

ON SCREEN

Tuning in on the road

In-car TVs and VCRs can be a blessing for vacation-bound families

BY ROY GREEN
Staff Writer

There's a sure-fire way to put an end to the age-old question asked on long auto trips — 'are we there yet?' It's called television.

Installing a TV set and VCR in the family van is no longer something reserved for only the rich and/or famous. In fact, it's becoming almost commonplace, particularly for families who spend a lot of time on the road.

"It has exploded in the last year, now that people know it isn't such a big project anymore. And a lot of them are looking for ways to keep the kids entertained," said Andrew Robertson of Kromer Radio in Toronto, one of a growing number of companies specializing in customizing vehicles with television, videotape machines, even surround-sound.

Car Smart, a GTA auto-purchase consultancy, reveals that in-car entertainment systems are almost routine in the U.S. and will soon be common here, too. They are installed most often in vans, mini-vans and sport utility vehicles.

The biggest advance in the field is LCD screens.

"There's just no room for conventional TV picture tubes in cars," Robertson said.

"The LCD screens range in size, but the most popular is a 6.4-inch model."

There are a variety of in-car versions, but the most popular is a TV screen that pops down from the roof of the vehicle — just like the mini-screen on an airplane.

There are also versions with the screen installed into the back of the headrests on the front seat.

"The cheapest models are floor consoles with TV and VCR designed to fit between the captain's chairs," Robertson said.

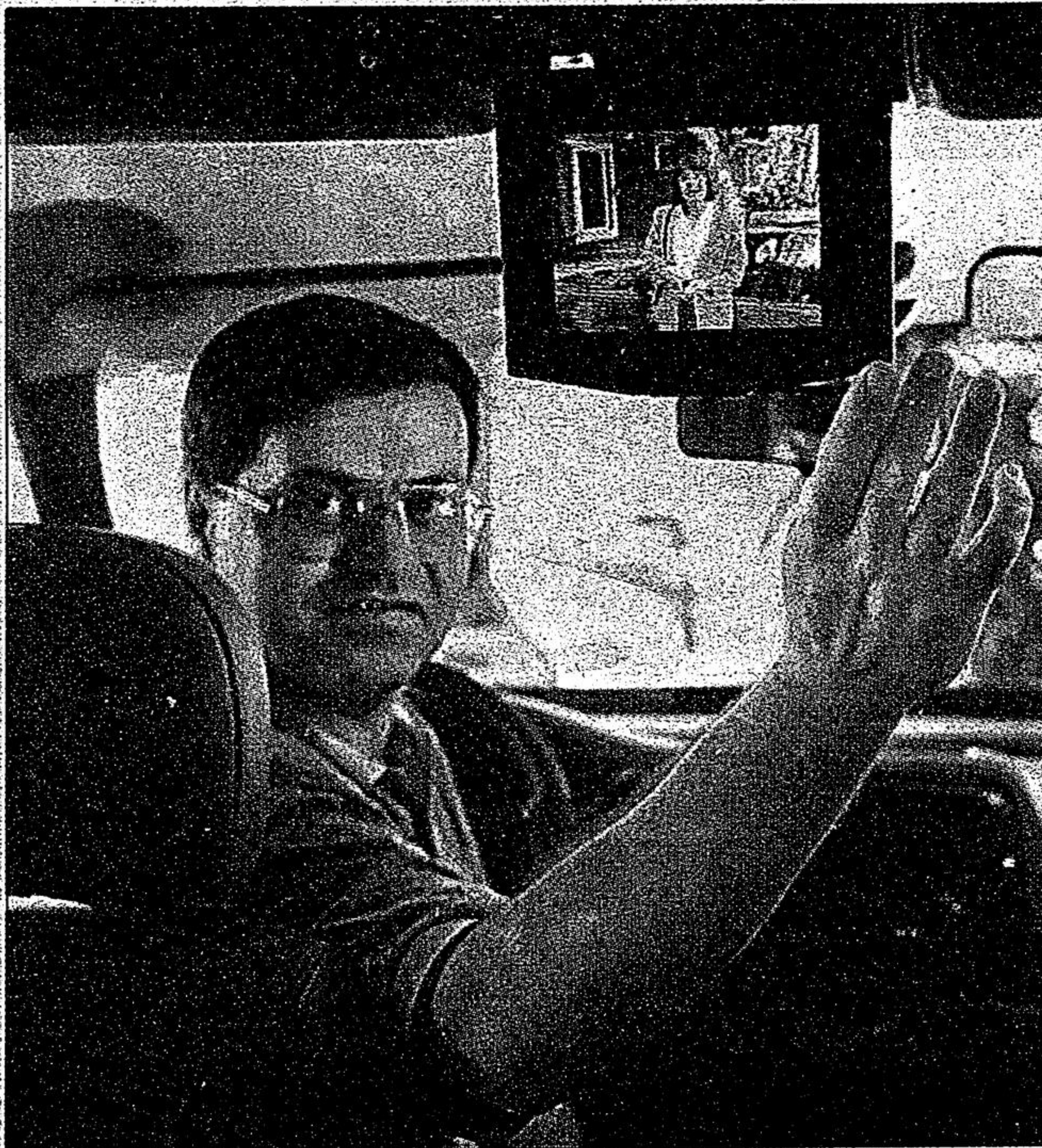
"They cost between \$1,200 and \$1,400. But the overhead pod is the best. It's much less visible and that's better for security."

