

# **RV Life Lessons Learned and Opinions**

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As of May 2020, Suzanne and I have just completed our 3<sup>rd</sup> “seven-month” season in our RV. By some measures, this makes us RV veterans. Although we continue to learn new things on the road, at this point in time we have learned a lot of lessons through our interactions with other RVers, reading, and simply making mistakes. We’ve been asked a lot of questions from friends and acquaintances who are interested in starting, or have already started, RV adventures of their own. So we figured that it may be useful to have some of our thoughts in writing. Our perspective is that of a retired couple who like to travel in a large Class A RV. Note that this document is based on personal opinions and experiences, not from any formal training (see the disclaimers on the title page).

## Driving

Many people have asked whether you need a special license to drive a large Class A (bus-like) motorhome. The answer is “no, but you should”. It can be pretty intimidating when you first start driving. Including the mirrors, most Class A RVs are about 10 feet wide. Given that standard US lanes are 12 feet or less, there’s not a lot of wiggle room. You share the road with a lot of 18 wheeler trucks that are over 10 feet wide with mirrors and often pass within a foot or so of clearance between mirrors. The good news is that you do get used to it and may even get comfortable eventually. However, in the course of learning, more often than not, you will put some scratches and dents in your rig. Without getting too far into the details of handling 60 feet and 20 tons worth of vehicle, consider this basic advice:

1. Don’t exceed speed limits – they were legitimately calculated for road curve tipping and stopping distances of trucks and RVs.
2. When maneuvering into tight spots slowly inch forward or backward with your partner directing you from outside over the phone or a radio.
3. If you’re unfamiliar with an entrance or exit, walk the route first – look for clearance right, left, and overhead.
4. NEVER be in a hurry. This is the best advice I have received so far.

## Towing a Vehicle (AKA Toad or Dinghy)

If you own a motorhome, you will likely want a car or truck with you. There are a several ways to tow it: flat tow, dolly tow, flatbed tow, or put it inside an enclosed trailer. Most motorhome owners prefer to flat tow as it is the fastest and easiest way to hookup/disconnect and you don’t have to store and fuss with a trailer. The catch is that only certain model years of certain cars/pickups are flat-towable and you will need a brake kit and some custom wiring done to your car so that the signals work with the RV. The cost for the whole set up is around \$5K. I don’t know what the cost of the trailer options are, but I’d guess it’s comparable or even more expensive. You can find which cars and trucks are towable by downloading *MotorHome Magazine’s Guide to Dinghy Towing* for the model year you’re looking at.

Driving with a Toad is pretty easy. In most Class A’s you can only see it in your rear view camera and otherwise hardly know it’s there. You do need to make room for it when you pass a vehicle and you cannot backup with it on. The backup restriction is a big deal – if you have to back up your RV you must unhook the car and move it out of the way. This can get quite exciting if you happen to be in traffic.

## On the Road

Everyone has their own preferences of how they travel: timing, urgency, distance, road types, break frequency, adventure threshold, and dining choice. We fit into the *early-retired, experience-seeking, see-the-US, not-in-a-big-hurry, have-a-solid-plan-but-willing-to-change-it* category. Our approach is tailored accordingly and is quite different from that of Snowbirds or people with young kids who do weekend and summer vacations in their RV. Note that we rarely drive our RV to attractions, it is almost exclusively driven between campgrounds. There's not a lot of convenient parking for a 60-foot-long setup except in the truck area of interstate rest stops. We get diesel fuel at truck stops such as Loves or Flying J, but they don't often have pull through parking, making them unusable for breaks longer than 5 minutes. Our typical full travel day is to leave around 9:00 in the morning (after rush hour), take a break every couple of hours, travel 300-350 miles, and arrive at our next destination between 3:00 and 4:00 in the afternoon.

## Spousal Coexistence

When spending an extended period of time living in an RV with someone there is a LOT of togetherness. Most people need a bit of alone time from time to time. It's important to recognize this and provide for the ability to do different things at different times. It's helpful if your RV can be separated into two rooms in such a way that each person "can do their own thing" whether it's reading, watching TV, talking on the phone, or some other solitary activity. If you haven't previously spent nearly 24/7 with your partner for extended periods of time you should expect something of an adjustment period.

## Social

It's not hard to have a social life on the road if you're so inclined. We are major advocates for the virtual happy hour with friends and relatives. When we have a decent internet link we use Zoom and when we don't we connect via Facetime or simple audio. It usually requires some advance planning, particularly when you are in different time zones, but the result is well worth the effort. Sometimes we go on for hours.

People in the campgrounds are usually friendly and like to chat at almost any time, particularly in destination campgrounds. Out of state license plates and name plaques are magnets for conversation seekers. Sometimes these spontaneous exchanges lead to happy hours and longer term Facebook relationships. We've met some really nice and interesting people this way and had a good time doing it. A word of caution: shy away from political discussions unless you align well with the other party – in today's polarized environment, an otherwise great meeting can go sour pretty quickly.

