

Every memorable RV trip I have been part of started long before the ignition turned. It started in the driveway with a hose, a bucket, and a method. A coach is a house, a work truck, and a billboard sharing the same chassis. It collects highway tar, coastal salt, pine sap, desert dust, and the smudges of every gas station between here and there. A good rv detailing routine preserves the mechanical parts you can't see and the finish you admire every time you walk back from a trailhead.

The checklist that follows is not about making a rig look shiny for photos. It is about avoiding water intrusion at a roof seam, preventing sun rot on seals, keeping bugs from etching a clearcoat, and stopping a mildew bloom in a closet. It is also about travel sanity. A steer tire haloed with brake dust runs hotter. A kitchen vent clogged with grease pulls poorly. A windshield smeared with product streaks is an eye strain at dusk. Attention here saves trouble later.

Start right: inspection and staging

Before a brush touches paint or gelcoat, take inventory. Park on level ground, extend slides if you plan to detail the slide sides and seals, and make sure the coach is cool to the touch. Direct sun bakes chemistry and makes even the best car detailing products misbehave. If you have to work in sunlight, prioritize the shady side and rotate the coach as needed.

Here is a tight pre-wash checklist that catches 90 percent of surprises:

- Roof scan, including AC shrouds, vents, skylights, antenna mounts, and sealant edges. Note cracks, loose screws, or chalking gelcoat.
- Front cap inspection for rock chips, bug loads, and any paint protection film lifting or yellowing.
- Decals and striping condition. Check for lifting edges, cracking, or brittleness, which affect decontamination and car polishing choices.
- Wheel and tire health. Look at valve stems, lug nuts, brake dust buildup, and sidewall cracking.
- Interior walkthrough for leaks, odors, and soft spots near windows, slides, and the bath. Note any stains that need targeted interior detailing.

Photograph issues you find. If you outsource work later, having a time-stamped record is useful.

Smart exterior wash strategy

I have learned not to rush the first rinse. A long, gentle pre-soak gets better results than aggressive brushing. Foam cannons help on tall coaches because surfactants cling to vertical panels. For exterior detailing, I prefer a pH-neutral soap on coated or well-kept finishes, and a stronger, but still paint-safe, cleaner on oxidized gelcoat. Start at the roof so you only have to clean panels once. Roof membranes vary. EPDM rubber prefers gentle soap and a soft brush with light pressure to avoid scuffing. TPO and fiberglass roofs can handle a bit more agitation.

Work in sections. From the roof, rinse downward and manage the runoff to avoid soap drying on the sides. For the sides, a two-bucket method with grit guards keeps tools from grinding road grit back into the finish. On tall surfaces, a telescoping boar's hair brush cuts fatigue. Around window frames and panel gaps, swap to a microfiber mitt or soft detailing brushes for precision. Rinse panels fully before they dry, then use an efficient drying towel or a filtered air blower to avoid spotting, especially on dark coaches and glass.

Most bug fields surrender to enzyme bug removers if you give them time to work. Spray, wait a few minutes, then nudge gently. Rubbing dry bug remains with pressure creates pigtailed you later chase with polish. Tar and

pitch usually need a dedicated solvent. Mind any aged decals. Solvents creep easily under lifted edges.

Wheels, tires, and wells

It is tempting to treat wheels as an afterthought. On a Class A, there is a lot of metal, and it shows from a hundred feet. Aluminum wheels with clearcoat need a pH-balanced wheel cleaner, not acid. Bare polished aluminum, often found on heavier rigs, handles stronger chemistry, but the finish etches quickly if you let cleaner sit. Agitate with a soft wheel brush and a lug nut brush. A foam swab around valve stems keeps cleaner from lingering.

Tires deserve a real scrub to remove browning. Work the sidewalls with a firm bristle tire brush and a dedicated rubber cleaner until the foam is white. Dress lightly. A glossy sling on a 22.5 inch tire flings a surprising distance, and it attracts dust. Matte, UV-stable dressings look natural and are easier to maintain. Wheel wells collect gravel and tar. A pressure rinse plus all purpose cleaner restores the black, then a trim restorer gives a uniform finish.

