

The Pre-Build Checklist

Get clear before you cut a single hole

Instinctively, we knew we had to do this. Our desire to travel and see the world has always existed. The moment we let the idea of road trips, roaming free and sleeping spots in nature seep in, we went for it. And never regretted it up to this day.

When we started out we made all the classic early mistakes: rushing in, buying stuff, ordering things online just because we were itching to begin. This checklist brings a bit of calm and some alignment, and it saves you from that mess. Print it and fill it in together. If you can't finish it yet, that's your sign to do a little more research before you start.

Why this matters. Reading tips won't stop you making mistakes, but writing things down might. So this checklist keeps asking you for actual numbers and limits (not vague plans), the mistakes you most want to dodge, and the honest limits you're working inside: weight, money, and time. If it feels slow, good. That means you're doing the thinking now, instead of paying for it later.

The beginner mistakes it prevents

- Starting to buy stuff online too early
- Designing cabinets before you know what to bring
- Underestimating weight and overbuilding
- Starting construction without agreeing on priorities
- Assuming problems will "sort themselves out later"

We learned they don't sort themselves out. They pile up.

01 Legal weight, rules & paperwork

Your build doesn't happen in a vacuum. Your country sets invisible boundaries.

- ☐ Maximum legal weight you're building under (commonly 3,500 kg, but confirm)
- ☐ Your van's usable payload (empty weight vs allowed weight)
 - Payload = max allowed weight minus the van's empty weight — it's all you have left for the build, water, gear and people
 - Both figures are on the VIN/weight plate (often in the door frame) or the registration document
 - Depends on the van and its year, so check per type if you're comparing
- ☐ Registration and inspection requirements for a camper conversion

- ☐ Mandatory design elements
 - Minimum measurements (bed, table, standing height, etc.)
- ☐ Taxes or classification changes triggered by converting
 - VAT, emission-related taxes, or your country's equivalents
- ☐ Insurance requirements during the build and after completion

Write it down

Max legal weight (kg):

Empty weight (kg):

Usable payload (kg):

Camper registration required: Yes / No

Key design requirements:

.....

Expected additional costs (€):

Insured during the build: Yes / No

Insurance type after build:

.....

REALITY CHECK If you can't explain these rules clearly to a friend, you don't understand them well enough yet.

02

Build vision: the life you're designing for

Get clear on what you'll actually use the van for. Answer these together.

- ☐ Primary use: weekend trips / long travel / full-time living
- ☐ You've decided whether you'll work inside the van
- ☐ Where you sit on the comfort scale: minimal / balanced / comfort-focused
- ☐ Each person lists up to three non-negotiables
 - This is what helped us agree when we couldn't at first
- ☐ You know which luxuries are worth the weight and space
 - Like air conditioning, a shower, a permanent bed, or an oven

Write it down

Primary use:

.....

Comfort level: Minimal / Balanced / Comfort-focused

Person A's non-negotiables:

.....

Person B's non-negotiables:

.....

You don't need a perfect layout yet. You do need clear priorities.

03 Storage, gear & space

Knowing what you'll bring is the key to a good layout. Bikes, surfboards, big gear? They all need a home.

- ☐ List every bulky or lifestyle-specific item
 - Surf gear, wetsuits, work equipment, instruments, winter gear
- ☐ You have an idea where each item will logically live
 - How often do you need it? Daily access vs occasional access
- ☐ You have a rough storage-volume estimate
 - Enough to prevent the "there's no space left" moment

Write it down

Must-bring items:

.....

Daily-access items:

.....

Occasional-access items:

.....

04 Electrical & water expectations

Simple checks now that help you size your power and water systems later.

- ☐ Travel style: mostly off-grid / mostly campsites / mixed
- ☐ You've decided on gas or full-electric (it changes your cooking capacity)
- ☐ Daily-use appliances listed (fridge, laptops, heater, ventilation)

- ☐ Optional appliances listed (AC, induction, coffee machine)
- ☐ Water-usage expectations (how long must the tank last? a shower?)

Write it down

Primary travel style:

.....

Will use gas: Yes / No

High-load systems included: Yes / No

Off-grid priority: High / Medium / Low

These decisions shape your wiring, batteries, solar capacity and water tanks.

05 Skills, help & realistic planning

Honesty here prevents burnout later.

- ☐ Existing skills (electrical, plumbing, carpentry, planning)
- ☐ Skills you still need to learn, written down
- ☐ People you can ask for help (electrical / plumbing / carpentry / mechanical)
- ☐ Tools you can borrow vs tools you must buy
- ☐ Weekly time commitment per person

Write it down

Weekly time per person (hrs):

Expected build length (months):

06 Workspace, materials & tool access

Where you build matters as much as what you build.

- ☐ You have a build location (indoors / outdoors / shared space)
- ☐ Safe material storage sorted
- ☐ You can move the van during the build
 - Matters e.g. in the Netherlands for insurance
- ☐ Power access for tools
- ☐ A plan if the build pauses for 2 months (is the space still yours then?)

Write it down

Contingency plan:

07 First purchases (and what not to buy yet)

These are the only things worth buying before you finalise your layout:

- ☐ Measuring tools
- ☐ Painter's tape (for mocking up the layout)
- ☐ Basic PPE (safety glasses, ear protection)
- ☐ Cleaning supplies (in case you bought a dirty van)
- ☐ Minimal must-have tools (see the Essential Tools Checklist)

DON'T BUY YET Insulation, wood, panels, appliances, tanks, fixtures. If you really need something and spot a crazy deal, don't wait. But planning your orders as a whole, instead of step by step, could easily have saved us a few hundred euros.

08 Agreements between the two of you

Skip this and you'll pay for it emotionally.

- ☐ Decisions that require both people
- ☐ Task ownership
- ☐ A clear "stop and talk" signal
- ☐ The decision most likely to cause conflict if made alone
 - e.g. where to drill a hole in your van

Write it down

Conflict-trigger decision:

You're a team. Talking this through upfront could have saved us a few arguments — the kind that creep in when you're tired and it's late, and mistakes start slipping in.

Before you start, you should be able to say:

- ☐ We understand the legal and technical limits
- ☐ We know our priorities
- ☐ We know what gear must fit
- ☐ We have a realistic time and space plan
- ☐ We're on the same page as a team
- ☐ We know the next three steps clearly
- ☐ We're excited to start

Filled it all in? Then you're not guessing any more — you're building from a plan.

Our next three steps

First step:

Second step:

Third step:

AI TIP Drop your filled-in checklist into an AI chatbot and ask what your ideal layout and setup could look like. It might spot an opportunity you'd have missed.

You just found out what you don't know yet. That's the point. The full VanMate Package walks you through the process and prevents you from making the mistakes we did. We wrote a complete book about it, including the checklists that come after this one (buying a van, essential tools, security, first trip). That is not all. WeightMate, the app included with it, helps you track everything each step of the way. Even the payload number you just wrote down by hand, automatically.

[See the VanMate Package](#)

Want to swap notes with other builders while you plan? [Join the free WhatsApp community](#)

Know someone else dreaming about a van build? Forward this to them. That's usually how we find out someone we know is thinking about it too.