One of the best conversation venues is the hot tub, if the campground is so equipped. Day or night, it's easy and natural to strike up a conversation on virtually any topic there. If it's in the evening, it's likely to be only adults and most are sipping some sort of libation. You can learn someone's life story, or more frequently, trade stories of experiences in life or on the road. We've picked up a lot of valuable info and tips on places to go, things to see, and things to do this way. Frequently, the session ends only because of impending dehydration due to the water temperature.

## Handling a Large Class A

There are much better sources of driving instruction than me so I won't describe how to drive an RV, but here are a few related tips.

- Take your rig to a large empty parking lot and practice driving, parking, and backing up. Have your partner get outside and guide you when backing up so that he/she gets to know the turning radius and you develop a signaling system that is reliable and repeatable. Some people use walkie-talkies or hand signals. We use our cell phones.
- If you can, set up your rear view camera to show your right side when signaling right and vice versa for the left. Always glance at it when changing lanes. Automobile drivers frequently speed up to pass you when you signal to change lanes. As a result they are often in your blind spot just when you're starting to move over. The side cameras are pretty good at allowing you to see them, even if it's just a "flash".
- Beware of wind – RVs are notoriously vulnerable to sway in the wind, especially gusting wind. When this happens devote your full attention to keeping your rig in your lane. Your RV is essentially one big sail and occasionally you will catch a huge gust that will push you over half a lane or more. It's not unusual that such a gust is "the norm" for that stretch of road due to a hill, valley, or some other natural phenomenon. Sometimes there are warning signs, sometimes there aren't.
- Beware of swaying trucks and other vehicles. There are a zillion trucks on interstate highways and it's surprising how many drivers seem to be half asleep, on the phone, or reading (yes, reading). I try to quickly, but carefully, past them if they driving slower than we are or at the same speed.
- Another truck anomaly is the "perpetual passing game". This is where a truck passes you when going downhill then slows down when going uphill. In many parts of the country this cycle continues seemingly indefinitely. It can drive you out of your mind. Given the desire to minimize how often you pass or get passed by large trucks, I will either back off my speed for a while or run hot until I have a half mile lead.

## Buying an RV

First, do not think of an RV as a financial investment, particularly if it's new or almost new. They depreciate very quickly in the first five years and accordingly, I don't recommend buying new for a first time buyer. If you like RVing, it is likely that your first RV will not be your last. Even if you love the RV, as you live in it you will decide there are changes you want for the long term. It could be that you want more room, an all-electric coach, or a different layout. Further, new RVs have problems just like older models – some would argue they have more in the beginning. As a result of the depreciation curve and the long life of a quality RV, you'll likely get the most bang for the buck from an RV that has a few years on it.

Buying an RV from a dealer is a lot like buying a car from a dealer only a lot bigger. The cycle is *Research. Blogs. Shows. On-line pricing. Dealer visits. Test drives. Hagglng. Financing. Warranty-hard-sell. Pickup. Get things fixed. Use it.* If there's no trade, dealers are generally willing to give big discounts off the listing price, whether it's new or used. Twenty percent isn't unusual. The advantage of buying a used RV from a dealer is that you can get them to fix all the problems. To close the deal, you may be

able to negotiate to get some of the things that wear out, such as batteries and tires, replaced if they are nearing the end of their life. Most dealers will give you a 3 or 6 month warranty on a used RV that will allow you to get things fixed that you discover after taking possession. A word of warning: they will try to sell you a number of additional “necessities”. These include extended warranties, rust-proofing, gel-coats, and the like. Like car dealers, they are trying to make money and/or get well from an aggressive deal on the RV. You get the hard sell on the extended warranty and will be told it covers “everything” and it will save you from bankruptcy if something major goes wrong. Before buying a pricey 3<sup>rd</sup> party warranty look VERY carefully at what it really covers. If you’re not careful you will end up with a very expensive insurance policy that covers only the most unlikely events. Just saying ..... hope I don’t sound bitter.

Buying from a private owner is also an option. You can get a very good deal, especially if you are a good and patient negotiator. It also helps if you know a lot about RVs and can spot the problems when you inspect the RV. The catch is that you lose your safety net for pre-existing problems. If you go this route, spend time perusing the RVT.com and RVtrader.com pages with the understanding that the pricing is “list pricing” and that the deal price should be markedly less.

