

RVing Alphabet

by Ellen Behrens

Smashwords Edition

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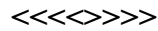
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Introduction: “You from around here?”

We’re sitting in a restaurant in a small town in one of these great United States, looking over menus, when the server appears, takes our order, and asks us the question we’ve heard nearly every day for almost ten years: “You from around here?”

When we started on our never-ending RV journey, we nodded our heads and said, “We’re your town’s newest residents.” But it felt like cheating, so now we tell people we aren’t local, we’re full-time RVers, and we’re enjoying visiting their town.

This is where the conversation takes its first turn. Every now and then the server says, “Oh! My aunt and uncle (or grandparents) do that,” or “My parents want to do that,” or “I want to do that when I retire (or quit or can get my spouse to go along with my plan to see the country).” We often catch a bit of envy in those voices, see a dreamy glaze in their eyes. More than once we’ve heard, “You’re living my dream.”

Maybe you’re one of those people we’ve met on the road.

Sometimes people want to know what a full-time RVer is, so we explain it to them in the shorthand version we’ve practiced over the years. “We live and travel full-time in our RV.”

“So you don’t have a house?”

We shake our heads. “We sold a three-thousand square-foot house and everything in it,” we explain.

“And you just go where you want?”

We tell them that’s what we do, as long as the weather cooperates.

“Wow! That’s so cool! I’d love to do that.”

Then, when we’re paying the bill, we often hear, “Have a nice trip” or “Have a great vacation.”

It's not a vacation -- it's not a limited time to travel between sections of scheduled employment. No, it's our lifestyle. But we don't say anything. It's easy and common to misunderstand this unique lifestyle -- a way of living more and more people are choosing.

With more than 30 million RV owners in the United States, chances are very good that if you don't have an RV, then you know somebody who does. In 2017 RV manufacturers are expected to send close to 500,000 new RVs out the doors of their plants into dealerships and rental companies. Maybe you're one of the thousands considering whether to adapt the modern, nomadic lifestyle of the full-time RVer.

Plenty of "how-to" books and blogs have been written about becoming a full-time RVer. I'm not going to waste your time with a lot of the nuts and bolts about choosing and buying the best RV for you and things like that when other writers and full-timers have covered those areas so thoroughly and so well. Instead, you'll get an A to Z look at a side of full-timing you don't find most other places, with topics ranging from bathrooms to xenophobia, from someone who's been out here for over eight years.

So sit back, relax, and let's look at your RVing dream from A through Z.

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A is for ADDRESS

“So you don’t live anywhere?” is a question a lot of people ask us when we say we live and travel full-time in our RV.

“We live everywhere,” we tell them.

Unfortunately, there’s no zip code for “Everywhere,” much less “Find us.”

It is, however, easier than ever to be mobile. We can pay things like our insurance through automatic fund transfers, and we can do our banking online. E-mail sends written communications faster than traditional mail service ever has.

So we don’t really need an address, right? Well, we do need to be able to drive, and that requires an address. Plus the government likes to know where to find us. Getting a permanent address when you don’t stay anyplace for very long is a detailed process, and I’ll leave those details to others.

But how do we full-timers get the mail we do need to receive through conventional mail?

We have mail forwarding services to thank for that. For a fee, ours delivers printed stuff to us at whatever address we give them -- whether it be an RV park that allows us to receive mail at their address or through a post office’s General Delivery service. It’s not complicated, actually, though it does prove physical mail is truly “snail” mail.

Every now and then, our magazines have gotten “lost” -- the postal service, for some reason, sometimes returns them when they’re sent to our mail forwarding service. I’d been getting a magazine for several years, especially enjoying their “Letters to the Editor” section. They were so good it was like reading a continuation of the stories in the earlier issues of the magazine. When I realized I was reading letters about stories I’d never seen, I discovered I’d missed at least one issue. I decided to investigate. I checked with the mail forwarding service, but everything seemed okay there, so I contacted the magazine’s circulation department. I found out from them that the postal service had returned the magazine. Perhaps the USPS thought the forwarding service wouldn’t send along the magazines (they do), but it means getting periodicals is a dicey business -- an online subscription might be better (or not.... See “I”!).

Mail forwarding services charge us the cost of sending items to us, so postage on everything we get is essentially paid twice (first by the sender, then by the mail service when they send it to us). This has made us sensitive about what we receive at our address. For example, a woman wanted to send me a manuscript through the mail (imagine about 200 printed pages in a box) and I suggested she send it via e-mail. She ended up sending her manuscript on a flash drive. She put

it in a small padded mailer, paid her postage and sent it to our mailing address. The service then included that small package with the rest of our mail, and we paid the postage for that bundle to be sent to us. So postage was paid twice.

That small package, even the occasional magazine, certainly aren't very costly to have forwarded. But ordering something that arrives at the mail service in a large package that then must be sent to our location adds time and cost.

If you have friends or family who want to send you homemade baked goodies, think twice about having them sent via a mail service -- will what's being sent still be fresh when you get it? We once had to turn down the offer of Christmas cookies because we weren't someplace where we could get mail sent to us directly and we didn't know when we were going to be able to have the mail sent from the forwarding service. Even homemade cookies lose their magic when they've been sitting someplace for weeks.

It doesn't mean we can't get packages. It just means we have to plan for them.

If we're in a spot long enough to receive packages, we can sometimes have items shipped directly to us, bypassing the mail forwarding service. Usually that works out fine.

But... some packages are problematic. I publish my print books through Lulu, an online printing company. When I ordered a box of my books, they shipped via FedEx to the US post office General Delivery address I'd used when I made the order. Fortunately, I'd stopped at the post office ahead of time to try to forestall any damage and through the true kindness of strangers (disguised as US postal workers and FedEx employees) I received my package. It did have a note scrawled across it reminding me that FedEx items should not be sent to post offices. Yep. Knew that. Lulu, however, hadn't indicated the shipment was being delivered FedEx. Lesson learned.

It's a lesson I pass on here: if you're having something shipped to your location, make sure it's being delivered through compatible services. If you leave it to chance, you could end up with an undeliverable package. There might not be an address for "Everywhere" but they sure know where to hide things when it comes to "undeliverable"!

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B is for BORED

...which is what your goal is. Not when you're talking to people (that would be rude) and not when you're traveling down the highway, mesmerized by the scenery. You don't want to be bored when you're exploring someplace new, either.

So when is a good time to be bored? Bored is the state of mind you hope for when you're in a spot for awhile and things are starting to feel comfortable. You want boredom for a few reasons:

1. If you're bored, you're relaxed, which is what you're after, right? Most full-time RVers embark on the never-ending adventure because they're fed up with the grind, the noise, the stress, the ticking of the clock. If you're bored, that means nothing is weighing on you. You aren't in a hurry to be someplace. You're bored because you've exhausted all the chores on your To Do list. You're fidgety because you're ready for something to do. This is good.

2. If you're bored, you're ready for your next adventure. You're ready to head down the road, find new places, meet new people, or re-visit someplace you enjoy. This is good.

3. If you're bored, things are going well. The rig is tidy and clean, you're well-stocked and fed, and time seems to be stretched out in front of you like an endless ocean. This means nothing is broken. This means you aren't dealing with some emergency on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere. Or in the middle of everything. This is very good.

So take a deep breath of that boredom, knowing it's a temporary state nudged between hectic repairs (see "R") and blissful exploration. Ah!

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C is for CAMPING

... which is not what most full-time RVers are doing. Full-time RVers are, well, living: traveling around the US, Canada, and Mexico -- with occasional cruises or airplane trips to other continents.

Sure, some RVers -- even full-timers -- are also campers. They hoist a tent, a sleeping bag, and enough food and water for a few days onto their backs to venture into the true wilderness (yep, there's some of that still left, even in the Lower 48, if you know where to look). They'll set up camp, complete with fire and rudimentary cooking utensils, using special canisters to store their food when in bear country (which also exists in the Lower 48 and in more places than you might think).

But for most of us, we're "RVing." We spend our nights in comfy beds, eat meals cooked on a stove, oven, or microwave, catch the latest episodes of our favorite TV shows on stations available via antenna, cable, our own satellite dish, or -- increasingly -- via wifi or hotspot connections, sometimes streamed over the Internet.

Some people call it “glamping,” but that’s not exactly correct for full-timers. The terms are blurred and not many definitions can be found, so let’s lay it all out here.

Full-time RVers are folks who do not have a “home base” -- they’ve shed property ownership or apartment leases to travel 365 days each year in their recreational vehicle. Sometimes they’ll stay someplace for a month or two, maybe a bit longer, but their hearts are on the road, and they’re led by the weather and curiosity to see this big continent. Their RV is their home. You might have seen a bumper sticker popular with full-timers that says, “Home Is Where We Park It.”

RVers can be weekenders or vacationers, traveling in a defined period of time, usually to a specific destination, and back home. They can also be long-term RVers -- people who have a house someplace, but who travel for extended periods of time in their RV, maybe a year or more. But whether they’re gone a weekend or a year, they all return at some point to a “sticks and bricks” house they call home.

Campers are, as described above, usually motivated by an urge to get as close to nature as they possibly can. They backpack with tents. But sometimes campers are also RVers. These RVers love campfires, barbecue grills, picnic tables, and a good game of cornhole (throwing bean bags into a hole cut into a wooden frame). Often we see families in small RVs where Mom and Dad sleep in the RV while the kids snuggle into sleeping bags in a tent.

