

RVs age in dog years if you let the weather have its way. Sun, road film, calcium-rich water, diesel soot, tree sap, bird fallout, and campsites with limited shade all take a toll. The difference between an RV that still turns heads after a decade and one that looks tired after three years comes down to technique more than time. The traps are subtle. On a house-sized vehicle with mixed materials, one wrong product or rushed step compounds into staining, oxidation, failed sealants, and even leaks.

What follows reads like a working pro's notebook. These are the mistakes I see in the field and the fixes that keep finishes fresh, from gelcoat motorhomes to aluminum trailers and painted bus conversions. The goal is not perfection every weekend. It is a process that fits real travel schedules, preserves value, and keeps maintenance sane.

Why RVs punish the wrong approach

An RV packs gelcoat or automotive paint, vinyl graphics, textured plastics, ABS caps, rubber trims, anodized aluminum, and a dozen sealants onto one shell. Unlike a car, there are miles of caulk joints and roof hardware that trap grime. You also work at height with uneven access, often with hard water and no shade. A routine that is safe for clearcoat might haze an acrylic window. A brush that lifts bug guts on the front cap might scour a vinyl stripe. If you treat an RV like a giant SUV, you will create your own problems.

I have corrected more damage from "enthusiastic cleaning" than from neglect. Improper pressure washing blows up seams. Strong degreasers marble gelcoat. Rotary buffers chew through raised edges of decals in a blink. The fixes take time and materials that could have been avoided with a little restraint.

Mistake 1: Washing in full sun with hard water

Hot surfaces lock minerals into paint and gelcoat before you can rinse. On white gelcoat and dark paint alike, you get ghostly rings and drip tracks that laugh at quick detailers. Even ceramic coating does not make you invincible to severe water spotting. If full shade is impossible, work in small sections and chase every rinse with a towel and a drying aid. A deionized rinse, even a small portable DI canister, saves hours on the back end.

Quick example. We had a 38-foot Class A come in with etched spots across the cap. The owner swore it was brand new wax. A TDS meter showed their well water at 420 ppm. No wax offsets that. We had to polish and then apply a ceramic coating to restore gloss. Prevention would have been cheaper than correction.

Mistake 2: Using the wrong soap or chemistry

Household detergents strip protectants and pull plasticizers from vinyl stripes. Heavy APC meant for engines can cloud gelcoat and chalk rubber. If you need bite for bug removal or diesel soot, use chemistry designed for exterior surfaces and dilute properly. Citrus pre-washes, pH balanced soaps, and dedicated bug removers are safer choices. Keep wheel acid away from bare aluminum and near vinyl graphics. Read the label like it matters, because it does.

On older gelcoat, avoid strong caustics. They open the pores and make oxidation return faster. Think of gelcoat as sponge-like. Gentle surfactants, mechanical clay or synthetic decon mitts, then polish if needed. If you reach for the harsh stuff, you are usually skipping a safer step.

Mistake 3: Ignoring the roof and its hardware

You can make the sides gleam and still have streaks next rain because the roof is shedding grime. EPDM or TPO roofs oxidize and chalk. The runoff carries dirt down windows and corners. Clean the roof first, then the verticals. Avoid petroleum solvents on rubber roofs. Work around caulked seams and lap joints with mild brushes and towels. Check skylights, A/C shrouds, and antenna bases while you are up there. A little attention now prevents leaks and black streaks later.

On one fifth wheel, the owner polished the sides every spring but never touched the roof. Every storm produced tar-like runs on the white gelcoat. The fix was a roof deep clean, gentle rinse control, and re-sealing a few hairline cracks that were wicking road film into the runoff.

Mistake 4: Scrubbing with stiff brushes or old towels

The bigger the surface, the more tempting it is to "get aggressive." Stiff boar's hair or garage brooms leave micro-marring, especially on dark full-body paint and acrylic windows around the cab-over. Retire any towel that has hit the ground. Use separate mitts for the lower third of the rig, where grit accumulates. Microfiber should be plush for paint and gelcoat, tighter weave for glass. On textured plastics, foam scrub pads work better than stiff brushes that leave scuffs.