One common dilemma many first time big rig buyers face is “Motorhome vs. 5<sup>th</sup> Wheel”. There are a number of trade-offs to consider, the biggest of which are:

- combo of a large pickup truck and 5<sup>th</sup> wheel vs. combo of large “bus” and car
- larger interior space of 5<sup>th</sup> wheel vs. more storage in motorhome
- bathroom and kitchen accessibility without leaving vehicle
- quicker motorhome setup and departure times
- lower 5<sup>th</sup> wheel maintenance costs – only one motor vehicle
- easier to drive a motorhome (I’ve read and heard this, but never driven a 5<sup>th</sup> wheel)

My opinions, based more on intuition than facts: the equivalent purchase prices aren’t dramatically different due to the high cost of a heavy duty pickup. Further, the overall net gas mileage isn’t a lot different. This is because half the travel total miles are without the RV. When calculating the average gas mileage half of the comparison is Motorhome towing a car vs. heavy duty pickup pulling a 5<sup>th</sup> wheel and the other half is a car vs. heavy duty pickup. At the end of the day, I think it comes down to this: if you plan to move around on a regular basis buy a Class A. If your plan is to go someplace and stay for an extended period, go with the 5<sup>th</sup> wheel.

## What’s really important in an RV ....

What is important depends largely on how you plan to use your RV, and therefore is highly subjective. Also, the RV size and budget will affect your “must have” list. The lists below are based on my observations and opinions. The standard things, like heat and air conditioning, are self-explanatory and not included below as I tried to stick to the less obvious.

## What’s essential in an RV

Stability on the road – Not all RVs are created equally for road handling. Many have excessive sway, particularly when it’s windy. The best way to ascertain how the RV will drive is to drive it. Unfortunately, that may not be practical when doing initial research. I found the RV Consumer Group

(rv.org) ratings to be helpful in getting an independent review of RVs. One of their key criteria is how each RV handles on the road. It's a hair pricey, but worth it when a lot of RV money is on the line.

Automatic leveling jacks – Saves a lot of time when setting up and gets your rig really level. This in turn makes your slide-outs work smoothly.

Workable kitchen – Unless you normally dine out, you need enough room and a big enough sink to make meals. A convection microwave and a stove of some kind are a must.

Comfortable place to watch TV – Unless you simply don't watch TV, this is important. Note that many RV manufacturers stick the TV wherever they can. Often you have to view them from the couch or chair at a right angle. This should be a non-starter for any RV as you will have buyer's regret every time you turn the set on.

Refrigerator that stays on while you travel – This may be standard on all big rigs and I just don't know it. If not, I can't even imagine what a pain it would be if you had to worry about food spoiling or defrosting while you're driving.

Comfortable table, dining area, chairs, and beds – You will spend a lot of time in your RV. Thin cushions and lousy mattresses will put a damper on your experience. Look and think hard before buying a booth dinette table as they tend to be quite cramped. If you have a sofa bed, look for the airbed mattress versus the classic thin-mattress-with-bar-across-the-middle. Your guests will thank you.

Storage for clothes – If you live in your RV for periods greater than weekends you will want reasonable storage for your clothes. While the RV lifestyle allows for a major wardrobe downsizing, you do need to accommodate a variety of weather conditions and the occasional week or two without washing clothes. And it's a hassle to get clothes out of storage units in the basement of the RV.

### What's nice to have in an RV

Heated floors – yes, this sounds ridiculous. However, if you travel from October through March, the nights get cold no matter where you are (we get frost in Yuma). The floors get cold and stay cold. Your feet freeze. Heated floors also allow you to turn off or turn down the forced air heat which conserves fuel and lowers the noise level during the night. Most RV models don't offer this, but if they do and you can swing it, I highly recommend you go for it.

Powder room/additional bathroom – same reasons as in a house.

Integral generator – many RVers get away with an external generator, but when they are integrated they automatically charge the batteries and can usually be programmed to turn on at specific times or battery charge levels. Also, they eliminate the need for a separate fuel supply. We don't use ours very often because we are normally plugged in, but every now and then the power fails or we are somewhere without power.

Satellite TV roof-mounted antenna – easy TV access when you have a clear southern view without having to set anything up. Many people have an antenna on a tripod that gets put on the ground near your rig. This is handy if there's a tree blocking your roof. In a perfect world, you would have both a roof mounted and a tripod mounted antenna, but it's just more stuff to carry and offends my sense of "excess".

Washer and dryer – RV laundry units are actually small apartment washers, dryers, or combos and have limited capacity. We usually go the campground laundry because it's faster and better. However, we frequently find that it's just not convenient and we can do a week's worth of laundry in three loads and 4 hours in our RV.

Decent outdoor lighting – We regularly return to our RV from somewhere in the dark, grill in the dark, or have to manage the black and gray water tanks in the dark. It's really nice when your rig has outside lights when you're doing those things. Otherwise it's flashlights.

Hose and cord reels – Another time-and-hassle saver.

Slide out pantry – They hold a lot of jars, bottles, cans, and spices. It makes finding what you are looking for an order of magnitude easier than sorting through the cupboards over the couch. Also, it frees up precious cupboard space.

