The Agony and the Ecstasy of Living Nowhere

As more people are giving up traditional addresses for life on the road, some find themselves wondering if they escaped the grind or just found a new one.

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL HIRSHON

Chris Moody / March 30, 2021

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The "RV Entrepreneur Summit," held at a mountaintop lodge overlooking Alabama's Lake Guntersville in the summer of 2019, promised attendees a long weekend of networking with full-time R.V.ers, workshops, and gear training with "brand ambassadors" from outdoor recreation companies. For as much as $300 a pop, attendees—22-year-olds living out of self-built vans, families with children in pop-up trailers, and grey-haired empty-nesters in house-size R.V.'s who hadn't quite reached retirement and still needed to work to pay the bills—gathered in the lodge's conference room, swapping Instagram handles and eating energy bars. I was one of them. At the time, I had been living in a van for nearly a year. Here we would learn how to live out a counterculture lifestyle but keep making money while doing it.

On the surface, the confab looked like any typical trade show, complete with corporate-sponsored happy hours and keynote speeches. Christina Gambino, a full-time R.V.-dweller who, at four feet and 11 inches tall, claimed to be one of the shortest competitors of the reality show *American Ninja Warrior,* kicked things off with a motivational pep talk. Panels featured successful couples who started online businesses from the road, bloggers who earned a living writing about R.V. designs, and ridiculously attractive YouTube influencers. Brands like Camping World and Dometic sponsored product giveaways: The most coveted gifts included a tire-pressure monitoring system, a low-energy refrigerator, and a free box of scented toilet pellets.

The R.V. companies that sponsored the event, in a way, were promoting a new version of the American dream. It is no longer one of stability and rootedness but one more fit for the current age that promises that you can have it all: The so-called "dream job" can be yours, all while enjoying an endless vacation.

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That dream appealed to Jeff and Candace Smith, a married couple who had been living in Austin, Texas, when he was laid off from his desk job and then reassigned to a remote position. They were looking to buy a house at the time but gave up when they saw how much that would cost. “The real estate market there is crazy,” Jeff told me over drinks at one of the post-session happy hours. “We were looking for a house to buy, and our budget kept creeping and creeping.” That trend hit the rental market just as hard: Total costs in Austin rose faster than in any other U.S. city over the last decade.

Driven away by the high cost of traditional housing, the Smiths bought a used fifth-wheel instead and started traveling while Jeff held down a nine-to-five shift online and Candace worked as a nutritional consultant. But moving around the country while working normal hours wore thin after a few months. “When we traveled, it was a matter of working eight hours then driving six hours. It was miserable,” Jeff said. “We really screwed that up. I don’t recommend it at all.” They hoped that they could learn how to work for themselves instead of a company that required so much of their time.

The Smiths were representative of most people who came to Lake Guntersville that week: ambitious, educated, and with a financial cushion that allowed them to gamble with a life on the road. Many were still grinding out full-time jobs from inside their R.V.s, and looking for ideas for how to escape even more. The politics of the event, if they existed, were vaguely articulated: lots of talk about feeling empty and purposeless in the rat race, lots of yearning for something better than punching a clock.

Full-time travelers like these comprise a developing subculture of American life that has grown in recent years. In 2018, as many as one million people lived nomadically in the United States. The pandemic has only further upended people’s sense of place and possibility. It’s impossible to pinpoint just what is driving this uprooting, particularly among young people, but the present moment might offer some hints:

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of the nation's real estate value, according to data compiled by the Federal Reserve. In 1990, when the median age of Baby Boomers was just four years older, their generation owned more than 30 percent.

To some, van life offers a sense of total control—you don't even *want* the house you can't afford—in the face of an increasingly chaotic present.

Today, the average net worth of a typical millennial is just around $8,000, far less than past generations that came of age in the second half of the twentieth century and first decade of the 2000s. Most families in this country have virtually no retirement savings; the same is true for an increasingly desperate contingent of older workers. With fewer jobs available that offer retirement pensions, young workers are now told that they should somehow stash away half of their paycheck into retirement savings that rise and fall with the whims of the market. Nomadic life isn't a fix for any of this, but it manages to promise two things at once: a way to keep costs down for people facing grim economic prospects and a sense of total control—you don't even *want* the house you can't afford—in the face of an increasingly chaotic present.

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There isn't a single profile of a full-time traveler. There are solo travelers, families full of children, modern-day hippies, and seemingly normal professionals who hold down conventional full-time jobs. People who, by choice, lived in trailers inside

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capitalism, it's a choice that carries costs: Building out a vehicle for full-time living can range from a few thousand dollars for a small used van to hundreds of thousands for a fresh-off-the-lot, rockstar-style megarig. (Building out my own van cost around $5,000, for supplies plus the cost of the vehicle.) In the nearly two years I spent living on the road, I met a nurse who lived in his van while parked in the hospital garage between shifts and in the woods during his time off, and many "social media strategists" and "content creators" earning a living from the digital envy economy.

A lucky few of these travelers were financially independent and living a carefree "retired" life in their thirties, while others barely scraped by, choosing to sacrifice a steady work life in exchange for freedom. Still, there were those who lived in vehicles out of desperate necessity. (Jessica Bruder's 2017 book, *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twentieth Century,* and subsequent 2020 film adaptation, shone an overdue spotlight on this oft-overlooked community.) Many shared physical spaces, whether in public forest land or while parked on unwelcome city streets. Lines between these groups often blurred. The lifestyle tends to attract mostly white and young people (like me), although there is a movement to build greater networks of community through groups like Diversify Vanlife and the National African American RVer's Association.

As much as nomadic living is painted as an escape from the crisis of capitalism, it's a choice that carries costs.