Acrylic and polycarbonate windows deserve their own warning. Treat them like motorcycle windscreens or aircraft canopies. Soft water, fresh towels, and plastic-safe cleaners only. Many RVs with hazy front bunk windows got that way from kitchen sponges and glass cleaners with ammonia.

Mistake 5: Skipping proper decontamination before polishing or protection

Clay bars, synthetic decon mitts, and iron removers have a place on RVs, not just cars. Rail dust, brake fallout from your tow rig, and even campground fire pit ash embed in the surface. If you jump straight to polish or wax, those contaminants scour the finish as you work and block bonding. Mechanical decon after a thorough wash, followed by a quick chemical decon for ferrous particles, gives a clean slate. This single habit makes every downstream step more effective.

Mistake 6: Attacking oxidation without a plan

Oxidation on gelcoat is sneaky. It can look better after a heavy compound pass, then ghost back two weeks later. The reason is simple. You polished the chalk to a shine, but you did not refine or lock it down. Build a progression: test spot, compounding only where needed, then polishing, then protection. Do not chase 100 percent defect removal near edges, decals, or thin spots. Leave a margin of clear and focus on uniform gloss.

On painted bus conversions with clearcoat, treat them like Auto Detailing jobs. Use paint depth judgment, mild to medium pads, and refine your finish. On aluminum trailers with a clear anodized finish, skip abrasive polishing entirely. Mild cleaners and a sealant beat the zebra stripes that show up when you break through anodizing.

Mistake 7: Burning edges and raising decal edges with a rotary

A rotary moves fast and makes heat. It also loves to grab vinyl. Use a dual-action polisher for most RV work. Tape the leading edges of stripes and graphics, especially factory vinyl with age. Work away from edges, not into them. Keep speed moderate and pads clean. If you must use a rotary on heavy oxidation, reserve it for open gelcoat with enough material left and keep the pass count conservative. Nothing sours a detail faster than a lifted stripe or a toasted corner.

How Xtreme Detailing and Ceramic Coatings approaches heavy oxidation

At Xtreme Detailing and Ceramic Coatings we run a strict test spot on every oxidized cap and flank. If a light cutting foam and a diminishing compound bring 70 to 80 percent of the gloss back, we do not push for that last ounce with a wool pad that risks texture and edges. We map the surface, work panels top to bottom, and stage two sets of pads so we never push a loaded pad. After refinement, we lay down a ceramic coating suited to porous gelcoat. That sequence slows re-oxidation and buys the owner seasons, not weeks.

One 40-foot diesel pusher came in with flat, chalky flanks from years near the coast. The owner had tried a silicone glaze that looked great for a day. Our process was a paired-down compound on foam, a dedicated gelcoat polish, solvent wipe to check true finish, then a high-solids coating. Twelve months later the sheen held. The difference was restraint and the right chemistry, not muscle.

Mistake 8: Overconfidence with pressure washers

Pressure washers save time on big rigs, but distance and tip choice matter. On aging seals and decals, a strong fan pattern can lift corners and drive water under lap joints. Keep a safe stand-off, use wider tips, and aim across seams, not into them. Use the wand to float dirt after your pre-soak, not to carve off grime. For slide toppers and awnings, lower pressure and a controlled rinse keeps stitching safe.

An airline client once told me their Airplane Detailing rule around static ports: if you think you are too far, take three more steps back. That mindset works on RV seams, fridge vents, and marker lights. High pressure finds the weakest link.

Mistake 9: Neglecting seals, gaskets, and plastic trims

Detailing is not only shine. Slide-out wiper seals collect grit and dry out, then score your fresh finish every retraction. Treat them with a manufacturer-approved conditioner, not a greasy dressing that attracts dust. Check basement door seals and clean the channels. For oxidized plastics, use a dedicated trim restorer after cleaning, then maintain with mild soaps. Rubbing compound on textured plastic turns it gray and blotchy.

Mistake 10: Letting water sit during the dry

Hand drying feels old fashioned until you [Ceramic Coating](#) add up water spot removal. Blower drying works well on RVs if you keep your air filtered and finish with towels on glass and flat panels. A drying aid, even a light spray sealant, gives the towel glide and reduces marring. On frameless windows and slide faces, chase drip points once more after ten minutes. That second pass avoids streaks and minerals creeping out of gaps.

