



CAMP GUITARS

Make the music travel with you

BY TOM WATSON

Strumming a song on a guitar around the campfire can be as soothing to the ears as snacking on finger-licking good s'mores are to the palate and just as much a classic part of the camping spirit. Only trouble is, even if you have the room, do you really want to expose your delicate studio instrument to the humidity, dust, water, temperature extremes and downright roughness of the camping environment?

Luckily, the marketplace of travel guitars has exploded. And, while they shouldn't be expected to fulfill the full-bodied sound of a seasoned dreadnought or the rich tones of a classical guitar, many of these travel guitars will comfort the diehard guitar players who don't want to leave home without their instrument.

For the longest time musicians were enticed by Martin's Backpacker with its weirdly shaped body no bigger than a cigar box. Designed for the trail, it was a serious instrument for those of us who really wanted to

bring our music into the backcountry. Others soon followed with several sizes and designs marketed as travel guitars. Names such as Trailblazer and Rover clearly suggested these guitars were specifically designed to be your traveling, music-producing sidekick.

Another approach used to promote the instrument as a travel guitar was to make the entire guitar smaller than most full-sized models. In some cases the guitar was downsized to 75 percent of the standard models. Called "three-quarter" or "baby" guitars, most will fit into overhead bins on commercial airlines. These are also popular first guitars parents often buy for their aspiring guitar-playing child. Technology has even enabled one manufacturer to offer as close to a two-piece guitar as is possible. The Voyage-Air literally folds in two where the neck meets the body.

Here is a sample of some of those camp-friendly guitars that can have you singing around the campfire on your next outdoor adventure.

Backpacker by Martin

The most familiar to backcountry guitar players, the Martin Backpacker is a rugged, compactly built travel guitar. It features an alluring, albeit small body that joins the 24-inch neck at a gentle taper. Construction includes a solid mahogany neck, spruce top with "tone-wood" sides and back. The 15-fret neck varies in width from about 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches



(common for most smaller guitars) at the nut to 2 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches at the body. It was a bit tight for my big-handed fingers to finesse chords on this narrow neck.

The Backpacker has adequate sound — after all, it is a very petite guitar. You don't get a lot of bass out of these small guitars. Replacing the store strings with a lighter gauge would probably soften the somewhat tinny banjo-like sound right off the shelf. The nylon string version is very mellow but pleasantly soft. The MSRP is \$309, but the best store price I found was about \$180.

Little Martin



This is basically a smaller version of a standard-size guitar. It has a much more robust sound, including more bass, and although it has the size of the three-quarter models, it sounds as good as or better than many full-sized guitars. If size were not an absolute factor, for

more, and more than double the sound quality, I would get the Little Martin Acoustic over the Backpacker.

Johnson Trailblazer



Johnson makes the Trailblazer and it shows the same quality evident in its vast array of full-size guitars. Features include a rosewood fretboard and bridge with 22 full-size nickel/silver frets. The body top is spruce; the sides, back and neck are mahogany. Nut width is 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches on a 33 $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch body. It is solidly built with a distinctive travel-backpack shape.

The Trailblazer had a surprisingly full sound for its compact size. It was a little soft at the bass end but had decent tone when picked or strummed. The Deluxe model has a

body that's 1 inch deeper and it is also 3 inches wider than the regular Trailblazer. Both guitars come with a custom carrying case. MSRP: Trailblazer, \$133; Deluxe, \$250.

Washburn Rover



While the Rover is technically one of many three-quarter-size guitars, it works well at satisfying both the overhead bin requirement and the compact size of a "take it camping" model. It's 24 inches long, with a fairly wide 20-fret mahogany neck and rosewood fingerboard. The Rover also features a solid spruce top with a mahogany body. All this is protected in a padded cordura case

with straps, clips and extra pockets. The Rover's sound is much fuller than the smaller backpack varieties, yet a bit more tinny than the full-bodied bigger brothers on the market. However, it's satisfying for its size. I tested Martin's Little Acoustic in the same playing room and found both models to have a similar and adequately full sound. Its MSRP is \$225, but I found them advertised for much less.

Voyage-Air



As I gazed upon it, I thought to myself there's no way a nearly full-sized guitar can fit into the handsomely crafted cordura backpack



sitting before me with the name Voyage-Air printed on it. It was too light and too small. I unzipped the backpack's padded top and peered down onto a guitar with its neck bent back at a 180-degree angle, right where it connects with the body. The patented folding neck-hinge system on the Voyage-Air clearly gives it the uniqueness award — and a high ranking on the scale for travel guitars as well.

The OM-04 model used to be called the Songwriter and features both a traditional OM-Style body shape or a traditional dreadnought body shape; both guitars have a 25.5-inch length with a solid spruce top and mahogany back and sides. Both also feature a mahogany neck with a 21-fret rosewood fingerboard and bridge. The nut width on the OM is 1.75 inches and the dreadnought sports a typical 1.68-inch width.

One of the first things one does when inspecting a new guitar is to examine the neck for warping and other signs of stress. I found none. This guitar's neck swings at 180 degrees, on a hinge. Direct light pressure, make a few turns of a thumb bolt, retune the relaxed strings and strum. Voila! Deep, rich, full-size guitar tones come gushing out. The OM-04 had nearly all the vibrant tones of my classic, 35-year-old Martin D-28.

It's built solid, incredibly light yet rugged for handling the elements. The bombproof case lets it ride in the overhead bin or strapped to your shoulders as you head up into the backcountry. It isn't cheap; the Voyage-Air OM-04 carries an MSRP of \$599, but can be found at most retailers for about \$500. It's a real guitar price for a real guitar.

Taylor

The Baby Taylor is 33.75 inches long and features a Sitka spruce top with a Sapele laminate back and sides. The bridge and 19-fret fretboard are made from ebony, while the neck is made of tropical American mahogany. Like all Taylors, the sound was excellent — rich and full bodied. Its MSRP is \$398.

The very best way to select any



guitar is to play it several times, preferably in the sound room at various retailers. You'll know when you find the one that's right for you. Don't expect a tiny cigar-box guitar to sound like a big-bodied Guild. However, do expect reasonable sound, produced with the same finger and strumming moves you make on your full-sized guitar — sounds that will be fantastic when accompanied by pleasing voices around a crackling campfire. ▲

SOURCES

C. F. MARTIN & CO INC.

610-759-2837, www.martinguitar.com.

JOHNSON GUITARS

www.johnsongtr.com.

WASHBURN GUITARS

800-877-6863, www.washburn.com.

VOYAGE-AIR GUITAR

800-371-6478, www.voyageairguitar.com.

TAYLOR GUITARS

619-258-1207, www.taylorguitars.com.