But growing interest in the lifestyle has fed a small cottage industry of podcasts, newsletters, seminars, conferences, services, and political advocacy groups that exclusively cater to people who refuse to stay in one place.

One of the most well-known of these groups is based in the woodlands of southeast Texas. Six days a week, a semi-trailer from the U.S. Postal Service backs down a slanted driveway behind a brick building about 75 miles north of Houston to deliver mail for some 10,000 people who do not live there.

The building is the headquarters of the Escapees RV Club, a members-only group that serves part of the nation's surprisingly large population of people who live full-

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Rainbow Drive in Livingston, Texas, on a single street, inside one building. Their ghost address allows them to vote, obtain a driver's license, register a vehicle, and, because it's in Texas, avoid paying a state income tax while they travel and work.

Originally, Escapees received its mail through the local post office in nearby Livingston, but as membership grew into the thousands, the town's local postal service—where the population is just more than 5,000—could no longer handle the amount of mail each day. So the mail now comes directly from a loaded 18-wheel semi-trailer. Inside the building, an industrial sorting machine processes tens of thousands of pieces of mail delivered each day. The rooms are filled with long rows of plastic bins and hanging file folders with lanes between them for workers who collect and drop each piece, one by one. Once the mail is organized, it's either forwarded, scanned, shredded, or kept for safekeeping. Escapees claims to operate the largest private mail service in the country.

The club's members have access to a stable of recommended consultants who cater specifically to the needs of road-lifers, including accounting and tax experts. Attorneys are available to provide legal counsel and advice. These services require extra cost on top of the annual $49.95 membership fee. As part of their membership, travelers can participate in free training seminars for living on the road and workshops on working remotely. In webinars like "Domiciles for RVers," Escapees employees show newcomers how to establish permanent addresses, at least for legal purposes, in states like Florida or South Dakota, which, like Texas, impose no state income tax. Obtaining residency in South Dakota, for instance, can be as easy as showing a receipt for an overnight stay at a campground and signing a form indicating that you intend to settle there once you finish traveling. (Not everyone actually follows through on that pledge. Plans, after all, can change.)

Escapees also acts as a lobbying shop that pressures local legislatures to pass rules and laws that benefit full-time travelers. In 2000, when officials in Texas challenged members' right to vote because they didn't actually live at the address they listed on their voting cards, Escapees led a caravan to the Texas Supreme Court in protest. They won the case and organized similar campaigns when voting rights were challenged in Tennessee and South Dakota. The group has also organized against

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the group has put pressure on local officials to keep R.V. parks open during the pandemic.

The group also curates a jobs board full of listings for seasonal and remote-friendly work: software engineers, cooks, campground hosts, a "tea ambassador" to sell tea at festivals, and a security guard at an oil field, to name a few.

In response to an influx of interest among nonretirees, Escapees launched a sister organization called Xscapers in 2015, which caters to a younger crowd. Since then, interest among young people living in R.V.s or vans during their working and child-rearing years has only increased. According to a study by the R.V. Industry Association, just 35 percent of those surveyed who choose to live in an R.V. instead of a traditional home are over the age of 55. Nearly 60 percent are still working.

While some lucky few have made a living in the "influencer economy" by promoting their own version of nomadic life, earning a living this way, even with services like Patreon or Substack, is difficult. Instead of trying to monetize the lifestyle, many supplement the small income they earn from personal content creation with seasonal work, remote gigs, or, as many of the RV Entrepreneur Summiters gathered in Alabama had hoped, by launching a successful business.

Summer Slevin, a 28-year-old from Peoria, Illinois, who attended the summit and lived in an old Ford Transit van with her shitzue-chihuahua-terrier mix named Rocky Roadtrip, was one of them. After studying broadcast journalism in college, she had struggled to find a job in media, so she worked part-time at an Escape Room near home and then got a job in marketing for an author. When she was laid off in 2018, she decided to try a new approach. She bought the van and built a rustic camper inside. "I was like, screw it, let's do it," she said.

On the road, Slevin spent $150 per month to pay off the van, about $500 for gas, and $300 to $400 for groceries. She parked the van in national forests, rest stops, and parking lots to sleep for free. To earn money, she started a podcast about America's national parks and raised funds from supporters on Patreon.

Slevin had imagined that the new scenery would transform her into the person she

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person who always wakes up for sunrise yoga, who follows their passion, and who spends downtime reading Important Books instead of doomscrolling Twitter. Gone would be the insecure, self-doubting, anxiety-filled imposter we all see ourselves to be. It wasn't long before Slevin realized that it would take more work than a van.

"I'm the same goddamn person on the road as I am at home. I took my procrastination with me. I'm still the same shitty person."

"I'm the same goddamn person on the road as I am at home. I took my procrastination with me. I'm still the same shitty person," she said. "I still feel anxieties about if I'm doing the right thing in my life. I'm not having the soul-gripping desperation that I was before van life, but I still don't want to work."

As Slevin's experience attested, living on the road is often subject to many of the same traps as living anywhere else: unexpected costs, unpredictable work, rising health care expenses. (As the pandemic shut down much of the country, people lost access to showers and bathrooms they had come to rely on.) After Slevin spent a year visiting dozens of national parks, her her van broke down; she eventually moved to Montana, found a job, and now lives in a log cabin. Despite best efforts on the road, it's nearly impossible to declare true independence from the realities of American economic life—workshops and webinars or no.

Still, for many who have chosen or been pushed by circumstance into this alternative way of living, the nomadic route at least provides options. Particularly for a generation that has lived through a dystopian parade of economic upheavals, it's understandable why they're skeptical—or just unable—to put down roots in one place. Having wheels beneath their feet at least means that when the next catastrophe comes, they have some hope to escape.

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