



GAME *on*

With its new Discovery hybrid, Queensland's Rhinomax offers an appealing combination of high quality at a low entry price.

PICS NATHAN DUFF



In brief...

- Custom built pop-top hybrid
- Quality build and finish
- External shower/toilet ensuite

Hybrid pop-tops have established themselves as major players at the serious end of the Australian offroad market, offering adventure-seeking 4WDers an alternative to camping under canvas.

Rhinomax has joined Kimberley, Australian Off Road, Northcoast Campers, Track Trailer, Complete Campsite, Trakmaster and Vista RV in this rapidly growing market, all offering variations on a common theme: hard-walls with a rising or pop-top hard-shell roof, based on rugged, high-riding underpinnings.

Some are packaged like shrink-wrapped caravans, with both interior ensuites and cooking facilities as standard for all-weather travel. The problem for many buyers is that these hybrids can be pricey for a small unit, usually starting in the high \$70,000 bracket and rising to well above six figures if you get enthusiastic with the options.

But there is another way. Rather than offer customers a pre-set package, Queensland's Rhinomax, with its new Discovery, offers customers a basic-spec but beautifully-built hybrid pop-top for a significantly lower entry price and then lets them choose the layout and equipment that suits their particular needs.

Launched in June last year, the Discovery's headline grabber is a basic price of \$65,000 (\$66,000 as reviewed). For that, you get a rugged, 4.5m (14ft 10in)-long pop-top with thick fibreglass composite body panels, TIG-welded aluminium framework for its interior fixtures, sitting on a full-length SupaGal galvanised steel chassis fitted with sturdy trailing arm independent coil spring suspension and 12in electric brakes or, in the case of this review Discovery, optional disc brakes.

Inside, there's a full queen-size north-south bed with a portable toilet drawer below, a large centre dining area with seating room for four and a full-width rear cabinet that, in its basic form, houses six huge stainless steel drawers.

That's the basic Discovery 'canvas' and Rhinomax then asks its customers to start painting from a palette of options.

"We work on the basis that no two customers want the same thing, so we custom build every Discovery," said Rhinomax co-founder Steve Punton. So if they want a rear corner shower/toilet ensuite, Steve and his partner Andy Dean will fit one. Ditto, single beds instead of a queen and an internal kitchen with gas or diesel appliances, if required. However, even ticking all the option boxes is unlikely to drive the price of a Discovery much higher than about \$75,000.

While the Discovery is making waves as the 'newbie' in this mushrooming hybrid market, what is truly surprising is that Steve and Andy are not seasoned outback warriors, like many

of their fellow manufacturers. Instead, both hail from England and became mates after meeting eight years ago and then business partners when they found that they enjoyed camping together. They mightn't have brought an Aussie twang to the table, but they did have something more valuable: a combination of top-end British engineering expertise and marketing savvy.

However, their initial collaboration was not remotely associated with campers or hybrids. Andy did his time at Rolls-Royce in the UK, and his and Steve's first project, hatched five years ago while camping under the Southern Cross, was a hydraulic manhole cover lifter.

