

# TO THE FIELDS OF GOLD

**THE LOWDOWN ON  
LIVING IT UP IN THE  
HI-LO TOWLITE 15T  
AND THE DAKOTA  
CREW CAB TRX4**

by Marleen Canniff

PHOTOS BY DAN SULLIVAN

# W

ith carpets of goldfields covering the countryside, we were compelled to witness the beauty of this floral wonderland. Behind the wheel of the 2008 Dodge Dakota Crew Cab TRX4 4 × 4 towing the 2009 Hi-Lo TowLite 15T telescoping trailer, we traversed the winding roads to and through Carrizo Plain to test ride this duo and to explore this National Monument in Southern California. Now this pair is a fairly small package, and as in any place with limited space, it makes sense to bring compact supplies. So to ride the many flower-lined trails after we set up camp, we made sure to bring our Downtube fold-up bikes.

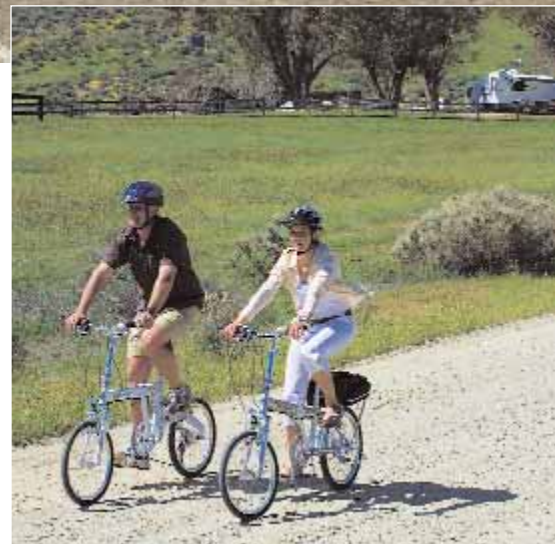
## **GETTING THERE**

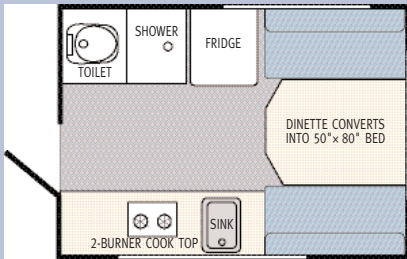
But getting to the campsite was half the fun. We took the Golden State Freeway (Interstate 5) north, and our test Dakota's 4.7-liter V-8 engine (\$985) maintained power up the initial 5-mile, 5-percent grade, starting the trip out with vigor. Producing 302 hp at



4,600 rpm and 329 lb-ft of torque at 3,600 rpm, this midsize truck packed more than enough power to handle this scenic freeway. Also, the Dakota is rated to tow up to 6,800 pounds, so it towed the 2,700-pound wet weight of the TowLite 15T up the grade with little effort. And through the Tejon Pass on the zigzagging stretch of I-5 known as the Grapevine, the truck retained control all the way down the 6-percent grade. We didn't see many wildflowers through this area, but on each side of the canyon walls we saw patches of what looked like ivy, but are instead descendent vines dating back to the thick Cimarron grapevines that the early settlers hacked through in the 1800s to make this road.

Even with the twists and turns on the Grapevine, the speeds on this interstate usually remain high, but we had no problem keeping up and were comfortable with the combo's handling. Often times when large vehicles pass travel trailers at high speeds, sway becomes a problem, but not with this outfit. Hi-Lo's low travel profile of 5 feet 9 inches made sway and drag just about nonexistent, which, in turn, made this duo more