Decontamination, safely

A coach that lives under trees loads up with bonded contaminants in a few weeks. Even highway-only rigs pick up iron, especially behind the wheels. An iron remover, used cool and in the shade, bleeds purple as it dissolves ferrous particles. Clay comes next if the paint feels rough after washing and iron removal. Clay bars and synthetic clay mitts both work, but adjust to the surface. On delicate decals, avoid clay entirely, or at least test a gentle grade with tons of lube. On gelcoat, clay makes quick work of grime, but heavy oxidation will clog the media. Swap frequently.

If you encounter heavy sap, treat spots locally. A citrus-based adhesive remover softens residue without attacking clearcoat. Again, decals are the weak link. Older vinyl can smear or stain when exposed to solvents. Mask vulnerable edges with painter's tape before you start a large decon job.

Car polishing and paint correction on big surfaces

Car polishing on RVs is a different animal than on a sedan. You often face three different substrates on one side: clearcoated panels, single-stage painted metal, and fiberglass gelcoat. Each behaves differently with paint correction. Gelcoat oxidizes, gets chalky, and loads pads. It also responds to heat slowly, then suddenly. Clearcoat likes measured pressure and cooling breaks, especially on thin edges around compartment doors.

Dual-action polishers remain the safest choice. A 21 millimeter throw quickly covers open panels. For tight areas, a 3 or 5 inch machine with a soft interface pad keeps the pad flat across curves and rivets. On gelcoat oxidation, I often start with a medium cut compound on a foam cutting pad, then refine with a polish on a yellow polishing pad. Wool cuts faster, but on tall vertical panels it sheds and can haze if you do not follow up carefully. If you are new to rv detailing, resist trying to chase every last defect on gelcoat. The thickness varies and edges burn easily.

Edges and decals deserve extra respect. Do not let a pad ride over a decal edge unless you are prepared for lift. Tape edges with low-tack tape. Around door handles, latches, and badges, hand polishing often beats trying to force a machine into a complex shape. Inspect your work in polarized light and in shade. Gloss on a sunny driveway looks different under canopy light. That matters when you weigh another pass for correction.

Protecting the finish: wax, sealant, ceramic coating, or film

Protection choices come down to how you use the coach, where it lives, and how much hands-on maintenance you enjoy. Traditional waxes still work, but heat on vertical panels and long trips shorten their life. Polymer sealants stretch durability into months rather than weeks. Modern ceramic coating products give a harder shell that resists chemical etching and UV better than wax or sealant. I have seen well-applied ceramic coatings last two to five years on RVs that live outside, with the front cap often needing a maintenance top coat sooner due to bug and rock impact.

Not every surface should get the same protection. Decals vary. Some manufacturers approve coating over vinyl, others do not. If you coat over aged vinyl, you can lock in chalkiness. Test a small area, or skip the decals and use a dedicated vinyl protectant. Textured plastics accept ceramic coating, but the application needs careful leveling to avoid high spots you cannot polish out later.

Paint protection film solves a different problem. On the front cap and lower skirts behind the wheels, film absorbs impact and spares the finish. On motorhomes that see gravel roads, PPF on the lower rocker panels keeps the sandblasting effect at bay. Headlights and fog light lenses benefit too. Film installation on curved RV caps is a specialist job, and removal of aged film is a project in itself. If you see yellowing, cracking, or a map of lifted edges, plan for a removal day with heat, plastic razor blades, and patience. Replace sooner than later. Once film adhesive bakes into gelcoat, getting to clean substrate takes time.

Glass, mirrors, and cameras

RV windshields are huge. Any product streak you leave at eye height translates into a smeared horizon at twilight. Clean glass cool, with dedicated glass towels and a cleaner that flashes fast. For bugs, use a separate towel and pre-cleaner so you are not rubbing grit during final passes. If wipers chatter, polish the glass with a fine glass polish and a rayon pad, then apply a hydrophobic glass sealant. Side mirrors collect overspray during washing. Hit them with glass polish too. Do not forget backup cameras and side cameras. A dirty lens ruins a perfect parking line.

