



RV Life Happens

Adventure and Happenstance
Full-Time on the Road

Jack Huber

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*Adventure and Happenstance
Full-Time on the Road*

By Jack Huber

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RV Life Happens

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Preface

Over the last few years of RVing, I have regaled many a tale of our ups and downs, interesting people, disastrous circumstances, breakdowns and hazards. I realized that people seemed to be interested in them, perhaps because of my storytelling style (doubtful), the unknown quality and happenstance of living full-time in an RV, or recognition of incidents and community by those who share the lifestyle. Almost all RVers have stories about dumping their black tank (bathroom sewer) and love to hear others relating similar accounts. After all, misery loves company.

In my Pat Ruger Mystery Series, the main character moved into a motorhome in Book 6, "Oblivion Highway." I enjoyed creating stories for that lifestyle, having just started living on the road at the time. However, these were either fictional accounts of events from the recesses of my gnarled mind or situations I had read about somewhere in the country, such as a sex therapist setting up shop in a motorhome in an RV park.

As much as I might have been tempted to invent such fables in a book like this one, I assure you everything in this essay is true to the best of my knowledge and memory. That there are so many stories from so few years in an RV gives you some

idea of how different the lifestyle is than living in your average sticks-and-bricks house in an average neighborhood.

I enjoyed compiling these anecdotes and hope my readers equally find pleasure in them, whether they own an RV or not.

“Life is a Highway”

“I want to ride it all night long ...”

It was way back in 2005, the year that Katrina made landfall in New Orleans, when Nadyne and I first decided we were both deranged and interested in someday living full-time in an RV. We were touring different motorhomes in an RV show in Las Vegas and we almost simultaneously announced, “I could do this.” My favorite uncle and his wife had started their retirement by traveling around the country full-time in a motorhome in the 1970’s, and they were at it for decades. But, little did we know our “someday” would be over a dozen years later.

Our first attempt at purchasing a beautiful new fifth-wheel was thwarted in Tulsa, Okla., by evil bankers refusing to finance it, even with \$40,000 down. We were living in Wichita, Kan., at the time and the only reasons the curmudgeonly loan officers gave was that we were renting our house and could, conceivably, move into the rig and skip town, never to be seen, or make payments, again. This was before full-timing in recreational vehicles became popular and the concept was extremely misunderstood by the nefarious financial institutions. Even if we had owned our home, we would have sold it before hitting the road, so what

was the difference? We exhausted all possible sources of financing and gave up.

Dejected from our RV purchasing attempt, we instead bought a manufactured home in the Denver area with that \$40,000 and set about making a stationary life there. Soon I was suffering in a full-time job, Nadyne was starting up a consulting business she could operate from home, and together we started paying off debt.

With my retirement approaching, we decided to try again, since this time we owned our home. A credit union gave us a pre-approved loan and we started shopping. We had no idea what we wanted, but with a new-found love of ATV four-wheelers, we thought having the pickup bed free would be nice. We ended up buying a used 30-foot pull-trailer in January of 2014 and when spring weather took hold, we took it out on its maiden voyage to Trinidad State Park, about five hours south of home. It wasn't very long into the weekend when we realized our mistake- no flippin' way we were going to be able to live in this trailer full-time.

We got back to town and almost immediately went shopping for a fifth-wheel, giving up any hope of hauling around a 4x4. I had a Ford F250 gas-fueled pickup and wanted to keep the length and weight down, so a toy hauler was out of the question. I had a floor plan in mind and started

looking for a quality used rig with the layout I wanted that was in the 30- to 32-foot range and under 10,000 pounds dry weight.

In the meantime, we were kidnapped by a newly-forming camping group ... okay, it wasn't exactly kidnapping. In the Camping World booth were a few Good Sam representatives trying to find members for their chapters and the closest one to us north of Denver was brand new. Nadyne dragged me kicking and screaming to the next meeting of the New Directions group, their second, and by the end of the meeting I was becoming comfortable with the idea. We hadn't yet made many friends in Colorado and here was a chance to make several.

New Directions goes on one camp-out a month together outside of winter months, and we joined them for four outings of jocularly during summer, each time getting to know our new friends better and better.

We bought our 2011 31-foot Crossroads Cruiser fifth-wheel with barely enough time in October to make the last outing of the season and tried for one more outing in November before winterizing. Unfortunately, Mother Nature laughed at our plans and an arctic blast came through at the beginning of the month, dropping the temps to 0 degrees. After a few days of cold and snow, we found that our

water pump had frozen and had to have it replaced after we had the de-winterized rig in the spring.

We made a decision in 2016 to retire and move into the fifth-wheel sometime between the fall of 2017 and the spring of 2018. Until then, we would downsize, giving away and selling as much as we could while still living in our house. The actual retirement plan ended up moving back to the spring of 2018, and over the late winter we sold our house, closing the sale in time to move into the rig to leave town. (Actually, I had to work for two weeks after we moved out of the house and stayed in an RV park during that time.)

We packed up our 1,680-square-foot house to move into our massive 340-square-foot RV. It WAS hard, and it didn't happen overnight. We had been doing the necessary things -- selling, storing and giving away stuff -- for months by then, and we still had to store more than we had hoped. On D-Day (Departure Day) we were still giving away furniture, like our living room sofa set and a full-sized dinette. In the span of a month, we had dealt away or carted to storage our living room and bedroom furniture, our guest room furniture, the dining room set, two wine racks, two big-screen TV's, most of the house's decor, half of my tools, three-fourths of our wardrobes, and even a car. Everything we had stored for a rainy day was gone.

While they mention the emotional pain of minimizing your possessions, what the bloggers and YouTubers don't really tell you is that some of the pain is the pure loss of value. Thousands of dollars' worth of things we bought because we needed them, or wanted them, was left behind. We obviously didn't have room for everything, so intellectually it made sense. However, I still felt the loss of monetary value from my day-to-day life over the first few months of full-timing, especially since it happened over a relatively short period of time. Even small, unsellable items can bear a cost.

Over our entire RV life, we have continued to downsize. It is amazing to think how little we really need to be happy. We have each other and we had Lucy.

Misfortune and Rigastrophe

Our first bout with misfortune came awfully early in our ownership of the fifth-wheel and was a direct result of my inexperience. My bad. We had the rig winterized and stored it through its first winter with us, having only used it for one camping trip. Upon de-winterizing at the RV repair dealer, along with having a new electrical outlet installed on the floor for our portable kitchen island and a new water pump installed, I went to retrieve the unit. I expertly backed the pickup to the fifth-wheel's kingpin, heard the clang of the hitch snapping closed and walked purposefully back to raise the landing gear.

I returned to the pickup and started pulling forward, then quickly found out that it hadn't snapped closed after all. In what may have seemed like a scene from a Bugs Bunny cartoon, the pickup bed slid away from the kingpin and the front of the fifth-wheel landed with a monstrous thud on the bed's side rails. To my credit, I had been moving in deliberate slow motion and was able to stop in time to keep the whole trailer front end from slamming to the ground. The RV center's techs heard the commotion and rushed out to help stabilize it while I lowered the landing gear enough to support the rig. Then I carefully drove out from under the now-

deformed fifth-wheel, leaving a crushed tailgate and crunched bed sides in the rear of the truck.

The reconstruction of the fifth-wheel's front end cost about \$1,200, the truck's tailgate was pulverized beyond repair, and the pickup's bed overhaul cost over \$5,000. I bought a used tailgate with V-shaped 5th-wheel access for \$50 from one of my New Directions friends and used the cost of the replacement tailgate to help reduce the repair costs.

Lesson learned the hard way — always check the stop bar in the kingpin hitch and lock the handle in the closed position.



In preparing to go full-time, Nadyne bought me a beautiful chrome-plated steel toolbox for across the back on my pickup bed. Normally around \$500, but she had gotten it 30 percent off. It was made for fifth-wheel hookup with a lower flip-lid section in the center, perfect for storing all my hand tools and accessories. I wasn't sure how to secure it and decided to wait until I could talk to my RV friend, Wendall, about it, since we were meeting up at a group campout soon.

I placed the box at the back end of the bed and hooked up, feeling great about the fit. Unfortunately, when we arrived in Nebraska at the campground, I found that the toolbox was a mangled mess — think Godzilla versus Bambi. Evidently the box had blown upward and wedged in between the bed floor and the bottom of the fifth-wheel front. When I turned, Bambi hadn't fared so well.

At first I thought I might just buy another, even though \$350 would have been a hit to the pocketbook, but then we found that it was no longer on sale. Wendall had been a body shop guy and told me not to worry. We loaded the contorted metal into his fifth-wheel when we departed and I waited to hear about it. When we arrived at the next camping outing, Wendall unveiled the toolbox, now about 95 percent straightened and usable, to our amazement. We were so pleased that we gave him and his wife a gift certificate for Wendall's favorite tool supplier, Harbor Freight. He advised me to use self-tapping screws to tack down the toolbox and I had it done the same day.



It is a well-known but little discussed fact that modern RV's are built for short trips, in length and

duration. The target consumer is the weekend warrior who uses the RV a half-dozen times per year. This means that much of the cost of manufacturing goes into the decor and features of an RV, but not the quality of the mechanical components. This isn't to say that they are poorly built (though some are) but that the priority isn't for continuous use. Suffice it to say that living full-time in an RV of any type stretches its manufactured purpose.

Our fifth-wheel was made in 2011, so by the time we used it for five years, the rig was eight years old. Even though we chose one of the best-built RV's we could get, eight years on the road, three of which were full-time, caused a great deal of stress and road trauma. This led to two major repairs and several expensive fixes.

We were in Yuma, Ariz., hooking up to begin our travel day, where we leave a campground and drive to the next stop. As always, I lowered the front landing gear to raise the kingpin high enough to hook it up to the hitch. It raised to height and I backed the pickup in and the hitch snapped in. However, the legs refused to retract and instead a clicking racket ensued. Panic and sweat drenched my body as I tried the system again and again. I unhooked and removed the contents from the front compartment, where the landing gear motor and assembly were installed. I then had Nadyne engage

the controls up and down while I lay half inside the compartment with a flashlight, hoping to see the issue. I didn't.

Some of the unsung heroes of the RV industry are the myriad of remote RV repair technicians all around the country. They have vans, tools and some parts and are in the field. Think about it. If you have a problem with an RV while camping, what is the likelihood you will want or be able to leave the camping site and take it to a repair center? Even if they don't have a six-week backlog, it's unlikely you'll get the repair done in time to sleep in the campground that night. The benefit of using a remote tech becomes obvious when one is needed. You sit tight and they come to you, much as a plumber comes to your house when a water leak springs to life. We have used remote repair services at least a dozen times in three years.

Our procedures when selecting a tech include getting recommendations from the RV park we're camping in and a lot of review searching on-line. We did that with this failure, conveying to the chosen tech the additional problem that our reservations were up that day. We were fortunate that he was able to move an appointment back and come right by. He was able to hand crank the legs up after we hooked the rig back to the truck so we could leave.

Our next stop was in Tucson at Escapade, the annual Escapees rally, and we were able to get a tech to come out and look the system over. That was helpful since we could no longer unhook and set up. In about an hour I had a \$1,200 estimate in my hand to replace the entire assembly, which cost more than just replacing the motor and gear box, but not enough more to warrant a partial replacement. That evening we had new landing gear.

We have had on-site techs replace the aforementioned frozen water pump, add a valve to our black water pipe, reset our slide seals, replace the manual switches for the rear landing gear and the awning and add extra fans and baffles to our refrigerator, which had stopped cooling in hot, humid weather. One of the difficulties with the water pump was that it was located behind a basement wall, which we didn't find until we thoroughly searched and eventually called the manufacturer.



In a campground on the Northern California coast, we were relaxing and watching reruns of Frasier when we heard a horrifying screech of metal on metal. “The truck!” Nadyne exclaimed as we

jumped to our feet. Sure enough, a half-million-dollar Class A motorhome had tried to park across the path from our site and while backing to adjust his orientation in his site, his rear passenger corner crunched my pickup's rear quarter panel and the driver's side of the rear bumper. The driver apologized and we swapped insurance information, then filled out a police report.

So, here's another problem living in your RV full-time. We needed to give up the pickup for two to three weeks for the repair and the maximum we could stay in any Thousand Trails Collection park was two weeks. We would only be in the current campground another week before needing the truck to move on to Oregon and two other parks, so we held off. Six weeks later we were finally in a park for a three-week stay outside of Seattle and we hoped to drop the truck off at a body shop there.

Another obstacle, we found out, is that many RV parks won't let you leave a fifth-wheel or pull trailer on their grounds without a tow vehicle present. They said something about in an evacuation scenario, that they couldn't be worried about who can get their trailer out and who couldn't — a perfectly reasonable explanation, we thought. However, this was our house and we would have nowhere to live if we couldn't park it in a campground. We were able to convince our scheduled resort that ours were special

circumstances and they grudgingly agreed to allow it. In the coming days we got many puzzled looks with a Nissan Maxima rental backed up in front of my 31-foot fifth-wheel.

It took nearly the entire three weeks for the body work. The day the truck was to be picked up, the body shop completed their sale of the business to a competitor and called to say it wouldn't be ready for two more days. To complicate matters even further, the insurance company refused to extend the rental period. We paid it ourselves so that we could get the truck and leave town with the RV. The deliberations among us, the body shop and the insurance adjuster continued for several days and the insurance finally did pay for the extension, since it was beyond our control.



Before hitting the road full-time, we planned a longer trip to Michigan to visit my daughter and son-in-law. I got two weeks off work and we were joined by Wendall and Andrea, a couple from the New Directions camping group who owned a 43-foot fifth-wheel and also had relatives in Michigan. We planned to boondock overnight somewhere in Nebraska and again in Iowa before arriving in

Michigan, then spend a couple of days with them before they split off to visit their own family.

We decided to leave the Denver area on a Friday evening and to go as far as we could before getting tired, then stopping wherever that was. We joined up as planned and followed Wendall's huge rig onto I-25 North. It was just getting dark when we left and rain started falling pretty quickly once we were on the road. The farther north and east we drove, the harder the rain fell. Near total darkness and pouring rain in the middle of nowhere in I-80 in Nebraska convinced us to stop for the night. We had just entered the offramp for North Platte when I noticed movement ahead of Wendall. In almost slow motion a hydroplaning car spun into view, leaving the oncoming freeway lanes and sliding across the median. Before we could react, it smacked Wendall's pickup and continued to slide back, raking the rear of the truck and several places on the driver's side of his fifth-wheel. The car ended up bouncing off the trailer and, fortunately for us, back onto the median where it came to a stop.

We all stopped and sat in shock. Wendall finally got out in the rain and I exited my truck to meet him halfway. He and Andrea were okay. I told him that Nadyne had already called the State Patrol and they were on their way. The driver of the other car seemed okay and he came over to check on us.

The State Patrol arrived in a few minutes and talked to each of us, finally telling us to follow him off the freeway offramp and into a convenience store lot. We noticed smoke coming off one wheel while following him and later found out that the wheel wasn't turning, just sliding on the wet pavement. By the time we parked under the awning of the gas station, the wind was howling and the rain was nearly parallel to the ground.

That was when the extent of Wendall's damage became apparent. A ten-speed bicycle was lodged in the front wall of the fifth-wheel just behind the truck, there were several holes on the side where you could see straight into the living room and kitchen from the outside, Wendall's side-view mirror was gone, and the driver's door and entire left side of his truck bed were creased and scratched. Also, both trailer axles were bent. He wasn't going anywhere.

Nadyne called their roadside assistance company for them and tried to relay the details of the incident, but the agent was having trouble getting the make and model from her. Wendall took the phone and even spelled it out loud, yelling at the phone, "B-I-G-H-O-R-N," but the guy kept repeating back bizarre names like, "Big Dog," "Long Horn," and other incorrect guesses.

Finally, the trooper took the phone with exasperation, since it was now past midnight and he was trying to wrap things up. After another few minutes of trying, he handed the phone back to Andrea and said, "This is the dumbest person I've ever talked to."

The trooper went inside the convenience store to talk to the night manager, then came out and told us that he let them know we were spending the night on the lot. The only caveat was that they opened at 5:30am and they would want us to leave soon thereafter. We parked outside of the gas pump awning and retired to the bedroom, exhausted. Lucy, our Cairn terrier, woke me up to potty and I checked my watch, which said 4:45, meaning that the gas station wasn't open yet. I pulled on my robe and had nothing else but tighty-whites on, put on the leash and opened the door, following Lucy out into a very surprised group of people gassing up. I hurriedly walked Lucy to the opposite side to potty, then quickly got back in the trailer in front of the still-gawking crowd.

"There's a bunch of people out there," I told Nadyne with much embarrassment. "I thought that they didn't open until 5:30." Then it hit me. We had crossed into the Central time zone in all the confusion that previous night and it was actually an hour later. I would hear about that morning walk for years afterward.