## TOWLITE 15T

**EXT LENGTH:** 15'

**EXT WIDTH:** 7' 10"

**EXT HEIGHT:** 8' 3" (minus A/C)

**EXT TRAVELING HEIGHT:** 5' 9"

**INT WIDTH:** 7' 7½"

**INT HEIGHT:** 6' 3½"

**CONSTRUCTION:** Molded fiberglass exterior, aluminum framing, polystyrene insulation

**FRESHWATER CAP:** 15.5 gal

**BLACK-/GRAY-WATER CAP:** 18/32 gal

**LP-GAS CAP:** 10 gal

**WATER-HEATER CAP:** 6 gal

**REFRIGERATOR:** 3 cu-ft

**FURNACE (1):** 12,000 BTU

**AIR CONDITIONER (1):** 13,500 BTU

**CONVERTER:** 45 amps

**BATTERY (1):** 12-volt

**TIRES:** ST205/75R15

**SUSPENSION:** Rubber, trailing arm

**WEIGHT:** 2,720 lb (freshwater, water heater, LP-gas full, no cargo)

**HITCH WEIGHT:** 320 lb

**AXLE WEIGHT:** 2,400 lb

**CARGO CARRYING CAPACITY:** 480 lb

**GROSS VEHICLE WEIGHT RATING:** 3,200 lb

**GROSS AXLE WEIGHT RATING:** 3,200 lb

**MSRP BASE:** \$16,513

**MSRP AS TESTED:** \$19,865

**BASIC WARRANTY:** 1 yr limited/unlimited lift system

## DAKOTA CREW CAB TRX4 4 × 4

**FUEL ECONOMY, MPG:** Solo: 18.5; towing: 13.2

**0-60 MPH, SEC:** Solo: 8.94 towing: 13.39

**40-60 MPH, SEC:** Solo: 5.75 towing: 8.94

**ENGINE:** 4.7-liter V-8

**HP:** 302 @ 4,600 rpm

**TORQUE:** 329 lb-ft @ 3,600 rpm

**TRANSMISSION:** 5-spd auto w/overdrive

**AXLE RATIO:** 3.92:1

**FUEL CAP:** 22 gal

**TIRES:** P265/70R16

**SUSPENSION, F/R:** Coil-over shock/leaf springs

**BRAKES (F/R):** Disc/drum w/ABS

**TOW RATING:** 6,800 lb

**GROSS VEHICLE WEIGHT RATING:** 6,010 lb

**GROSS COMBINED WEIGHT RATING:** 11,700 lb

**WEIGHT AS TESTED:** 4,900 lb

**PAYLOAD AS TESTED:** 1,110 lb

**LENGTH:** 18' 3"

**WHEELBASE:** 131.3"

**MSRP, BASE:** \$29,745

**MSRP, AS TESTED:** \$35,825

**BASIC WARRANTY:** 3 yr/36,000 mi; Lifetime powertrain



**Above:** The view from the back door was spectacular, making cooking in the kitchen all the more pleasurable. **Right:** These collapsible and removable under-the-seat storage bins come standard with all Crew Cab models. **Opposite page:** The Dodge and Hi-Lo faced this herd of cattle for an amusing display of bold elegance.