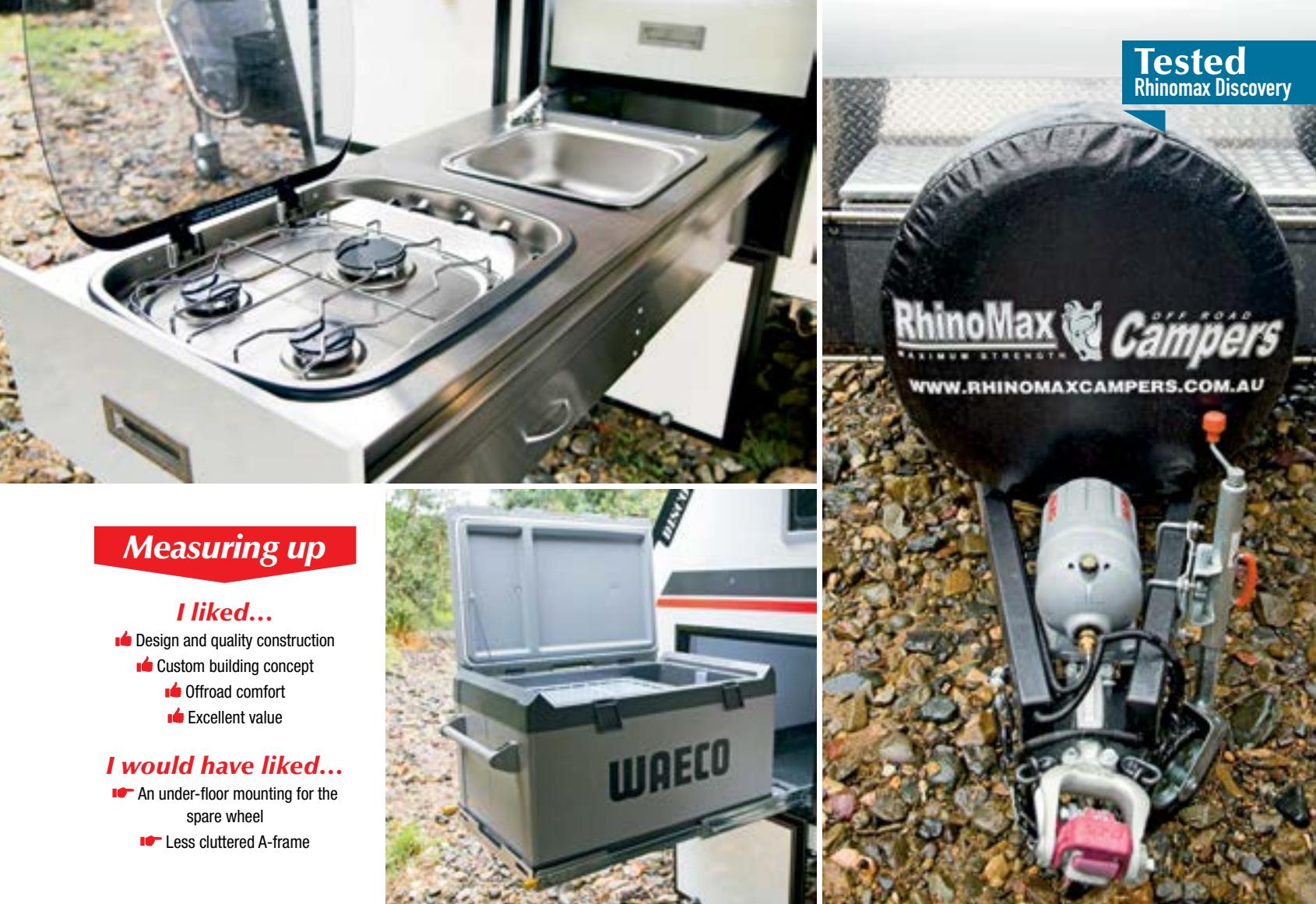
This deceptively simple, but labour-saving, device allowed one man to remove a heavy steel cover for maintenance and inspection, while previously this operation involved a team and heavy equipment. It was immediately welcomed by road authorities and local councils and, on the back of its success, the pair turned their focus to their personal passion – camping.

Tired of tenting it, they looked for a camper trailer, but couldn't find the high quality they sought at the price they wanted to pay.

"The choice then was cheap box trailer-based campers, or expensive top-end Australian models, but we wanted the low price with real engineering integrity, so we decided to build our own," Andy explained.



WORDS MICHAEL BROWNING



Measuring up

I liked...

- ✚ Design and quality construction
- ✚ Custom building concept
- ✚ Offroad comfort
- ✚ Excellent value

I would have liked...

- ☛ An under-floor mounting for the spare wheel
- ☛ Less cluttered A-frame





Clockwise from top: The Discovery squeezes a lot of living space into its 4.5x1.9m dimensions; the external shower tent lifts up and drops down effortlessly; an under-bed compartment fits a portable toilet; separated storage helps maintain organisation on the road.

MAKING A DISCOVERY

So four years ago they built two, sold one at the Maryborough Show, put a half-page advertisement in CW's sister magazine *Camper Trailer Australia* introducing themselves as Rhinomax ("it sounded strong and durable") and then went into business together to produce their Outback Warrior hard-floor camper, armed with a full order book.

The pair then saw a similar demand for hybrid campers, and invested \$20,000 on new engineering software and designed the Discovery, which was launched in June last year to a welcoming market.