Glampers are people who want the camping experience but with many of the niceties full-timers appreciate: an espresso machine, perhaps, or a sauna. They’ve melded the luxuries of full-time RVing into the short-term camping experience.

Before I get a lot of angry notes from people saying I’ve got it all wrong, I’ll admit these are just my impressions. There are no rules, no true expectations about RVing or camping, and that’s the beauty of it. You can bend it and mold it into something that fits what you want to do, the way you want to do it. For example, some people travel with horses, and their RVs are a combination living space (quite comfy!) and horse trailer. And in some parts of the country you can buy a trailer with holes cut in the floor for your ice fishing pleasure. Another category of RVers call themselves “vanabons.” One described herself as a “budget traveler of the extreme variety; a specialist in creative vehicle conversions, spontaneous road trips, and serendipitous meetings; a wandering seeker of friendship, adventure, and art” (Christina Ammon at <http://www.vanabonds.com/>).

You see why no one should assume all RVers are campers or vice versa?

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D is for DOGS

About 56% of US households own pets -- and that's probably about the same for RVers. Once upon a time, many people bought RVs for vacations and trips because hotels and motels wouldn't permit pets -- so traveling via RV meant the entire family, "fur-babies" included, could vacation together.

Most RVers still have pets, and most of those pets are dogs (according to some unscientific surveys I would cite if I could find the source). Every now and then we see someone with a cat on a leash and once my husband caught a glimpse of an RVer guiding a pig into a rig (quick bugger -- I missed it). I've heard about people getting pigs as pets, apparently not the type I've seen on farms that grows to weigh several hundred pounds, but this was the first eyeball proof of it we've had.

I should mention up front that my husband and I are allergic to cats and dogs -- my husband is especially sensitive (his eyes can swell shut when an animal has been in a room -- we don't want to think about the damage one could do if it were to lick him or brush against him). Being highly allergic means we always check the rules before we commit to staying in a campground

or RV park. If leashes are required, we sign in. We avoid hikes and stores where pets roam freely, and give a wide berth to those we pass along the street. We do our part and are grateful when pet owners do theirs.

Many RV parks provide off-leash areas; campgrounds usually designate areas where pets can roam freely. Sadly, some people are reluctant to use them, preferring to let their animals run through RV sites and into common areas. Perhaps people feel so at home in some RV parks and campgrounds they figure they can let their animals run loose the way they would on their own property.

“He doesn’t bite,” a dog owner will tell us, but that’s not the point. A friendly lick can send a highly allergic person straight to the emergency room. Please leash your animals when you’re in RV parks -- even if there’s no written rule about it. It’s the courteous thing to do.

One of the biggest complaints we’ve heard from RV park and campground managers is that dog owners don’t properly dispose of their animal’s poop. “Scoop The Poop” is a familiar sign and rule. So what’s the harm in leaving the doo-doo there and there?

1. Kids play all over RV parks and campgrounds. That’s part of the RV allure for young families. They’re not looking where they’re running and jumping and playing. Barefoot. Doing cartwheels. I mean, have you ever watched kids play? We were our most physically relaxed when we were young -- we rolled and scooted, we crawled and tiptoed. Hopped. Squirmed. You don’t want kids doing all that where there’s doo-doo, do you?

2. If #1 didn’t convince you picking up your pet’s poop is a good idea, nothing in the #2 spot will do the trick.

One manager at a KOA lamented picking up dog poop in the tenting area. “Don’t they know people lay their heads down in that area to sleep at night?” Apparently they don’t. Or don’t care.

RVers are generally known as considerate souls. Leash your pet, pick up after it, and understand not everyone can go nose-to-nose with your fur-baby -- and you’ll be one of the considerate RVers.

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E is for EXERCISE

The RV lifestyle can be pretty sedentary, if you let it. After all, you spend time sitting behind the wheel of a motorhome or tow vehicle, then stop to eat in restaurants or share meals with fellow travelers at an RV park. After a long day of travel, all you want to do is relax -- yep, laze in front of the TV or crash into bed with a good book if you can keep your eyes open long enough. It's easy to let those muffins we snack on become muffin tops.

My husband and I are more conscientious than most people about what we eat. We do a pretty good job of balancing healthy meals with indulgences too tempting to resist (he gets all the credit for this -- I'd have a few muffin tops if not for him). After all, seeing the country is about sampling the local dishes, right? And we've had quite a variety, from corn fritters to wild rice pancakes. Not to mention the key lime pie, peanut butter bread, and all manner of pastries....

So we weigh ourselves every day and find ways to exercise. In one town we joined the local fitness center on a special plan for short-term visitors. In another we jogged in a park where work-out equipment peppered the trail, stopping to heft our body weight, balance on a beam, and do other exercises.

We bicycle and hike, both popular choices among RVers -- they lead to places we might not otherwise find, giving us a closer look at our temporary home. We've seen kayaks lashed to the tops of RVs or their towed vehicles. Many RV parks have swimming pools, tennis courts, and workout rooms. They vary in size and sometimes the equipment isn't in very good repair, but if they have free weights it's hard to go wrong.

Such is the life of a full-time RVer: always looking for great food, then ways to burn off those nasty calories that come with it!

(What? Still sitting there? Get out and do something before you read the next chapter!)

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F is for FOOD

Food is one area that could define the difference between casual RVers and full-time RVers. Of course everybody needs to eat, but how and where we do that depends on a lot of factors -- taste, budget, and something we'll call "dining experience" among them.

Casual RVers -- weekenders, vacationers, or anybody spending time in an RV every now and then rather than all the time -- seem to enjoy the outdoor dining experience, cooking over an open flame or using a grill, maybe grabbing something from a nearby restaurant or supermarket deli so the meal can be shared around a picnic table.

Full-timers might do that, but they also tend to make a lot of use of their kitchens, small though they are. Amazing meals can (miraculously, it seems) come out of such kitchens. My husband is a fantastic cook. We've enjoyed homemade pasta with lobster tails and soft-shelled crab sandwiches on artisan bread, among other memorable meals. Every morning that isn't a travel day he uses a hand-grinder to crush the beans he uses in our French-pressed coffee. He'd be the first to admit he's no gourmet, and we're not food snobs, but we do love hot, tasty, healthy food -- and the best place to get that is at home.

But we've learned a few things over the years about living with an RV kitchen. We've given away more pots and pans than most people use in a lifetime -- all because of our tiny kitchen. Yes, storage space is at a premium. But have you looked at the size of the sinks? The oven? The range top? Since living in our RV, we've taken to choosing pots and pans not only for all the usual reasons, but we literally size them up. Will this pot fit on top of the stove? Is the pot short enough to use its lid with room to spare under the stove hood? Will this fabulous frying pan fit in the sink to clean it?

Yes, living in an RV means making all kinds of choices differently than you do in a sticks-and-bricks house. Our Class C (that's the RV with the front that looks like a truck) and our fifth wheel (this RV is towed using a hitch in the bed of a pick-up truck) both have just three burners on the stove, and ovens so small we haven't bothered to use them. Ever. In more than eight years. (Some RVers use their ovens all the time; others have converted them into cabinets. Even the food we buy is thoughtfully debated: do we have room in the refrigerator or freezer for this? When will we use it?)

If you're considering downsizing to an RV, make sure your favorite pots, pans, serving dishes, and other favorite kitchen items will fit on the stove, in the oven, and in the sink. Don't plan on washing dishes in a campground or RV park bathroom -- there are usually rules against this (besides... ew!!).

Choose your small kitchen appliances carefully. They take up space on the already cramped counter tops and cupboards. If something isn't going to get used frequently, it shouldn't be in the rig. We own three small appliances: a toaster, a juicer, and a crock pot. I don't use the juicer as often as I used to, but it still comes in handy enough for the space it occupies.

Limited floor space in RVs means most of us have developed a careful choreography, especially during meal prep: giving wide berth to someone wielding a sharp knife in confined quarters keeps everybody safe. Am I paranoid? Probably. But I also have all of my fingers and toes.

Despite how much we love our own food, it's hard to avoid the temptation of trying food in places we've never been before or will never return to. And we have favorite places around the country we like returning to.

So how do we find good places to eat? We talk to other RVers. We ask campground/RV park managers or hosts. We consult TripAdvisor or Yelp. We inquire at visitors' centers (many

folks in these aren't supposed to make recommendations -- but you can learn a lot from the first places they think to mention). And we quiz every local resident who crosses our path: gas station attendants, store clerks, sometimes people we stop on the street. If we're getting our teeth cleaned or the oil changed in our rig, we ask the employees where they like to eat.

But we all have our own tastes, and sometimes the suggestions we get don't match up with our own preferences. You'd be surprised how many times a server or cashier in a restaurant where we didn't like the meal we were just served has given us a recommendation for a place we ended up liking much better.

One of the main reasons I keep a blog is so I can remember where we've eaten meals we've enjoyed. I refer back to our annual "Best Eats" blog posts when we've returned to area where I can't remember where we ate or if we liked it.

Farmers' markets have sprung up in every town it seems, and we make a point of going to them whenever and wherever we can. Homemade bread or pastries, just-off-the-tree fruit, picked-this-morning produce, freshly butchered chicken hearts... we never know what we'll find.

We watch for signs along the side of the road for produce stands or U-pick orchards or farms. Though gone now at least three years, we still miss a special property just outside Yuma, Arizona, where the owner allowed the public to pick tangelos right off his trees (\$5 a bucket spoiled me forever). We had fresh-squeezed juice throughout the winter. This is why I invested space in a juicer -- and my futile hope we'll be able to pick those tangelos again is probably why I keep that juicer where it is.