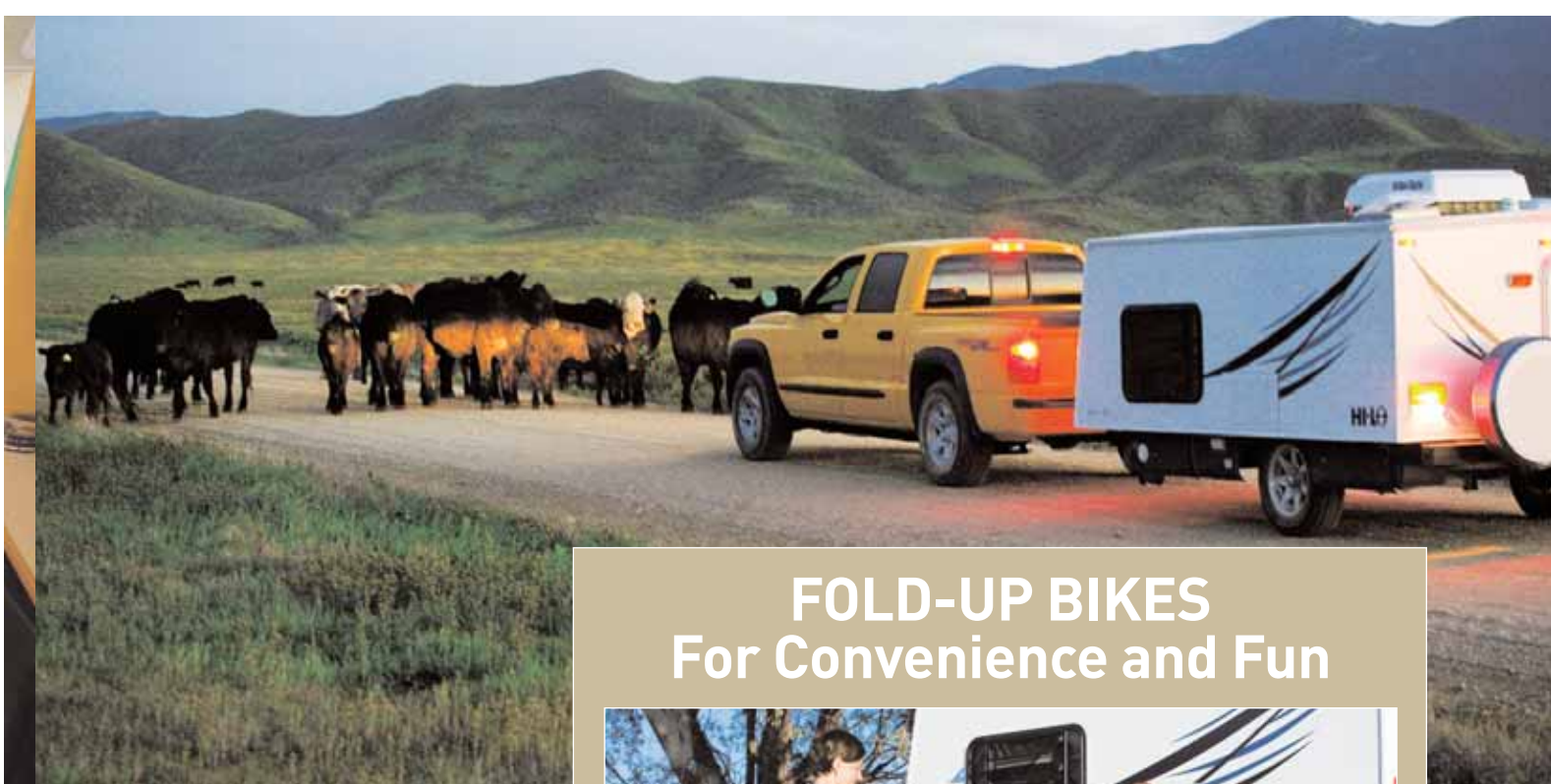


fuel-efficient than many other towing packages — solo, the Dakota turned in a reasonable 18.5 mpg and dropped only to 13.2 mpg when pulling the TowLite. And for an added perk, Dodge designed this truck to also operate on E85 ethanol, making it a flex-fuel vehicle.

The multi-speed overdrive automatic transmission (\$75) made driving this distance pleasant, but the distance ran us low on fuel and there are no gas stations after arriving to Carrizo Plain from Highway 58. So we fueled up before heading in, finding a nearby gas station by using the test vehicle's MyGIG MultimediaSystem with GPS navigation (\$1,445). We used this system to map our entire road trip, and even connected our cell phones to the Bluetooth connection so we could speak with friends and family back home through the truck's speakers to let them know that we'd be out of cell service after entering Carrizo Plain.