Seals, seams, and the roof line

The roof is the leak line. After washing, inspect every seam and penetration. On rubber roofs, chalking is normal over time, but a sudden increase in chalk or visible cracking at lap sealant tells you to reseal. Use the sealant type the manufacturer specifies. Dicor on EPDM is common, Sikaflex or similar on fiberglass. Never bury a cracked sealant under a new layer without cleaning and feathering the edges so water does not track under.

Slide toppers deserve a rinse and a look at stitching. Awnings collect mildew on the inner wraps. Unroll fully, clean with a fabric-safe cleaner, and allow to dry before retraction. Door and compartment seals respond well to a silicone-based conditioner. It keeps rubber supple and reduces sticking in heat. For slide seals, clean both the wiper and bulb seals, then treat lightly. Too much product attracts dust, which later abrades the seal.

Trim, metals, and details that make a coach look “finished”

Black plastics around lights and vents fade to gray fast. A trim restorer with UV blockers brings the depth back. Choose a product that dries to the touch, not one that remains oily. Stainless grab rails and chrome accents need a non-abrasive metal polish. Remove compound dust from panel gaps and around rivets with a soft brush and rinseless wash to avoid water spots from another full rinse.

Badges and vents catch polishing residue. A wooden toothpick wrapped in microfiber cleans edges without scratching. The ladder, often forgotten, should be cleaned top to bottom. It telegraphs how much care you gave

the rest.

Cockpit and cabin interior detailing

An RV interior asks you to be part housekeeper, part boat captain. Start with the cockpit. Vacuum seams in the driver and passenger seats, clean the dash with a mild interior cleaner, and blow dust out of vents before you wipe. If the rig has a lot of piano black trim, switch to a plush towel to avoid micro-marring. Leather seats vary by coach level. Many are coated leather or high-grade vinyl. Test cleaners in a hidden spot. Real leather benefits from a gentle cleaner and a conditioner that leaves a dry finish. Steering wheels get grimey quickly. Clean, then apply a light protectant. A slippery wheel is a hazard.

Floors tell the truth about travel. Sand works into carpet like sandpaper. If you have removable runner carpets, take them out and pressure rinse from the back side to push grit out. Let them dry fully in the sun. For wall-to-wall carpet, a hot water extractor lifts embedded soil. Use low moisture on slide floors so you do not swell wood edges. Vinyl plank and tile like a neutral cleaner, not anything that leaves a gloss film. Steam helps on grout lines, but keep steam away from vinyl seams.

Kitchen galleys collect film around the cooktop and vent hood. Degrease, rinse, then polish stainless with a true stainless cleaner to avoid streaks. The refrigerator door seals trap crumbs; clean the grooves and lightly dress the gasket. In sinks, clean the P-traps and run a cup of diluted disinfectant through the drains. If you store with tanks dry, let them air out after cleaning.

Soft surfaces from dinette cushions to theater seats take a beating. For fabrics, a fabric cleaner with a gentle brush raises pile. For hard water spots on shower walls, a vinegar-based solution or dedicated water spot remover softens deposits. Squeegee after each shower on the road to cut cleaning time down to minutes.

Odors and indoor air quality

A coach that smells like last month's bait cooler is a trip killer. Odors hide in air returns, under dinettes, and behind the refrigerator. Pull cushions and vacuum the plywood bases. Check condensate drains on AC units. If water backs up, you get mildew around ceiling panels. Replace cabin filters, if your rig has them, and consider a HEPA purifier to run on shore power during cleaning days.

Be cautious with ozone machines. They neutralize odors, but they also harden rubber and can bleach fabrics if misused. If you deploy one, remove people and pets, set a timer for a controlled run, and ventilate fully. Enzyme-based odor removers work well on organic spills and are safer for daily use.

