures taken from what actual owners have reported, rather from the bare, dry weights listed by Scamp. The weights are for a trailer loaded up and ready to go, with the propane bottles filled and water in the tanks.

	Interior length	Interior width	Interior height	Approx. travel weight
Scamp 13	10'	6'6"	6'1"	1,800 – 2,000 lbs.
Scamp 16	13'	6'6"	6'3"	2,500 – 2,700 lbs.

Also, despite their small size, these trailers have a propane furnace, hot and cold running water, a bathroom, a closet, cupboards, and a kitchen range and sink.

Cons:

First, they lack a roof rack with which to carry extra luggage, a canoe, or a kayak. Also, a roof rack is vital when used, along with a tarp, to keep the trailer in the shade. (See chapter 5.)

Second, most of the floor space is taken up with the kitchen, the furnace and the bathroom. In my own Scamp 13, I worked on my laptop computer in the dinette but the cushion was uncomfortable and the table was not the right height. I invariably take a mid-day nap but to do that in the Scamp, I had to lower the heavy table, add another board, and then put in cushions to make it into a bed. After the nap, of course, I had to reverse the procedure, and then do it again if I stayed overnight.

And third, the uncomfortable cushions were no substitute for a real mattress. After the first night I bought a sponge mattress to put on top of the Scamp's thin cushions. Better, but then the problem was where to store the extra mattress during the day. (Since I was not using the trailer's bathroom, I stuck it in there.)

Later, I tried to fit a folding chair and a tiny adjustable table into the so-called "open" space, so I would be more comfortable working on my laptop, but adequate space was simply not there.

Scamp claims that its 13-footer, equipped with the bathroom, will nevertheless sleep two people. True, but the double bed that converts from the dinette runs *across* the trailer. This means that when the sleeper in the back gets up in the night, he or she needs to crawl over (and wake up) the sleeper in the front. Not a happy feature, which is why I recommend the 13-foot model only for one adult plus a dog or cat. (The 16-footer is slightly better but the floor space is still extremely limited.)

The approximate prices of the Scamps with bath and custom oak cabinets (the oak option is highly recommended and is not available on Casitas) are \$12,700 for the 13-

footer and \$16,000 for the 16-footer. All other options are extra, *including shipping from Backus, Minnesota*, which alone may raise the price by another \$1,000.

Due to the aforesaid lack of floor space, I sold my Scamp. However, I still liked the idea of having a small, light-weight trailer as a mobile home office. However, it would have to have a sturdy table, a comfortable office chair, an easy chair for relaxing and reading, and a comfortable bed. Further, it would be great to have a roof top carrier for my Clipper canoe, and some way to carry a friend's motorcycle or his small all-terrain vehicle (ATV).

Most of all, it still had to be light enough to be easily towed by either our Lexus LS sedan or by our Toyota Highlander. The one manufacturer that seemed to have the answer was Airstream, with their \$30,000 *BaseCamp*. However, in addition to the high price, the Airstream draws a great deal of attention due to its flashy design. I prefer to travel more "on the QT", which is the title of the next chapter.

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