We took Soda Lake Road to get to our destination KCL campground and found that portions of the road are unpaved. But the coil-over shock front and leaf-spring rear suspensions on the truck helped make the ride smooth and in control, while

the rubber suspension system on the Hi-Lo contributed to an easy ride for our supplies back in the trailer. Just a couple miles before reaching camp, we happened upon cattle crossing the road. We could see the herd a quarter-mile away, so there was no need for us to use the optionally equipped four-wheel anti-lock brakes offered in the Extra Security Package (\$640); however, we decided to test them out anyway, after the herd was behind us. But not too fast, as we hung out for a while admiring the bold stance of these beasts and taking lots of pictures. While testing the brakes a bit



## FOLD-UP BIKES For Convenience and Fun



down the road, the truck and trailer remained in control, and we stopped with mostly desired results; we experienced some minor slippage — as expected — while trying to maintain traction on the unpaved road.

Inside the truck, we had ample space and were comfortable in the cloth bucket seats. Our test vehicle had optional heated front seats (\$250), but the days were warm, so we opted to use the air conditioner instead. Collapsible and removable storage bins are under the 60/40 split-folding rear seats, where we could store snacks for the trip. We arrived at the campground near dusk and were lucky to score a campsite because the KCL campground runs on a first-come, first-served basis with no reservations taken.

### LIVING IT UP

The view from our campsite was spectacular as the sun was setting, but we wanted to get the trailer set up before it got too dark. With a push of a button, the trailer's roof raised in less than a minute using its lifetime-guaranteed hydraulic system, turning it into a livable height of just less than 6 feet 4 inches. This rear-entry trailer looks smart with its fiberglass exterior side walls and seemingly simple telescoping design (with the upper half slightly larger than the lower half). The inside of the walls are constructed of backer board, polystyrene foam and aluminum tubing, and the interior is plywood paneling.

Ever since we learned about Downtube's fold-up bikes several years ago, we've wanted to take one on a ride. We tested the 2008 models 8H and FS. The 8H is an eight-speed, 20-inch-wheel bike with front suspension and an internal hub, which means no external shifter and no gears, so there's no way to improperly shift. And with the drivetrain completely sealed, it stays clean and is maintenance-free. The FS (full-suspension) is a nine-speed, 20-inch-wheel bike with a preload adjustable transarch suspension fork, alloy and stainless frame and stem quickreleases. And it's the lowest priced nine-speed folder out there.

It took only five minutes to open the shipping package and put together each bike after receiving them in the mail. It took mere seconds to fold each one up into its travel bag and pack them in the trailer and only seconds more to unfold them at the campsite. After adjusting the bikes to fit our sizes and riding styles, we spent several pleasant hours tooling around and exploring every nook and cranny around our campsite, checking out the wildlife and wildflowers.

But before taking off on our RVing trip, we were sure to check out the bike-fitting instructions on the company's Web site ([www.downtube.com/Bicycle\\_Fitting](http://www.downtube.com/Bicycle_Fitting)), to make sure we would enjoy our ride when we arrived. This link helped us in simple terms to understand and diagnose common causes of discomfort while riding, so we could make the proper adjustments to optimize our comfort — a valuable tool for any rider.

With all this excitement, we were surprised at how affordable the line of Downtube bikes is, with prices ranging from \$299 to \$585. For more information, call (215) 245-4032 or visit [www.downtube.com](http://www.downtube.com).

## TO THE FIELDS OF GOLD

Although it's a 15-footer, we noticed its spacious interior feel right away after entering and were amazed that this little trailer contained all the amenities of most full-sized trailers — except we missed having a microwave. We used the two-burner stove to make a quick meal and pulled out a cold one from the three-way fridge. There was plenty of elbowroom, even with three of us sitting at the dinette; but we had to take turns (two at a time) moving about the kitchen area — not unlike many small trailers.

The trailer holds only 15 gallons of freshwater and was equipped with two LP-gas cylinders and an on-board 12-volt DC power supply, but knowing we'd have no hook-ups at this campground, we brought along our generator and extra water in five-gallon containers for the trip just in case.