Bedroom ceiling fan – For those nights when it's really warm in the RV and you don't want to listen to the A/C.

Full size refrigerator – If you will be going to remote places (like most National Parks), you will often find the grocery markets lacking. Also, a decent fridge/freezer full of food allows you to eat well and chill your beer and white wines in a civilized manner.

Lane monitor – We don't have one of these but wish we did. It's easy to miss a car in your blind spot when sun glare obscures the camera screen.

### What's not important or over-rated in an RV

Outdoor kitchens – They don't tend to be used very much, are just another thing to keep clean, and take up valuable cargo space.

Outdoor TVs – This might be desirable if you are a dedicated tailgater, but they are usually hard to see because of sun glare during the day and are a bug magnet at night.

Carpet of any sort – It is constantly dirty and a hassle to clean. Also tends to look dated.

Physical books – They add weight and take up valuable space. The exception is a road atlas like Rand-McNally or Michelin. Get a Kindle and tablet and do the eBook thing.

Winegard Connect – This is a device offered by many RV manufactures that provides internet data and wifi range extension. The data costs just as much as the cell phone providers, the unit has a terrible UI, and it uses the AT&T network which doesn't have as good coverage of Verizon in our experience. The wifi extender function works pretty well, but you're usually just getting a slightly more reliable version of lousy campground internet.

## Trip Planning

We often get asked how (and why) we come up with a detailed schedule 6-12 months in advance.

Why: We make it in advance because 1) reservations are required at many of the best places, 2) it's fun, and 3) it is in our nature to have a plan.



How:

1. Revisit our list of places and things-to-do lists, as well as our bucket list.
2. Map out several routes that would get us to the most important venues.
3. Determine how many days to stay at each venue and how many travel days are required between venues.
4. Generate a schedule where every day between departure and return is accounted for.
5. Make sure the climate will work for the time we'll be at each venue.
6. Check with friends and relatives we will visit or meet up with.
7. Look for acceptable campgrounds at each destination.
8. Make RV site reservations at all destinations.
9. Repeat steps 1-3 as necessary.
10. Determine likely overnight travel stops enroute to destinations.
11. Make list of overnight campsites and make reservations ahead of time if likely to be sold out.

## Routes

The routing process has Macro and Micro elements. The Macro aspect revolves around the major routes we will take and is usually at "4-lane" highway level. We consider things like "will it be snowing during the time we'll be on this road" or "is there someone or something we want to see on our way to a specific venue?" This route is established in the planning process and heavily utilizes Google Maps.

The Micro route is the detailed roads we take on a given day and is usually figured out each morning before we depart or sometimes enroute. We utilize two GPSs – the Trucking Garmin in our RV and Google Maps on Suzanne's phone. The reason for this is that they have different strengths and liabilities. The Garmin has software which takes into account the unique characteristics of trucks and large RVs. It checks for height, weight, and vehicle-type restrictions and automatically routes around them. Restrictions are a big deal as our RV is 13'2" high and weighs more than 25 tons. Neighborhood restrictions are often accompanied by low hanging tree branches. Unfortunately, the Garmin also does some bizarre routing and often takes you 10 or more miles out of your way or sends you the wrong way down on interstate only to turn you around miles down the road. Google is quite good and versatile for passenger cars, but it doesn't consider any vehicle restrictions and will take you through a dozen turns in a residential area if it saves you three minutes. Simply put: Garmin keeps us safe, Google keeps us sane.

Suzanne reconciles the two GPSs in real time. This sometimes requires her to do online research about the roads using Wikipedia, blogs, and Allstays. Often a "is it safe to drive a big RV on US 182 in Utah?" Google search will yield an immediate "yes, it's just fine" or "you would be out of your mind". Occasionally, we need to stop the RV and figure it out, but not often.

## Weather

It's important to watch the weather whether you are driving or not. First, you'll want to know the wind conditions. Every RV handles the wind differently but each has a limit at which driving becomes dangerous for you and other vehicles on the road. The more you drive the more calibrated your sense of this will become. Wind speed, direction, and gusting will all play into how difficult your day will be. Rain will amplify the negative effects of the wind. I find 10 mph winds a nuisance, 20 mph winds tiring, 30 mph winds exhausting, and anything more than 30 mph terrifying. Light rigs or 5<sup>th</sup> wheels will

probably have lower thresholds of pain. Other weather effects that impact driving include dirt devils and sand storms. For the most part you can be warned in advance by regularly checking real-time weather info sources from the news and the web. Another high-wind danger is swaying trucks and other RVs – you should not assume that just because you can keep in your lane that everyone else will. We occasionally see RVs and vehicles tipped over on the side of the road after a major wind storm. Don't hesitate to wait out a storm or extremely windy day even if it's quite inconvenient. Having said all this, most days are relatively calm and an absolute delight to drive in. One of the absolute best parts of traveling across the county is SEEING it, much of which is from the front seats of your vehicle.