A service-day rhythm from Xtreme Xcellence Detailing

When we stage a large Class A at Xtreme Xcellence Detailing, the day has a rhythm. Two techs head to the roof first with soft brushes, a pH-neutral cleaner, and a visual punch list for sealant watch-points. Another tech suites up for wheels and wells with a dedicated cart so no wheel brushes ever touch paint. The wash team foams from the top down, rotates the coach if needed to keep panels cool, and uses a deionized rinse on dark coaches. During drying, a lead tech inspects the front cap and lower skirts for chip mapping to decide whether the owner needs touch-up before applying a ceramic coating.

On an aging gelcoat, we block out realistic goals. We often split the side into quadrants and run test spots to choose the least aggressive combination that meets the coach owner's expectations. If the coach carries a lot of vinyl graphics, we tape edges. After correction, protection is tailored. A coach that lives outdoors but travels

monthly usually gets ceramic coating on the painted panels and a dedicated vinyl protectant on graphics. If the owner frequents gravel roads, PPF on rocker panels goes on the list for a body shop or film installer.

Troubleshooting the stubborn stuff with Xtreme Xcellence Detailing's playbook

Every rig has a quirk. Some Newmar owners fight a persistent black streak below a certain molding. A few Thor models like to collect dust behind a headlight trim. Our approach at Xtreme Xcellence Detailing is to reverse the problem. For black streaks, trace the drip line. If the streak originates at a roof seam, clean and reseal, then protect the panel below with a sacrificial spray sealant or a light ceramic topper. If the streak stems from an unpainted rubber trim, dress it with a dry-to-touch protectant and wipe the runoff channel regularly. For dust-prone trim, remove the piece if practical, clean behind it, and apply a thin foam tape to close the gap.

On interiors, a mysterious dampness near a slide often turns out to be a clogged weep hole or a flattened slide seal. Clean the weep, treat the seal, and check for alignment. Odors from a new-to-you coach with a nice shine but a lingering funk typically hide in the ductwork. Pull registers, clean ducts as far as you can reach, and replace any filters in-line. For persistent fishy or electrical odors, do not mask. Investigate. An inverter fan or a refrigerator control board can smell wrong before it fails.

Maintenance intervals that hold up on the road

I build maintenance on a calendar, not on hope. Washes every 2 to 4 weeks during the season keep bugs and fallout from etching. A decon pass with iron remover every 3 to 6 months, depending on travel, resets the finish without polishing. Inspect roof seams quarterly. Reseal as needed. Interior touch-ups [interior detailing](#) are easiest when they are small. A quick vacuum, a damp wipe of horizontal surfaces, and a glass pass at each fuel stop keeps grime from winning.

If you have a ceramic coating, respect its maintenance routine. Use coating-safe soaps and toppers. Skip dish soap and harsh degreasers on coated panels. On coated glass, replace wiper blades more often. The hydrophobic surface can chatter with old blades. If you run PPF, inspect edges after long heat cycles. A tiny lift can turn into a dusty line that grows.

A practical on-the-road cleaning kit

You do not need a rolling detail bay to keep a coach presentable between campsites. A small kit handles 80 percent of needs without taking much space:



- Rinseless wash concentrate, two plush towels, and a pump sprayer for water-restricted cleanups.
- Dedicated glass cleaner and two glass towels for the windshield at fuel stops.
- Interior cleaner safe for multiple surfaces and a soft brush for vents and seams.
- A small bottle of bug remover and a mesh bug sponge for the front cap at day's end.
- Tire dressing in a travel bottle and a small applicator to clean up the look quickly.

Store chemicals upright in a bin. Heat expands liquids and can burst poor caps.

Edge cases, from winter storage to desert boondocking

Winter storage demands a different prep. Wash, decon, and lay a durable sealant or ceramic coating before you cover. If you use a cover, clean it before storage. A dirty cover grinds dust into the finish all winter. Crack windows slightly only if you are in a dry climate or have a dehumidifier running, otherwise you invite condensation. Prop refrigerator and freezer doors open to prevent mold, and put a baking soda box inside.

Desert boondocking flips the script. Dust is constant, UV is severe, and water is scarce. A rinseless wash becomes the hero. Keep interior filters clean, and wipe seals often so dust does not wear them prematurely. If you run solar, clean panels with distilled water and a soft towel in the morning when panels are cool. Heat-shocked glass hates cold water.