Due to the semi-arid grassland climate of the San Joaquin Valley, the days are much warmer than the nights, so we had to click on the furnace to warm our toes before bedtime. We set up the convertible



**This 15-footer has a comfortable dinette area that nicely converts to sleep up to four with the optional bunk.**

dinette to a 50-inch × 80-inch bed, and then pulled down the large optional bunk from above. The two sleeping areas were a perfect fit for the three of us, and we could have easily and comfortably had a fourth member in our party. The bed was snug enough, but a constant and uncomfortably cold draft oozed from the joint where the top and bottom sections of the trailer meet. We weren't expecting such a strong and cold night wind. We managed the draft a little by placing blankets and items against the seam to minimize the

cold air's entry. We spoke with the manufacturer after we returned and learned that a quick stop at the dealer before our trip for a simple cable adjustment would have allowed the trailer's roof to raise completely, which would have sealed the joint.

When the night winds blow and leaving the campsite to visit the campground's public facilities seems impossible to fathom, it certainly is convenient to have a toilet inside the trailer. But morning came quickly with the hoot of a great-horned owl that was sitting in a tree very near to

**Towing EQUATION**

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our trailer. Showers were possible within the very small partitioned bathroom area, and we were ready to start the day after a cup of hot tea, yogurt and some sweet strawberries. The morning grew warm with the rise of the sun, so we set out early to explore the area on our fold-up bikes.

### TOOLING AROUND

It seemed fitting and convenient to bring along fold-up bikes in such a compact RV package. We stored the bikes folded in their travel cases in the back of the trailer while in tow, but they would have also fit fine in the bed of the truck or even in the truck's back seat. They added only minimal weight to the load, and the fold-up style kept us from messing with bike racks and straps on the trailer or truck. We had never used fold-ups before, so we had only imagined that these bikes would be the ideal vehicle to explore the campground and surrounding trails. We couldn't have been more correct.

They were the perfect addition to our RVing adventure. They were not only con-

venient and easy to set up; they were also fun. The bike ride was so smooth and easy that we hardly noticed we were exercising. And the area we explored was absolutely beautiful. Not only did we see plenty of goldfields covering the ground, we also discovered yellow fiddleneck, purple phacelia and lupine, orange California poppies and baby blue-eyes all in the mix. We saw a desert cottontail, a California ground squirrel, that great-horned owl that hooted us awake and all kinds birds. A fellow camper told us that just days before she saw a pronghorn antelope, a San Joaquin kit fox and other animals in the area.