I can't help being amazed when I hear other RVers talk about chain restaurants. Sure, we have a couple we patronize, but we much prefer discovering those Mom and Pop spots and have enjoyed some incredible meals in some very unexpected places.

Feeling hungry? Flip back a chapter and re-read "E" before going on to "G"!

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G is for GUEST

...which is what every RVer is when we're out and about. We're guests on someone else's property. Sometimes we forget that: we park our RV, set up chairs, maybe a grill, form a little living area just outside our door. We roam the park or campground, exploring. We do our laundry there, maybe purchase a few things in the office or snack bar.

It's especially easy to relax when the managers or owners make us feel welcome and comfortable. And the longer we stay, the more relaxed we feel, the more we feel at home. Those who know campground/RV park etiquette know not to walk through the site we've rented, and we show others the same courtesy.

No wonder we forget we're just visiting. That this isn't home -- it's just a place we're staying for awhile.

And because we're guests, we need to be sure we're following the rules those who own and manage the property have laid out for us. Quiet hours, laundry procedures, handling our pets, making sure our sewer hoses are sealed and secured... things like that all make a difference not only in our stay, but in our neighbors' experiences as well (see "N" for more about those folks nearby).

So settle in, get comfy, but don't forget you're on the property as a guest. The owners/managers have the right to throw you out -- without notice -- if they judge you've broken rules or otherwise become a lousy guest.

Don't for a minute think the property has made a list of rules just to make your stay miserable. Every rule has a reason. For example, requiring a sewer hose that screws into the sewer connection might be a rule made to stay in compliance with a local ordinance or state law. A five mile-per-hour speed limit is to protect children, pedestrians, pets, and sometimes a way to

keep the dust down on unpaved roads. Assume there's a good reason for the rules, and follow them. Which of course means you have to read them. I know of at least one RV park that's embedded a special message in their rules; those who read it are eligible to claim a small reward from the office.

Treat the property you're parked on, walk all over, and generally inhabit during your visit the way you'd want your own land to be treated by strangers. If you don't know where to throw your trash -- ask. Don't just drop it someplace on the property hoping someone will find it and dispose of it for you (raccoons or bears or other animals will shred that bag and scatter its contents before you're out of sight). If you see something that doesn't seem right or notice someone breaking the rules -- let the management know so they can take care of it.

This doesn't just apply to private campgrounds and RV parks. State and federal lands have owners, too -- the taxpaying citizens who've deemed it important enough to provide this space for you to stay have made an investment. With that investment comes a trust you'll do right by them and will treat the land with respect, that you'll leave your spot on it at least as nice as you found it.

You know the business saying: "If you were disappointed with your stay, please tell us. If you enjoyed your stay, please tell others." A compliment goes a long way, though. If you liked the property and intend to come back, if the owners/managers did something in particular to make your stay especially comfortable (maybe they shifted some things around so you could stay in the same site for longer than you'd planned or took care of a loud, late-night party nearby), let them know.

Remember under "F is for Food" I mentioned we ask managers and owners for restaurant recommendations? Often they'll say, "Well, we like..." You've not only been given a suggestion, but a hint. Sometimes when managers/owners or other staff members at an RV park have been particularly good to us, we'll pick up a gift card or maybe their favorite dessert or other item from their favorite restaurant to give them as we're checking out.

After all, when you've been a welcomed guest somewhere, it's nice to say thank you.

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H is for HOUSEKEEPING

Some full-time RVers forget the rig they're living in wasn't meant to be a year-round residence. It was built for temporary overnight stays, occasionally moving from one location to another. A lot happens when you drive your home over thousands of miles of rarely smooth roads -- one study reported the effect is equivalent to a 7.5 magnitude earthquake. Ikes! Of course, maybe that's why when an earthquake of nearly 6 magnitude hit while we were sitting in Yuma, Arizona, people with park models (smaller versions of mobile homes that sit pretty well anchored to the ground) said they had damage, while our rig -- everything in ready-to-roll mode -- was exactly as it had been before the quake. From the outside the rig swayed and I was surprised to see nothing had shifted or fallen on the inside.

All of this is to remind you that living in an RV, luxurious though it might be, is still an RV. It has little nooks and crannies where outside air leaks in and where bugs and critters can slither through if you're not careful and diligent.

You can take measures to cover some openings with mesh and keep your seals sealed with that stuff in tubes from places like Home Depot. I'll leave those details to the nuts-and-bolts books and blogs devote to those sorts of things. Just be aware you can do all that, but it still won't be enough.

You need to keep your home on wheels tidy. I'm no fanatic when it comes to keeping things clean, but my husband and I are careful not to drop crumbs everywhere, and I vacuum frequently. I even have a hard-bristle brush and hand sweep some sections of carpet when we

don't have an electric hook-up. I also found a long skinny brush (like a bottle washer, but longer and tapered at the end) for sweeping under the slide-outs as far as I can reach.

One day, purchasing filter bags for the vacuum, I noticed a package of vacuum cleaner attachments meant for electronics: a series of pieces, when connected to each other or used alone, they can get into teeny tiny places. Had to have it. Bought it. Use it. If you've never opened the top of your stove (remove the grates, then open the stovetop like a lid), you need to do it pronto. I wipe spills with a rag and, with the special attachments, the vacuum sucks up crumbs that hide under here.

I clean the top of the stove and under the stove hood after nearly every meal, and frequently wipe the kitchen walls and cabinet fronts. My husband does all the cooking (I made a meal about twenty years ago and he said we should leave the cooking to him -- not hard to do; he's a fantastic cook) and he's very neat about it, but frying chicken and eggs spatter grease in ways that can't be contained, no matter how masterfully he wields the splatter guard.

We use our dishrags and drying towels once, then into the laundry they go. Tough dirt (like around the toilet!) gets cleaned with paper towels, which are promptly tossed.

Trash gets taken out at least once a day and dropped in the nearest dumpster.

Why go on and on about all of this? Because it's important to do everything you can to keep bugs and critters and cooties in general out of your rig. Your health and the health of your rig depends on how clean you keep things.

[I'd confess we haven't had problems with ants or other bugs, nor have we battled rodents (yes, some RVers have problems with them) but I don't want to jinx us.]

I should add here we don't have pets. This helps, I'm sure. Cats and dogs are -- well, animals. You think of them as members of the family, but they are furry insect attractors. Keep them clean, keep their food and sleep areas disinfected, and you have a fighting chance at winning the battle against the natural forces attacking RVs every day.

The same goes for outside stuff. I love birds as much -- probably more -- than the next person. But we don't hang birdfeeders in nearby trees, nor do we mount feeders topped out with nectar for those amazing hummingbirds. Why not? You got it. They attract rodents. If you're lucky, a hawk will be soaring nearby to snatch up anything that isn't feathered (though they're known to grab other birds from around feeders).

But why leave it to chance? Eliminate all possible ways your RV castle can be breached. Wage war. Never surrender.

One final housekeeping note: I make the bed every day (okay, occasionally I cheat and just pull the blankets over the top). I do this for two primary reasons:

First, a made bed gives us a big expanse of open space. At one point we needed to collate several sets of papers to send out, and the bed made a perfect platform for laying everything out. We always use the bed for folding fresh laundry -- why spread out in a busy laundry room when we've got a big open space in the rig?

Second, a made bed protects the pillowcases and sheets from getting dusty. Remember when I said air seeps into an RV? Well, depending on where you are, that air can carry pesticides, herbicides, dander -- all manner of stuff that can wreak havoc with your respiratory system. Battling allergies on the road is tricky enough without aiding and abetting the enemy by leaving our sheets and pillowcases exposed.

Does this help keep us healthy? Don't know. But why take the risk? It doesn't take much to make sure the bed is made, plus it looks better, don't you think?

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I is for INTERNET

Many RVers choose to purchase a satellite or wifi service when they embark on the full-time RVing lifestyle. The specifics of how to do that are covered in other places to much greater degree and higher level of understanding than I can offer up here. What I can tell you is that you can live just fine on the road without paying those hefty fees.

We purchased TracPhones at a Walmart before walking away from our sticks-and-bricks house in 2009. We replaced them in 2014 with a similar model. We purchase minutes and get all kinds of bonus time. I have more minutes than I'll ever use on my phone. It is not a smart phone. It does not connect to the Internet.

For that I use my laptop to access whatever Internet connections are available. We've seen some pretty nice local libraries this way and have joined a few, enabling us to borrow books and DVDs. Plus we get to know the librarians -- who often have great suggestions for places to eat and explore in the area.

Yep, a person can get by on just a couple of hours of Internet access per week or less if need be. Take it from one who knows. The trick is to make your time online as efficient as possible.

I write my blog posts offline and include in my notes which images to include and where to place them. With Wordpress I can even upload posts far in advance and schedule them to publish, so I don't even have to be online myself for a blog post to go live. Other blogging platforms probably have the same feature and it's well worth learning. My settings are also configured so I get an e-mail notice when someone has posted a comment, which means I don't have to visit WordPress every time I'm online. Instead I can monitor the blog activity from my e-mail account.

And e-mail is the primary reason I go online. I have an aversion to using my phone (probably some minor trauma induced by my last few paid employment positions, which required me to be on the phone almost all the time), so I'm in touch with family and friends via e-mail. I do let them know when we're in an area where we have limited Internet access and before we head into no-access areas ("going dark") so they won't worry if they don't see messages from me or quick responses to theirs.