Wendall and Andrea stayed and we continued to Michigan without them. They had quite a bit of trouble in the weeks that followed, before their rig before the rig was finally totaled. In the meantime, they had to unload their belongings into their pickup and return to Denver. That wasn't an easy chore either. For a long time, Andrea was extremely nervous riding in the truck, with or without the fifth-wheel attached, but after a couple of years, she got more comfortable again. Nobody was hurt, miraculously, and it's now just a bittersweet memory.



RVillage friends “Warren and Terry of NE PA” speak of an issue more common than we’d like to think.

“During one of our first long trips with our travel trailer we got to a campground in South Carolina late at night. We had never been there before and information and a map were left for us at the park entrance. Well, the map wasn't exact to how the roads are laid out and we tried to find our way around and locate a sign showing what road we were on. We realized that we weren't on the right road and made a swing to the right to get to another

road. I didn't see that we were too close to a tree and caught my awning assembly on the darn thing. Needless to say, we had to stop for repairs on the way home.”

They were fortunate that it was just the awning. Lesson learned — never arrive to an unknown campground at night.



Why don't RV manufacturers give owners a map of the rigs with locations of all pertinent parts that will eventually need to be replaced? For the water pump, Crossroads was able to give us the location behind a wall in the basement. But for the converter, not so much.

We arrived at a moochdocking spot, our son's front yard in New Jersey, with no battery power. Dead. I double-checked the shore power and the battery connections and all seemed okay, but no 12-volt devices were working. When I bought my Lithium-ion batteries about three years earlier I had also purchased and installed a Victron battery monitor and an external battery charger. Remembering this, I pulled an extension cord from the house to the charger and almost immediately had 12v power. Hmmm...

I suspected the converter, which converts 120-volt power to 12-volt and distributes it to those systems, as well as charging the batteries. To troubleshoot the issue, I needed to test the input and output lines of the batteries and on the converter. The batteries showed 12.4 volts, low but operational. The converter could not be found. I thought it was behind the circuit breaker panel and removed it, but just wires were found, no converter. Two other places that I thought it could be gave the same result.

With the manufacturer being no help (they told us to look under the bathroom cabinet behind a wall with no access), I reached out to a solar power expert, who told me to put the voltage meter on the batteries while Nadyne turned off and on the converter's breaker. If the voltage changed, the converter was working. If not, either the unit was bad or its built-in fuse had blown. There was no change in the voltage.

I ordered in a new converter with more amps than I currently needed so that it would handle more batteries later and waited. When it arrived there was no help available to come on-site. We left New Jersey and landed in Virginia. Fortunately, we did locate a mobile tech, who came out and told me it was probably behind my basement wall but on the opposite side of the spot where the water pump

was installed, naturally. I had made an access panel to that device.

Now, anyone who has seen my basement knows that I installed two plywood shelves across the space, seven-foot deep, and filled with everything we needed for full-time living, including my electric clothes dryer. It was going to take a while and the tech graciously said he would come back the next day, after the basement was emptied.

After about three hours of working on it the next morning, I removed the wall he had indicated, and it wasn't there. Instead, we found wires and air vents going through a more permanent marine plywood wall. But, Nadyne took a flashlight and shined it behind that wall from the far end and thought she could see a small metal box on the other side of the rig. Sure enough, when the tech returned and saw that box, he confirmed that it was indeed the converter. Removing it would be impossible from the basement, however.

The tech stepped back, sizing up the problem and, I'm sure, virtually moving through the fifth-wheel in his head. "Got it," he said, calmly. "It's under your kitchen sink."

We had never seen an access panel in that cabinet, but, then again, we hadn't really ever looked there. I removed all the cleaning supplies we

stored there and voila! An access panel! The tech removed it and found the clandestine converter just sitting there, with an imagined embarrassed smile on its sneaky little face. He tested it, found it was bad and replaced it with my new component in about fifteen minutes. My monitor showed the batteries charging and sitting at 13.45 volts immediately, and 14.4 volts soon after. It was now up to me to put everything back together, which I was happy to do, taking two days and saving the \$100/hour labor fee for the cleanup.

I can tell you this: If we had a map or schematic of the fifth-wheel, including all the pertinent components, we could have saved many hours of work, grief and worry. It all goes back to using something full-time that was meant for camping only a few weekends a year.



On the theme of RV's being made for weekend use, our fifth-wheel's springs were evidently not meant for the amount of road time we've subjected them to. They finally broke on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, a relentless toll highway on which you get the privilege of paying for driving hundreds of miles on cement that makes a washboard seem as smooth as glass. During that drive we could have churned

20 pounds of butter while getting a long vibrating massage. Our brains were vibrating in our skulls after just a few miles, all of our belongings and refrigerator contents migrated to the floor within a hundred miles, and soon thereafter the springs gave up their valiant struggle.

Unlike tires, you can't just take your rig to a repair facility to replace all your springs and have it completed the same day. Some RV repair facilities are backlogged for weeks, and tire centers don't do springs on trailers or big trucks. After limping into New Jersey and parking at our son's house, I called around to the various trailer repair businesses around and found one that would do the job in about a week, but I had to leave the rig there. We packed like we were staying in a hotel and moved into a guest room, then I towed the fifth-wheel over to the facility. Twelve hundred bucks, that was the estimate for suspension leaf springs, equalizers, bushings and various parts and bolts, but we didn't have a choice.

I parked the unit in their back lot and plugged it into power with an extension cord to keep the refrigerator running, getting their promise to keep the power going, and left it. This was the first time since hitting the road full-time that we had to leave the rig somewhere for repairs. Not cool. A week later I was relieved to see brand new springs and bushings installed, but they had to move the axles

slightly closer together to make the new equalizers fit. That meant I could no longer use the X-chocks for securing the wheels when parking, since the tires were now too close together for them. Thank you, Pennsylvania.



The following was sent to me from RVillage members Ray and Karen, who have been work-camping for a few years now. It shows how important finding good vendors on the road is to us full-time road warriors.

“We had a bad trip going north in Texas a few years ago when we had a blowout. We got help from a local passerby, who took us into the next town to get a tire. I gave her money for helping, but she wouldn’t take it, so I put it in her console.

“Then about a quarter-mile from Austin we had another one, fortunately right near a tire shop. The problem was that there was no place to park, so they had us park in the lot right next to the building while they replaced the rest of the tires.

“While we were waiting, we found a restaurant called Cotton Patch, and we found it to be a great restaurant. After dining, we returned to the tire

shop and the best worker I think we have ever seen was finishing the last tire. He replaced all of the tires all by himself. We went inside and paid and then handed the young man a gracious tip.

“We were so lucky that day to have the help from great people who took time out of their lives for us. They were professional and skilled, finishing the work when most people would have needed more help. Bless them.”

"We Have Clearance, Clarence"

Having spent much of my adult life in the West, and all of my RV life in the West before hitting the road full-time, I didn't think about the height limitations when driving an RV very often. I almost always had clearance.

The one exception was trying to get to a campground in Monument, Colo., when we exited the I-25 freeway and then had to pull through a railroad underpass with no height notice or marking. I knew it would be close but also thought we could make it. I had Nadyne get out and try to get to a good vantage point while I s-l-o-w-l-y crawled through the opening, holding my breath. Inch by inch she waved me forward until we were all clear and I could exhale.

We once measured the tallest point on the fifth-wheel at 13-foot 5-inches. Clearance on interstates have the following standards, per Wikipedia:

"The minimum vertical clearance under overhead structures, such as bridges, is 16 feet, including both paved shoulders and an allowance for extra layers of pavement. Through urban areas, at least one routing is to have 16-foot clearances, but others may have a lesser clearance of 14 feet."

This means that all interstate highways should inherently be at a minimum of 14-foot clearance. However, state routes, city and county roads and other highways can have a variety of standards, so a driver must take precautions. I love seeing semis on the same highway that I am on, especially coming the opposite direction, because they always need 13-foot 6-inch clearance, so I am mostly assured of safety.



That being said, we have had close calls.

One itinerary a couple of years ago had us driving through downtown Binghamton in Upstate New York. This town has a population of less than 50,000, so we weren't too concerned about traffic. We also checked the RV Trip Wizard map that shows low clearance locations as well as a trucker's low clearance site on-line, and both showed Binghamton devoid of clearance problems.

We came into town and proceeded to follow our navigation as we entered their small downtown area. We turned the corner and headed into an underpass and I noticed at the last moment the bridge height sign that read 10-foot 11-inches. That

would have left a mark. I braked immediately and could see the low bridge ahead.

There was an older teen on a bicycle standing on the sidewalk nearby and he waved us on. The boy wasn't exactly trustworthy by sight, wearing a tattered T-shirt, long drooping shorts, flip-flops (on a bike?) and faded colored stripes in his otherwise blond hair. "You'll make it, no problem!" he shouted at us.

I rolled down my window and pointed to the sign, then yelled back, "We're 13-5!"

He seemed to not understand but that made no difference. Nadyne got out to see what could be done. Since we had entered the entrance to the underpass, there was no room to make a U-turn. Instead, she and the kid helped stop traffic behind us while I backed out of the tight spot. After about twenty minutes, I was able to turn around and head in another direction.

Another lesson learned — not all low clearance bridges are marked on maps.



Our first trip to New Jersey took us through Philadelphia on I-76 until it reached the Delaware River, then became I-676 at the Benjamin Franklin Bridge. We entered the bridge unaware of its non-standard construction specifications and I was shocked to see the clearances posted above each of the five lanes. The far-left lane was 13' 1", the next 13' 2", up to the far-right lane at 13' 5". I stopped in Interstate traffic, unsure of what to do. We were in the second lane from the right and since I couldn't be sure we would clear the highest point in the right lane, I chose to use the last exit before there was no return.

I turned on my blinker and traffic let me over. I was relieved to have avoided that potential disaster. However, that offramp set us directly into a 100-year-old neighborhood with extremely narrow streets and cars parked on both sides of us. There was probably an inch between us and parked cars on each side of the street and no chance to avoid the obstacle course. I weaved slightly right and minuscule left until we got down the block. With the cross street equally packed with vehicles, I had to continue the course one more block ahead before I could turn onto a more reasonable artery, then found the I-95 south to look for another bridge across the Delaware. The Walt Whitman Bridge granted plenty of tall access and we finally entered our destination state, New Jersey.



That wasn't the last time we had trouble in the Garden State. The following year we wanted to visit a friend in Lyndhurst and once off the freeway, State Route 7 took us parallel to the Passaic River and an aqueduct. As we headed north there was warning sign after warning sign at each cross street that the aqueduct clearance was extremely low, from 9-foot 9-inches to 11-foot 1-inch and everywhere in between. We were worried that we just weren't going to be able to get into Lyndhurst at all.

Our navigation had us turn right well past the raised aqueduct, thankfully, but the bridge over the Passaic had a clearance posted of 13-foot 6-inches. We could clear that, but was it accurate? One problem, especially in the East, is that sometimes a roadbed is repaved, adding layers to the thickness of the road, and the signs are rarely changed when this happens. Again, I crawled beneath the bridge's lowest girders and was able to cross without incident.

We have had close calls and have seen how much damage an overpass can do. Many air conditioners have been ripped off RV roofs, usually leaving wide-open, jagged holes in their ceiling. Worse, though, is when the roof actually collides with a bridge face, which can actually result in a

total loss of the vehicle. Also, there was a time, even somewhat recently, when you had to be very aware of gas station awning height, and at least one of our friends lost an A/C unit that way. That is less of a factor now that stations have added diesel pumps and raised awnings accordingly.



It is easy to understand why there are more clearance issues in the East than out West. Simply the age of the roads and highways is a big part of the story, with many western highway systems and city streets planned and built quite a bit more recently than the opposite coast, and many built after the rise of commercial trucking. There is also the difference in terrain, with much of the West and Midwest lying flat and much of the East being hilly.

But, regardless of where you are and where you are headed, prudence dictates being diligent in route planning and observant in your travels.

After all that diligence, you have to scratch your head and wonder. In Texas, we noticed several very tall overpasses — some as high as 23 feet — with damage on their faces from even taller vehicles. Why are 20-foot-tall trucks or semis carrying 24-foot cargo driving on highways where 13-foot 6-inches is

the minimum clearance? I have a vision of a tractor-trailer with a crane on board when an inauspicious event affects the crane controls unbeknown to the driver and the arm lifts up enough to hit the first bridge front it can't clear.

There wasn't just a single overpass we noticed with damage. There were several. If you have a tall load that won't fit under 18-foot why wouldn't you check your route for those bridges? Maybe NASA transports so many rocket parts on Texas highways that they lose track of which roads are acceptable.

Hello, Neighbor

Sharing RV parks with the one-million-plus other full-time RVers and meeting all kinds of people around the country can have its ups and downs. Overall, our experiences have been positive, with friendly and interesting people living in all parts of America — but not all. Here are a few examples:

Very recently we had the pleasure of camping in Kentucky for the first time in our travels. Servers, staff, checkers and other public-facing employees mostly showed a friendliness we hadn't seen except in southern Texas and southern Georgia. It was bizarre, then, when in a 15-minute span we went from the sweetest cheese shop owner to being shot at with what looked like a 12-gauge shotgun.

We were out on one of my usual photo jaunts in a new (to us) state countryside and stopped in at a dairy with an old-fashioned sign and storefront, both with quaint references to custom cheeses. Being cheese fans, especially freshly-made, we stopped and were the only customers inside. The owner or manager was a woman who made us feel at home and was as pleasant as she could be. We left with some of the most delicious Colby Longhorn and curds we had had since we had toured the Tillimook plant in Oregon the year before.

A few minutes after leaving the cheese shop, I spotted a couple of interesting farm buildings I thought were picturesque. There was no shoulder to park on, one of my complaints about rural Kentucky, so I pulled onto some cut grass and weeds just off the road at a house. I got out with my cameras, one wide-angle, one telephoto, and snapped a half-dozen pics from the other side of the road, across the street from where I had parked, but still staying off any lawn or manicured area.

I decided I had enough and started back to the truck when I heard a couple of gunshots to my left. I looked toward the salvo and a farmer was holding a shotgun toward me. He was a couple hundred yards away, so I wasn't fearful of being hit at that moment, but anything could happen. I completed my retreat to the pickup and left without hesitation. I had not parked on that farmer's land, nor was I taking photos towards his house or property, so I'm guessing he saw a tourist and wanted to scare him. I am always very respectful of private property, so I was somewhat taken aback from this surprise attack.



In the same vein, in "Middle Georgia," we were leaving after a short four-day stay and approached

the primary arterial, about a block from the freeway. It was a very small business road with gas stations, a few fast-food restaurants and other local businesses scattered on both sides. I needed to turn left and waited for a few cars to pass. There was nobody to the left and an older box truck was a couple hundred yards up the street to the right. As I always do, I crawled onto the road for my left turn and headed towards the on-ramp.

In the rear-view mirror, I spied a pickup whip around me on my left side and watched as it cut me off and stopped abruptly in front of me. I stomped on my brakes and waited for the truck to move on, but it didn't. Instead, the driver got out and glared at me. I quickly scanned him and his red and white truck, seeing a red-haired, bearded, husky farmer (AKA "good ol' boy"), complete with faded denim overalls, a checkered flannel shirt and trucker's cap, standing there with his late-model truck, which, thankfully, didn't have a rack of firearms in his rear window.

Not wanting to be mentioned in a headline the following morning (e.g., "Local Man Arrested after Tourist Gets Gunned Down in Road Rage Incident"), instead of getting out to confront the man, I mouthed the words "I'm sorry" and shrugged. He wasn't happy but after an hour or two ... make that a minute or two ... he climbed back into his pick'm-up truck and squealed his tires as he swerved onto

the on-ramp and the freeway. By the time I got on the freeway myself, he was nowhere to be seen. I looked at my rear-view mirror, which is also a dash cam, and counted myself lucky that the video wouldn't be necessary.



We have boondocked, or dry camped, for more than a day or two on government land only a couple of times. One of those was a four-day stay just outside the entrance of Joshua Tree National Park. It was an amazing experience, even with the constant trucking noise of a distant I-10 throughout the day and night. Most of the RVs camping in the desert there stayed about 200 feet or more apart, so it felt very spacious. I grew up in Southern California and had always loved the Joshua Tree region of the Mojave Desert.

On our third day, a young woman knocked on our door. She spoke English with a Scandinavian accent as she explained that her van tires had dug in. She was pretty but definitely looked like she had been camping for a few days, so we felt okay about trying to help. Her vehicle was nearby and was a very old, two-tone GMC van in faded pastel yellow and white. Sure enough, the right rear wheel had dug deep into the loose desert sand and dirt. I

returned to my truck, grabbed my camp shovel and some 2"x6" boards for leverage, carried them to her van and went to work digging.

I dug out around the tire as best I could and then wedged the boards in front of the wheel. The van had a manual transmission and clutch, so I had her start the engine and put it into second gear to keep the tire from spinning in the sand. She gunned it and the tire spun. I swapped places with her and I tried to move the tire more slowly. As I let up on the clutch the opposite tire began spinning. I stopped and started several times and I finally quit when the left tire was as dug in as the right.