Mistake 11: Treating decals like paint

Most factory graphics are cast or calendared vinyl with a finite life under UV. Aggressive polishing thins them, brightens the color for a week, then accelerates failure. Clean gently, avoid strong solvents, and protect with products marked safe for vinyl. A ceramic coating can go over many vinyls, but test for darkening, especially on matte. If a decal is cracking or chalking severely, plan a replacement rather than a rescue.

Mistake 12: One-size-fits-all protection

Waxes, sealants, ceramic coatings, and Paint Protection Film serve different jobs. On gelcoat, many carnauba waxes wash away in a few weeks. Synthetic sealants last longer but struggle against chalk-prone pores. Ceramic

coating bonds stronger and resists staining better, but only if the surface is properly prepped and the product is formulated for gelcoat's porosity. On front caps that see gravel and bugs, a high impact area benefits from a strip of Paint Protection Film. It is easier to replace film than repaint the cap.

Xtreme Detailing and Ceramic Coatings on when to step up to coatings or film

When an owner asks if ceramic is worth it, we ask about storage, travel miles, and water quality. At Xtreme Detailing and Ceramic Coatings we have rigs that live outside under hard well water. For them, a ceramic coating makes maintenance practical. The surface releases grime, buys you time in the sun, and shrugs off bug acids better. On a coach with a pristine painted front cap that hammers through the Rockies every summer, we recommend a clear Paint Protection Film on the lower third and high-strike areas. The coating then goes over the paint and the film for uniform behavior in the wash bay.

We learned this approach after redoing a varnished-on bug field on a coated cap that lacked film. The coating survived, but the etching was deeper than a wipe-back. With film, the next season the owner just peeled and replaced the lower strip after a particularly rough June. The paint never took a hit.

Mistake 13: Ignoring glass and camera lenses until the end

Water spotting on glass, rear camera lenses, and side-view cameras ruins visibility. Treat glass like its own job. Decon, polish with a cerium oxide or glass polish if needed, and protect with a glass sealant. During wash, keep strong chemicals off rear camera housings, and hand clean those lenses. A small smudge covers a lot of image at highway speeds.

Mistake 14: Forgetting the hitch, toad connections, and rear cap soot

Diesel soot and road film stack up on the rear cap, ladder, and tow equipment. If your toad launches off on a long trip without a prep, that grit returns to the coach. Clean the hitch hardware, safety chains, and plug surfaces right after the wash. On rear caps with chronic soot staining, adjust your protection choice. A ceramic coating or a durable sealant on the rear cap reduces staining and makes quick cleanups mid-trip easier.

Mistake 15: Overlooking awnings and slide toppers

Textiles do not like strong chemicals or careless pressure. Support the fabric, clean with a fabric-safe cleaner, rinse gently, and let it dry fully before retraction. Algae blooms come from rolling up moisture. If your coach parks under trees, an occasional fabric protectant helps repellency. For manual awning aluminum hardware, a light cleaner and a dry lubricant on pivots keeps things moving without attracting dust.

Mistake 16: No masking or protection of sensitive parts before compounding

Mask refrigerator vents, hinges, rubber trims, camera bezels, trailer plug ports, and any porous plastics before you polish. Compound dust cakes in louvered vents and looks like talc in every photo. If you are in windy conditions, pull the rig into a lee or tape more generously. This one hour of prep saves three hours of Q-tip work later.

I borrowed a trick from Marine Detailing on boats with teak and non-skid. Tape first, then prime your pad against a side panel before you get near edges. On RV non-skid steps, skip polish altogether and use a dedicated cleaner that does not leave slick residue.

Mistake 17: Underestimating safety and access

Ladders and scaffolds beat standing on tires and tongue jacks. A stable platform lets you work patiently along a seam instead of reaching and dragging a pad over an edge. Tie off extension cords, keep hoses on the shadow side, and stage your buckets so you do not kick them when you step back to check your work. Nothing smears a finish faster than a near-miss with a wet hose flung across the panel you just corrected.

