

# Sheltering in Place in an R.V. Is Not as Fun as It Sounds

With parks shut down and utilities harder to come by, drivers of motor homes are finding themselves trapped in the vehicles meant to liberate them.

By **Lana Bortolot**

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In the six years since they decided to sell their house and move into a 40-foot motor home, Julie and Marc Bennett have crisscrossed the country and become masters of the R.V. lifestyle — all while “still working and saving for retirement,” as they note on their website, [RVlove.com](http://RVlove.com). They even wrote a book, “Living the RV Life,” with tips on how to choose the right vehicle, how to get mail and how not to get electrocuted.

But even the Bennetts couldn’t have foreseen the challenges of living the mobile life during a global pandemic. “Amidst a challenging time for many R.V.ers, we have had to put our resourcefulness to the test,” Ms. Bennett said.

The couple are among about 11 million owners of recreational vehicles, an estimated one million of whom live in their rigs full-time, according to the [RV Industry Association](http://RV Industry Association). Sheltering in place may sound like a more pleasant experience when your home is on wheels, especially with gasoline prices at rock bottom. But with a patchwork of travel restrictions in place, national and most state campgrounds closed indefinitely, not to mention locals feeling less than welcoming of out-of-towners for fear of contagion, R.V. drivers are increasingly trapped in the vehicles meant to liberate them.



Marc and Julie Bennett outside their R.V. at St. Vrain State Park in Longmont, Colo., in September 2018. “Amidst a challenging time for many R.V.ers, we have had to put our resourcefulness to the test,” Ms. Bennett said. [GabrielaPhoto.com](http://GabrielaPhoto.com)

“Most R.V.s are not set up to be disconnected from utilities for extended periods of time, so as a result, when a shelter-in-place order is issued, it creates a nationwide game of musical chairs for people trying to find a spot to hunker down in,” said Shawn Loring, chief executive of the [Escapees RV Club](http://Escapees RV Club), one of the country’s oldest and largest groups for R.V.ers.

The Bennetts monitored the growing pandemic as they “boondocked” off the grid in the Arizona desert for five weeks — about as long as they could live self-sufficiently. Then, as they looked ahead to extended lockdowns and rising temperatures in the southwest, they headed for their home state of Colorado.

“For us to keep moving was a big decision,” Ms. Bennett, 51, said, noting that with about 100,000 online followers across their platforms and subscription lists, the couple felt their conduct would be scrutinized. “We have to be responsible about the choices we make because we’re not promoting recreational travel, and our actions set an example.”

While people can set up on “dispersed” public land — open grounds without utilities — most are still in need of R.V. parks that offer connections for power, water, septic tanks and Wi-Fi, among other services. Leigh Wetzel, co-founder of [Campendium](http://Campendium), an online resource with 27,600 campsites in its database, said that as of March 20, 9 percent of those sites were closed. A month later it was 46 percent.

Some R.V. advocates have been lobbying to get these parks recognized as essential services. “Local governments don’t understand, only a very small percentage of R.V.s are equipped for off-the-grid living,” said Curtis Coleman, chief executive of [RVillage](#), an online community with about 216,000 members. “They think campgrounds are gathering places and are not thinking they provide an essential service for the full-time R.V.ers who are now displaced.

For many R.V.ers, the only solution has been to find a friendly driveway and stay there.

Joe Rhodes has been on the road in his “Traipsemobile” for 10 years. “But what’s happened is that those spaces where I was living my life have slowly but surely all shut down,” he said.

Lisa Rapfogel

Joe Rhodes, who’s been on the move in his “Traipsemobile” camper for 10 years, has made a life of eating in restaurants, drinking in local bars and going to gyms, where he uses the shower. “But what’s happened is that those spaces where I was living my life have slowly but surely all shut down,” he said.

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As the crisis worsened, he fled to a friend’s home in Dallas, where he is now parked in the driveway. He has access to the house, a shower, a meal or bed should he desire, but he feels keenly aware of not wanting to impose on his hosts. “I will stay here for as long as that seems viable,” he said.

A former entertainment journalist, Mr. Rhodes, 65, has always enjoyed meeting new people in new towns. “My whole career was built on mostly talking to people that I didn’t know,” he said. “But now I’ve had some days where I felt a little lonely.”

Mr. Rhodes has only himself to worry about on the road. Robert Meinhofer, 49, has been living in a one-bedroom trailer with his wife, Jessica, 42, and their two children since 2015. He said [the family’s life](#) is now on pause in their “mobile quarantine pod,” which is marooned in his in-laws’ driveway in Mount Dora, Fla.

Traveling in such a small space has always been offset by the excitement of pulling into a new destination, Ms. Meinhofer said. Now that they’re “grounded” at her parents’ house, the confinement is amplified.

“Once you stop traveling, it turns into a routine and then we’re, ‘Oh my god, we’re in 26 feet of living space and my daughter is running down the middle of the R.V. and my son is trying to have video calls with his friends,’ and it just feels like the walls are closing in on you,” she said.

Then there’s the added stress of parking a few feet away from relatives who don’t endorse their itinerant life. “In an R.V. park, everybody’s in the same situation and you understand that you choose to live in a small space,” Mr. Meinhofer said. “But my in-laws — they have never really approved of our lifestyle, so whenever we go to the house we’re very conscious that it’s not our place.”