Employing the same SupaGal one-piece chassis, drawbar and in-house SupaGal steel trailing arm independent suspension as the Warrior, the Discovery employs the same basic marketing idea: high quality construction at a lower-than-expected price. The aim, quite simply, is to gain a foothold in this competitive market, then to build on it with other models and variations in the future. It all seems to be working, with Rhinomax's order books currently full for six months ahead, with one hybrid being built for every two campers.

HYBRID WEATHER

The weather was perfect for hybrids when we encountered the prototype Discovery at the beautiful Borumba Deer Park camping



ground near Imbil, in the Sunshine Coast, Qld, hinterland – it was pouring with rain! I say 'perfect' because the ability to make camping comfortable in all types of weather is one of the big reasons why more and more travellers are drawn to hybrids over canvas campers.

The Discovery can go most places that a regular camper trailer can, unless height is a consideration, and it can be set up and levelled with the aid of chocks or rocks on uneven ground on its own footprint. As reviewed, it measured a manageable 1550kg Tare. After popping the top and winding out its standard Fiamma awning, you can be camped, dry and



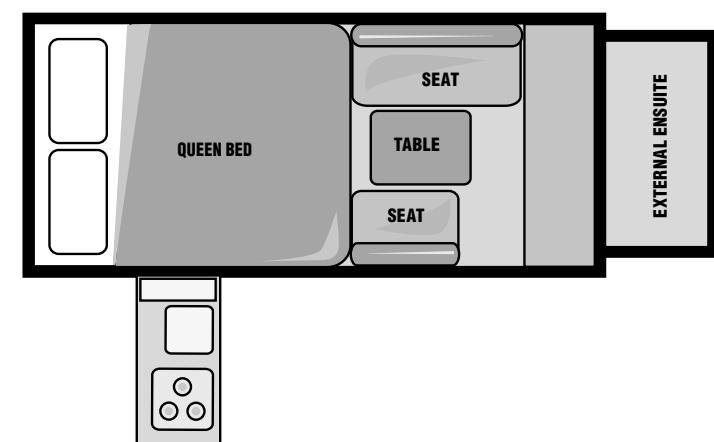
comfortable in just a few minutes. In our case, the bubbling Yabba Creek was right on our rocky doorstep and, when the sun made a brief appearance, it was a magical setting.

With a body length of just 4.5m (14ft 10in) and a (LandCruiser) width of 1.9m (6ft 3in, plus awning), the Discovery doesn't demand a lot of real estate. And like many of its hybrid rivals, it has a steeply-raked rear cutaway to allow it to get across creek beds and rough terrain easily. However, instead of taking full advantage of this body cut-away to house the spare wheel underneath the rear, Rhinomax has mounted the wheel vertically upfront on the A-frame where it serves as the first line of defence against stone damage to the twin 4.5kg gas cylinders and their regulator.

A mesh stone shield behind the spare protects the large checkerplate toolbox and its twin outrigger jerry can holders, while there's further checkerplate covering the lower half of the front panel. It is, perhaps, a little bit of overkill. However, the air compressor for the optional Al-Ko Sensabrade and its pipes that delivers power to the test Discovery's optional disc brakes was mounted vulnerably in front of the spare wheel.

The body employs European-sourced 30mm-thick composite fibreglass wall panels that are secured where they meet the front and rear panels by external ribs that form a design feature. Rhinomax also uses the same 30mm fibreglass sandwich panel in the Discovery's pop-top roof, which I haven't seen in a hybefore, offering what I believe to be class-leading insulation.

As you would expect from a Queensland builder, the focus with the Discovery is on outside living, when the weather allows, and this is well catered for by adjacent slides for the top-loading fridge and stainless steel kitchen with three-burner cooktop, both of which emerge from under the bed at right angles to the Discovery's body, leaving enough room under the awning to shelter from the rain or the sun.



