



High on Mobile Life

In doing so, they paved the way for generations of camper van lovers to put their own twists on the mobile lifestyle. You can credit their children—millennials—for elevating the van-life aesthetic with social media photographs of sunrise beaches, faux-vintage tin mugs, and customized campers.

But it was the global pandemic and the resulting work-from-home boom that really supercharged the recent van-life craze, filling American campgrounds to overflowing these past two summers.

According to the RV Industry Association, recreational vehicle (RV) ownership surged to 11.2 million households, an increase of 62 percent in the past 20 years. The trend stretches across all age groups, but about half of RVers are over age 55. Roughly one million RV owners live in their vehicles full time.

RVs, trailers, fifth wheels, converted school buses (called *skoolies*), and other luxury camper vans have been hot commodities in recent years as Americans seek the freedom to vacation—and live—in the open air or to safely visit friends and relatives.

Shops specializing in upscale van conversions are now common across the country and are doing roaring business: A Mercedes-Benz Sprinter or Ram ProMaster van with a built-in bed and storage and an on-board kitchen can cost more than \$100,000, depending on the customizations. Or you can convert a camper on your own for around \$1,000.

Cindy and Kevin McCabe retired in February 2020, sold their home, and had big dreams of traveling the country in an RV, but campground closures halted the plan. Instead, the two made a semipermanent home solution, splitting time between their parked 40-foot fifth wheel at Lake Gaston, North Carolina, and an active retirement community in Central Florida.

The McCabes love having kayaks and sporting gear at their disposal, but the people are what keep them there. “We have found that people who camp are friendly and so unique,” says Cindy. Camping culture is full of camaraderie, from cookouts to boating on the lake together. “We meet so many folks from all walks of life. That’s what we enjoy most about the campground.”

Here are some other ways that baby boomers are enjoying their RVs and campers.

RVing Off-Grid

One major trend has been to venture beyond established campgrounds into the wild. Recently, many campers seeking solitude or to socially distance from their neighbors leaned into the joys of dispersed camping, meaning off-grid camping outside of designated sites. Think of it as backcountry camping in an RV. These sites usually don’t have access to amenities like bathrooms or trash removal, but they can be some of the most beautiful places to camp.

Tracy Finnegan, 54, says she and her husband, Tim, 56, bought their camper in 2019 as a way to decompress from the work week. The pair, who have been married for 31 years, have dreams of retiring and traveling across the U.S.

For now, the empty nesters are venturing out mostly on the weekends. “Our first trip was in April of 2019, and we’ve had 51 since,” says Tracy. The Finnegans like to travel across the Southeast, finding new campsites where they can hike, kayak, or simply take in the views. “The mornings are spent with coffee by the campfire, and then we end the day with sunsets by the campfire. We love the minimalistic lifestyle it provides.”

Dispersed camping—also known as boondocking, dry camping, or wild camping—has grown increasingly popular as more RVers park on public land, often for free, but without the benefit of water and electric hookups.

The Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management allow this type of camping only in specific areas, typically requiring that visitors stay no longer than 16 nights at one spot, keep away from developed recreation areas, follow rules to protect natural resources, and remove all their own garbage and waste. Often, you will also need a permit.

But the reward for your effort is an unspoiled, back-to-nature experience. And it’s easy to plan and book through *recreation.gov*—the federal government’s trip planning and reservation service portal.

The App Experience

Another type of camping experience that's all the rage these past few years is upscale glamping—or glamorous camping—on farms and other private properties. Mobile tools like Campendium, The Dyrt, and Hipcamp make all sorts of camp settings easy to find and book.

For example, Hipcamp has created networks of property owners who open their cabins, RV sites, vineyards, or orchards to campers. To browse the site is a trip in itself, and you'll find thousands of unique spots, often paired with unique experiences.

Recent RV site listings include \$25 to camp at an Ohio fish aquaculture farm, with an option to participate in a shrimp harvest on certain dates and a free shrimp-boil dinner for those who help with the harvest; \$70 to park at an Oregon winery next to a creek, among apple trees and chickens, with an eight-wine tasting flight available for an additional \$9; and \$60 for a waterfront RV pad on Core Sound in North Carolina, next to the ferry landing for Cape Lookout beaches.

Work Camping and Volunteering

Many baby boomer campers and RVers feel a strong desire to give back, along with a fervent wish to stay longer in many of the beautiful areas they visit. Hence the allure of work camping—which means taking a casual short-term job or volunteer position at a park for a few days, weeks, or a season.

Instead of just a short stay, wonderful though that may be, imagine getting up-to-your-elbows involved as a camp host at Yosemite National Park or the Grand Canyon. Imagine helping to clean up animal habitats or beach boardwalks at scenic parks across the country. In exchange for such typically light-duty jobs, the work camper often receives access to a free RV pad with hookups, amenities like laundry and propane, or sometimes even a small wage.



The possibilities are endless, ranging from pure volunteerism to paid positions. Work and volunteer campers have lent a hand at amusement park booths, Christmas tree stands, park gift shops, recreational shooting ranges, and more. Opportunities are available for individuals, couples, or families.

Some gigs are mostly indoors, such as the chance to work in cultural resources at Yellowstone National Park, researching museum exhibits, archiving photos, and creating custom storage boxes for interesting artifacts. Campers can also contribute their professional talents in photography, resource management, computers, and more. Volunteers often receive a free national or state park pass after a certain number of service hours.

Unique Local Stopovers

While road tripping, it's often a good idea to break up long drives by finding somewhere—anywhere—to park your RV to catch a few z's. In a pinch, that can mean a less-than-beautiful parking lot. But surely you'd prefer something more memorable.

The need for an overnight stay inspired the membership club Harvest Hosts. This booking service (\$99 a year) connects RVers with available private lands where they can stay overnight. However, only self-contained vehicles with indoor plumbing are permitted—no tents, RV hookups, or outside cooking. The network has nearly 5,000 unusual camping locations in the U.S. and Canada, including alpaca farms, lavender farms, golf courses, and museums.

Members don't pay to stay, and the hosts don't collect a campsite fee, but you're encouraged to talk with the business owners; sample local wine, craft brews, or homegrown produce; and buy handmade goods or play a round of golf.

By venturing off the beaten path in your camper van, you'll have more opportunities to connect with local residents and make an impact on local economies. Many campers choose to support small businesses by bringing their wares to the folks back home as gifts and souvenirs. After all, the whole point of RVing or van life is to see new sights, try things you've never done before, and explore the world.

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