A wash day setup that prevents most headaches

- Check water quality with a TDS pen, and choose DI rinse if you are over 200 ppm.
- Stage shade or plan your route panel by panel to keep surfaces cool to the touch.
- Pre-rinse the roof first, then clean it, then rinse verticals top to bottom.
- Prep two wash mitts and two drying towels for upper and lower sections.
- Keep a plastic-safe cleaner and separate towels for acrylic windows and lenses.

When the job is bigger than a weekend

Some projects demand more than a quick wash and a spray sealant. A coach that has lived at a coastal campsite with salty air and little shade will need staged correction over multiple days. That can mean machine polishing in sections, letting panels cool, and finishing in the mornings. Think in zones. Roof and cap one day, passenger side the next, driver's side third, rear cap last. Protect each finished zone as you go so dust and dew do not undo your work.

This is also the right time to think storage. If off-season involves ice and wind, consider Boat Shrink Wrapping principles. A tight, breathable cover with adequate vents and chafe guards on corners helps. Never let plastic rest directly on a freshly coated surface for months. A proper RV cover that allows air exchange keeps the surface from sweating and spotting under wraps.

Borrowed lessons from other disciplines

Airplane Detailing taught me patience around acrylic, plasticizers, and the danger of forced air on seams. Masking ports and seams prevents headaches. Keeping distance with pressure and avoiding ammonia-based cleaners on plastic parts applies cleanly to RVs with skylights and cab-over windows.

Auto Detailing drilled repetition. Clean tools, controlled passes, and the value of a test spot. Many RV owners want to start big. A test panel pays off more because the acreage amplifies any mistake.

Marine Detailing is the closest cousin. Gelcoat is porous and loves to chalk. Once it starts, you are in a cycle unless you cut oxidation properly and lock the surface. Ceramic coating tailored to gelcoat, or a marine-grade sealant, stands up better to sun and spray. The trick from the docks is knowing when to stop sanding the teak. That restraint keeps you from chasing gloss at the cost of material.

Choosing protection that matches your reality

Ceramic Coating has a mystique. Used well, it is honest value. It is not invincible, but it resists UV, bird fallout, and road grime, and it keeps the surface slick so you are not scrubbing. On gelcoat, look for a product engineered for high porosity. On painted sides with good clear, a consumer-grade professional coating can last multiple seasons with careful washing. Maintain with neutral soap, a periodic topper, and gentle drying.

Paint Protection Film is armor for specific zones. Front caps, lower rockers, and leading edges around wheel wells take the beating. Film wears the hits and keeps bugs from etching into the clear. Installed cleanly with wrapped edges where possible, it becomes part of the coach's maintenance rhythm. You wash, you decon gently, you replace film strips when they have served their time.

Window Tinting gets overlooked on RVs. Proper tint on side glass cuts heat load and UV, protecting interiors and slowing fade on dash plastics and seats. On rigs with large greenhouse areas, tinting makes the cabin livable and reduces air conditioning strain. Use film that is legal in your area and compatible with defroster and antenna elements. For acrylic or polycarbonate windows, use films designed for plastics to avoid outgassing haze.

Putting it all together without turning your life into a detail bay

You do not need to stage a concours prep every month. Build a realistic cadence and stick to it. Wash gently after trips, remove bugs quickly, and dry right. Twice a year, decon and boost the protection. Every two to three years, plan a correction day on the caps or the sides that face the sun. Watch seals and address the roof before it whispers for attention.

Xtreme Detailing and Ceramic Coatings: field habits that save time

Out on the road jobs we have a couple of habits that keep results consistent. At Xtreme Detailing and Ceramic Coatings we chase shade, not time. Morning roof work, late day polishing on the driver's side if the campsite opens to the west. We always bring extra nozzle gaskets and quick connects so a leaky fitting does not mist minerals onto a finished panel. We keep dedicated bags for acrylic window towels and plastic cleaners. It sounds fussy until the day someone grabs the wrong towel and adds a spiral to a bunk window.