There are also a few things to watch for even when you are camped. These include very high winds, tornados, floods, and hurricanes. When things look very nasty outside, the best and most useful weather reports will be local TV and radio, not the Weather Channel on cable. If winds get over the 50-mph level you should consider pulling in your slide-outs until it calms down, especially if it's raining. Really strong winds can damage or tear your slide-out covers and make your slide-outs vulnerable to leakage. If a tornado strikes, you'll want to make your way to a solid building or basement. Unfortunately, in a campground this usually means the rest rooms. ... Just you and a couple hundred of your closest friends. In case of hurricane: You're mobile. There's fair warning. Leave.

## Departure

Before departing there are a lot of things that need to be done to avoid disasters, major problems, or self-inflicted irritation. The best way of preventing this is to have a comprehensive departure checklist and religiously and deliberately check it before you leave. Our list is shown below:

- GPS route set up
- Cabinets secured
- Refrigerator secured
- Shower locked
- Closet secured
- TV down
- Satellite antenna off
- Heat off
- Pantry locked
- Ceiling vents closed
- Windows closed
- Shades up
- Front seats forward
- Rugs to front
- Toilets flushed
- Electronics secured
- Bikes loaded
- Grill, chairs in basement
- Propane in car
- Car contents secured
- Awnings in
- Hoses in
- Power removed
- Slides in
- Brake monitor on
- Car EZ-Pass stored
- Car brake set up
- Car signals tested
- Jacks up
- Jack pads stored

When checking to insure the jacks are up, walk around the RV and vehicle and do a visual check of the exterior and double check that the slides are seated, the awnings are in, hoses/cords are in, bikes are secured properly, and that the car is properly connected. Do it every time with no exceptions and no excuses. The time you cheat because you're in a hurry is the day you'll drive off with your power still connected.

## RV Repair

Regardless of the size, make, year, or price of your RV, things will break. There are thousands of parts that are either moving and/or subject to severe vibration. It's remarkable that they hold up as well as they do. There will be nuisance problems that can wait until a later date for repair or replacement. However, every now and then, something breaks that needs to be addressed immediately. Some issues,

like a major engine problem, will require a professional. Others, like a missing bolt from the stair retractor, can be fixed with standard hardware. Unfortunately, some problems require unique parts that you can only get from a RV store or from the RV manufacturer. A few things to consider:

DIY. There are a lot of RVers that do everything for themselves. They think nothing of tearing apart a chassis to add a sway bar to their 20-ton vehicle. There are others that get queasy thinking about replacing a drawer slide. No matter where you fall on the spectrum, you will need to make some repairs or improvise temporary fixes for yourself because help will be too far away and/or the necessary parts won't be available. To do this, you need a good set of the standard mechanical tools, electrical tools, and consumables like nuts, bolts, screws, electrical supplies, tape, and bungee cords.

Dealers. Most dealers have competent repair shops for the brands that they sell. Also, they can generally repair the standard things on other brands too, such as slides or furnaces. Their skills are quite variable for other brands and 3<sup>rd</sup> party items like engines and chassis. Further, with the rising popularity of RVing and the sheer number of RVs on the road, service departments are often booking appointments a month or more out. They also charge a premium – in many places the mechanic rate is close to \$100/hour and the mechanic is less-than-stellar. Your tabs runs up in a hurry, even when most of it is warranty work.

3<sup>rd</sup> Party Repair Services. There are a lot of these around, particularly in RV destination areas. Some are rip-offs and incompetent. Some are outstanding, have reasonable pricing, and are responsive. Often, the dealers will send some of their work there and your RV manufacturer will recommend them. Like most things these days, the online reviews usually tell the story. In a pinch, truck repair places such as International or Freightliner can do competent and reasonably priced work on chassis and engines.

An on-the-road breakdown and repair is a lot like breaking down in your car only a lot more of a hassle. The AAA of RVs is Good Sam Roadside Assistance and is well worth the annual fee if you break down. Like AAA, they will bring you gas, jump start your battery, and the like. They will also tow your RV to someplace that can fix it. Note that this is a different membership than the Good Sam Club (which is also well worth being a member).

## RV Maintenance

If your RV is less than 10 years old, there's not a lot of maintenance required – that's one of the beautiful things about the lifestyle. The everyday maintenance tasks include emptying the waste water tanks and keeping the RV clean. The (diesel) engine, chassis, and generator maintenance is done once a year. Like car maintenance, you can do most of this yourself or shop it out. If the RV is left in freezing temperatures without heat, it will need to be winterized – which can be done in 30 minutes once you get the hang of it. Every five years or so the tires will need replacement. This is not because of wear, but from cracks caused by sun exposure. This can be expensive for big rigs as some tires cost over \$1000 each. Tire life can be extended dramatically with the use of wheel covers, particularly when your rig is parked in direct sunlight for long periods of time.