I was still hooked up to our fifth-wheel and I really didn't want to chance getting my truck stuck in the sand by trying to pull out her van. As I was looking over the situation, a large sport truck flew by and I realized there were plenty of young guys around with both the proper pickup to tow it out and the desire to help a pretty Scandinavian woman in distress. I suggested she flag one of them down.

I apologized for not being able to pull it out myself, but the cute Bohemian woman must have realized I was right and she seemed all too happy to flag down a colorful sports truck driven by a tall and tan shirtless bodybuilder.



While still in California we camped in an RV park in Lancaster, 50 miles north of Los Angeles. We chose a spot next to an older but very large fifth-wheel whose outside graphics were all removed and was completely painted a dirty-white color. I spoke to the owner, a 60+ year-old country gentleman who introduced himself as Gary. He explained that he, his son and daughter-in-law were living in the unit with two large gray huskies. All three were commuting into Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley for work. Feeling like vagabonds, they had been moving from park to park, trying to find space closer to at least one of their jobs. Gary seemed like a nice guy and we spoke a few times in our first week there.

Soon I noticed that they were packing up to move and it took a couple of days before they were ready to hook up and leave. On their site was also an older Dodge 1500 pickup, a 1/2-ton model, which I had thought was being used for commuting to and from work. I was flabbergasted to see them hook it up to the huge trailer and leave. Folks, if you have a 15,000-pound trailer, a 1/2-ton truck might pull it but it won't stop it when traffic stops in front of you. We never did see this fifth-wheel or Gary in the news, so we can only assume he found a campground to park it permanently.



RV parks are full of friendly people, but, sometimes, too friendly. One stay in Texas had us parked next to a fairly late model travel trailer and what looked like a brand-new pickup truck. I have a decal on the side of my rig that touts my writing and mystery series, and when they saw it the husband, Jim, came over to talk. And talk. And talk. I was able to convince Jim that we were still busy setting up and he graciously went back to his trailer, where he and his wife sat outside smoking. They looked like they were easily in their late 60's, perhaps older. Over the next several nights they proceeded to make a campfire and sit around it, smoking, even in pouring rain. I guessed that the urge to smoke was extreme and only slightly less than their desire to keep cigarette smoke out of their newer trailer.

Later that first afternoon they both came by to visit with a cloud of cigarette smoke following them and we managed to keep them outside of our trailer. Jim and Ruthie informed us, lit cigarettes hanging out of their mouths, that they were in their 50's, which was shocking to us. It just didn't seem possible that they were younger than we were. Lesson reaffirmed — don't smoke.

Jim asked about buying my books. I told them that by signing up for my newsletter they could get

Book 2 for free, but Ruthie said they didn't have Internet or phones, so they could only read paperbacks. I mentioned that I had my books in paperback on board for \$10 each and they excitedly went through their cash and came up with \$23. I felt for these very pleasant folks and decided to sell them the whole series for that amount, which at that time was five books. I took a loss but was happy to do it.

Just to prove that no good deed ever goes unpunished, I was rewarded with half a dozen visits a day. We had nothing in common, nothing much to talk about, didn't appreciate their smoking around us, and had difficulty with their country speaking style and the fact that they, let's just say, weren't well read. But none of that stopped them from coming over. This was the first time we had ever peeked through our shades to see if the coast was clear before going outside, but it was necessary.

Before long Jim asked if I could ghost write a book for him. It turned out he had this idea for a spectacular science fiction story that had international intrigue, mystery and was set in the future. He began to explain the plot almost incoherently and I stopped him to give him some advice.

I told him to summarize the plot on paper and begin to formalize the important characters in the

story. He said he couldn't do that but it was such a good story, certainly a professional writer like myself would jump on it. I was sure regretting our encounter now. I tried to explain that I didn't have time for another project, since I was writing a mystery series, my forte, and had three more books to write before I could consider anything new. He kept at it for a while and then left dejected. Fortunately, we left after just a couple more days and didn't look back.



In Michigan we set up in a site behind a seasonal resident who only stayed in their huge fifth-wheel on the weekends. Their elaborate setup included a deck, a full bar, a covered outdoor kitchen and even a TV viewing room, all in tiki decor. It was so elaborate I eagerly awaited their return. We hadn't been full-timing very long and I introduced myself to the row of barflies from the resort. I sort of invited myself to their bar, offering to bring tequila and they seemed excited to have me drop by.

I joined them around 9 p.m., just when the bar seemed to be hopping with people. Music was playing, a football game was on the TV behind the bar and the grill was grilling. I placed a shot glass and my tequila on the counter and I offered some to

the other guests. The owner was tending the bar and he declined, as did everyone sitting nearby. I shrugged and downed a couple of shots, then tried to drum up some conversation. To the owner I asked how long since he built this camping patio ensemble, where he was living during the week, and other questions to break the ice, but all I got were one-word answers.

When I realized they could care less whether or not I was even there, I told them they could keep the tequila and I was going to turn in. They didn't seem to care. I don't know if this was a Midwest thing, a Michigan thing or just something about this particular group of people, but everywhere I have lived in the West, or even in Upstate New York for that matter, would have embraced the tequila and my attempt to join the party.



At least this neighbor was friendly, if not engaging. We have had our share of less-than-amicable RVers nearby.

For example, in California I was walking our dogs, Rosie and Sadie, through an empty site and had the next-door resident yell at me to get off the private property. I explained that I had a site down

the row and didn't think it should matter if I cut through, since nobody was parked there, it wasn't their lot and that we weren't hurting anything. The response was a selection of curse words and another demand to leave. I quietly continued through the site in my original direction to the other side and returned to our rig, expecting a call from the park management that never came.

More recently we were camped in a very narrow site with a grassy area in the rear with a tree, a fire ring and a picnic table. Our neighbors were close on both sides. The people on our back side were part of a full-timers camping association for families, several members of which were camping in that park at the time. Every night they congregated in their site, up to 30 people, around their campfire with loud kids and conversation until well past midnight, though quiet time started at 11 p.m.

To make matters worse, their porch light was bright enough to use as a searchlight looking for incoming bombers, and it shone right into our bedroom windows. Most RVers know that it's common courtesy to turn off bright night lights when you go to bed, but this intense beacon was on 24/7. We learned long before we went full-time that it's not worth making your next-door neighbors angry with you, so we just bided our time until they moved on, which was just a couple of days before we did.

In New York State, a bunch of young adults were partying next door and by evening had built quite the bonfire. We went to bed at a normal time (for us) and Nadyne watched the large fire from the window next to her side of the bed until quite late. At around 2 a.m., the kids went back inside to go to bed but left the fire going, flames still a couple of feet tall. Out west we were both taught at a young age to pour water on a fire, stir the ashes and pour more water on it before leaving it for the night. Since the opposite happened, Nadyne couldn't sleep until the fire burnt itself out a couple of hours later.



In North Carolina, there were quite a few families in the resort and we were nearby the playground and a row of families in RVs. In the middle of the day, I was out on a drive. There were what must have been very young trust fund kids playing on the swings and jungle gym, and Nadyne walked the dogs near the playground's sand. There were signs saying no pets in the play area and Lucy pottied in the grass, outside the designated playground. When Nadyne stooped over with a poop bag to clean it up, a couple of the kids started yelling at her to get the dogs out of the playground. She told them she would as soon as she scooped up

the mess, but they got closer and louder until Nadyne finally told them to shut up and go home if they didn't like it.

In about an hour, the trust fund mother came over and knocked on the door, then proceeded to yell at Nadyne for correcting her kids. Nadyne told her she was minding her own business when the kids started yelling and that where we came from, kids don't order adults around. That conversation didn't convince the lady, evidently, because the next day there was a note scribbled and stuck on my windshield. It was difficult to read, but I gathered the gist of it was that my wife was a b****, that she looked me up on Amazon and was going to leave several bad reviews on my books.

We called the campground to let them know they had a problem tenant, but they already knew about this family and were already getting ready to ask them to leave.

Yes, there are all kinds of people in the world and the more you travel, the more likely you are to meet some of the unsavory kind. However, we have an advantage over people living in stick-and-bricks homes — if we don't like it where we are, we move.

Gone with the Wind and the Mud

Over three years of full-time RVing, we have been incredibly fortunate with respect to weather. As we have moved about the country, we've been able to stay one step ahead of severe weather, or at least to stay put as it ambled by.

One particular severe weather magnet is Nebraska, a flat Midwestern state that experiences many tornadoes and straight windstorms in the spring and summer. During our last camping visit to Lake McConaughy, in May, we were buffeted by 45 mph winds each night, and saw a few awnings and canopies around the park significantly damaged. We knew not to put anything out that could be mangled, and there were no thunderstorms in the weekend forecast, so we still felt pretty safe. The slight rocking and jolting of our fifth-wheel by the nightly wind gusts did tend to keep us awake, however.

Our friends, Dave and Cindy, had brought a boat to the park, towing it behind their class C motorhome. Other friends, Jackie and Vickie, agreed to tow the boat down to the ramp with their pickup and help launch it, but we were worried about the wind coming up quickly, as it often does on a large reservoir such as McConaughy. For confirmation, we asked the camp hosts about it and

they suggested we try Lake Ogallala, the seepage lake at the foot of the dam, sitting just below Lake McConaughy. It was much smaller, they intimated, and tended to be sheltered somewhat from the wind gusts by the 162-foot-tall Kingsley Dam.

We were anxious to fish, so we drove the boat and trailer down to Ogallala's launch ramp the next morning and decided to launch the craft during the very light breeze that was present at the time. Dave and I took the boat out and Jackie drove the truck and trailer away to park, but didn't join us.

All went pretty well, other than our lack of fishing production, until early afternoon. The breeze became stiff and we decided to head back to the ramp and dock, since we were on the opposite side of the lake from them. On the way back, the breeze became wind and changed direction to a headwind, with waves and whitecaps. Our motor didn't seem to be moving us, gusts actually pushing us backward. We each grabbed an oar and assisted our forward motion by paddling, and we were able to get the boat to the far bank, about a hundred feet from the dock next to the ramp. There was no way to power or way over to the dock, so Dave grabbed the anchor rope, jumped out onto the rock-and-sand lake bed in about two feet of water and began to drag the boat toward the dock. By this time, waves were three foot high or more and

coming every few seconds, making the chore even more difficult.

We finally got to the dock, but even larger waves were knocking the boat's hull onto and against it. I jumped off with another rope and between us we walked the craft over to the ramp, trying to keep it away from the wooden structure. Our friends saw our predicament and eventually got a hold of Jackie, who hurriedly brought the truck and trailer to the ramp. While he was helping corral the flailing boat, Cindy reluctantly and nervously backed it down the incline. As we tried to move the boat onto the trailer, six-foot-tall waves were making cranking it in almost impossible. Jackie jumped in the water, climbed up on the front of the trailer at the crank and began manually pulling the boat in and cranking up the slack.

The boat got close, even as it rose and was slammed down by the waves onto the trailer's frame, and then the main rope snapped. Jackie was able to hang on to the remnant attached to the boat long enough for Vickie, who had jumped into the driver's seat of the pickup, to drive the entire assembly and those of us hanging onto it up the ramp and onto the level parking lot. We all looked at each other and didn't know whether to cry or laugh at the experience, but were too exhausted to do either.

We were finally able to get the boat tied down properly, more or less, to the trailer and shortly after getting it home, Dave sold it, vowing never to board or own a boat again.

On the way home from that trip, well before we were full-time travelers, Nebraska threw more weather at us- nearby lightning strikes, buckets of rain, high winds that made us consider finding shelter, and hail that started out small and increased in size as we drove. Fortunately, just when we began searching for a tire store or gas station with a tall overhang, the storm headed east. We were halfway home and able to breathe easier.



And then there's mud...

We were excited to visit a resort near San Diego and arrived with high expectations. As we approached the park, we noticed RVs parked in loops on both sides of the road. It turned out that north of the road, sites did not have sewer hookups, while the south side offered full hookups. We got the very last available full-hookup site, but it was a fairly muddy mess, albeit semi-dry mud at that point. I put out all of our mats so as to keep any muck out of our living space inside.

During the third day there, the rain started and didn't let up the rest of the week. After the first day of precipitation, muddy water began pooling around the campsite. Soon after, it was seeping up through the mats and making our patio area a quagmire. We asked the camp hosts for gravel, as we had seen in other sites, and they promised to see what they could do, but no help arrived. My only option was to sweep the muddy puddles aside and off the mats, but any relief was short-lived until the rain stopped.

We learned a valuable lesson on that trip. Now, when it appears that mud could be a problem in a site and can't choose another, I head to the nearest ranch and home store and get a few bales of hay before setting up camp. Spreading the hay around where the mats are to be laid has worked wonders to keep mud from ruining our enjoyment of a campground.



Mud caused a completely different problem in Louisiana. It was to only be a short three-day stay, so I wasn't as fussy about the RV site that was assigned to us, but when we drove to it, I noticed deep grooves in the gravel from previous RV tires. Thinking that getting in and out might be a problem,

not to mention leveling, I asked the managers if they could fill in and level out the site and they agreed. I watched for an hour while the bobcat tractor went back and forth, and finally the gravel was flat and level.

The manager left and I proceeded to back the fifth-wheel onto the parking spot and my rig's tires immediately sank. It took me several attempts to get straight, but I finally did. Then I knew why the original tire grooves had been there. Looking at my tires, they had made even deeper ones. I needed two blocks under the driver's side wheels of the trailer to level up, but as I backed over them, they disappeared and the trailer did not raise up. I drove off of them and added two more on each stack, and they disappeared, too. Eventually I placed two 2"x6" boards in the groove and after backing onto them, I placed a couple of leveling blocks on the boards for good measure. That worked, somewhat, and we lived with being out-of-level rather than fight it any longer.

It turned out that the water table was only two feet below the muddy surface and the gravel had actually made the parking situation worse. I'm sure that gravel was placed in the sites to keep the muck from cementing in any tires parked on it, but it hadn't been pressure-rolled, so it was too loose to do much good. Interestingly, you could dig just a few inches down almost anywhere in the park and

water would quickly seep into the hole. Also, there were a great many crawdad towers of mud scattered around the parking loop. I had to be told what they were, since I had never seen them before.

RVillage, Strangers and Friends (Oh, My)

There's a saying in the RV community: You arrive as strangers and leave as friends.

RVillage is an on-line community of RV enthusiasts. As of this writing there are just over 350,000 members on this site, and the overwhelming advantage of this over other groups is its dedication to facilitate communications and friendships between members. I had already spoken to and traded emails with their founder and CEO, Curtis Coleman, by the time we met in person at their third national rally in Northern Florida. Curtis' vision is why RVillage is, and will continue to be, successful, plus he's a genuinely nice guy.

For much of 2019 we were hosting gatherings of RVillagers in whatever locale we were visiting, groups of between five and 45 people coming from all walks of life and from all over the country. Since the pandemic, in-person gatherings became risky and RVillage appropriately stopped supporting its official get-togethers. Instead, we have been meeting over the Internet on Zoom and other video platforms. This has been far less satisfying to me and much less intimate as meeting in person, but it is all that can work right now. That being said,

RVillage members regularly flock to the virtual get-togethers, which happen almost daily on different topics and hosted by various members, and I hear from many of them that they love the gatherings. Most are still looking forward to the in-person meet-ups, but are thankful that they can safely converse with their on-line friends and other RV enthusiasts.

After meeting close to 200 RVers by hosting on-line and in-person get-togethers, we have made several friendships specifically from these RVillage gatherings. Some couples have joined us several times around the country, even from one coast to another. Sometimes we meet in a campground first and then continue to run across one another.



That was the case with Murphy and Sara, a retired couple we met in a Pennsylvania resort, their home park, when they saw our RVillage flag. I always place our flag in plain view in our campsite yard. We just barely crossed paths during that visit but spoke with them for an hour or so the night before we left that resort, long enough to remember them several months later when we hosted an RVillage gathering, a soiree near Orlando, Fla. We have met them in person and on-line probably a dozen times now. When we return to

their part of Pennsylvania, I'm sure we'll be spending some quality time together.

We met RVillagers Vic and Mary in our Southern Carolina gathering and got along so well that when we found out they would already be in the Florida Keys when we arrived there, we made plans to go out on a fishing excursion from Key West and join them for some sightseeing. They also joined us for a couple of our other get-togethers before Vic was called back to California for work. I had a blast on the fishing charter with Vic and Mary in the Gulf side of the Keys, and with one of their friends who lives in the area.

DUN-dun-DUN-dun-DUN-dun... no, just kidding. We didn't see any sharks and our boat was plenty big enough.



In Blaine, Wash., just five miles from the Canadian border, we were in an RV park for a couple of weeks while we waited to leave from Vancouver, B.C., on an Alaska cruise. We noticed on the RVillage site that there were five other members in the campground and we met one of the couples while walking our dog. One thing led to another and we decided to have an impromptu pot luck dinner in a

couple of days at our new friends' front yard. We invited the other RVillage couples and our friends even invited the neighbors facing their door.

When the time came, we all brought what we promised and the friend's neighbor broke out his deluxe barbecue grill and cooked amazing salmon filets, while the host did burgers and dogs. We brought a potato dish and others brought various snacks, but the couple that was supposed to bring dessert was missing. That's probably why we missed them. Our hosts messaged them but didn't get an answer.

