



KEY FEATURES

# EQUIPMENT OVERLOAD

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## NEW GEAR FROM THE 2023 OVERLAND EXPO WEST

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**SURE**, it sounds like a fun assignment: Pick out the best dozen or so new products at the 2023 Overland Expo West. But given 417 vendors to scope out, and the necessity to weave my way through a record-breaking 30,000 attendees (and what *seemed* like approximately 29,000 dogs), while also teaching a few classes, it was actually brutal. No, okay, it was fun, but admittedly tough to narrow down a selection. The overland industry has reached a point where many “new” products are barely tweaked versions of existing products—there are only so many ways you can re-envision a composite traction board, for example. Nevertheless, I found bright spots of genuine imagination—consider the porta-potty that includes a

little bell-shaped privacy tent you deploy and wear on your head. Intriguing, but watching an Expo-attendee fighting a breeze while trying to plop down on the seat made me pass it by. I was reminded of the axiom, “Sometimes it’s good to think outside the box; other times it’s best to stay in there and have someone tape it shut.”

**ASIDE FROM** one global debut of universal, as well as personal, significance, my editorial eye passed on most vehicles. Instead, I found a number of companies trying for real innovation and practicality in smaller products. One thing was clear: The enthusiasm for self-sufficient, vehicle-based exploration—and the gadgets that go along with it—is still far from tapering off.



## **BENCHMADE MEATCRAFTER**

It looks like a fillet knife on steroids, and that's exactly what it is. The Meatcrafter would be equally at home deboning a cod or a caribou—in fact it might easily function as a one-knife solution for game prep and camp chefs. (My sample is going to Alaska with me, where it will get the chance to prove it.) There's just enough flex in the tip for detail work, with a stiffer spine closer to the grippy G10 handle surrounding a full tang. The Meatcrafter starts at \$200 in premium CPM-154 steel, and goes up to \$370 if you want super-premium CPM-S45VN steel at 60-62 HRC. (If you need something stouter, look up the company's Station Knife, like a chef's knife and cleaver rolled into one.)

**\$200-\$370; [benchmade.com](http://benchmade.com)**



## **DOMETIC TRT 140 AIR TENT**

Apologies, but the pun came unbidden: This air-framed Dometic roof-top tent blew me away. Erecting the TRT 140 Air is as simple as pushing the button on the included 12-volt pump, inflating the structure majestically in a couple minutes to astonishing tautness—far better than most poled roof tents of my experience. Deflating for travel is even faster: Pull the main plug and WHOOSH—flattened in about three seconds. (Warning: This offers tempting opportunities for practical jokes by fellow campers.) The air frame also makes this tent about 25-percent lighter than an equivalent traditional model. Given the scores of RTTs on the market, I'm hard to impress. This one did.

**\$2,500; [dometic.com](http://dometic.com)**



## TOYOTA 2024 TACOMA

As a two-time Tacoma owner and a vocal critic of Toyota's "we're-number-one-why-worry" approach to the last redesign, I greeted the Expo's global debut of the 2024 model with something approaching ecstasy. The new Tacoma returns to a proper, fully boxed chassis, and on several

models offers a multi-link coil rear suspension. A 2.4-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine comes in four states of tune—none of them sub-par—with the high-end hybrid producing 326 horsepower and an astounding 465 pound-feet of torque at a diesel-like 1,700 rpm. It's much better

looking than the slab-fronted Tundra, with an elegant interior and a wide range of cabs and beds. ARB-sourced components? Recovery capable rear bumper? Disconnectible front anti-roll bar? I'm ready to do that Toyota jump again.

**Prices vary; [toyota.com](https://toyota.com)**



## VANULTRA QUICK-RELEASE MOUNTS

Let's face it: Some people enjoy driving around town with a 130-pound roof tent in place to prove they're genuine explorers. Others of us would rather have that awkward, aerodynamic brick off there between journeys. Vanultra's Quick-Release Mounts—with adapters to fit just about every roof rack on the market—make detaching a two-minute job. Yet security is ensured with optional hitch-pin-style locks, on one or as many corners as you like. Next up from the company: a hoist system for garages to lift and store the tent ready for re-deployment. (Don't worry—the MaxTrax and Rotopax will still let everyone know you're an overlander.)

**\$349; [vanultra.com](https://vanultra.com)**



### WAGAN 40A DC-DC BATTERY CHARGER

Today's increasingly complex auxiliary 12V power systems require increasingly sophisticated management. I was impressed with the Wagan's specs—fully potted, dust- and waterproof elec-

tronics; intelligent three-stage charging, MPPT solar management and dead-simple mode selection—as well as its competitive pricing. The unit incorporates protection against reverse polarity,

over-and under-current and high temperature, and is compatible with newer "smart" alternator systems. A remote monitor will soon be added as an option. **\$400; wagan.com**



### OPTIMA ORANGETOP LITHIUM BATTERIES

Optima was a pioneer in AGM battery technology back in the 90s, but comes a little late to the LiFePO4 party. The results should be worth the wait. The Orangetop powersports battery lineup includes six models for motorcycles, ATVs, UTVs, personal watercraft and snowmobiles. They feature terminals at each corner for easy fitting in any configuration, microprocessor-controlled management system, IP67 rating against dust and water intrusion and a built-in jumpstart capability that preserves starting power from parasitic loads. Also, of course, each battery weighs less than half what an SLA equivalent would. And yes, Orangetop lithium batteries for full-size vehicles are in the works.