Those overhead roof-screen versions range in price from \$1,900 to \$2,400 and, Robertson said, other customizing options can go as high as \$12,000.

"I've seen them with full Dolby digital sound. You can invite the whole family over to watch drive-in movies in your own driveway."

But even on the cheaper models, if the car is equipped with a small boomerang antenna, the TV will pick up some local channels. More important, Robertson said, they can be equipped with a hookup for video games.

"They can be customized to have the system tied into the car's audio and sepa-



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Terry Parvizian fine-tunes the picture in the pop-down screen installed in this car. In-car entertainment is popular in the U.S., and is catching on in Canada. Some auto manufacturers now offer TV and VCR as standard features.

rated so that the kids can be listening on headphones in the back, while the parents enjoy their favourite radio station in the front.

The key to custom installations, he said, is that the driver is definitely excluded from watching.

"It's illegal here and in the U.S. to have full-motion video in front of the driver. We've made some with front-seat video for cars going overseas, where no such laws apply."

The primary market, according to Car Care, is not surprisingly, parents who want to keep amused on long drives.

Robertson agreed. "The last thing you need is kids whining aloud."

There's also a business application.

"We've installed them for businesses driving people back and forth to the airport," he added.

Auto manufacturers are very much aware of the interest in in-car entertainment. The Oldsmobile Silhouette now comes with a TV as a standard feature, while Pontiac and Chevrolet are expected to add it to their versions of the van soon.

But whatever manufacturers add to their assembly lines, it won't match what some entrepreneurs are offering.

Among the extras being offered by customizers are fax machines, aromatherapy dispensers, two-line phone systems with hands-free controls, satellite antennas for more channels and mapping and satellite navigation systems.

Waking Ned Devine just the ticket for movie renters

BY ROY GREEN
Staff Writer

Look to 'the old country' for the best on video this month.

Two of the most entertaining film releases in June, *Waking Ned Devine* and *Still Crazy*, come from over-ome and outshine even this month's Oscar-nominated *The Thin Red Line*.

Waking Ned Devine, which was released June 1, is a delightfully funny charmer about a small Irish village struck by lottery fever. The thin plot line doesn't matter because the performances, particularly by Ian Bannen and David Kelly, are so wonderful. The hit of this year's Toronto Film Festival, it is also picture-postcard pretty.

Some critics were quick to stomp on *Still Crazy* (June 29), calling it a lesser version of *This Is Spinal Tap* and suggesting only hardcore fans of '70s British rock would enjoy it.

Wrong. You don't have to like the music to enjoy this film about a group of aging ex-rockers staging a reunion.

It isn't, as the publicity suggested, this year's *Full Monty*, but I found it better than *Spinal Tap* and not as good as *The Commitments*.

Consider all those titles and you have some idea of where *Still Crazy* fits. Add the great performances by Stephen Rea, Glasgow comic Billy Connolly and Bill Nighy and you can understand why it was nominated for a Golden Globe.

Which is not to say that *The Thin Red Line* (June 29) is not worth your video time. Far from it.

The big star treatment of James Jones' 1962 Second World War novel features spectacular performances by Nick Nolte, John Cusack, Sean Penn and Elias Koteas.

But it veers erratically between brutal battle scenes and pointless flashbacks. And it does that for almost three hours.

Also very rent-worthy is the psychological thriller *A Simple Plan* (June 22), starring Bill Paxton and Billy Bob Thornton. As one critic put it — "A simple tale brought to life by complicated performances."

Other notable releases are *The Red Violin* (June 1), Will Smith's *Enemy of the State* (June 15), Meryl Streep's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (June 15) and Bill Murray's *Rushmore* (June 29).

Also scheduled for release this month:

June 1 — *Gods and Monsters* and the re-mastered *Silverado*.

June 8 — *Psycho*, *Dead Husbands*, *Last Rites* and the HBO special *From the Earth to the Moon*.

June 15 — *Just the Ticket*, *Little Voice*, *The Faculty*, and *My Name is Joe*.

June 22 — *Patch Adams*, *Jawbreaker* and *Hurly Burly*.

June 29 — *Varsity Blues*, *The Mighty* and *Outside Ozona*.

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