I subscribe to several blogs and online media resources, but I've learned to scan items quickly to see if they're important, need immediate attention, or if a glimpse followed by Delete is enough. You might be surprised to learn you can save Web pages to your laptop's hard drive to read later (I'm such a Neanderthal I can't tell you about tablets; if your smart phone doesn't do

this, it's not as smart as it thinks it is). On Firefox I just go to File, then Save As, and click the option to save as a Web page. You can even pick where on your hard drive you save them. Two files will be saved: a “_files” folder, which contains all the stuff the page needs to show properly, and an htm or html file. To open it, just click the htm file and it will open your browser and show the page, close to the way you originally saw it online (some of those ads won't appear; you'll see “SERVER NOT FOUND” or something like that, but who misses the ads anyway?).

The other option is to invest in the inexpensive Snagit program from the terrific Michigan company TechSmith. You can capture Web images or get screen shots and do all kinds of things with that handy little program.

Why is this so important? You might come across a Web page that has information you want to be able to access later, and this is the best way I've found to save it and reference it when needed. I keep Web files on things from hiking trails to campground information to local TV listings, among other things.

If Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites are taking a lot of your time, you might want to dial it back a bit. If you have a job or responsibilities that require more frequent online contact, then using available, usually free Internet access might not work for you. Family emergencies can sometimes shape how we use -- and need to access -- the Web.

But if you're looking for a way to trim your cost while living the full-time RV lifestyle, know that you can get online in more places than ever for free. Think about it: if you're paying \$30/month for wifi access, that's \$360 a year you could be spending on something else. Not a bad thing, eh?

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J is for JUNK

When we started downsizing from our 3000 square-foot house to our 400 square-foot fifth wheel, we sold or gave away about 99% of what we owned. What's that like? Walk to your clothes closet. Imagine getting rid of half of the stuff in it. Now mentally eliminate half of that. Do it again. Do it one more time for good measure. Oops. Maybe once more. What do you have left? Or imagine a closet about three feet wide. That's your new space for clothes. We'll throw in three shallow dresser drawers for good measure. That's your limit in your RV.

Size of the rig doesn't matter when it comes to storage space. Some smaller RVs come with more storage space than some large, expensive ones. It's all a matter of how they're designed. So if closet space or drawer space or kitchen cupboard space is important to you, keep that in mind if you're looking to buy an RV.

What we've found is we don't need as many jeans or shorts as we did before we hit the road, can do without a dozen sweaters or shirts, can get a lot of wear out of a few pairs of shoes. The beauty of traveling all the time is that you don't see people more than once -- or at least not that often -- so they'll never know if you wear the same few shirts and pants all the time. Ah! Fashion freedom at last!

Usually it's the rest of the stuff that's harder to part with. There's at least one book on the market today about downsizing from a house to an RV, so I won't repeat what they probably cover much better, but I will say you do have to cut the clutter.

We recently watched a couple haul truckload after truckload of stuff from a house they'd just sold to an RV rental site. They'd packed the small shed on the site and were struggling to find places for everything. The boxes and plastic tubs sitting around their RV were unsightly and caused the park management to take notice. RV parks are RV parks -- they are not storage areas.

Some full-timers decide to rent storage garages for things like heirlooms or furniture they don't want to have to replace if they buy another house. That's their choice, but every person we've spoken to who did this ended up returning (reluctantly, because by then they had other places they would have rather gone) to empty the storage space, something they wished they'd done before they'd hit the road in the first place. (Not to mention the money wasted on monthly rental fees for the time those things they eventually gave up just sat there.)

Despite our best planning and packing, we ended up stopping at several Goodwill stores along our route in our first few months of full-timing just to drop off items we were finding we didn't need. And we still find ourselves cleaning closets, cupboards and shelves, bagging and boxing things up to donate.

If you're really attached to your stuff, you need to re-think the whole notion of becoming a full-time RVer. Seriously.

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K is for KEYS

When you've lived in a sticks-and-bricks house your entire life where you had a trusted neighbor serve as a keyholder -- someone with a spare set of your house keys -- then you have to devise a new contingency plan in case you lock your keys in your RV. Sure, you could call a locksmith, but what if you're someplace that's... well, no place?

Best to have a few options. Of course, there are the "hide the keys" products that enable you to tuck a spare key in a vehicle's wheel well or under the hood someplace. Good idea.

We like to be sure we're our own keyholders -- I don't go anywhere without the key to the rig (or towed vehicle, if we're out and about away from the RV) on my person someplace. It's easy to carry a second set of keys in my purse.

What about when we're riding our bicycles or jogging? Backpacks and fanny packs come in handy for these excursions.

But we've discovered a couple of cool items we now use all the time: lanyards and something I'll call "bungee bracelets."

Lanyards are those ribbons or cords worn around the neck. They're popular in three places I can think of off the top of my head: workplaces where wearing a visible identification or visitor's card is required; conventions where attendees wear these so they can be easily admitted into various events; and casinos, where their VIP cards dangle, ready to be slipped into the slot machines. Use the little hook meant to hold the ID card to latch into your keyring, and voila! Your keys are right there. I don't often wear mine this way, but just hanging them close to where I keep my sunglasses is enough to remind me to grab them before I go out the door.

My husband spied some small, stretchy bands with key rings on them at a hardware store. Sometimes you see employees in stores where they have to open jewelry cases, cash registers or other things requiring keys wearing these around their wrists. Bob started wearing his keys on a bracelet bungee like this and I've since started doing the same thing. For unlocking the storage bays around the rig when we're setting up or going through our take-down, the bungee bracelet is easier to wear than the long dangling lanyard.

Of course, neither the lanyard nor the bungee bracelet will help if you forget them on a restaurant table... which is why a hidden little niche with a spare key is always a good idea!

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L is for LAUNDRY

Within their first week or so, new full-time RVers realize although they've left a lot of homeowner chores behind (raking leaves, shoveling snow....) life on the road doesn't eliminate the need to do things like shop for groceries, wash the dishes, and do the laundry.

RVers have two basic choices when it comes to laundry: onboard appliances or a public laundry. Though we prefer using our own washer and dryer, we can't always do that. Sometimes an RV park doesn't allow us to use our own washer due to water supply, septic system, or other issues. It's their prerogative, and as guests we need to respect that (see "G").

That leaves either using a laundry room in the RV park or finding a local laundromat. They both have their quirks and knowing what those are can make for a better laundry day.

Lesson #1 for using laundry rooms at RV parks (especially those with many long-term "residents") is to never mess with the Laundry Lords and Ladies -- those folks who have regular days and times for doing their laundry. You'll recognize them right away -- they might say hello but most likely they'll ignore you and you'll get a distinctively cold feeling from them. It's not you. It's because they don't appreciate having their schedule interrupted. You've trespassed on what they consider their turf. You might have even dared to drop your dirty towels into "their" washing machine. Best thing to do is be polite but do the job you came to do, knowing neither of you owns the property but are just being allowed the privilege of using the facility. This isn't true everywhere, but we have come across a few places on the map where we learned to tread lightly as soon as we walked into the laundry area. (Why people get funny around their dirty clothes is

anybody's guess... they can't all have just come from a terrible crime scene and are trying to get rid of evidence, can they?)

Maybe it's to avoid these "turf wars," but some places have sign-up sheets. We like seeing them -- we can commit to a time and know machines will be available to us. But some people aren't fans. On a July Sunday we were in the midst of doing our laundry when a couple rushed in, arms filled with linens, and headed straight for a washer. When we pointed out the sign-up sheet, they said something about just wanting to drop their stuff in. Well, someone was scheduled after us -- and, fortunately, had only signed up for one machine. Otherwise we might have stopped back in just to see whether sparks flew. So look for a sign-up sheet when you first enter an RV or campground laundry room, sign up for a time that you'll know will work for you, then be on time. To skip your time slot is rude: you've prevented someone else from being able to fill that slot. If you discover you can't make your laundry date, stop in and erase your name from the time slot so someone else can take it. Do NOT block off a big chunk of time just to give yourself extra time in case you're running late -- it's selfish and inconsiderate. You're not the only one who'd rather be doing just about anything other than laundry, so give your fellow RVers a break!

Lesson #2 for RV park laundries is to follow any posted instructions. If a certain type of detergent is recommended or if bleaches or other products are banned, you should do your best to abide by that request. Water differs all over the country -- sometimes the amount of soap you add to the washer will cause more suds than you're used to. We've seen some machines pour soap suds out the back pipe. And sometimes the park has put rules in place to allow for septic issues, so don't assume you can make an exception to the rules -- you're just becoming part of the problem when you do that.

You might have your favorite detergent, but those labeled "HD" are the ones we've seen most requested in RV park laundry rooms, so we purchase them without exception. A wide range of HD detergents are available; we prefer those with the most natural ingredients.

Lesson #3 for RV park laundries (and all public laundries, as a matter of courtesy) is to refrain from cleaning pet bedding or other items in public washing machines or sinks. Some facilities have actually installed washers specifically designated for pet items -- ask at the office when you check in. Be mindful that many people have all kinds of allergies. We once met a

couple so sensitive to chemicals they have to thoroughly clean every washer and dryer they use before they put any of their belongings into them.

While we don't have to go to that extreme, we do check every washer and dryer before we place anything in them, not just to be sure the previous user removed every sock and pair of panties, but running our fingers around the inside assures us we're not inheriting any shredded tissue paper, that a ballpoint pen hasn't exploded ink everywhere, or any other disaster isn't lying in wait. We embarked on a life of adventure, but those are the types of adventures we're happy to avoid.