We went on with dinner without them as dusk approached. As most of us were finishing up, a couple came hesitantly around the front corner of the RV holding a cake pan. They sheepishly explained that they had the wrong site number and asked if they could join us.

Apparently, the site number given was 165, where we were, but the pedestal with the site numbers was so confusing that they ended up on the doorstep of site 166. They knocked and said something like, "Here we are!" The woman who answered saw them holding a chocolate cake and thought her husband had invited them, so she asked them in. The husband thought the wife had invited them and they both scurried around to find something to serve for dinner.

After a while, their conversation revealed that neither had invited this random couple and they all were shocked at the realization. They found they were one rig off and joined us, albeit with only part of the chocolate cake left, and we shared a great laugh about it. The potluck hosts walked over and invited the remarkable couple who had served the impromptu dinner over for a nightcap. They were yet another example of campers meeting as strangers and leaving as friends, even if it was serendipity that brought us together. They even joined RVillage.



A couple of years ago, we spent one entire spring and summer season driving and camping up the California, Oregon and Washington coastlines. In one of the Thousand Trails resorts in California, Rob Kenny, a gentleman from Ireland, was parked in the site next door. We eventually met and had a conversation, and his thick brogue made him a bit difficult to understand until I got used to it. He and his family of six — him, his wife, three school-aged kids and a baby — were living full-time in a 40-foot fifth-wheel and he was making his living by consulting on and installing solar systems for RVs. His wife was also working remotely for a university

while they took turns taking care of and home schooling the kids. I had been thinking about solar for my rig and he was a fountain of information.

We soon realized that we were both headed to the same Thousand Trails park on the California coast next and that he was doing a large solar installation for a toy hauler while he was there. I asked if I might lend a hand in the install, which he accepted but didn't think there was much I could help with. Rob was correct, there wasn't much I could do, but it was interesting to see the process unfold. They also had an extensive history staying in Thousand Trails resorts and were quite helpful in helping us choose which parks to avoid and which ones were acceptable to our requirements (full hookups, some cell coverage, southern sky for satellite) and we actually changed our schedule with this helpful information.

We went our separate ways from there but kept in touch. A year later we were headed to Oregon and he let us know he had moved into a resort near Mount Hood and had become the Thousand Trails Membership Specialist there. The pandemic had begun and some campgrounds were locking down, but he let us know this park would accept us in and he could reserve the kind of site he knew we were looking for. This resort became one of our favorites in the entire system.

Rob is a very interesting guy and I interviewed him for an article I wrote about the Thousand Trails membership plans, though he has since moved on from that position and the Mount Hood area. We still keep in touch and maybe someday he'll help me with my own solar system.



During the first September after we became full-timers, Nadyne took me to the Rainbow Shores Hotel near Pulaski, NY, for an exquisite birthday steak dinner at sunset over Lake Ontario. This was a very special evening, not only celebrating my day but also the enjoyment we both felt of our RV lifestyle. The sunset was everything we'd hoped and I got some very nice pictures outside from the grounds and seating above the lake shore, which we had perfectly timed between antipasto and the main course.

Back inside, there was a table nearby ours with three people talking and we couldn't help but overhear their conversations in the intimate setting, especially from an older gentleman with a pleasant voice and keen sense of humor. He had joined a couple at their table to talk about his personal mission to improve the environment in the area for butterflies. Evidently he owned much of the land

around the restaurant and had been planting butterfly-friendly flowers, such as lavender, daylilies, mallow and bluestar.

The couple he was with began discussing Alaska and since we had booked a cruise to the “Last Frontier,” we asked about their adventure. We eventually introduced ourselves and the eccentric man, Alan Drohan, was particularly interested in my mystery novels and the process of writing and publishing. He went into his personal history, which was rather colorful, having to do with being a local rich guy and his dealings with the Upstate New York underworld in his younger years.

The conversation circled back to our reason for dining at the steakhouse, my birthday. Soon the server brought out a chocolate mousse with a lit candle and Alan pulled out, of all things, a kazoo. He walked around the room as he played “Happy Birthday to You,” getting other patrons to join in the singing, then improvised a long ending.

We all laughed and Alan seemed to enjoy the spotlight, but also seemed a little melancholy. It seemed that the elderly life of the party had cancer and was experiencing some side effects from his chemo sessions. When he asked if I could put him in one of my books, I was pleased to promise I would, and I kept that promise in “Pat Ruger: Oblivion Highway” in the upcoming year. I had no way of

contacting him about it, but I wrote the Rainbow Shores owners to see if they could let him know and to pass on a link for the book for free. I often wonder how he's doing and whether he beat his illness, and how his butterflies are making out.



A world away, in Central Texas, we were visiting some of our Colorado camping friends, Jackie and Vickie, who had just moved there. In fact, they hadn't even received all of their furniture yet. I had been missing karaoke and Jackie found out there was a bar just outside of our campground that was advertising karaoke. We both decided to try it out and arrived just before opening time, which was 10 p.m.

Stepping through the door, cigarette smoked enveloped us and we fought through it to find a table inside. I was having a difficult time breathing but wanted to stay for a song or two, so we each ordered a beer and waited. The bar was set up with about a half-dozen somewhat-dilapidated folding tables like you would find in a cafeteria, without any table cloths or placemats, but definitely marked up by knifepoint, marker and pen over the years. The tables just in front of the lounge's bar and bartender were full of locals, at least those that I could see

through the fog, and the ones near the door were empty. We sat at one of the empty tables and soon our beers appeared, courtesy of a server that was, well, a pretty young woman who looked like she'd had a hard life.

When the KJ (AKA karaoke host) arrived and started setting up, I did my usual thing — introducing myself, finding out about how they run their rotation, about how many songs in their collection, etc. If they had a tip jar set out, I usually put a couple of dollars in it to “prime the pump,” and they usually appreciate that. I wasn't just being friendly, but since local singers often are given the highest priority, I wanted to level the playing field, which sometimes helps.

Looking around, the bar was full of cowboys and cowgirls, nearly all smoking and drinking beer and downing shots, all adding to a local-friendly clamor. When the music started, the KJ started the singing with “All My Rowdy Friends” and then called me up as the first singer of the night. Now, this is sometimes good, since I sing pretty well and can win the crowd over early. But I'm not a country/western fan, nor do I know any country songs, so it was iffy that the bar patrons would like my pop/rock 70's music. Knowing this, I chose “Horse With No Name,” a sort-of universally liked tune.

In my early days of karaoke, one of the things I had to get used to was singing in smoky bars. Not only have I never smoked, but I have asthma, which complicates things a bit. I do remember a few nights I had to head out early because of smoke, and eventually states began banning smoking in restaurants, bars and lounges, to my respiratory relief. That was several years ago and I just wasn't used to cigarette smoke any more. It appeared that Texas never joined that list of smoke-free states.

I choked on my first breath at the microphone, coughed to the side and got back to it. I got through the song to a big ovation of yells, cheers and other noises of satisfaction, making me want to take another turn. I put up my go-to karaoke tune, "Eye In the Sky," for my next song and sat down.

Interestingly, Jackie had been making friends during my endeavor, and several joined us at what had been a vacant table. Jackie is a grand master of telling old, bad jokes and people love him for it. This crowd was no different, with simultaneous groans and laughs between each story. This was not exactly my crowd and they could have easily been put off by my city, West Coast demeanor, but they weren't. In the noise they talked to us and seemed to be fascinated by our stories of RV living and Colorado. I sang my second song, now almost midnight, and received a similar response, making my night most rewarding. But, I was having a lot of trouble

breathing and we said our goodbyes. They said they were looking forward to seeing us again the next time we were in town.

Alas, the following visit a few months later was during the pandemic and that bar was permanently closed. Sadly, that was the last time I've performed karaoke in public.



Nothing highlights the benefit of community like our visit to Niceville, Fla. When we arrived at our resort as scheduled in the Florida panhandle and found only remnants of a campground, alternative arrangements were necessary. We decided to extend a couple of our stays in Texas and Arizona to make up the time, but still had to get there. Our first overnight stop was a Walmart in Niceville.

An RVillage member living in Niceville, Lyn Miesch, read our post about our dilemma on the site and invited us to lunch. We happily agreed. Since we were still hooked up, she offered to pick us up and we were eagerly anticipating making a new friend at a local restaurant.

Lyn picked us up and, instead of heading to a restaurant, she drove us to her home, a beautiful

condo in a quiet gated community near the Gulf coast, just a few miles from our parking spot. On the way she confided that she wasn't a full-time RV'er, but wintered in Florida, satisfied to travel during the summer.

Once at her residence we found a big spread set up on her dining room table, including bacon, fruit, toast and a delicious quiche. This was above and beyond what was expected and we said so. She just graciously replied that she was happy to do it, not having guests over nearly often enough. She had great feelings about RVillage and how great it was that RVers help each other, and we echo those feelings completely. We met Lyn once more in the Florida Keys at one of my RVillage get-togethers. It turned out that she had once lived across the street from the "Nowhere Bar" we were enjoying.

Yes, Niceville is full of nice people, as advertised!



Before full-timing, one Sunday we were returning from a long weekend in southern Colorado. As we sometimes do, we were caravanning in groups of seven or eight rigs, with our friends Wendall and Andrea, and Jackie and Vickie, who owned massive fifth-wheels. I think you

could play soccer inside either RV, they were so large. We all pulled into a rest stop off the Interstate and we ended up parked between them, side-by-side. It looked as though their two rigs got together and had a baby fifth-wheel, ours.

A tour bus pulled in shortly after we did and soon there were tourists looking all around our RVs with some excitement, and soon some of them were snapping photos of our rigs and trucks while we were still sitting in them. Wendall, Jackie and I met outside of Jackie's pickup to discuss the odd situation when the tour driver walked over and introduced himself. He explained that he was driving a group of visitors from France, none of whom had ever seen a large RV before. Evidently in Europe, most RV's at the time were small Class B van conversions or travel trailers, both tiny compared to most of our rigs. They had asked him to ask us if they could see inside our units.

Jackie and Wendall eagerly agreed and I figured my small 31-footer couldn't hold a candle to the other two 43-foot-long apartment buildings on wheels. The French tourists must have agreed because they never even asked to see ours after walking through the other two. I told them they should have charged admission.

Every time I get size envy I think about those tourists, but then I remember the struggles I

sometimes have just maneuvering my more manageable rig, and miraculously those feelings go away.

RV Park Follies- Part 1

To borrow from Paul Simon, we have had more than our share of “accidents and incidents” at RV parks. Some are humorous, some, not so much.

RV parks are often miniature cities, with permanent or seasonal residents usually in their own neighborhoods, a management office, utilities, maintenance, one or more activity centers, laundromats, dog parks and sometimes a lake or pond. Depending on the mix of residents, some resorts offer holiday potlucks or parties, many offer activities for kids, and most activities are open to us interlopers, who have the gall to come and go as we travel. Managers and staff can vary widely, to the most friendly and helpful to ... well ... not so much.

We had the good fortune to be in a warm state for Thanksgiving one fall, our first lengthy stay in Florida, and decided to take part in their pot luck, for a change. We normally are picky eaters, or at least I am, and don't often partake in these events unless we know the cooks. Whenever we had them with our Colorado camping friends, there was always an abundance of fabulous food, enough for three times the number of us. That wasn't usually the case with strangers in RV parks, but it was a special occasion, and we thought, what the heck.

We decided to make it worthwhile and sprang for a large spiral ham to bring as our contribution. We got ready and packed up our ham, utensils, drinks and dinnerware into our wagon and headed to the event center, which was a small building normally used for religious services. It was hot and sunny that day, 90 degrees (welcome to winter in Florida), and we were disappointed to see the long line for the food tables and sitting indoors. Nadyne got in line while I hurriedly delivered our ham and serving knife, then I rejoined her in the hot sun. I noticed a few picnic tables nearby with shadow covering the ends next to the camp store, so I pulled our wagon over and set our drinks on one of the shadowed ends of a table. I joined Nadyne as she finally approached the door and we stepped inside.

First, we noticed that several people had claimed entire sides of the decorated dinner tables and were holding them for yet-to-be-seated family and friends. We had been told not to do that, but somehow these people were allowed. We followed the food line and served ourselves small portions of this and that until we got to our spiral ham, which was now simply a bone, picked clean by the hungry masses. Disappointed, we got to the end and were served small portions of cold turkey and even colder gravy and exited to our table places, which were now in the heat of the sun and crowded by a family with six young kids. That was the last park pot luck we have ever attended.



Once upon a time my brother, Paul, dragged me, kicking and screaming, into karaoke. Eventually, I began to love it. We won singing contests both together and individually, and were both “KJ’s” (karaoke jockeys) for a few years up in Washington state. Paul ultimately moved to Tennessee and continued hosting karaoke and DJ parties there. So, when we first started planning our first few months of full-time RV living, I thought I might try to host a few karaoke parties at campgrounds and resorts. I was taken up on my offer for a free night of karaoke by a Thousand Trails resort in New York State.

Sitting on the eastern shore of Lake Ontario, a perfect location for beautiful sunsets over the lake, a good-sized community of seasonal residents grew. They have become close and party together nearly every weekend of the summer. This was the crowd I was going to provide karaoke to, which made me both excited and apprehensive. A big, fun-loving crowd usually makes for a marvelous night of singing, so I made my mind up that this would be the case.

When we arrived to the park, I checked in with the activities director, who assured me that preparations had been made for my soiree that Saturday night. I would be following a fun night of

bingo, I was told, so there should be many residents staying for my gig.

Nadyne and I set up my laptop and karaoke equipment earlier that Saturday, then decided to join the bingo session, since we were there anyway and had nothing better to do. That's when we found out it was "beer bingo," meaning instead of paying for bingo cards, players would swap beer and alcohol for them. They set up picnic baskets in which to accumulate the booze, which then became the prizes for the various bingo games. This made me somewhat nervous, since drunks doing karaoke does not a fun time make.

I grabbed a couple of beers to swap for cards and sat at a table, hoping to meet a few people before the games started. Perhaps we could convince some of them to stay, at least that was our plan. Soon residents began staggering in, barely able to hold the booze at the entrance. Cards in hand, several loudly snickering and laughing players staggered to their pre-reserved tables. Many were already sloshed. I asked the director about it and she said that before bingo that night was a golf cart parade and most of the residents had been drinking all day and during the parade.

We sat through bingo for two hours and with each win of a basket, the booze winnings were distributed to each person sitting at that player's

table. I was aghast at the prospect of hosting karaoke to this group but couldn't really get out of it at that point.

After bingo, about 20 people stayed for karaoke. I started the night with a couple of songs and the audience began to bring up their requests, some by proxies because the would-be singers couldn't walk up to the stage. Those people were actually carried to the stage to sing and the height (low point?) of the show was a 78-year-old woman screeching AC/DC tunes into the mic.

There were a few were good singers in the crowd and I broke in with my own songs every few singers, but several in the audience could barely walk or talk, let alone read lyrics on a screen, and some had a New York accent so thick I had to get a translator. Overall, it was a KJ's nightmare. That was the last time I hosted karaoke at campground of strangers.



In a popular northern Florida park, we had reserved a full-hookup site, but when we arrived, the sewer drain was nowhere to be found. A thorough search by the maintenance crew found it ... over 60 feet away from my sewer outlet, and

slightly uphill. The park was full for an event, so I couldn't swap spots for the week. I decided to make the best of it and purchased two 20-foot sections of sewer hose, three couplers and some duct tape.

Once strung out with duct tape to my 19-foot main hose and a 10-foot section I use for extending it on occasion, we reached the drain. That it was uphill was a whole different problem, as the black and gray tanks just simply didn't drain properly. I ended up lifting the hose and walking the raised portion all the way from the fifth-wheel to the drain, and it took several times doing this to get the tanks drained each time.

Speaking of sewer drains in Florida. At a Central Florida park, I had the unenviable task of figuring out what to do when the black water (AKA "poop water") began backing up out of the drain a minute after I opened the sewer lever. My reflexes made me shove the lever closed immediately. The backup stopped, then slowly seeped back into the drain. I opened it again and the same thing happened. Long story short, it took a couple of hours to drain the tanks and we let the park know. A few weeks later when we returned during our "Florida shuffle" that site was still closed for repair.



Most full-time RVers have trepidation about non-level sites and there are many products out there for that very concern. Everything in the rig works better when it's level: the refrigerator, the oven, the water drains, even the bathroom door closes better. My friends with 40+ foot fifth-wheels or Class A motorhomes have "six-way leveling" systems, something our shorter fifth-wheel does not possess. So, we use two bubble levels and standard leveling blocks to level up left-to-right, while adjusting the height of the front landing gear gets us level front-to-back. I found out early on to back up onto the leveling blocks — pulling forward onto them can put undue pressure on the hitch's cross bar by the kingpin and keep you from opening the hitch.