**\$200-\$330; optimabatteries.com**



### GOOSE GEAR PARK SERIES SLEEP & STORAGE SYSTEM

Subaru's surprisingly capable Outback has long been a favorite of economy-minded explorers, but its compactness means it can benefit from a little help with cargo organization. Leave it to the experts at Goose Gear to come up with a solution that not only creates a space for gear, but also for you. The company's modular Park Series storage system can be configured to provide an interior 6'6" sleeping platform for two, with gear below accessed by hatches and/or drawers. It comes flat-packed for economical shipping, and is easily assembled with a hex wrench. High-quality birch plywood-cored panels are weather-resistant and warp-proof, and the hexagon-patterned phenolic surface helps prevent your sleeping pad slipping around.

**\$2,160; goose-gear.com**



### TRUKD BED MOUNTS

No category of overland vehicle modification has exploded in popularity faster than the multi-purpose bed rack, a sort of MOLLE system for your pickup. While it's easy to get carried away with festooning ("Where the hell did I mount the fire extinguisher?"), the perforated side panels keep frequently needed items handy, and the overhead bars serve as a much better mounting base than the

roof for a roof tent, positioning it where it's more easily accessible and less aerodynamically harmful. Of all the models I looked at, the Trukd seemed the most versatile, with a seemingly endless number of configurations. Change at will from a cab-height system with full side panels to a low, two-bar set for carrying bicycles or, as you'll soon read, plywood. **\$850-\$2,100; [gettrukd.com](http://gettrukd.com)**



### ARB INTENSITY IQ DRIVING LAMPS

Can a single pair of driving lamps take the place of four or six, or, um, eight? The user-configurable four-optic design of the new Intensity IQ—super spot, spot, mid-range and flood—offers dozens of combinations in a single housing, from a low-range carpet of 5,700°K light to a Baja-racer pencil beam with nearly a mile of reach, or anything in

between or everything all at once. With up to 14,000 lumens of output from 31 Cree LEDs, there's simply no need to clutter your front end or roof rack with a row of single-purpose lamps. An ergonomic control switch allows up to eight preset configurations, easily selected by touch. **\$1,850 per pair; [arbusa.com](http://arbusa.com)**

### PLYBOO BAMBOO PLYWOOD

If you're considering a DIY build of a camper or van interior to suit your own needs and tastes, you'll want cabinet material that is strong, light, dimensionally stable and handsome. If it's eminently sustainable, that's even better. And there's no more sustainable building material than bamboo, which is, after all, grass. Strength? Construction crews in China still use multi-story scaffolding constructed from bamboo poles. After trying to bend a piece, I'd have no hesitation in going one size thinner for cabinetry than standard plywood. Plyboo can be cut and sanded with traditional woodworking equipment, and comes unfinished in either a natural or amber hue. This stuff is high on my list for redoing the interior cabinetry on our Land Cruiser Troopy. **Prices vary; [plyboo.com](http://plyboo.com)**

## METHOD BEAD GRIP WHEELS

Airing down the tires is the single best way to instantly increase your vehicle's off-road prowess. Lower pressures too far, however (under 10-12 psi or so), or do too much hooning while below street pressure, and you're likely to roll a bead off the rim, resulting in instant deflation and possible tire damage. Beadlock wheels, which mechanically clamp the bead, are one solution, but generally are not street legal. Method's Bead Grip wheels use machined grooves and a larger safety hump to firmly grip the beads at significantly lower pressures than a standard wheel. I wouldn't be surprised if they offer a solid 3 to 4 psi safety margin. They're lighter than beadlock wheels, and of course, fully street legal—not to mention stylish. **\$239-\$389; [methodracewheels.com](http://methodracewheels.com)**



## TREDDER INSURANCE

Is your overland vehicle insured? I mean, is all of your overland vehicle insured? The roof tent? Winch? Batwing awning, driving lamps, on-board air? Probably not, as many owners have found to their chagrin after an accident or theft. Tredder Insurance aims to solve that issue, with full umbrella coverage for every option you've added, from the roof rack down to the suspension and wheels. But that's not all: They'll also cover such things as kayaks and canoes, bikes and camera equipment. Plus, campsite liability, off-road recovery and emergency expenses, so you can embark on your next adventure with full peace of mind.

**Prices vary; [tredder.com](http://tredder.com)**



## BOXO OVERLAND TOOL KIT

Several all-in-one tool kits aimed at overlanders advertise one-stop-shop comprehensiveness. The Boxo kit actually comes close. Combination wrenches and 3/8 sockets from 8 to 19mm, 1/2-inch impact sockets from 16 to 21mm, plus 32 and 35. Ratchets, breaker bar, dead-blow and ball-peen hammer, various pliers, scissors and side cutters. Plus, hex and Torx keys, screwdrivers, a pry bar, even a flashlight, an electrical tester and a tire plug kit. It's all neatly organized in a roll and case with room for your own additions. Throw in a roll of duct tape and a can of WD-40 and you should be good to go.

**\$595; [boxousa.com](http://boxousa.com)** 