Coastal coaches battle salt. Rinse thoroughly whenever you can, including the undercarriage, axles, and hitch hardware. Stainless hardware still stains from airborne salt. A thin film of corrosion inhibitor on exposed steel helps, but mind overspray near paint.

Safety, ergonomics, and working tall

Working at height for hours wears you down and invites shortcuts. I favor a stable rolling scaffold rather than a ladder marathon. Knee-friendly mats in front of wheels and wells save you the next day. Switch hands with your polisher every few panels to avoid forearm fatigue. Use ear protection with polishers and blowers. Many techs skip that and regret it after a season.

Chemical safety is not optional. Gloves are cheap. Eye protection is non-negotiable when using iron removers and solvents. Ventilate interiors and never mix ammonia cleaners with bleach-based mildew removers. Label spray bottles clearly. On hot days, cut dwell times and work smaller sections so you are not racing drying product.

What a before-and-after really means

One of the most satisfying days I remember at Xtreme Xcellence Detailing was a 12-year-old fifth wheel whose owner thought oxidation had won. The gelcoat looked chalked, and the graphics were brittle. We ran controlled test spots, accepted that some decal edges were too fragile for machine work, and used a measured combination: moderate cut on gelcoat panels, hand polished around graphics, then a ceramic coating specifically rated for gelcoat. The coach did not look new, which was never the goal. It looked honest and well cared for, with deep gloss where it mattered and protected surfaces everywhere. The owner's next trip through Utah's red dust rinsed off in ten minutes at a campground spigot. That is the payoff.

Bringing it together

Detailing an RV blends auto detailing technique with the practicalities of a moving home. You wash to reveal, decon to prepare, correct where it counts, then protect in layers that respect how the rig is used. Car polishing and paint correction are tools, not religions. Ceramic coating and paint protection film are options, not obligations. Interior detailing is not a once-a-year spring clean, it is a rhythm that makes living on the road easy.

If you invest in the routine, the coach pays you back. Seals stay flexible. Panels shed grime. Wheels clean faster. The windshield stays clear in rain. You end a driving day with enough energy to enjoy where you landed, rather than fighting streaks and grit. And when the trip is done, you have fewer repairs on the winter list.

That is the quiet value of a solid rv detailing checklist. It is not a ceremony. It is a habit. Give the rig an honest inspection, clean with purpose, protect where it matters, and adjust as the seasons and miles change. Whether you do it all yourself or team up with a shop like Xtreme Xcellence Detailing for the heavy lifting, a road-trip ready coach is built in the driveway, not at the campground spigot.

Xtreme Xcellence Detailing

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FAQs About Car Detailing & Paint Protection

How often should you service your car?

Regular car servicing is typically recommended every 5,000 to 7,500 miles or every 6 months, depending on your vehicle and driving conditions. In areas like Laguna Hills, CA, frequent driving and sun exposure make routine maintenance especially important.

What is the difference between waxing and ceramic coating?

Waxing provides a temporary layer of protection that lasts a few weeks to a couple of months, while ceramic coating offers long-lasting protection for several years. Ceramic coatings bond with your vehicle's paint, delivering superior durability, gloss, and resistance to contaminants.

Is paint protection film worth it?

Yes, paint protection film (PPF) is a great investment for preserving your vehicle's exterior. It provides a durable, transparent layer that protects against rock chips, scratches, and road debris, helping maintain your car's value and appearance.

How long does a full car detailing take?

A full car detailing service typically takes between 3 to 8 hours, depending on the vehicle's size, condition, and the level of service required. More advanced services like paint correction or ceramic coating may require additional time.

How often should I get my car detailed?

For optimal results, it's recommended to have your car detailed every 3 to 6 months. This helps protect your vehicle from environmental damage and keeps it looking its best year-round.

Does ceramic coating eliminate the need for washing?

No, ceramic coating does not eliminate the need for washing, but it makes cleaning much easier. Dirt and grime have a harder time sticking to the surface, allowing for quicker and more effective maintenance washes.