In one Texas campground, the lots were unlevel in many directions at once. Instead of the normal two blocks under the wheels on one side, using four didn't quite get it done. Even with the spare tire under the front sitting on the ground, we couldn't quite get level front-to-back. Let go of a marble on my living room floor and I suspected it would roll in a spiral. That was a fun week. My only satisfaction was seeing a million-plus-dollar motorhome on cheap blocks because their fancy automatic system couldn't hack it.

At least we had full hookups and a phone signal at that park. We found neither to be available in a large Tennessee resort, even after touring the 600+ sites in the five or six levels of loops. Even more maddening was that we had called two weeks earlier to confirm that the park had sewer hookups and a decent cell signal. No problem, we were told. Yeah, not for them. We ended up releasing our reservations and staying in town, a suburb of Nashville, at the only campground with an opening within two hours of Nashville, where we were visiting family.

That park had full hookups and good cell reception but was practically a trailer park in the worst sense of the phrase. Dirty and ill-maintained, the campground was replete with run-down 30- to 40-year-old RV's set up as full-time residences, complete with filthy, half-dressed ragamuffins and an abundance of feral cats. We stayed longer than we liked because we were visiting the aforementioned family, and will not make that mistake again.



We needed to stay somewhere on our way west from Florida and one particular park in Alabama seemed nice on the reservation site. When we

arrived, we had to go into a dilapidated office building to check in. Inside the office, besides its '70s-era paneling and cigarette smoke residue, we found a myriad of less-than-subtle racist and extremist posters, bumper stickers and flags.

We considered skipping the stay, but we were only going to be there three nights and we definitely didn't want to upset the park owner — I could almost hear "Dueling Banjos" in the background. The campground itself was old but wasn't bad, and friends we had met the previous week in Florida were also staying there (right next door to us, it turned out). However, moments after setting up our dog fence, the owner pulled up in his golf cart and told us to take it down. This park is now also on our "Do Not Return" list.

Kicked the Bucket Lists

Like most travelers, we have our individual bucket lists and enjoy helping each other cross items off. We also have shared items that appear on both our lists, and those are especially exciting to experience. Many are National Parks, others are tourist attractions like Arkansas' Crater of Diamonds State Park, New York's Herkimer Diamond Mine (from which they mine hard quartz, not diamonds), an Alaska cruise and others. I also included meeting up with one or more of the YouTube RV stars that we have been watching the last several years. Here are a few of our successes, thankfully completed before we actually kick the bucket.

It occurred to me recently just how many National Parks we've had the good fortune to visit. We don't have a specific goal of seeing every National Park, but we have enjoyed more than a few. We both did have a few specific National Parks on our own bucket lists, as you'll see below.

The United States has set aside just under 65 protected areas of the country (plus one shared by Canada) known as National Parks. Since Nadyne and I have been together, we have visited 23 of them, with several more that are on the calendar for the coming year. It didn't hurt that we lived in

Colorado with proximity to Utah, but we visited most of them just since we hit the road full-time.

Our favorite so far? That's a difficult choice. I loved Zion and Bryce, and camping on the edge of the Badlands was memorable. Acadia was a bucket list item for me that didn't disappoint, as was Campobello for Nadyne, along with Rainier and St. Helens. We were both in awe of the sheer size of the giant redwoods, the splendor of the Rockies and, of course, the sights and sounds of the mighty glaciers in Alaska. And I didn't even mention the Grand Canyon. No, there's just no way to choose. Thus far we have toured the following National Parks:

Acadia (ME)	Hot Springs (AR)
Arches (UT)	Joshua Tree (CA)
Badlands (SD)	Lassen Volcanic (CA)
Black Canyon of the Gunnison (CO)	Mammoth Cave (KY)
Bryce Canyon (UT)	Mount Rainier (WA)
Campobello Int'l (ME-NB)	Mount St. Helens (WA)
Canyonlands (UT)	Pinnacles (CA)
Everglades (FL)	Redwood (CA)
Glacier Bay (AK)	Rocky Mountain (CO)
Grand Canyon (AZ)	Saguaro (AZ)
Grand Teton (WY)	Wind Cave (SD)
Great Sand Dunes (CO)	Zion (UT)



For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to take a sunrise photo from Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park in Maine. Cadillac Mountain is one of the highest points on the eastern seaboard. Most people think that this peak is first to see the sun all year long, as I had thought, but we were mistaken. Even though it's not the easternmost point in the United States, Cadillac's height does allow it, for roughly half the year, to receive the first rays of sunshine in the continental United States. The other half of the year, from March to October, a slightly taller peak near the Canadian border has that honor. The tilt of the earth and changing position of the sun throughout the year is what causes this difference.

Regardless, as a photographer, it was still high on my bucket list. We had been camping for a couple of weeks about 20 miles from the Park, which resides on Mount Desert Island on the rocky Maine coast, and I truly wanted to see and photograph the sunrise while we were there. However, another quirk of Maine's environment nearly foiled that. Almost every day I was there it had either been raining or extremely foggy at daybreak -- until I finally had my chance.

I had been checking forecasts two or three times a day since arriving and it finally appeared that Thursday would be clear. I went to bed early so I could get up at 4 a.m. to set out for Cadillac. I was awakened at about 12:30 a.m. by a severe thunderstorm, one that had not been in the forecast. I decided to give it one more day and, fortunately, the weather stayed clear on Thursday night. At 4 a.m. Friday morning, it was as dark as midnight but I packed a brunch and headed out.

When I arrived at the park a little more than an hour before sunrise, it was quite foggy but it was starting to lift. About a half-mile from the parking lot, cars were already parked on both sides of the road. This didn't bode well. Sure enough, I drove through the jam-packed parking lot and back down the road to the end of the parking line. There must have been 500 vehicles parked in and around the mountain peak's visitor center.

By the time I got my gear and began the hike, time was starting to worry me. I finally made it to the viewing area and there were hundreds of people on the ridge, many with tripods set up, some with their phones out and taking video, several with sleeping bags on the bedrock.

I hiked through the crowd carrying my camera backpack and my own tripod, stepping down several levels of rock shelves and I was able to get to a large stone block with no other photographers in front of

me. I set up just as the sun poked out of the fog. If you have never taken sunrise or sunset pictures, it's difficult to understand the excitement of the time limit you're given. The sun is moving with or without your readiness or the equipment's cooperation.

I had my camera with the 55mm lens on the tripod and held the other with my 500mm telephoto lens in my hand. I alternated snapping shots between the two and kept it up for about 30 minutes. I remembered to take a couple of photos with my phone and posted them on online so that friends, family and followers could enjoy the sight right away.

By the time I got back to my truck, 90 percent of the vehicles were already gone. Satisfied, my bucket list reduced, I climbed back in and took advantage of the blue sky to explore more of the Maine coastline. Blue is so much better than gray.



One of our favorite pastimes during our preparatory phase of RV living, before going full-time, was watching YouTube videos by people already living the lifestyle we aspired to. We had several favorites, including [Less Junk](#)<>[More](#)

Journey, RV Love, Drivin' and Vibin', The Motorhome Experiment, Keep Your Daydream and several others. After launching the lifestyle, ourselves, we wondered if we would ever meet up with any of these RV stars. How possible was it? How cool would it be to talk to those who moderately inspired or educated us all those months?

Well, it was far more difficult than we imagined. Our first attempt involved Eric Jacobs of Nomadic Fanatic, who was within a hundred miles of us for four months. He was filming his Lincoln Highway series and we spent several weeks in his proximity as we crisscrossed the Lincoln Highway ourselves. Eric had included in his videos that he would love to meet up with his fans if they were nearby, but no amount of communication via YouTube comments, Facebook messages or email resulted in a reply. For security reasons, he purposely delayed his posts, so there was no way to know exactly where he was at any specific time, and eventually we went our separate ways.

The next opportunity came in Las Vegas, where both we and The Motorhome Experiment were due to be in the same park at the same time. I let them know and they seemed anxious to meet. When we arrived at the Thousand Trails Las Vegas Resort, we found that they had moved across the valley to another park, but would return sometime soon.

This was Christmas time as well as the home city for Paul and Lorena Charron, so it was natural that much of their time would be taken by friends and family. We left Vegas without meeting up.

Other YouTubers seemed to be the opposite side of the country from us wherever we were, but finally it happened. We left the Florida panhandle earlier than planned because a hurricane had wiped out our reserved resort, and decided to try to meet up with Kyle and Olivia Brady of Drivin' and Vibin' fame, who happened to be in their home town of Fairhope, Ala., right along our path.

We messaged them and they replied, and we ended up inviting them to breakfast at a Cracker Barrel, since time and space were short at their home. As usually happens on these long-awaited meetings, it poured rain on that Saturday morning, but we had an absolutely fabulous breakfast and enjoyed our conversation immensely. I had sent them my first three Pat Ruger books when we first conversed on line, then Books 4 and 5 as they came out. I brought Book 6 with us and autographed it right in front of them. It was great. After a couple of hours and a group photo, we left the restaurant and made our way through the deluge to our cars.

Since then, we have seen some of the YouTubers at the last RVillage Rally we attended, including Kyle and Olivia, then with a newborn, Marc and Julie

Bennett of RV Love, with whom I have collaborated on a couple of small projects, RV Geeks, and Tom and Cait from Mortons on the Move. But none of these encounters were as exciting as our first rendezvous with Kyle and Olivia, punching another item on our bucket list. I suppose that is to be expected.

“Incidents and Accidents”

Most RVers have had breakage, events or failures inside their rig, and being a full-timer maximizes the risk of multiple such incidents. Like Paul Simon sings, “There were incidents and accidents. There were hints and allegations.” Sometimes they are the fault of the equipment involved, sometimes it’s just plain me.

Take the expensive curved LCD TV we bought before I retired and moved into the fifth-wheel, for example. The 42-inch screen was too large to fit in the recessed spot the 30-inch TV had occupied. I removed the bracket and installed three 2” x 6” boards there, then placed the bracket on the added wood, then about 6 inches out from the wall and outside the recessed cubby. I attached the new set on the bracket and was very pleased with the result, now able to clearly see the picture from all points in the living room.

In order to lock the bracket closed so it wouldn’t move radically during travel, you had to push the TV screen straight back until you heard the click. Being a curved screen, the most convenient way to do this was to grab the left and right edges and push back. This worked fine for a while, but soon a thick black line appeared vertically on the picture when the TV was on. At first it was only a three-inch line and

slightly irritating. Then it grew to six inches, then a foot, before stretching the entire height of the screen. Apparently, the combination of pressing back on the edges and the mechanical clicking of the bracket was enough to detach several vertical rows of pixels. By the time we gave away the unit, more vertical lines had appeared. By the way, that wasn't covered by warranty.

Lesson learned: I won't be purchasing a curved TV again any time soon.



Bathroom issues can be particularly harsh. For example, you flush the toilet and the water doesn't stop, soon overflowing the bowl and flooding the floor. In this case the temporary answer was to shut off the water pump (we were boondocking at the time), but that also meant the toilet was out of commission until we could have it fixed.

Speaking of toilets, have you ever seen a toilet fountain? It's not as pretty as it sounds. Most trailers and fifth-wheels over the years have plastic toilets installed. For the most part they work fine, though one might prefer the solid feel of porcelain. One of the weakest stress points ever installed in an

RV has got to be the flush pedal, which is just what it sounds like — a foot pedal to flush the toilet.

This pedal is pressed something like 20 or 30 times over a weekend, and perhaps three or four weekends a year for the average vacationer. The problem is that we had purchased the fifth-wheel a few years second hand and had then taken it out for several trips, usually on long weekends, for three more years. Those thousands of flushes eventually wore out the system.

The lever opening the hole from the toilet bowl to the drain and black tank started sticking. Our RV repair facility told us to simply double-pump it hard and it would work, and then showed me with a sample flush. I tried it while the tech was there and it worked for me, too. On the next campout Nadyne used the bathroom and double-pumped the flush pedal like we were shown, but she must have pressed too hard and the lever broke off. Instead of flushing, a geyser ensued, hitting the ceiling with a steady stream. “Jack!” she yelled. “Jack?”

I rushed in and immediately turned off the water. The fountain subsided and Wendall, one of our friends who was RV-handy, rigged the lever so the unit wouldn't leak with the water back on.

“Did you know you were flushing with hot water?” he asked.

I just shook my head. When we got back to town, we had a porcelain toilet installed and we haven't had any problems since.



When you are in a full-hookup resort and run out of propane in the middle of the night, you can always turn on the electric fireplace for heat. Unfortunately, when it happens while boondocking, all you get is cold. The first time this occurred for us was while camping in the middle of nowhere, overlooking the canyons of the Badlands in South Dakota.

No accurate propane level indicator exists for propane tanks, so I installed auto-switching valves on my two seven-gallon tanks. I leave it pointed to one tank and, when that one runs out, the indicator turns red and the valve switches to the other tank. Trouble is, after it switches, there is still no way to know how much gas you still have left. Ideally, when one tank is used, I should go ahead with removing that tank and having it refilled, but this isn't always convenient. Also, usage itself isn't always predictable, with several pieces of equipment drawing propane at once, including the furnace, water heater, range, oven, and refrigerator.

So, sometime before boondocking, the tank switched and I didn't notice. A few days later in South Dakota cold nights and evenings became normal, and we went to bed unaware that the furnace would use up the rest of the gas just after midnight. The cold crept in and when it got down to around 55 degrees inside by about 2 a.m., we became aware. Though groggy, I dug back into the basement compartment and dragged out my two-gallon grill and fire ring tank. I unhooked the empty tanks and added the small one in, then waited for the furnace to come on.

By late morning, when that tank was also empty, I drove into town with all three and got them refilled. You'd think I would learn my lesson, but it just takes so darn long in the summer to use up the propane in a tank that by winter, I am simply out of practice to check it very often. I pay the price each time, of course, and I kept the small tank with us even when I stored the grill, just as a backup.



Television programming is not ideal on the road, with over-the-air stations minimal or nonexistent away from cities and Internet bandwidth necessary for streaming is capped or intermittent, even with a

cell booster. I decided that a satellite dish would solve the problem, at least in those parks not completely covered by forest. I chose a Dish Tailgater that supplied signal to two receivers, with only one a primary. The secondary receiver must be tuned to a channel on the satellite that the primary is tuned to.

One big advantage of the Tailgater system is that it is auto-sensing for satellites. You just point it south and let the electronic tracking do the locating for you. Another is that you can simply stop paying the monthly fee if you don't want to use the system and there is no charge for restarting the service.

This system took a few hours to initialize, with Dish techs on the phone the entire time. They had provided everything I needed, including the dish itself, two Joey receivers, a DVR drive, two Internet connectors and two 25-foot satellite coax cables. I set it all up as instructed and although they had quite the time getting the second receiver activated and running, it eventually worked, at least until the next time we set up camp.

I did everything as instructed the first time but, no matter what I tried, the second receiver wouldn't connect. I even swapped cables, in case there was a bad one, but since they both worked on the primary receiver, I ruled it out. I called and they walked me through everything I had just done, which took over

an hour the first time, and an hour later it wasn't working. They upped my tech status and a higher-level technician had a stab at it. Guess what? He instructed me to repeat everything I had just gone through twice.

Two hours later, they blamed the cable and told me to go buy a new one. I told them they provided the cable so I really shouldn't have had to spend more money, which didn't convince them. I hung up and called it a night. The next evening, I tried again and after about an hour of trying different setups, I got it to work. The next night it worked for about 15 minutes, then disconnected. I gave it up and swore to get with tech support again when we stopped at the next park.

There was no view of the southern sky at the next resort, but the following campground was pretty clear of trees. I set it all up and got nowhere, even after two more hours of tech support. Again, I gave it up, and I kept trying each evening when we went to bed, hoping to get satellite TV. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it worked for a while then stopped, sometimes I never could get it to work. I tried using tech support a couple more times in the next couple of months, but nothing they ever did was a permanent solution.

I eventually turned off and stopped paying the monthly fee for the second receiver. The entire

time the primary worked flawlessly, though I had to learn the quirks of Sat TV, such as local channels aren't always in HD, sometimes one of the three satellites aren't fully viewable due to obstructions, and especially wet weather can interrupt the signal completely. In discussing my plight with other Dish users in various parks, I found that most of them were experiencing the same thing I was. I felt somewhat vindicated, but not happy with Dish.



Another necessary evil when boondocking, either between parks or at a destination, is a generator. Our first one was a 2,000-watt, extra-quiet model, much hailed as the best solution by many an expert in the matter. However, over time we found that 1) we couldn't run our single, large air conditioner with just the generator, 2) we couldn't run the microwave, the fireplace or the induction stove in any combination, and 3) the kicker, Nadyne's coffeemaker would shut down the generator. That was unacceptable.

I purchased a larger 4,000-watt unit and built it in on our back bumper. When new, this unit ran the A/C and any two of the electrical equipment I mentioned, including the coffeemaker. The problem was that I really didn't know how or how

often to perform maintenance and, after a year, it slowly became unusable. When it wouldn't start, we found that it needed oil. Then it started immediately again, but over time the voltage it supplied became weaker. It got to the point where it would only provide power for a couple of minutes and stop, so I removed it from the bumper and performed what I researched to be a full maintenance on it — oil change, spark plug, sponge air filter cleaned and gas line trap cleaned.