## Things you should have with you

Grill and propane tank – the majority of RV people who grill have one of the Coleman Roadtrip models. These grills are small, easy to get in and out, generate a lot of heat, and work well. They run off propane canisters but can be easily hooked up to a standard outdoor propane tank.

Chairs – invest in some quality outdoor chairs. Chairs with the attached side table are popular and handy.

Fold up table – some campsites don't have outdoor tables.

Tools – get a good set of “basic car mechanic” and “household fixer” tools. An expandable garden hose, nozzle, and Y fitting are also useful. A small fold-up shovel is also handy.

Propane fire pit – This is a bit of a luxury, but if you already have a propane tank it's a natural addition. On a cool night, it's nice to sit out around a fire, sip a bit of something, and chat. Also, many campgrounds prohibit wood fires.

Jack pads – A must-have to level your rig when the grade is too steep for your jacks to level. Also, they keep your jacks from sinking into soft or wet soil. If you're in a Class A get high-quality, heavy-duty pads. They are expensive but they work when other pads won't. I highly recommend a half dozen of the DICA RoadWarrior 15- or 18-inch jack pads.

Spare parts – there are certain things that break over time that you can't get at Home Depot. Things like latches for cabinets and sliding doors that are unique to your RV brand. Buy a few of each size and keep them with your RV. If your windshield wipers are not commonly available, get a spare pair.

LTE hotspot – campground internet is generally poor or non-existent.

Clothes for inclement weather – there are always surprises. Be prepared for hot, cold, wet, and anything thing else.

Luggage – you never know when you will need to make an unplanned trip away from your RV by plane or automobile. It could be a death in the family or a spontaneous trip to visit someone. If so, you won't want to spend the time shopping for luggage.

Printer/scanner and spare ink cartridges – not everyone will agree with this, but we regularly print things out for legitimate reasons. And sometimes we print out the Sunday crossword. A decent scanner is personally preferred to digitize document over taking a picture on your phone. Combo printer/scanner/copiers are small and cheap. The ink cost is generally outrageous, but you don't use much of it.

Movies, video series, and TV shows on Blu ray/DVDs – there are times when this is your only TV option. Bring/buy/borrow an adequate library. A lot of Mom & Pop campgrounds have a stash of DVDs that you can borrow but they are generally old and/or lame.

## Camping and campsites

According to Wikipedia there are nearly 15,000 parks that cater to RVs in the US. That number includes private, federal, state, and local campgrounds. They range from big dirt patches to fabulous resorts and cost from nothing to more than \$100 per day. Common amenities include: potable water, power, sewer, trash, SD cable, bad wifi, a pool, a store with food and RV essentials, propane, and a dump station. The discussion below is our perspective on glamping (glamorous camping) in a large RV.

To date, we've stayed in just about every type of campground except dry camping (no hookups whatsoever). We normally look for full hookups and don't use campground bathrooms or most other

amenities, but we can go a several days without a sewer hookup. Our preferred compromise between quality and price depends on whether we are at a destination or in transit. At a destination park, we like a patio or grass site with gravel or concrete under the RV. Because we usually spend some time sitting outside if the weather is nice, we like a bit of room between sites and we really don't like dirt or mud. Our average cost is about \$50 a day. When we are in transit and just staying for the night we look for a campground within a few miles of our route with a level pull-through site where we don't have to unhook the car. Ideally, a site won't have trees blocking satellite TV reception. Easy in and out is our goal. These tend to be either Mom & Pop campgrounds or KOAs. The M&Ps tend to be in the \$35 range, KOAs closer to \$45. About half the time, we stay at KOAs. They tend to reliably provide the above amenities across the US. You pay a premium over the equivalent family campground, but they don't often fall short of expectations.

Some resort campgrounds are destinations in and of themselves. If you're on the daily rate they can be well over \$100 a day. Monthly or seasonal rates are substantially less, but tend to bill independently for electric. Most independent campgrounds will give a 10% discount for Good Sam or AAA. Also, KOAs give a 10% discount if you pay \$40 a year to belong to their club. We pick campgrounds largely from Google reviews. You need to read enough reviews to get an accurate assessment, but after a while you can quickly spot the "red flags".

As we travel the US, particularly in the West, we see a lot of people boondocking. Boondocking is dry camping for free or almost for free. Some people boondock at interstate rest stops or Walmart parking lots while in transit. Also, people boondock for longer periods of time in Federal lands such as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands. There are some beautiful, isolated places to stay in this country if you are willing to deal with the challenges of living with no water, electric, or waste disposal. Most RVs can handle it for a few days without much work, but it takes some special provisions and resourcefulness to do it long-term.