Robert, Daniel, Nadia and Jessica Meinhofer in the family's "mobile quarantine pod," a 32-foot, two-bedroom rig now parked in a family member's driveway in Mount Dora, Fla. Robert Meinhofer

Still, they share grocery shopping and occasionally use the house for other amenities. Recently, they all hunkered down in the house during a tornado warning. "After all," Mr. Meinhofer said, "we are family."

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For other R.V. families, enduring the crisis has remained a communal activity. Lauren and Aaron Grijalva, who traded their home in Atlanta for a 42-foot Coachman "fifth wheel" trailer 18 months ago, were parked at a campsite in Hardee County, Fla., preparing to join a crew of mobile friends in the Florida Keys when the state shut down its southern archipelago in March. They stayed in the park with their two children and two other families, and awaited their friends' return.

The reunited group, totaling five families, is now set up in an isolated spot along a river, creating a self-contained community away from other campers. Together they number 21 adults and children, including Michelle and Justin Russell, who have two children in a 35-foot motor home.

Ms. Russell said they have made rules about congregating in small groups. Designated people make trips to the grocery store or a local egg farm so that most of the group stays put. "We're used to having a big campfire and our kids in and out of each other's rigs, and we love that," she said. "But it's just a different time right now. We feel safe and we know that each one of us is respecting the other's space and we're all on the same page."

Ms. Grijalva, 39, and her husband, who blog as the [Wanderpreneurs](#), have an aggregate following of 42,000 on their social media platforms. "We are concerned how it will go over that we didn't distance ourselves from our neighbors during this time," she said. "Everyone knows that we 'river people' are hanging out together, and it's even raised some eyebrows in the campground. Some people don't like it and have said we should be kicked out."

Lauren Grijalva, left, and her family stationed their R.V. in a park in Hardee County, Fla., to wait out the pandemic with a group of friends and their families. “Some people don’t like it and have said we should be kicked out,” she said. [Lauren Grijalvas](#)

The manager at their park did not respond to calls seeking comment, but other camping veterans acknowledged that groups are continuing to convene. Mr. Loring, whose club owns eight R.V. parks in seven states, has tried to find a balance between campers’ needs and pandemic protocol.

“The threat of contagion does go down when you have confidence in the people you’re camping with and who have been traveling with you,” he said. “The threats go down when you’re in an isolated community. But they’re not eliminated. We have adopted procedures for safety and health, and are advocating other campgrounds do the same.”

Ms. Grijalva said her group feels safer together. “I’d rather be here with our community figuring this out together than at my parents’ and feeling displaced,” she said.

While many R.V.ers wait it out, others who rely on their vehicles for employment face a tougher road. Lindsay and Chase Garrett, both 28, are traveling nurses who bought their R.V. two years ago with the idea of alternating nursing contracts and road trips. Most of their peers stay in hotels or rentals, but then “you are essentially living out of your suitcase,” Ms. Garrett said. “We really enjoy our R.V. because we are home anywhere we park.”

In January, they began a 13-week contract at an intensive care unit in Bradenton, Fla., when they heard about the virus spreading through Wuhan, China. Mr. Garrett said the contract ended before the virus spread in their area, but not before they had treated a few potential Covid-19 patients.

“Things were changing by the minute and it was pretty overwhelming and stressful because everybody was just trying to figure out what was the best thing to do,” he said.

Jude Russell in his family’s 35-foot motor home, currently in Florida.  
[Restless\\_Russells](#)

They've been forced to stay in Bradenton under shelter-in-place orders. As nurses, they had little trouble extending their reservation — many R.V. parks are giving priority to health care workers and first-responders. But what they need are new jobs, and Mr. Garrett said traveling nurse contracts have dried up.

“There’s just a lot of uncertainty right now for us to pick up our lives and travel without jobs,” Ms. Garrett said. “So with everything going on right now and the market very volatile, we don’t really know where to go.”

Other R.V.ers know exactly where they have to go: home. Last December, Mary Lorenz and Lyndell Rowe set out from Northampton, Mass., in their 19-foot camper van for a six-month tour of the west coast and national parks in Arizona and Utah. “We just picked our dream destinations and planned a trip around that,” Ms. Rowe said.

By late March, most of those destinations had closed and they headed east, stopping in open parks as they made their way back to stationary lives. “We were not anxious to get home and live under shelter-in-place restrictions,” she said.

Rerouting their journey, they used online maps to find areas with low case counts. The women, both in their early 70s, knew they were in a vulnerable demographic, though they felt they were “in good health with really good immune systems,” Ms. Lorenz said. They ended up staying in some places longer, choosing more open and isolated spaces where they could at least hike. But their small refrigerator meant regular shopping trips, something they didn’t relish in small grocery stores with narrow aisles.

Lyndell Rowe, left, and Mary Lorenz with their Roadtrek 190 motor home at a campground in Cadiz, Ky. Jack Smith

At one, Ms. Rowe said, “I flew in and out of there as fast as I could, and then sanitized like crazy when we got back to the van.”

The women, now home, cut their trip short by six weeks as they felt the situation getting worse while driving northeast. There was no plan for a global health crisis. “We’re disappointed,” Ms. Lorenz said, “but we’re also aware of the pain and suffering of everybody else in this country.”

As in many other corners of the world, the pandemic will change how this subculture operates. Ms. Bennett, of RVLove, said more R.V.ers are talking about scaling back travel and seeking longer-term leases in parks to ensure having a home base, should they need one. “R.V.ers, now more than ever, need to consider their options at a whole other level and have a backup plan,” she said. “Even an exit plan for getting off the road.”