I hadn't seen that you had to re-oil the air filter, so it only worked for a day and stopped again. After I re-cleaned the filter and added oil again, the voltage never did come back to normal. Trying to boondock without power is a frustration that makes one question all his or her decisions in life. When I couldn't find a local small engine repair center, and guessed I had ruined it anyway, I repurchased the same generator and installed it within three days. Boondocking is fun again, and now I know what to look for and when to maintain it.



One of the difficult parts about moving days is when you want to stop for a bite to eat. Often there are fast food or other restaurants in or near a grocery store, Walmart or shopping center that

provide a large area in which to park, and that is always desirable. However, driving in or through small towns, that's not usually available. Sometimes we just park on the side of the highway, sometimes we park a few businesses away and walk back, or else we may just skip it and plan to picnic at a rest stop.

That doesn't take into account our craving for McDonald's breakfast sandwiches, when nothing else will do. That happened in Wauchula, Fla., on our way north. The highway split up with traffic driving on both sides of a block-wide strip of buildings, none of which had parking lots that would accommodate an RV. McDonald's was on that block. Since it was early on a Sunday morning with little traffic and there were three lanes in the northbound direction of the road, I pulled up opposite the McD's entrance on the far-right lane against the curb, flipped on my flashers and hoofed it over to the restaurant, leaving Nadyne and the dogs in the truck.

When I stepped back out onto the parking lot to return to the rig, I saw a state trooper next to my truck with its lights on and flashing wildly. I ran all the way back as my back tensed and my stomach knotted up a bit. I composed myself and asked what the problem was. The tall trooper seemed annoyed as he explained that I was parked illegally and unsafely on that road. Instead of arguing with him, I

simply apologized saying that there wasn't any parking available to me anywhere nearby. He harrumphed and told me to get going, then climbed back in his patrol cruiser and sped away, practically laying rubber in the process.

Nadyne told me that he had asked her to move it and she replied that she didn't know how to drive the truck when towing the fifth-wheel, and that I would be right back. I guess he had given her some flak about it. I sometimes wonder if cops who are having bad days take it out on those they deal with or if some are just so inflexible in their encounters that they can't see common sense actions. I had indeed illegally parked, however brief the intent, but there was no traffic and the next McDonald's was 24 miles away. What had he wanted me to do? We let it go and enjoyed breakfast.



Before leaving Colorado for the road, Nadyne had found that gummy bears made from indica, the relaxing, therapeutic version of cannabis THC, was helping her with her long-suffered insomnia. At the time only Colorado and Washington State had legalized recreational marijuana, which meant that if she was going to continue to use it, we'd have to

stock up. We did that gradually and, by the time we left the state, she had about a six-month supply.

We headed east, driving all the way to Maine and down the East Coast, took a right turn in the Florida panhandle and continued to Texas. After spending some time in the Lone Star State, we left for Arizona. Since much of Texas borders Mexico, there are immigration and drug stops in undefined locations inland from the Mexican border on state and federal highways and Interstates. We came upon one of these road stops after leaving El Paso.

We were in a short line, with just a few cars in front of us, and I didn't think anything about it until the old relic of a car just in front of us pulled into the booth and border patrol agents brought a dog out. By the time they circled the dog around the car a couple times it hit me. I asked Nadyne where her marijuana gummies were. She thought about it and said that she thought they were under the pillow in the bedroom. I gulped, realizing that if they pulled us over to do an inspection or brought the dog over to the rig, they would find the stash. What was worse was that they made the guys in the old junker car pull over to be searched.

I nervously pulled up for our turn and tried to keep composed. They asked where we had been and where we were heading, looked at our licenses, and waved us through. I think that a couple of

senior citizens from South Dakota, where we are domiciled and our licenses and plates show, in their well-used RV are probably not the drug-running coyotes they were looking for, no matter what Breaking Bad may have suggested. We no longer carry THC, at least until it's legal everywhere.

“Heartbreak Road”

*“Baby, take me anywhere you wanna go,
Just don't take me down Heartbreak Road, no”*

I am interrupting my stories with a few instances of tragedy, personal hardship and sadness. Dreadful circumstances are a part of life and living on the road does not let us avoid them.

Those that follow us on Facebook know how devastated Nadyne and I were to have our Cairn Terrier, Lucy, put to sleep. About three weeks before then, she had shown some symptoms of something wrong, but at that point we chalked them up to her older age. She was 12 years old and of a breed that has a 12- to 15-year average lifespan. Having her thumb her nose at dinner, though, was concerning. But she did eat her food later in the evening, so we thought maybe she changed her mind about liking that particular brand of dogfood. She had done that before with different treats and dry food. We changed brands but she didn't seem to like those either. Then she started eating again.

When she started to throw up her food a few days later, we thought that she had a bug, something that feeding her chicken and rice had resolved in the past, but didn't this time. We had

been camping in "The Middle of Nowhere," Wyo., and decided to cut our stay short so we could have her examined in Wichita, Kan., our next stop. We took her to a vet and X-rays showed a mass growing in her abdomen. They recommended surgery, about \$5,000, with no realistic reason for optimism. On top of that, they would keep her in the hospital alone over the Labor Day weekend before they could further assess her. We decided to keep and watch her while we canceled our next leg in rural Illinois and moved up our stop in Michigan near civilization, in case things got worse. They did.

We took Lucy in for a second opinion, which resulted in a terrible choice — either having her put to sleep painlessly or risk a rupture of the mass and having her bleed out in excruciating pain. Her advanced age for a Cairn meant she likely would not recover well from any major surgery and there was little hope for a better outcome regardless. The doctor whole-heartedly supported our decision and cried alongside of us while the drugs took effect.

It's obvious that knowing that you did the right thing doesn't help heal you emotionally. Only time can do that, a lot of time. I remember the lyrics from Mr. Bojangles: "His dog up and died, he up and died, and after 20 years he still grieves." Most people we have talked to that have lost beloved pets fall into this category.

We needed to fill the void she left and we pretty quickly adopted two Chihuahua-mix dogs that had been abandoned in Mississippi and moved by an agency up to Pennsylvania to try to home. Rosie and Sadie have helped us emotionally but after a year we still are not recovered completely. Perhaps we never will be.



I mentioned how much of a comfort a community of RVers can be. This was highlighted for us at an RVillage Rally, when we hosted two happy-hour gatherings at our campsite. Next door to us was author Gerri Almand and her husband, Michael Hamlin, with whom we hit it off and still meet over Zoom. But it was meeting David Ordonio and his wife Denise, a couple in their mid-50s, that underscored the effect we can have on others.

David seemed odd right off the bat as he was unable to move his head left or right. A serious climbing accident, he intimated, had been life threatening and his neck vertebrae were fused. The only way for him to look in either direction was to turn his whole torso. That accident had been just the beginning of a string of serious health issues, but he had surprised Denise with a brand-new Class C

motorhome just before the Rally and this was the first time they had met fellow travelers.

David and Denise met Gerri and Michael at our first happy hour and began spending time together. In fact, when David was told by his doctor to get tested ASAP for a blood abnormality and was without a “toad,” Gerri drove them to a clinic an hour away. That resulted in some medication being needed, but fortunately it had turned out to be less urgent than first suspected.

David was jovial much of the time we saw him. He seemed to really enjoy meeting and mingling with us and the RVillage community, and he felt comfortable enough to tell his life story to anyone who was interested, including the fact that he had suffered several strokes that forced him to retire early from a federal job.

After the Rally, it just so happened that both we and the Ordonios made the same campground in Alabama our next destination and we were surprised and pleased to see them pull into the site right next to us. After a brief setup, he asked me some questions as a new RV owner, such as how our security lighting worked and how we made reservations. I led him through our thinking process on different solutions and answered all of his questions.

We had been on a mission to find the best fried chicken in the area and were told of a place in our proximity that specialized in fried chicken and southern family-style cooking, Lambert's Cafe ("Home of the Thrown Rolls"). We took them both and we all enjoyed the chicken dinner immensely. David especially liked catching the homemade rolls thrown to him from across the cavernous dining room.

Back then we were still hosting get-togethers for RVillage members at lounges and restaurants and had one scheduled in Mobile while we were in Alabama. The Ordonios joined us and we all had a splendid time with a new group of RV friends.

After leaving this campground, we went our separate ways but stayed in touch. They messaged us about how to host their own RVillage gathering, another indication of how much they enjoyed meeting other members. We heard that they had decided to head back home in Maryland and didn't hear from them for a few weeks.

The next thing we read, sadly, was that David had suffered a stroke and had passed away. I sent Denise all the photos I had taken of David at the Rally, the Mobile gathering and Lambert's. I suppose his passing shouldn't have been a complete surprise with all his health issues, but was still a shock when reality struck in this way.

David was a man who wanted to enjoy life, no matter his circumstances or difficulties and he died while experiencing all he could. He was a prime example of what we all should aspire to be.



We were staying in a delightful resort in Oregon when we heard what we thought was gunfire from across the park one afternoon. Sometimes there are shooting ranges or even people hunting just outside RV park grounds, so it wasn't exactly startling. Still, we didn't hear any further shooting into the evening, so we were curious as to what it was.

One of our travel friends was working in this resort and he stopped by the next morning. He asked if we had heard the shooting and then informed us that a camper in a nearby loop had committed suicide by cop. Evidently this man was a veteran with mental problems he could no longer deal with. After deputies tried to subdue the man with non-lethal options, he shot and injured one of them with a handgun before deputies returned fire and killed the man. Thankfully the deputy was treated for non-life-threatening injuries.

We were shocked and saddened by this reality. During all our travels an event like this had never occurred and we couldn't help but take stock in life.

A couple kidnapped from an RV and later killed was also a reality check, especially since the exact location they were taken from was on our own itinerary for later in the winter.

Down on Padre Island on the Texas coast, a New Hampshire couple, ages 48 and 45, were boondocking in their truck and travel trailer on a popular but isolated section of beach and sand dunes. They disappeared during their camping stay and their bodies were found a month later buried in shallow graves near Padre Island Beach south of Corpus Christi, and their truck and trailer were still missing. They hadn't just been kidnapped — they been murdered.

The authorities said at a news conference that their suspect had fled to Mexico after stealing the truck and the travel trailer. He had been seen in a surveillance photograph crossing the border into Mexico with a woman, and both were extradited from Jalisco back to Texas for grand theft, along with her small child. Murder charges have still not been filed.

From the reports we read, it appears that the suspected couple, along with their child,

approached the New Hampshire campers on the beach, then killed them, stole their truck and trailer and fled to Mexico. Any RVer may well have been put at ease at the sight of a child, and let their guard down, a fatal mistake. We most certainly would have. We canceled our plans to camp in that region of Texas and it definitely made us more aware of possible threats to us when boondocking.

Film at Eleven

There are certain events where a picture or video would paint a thousand words, but I'll give a few of them a shot here.

I'll start with something that was totally a matter of taste, "balled" peanuts. That's South-speak for boiled peanuts, something we saw advertised on roadsides throughout much of the Carolinas, the Florida panhandle, Georgia and Alabama. Also known as "goober peas," they are the "official snack food of South Carolina."

The last time we were camping in the Carolinas, we saw a typical but rustic roadside fish and crab stand that had strewn huge "Balled Peanuts" signs up and down the rural highway. After several days of seeing the signs, we finally decided to try them and find out what they were. Best when using freshly harvested peanuts, before drying, well before maturity, boiled peanuts are boiled in water in their shells with only salt or other piquant spices added to the solution. This makes the shell soft and the nut softer.

We bought a bag for about five bucks, took it out to the truck. We each took and opened one, and almost simultaneously spit out the mushy peanut and reached for a drink. "Yuck" was the first

thing that came to mind, but I might have well been eating raw snail scat. Neither of us would even consider trying a second one, so we approached the ranger station in the State Park we were camping in and asked if they wanted them. The rangers excitedly accepted, astonished that us city folk didn't like them. We were given the look I usually receive when I tell someone I don't like cheesecake.

Neither of us are what you would call adventurous eaters, so I wasn't surprised that we didn't like our balled peanuts. What was surprising was the number of people we came across who LOVE them.



When we traded in our F250 gas pickup for an F350 diesel truck, the towing capacity and gas mileage were of utmost importance. Little did I know that it would be the 4x4 transmission that would be the lifesaver. This is a story Nadyne seems compelled to tell whenever we are with new acquaintances, so I might as well tell it here.

As a photographer, driving in the wilderness, on mountain roads or along coastal waterways is always exciting and I am always watchful for a shot as I pass by. One day in the Saguache Mountain

Range in central Colorado, on our way to St. Elmo, one of Nadyne's favorite ghost towns, we were on such a photo jaunt. The dirt-and-gravel road was about two car-widths across and curved in and out around the valley below. In some sections the road's edge dropped off several hundred feet. I stopped at one such section, having seen a rustic building below us, and began to back up, as I often did.

"Jack!" Nadyne yelled with some terror in her voice. Before she could explain, I stopped immediately. I always back very slowly in case I missed seeing something in the way, so stopping wasn't a difficult task. I looked at her and she was pale white. Then I saw past her and saw that were precariously close to the edge of the road.

She managed to utter, "Go forward, you're off the road."

I deliberately shifted into Drive and began to press on the gas pedal. Instead of moving forward, the right rear tire sank in over the edge. I stopped and thought for a moment. I asked her if she wanted to get the dog and exit via the back seat, just in case, and she declined, saying we would go down the ravine together, if at all.

I was extremely nervous but decided, calmly, to switch to 4-wheel drive mode, which entailed

shifting into Neutral, turning a knob on the dashboard to “4x4 Low,” waiting for the dash to confirm we were in 4x4 mode, then shifting to Drive. After doing all that, I gently stepped on the gas and the truck slowly pulled forward, the right rear tire quickly gaining traction as it contacted the road again.

I pulled a few yards forward and stopped, placing the truck in Park, then began shaking. When I teared up a little bit, Nadyne realized just how scared I was. I told her not to fret, the trees a few yards down would have broken our fall and kept us from rolling side-over-side down the cliff to the bottom of the valley. She didn't buy it. I don't back up on mountain roads any more.



I wish, wish, wish I had had my camera ready when we were out with friends on a pontoon boat on Cedar Creek Reservoir in Malakoff, Texas. The scene will be forever ingrained in my memory, but a photo to show off would be golden ...

It was a dreary day in Central Texas, but we had made reservations for the six of us to rent a small party barge and decided to go ahead with our plans. It was windy and choppy, and taking photos around

the lake was difficult at best. I decided to sit in the far back, Jackie was driving, Nadyne was at the bow, Dave and Cindy were just behind her up front, and Wendall was back with me. Wendall and I had great views both to the sides and through to the front, when the bow wasn't lifted up by the waves.

At one point what we are calling a "rogue wave" approached the boat and when it hit the bow, it raised up at least six feet in the air over the boat. The wave seemed to hang there like a surfing curl for several seconds — a lifetime for Nadyne, Cindy and Dave, who were steadfastly watching it hover over them, helplessly. The wave finally finished crashing over the three of them, with Nadyne and Dave receiving the brunt of the wall of ice-cold water. They all three were drenched like wet chihuahuas, and when Nadyne grabbed her purse, which had been unzipped and open, she poured what seemed like a gallon of lake water out of it.

Of course, there was nothing the rest of us could do about it, and we did feel very badly for them, even as we laughed so hard our sides ached. Nadyne was wearing a raincoat, but the wave went right inside of it, soaking her all over. They removed their jackets and a few dry towels were on board, so they dried off as best they could. To make matters worse, we had plans to stop at a shoreline restaurant at the far end of the lake and they had to

eat while soaked. Nadyne's jeans were still wet three days later.

I pride myself on being a good photographer, often at the right place at the right time, but at this time and place, I just couldn't get my camera up and snapping photos before the wave was gone. What a shot that would have been!



The last thing I'll mention is our unique view of the country, state by state, and how poverty is so obviously more extreme in some regions we have driven through compared to others. Some states, which I won't mention, seem to be filled with mostly middle- and upper-class neighborhoods, with no poverty to be seen anywhere. In others, however, we found entire towns of dilapidated buildings, mobile homes, trailers and other structures that we thought must be abandoned and possibly condemned, only to see new toys or bicycles in the back yards, satellite dishes on the roofs, and/or late-model cars parked nearby.

Most successful small towns have one of two advantages. First would be a natural feature that feeds a large tourism economy, such as Yellowstone or Arches National Parks. The other would be a

major employer that keeps the bulk of its citizens working. In each case, the dependent town often has all its eggs in one basket. If a natural phenomenon stops enthralling the public or is lost due to a catastrophe, the small town's workforce must find other sources of income. Likewise, purely out of the control of a town's residents, a corporation can close down or move a facility, leaving workers scrambling. These towns cannot sustain their basket disappearing and a blight replaces the thriving business they once enjoyed.

Larger cities and towns in some states have entire blocks of businesses closed and boarded up, while others have quaint Main Streets thriving, well-managed and maintained. In some townships, mostly in the South, we found brand new houses and crumbling homesteads interspersed on the same streets.