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M is for MEMBERSHIPS

A common mistake many new full-timers make is purchasing memberships in a lot of RV clubs, a mistake because they're investing money on the say-so of someone else. Instead, it's better to find out how you're going to be traveling and make the investment based on that. Some of those memberships can cost thousands of dollars for the benefit of staying at certain RV parks for a specific number of days per visit or year, a sort of time-sharing proposition. If these are places you want to spend time in, by all means, make the purchase.

We've gotten more use from our Escapees membership than any other -- while fellow RVers we've met tell us they've never heard of the organization. Clearly where they like to travel and stay doesn't put them on the route that makes an Escapees membership worthwhile for them. That's okay -- to each his own, right?

Our Passport America membership has also reaped benefits worthy of its dues. We've been in and out of KOA membership, depending on where we're going and whether staying at a KOA for the length of time makes signing up worth it.

On the other hand, we've never seen a benefit in purchasing a Thousand Trails membership, or others like it.

Though we're Winnebago owners, we've opted not to join the WIT RV club -- a membership group for owners of Winnebago and Itasca RVs. The group is oriented to social gatherings -- from regional rallies to a national convention. We haven't been to any of those sorts of events in the more than eight years we've been full-time RVing, so joining a group based on something we don't do doesn't make sense.

Your situation might be completely different -- if you enjoy RV rallies, caravanning rather than traveling on your own, or have a business affiliated with RVing that would benefit from your networking opportunities, then joining an RV club might be a good bet.

Familiarizing yourself with what the club does and what membership entitles you to will help you make the decision about whether to join. We've never been to the Escapade (the annual gathering for Escapee members) but our membership has benefited us in many other ways, and we'll keep it as long as we're RVing.

Memberships can save you a lot of money, or they can be a complete waste of it. Like the old adage goes: Buyer beware. Do your research. Use common sense. Make smart choices.

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N is for NEIGHBORS

And you'll have a lot of those, some good, some bad. Sometimes you won't have any neighbors at all, and you might be grateful for that (we are). Full-time RVers like to say one of the many advantages to living the lifestyle is "If you don't like your neighbors, you can move." That's true -- usually. But sometimes you can't -- or don't want to -- pack everything up and head down the road. Maybe you've planned to be in that spot for an event or to visit friends or family. Maybe you made a reservation for an extended period because you've wanted to spend time exploring that spot. Now you've got the neighbor from hell.

It happens to all of us. Just remember it isn't what the neighbor is doing (or not doing) that's the issue: it's how you deal with it (or don't).

Sometimes those neighbors are long-term "residents." They have a site where they stay for an entire season, or maybe they've permanently settled into the RV park. We've seen these "long-termers" all over -- in big, fancy RV parks and in small, out of the way campgrounds. Construction workers, road workers, people who live from project to project and town to town often live in RVs. People down on their luck, looking for an affordable way of life, often opt to move into an RV park.

Your neighbors might also be families on vacation. Kids and dogs bring hustle and bustle with them. When you've gotten used to peace and quiet, this can sometimes be frustrating. We calm ourselves by reminding each other that these families only have a weekend or a week,

maybe two, to enjoy their RV. We full-timers have the luxury of time. We can wait out the weekend and holiday crowds if we choose.

But that doesn't always stop the irritation loud music, smoky campfires, and barking dogs can cause. What to do?

Fellow RVers suggest telling the neighbors they're making too much noise (not much you can do about smoke) and politely ask them to tone it down. We've found this usually doesn't do much good and sometimes escalates things (why some people insist on making more noise in this situation has to do with human behavior that's beyond my comprehension). Generally notifying the park or campground management is best. The property has its rules and those rules are being violated; management should know there are offenders and who those renters are. Maybe it's a chronic problem and this is the last straw for them. You don't know the background -- you can only do what's in your realm of options.

Every now and then you'll come across managers or owners who are reluctant to do or say anything about excessive noise, pet owners who don't clean up after their animals, and other ways clearly stated rules are being violated. We once stayed at a campground along a scenic river in Montana. We'd been there before to eat at their excellent cafe and had decided the next time we were in the area we'd stay there. We made reservations ahead of time, got into our spot, and were immediately subjected to neighbors who not only walked through our site (a breach of common campground etiquette) but lingered near our windows, peeking in! In any suburb in America, this is against the law. People get taken to jail for this. We levied a complaint in the office with the owners, who asked us to please write the complaint down, as they had been "trying to get enough documentation" to not only ask them to leave but to prevent them from coming back. We wrote the letter but wondered about it, and stewed about having been put in a position where we were asked to help police a situation on private property where we were guests.

Later we asked another RV park owner about this (also in Montana) and she told us either we'd been fed a pile of doo-doo about needing documentation or the owners had been misinformed about what they needed to do to keep people from coming back. The campground was on private property and the owners have ultimate control over who stays and who goes. End of sentence. What's more likely, we figured out later, was that the owners were reluctant to toss out regular visitors who returned on an annual basis, rented out not only RV spaces but cabins as

well, and could be counted on for a good chunk of that month's income -- and in a short season, that matters. We were the small cog in a big wheel. We canceled the remainder of our reservation and left the next day. In pouring rain. That tells you something.

And we never went back to that place. Had the owners handled the situation differently we might have considered it, perhaps at a time when the rowdy group wasn't there, but then, we might have had similar problems with others.

In other places we've had great interactions with our neighbors. We often gift neighbors with books I've written, and once received a return gift of lemon curd made from the fruit of trees growing on the RV park property. Neighbors among RVers often become friends. And those folks make putting up with the others worthwhile.

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O is for OFF

When we lived in a sticks-and-bricks house, there were only two times I worried about getting water damage: once it rained so hard and so fast I watched the creek out back to make sure the water didn't climb high enough to crest a small hill in the backyard and pour into our

basement. And during the winter we trickled a bit of water to make sure the pipes didn't freeze and burst.

In RVs, we have to worry about things we don't give much thought to in conventional houses. Fire. Gas leaks. And water damage.

As soon as we got our RV we made it a habit to turn everything off in the rig before we leave it, even for an hour or so, reducing the chance we'll come back to a disaster. We even turn off the circuit breakers to the washer and dryer if we're not using them, and don't let them run if we're leaving the RV site. We've read stories of people who don't turn off the water at the spigot or shut off all the lights and fans before leaving the RV for awhile.

You might be surprised, leaving the code-enforced, inspections-required world of residential housing, that recreational vehicles suffer from quality so poor some reports suggest there are more recalls for RVs than any other vehicle. Quality is not what you'd expect, based on your experiences with the automotive industry, and lemon laws are few and far between for RVs. As I write this, in mid-2017, a projected half-million new RVs will be delivered to dealerships this year alone. A half-million! RV production is slower than cars and trucks because there's more stuff in them, but when the orders for new RVs come in, the production line moves as fast as it can. The workers do the best they can, but take it from someone who knows about production lines, line workers don't control how quickly the next unit comes bearing down on them. They can only move so fast, trying to keep up. Even so, stuff gets missed. Screws aren't secured. Wiring doesn't get secured. Details go unchecked.

This isn't meant to scare you. Think of it instead as a big warning sign, the kind you see when you're coming up on a steep grade on the highway and a yellow marker at the side of the road says "7% grade" and you know you have to control your descent or you'll have bits and pieces of your rig to pick up somewhere at the bottom of the hill.

I wrote a list and stuck it on the mirror next to the door: Lights out? Fridge closed? A/C or furnace off? Water off?

Make your own list. Check it. It's sort of like insurance. You might never know if you really had to follow any of these steps, but if you forget at the wrong time... you'll definitely wish you had remembered to turn things off.

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P is for POOP

You know you're a full-time RVer when someone says "sewer" and you suddenly have images of flexible lines, "sidewinders,*" and connecting plastic pieces which never seem to be the right ones when you need them. When you're a full-timer you carry all your crap with you – at least until you can pull out that flexible hose, find the right fitting, connect the contraption together, pull the handle and send it all into some septic tank. You'll be so ready to this sometimes that you'll pay money for the privilege: "Dump tanks here" the sign might say. "\$5" or "\$10." Brings new meaning to the phrase "taking a dump."

So just how do RV bathrooms work, anyway? Is it really like having a "regular" bathroom? Is it the same as using your own bathroom in your house?

RV bathrooms come in all shapes and sizes, yet they all manage to provide the same basic function. Depending on size of the RV, the bathroom includes the same amenities you find in a house: sink, toilet, and shower. Some high-end RVs these days include two bathrooms (wouldn't believe it myself if I hadn't seen it -- one included a sauna, and a new model unveiled in 2017 included a soaking tub), but the essential information about an RV bathroom isn't what you see inside the rig, but what's going on underneath it.

The holding tanks -- fresh water, gray, and black tanks -- are what make a rig self-contained. The black tank captures whatever has gone down the toilet. The gray water catches water from

your shower, washing your hands or brushing your teeth, whatever isn't going down the toilet, in other words. The fresh water tank feeds the sinks and shower, and is used in a dishwasher if the rig has one (yep, some RVs have dishwashers), but you don't have to use the water in your fresh water tank if you have a hook-up to a water source in an RV park or campground.