We also photograph every decal edge and seam before and after taping. It helps on multi-day jobs when different hands pick up where the first crew left off. On coaches with mixed finishes, those photos guide which panels are gelcoat, which are paint, and which plastics hate polish. The result is fewer surprises and a finish that holds.

A practical kit that covers most RV scenarios

- pH balanced wash soap, bug pre-soak, and a mild APC for trims and bays
- Two mitts, two buckets with grit guards, plush drying towels, and a blower
- Clay or a synthetic decon mitt, iron remover safe for paint and gelcoat
- Dual-action polisher with light to medium pads, painters tape, and trim guards
- A gelcoat-friendly ceramic coating or durable sealant, plus glass sealant

Fixes for common “oops” moments

Etched bug guts on a front cap after a long day? Pre-soak with a bug remover, rinse cool, then use a soaked microfiber with glide. Do not scrub dry or hot. If etching remains, polish lightly and top with protection. Install a bug screen before the next run if your route is a June moth gauntlet.



Compounded dust in fridge vents? Vacuum with a soft brush and a narrow nozzle, then clean with a damp microfiber. If residue has packed in, remove the vent panel and wash it separately. Reinstall only when dry.

Stubborn black streaks after a rain? Clean the roof. Address the source rather than chasing the symptom. Use a streak remover sparingly and follow with a neutral wash so you do not create bright spots.

Acrylic window haze after the last DIY wash? If it is light, a plastic-safe cleaner and a dedicated plastic polish can recover it. If you gouged it with a dirty towel, you may need a multi-step plastic polish set. Test in a corner first. Never use glass polish with cerium oxide on plastic.

Storage and travel tips that protect your work

If your rig sits under trees, rinse pollen off before it bakes. Sap etches. In winter storage, elevate and vent your cover so moisture does not sit on the same panel for months. If you do commercial Boat Shrink Wrapping, give hard edges chafe guards and build vents high. On long runs, keep a small kit accessible with a rinseless wash, plush towels, and a bug sponge. Fifteen minutes at a fuel stop removes acids that can etch by the time you reach camp.

The payoffs you feel every trip

A well maintained finish is not only a reflection. It means faster washdowns, less water on board wasted on cleaning, clearer glass in a downpour, and fewer weekends lost to rework. Polishes last because you are not grinding grit into them. Sealants bead because you did not cook them in noon sun during the application. Caulk stays put because high pressure never hammered it. It is a hundred small habits that make your RV easier to live with and easier to sell when the next adventure calls.

If a job feels like it is fighting you, step back and simplify. Cool surface, clean media, correct chemistry, and the lightest touch that does the job. Those are the same principles that guide good Auto Detailing bays and the same habits that keep Marine Detailing pros out of trouble on gelcoat. Applied to RVs, they add years of good gloss and far fewer surprises.

Xtreme Detailing and Ceramic Coatings

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FAQs About Car Detailing Services

How much should I spend on car detailing?

The cost of car detailing can range from \$100 to \$300 for standard services, while premium packages like paint correction or ceramic coating can cost several hundred to over a thousand dollars. The right budget depends on your vehicle's condition and the level of protection you want.

Is detailing worth the money?

Yes, professional detailing is a worthwhile investment. It helps protect your vehicle's paint, maintains the interior, and preserves resale value. In areas like Fontana, CA, where sun exposure and dust are common, regular detailing can significantly extend your car's lifespan.

How often should you fully detail your car?

A full detailing service is typically recommended every 4 to 6 months. However, this can vary depending on driving habits, weather conditions, and whether your vehicle has protective treatments like ceramic coating.

What time of year is best for car detailing?

Spring and fall are ideal times for car detailing. Spring helps remove winter buildup, while fall prepares your vehicle for harsher weather conditions. In Southern California, detailing year-round is beneficial due to constant sun exposure and environmental contaminants.

How long does car detailing last?

The results of detailing can last anywhere from a few weeks to several months, depending on the services performed and how well the vehicle is maintained. Protective options like ceramic coating can extend these results significantly.

Do I need ceramic coating after detailing?

While not required, ceramic coating is highly recommended after detailing. It adds a durable layer of protection, enhances shine, and makes future cleaning much easier, especially in high-heat environments like Fontana.