The state of counties around the countryside can be extremely disheartening and fills you with questions as to just how bad America's economy is, and how some regions were not suffering to the same extent. I know that there are no simple answers, but we found the opportunity for an improved society everywhere we drove, and have hope that many of these downtrodden people's lives can someday be much better.

“Planes, Trains and Automobiles”

Ask anyone in our RV camping group in Colorado about “Planes, Trains and Automobiles” and you’ll get an immediate, one-word answer: “Amarillo.” Nadyne and I hosted an out-of-state camping outing for our group in Amarillo, Texas. Having never been to Amarillo, we booked a campground, sight unseen and without knowing anyone with experience there, but it was part of a national group of resorts, and we all safely arrived after a two-day caravan.

After setting up camp, a group of three Air Force fighter jets buzzed overhead, making me involuntarily duck. I looked around and saw one other camper ducking, so I didn’t feel so foolish. Then I noticed an air field nearby, which turned out to be Amarillo’s International Airport. Being within a mile or so of an airport isn’t ideal, but it was located practically in the middle of nowhere, so we figured we could put up with an occasional fly-over.

The park was also located along Historic Route 66, somewhat exciting for the tourist in us, with the famous Cadillac Ranch and an awesome RV museum to visit, along with the Route 66 historic district. Little did we know that this section of 66 was well-traveled and we had road noise from an almost constant flow of traffic.

To make matters worse, Amarillo is a cattle transportation hub and railroad tracks head to the center of town from many directions. There were well-used tracks just on the other side of the highway and trains periodically rolled by in just about all hours, day and night, often blaring their horns for good measure.

So, between the airport and Air Force activity, Route 66 and the cattle trains, silence and solitude never lasted long and we were kept awake each night we were there. Thankfully the outing was only five days and four nights long. I'm not sure of the lesson here, but I definitely look for noise problems in campground reviews.



We experienced a similar problem in a campground in Soledad Canyon in Southern California, just over the San Gabriel mountain range from Los Angeles. I grew up in the L.A. area and was excited to show Nadyne around, so staying less than an hour from where I was born and raised was very satisfying.

What wasn't satisfying was the commuter train tracks less than 100 yards from the campsites. Almost imperceptible from the park, the tracks

provided access to and from the metropolitan area and the residential neighborhoods in the Antelope Valley. Trains ran every half-hour during typical drive times in the morning and afternoon, and every hour around the clock otherwise.

Most people hear train whistles, which is a misnomer, since they really have transitioned from “steam trumpets” to air horns, from afar as they blow them at intersections in both cities and in the countryside. If you’ve never had them wake you up in the middle of the night from 200’ away, count yourself fortunate. There was a train intersection at the park entrance, so we got the full experience.

This was a long two weeks. We ended up trying ear plugs, but the trains were so close, they shook the ground like mini-earthquakes when they passed by, thereby vibrating the RV’s in the park. In addition, that week there were two major train crashes in the news, with loss of life, and knowing they happen all the time made us even more nervous about being so darn close to those tracks.

This was the first time we encountered such an ordeal when camping since we began our full-time RV life, and we won’t be returning to this campground unless desperate measures are required.



We have stayed in several campgrounds close to traffic — it's just inevitable that RV parks would be near highways that bring travelers to their area. But one Georgia campground took it to an entirely new level.

Interstate 75 connects Tennessee with Florida, traveling through “Middle Georgia” in the process, including Atlanta, one of the largest cities in the South. We seem to choose the Peach State as a convenient place to stop over on our way from the East Coast to Texas and the West. We have a friend in Byron, so any stay in the region would be close by for a convenient visit. The last time we stayed in Unadilla, a small town right on the Interstate.

We chose our site for a four-day stay with full hookups without being aware of our actual proximity to the lanes of traffic. That first evening I realized that I could literally throw a rock from our site and hit a semi, should I feel inclined. Traffic noise was loud but acceptable, at least until bedtime. The train tracks that paralleled the freeway didn't help matters, either.

One time we boondocked just outside Joshua Tree National Park in Southern California about a half-mile north of the I-10. Throughout the night we

could hear the trucks throttle up and down throughout the night, even that far away, and it actually seemed louder after the sun went down. In Unadilla, the effect was the same, except that we were only a few dozen yards away instead of a good portion of a mile. We were astonished at the lack of a noise barrier — barbed wire didn't block much sound, as it turned out. Traffic noise and train horns continued unabated.

On our third night I was still awake at 3 a.m. and decided to record a video of the traffic, with audio, out my bedroom window, which is just next to my head and pillow when I'm lying in bed. I posted that three-minute video on social media and was amused at the various comments, some aghast, some sympathetic, some humorous. It wasn't until the next night in a Cracker Barrel parking lot in Alabama that I got my first good night's sleep in a week.

RV Park Follies- Part 2

Scene: Competitive brothers-in-law live next door to each other on a suburban street, so when one puts Christmas lights outside his house, the other responds with a bigger and brighter set, unleashing a war of twinkling light-bulbs and neon displays which threatens to ruin both families.

Now, change Christmas lights to national political campaigns, Republican flags and Democratic signs and you have the makings of a campground battle royale, and not very pleasant for other camping neighbors. Yes, you might be living full-time in your RV and don't have a sticks-and-bricks house in the suburbs to announce your allegiances. Yes, you have a right to post any political statements you want in your space (unless the campground rules prohibit it). Yes, you may well be smarter than everyone around you. And, yes, you might be a jerk.

Just because you can be a political animal in an RV resort doesn't mean you should. You must realize that friends and neighbors don't want to judge you; they want to have fun with you. In this polarized political climate, it makes no sense to alienate half of the people around you for no justifiable reason.

That all being said, the 2020 election season was worse than most. The climate was so bad that we found RVers pulling others' flags down, defacing signs and nearly having fistfights in the dirt aisles between rows. For the first time I decided not to put up my American flag, just because it was usurped by one party's worst members.



This is a story I have told a few times, but it took place in a campground, so I'm eagerly giving myself permission to include it here. A few years back, I was hosting a family reunion in a Washington state park. We all arrived on time in the middle of summer and the weather was gorgeous. Something my youngest brother, Paul, and I used to do whenever we got together was throw a Frisbee around. We were actually pretty good at it, and even in a breeze we could usually get the flying disc within a few feet of each other.

Well, in this park there was minimal grassy lawn to play Frisbee, but the pathways around the campground were wide and long — perfectly fine for us. We threw it back and forth for a few minutes when Tom, my second younger brother but Paul's elder, ran up to angrily tell us to get the hell away from his baby, a beautiful, brand-new, expensive

Eagle Talon. He ordered us to not throw the Frisbee anywhere around it.

I couldn't leave it that way, naturally, so I decided on payback for his unreasonable demand. My kids were school-aged at that time and we had brought crayons for the trip. I found the white crayon and grabbed Paul and the Frisbee. We waited until Tom was otherwise occupied and not near his car, then I drew the most perfect spiral "crack" with the crayon on his windshield. For good measure, we left the Frisbee disc on his hood not far from the crack.

We left the car and went about socializing with family for a bit. Suddenly we heard a string of profanity coming from the other side of the campground. Tom was so loud and angry, he could be heard throughout the forest for miles. After a few choice obscenities there was silence, then, after a few moments, hysterical laughter. He later admitted just how mad he had been, but apologized for being somewhat of a jerk about his car. It had been a payback unequalled in family history.



I was away on a photo shoot when Nadyne heard a loud howl nearby our campsite. She described the incident to me:

“It sounded like a coyote, so I leapt from the outside lounge and headed toward the crying. In the distance I could hear an animal and I began running toward the sound, in my slippers, directly through weeds and gopher holes.

“I arrived at an older fifth-wheels with the front end of a large pit bull hanging out the bedroom window. He was in a panic, bleeding from his side where he’d broken out the window. As I got under him, he fell on out and hit the ground. He was so thankful to see a human there, he stood and his huge mouth opened and I got a big wet pit bull kiss. He was so large that standing on his hind legs, he was taller than me! The ranger arrived about then and told me she would have taken off if that huge male pit bull came up to her like that. I got him a drink and attached him to his lead, which was lying outside. The ranger found the owners at the pool and they came back to care for him.

“I stopped by later to check on him, and he remembered I was his human and wasted no time coming outside to happily greet me again.”



Brenda and Bob from RVillage share this story:

“We arrived at a Vermont State Park and found out that no state park in Vermont has electric and water hookups. Their maximum length allowed was 35 feet and that is the size of our fifth-wheel, but we weren’t set up to boondock, so we decided to leave to find a larger private RV resort. We asked where we might turn around and were told to go up to the first loop and use it to turn around. Unfortunately, the loop was so tight, we got stuck between a tree branch and an underbrush-covered boulder.

“We have three roadside assistance policies and we called each one. The first one outright refused to help, and by 6 p.m., the other two had shown up and left, abandoning us and our predicament. By 7 p.m., we found a company that would “wrench” us out. By 10 p.m., we were finally free at a cost of \$2,900!

“Thank goodness we had text messages and phone call time stamps so we could submit a claim with proof that our insurance carrier had abandoned us. Our claim was paid in full.

Our lesson learned: Be aware of park size maximums even if their site sizes appear long enough for your RV and any accompanying vehicle.”



The following was sent to me from RVillage members Marc and Brenda, who have been work-camping for a few years now. These are stories from their work experiences.

“We do work-camping when we find a job that fits us. We accepted a job in Georgia at a park that sold their sites. When we arrived, we had several people help get us settled. We met up with all the new workers they had just hired along with managers and their real estate people. There were about 10 of us, all husband-and-wife teams, ready to get things done. One of the couples had the exact RV as ours. We were the best group of team workers you could ever have, doing our jobs and helping each other get things done. We all were praised by the site owners and the park’s owners. We spent time with each other and several of the site owners, becoming great friends.

“A few months into the working stint, the park’s owner hired a Property Manager because some of the site owners were fighting and going against their bylaws. Once she got hired, she changed our positions and hours, so couple by couple we all decided to quit. Many of the site owners sold their properties as well. We are still friends with many of

them and to this day we still hear of people selling their lots due to the Property Manager.

“On our first trip to Texas, we got a job in a cute little park. I worked office and did activities and my husband, Marc, did Maintenance and ran equipment. We fell in love with the campground and became close to the owners — we even had Christmas with them. We also met some great people who were camping at the park. We were asked back the following two years. Marc and I became really close to the owners. The husband would stop by and talk, and would take us out to lunch. The wife had interests other than the park, and Marc even helped her husband build their home.

“The next year, the owners were away, out of state, when they had booked a wedding event at their campground. I started getting calls from the RVers in the park about the band, people yelling and traffic. I texted the owner and she told us a few things to do, then called a park resident who often helps with management issues. The next day we did what she told us to do with the newlyweds, have the cleaning lady check to see if their cabin was cleaned up so they could get their cleaning deposit back. I went down with her; it was terribly dirty and things were missing. I called the owner and informed her what we had found.

“The wedding couple came to get their deposit and I told them they had to wait for the owner as she does the refund. Well, they didn’t like that, messaged the owner and said their unit was cleaned and that I was rude to them. The owner returned to the park and wanted to know why I was rude. I looked at her in disbelief, as I had been there three years without a complaint, and told her I was done. They kept Marc on until we left.

“We worked at another park close to there as we had made many friends. The second year, the husband contacted us and asked us to come back. I told Marc we could go but I wouldn’t work. He put us in one of their new RV sites. Things were going great, then the husband got severely sick and lost his hearing. They needed Marc more than ever. They left the state for medical treatment, came back, the wife asked me to help take care of him, we did until right after that next year.

“So, in April of that year, we get a phone call from the wife, these were her exact words, “I feel like a third wheel with you two and my husband. You need to leave the park.” I was astonished. We said our goodbyes to some of our friends, and have never returned or seen either of them. To this day we wonder if she ever told her husband what she did or lied, telling him we just left.

“These are just a few things that make us continue what we do. We find good people out there and hope any bad people and happenings are few and far between.”

COVID Pandemonium

Nadyne and I had been living in our fifth-wheel on the road for over two years when the pandemic lockdown affected us, almost immediately, when it began in late March. With our Thousand Trails membership, we typically spend two or three weeks in a single park, the limit for the program, before moving on to the next resort. We were in the Brownsville, Tex., area when the stay-at-home orders began and were able to move as planned to Lakehills, Tex., near San Antonio.

Before our two-week stay there was complete in mid-April, multiple states in the South and West shut down new arrivals in campgrounds and we were forced to stay in our park for a total of five weeks. By then Arizona, our next destination, had designated campgrounds as “essential businesses” and we packed up and left Lakehills on April 30th.

We boondocked at a Walmart overnight in El Paso on our way to the Sedona, Ariz., area, common for us on an extra-long drive between parks. That night we received a notification from Thousand Trails that our Sedona reservation had been canceled and none of their parks in Arizona would be accepting new reservations. They suggested we continue to stay in place in Lakehills, but of course we were now nine hours removed from that park.

To explain how much turmoil there was at the time, all of the 10 or so RV campgrounds we called in Arizona told us we could come there and stay, and that there were no restrictions in Arizona for new reservations. Another call to Thousand Trails resulted in their reaffirming their decision, which I have since been told was due to a confusion of what Arizona counties had been instructing them.

We decided on a high-elevation park in Williams, the “Gateway to the Grand Canyon,” where at least it was cooler than in other Arizona towns. Nadyne grew up in Arizona and we had been hoping to visit many of her old stomping grounds, friends and family. With most businesses and public lands closed down, we had to be content to stay in the campground without visiting anyone or doing anything.

Thousand Trails relaxed the restrictions during our two expensive weeks in Williams (at Thousand Trails parks we pay no out-of-pocket fees), and we were able to basically continue a revamped itinerary. We normally have our schedule planned nine to 12 months ahead, but, when the pandemic hit, we scrapped everything and started over with a short time-frame, up to a couple of months in advance.

There are over a million full-time RVers and a great percentage of us live only in our RV, with no sticks-and-bricks house or land to call our home base. The truth is that RVs are made for quarantines. They are self-contained, and, with proper hook-ups, people can remain isolated in them for long periods of time, and they are less likely to be infected than the general population in concentrated cities. Regardless of whether they are coming from out-of-state, full-timers are considered safe travelers, especially since social distancing rules have been in effect.

What could we do if the majority of states were to close all public and private campgrounds? RVs in the states that have closed were made to leave their parks when the pandemic started. With no regular home to go, where could we go if no other campgrounds were open? I can only imagine what parking lots and vacant lots would look like, let alone what would happen to their waste tanks. It could be quite unsanitary. States need to consider full-timers as equal citizens in this open country and make allowances. Closing parks does not reduce risk from spreading infection, it increases the risk of unsanitary conditions on a widespread scale.

There's a private toll on us full-timers, though. Without friends and family nearby, life on the road can be lonely during the best of times. Usually, we strive to combat these feelings by meeting up with

fellow RVers, participating in RV resort activities, trying local cuisine and enjoying the nightlife that changes so vividly from town to town. These have all been taken away with non-essential businesses closed and social distancing in place. Activities, restaurants and sports bars have all been closed and although Skype or Zoom gatherings happen, they are often lacking in the one-on-one interaction that is so satisfying.

Nadyne and I are fortunate to have been best friends before we got married and there hasn't been much strain to our relationship. But that's not true for everyone. Most RVs have between 150 and 400 square feet of living space. Normally the outdoors provides enough extra expanse so that cramped quarters aren't an issue. But force everyone indoors... well, it might not be pretty.



Now, months into the pandemic, I feel badly for those who have been paying full price for camping when almost all of the amenities are closed — no clubhouse, no game room, no or very restricted pool, no or limited laundry room, no library, no or scaled-back camp store, no boat rentals, no events. It would be like going to a premium steakhouse and paying full price but not getting the normally-

included baked potato, bread or garden salad. It just doesn't seem right.

With our Thousand Trails membership we don't get overcharged for services like that, since we pay nothing out of pocket for those reservations. But we paid over \$600 for our two weeks in Williams with absolutely no amenities available, and have experienced other full-price camping here and there.

If you think of a fifth-wheel as a miniature "tiny home," you can understand that we don't have much storage space available for stocking up on critical staples. There isn't room for an abundance of toilet paper, paper towels, canned goods or frozen meat. But shortages of these items during the pandemic made life difficult, since those with "sticks-and-bricks" homes were able to hoard at will. I remember seeing Walmart customers with several baskets filled with meat lined up at registers, and found no hamburger or chicken in the meat department to buy.

The worst shortage for us was TP when we were camping-in-place in Texas. We were down to three rolls and still finding empty shelves everywhere. We followed recommendations to try home improvement and hardware stores without success, and probably tried two dozen different grocery stores, large and small without finding any at all. I

knew that RV supply stores carried specialty toilet paper (we usually only bought cheap septic-safe, 1-ply TP) and I began calling around the area.

One RV repair shop owner informed me that they were due to receive some RV toilet paper in two days and, thankfully, she promised to put aside two four-packs. On that day, she called to let us know it was in and we rushed over to make the purchase, which was about four times the price we had been paying. But beggars can't be choosers.