Holding tanks vary in size, although the larger the RV the larger the tanks (generally speaking). When the fresh water tank gets empty, you fill it with potable water. When the black and gray tanks fill up, you empty them. You can do all this at a campground, RV park, or other public "dump stations." Once you start looking for them, you start seeing in places you never noticed them before: gas stations (especially those catering to big rig trucks and RVs), rest areas, and even city and county parks. Online resources and guidebooks list them. Some RVers rarely stay in campgrounds or RV parks, instead using what they carry and emptying/filling when they have to while in transit.

Sounds simple. Where it gets complicated is product choice. RV hoses leading from the various components to the tanks are made for weight and flexibility, so they're easily damaged by harsh chemicals and products. We read labels and research to find recommended products for everything we use in our RV.

When I say everything, I mean it. We use organic, biodegradable cleaners. I use a paper towel to wipe every pot, pan, dish, and utensil coated in cooking oil, salad dressing or any other greasy ingredient and toss those paper towels into the trash before I wash the dishes. Not only does it keep the connections between the sink drainer and holding tank as clear as possible, it helps keep the bugs away (especially if the trash gets taken out right after). It sounds like a lot of trouble, but it only takes a few extra minutes, saving hours and hours of potentially costly repairs. Sink strainers are critical to keeping the drains free from food particles, not to mention loose jewelry or other small items that find their way into the sinks or shower.

RV parks and campgrounds often use septic systems that require special care, too, so we're careful to use septic-friendly toilet paper and to never, ever, put anything down the toilet or sinks that doesn't belong down there.

*Sidewinders are plastic or metal braces used underneath sewer hoses to prop them up off the ground and guide the hose from the rig to the sewer drain.

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Q is for QUESTIONS

In RVing, there truly are no stupid questions. That's because all of us, at one time, were newbies. When we bought our first RV in 2005 or so we'd never RVed before. Neither of us came from families that camped on vacation. What attracted us to buying an RV was the full-time RV lifestyle, which my husband was exposed to through an aunt and uncle who'd roamed the country for several years in a small rig as full-timers. "They said those were the best years of their lives. They only told us the good stuff," he told me.

So we had a lot of questions when we started. And all these years and miles later -- we still do.

Fortunately, we discovered pretty quickly if we ask another RVer something about the RV, a possible route someplace, or generally anything hopping around in our brains, we get an answer. It might not always be the answer we'd hoped for, or wanted, or expected, but we inevitably got an answer of some sort.

That's because RVers help better than almost anything else they do (even drive). So if you're venturing out in an unfamiliar RV and you have a question, ask.

We watched a neighbor at one RV park as he walked around his propane tanks, mounted on the front of his trailer. He'd taken the cover off, which was a sign he was either checking the levels or preparing to refill them or otherwise just... well... checking them. Studying them. We

debated about whether to go out and offer help. Maybe he knew all about his propane tanks. Then again, maybe not. Nothing about his demeanor suggested frustration or puzzlement, so we left him to his own devices. Eventually he removed one, apparently to get it filled. We weren't needed, but we were ready, just in case.

Getting in the habit of asking questions is a good one for full-time RVers, and not just when it comes to the RV itself. Asking questions is the best way to find where things are in a store (because even big box chains seem to like to put things in different places from store, just to keep us confused), whether you have to make an appointment or can just stop in, when the best time is to visit a local attraction, how to navigate the local rush hour... the list goes on.

There are actually more stupid answers than there are stupid questions. But ask anyway.

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R is for REPAIRS

Our inaugural trip in our first RV was a disaster. One of our three slide-outs broke, a seal around the back end of the rig came loose (dangling about twenty feet of rubber behind us)... and those were just the start of a series of repairs that hasn't let up since. After a couple of years of wondering when we might catch a break, a long-time full-timer told us the RV motto: "If you

ain't fixin', you ain't RVin'." Not something RV dealers ever tell shoppers, nor is it anything that'll ever show up in an advertisement promoting the RV lifestyle, catchy though the motto may be.

It is, however, something every prospective full-timer needs to be aware of and make peace with as soon as humanly possible. In the spring of 2017 several reports were released about the uncomfortably high number of faulty RVs being churned out by an industry happy to be back in the black after a very tough economic time (a Google search using the phrase "RV death spiral" just about sums it up).

Despite the amount of research you do about the RV you purchase, you're likely to have issues you'll need resolved, if not early on, then at some point.

We've not only learned the RV motto (above), but a few other truisms as well. If Murphy had been an RVer (and maybe he was), these would be part of Murphy's Law:

- Something will break in the worst place, at the worst time. We're always anticipating what could go wrong and devising a plan for dealing with it. We'd heard everyone who drives to Alaska from the Lower 48 suffers at least one tire blowout and at least one busted windshield. We replaced all of our RV tires before we left, made sure the spare was in good shape, and still had a blowout. Fortunately, it happened about five miles outside of Whitehorse, Yukon, where a friendly resident nearby not only let my husband use her phone but eventually followed us to the tire repair shop to make sure we were making out okay. We thought we got a windshield chip but it rubbed out at the next gas station -- whew! Moral of the story? Always carry roadside assistance.

- Do what you can yourself -- this has enabled us to stay on the road awhile longer before having to interrupt our travels for repairs. My husband gave up a lot of tools when we moved into the RV, but he's used every one he's saved, I'm sure.

- Leave room in the budget for unexpected emergencies. Mid-July of 2012 our generator quit. We found the nearest Onan/Cummins service shop, managed to get someone to look at the unit on a Friday so they could order the part for the following week when they were able to make the replacement. Always being prepared to cover the cost of repairs meant we were still able to consider it an adventure, and had we needed to stay in a motel while our rig was being repaired, we could have done that. While it wasn't the way we wanted to see West Valley, Utah, we did find a great RV parts store and a restaurant where the conversation around the front counter was

as friendly as the chicken noodle soup was tasty (with chunks of chicken nearly the size of my fist -- no kidding).

Though we never welcome having to stop for repairs, we do consider it part of the adventure, rather than fret too much about it. We remind ourselves we're having a character-building experience, that we'll discover places we never would have found otherwise. Experiencing the country in an RV was what we've chosen, and this is part of it.

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S is for SHOPPING

Shopping changes when you move from a sticks-and-bricks house into an RV. We spent our first weeks on the road traveling from the Great Lakes through the Dakotas and westward. Despite all of our efforts to downsize, we still had so much stuff we were donating to Goodwill (see “J is for Junk”) in towns along the way. When we hit a patch of weather that kept us from hiking or bicycling, we ventured into a mall for the first time as full-time RVers.

All the stuff! We walked through store after store, down aisle after aisle, and all I could think of was, “What do people do with all these things? What did we do with all these things?” I’m sure I was feeling what people coming to America from Third World countries must think: what’s all this for? Do people really need it all?

It reminded me of a story I'd read about a woman serving with the Peace Corps in Africa. She was washing clothes in a stream with a local woman, who was mesmerized by the American's description of a washing machine. What an amazing contraption it must be to do all this work all by itself! She thought a washing machine was a great idea. But when the American described a clothes dryer, the African woman was perplexed. Why possess a machine that would do what the air can do? Of course, those of us who've lived in places where it snows can appreciate owning a clothes dryer. But the woman in Africa just couldn't make sense of it.

It's all relative, after all. Despite packing every possible thing we thought we'd need (and then some), we inevitably discovered items we wished we'd kept but didn't.

The smaller the RV, the fewer things you can carry and the tougher the choices are. Believe me. But every time something seems to be screaming "Buy me!" we asked ourselves: What will we use it for? How often will we use it? Where will we put it when we're not using it?

Oh, and that idea of renting a storage unit to keep stuff in while you RV? Have you really thought that through? Unless you have family someplace where you'll be returning frequently, cross "storage unit" off your list. Otherwise you'll be trying to figure out when you'll get there, what you'll do when you visit the storage unit (just check to see if everything is still there? Part with things you maybe shouldn't have saved in the first place?) See "J is for Junk" if you're cloudy on this issue.

Which takes us back to shopping. Even though we're not adding to our closets the way we once did, even though we're planning meals based on the amount of space in our refrigerator, we still love to shop. Things eventually need to be replaced. And sometimes we just want something as a souvenir -- clothing is a great way to do that. I have a vest from Alaska and a few other articles of clothing I purchased on our trip up there. In some cases these new items meant something had be donated to the Salvation Army or Goodwill (again) and that's a good thing.

Plus we buy things for others when that urge hits, when we come across something we really can't use in any way, shape, or form. Who might appreciate this? Can we mail it? Ship it? Of course, if they love the granola you sent, you might have to make a trip back to that particular spot so you can send it again, but who's complaining about more traveling? Not me!

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T is for TELEVISION

When we bought our first RV in 2005, onboard satellite dishes were luxurious add-ons. In the spring of 2009 we started full-timing and were perfectly content with our TV antenna. We still are. You can't beat the price and when we can't get reception, when no cable option is available, well... that's when the real fun of watching TV begins.

We've been in places where we only get one channel -- MeTV or MyTV, something generally showing only those old black-and-white programs from the 1960s, which is okay with me as it brings back my childhood (I'd totally forgotten about the crush I had on Johnny Crawford, who played The Rifleman's son, remember him?). The silver lining with these limited options is that they shield us from whatever "breaking news" catastrophe showing on the 24-hour news channels we aren't able to tune in.