Rhinomax Discovery

Weights and measures

Overall length 6.3m (20ft 8in)
External body length 4.5m (14ft 10in)
External body width 1.9m (6ft 3in)
Travel height 2.3m (7ft 6in)
Internal height 2.1m (6ft 10in)
Tare 1550kg
ATM 2500kg
Ball weight 105kg

External

Frame TIG-welded aluminium
Cladding CNC-cut fibreglass composite sandwich walls and pop-top roof
Chassis SupaGal steel 100x50x3mm
Suspension Steel independent trailing arm with twin shock absorbers per wheel
Brakes Al-Ko disc brakes (12in electronic drums as standard)
Wheels 16x8in alloy with 265/75-16 offroad tyres
Water 1x125L poly-tank
Battery 2x100Ah deep-cycle AGM
Solar 1x150W
Air-conditioner Optional
Gas 2x4.5kg
Sway Control Optional (Al-Ko ESC or Dexter DSC)
Cooking External three-burner gas
Fridge 80L Waeco 12V compressor fridge-freezer
Shower Exterior rear shower pod

Internal

Microwave Optional
Toilet Portable
Lighting LED
Hot water Truma gas

Options fitted

Disc brakes

Price as shown

\$66,000 (Qld)

Enquiries

To enquire about this hybrid, visit www.caravanworld.com.au/spec or phone (07) 3073 8366

On CaravanWorld.com.au

- Video test
- More pictures
- Specs to compare



Above: With windows both sides and the pop-top, there is plenty of light and airflow around the bed.

Below: Storage lockers along the sides of the bed double as a shelf.

There's also good storage space in other lockers on the offside for tables and chairs, etc., while the rear-most one houses the portable toilet that can live under the bed inside during the night. There are additional angled storage lockers adjacent to the wheel-arch on both sides for storing messy things such as muddy boots.

Inside, TIG-welded aluminium framing is used for the frame of the front-mounted bed and the cupboards and fittings to ensure the entire structure is extremely robust. There's no front window, which is good, as this is always a potential source of water leaks on any caravan-like structure – and the full-height rear door means you don't have to stoop to get in. Plus there's a mountain of headroom once the pop-top roof is raised on its gas strut-assisted scissor lifts. The reason for this headroom is quite simple: both Steve and Andy are very tall (6ft 4in) blokes and the Discovery is built around their personal dimensions!

The Discovery we reviewed had what Rhinomax calls its 'basic' layout, meaning the space to the right of the rear-entry door was occupied by a wall-to-wall cabinet with six stainless steel-lined drawers, with a useful long storage space below and an uncluttered large benchtop above. But the space could be occupied by a corner ensuite, a small internal kitchen with an under-bench cabinet style fridge, or both of the above. And Rhinomax likes to emphasise that, as a true custom builder, it will fit whatever the purchaser wants – within reason, of course.

In reality, few customers so far have shown much interest in the internal ensuite for one good reason: with the Discovery, Rhinomax has introduced what I believe is probably the simplest and fastest-erecting exterior shower tent in the business, something Andy and Steve are quite proud of. Simply release two catches, let the pod rise on its gas-assisted struts and



Ratings

1. Value for money	★★★★★
2. Towability	★★★★★
3. Setting up and hitching up	★★★★★
4. Suitability for intended touring	★★★★★
5. Layout	★★★★★
6. Quality of finish	★★★★★
7. Build quality	★★★★★
8. Creature comforts	★★★★★
9. Innovation	★★★★★
10. X-Factor	★★★★★

unzip the drop-down, quick-drying shower screen and you instantly have a private shower and portable toilet space, served by a hot/cold mixer shower tap.

Solid hinges, quality catches and excellent furniture fit give the impression the Discovery is built to last. Top-hinged storage hatches beside the bed and LED lighting around the perimeter of the pop-top frame show attention to detail.

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE

The Discovery might be the first hybrid that Rhinomax has produced, but it's the start of an expanding model line. A new, lighter yet stronger chassis with a larger 3mm thick, 150x50mm gusseted A-frame is now standard for all Discovery production models, while several new Rhinomax variants are in the pipeline.

Soon there will be two Discovery models, with a larger version due in July, plus two trim levels across the range, with Webasto diesel heating, various AV packages, leather upholstery and designer interior panels among the new options.

Then, in August, Rhinomax will bridge the gap between its hard and soft-floor campers and hybrids with a new 10ft-long Scorpion hard-walled camper. Not bad for a company that is only four years old.

"Our end game is to be known as the offroad specialists," said Steve. The Discovery is an excellent start along that rocky road.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The Rhinomax Discovery is a worthy new entrant to the growing hybrid ranks. With its combination of wanted features, high quality materials and construction, attention to detail and very competitive pricing, it deserves to be high on every potential hybrid buyer's shopping list. Regardless of their choice of options, customers will get an impressively finished hybrid if the review van is any guide. **cw**