Not long after that, Walmarts began limiting the previously hoarded items and provided special early hours for seniors. We took advantage of that and eventually were able to stock up with a few dozen rolls, along with meat, paper towels and canned vegetables. Since then, we have made sure that we have some extra of all of those items, even if it means squeezing them into some tight spaces.

“What, Me Worry?”

Younger generations might not remember the Alfred E. Newman quote, “What, me worry?” in Mad Magazine, a staple of our generation, but it typifies many a weekender’s attitude.

We spend, on average, two weeks in each campground or resort we stay in, meaning that about twice a month we have a travel day, moving our house to the next stop, sometimes taking three or four days to arrive (while boondocking at Walmarts or Cracker Barrels on those nights in between destinations). Often during these commutes, I have anxieties about our next stay.

We belong to Thousand Trails so that we don't have out-of-pocket resort fees to worry about, but most of those parks are first-come, first-served for full hookups, meaning that we may or may not find sewer or 50-amp electric hookups. This is important because without sewer, we can't shower more than once or use our toilet more than one week during our stay. It takes a couple hours to set up or break down camp, so even if there is a dump station on-site, it takes several hours and a lot of hassle to make use of it. Often water pressure is an issue as well. We always keep our fresh water tank full in case there is little or no water from the park spigot.

Speaking of confirming Internet availability, both Nadyne and I work on the road, Nadyne remotely doing insurance agency accounting and me writing and marketing. Both of us require Internet access and Nadyne must be able to speak to clients across the country, so early on we purchased a cell booster to give us a stronger cell signal and more reliable Internet, along with utilizing cell coverage from Verizon, AT&T and Sprint (now T-Mobile-Sprint). Among the three service providers, we almost always have something we can use, but every once in a while, we don't. You can't boost zero signal.

We don't have a massive RV, just a 31-foot fifth-wheel, but backing into some spaces requires time, energy and often nerves of steel. Only once have I not been able to, eventually, get parked. Because of narrow sites, trees at the corners of the site entrance, narrow paths between rows of sites and close proximity to immovable park models, parking can be harrowing. In the case of a Palm Springs-area resort, all four were problems. Add to that the situation where a truck or toad is partially blocking your path whose owner can't be found, or the off-level nature of a site, there is a lot to dread about parking, even if we've been to a resort before.

We are mobile and can move our fifth-wheel when we know severe weather or flooding is imminent, but it's not always foreseeable. Since we are usually traveling hundreds of miles in any

particular leg of a trip, forecasting isn't often reliable. My biggest concern is wind, which at best can greatly affect gas mileage and at worst cause an accident. We have been extremely fortunate to not have any serious weather issues in our first few years on the road, but it's something I actively fret about.

I mentioned that we use three resources to check for clearance and my in-dash navigation system utilizes an app on my phone via Bluetooth to check for traffic and hazards, but no resource is foolproof, as we have found the hard way. East of the Mississippi, especially in New England, there are far more of these low bridges than out west, but really, it's a national concern.

The road age and condition are themselves major concerns, from coast to coast. The last time we were on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, the long duration of significant bumps actually broke one of the springs on the fifth-wheel. Any rough road is bad for an RV's interior and joints. Prolonged travel on such highways can be like riding out a continuous earthquake, but even a single big bump can rearrange our contents.

Logging over 20,000 miles in a single year means that the odds are always against us. Eventually we will have a major breakdown or tire blowout on the road. To help mitigate this we installed a TPMS (tire

pressure monitoring system), which has saved us a major tire issue twice since we starting using it. The first time, a tire went flat after picking up a screw while traveling 60 mph, allowing us to pull over before a blowout ensued, and the other a slow leak developed in a brand-new tire on a dirt and gravel road and we were able to get it repaired before a serious issue occurred. In both cases a disaster may have resulted and I worry about that happening, even with a commitment to the technology.

We have seen some overly aggressive park rules against pets and other uses of a campsite. Long before going full-time, we installed a doggie door flap in our rig's screen door. By setting up a small fence around our steps we give our dogs both shaded and sunny areas on a mat and on dirt or grass, and they can come and go and potty as needed. We never leave them in the pen without us being home and are always diligent about their barking while outside. Despite this, some parks forbid outdoor pens and even having pets on leashes without the owner's full participation and attention. While I understand the purpose of such an edict, it makes our lives difficult, as does restricting clothes lines under our awning, restricting noise at 7 p.m., a 3-mph speed limit and other rules that some bad apples have forced into park codes.

Having a refrigerator only one-third the size of a house fridge means having to shop for groceries more often, at least once per week. Staying in the boonies doesn't make this an easy chore and we have camped as far as 50 miles from the nearest Walmart. Small local supermarkets (with "super" sometimes being a bit facetious) usually have a much smaller stock and higher prices than a big chain store. Sometimes the rural market has fresh, locally-grown or raised food or delicious baked items, but usually it's just missing several items we're looking for. Not having gas stations nearby can also be an issue and requires a more thoughtful plan to stay filled up.

We don't experience these difficulties often, but enough to cause us trepidation. No matter how much advance research we do, some things just cannot be known until you are present, and that is a cause for concern every time we begin our travel day.

Where in the World is the Gall-Durned Geocache?

Those of you who hunt for caches, your own language is probably far more colorful. Following a treasure map... that is what geocaching is like, except the "X" that marks the spot is given in GPS coordinates and the treasure might just be the thrill of the hunt.

Wikipedia defines geocaching as "an outdoor recreational activity, in which participants use a Global Positioning System (GPS) receiver or mobile device and other navigational techniques to hide and seek containers, called "geocaches" or "caches", at specific locations marked by coordinates all over the world." Caches might be a large bin or lockbox, or a small coffee can, and "micro-caches" are often tiny pill bottles, matchboxes, spent bullet casings or plastic film containers. The contents, or "stash," usually consists of a small paper log and pencil for finders to check in and small trinkets, the odder the better. It has always been standard convention for seekers to take a trinket and leave one of their own, but many cache-hunters don't bother with either.

Whether you enjoy solving puzzles, exploring, hiking or just being outdoors, geocaching is something you may love. In these days of social

isolation, it is an activity that can bring much happiness. We have found caches hidden inside hollow tree trunks, hanging from tree branches, wedged between boulders, stuck on the side of a steel utility box and stuffed into a support pole of a culvert's guard rail.

With COVID lockdowns severely limiting recreation, geocaching provides us an outdoor activity with little risk of exposure, especially when you consider that much of our time is spent in a closed vehicle or hiking in isolation. In many locations, we have set aside some time to hunt for caches, and now have a couple dozen finds under our belts.

Not long after the pandemic began we were out looking and the cache website we use described one near a cemetery. We pulled in the entrance and as we passed the entry fence, the GPS navigation immediately told us we had passed it. I stopped and as we got out, another car pulled up behind us. They were fellow cachers searching for the same stash as we were. All of us masked, we decided to spread out and combine efforts to locate what they call a "micro-cache," often hidden in a tiny pill bottle or film cannister. For you in the newer generations, "film" is the medium cameras previously used to create photos. We would take the exposed rolls into a shop or supermarket drop and then pay to receive back the printed photographs.

I found a small plastic tube that had been painted green for camouflage hanging from a branch in an oversized bush, but out of my reach. The other family had a taller teenager who came over and pulled it out, as I stepped away. He wrote both families' names in the mini-logbook so we didn't have to spend more time in close proximity. This was the first and only time we have met someone looking for the cache we were searching for.

We decided to host our own cache but found out that for those in our lifestyle, it's not simple. First, without the major websites showing your cache on their maps, nobody will know even to look for it. Second, these websites and organizations require the stash owners to be within its local area so they can perform maintenance frequently. That is difficult to do if you hide a cache in Arizona or Texas and then head back east, or vice versa. So, after getting all the supplies and camouflaging ready, we had to give up that idea for the present time.

We did host a cache-finding party during one of our group campouts, making sure we arrived a couple of days early so we could hide the stash and make the coordinates slips to hand to those joining in the fun. All went as planned and we even had a

cheap prize for the first one to find it, which was awarded in just about an hour's time.

Three couples that were evidently searching together did not return for quite a while, and just about the time we began to worry, they came back and found us. They asked if there was a snake involved in our cache, and of course there wasn't. It turned out that their navigation went across an irrigation ditch away from the actual hiding spot and when they came to where they thought it was, a large bull snake was protecting the hole. Reluctantly they had given up the search.



From RVillagers Warren and Terry:

“We went to a campground north of Fort Worth, Texas, because we were going to the GeoWoodstock event there. The couple next to us noticed our trackable on our truck and asked if we were geocachers. We stated we were and had planned to go to GeoWoodstock. They too were geocachers and also going to attend the event. Well, we met up with them there.

“They left to go back to Tennessee and we headed to Kentucky. We had stopped at a Walmart

for some supplies and went to nearby gas station to fill up. I noticed on my phone app that there was a geocache at the gas station and when my wife asked where, I spotted another cacher heading for it. It turned out to be our neighbor from the campground in Texas, who had come from Tennessee to look for this cache just as we were filling up.

“If that wasn’t enough, in January this year we traveled to Florida for the winter and that same couple pulled into the same campground a couple of weeks later. We met again at an event in Florida and they took another geocacher with them and it turned out she was staying at the same campground as well. That gave us another geocaching friend.

“We still keep in touch with friends we've made camping and geocaching, no matter where we and they happen to be.”

Reality Bites

We love our lifestyle, regardless of the difficulties we have endured. But there are many obstacles to enjoying life on the road that we've had to overcome, or at least deal with.

We don't have a garage. Or car port. Wherever we are camping, there is often shelter available for tornadoes, large hail and the like, but probably not for our RV or pickup.

Local news is ... well ... local. Even when we find stations from far-away cities, TV news has become trivial. Do we really care that there was a traffic accident in Davenport, Iowa, or that there's a marathon being run on Saturday in Rockford, Ill.? Not really.

Even before COVID, we have had a very limited night life. Ever try to find a karaoke bar in the middle of rural Missouri or Wyoming? I have, with no luck. Even if I find one, I hesitate being an outsider at a local redneck establishment. I remember one such bar in the Midwest. A group of locals sitting around a nearby table probably had one set of teeth among the six of them and, sure enough, there were two bar fights in the place before we decided to leave. Scenes of "Norm!"

(from “Cheers”) never happen because we’re never in a place long enough to become regulars.

We have a significant loss of friends on the road. When we lived in Denver, we met up with friends all the time, for dinner, drinks, game nights, and other get-togethers. Once a month we camped as a group, spending every waking hour with someone in the group. Now, we often have few neighbors from Monday to Thursday and a myriad of families (and young kids) on the weekends. Someone living in the city might celebrate this fact, but when you are hoping to meet other nomads and share some wine or other beverages, the middle of the week sucks. That’s one reason we try to visit friends and family all around the country whenever possible, and why, before the pandemic, we hosted in-person gatherings of RVers at local lounges or restaurants.

You’ll know if one of your friends or family members lives in an RV when they bring over a lopsided cake they obviously made. Cooking without being perfectly level is one of the first difficulties you have to manage when you start using an RV. Even with the fancy new six-point auto-levelers, it’s never perfect. We don’t use our auto-levelers because it only uses the front legs to level, not ideal, so I manually level with a system of bubble level indicators, wheel blocks, front landing gear height and rear stabilizer height. Even with all that, grease and butter roll to one end of a frying

pan and nothing in the oven bakes with a level top. It's just a fact of RV life you have to contend with. Perhaps a manufacturer will someday invent and install self-leveling stoves and ovens.

Fuel is our largest cost factor. When you think about it, it makes sense. We sold our high-gas-mileage Kia because we couldn't take it with us — we're pulling a fifth-wheel with our one-ton Ford diesel pickup. But that also means that sightseeing is done using diesel at 15 mpg instead of gas at 30 mpg, so our only touring vehicle is a gas-guzzler, or, I should say, a diesel-guzzler. When we have to get across country, we drive, boondock, then drive some more. Getting across Texas without camping took us four days and 100 gallons of fuel. That's one of the advantages of staying put for at least a couple of weeks instead of doing the boot-scootin' boogie across multiple states.

It can feel like we're on vacation, but we're not. Even during the pandemic, the temptation is always there to eat out at the local hangouts, do all the tours, drive everywhere. However, we're on a tight budget in order to sustain this lifestyle and often we have to stay put in the campground instead of spending all of our time — and money — as tourists.

Let's face it, when you have to get up at 4:45 a.m. every morning for years because you have a job to go to, sleeping in until 7:30 a.m. feels great but

comes with unexpected guilt. Ditto with not going to work and collecting a nice paycheck. Intellectually we both are all-in on our budget, but emotionally, we feel like we should be more productive. Working part-time helps fill in the monetary gaps but it's not even close to what we were making before we hit the road, and we are hesitant to touch savings, which would be another source of remorse.

Nadyne is continually cleaning, fixing or prepping — there's always something to do. When you have a bricks-and-sticks house, you have space and rooms to spare, possible even a storage or clutter room. That is a luxury we don't have in our 360-square-foot fifth-wheel. Set a glass down on the wrong surface and the whole place looks a mess. Things break on the road, and you can't wait until something becomes serious before fixing it, since you don't want to be living in your rig while it's parked in a repair facility.

Receiving mail shouldn't be this hard. US mail takes planning, but is usually not an issue. However, especially more recently, parcels are sometimes impossible to get. The problem starts with campgrounds, who often limit what services they will or won't accept for you, and they sometimes charge per package for the privilege. Even so, some will take in UPS and Fedex packages but not US mail parcels, while others are just the opposite. Because

we plan our itinerary weeks or even months ahead, we are able to call ahead to find out about a park's individual policies. Even knowing doesn't always help, since most of the time you cannot request a specific carrier from an on-line store like Amazon.

Let's say a park accepts UPS but not U.S. mail. We order a patio mat from Amazon and note the fact that we need it to be shipped via UPS on the ordering screen. Amazon or their affiliated supplier ships the mat out via U.S. mail and the park refuses it. The opposite scenario happens as well, when we use a post office's General Delivery address to come via mail and it comes UPS, and we have experienced both dozens of times. It's extremely frustrating.

Last, personal services you take for granted in a house and permanent neighborhood, such as doctors, dentists, repair technicians or even dog groomers, require intentional strategies to utilize, and a lot of trust. Feedback and ratings on-line are not always on the money, so we usually ask the campground staff when possible, which does help. We have been very fortunate thus far, knock on a tree stump, especially when looking for a mobile RV repair tech. A couple of times we have had to put off a repair or replacement, e.g., replacing our carpeting or the awning canvas, because nobody carried the materials in stock and it would take longer to order it in than we would be in town. We ended up putting those repairs off until we finally,

months after we wanted them, found companies that did stock them.

Don't get me wrong, it might seem as if I like to complain, but none of our difficulties keeps us from loving our life, spending quality time together in our very personalized tiny home and visiting all the natural and man-made wonders this country has to offer. However, those who aspire to the lifestyle may not realize the reality of living this way, and, sometimes, reality bites. Keep your eyes open and plan, maintain and enjoy!

Acknowledgments

First and most important to me is to thank my wife, Nadyne, without whom this lifestyle would not be possible. She puts up with a lot, and though she is all-in with being on the road full-time, it hasn't been easy for her. I am one very lucky dude.

I would like to acknowledge several third parties mentioned in this book, i.e., songwriters, movies, magazines, friends and family. Individual's and couple's names were used with their expressed permission.

I have included quotes, lines and titles from various movies, songs and magazines:

"Life is a Highway" is a song by Tom Cochrane from 1991 that has been covered by Rascal Flatts, Chris LeDoux, Jerry Jeff Walker and Home Free.

"We have clearance, Clarence" is a line from Kareem Abdul Jabbar's character, Roger Murdoch, in the 1980 comedy "Airplane!"

"Incidents and accidents" is part of a line from Paul Simon's 1986 hit, "You Can Call Me Al."

The "Heartbreak Road" title and two lines of lyrics are from the 1986 release of "Heartbreak Road" by Darius Rucker.

"Planes, Trains and Automobiles" was a 1987 comedy starring Steve Martin and John Candy.

"What, Me Worry?" is a phrase most often associated with Mad magazine and its cartoon cover boy, Alfred E. Neuman.

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Escapees RV Club is "one of the oldest, largest and most loved RV membership organizations in the world. We provide a total support network for all RVers, regardless of their travel style, type of RV, or experience level." Escapees also hosts annual rallies, called Escapades, and provide a network of RV resorts and member community groups.

Thousand Trails is "one of the largest networks of RV resorts and campgrounds in North America, with over 80 locations in 22 states and British Columbia." We enjoy an Elite membership with them.

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Jack Huber is an author, poet, photographer, blogger and RV full-timer, living on the road with his wife, Nadyne, and their two Chihuahua-mixes, Rosie and Sadie.

Jack has found a niche in the detective, mystery and crime/thriller genres with several Pat Ruger Mystery Series novels on the market. He also has over 350 poems published, most with photographs, in six books, as well as a primer for writing in poetic forms.

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