In a small settlement in Alaska I'm sure the one channel we got was whatever the woman who owned the RV park had tuned in that night. Mondays through Thursdays she watched Jay Leno. Friday she tuned in David Letterman. We'd be watching a show on one network and then -- phtzz -- suddenly the next show was starting on another network and we didn't have to change the channel (even if we tried, no other channel came in). We were just glad she watched the NOAA weather broadcasts because we really liked seeing those. In Alaska, nothing is more

important than the weather, even in summertime. This report gave everything from the inland weather forecast to flight restrictions and currents to tidal information.

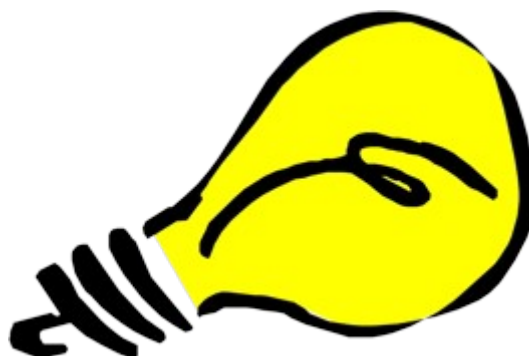
In other towns throughout the states we might get a smattering of stations -- one or two of the major networks, then an off-channel like MeTV. In other places, there might not be any antenna reception at all. In those spots we rent movies or watch something from our own small selection of DVDs. Our first year of traveling we hit a location where we couldn't see ABC, so we watched "Gray's Anatomy" on Hulu (in those days Hulu was free). Yep, odd to get a decent wifi signal when TV isn't available, but trust me, it happened.

Of course, if cable's available at the RV site, we plug in and catch up on what we might have missed while we were in never-never TV land.

Our roof antenna can usually pick up at least one of the major networks -- CBS, NBC, ABC, or Fox. We're always tickled when we can get PBS -- and say a silent "Thank you" to local contributors who keep the public broadcast system on the air.

And when we end up missing a favorite TV show because we couldn't pick up the station or didn't have cable? Well, that's always a reminder that we embarked on this never-ending journey for the adventure of it, not to watch television.

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U is for UTILITIES

RVers talk about “hook-ups.” When we can attach our water hose to a spigot, our sewer hose to a drain, plug in our electric cord, and maybe connect to a cable TV outlet, then we have “full hook-ups.” We’re as hooked up as we can be to utilities. “Partial hook-ups” mean some of the park’s utilities are available to us, but not all of them. A common combination is water and electric -- our gray and black tanks catch the water and waste we’re generating, and we have to visit a dump station to empty them (usually at the same RV park, but not always).

I always get a bang out of people who talk about how important it is to conserve energy, reduce waste, and generally live more modestly to preserve the ecosystem: RVers were the first modern conservationists, when you think about it. Although there are some RVers who drive behemoth rigs, find a place to park with full-hookups, then turn on two or three TVs at one time, use a dishwasher, take long showers... most RVers are more conservative than that. Especially those of us who occasionally boondock or dry camp (two different ways to stay in the RV without using any hook-ups) because we’ve experienced saving water and making do without electricity or limited power from a generator.

Some places include electricity in the nightly fee unless we’re staying a few weeks or a month or longer. Other parks charge extra for cable or wifi.

When they charge extra for electricity, we copy down the numbers on the electric meter before we plug in our cord or we take a photo of the reading. Then, on check-out day, after we’ve unplugged the electric cord, we take another photo. When we check out at the office and pay the bill, we make sure we’re charged only for the number of kilowatts we used. We do this in a friendly, “just making sure” manner. This might sound frugal and picky to you, but we have had some errors in the electric charges, and though they were accidental and cleared up without any trouble, we were glad we mentioned them -- not only did we pay a fair bill, but the managers were able to correct issues that saved future guests any problems.

Oh, and the difference between dry camping and boondocking? Dry camping is setting up the rig as if you’re someplace with hook-ups -- putting out the slide(s), the awning, the chairs... maybe lighting up the barbecue -- but not having any hook-ups. You’re camping, but you don’t have water or sewer (or electric) and therefore you’re “dry camping.” A lot of people do this on government land out West -- they pick a spot in the desert, set up camp, and stay as long as their tanks or generator or patience will allow.

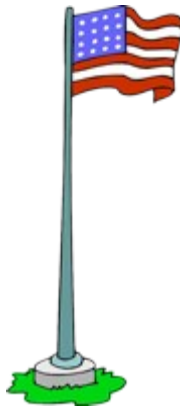
Boondocking is parking someplace to sleep. You're not camping. You're not letting out the slide(s), you're not setting out your chairs, you're not barbecuing, you're not unhitching your towing or towed vehicle. You're parking someplace where there are no hook-ups. Like a store's parking lot. A rest area.

Unfortunately, when people confuse the two, especially when they decide to set up camp in a store parking lot, they end up taking advantage of the generosity of the business. In some cases communities have rallied against those businesses because of RVers who exploit the space they're allowed to use. This is very sad, as it endangers the practice for all of us.

When we want to boondock in a parking lot, we get permission from the business first (or we park near a boarded-up, closed-down business). We don't set up camp. We don't overstay our welcome. We leave the place the same way we found it -- no one would know we were ever there. When we've been granted permission by a business that's open, we show our gratitude by buying something in their store.

It's common RV courtesy to do at least that much.

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V is for VOTING

Back in “A is for Address” we laid out how our mailing address works. Another reason for a domicile address is so we can vote. I haven’t missed a presidential election since Jimmy Carter and I didn’t intend to give up my Constitutional right to cast a ballot when I went on the road (don’t want the guilt of causing countless suffragettes to roll over in their graves). Because we sold our property in the Great Lakes states and decided to domicile out of South Dakota (for many reasons, including its great tax rate and that the state seems to appreciate full-time RVers, unlike other states), we were suddenly South Dakota residents. We have a voting precinct and everything.

Though we’ve visited our new home state several times, we’ve been on the road every election day so we cast absentee ballots. And while I read the entire ballot, I only cast votes on issues or for individuals I’m informed about because, unless I’ve taken the time to do some online research or we’ve been in the state when particular issues have been discussed, I can’t be sure I’m making the best choice. As a part-time resident, it would be irresponsible to vote for or against things just because I thought they sounded okay. It would be a disservice to full-time residents of South Dakota to do so.

Every state, every county, every community in the United States has unique issues. South Dakota is a good example. In Minnehaha County (Sioux Falls area), there’s a “wheel tax” based on the number of wheels on a vehicle. When a similar measure came up on a ballot in Pennington County (Rapid City area), it was voted down -- and RVers who use the county as their domicile address but don’t live there were blamed for measure’s failure and the subsequent loss in tax income for the county. It strikes me as particularly selfish if RVers are to blame: RVers want their freedom, but they don’t want to have to pay for it, even if residents of their domicile county would benefit. Who knows? Maybe a lot of truckers voted against the bill. Either way, it’s one example of where a limited point of view can skew a vote.

If you’re giving up a home state for a domicile state when you go on the road, be informed or resist the temptation to cast a ballot. You could be doing more harm than good.

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W is for WEATHER

Ah! The dream of full-time RVing: see the country, park along picturesque rivers on untraveled byways, relax under the big blue sky....

And most of the time it's like that. Or close.

I thought I paid a lot of attention to the weather before we moved into our RV and hit the road. Then I found out I was paying as close attention to the national weather year-round as I was paying attention in sophomore English class: I had one ear open, but both eyes on my notebook where I scribbled ideas for all the great novels I'd write someday. When the teacher called me out for not paying attention, I was able to prove I knew where the class was and answered the next grammar question correctly.

If it had been national weather class instead of English class, I would have gotten the answers all wrong. I would have said we could travel year-round, following great weather by traveling south in the winter and north in the summer.

And many full-time RVers do this.

But most don't.

Most find a nice spot in the winter to hunker down. There's a reason why the population of Yuma, Arizona, more than doubles during the peak winter months and why the little town of Quartzsite to the north (population most of the year: about 3500) swells to about 100,000 every January. The sun shines in Yuma about 97% of the time and it gets less rain than just about anywhere. Winter there is like springtime in the north.

We spent more than five months of our first full-time RV winter in Yuma. We couldn't get enough of the sunshine, the fresh fruit, the fact that we could be outdoors in shirtsleeves. We rode our bikes, hiked in the desert, and enjoyed the occasional flash of rain when it came through ("Get out your cameras -- it's going to rain," said one of the local weather forecasters).

This isn't what we'd planned. We'd planned to stop through Yuma on our way eastward, tracking a path along the southern edges of the country. But something kept stopping us, holding us in the southwest. It wasn't a medical situation. Our rig was in great shape for the road. We were rested and curious enough about what lay ahead for a new leg in our new journey. Still we stayed.

Why? (Have you been paying attention?) Weather. Every day it seemed, day after day, we watched the weather reports out of Texas and points east: rain. Storms. Hail. And between Arizona and Texas? The high desert of New Mexico, where it insisted on snowing.

We did not want to drive through that. Or sit in it. At first we thought we'd just wait it out a week. Then we'll go. But the weather persisted, and another week passed. Then two... three. But by the time the weather seemed to clear, it was in the 80s (comfortable in dry Yuma but ungodly in the humid south) and we turned northward again instead of driving East.

Though we dodge bad weather whenever we can, we've still (okay, I use the term "we" loosely -- my husband does 99% of the driving) driven through blizzards, hail, and pouring rain. This journey isn't supposed to be stressful or dangerous. Being aware of our environment and planned route makes all the difference. We think about whether we'll be traversing flash-flood areas or a sandy desert where a windy day could be a problem.