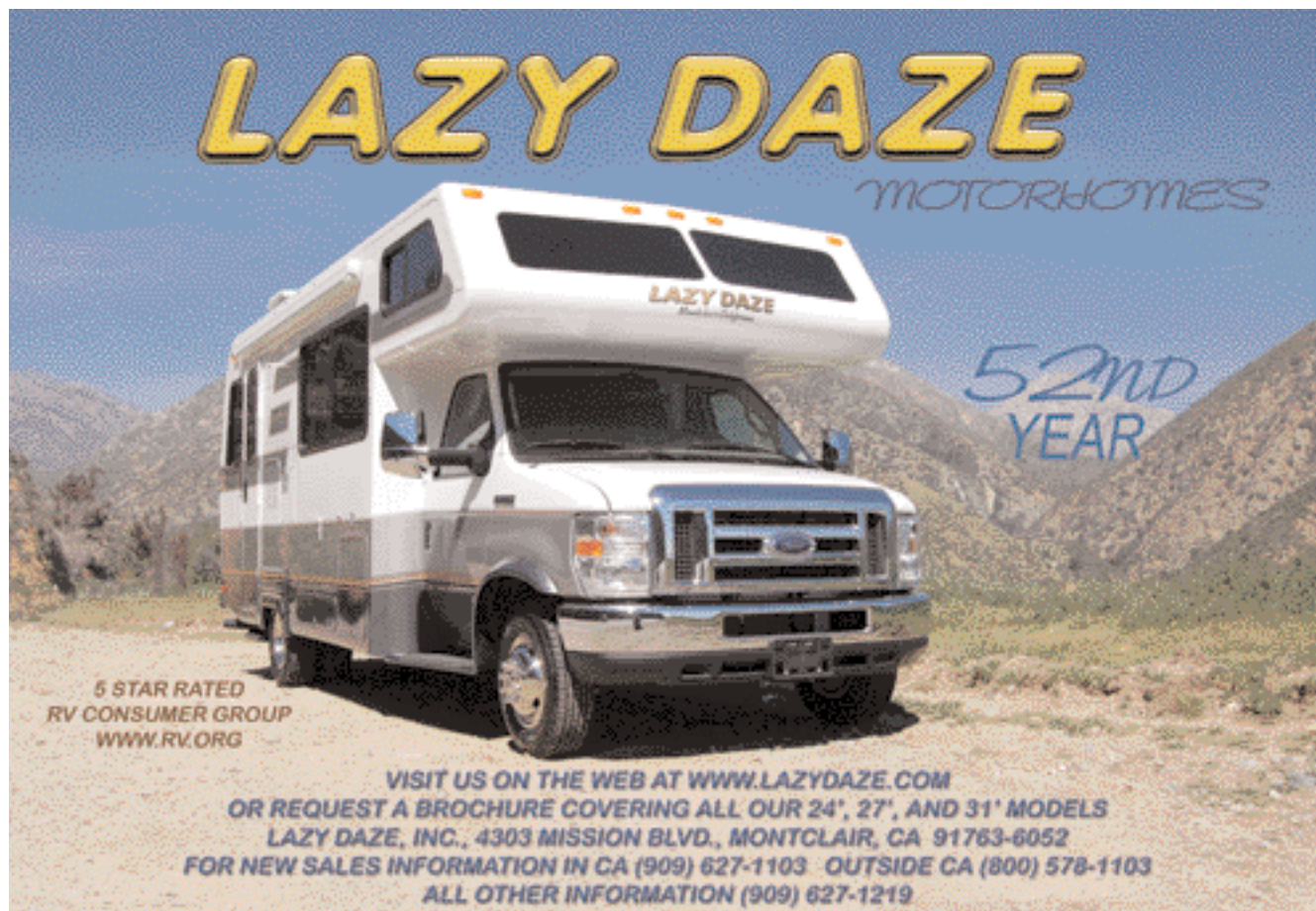
There's so much to see at Carrizo Plain. We ended up unhitching and driving solo to cover more ground, such as the San Andreas Fault site at the northeastern edge of the plain. We couldn't help but notice how the Detonator Yellow exterior paint of the Dakota matched the goldfields and fiddleneck so well. We then headed over to Painted Rock, a sacred, ceremonial site of the Chumash people, and finally checked

out Soda Lake. This time of year, the lake is a dry shimmering bed of white salt, but by November, the water will return with thousands of migrating birds to follow.

Back at camp, we folded up the bikes, packed our supplies, hitched up and, after checking the trailer interior to ensure everything was properly stowed, with a push of a button we lowered the Hi-Lo back down to travel mode. Driving away, we discovered how very similar the Dakota handles hitched up to this low-profile trailer compared to its solo drive. Enjoying the small size and ease of this package, we can pretty much say that this test ride was golden. 🚐

**Hi-Lo Trailer Company**, (800) 337-6490, [www.hilotrailer.com](http://www.hilotrailer.com). Circle 208 on Reader Service Card.

For more information on the area, contact **Carrizo Plain National Monument**, (661) 391-6000, [www.blm.gov/ca/bakersfield/carrizoplain.html](http://www.blm.gov/ca/bakersfield/carrizoplain.html).



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