

Voyage-Air VAD-2

A radical approach to the travel-guitar concept enables globetrotting pickers to pack a full-size ax.

By Charles Saufley



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Travel guitars, almost by definition, demand some trade of tone for portability. For at the end of the day, even the most masterful luthier can't get around the physics that makes small guitars sound less panoramic and robust than your prized D-28 back home.

Voyage-Air, an enterprising California guitar company, didn't view the exchange of big tone for portability as a given, but rather an opportunity to apply engineering ingenuity—in this case the ingenious design work of renowned luthier Harvey Leach. And the fruit of these labors, which unite top-flight guitar craft with a fold-and-stow design worthy of the Transformers, will be welcome news to any frequent flier who needs a six-string fix on the road.

Voyage-Air's solution for making a full-size guitar small enough for an overhead compartment hinges (forgive the pun) on a neck joint that enables the player to fold the guitar in half—pivoting the neck just ahead of the joint so the fretboard lays flat against the guitar's top. For this review, I checked out the company's VAD-2 dreadnought. And while I marveled at the clever engineering behind the VAD-2, I found the guitar to be a delight to play, too.

A REALLY SWINGING JOINT

For players who obsess over how dovetails and hide glue can affect construction, sustain, and tone, Voyage-Air's hinged-neck concept may seem counterintuitive. But the VAD-2 looks and feels rock solid, and most folks who casually strummed the Voyage-Air without a briefing on its travel-guitar identity failed to notice the telltale seam and hefty heel that indicate where the neck is hinged.



Operating the double hinge that folds the Voyage-Air in half is a breeze. You simply twist the heel-mounted screw, which doubles as a strap pin, and the neck releases from the neckblock. The operation doesn't require de-tuning, so the first few attempts can surprise you because string tension tends to swing the neck away from the heel with a jolt. I found the best method to control the speed of that swing was to brace the guitar's body between my knees and unscrew the joint while holding the upper part of the neck with my free hand.

Setting up the guitar to play again also takes a little effort, and players accustomed to treating their guitars with kid gloves may be wary of the force needed to overcome string tension and reposition the neck. A few times through both operations, though, reveals just how simple and efficient the design

AT A GLANCE

Voyage-Air VAD-2

THE SPECS

Solid Sitka spruce top. Solid East Indian rosewood back and sides. Three-piece mahogany neck with hinge joint. Rosewood fretboard and bridge. X-bracing. Gold Schaller-style tuners. 25.5-inch scale. 1¹¹/₁₆-inch nut width. 27⁷/₁₆-inch string-spacing at saddle. Polyurethane finish. Light gauge D'Addario phosphor bronze strings. Made in China.

THIS IS COOL

A full-size guitar with travel-friendly dimensions.

WATCH FOR

Case may not fit in overhead compartments on small commuter planes.

PRICE

\$1,895 list/\$1,595 street.

MAKER

Voyage-Air Guitar: (925) 271-4064; voyageairguitar.com.

is—there's no potential for damage to the finish, and while each cycle of folding and unfolding the guitar required a minor re-tune, it was remarkable how close to pitch the guitar remained after being folded in half.

The neck hinge isn't the only bit of clever thinking on the Voyage-Air. The nut design uses small ports rather than slots to hold each string in place while the neck folds and unfolds. That solution eliminates the possibility of slot adjustment in a setup, of course, but Voyage-Air overcomes the limitations of a nonadjustable nut by building in a zero fret—a detail that's uncommon in contemporary steel-string design but that's still used by European luthiers and in Gypsy-jazz guitar construction.

Presumably in the interest of saving space, the Voyage-Air's headstock is smaller than usual for an acoustic, and its design suggests a Paul Reed Smith influence. Elsewhere, though, the Voyage-Air is an exercise in traditional and restrained dreadnought design, with a tasteful and not-too-ostentatious abalone rosette, black-and-white striped purfling, and white binding that all complement the handsome spruce top.

The VAD-2 comes in a soft case designed to protect the guitar in its compact, folded configuration. It's strong, smartly designed, and built to provide ample protection to the neck joint and top, which are the most vulnerable parts of the instrument when it's folded. The case also features a detachable laptop/attaché case that helps the traveler keep carry-on luggage to a minimum. The case is certainly small enough to fit into the majority of overhead compartments, but just big enough that it could be harder to fit on packed flights or on the smallest commuter jets.

PLAY IT ALL TOGETHER

Just as most folks who looked over the VAD-2 failed to notice the visual tips to its dual identity, few who picked up the guitar to play it suspected they were strumming anything out of the ordinary. Only players who ventured higher than the ninth fret noticed that the neck



begins to taper farther down toward the nut than the average 14-fret guitar to accommodate the substantial heel. The folding neck seam, which bisects the fretboard between the 13th and 14th frets, was virtually imperceptible to the touch and did nothing to impair fretting or bends that far up the neck. Just-short-of-jumbo-size frets help give the guitar a very playable overall feel, though their high profile demanded a little more fretting force higher up the neck—an issue that was compounded somewhat by the VAD-2's high-ish action.

Few of these issues came into play when I chorded below the seventh fret or played bluesy runs within the guitar's bassier registers, which is where the Voyage-Air really excels. In this range the guitar demonstrated an impressive volume ceiling that put to rest any concerns about the folding neck's structural integrity or its effect on sustain or tone. Heavy strumming delivered the projection you'd expect out of a good rosewood-and-spruce dread, and it also alleviated concerns about whether or not the folding neck would affect tuning stability—the VAD-2 held standard and lower open tunings under the most aggressive rhythm bashing.

The VAD-2 tone palette is mostly typical of a dreadnought, with an emphasis on the midrange. It lacks just a little low-end muscle and a bit of clarity on the high end. But on the whole, the VAD-2 has a rangey voice that lends color to open-tuned bluesy jams and first-position folk strumming, and it delivers a nice punch to country-flavored flatpicking.

THE WRAP

If you're a player for whom frequent travel is a fact of life, the VAD-2 and the other guitars in the Voyage-Air line are a practical, workable way to bring a full-size, full-scale guitar along for the ride. Our review model is about \$1,600 street price (and Voyage-Air recently introduced its lower-cost Songwriter series, which will start at about \$900), so some players might still prefer to risk the loss of a more inexpensive travel guitar. But for jet-setting pickers who can't spend a day without a booming, big-bodied dread at the ready, the VAD-2 is the best cure for the traveler's blues yet.

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