Sometimes no matter how much planning we've done, we still end up in unpleasant weather. In the spring of 2017 we decided to linger a month or so longer in southern California than we had the year before, only to end up sitting indoors many afternoons when temperatures reached into three digits -- twenty degrees or so higher than average.

Fortunately for us, the worst thing that's happened is contracting the not-unwelcome affliction I like to call "seasonal confusion." Standing on the deck of a wilderness cruise boat off the coast of Alaska in the freezing cold certainly felt more like an Ohio March than July. Riding our bicycles under the hot sunshine of the Sonoran Desert was more like July than December. I battle being seasonally confused year-round, but it's a battle I'm happy to fight.

If you're embarking on a never-ending RV journey, know that the weather can be your friend or your enemy, plan accordingly, never forgetting Mother Nature has a mind of her own.

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X is for XENOPHOBIA

...which is the fear of strangers or foreigners. RVers -- travelers in general -- are constantly exposed to strangers, domestic and foreign. If you have any concerns about coming into contact with people you don't know, re-think going on the road.

Of course, in this day and age, being cautious isn't a bad thing. Protecting your personal information can help keep you safe -- we aren't on Facebook (if you read their Terms of Service, you might cancel your account too) but if we were we wouldn't reveal specifics about where we happen to be at any given time. Regular readers of our blog (<http://bobandellen.wordpress.com>) know it's chronically "out of date." This is intentional for a few reasons, but an advantage to publishing posts well after the events described means readers -- and strangers -- don't know whether we're still at that location or somewhere far down the road.

We once stopped to boondock on a pull-out along a two-lane highway south of Glacier National Park. The open gravel area was huge -- large enough for several big rigs. We pulled

close to the edge farthest from the road, leaving plenty of space for other vehicles to park if any showed up. And one did. A small car pulled up right behind our rig. Sure, some people want to be close to another vehicle for safety, but something about this lone male on this even lonelier stretch of road struck made us uncomfortable. We put the rig in gear and drove to a rest area a few miles farther along the road where lighting was better and we felt more secure.

Weighing personal safety against being friendly is a constant judgment call, and one we're used to making. When we're in doubt, we move on.

Even so, we've met some wonderful people, proving that you can be cautious without missing out on the congeniality of traveling.

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Y is for YOU

Every RV adventure comes down to you: how prepared are you? How willing are you to take things as they come? Make adjustments when things don't go as planned? Follow your instincts? Explore the world around you?

Though we never made reservations early on in our travels (the height of the recession/depression in 2009-2010 meant they weren't needed), we've started making them in

recent years when we want to be sure to have a spot in places we want to be. In August of 2015 we booked a month in a small RV park in a tiny Montana town, looking forward to hiking the nearby mountains and wilderness area. What we got were weeks of smoky haze from nearby wildfires. We hiked a couple of times, but mostly haunted the local restaurants and stores, bandannas tied across our faces like old-time bandits. The RV park owners offered to refund our balance if we wanted to leave, but I kept an eye on the wildfire reports and it seemed everything for hundreds of miles around was on fire or experiencing the same smoky conditions, so we stayed put.

Our bandannas attracted attention -- several locals telling us it looked like a good idea and they were going to try it. We tracked the local firefighting progress. We visited farmers' markets and chatted with the local residents.

We weren't just coping with a lousy situation, we were making the most of it. To give you an idea of how much we enjoyed our stay despite the smoke-filled valley, we even looked at property with a real estate agent. (We decided to stick with the nomadic life... at least for now.)

Moral of the story? Be ready to shift your priorities, to make the most of whatever is delivered to you, and you'll have an adventure that might just be even better than the one you thought you'd have -- or at least a memorable one.

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Z is for ZONES

...as in time zones. Depending on how fast and how far a person travels in a day, you can cross a few time zones. I've long made it a habit to re-set my watch as soon as I cross a time zone so I'm immediately on local time. This is the easiest thing about traversing time zones.

What's tough is how those time zones affect us, and they do, in a few different ways. For one thing, they scramble the TV schedule in ways you don't realize when you're in one place most of the time. The best way to explain this is by using a show we'll call Favorite on CBS (to randomly pick one of the major networks). Favorite is on at 10 p.m. in Eastern and Pacific time zones. It's on at 9 p.m. Central and Mountain times. Except in some Mountain time zone areas, where it might be on at 10 or maybe at 8 p.m. That's the easy part.

In Southern California's Riverside County, the printed TV Guide (the one you can buy all over the country) says "Pacific" for the time zone, and the major network shows are correctly listed. Favorite is on at 10 p.m., which is what we'd expect.

But let's say there's a show on cable TV we'd like to see. We tune in that station and the noted time -- but something else entirely is on the tube. What?!? Cable TV listings are hit or miss in this neck of the woods. I combat this by downloading the local TV listings from screenertv.com. The discrepancies could be due to the re-direction of a satellite signal through the RV park where we stay... or it could be something completely mysterious. In any case, it took us awhile to figure out there were inconsistencies between reality and the printed schedule, but once we did, we found a way to work around it.

TV schedules, of course, are the least of anyone's worries. We can miss a TV show (okay, as long as it isn't the Favorite finale) but we don't want to miss an appointment. The dental and eye care services in Los Algodones, Mexico, do so much business with folks in Yuma that they make appointments for "Arizona time," rather than Pacific Time, which is Algodones' time zone. When we're there, if we're making a cross-border appointment, we make sure we're clear about the time zone for that appointment.

No matter which time zone you're in, crossing to or from, one thing is sure: there's never enough time to see everything, to visit every place, to meet every one.

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Resources

For more detailed information on how to plan for a life on the RV road, check out these resources.

Books:

- *For Women Only: Traveling Solo in Your RV* by Margo Armstrong
- *For Women Only: Motorhome Care & Maintenance* by Margo Armstrong
- *Retire to an RV: The Roadmap to Affordable Retirement* by Jaimie Hall Bruzenak
- *Support Your RV Lifestyle* by Jaimie Hall Bruzenak
- *The Mobile Internet Handbook* by Chris Dunphy & Cherie Ve Ard

Helpful online resources:

- Margo Armstrong's The RV Lifestyle [<http://TheRVLifestyle.MovingOnWithMargo.com>]
- Susan Woodward's RV Adventuring [<http://www.rv-adventuring.com>]
- Jaimie Hall Bruzenak's Retire To an RV [<http://www.retiretoanrv.com/>]
- Everything About RVing [<http://www.everything-about-rving.com>]
- RVers Online University [<http://www.rversonlineuniversity.com/>]

Newsletters:

- Join Us For a Trip Down the RV Highway [<http://www.ka-ron.com>]
- RVTravel.com [<http://www.RVTravel.com>]
- RVDailyReport.com [<http://rvdailyreport.com>]. See especially the "Death Spiral" report on the state of the RV industry starting here: <http://rvdailyreport.com/opinion/opinion-the-rv-death-spiral-part-1/>]

Organizations:

- Escapees [<http://www.escapees.com>]
- Passport America [<http://www.passportamerica.com>]

About the Author



Ellen Behrens and her husband, Robert Craig, have been living and traveling in their RV since the spring of 2009. Despite a disastrous first RV trip they've stuck with the full-time RVing lifestyle and can't imagine sitting in a sticks-and-bricks house where the scenery never changes. Follow their travels via their blog, Bob and Ellen's Great RV Adventure at <http://bobandellen.wordpress.com>.

More Books by Ellen Behrens

A novelist of note, Ellen's Rollin RV Mystery series is especially popular with fellow RVers, though readers in general enjoy the escapades of main characters Walt and Betty Rollin,

full-time RVers who, despite their desire to travel in peace, have found themselves in the midst of murder, first in *Pea Body*, then in *Yuma Baby*. *Road Tales: Short Stories About Full-Time RVing* collects seven short stories about seven very different full-time RVer experiences; the second edition includes a short story featuring the Rollins, solving yet another mystery.

E. Michael Helms, acclaimed author of the popular Mac McClellan Mysteries, said this about *Pea Body*: “Reading this book is not only an enjoyable escape, it's also a brief guide to the perks and cons of the full-time nomadic life.” Sherry Fundin, at her book review blog Fundinmentals, calls *Pea Body* “a fun and entertaining cozy mystery that shares the wonders of nature, the characters of a small, seasonal coastal town on the outerbanks of North Carolina, the danger of greed in the hands of those that will do anything to get what they want and the freedom and drawbacks of a home on wheels.”

You can read the first two chapters of *Pea Body* for free here:

https://ellenbooks.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/behrens_peabody_excerpt.pdf

Marcella Gauthier, reviewing *Yuma Baby* for the RVing magazine *Escapees*, writes, “She's done it again. Ellen Behrens has created a can't-put-it-down mystery. Like her previous book, *Pea Body*, this one keeps you on the edge of your seat wondering what will happen next.”

Read the first two chapters of *Yuma Baby* for free here:

https://ellenbooks.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/behrens_yumababy_2chapters.pdf

(Nope... I'm not collecting information on you behind the scenes so I can bug you to buy something or sign up for something.... I know. It's a rare thing these days.)

More information about Ellen's other books can be found at her Web site ellenbooks: <http://ellenbooks.com> or through her travel blog at <http://bobandellen.wordpress.com>

Have a comment? Want to receive notices of new books or other announcements? Maybe you've always wondered about something related to RVing... or maybe you've found a few things work differently for you if you've been RVing awhile -- she'd love to hear about your experiences. Just drop Ellen an e-mail at ellenbehr@aol.com.

Thank you!