Another desirable place to camp is in National Park campgrounds. The key advantage is that they are right in the park. They are usually in a beautiful and natural place, and can save an hour or more versus commuting from outside the park. The catch is most parks have limited services and do not accommodate RVs over 36 feet. Also, many of the roads into National Parks are a bit terrifying with big rigs.

In general, we've found most campgrounds to be safe. The confidence level varies largely on where they are. Rural areas feel safe largely because you're isolated. It also helps if you're in a crowded campground. Urban campgrounds vary dramatically depending on the area of town and the level of security that the campground has. Some have elaborate gate and security systems to get in and out coupled with walls or fences. Some have visible 24-hour security staff. As you would expect, those campgrounds with excellent security come with a higher price tag. We don't have much experience with rest stops or Walmart largely out of security concerns.

## Pets

I would estimate roughly half of RVers have pets. Most are dogs and many people have more than one. People walk their dogs at all hours of the day and are generally very good about cleaning up after them. Most campgrounds have fenced dog play areas and they get a fair amount of use. Some campgrounds

have sections of the park where all the sites are reserved for people with dogs. Many small pet owners, including cat owners, have portable pens that they put up on their sites for their pets to be outside.

There are some things to consider before bringing a pet, starting with the obvious: space, hair, dirt, and wear and tear inside your small living area. The bigger challenge is the loss of freedom. You can leave your pets in your RV and go places, but if they bark a lot it can irritate your neighbors. In extreme circumstances the campground authorities will ask you to move or leave. You can take your pet with you in the car, but in many states (Arizona for example) there are laws prohibiting dogs from being left alone in vehicles. This can be problematic when shopping or hiking in National Parks where dogs are prohibited on the trails. Also, if you decide to leave your RV and fly somewhere, you will likely need to put your pet in a kennel you're not familiar with.

## Mail and Documents

One of the questions I always get asked is "how do you get your mail?". The short answer is that we use an online mail service. There are several of these and they all function pretty much the same. We use [travelingmailbox.com](http://travelingmailbox.com) and this is how works: you sign up for a specific plan and they give you an address that looks like an apartment address. You either change your address for all your accounts as if you had moved, or you have your mail temporarily forwarded to your mailing service address. When mail gets delivered to the mail service, they scan the front of the envelope and send you an email with the image. You go onto their web page (or app on a table or phone) and decide if you want to have them open it and scan it, forward it to you at an address of your choosing, hold for later forwarding, or shred it. If they scan it, you get a pdf file emailed to you within a day. They will hold the original until you decide what to do with it. They will deposit checks for you if you like and they will accept packages. Your plan includes a certain number of received envelopes and scans. The plan we are on costs about \$150 a year and about \$10 each time they forward our mail (roughly once a month).

The mailing service is just one part of the overall "digitization and paper reduction" process. We have changed every possible account, including banking, to paperless. All bills are received and paid online. We have a couple of cloud accounts to back up all our data and documents.

By and large, digitization is efficient and works well. However, there are a handful of complications if you do the wholesale address change. For example some entities, such as your Department of Motor Vehicles, require a physical address in your state of residency. For full-timers your residency state is a major decision and is subject to "domicile". If you go this route, do some homework and/or consult a tax attorney.

## Electronics

For the most part, the electronics complement that you have at home is the same that you can have in your RV. We have laptops, tablets, phones, MP3 players, Kindles, TVs, a stereo, and a printer/scanner. However, in my opinion one of the few disadvantages of life on the road is the lack of a decent internet connection. Internet in campgrounds is steadily improving, but is still lousy. It is rare that you can stream video and most campground wifi performance is like that of an old dial up line, if you can even get on it. Most traveling RVers have an LTE hotspot. Many of the campgrounds we've stayed at are remote or in rural areas and have little or no internet, so cell coverage really matters. Consequently, we use Verizon because of their excellent coverage. It's still expensive, but each year the data performance gets a bit better. It's handy to have a wifi hotspot in addition to our phones so that tablets and laptops

don't rely on a specific phone being plugged in. However, the performance of an LTE hotspot should not be confused with the performance of a proper wifi router. We still have very little streaming video, but at least we can read newspapers, update our blog, surf the web, and do other normal computer things. We have a large collection of Blu Rays and DVDs, including multiple seasons of a variety of series. Between gifts we receive and those we buy, we continue to have more new material to watch than we need.

## TV

**Local on air** – If you have an on-air local TV antenna and you're close to a city, you can watch local channels. Some content, such as NFL games, is often better on-air than on campground cable.

**Cable** – Most, but not all, campsites have some sort of cable TV. When it is available, it is often poor-quality SD. Once you've connected to the campground cable, you'll want to "channel auto-scan" each TV you plan to watch to find the viewable channels.

**Satellite TV** – You can get Dish or DirecTV antennas and receivers at the usual home prices. Dish allows you to turn it on and off each month. There are 3 popular types of antennas: 1) the small "dome" type that can be mounted on the roof or on the tripod on the ground, 2) the roof-mounted Winegard traveler folding dish, and 3) a standard household model attached to an immovable object (usually involves cinder blocks). It's handy to have the antenna mounted to the roof.

**Blu Ray, DVD, and DVR** – Most RVs are fitted with some type of Blu Ray/DVD player. If you travel off the beaten track and your satellite reception is blocked this is often your only TV option.

**Tablet or laptop with downloaded content** – a great personal option if you had the foresight and bandwidth to download the content.

## Bikes and Hikes

As we travel the US, we're amazed at how many biking trails there are, particularly in cities. Some are long, scenic, and sometimes take you through areas with restaurants and other attractions. A lot of people travel with bikes, many that are battery-assisted. To do this effectively you need a decent bike rack that you can attach to your RV or car. If you buy one, don't skimp - go heavy-duty. A flimsy bike rack won't cut it on the "RV road". The rack and the bikes take a beating as you drive over thousands of miles of road, many of which are bad. Also, I recommend you get one with a built-in lock system, particularly if you expect to leave your bikes on an unattended car.

There is an incredible variety of fabulous hiking in the USA. Many of our wonders are best seen from a hiking trail. If you plan to hike at all, invest in quality hiking boots, retractable hiking sticks, small backpacks, and water bottles. It's a good idea to have a small first aid kit as well – at least some Band-Aids. We use Alltrails.com to find and stay on trails.

## Shopping

**Groceries** – You can find groceries just about anywhere. However, in small towns, the selection is often lacking for meat, vegetables, and quality alcohol. We stock up before going to places that are far from "civilization". With a couple of exceptions, the major supermarket chains have loyalty cards. These will frequently reduce your tab by 10-20% and are well worth having. We grabbed one from every one of

the major chains and also entered our phone numbers online so that we don't pass up the savings. Repeat the process with drug store chains.

Online – We still shop online, predominantly with Amazon. The key is getting orders delivered to someplace you will be. Most campgrounds will accept packages on your behalf, but will accept no responsibility if you're not physically staying at the park when the package arrives.

Something comes in, something goes out – Even in a large RV, there is very limited storage space. The rig tends to get filled up not long after you take possession of it. Accordingly, if you want to avoid a hoarding-like situation you will need to stop buying stuff and/or when you bring in something new, you need to get rid of something else. This concept flies in direct opposition to the American psyche but is necessary if you want to avoid a ton of clutter. A good rule of thumb is if you haven't used it in a year, you probably don't need it.

Fueling – Fueling a gas Class A or 5<sup>th</sup> Wheel can be tricky because of height and maneuverability limitations of gas stations. Whether you have a gas or diesel vehicle we recommend using truck stops because they are set up for the height and turning radius of big rigs and are often an easy off and on from the interstate or major route you are on. Fueling a diesel Class A is in some ways easier, because you can use the diesel lanes used by the 18 Wheelers. We find the best truck stops to be the national chains such as Pilot, Love's, Petro, Flying J, or T/A. Most of these have a convenience store, decent restrooms, and some sort of fast food restaurant. You should always have a good idea of where you will need to fuel and find/plan a stop. Allstays is a great app to find a good one. In some places, you can go for 100 miles or more without a viable RV filling station. Sometimes the void is in a place where you least expect it, such as the Washington DC area.

## Key apps

There are a number of key apps we regularly use that are helpful or even indispensable. Most of these have both an app and a web version.

A weather app – there are several good apps including NOAA Weather Radar and The Weather Channel. Most apps have a pro version that has extended hourly forecasts, dangerous weather alerts, and other nice features. It's worth the \$5-\$10 it will cost you.

All Stays Camp and RV – A must have app that identifies traffic hazards, bridge clearances, truck stops, restaurants, and just about anything you can think of. It also has reviews and details of rest stops and truck stop diesel lanes and parking spots. Don't leave home without it.

Alltrails – searches, descriptions, distances, elevation changes, and real-time tracking of hiking and biking trails. Additionally, it's well worth the \$10 per year for the professional version as you can download trail maps to your phone and know where you are when outside of cell coverage.

Wine Spectator Wine Ratings+ – find great wines and save yourself from some duds. Okay, not everyone needs this.

## Handy Websites

[Google Maps](#) – directions, distances, campsite locations and reviews

[National Parks](#) – guides, maps, hiking trails, warnings



[IRV2 Forum](#) – RV info and blogs on just about any topic

[RV Net Forum](#) – Good Sam blog site

[RV Trader](#) – Multiple listings of RVs for sale

[RVT](#) – Multiple listings of RVs for sale

[Allstays Camp and RV](#) – map based search tool for relevant travel info

[Campendium](#) – Campsite search tool that includes places to stay for free

[RV Parky](#) – campsite finder