

**EVERYTHING YOU
NEED TO KNOW
BEFORE YOU
START RVING**



ALYSSA PADGETT

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PROLOGUE

We pulled into our RV park with “Just Married” faintly legible on the back window of my car and parked next to a 20-year-old motorhome. This would be the first home of our marriage, the home that would take us to all fifty states. Well, 49 of them at the very least.

Heath didn't carry me across the threshold, since that would require carrying me up a questionable metal step that we would end up welding a few months down the road.


Four days into our marriage, we started the engine and drove away from Austin, Texas fully unprepared for the adventure ahead.

How do you prepare for traveling to all fifty states during your first year of marriage?

Heck if I know. Google didn't provide any good answers three years ago when we started our journey.

Now, with three years worth of mistakes, lessons learned, and blogs about our adventures, I've taken everything I know about RVing and typed it into these pages as your guide.

From how to pick which RV is right for you to why you should NEVER park your rig on an incline, this guide is designed to answer all of your questions to help you transition into RV life as easily as possible.



PART 1

FINDING THE RIGHT RIG



So you're about jump into RV life. That is so exciting! The first thing I did after making the decision to travel full-time was check out a bunch of travel photos on Pinterest for an hour.

And then I was instantly slammed with worrying about what RV I should buy, how do you know if it's a lemon, and how do you even drive this behemoth? Do I need a special license or do I have to take a class?

Part 1 of this book is all about figuring out which type of RV will be right for you. We'll get into the nitty, gritty differences between all the different types of RVs, what size you should get, and where you should buy it.

Buying an RV is not easy on the pocket book, so you'll want to weigh all of your options before you purchase one. Don't worry. We'll go through each option one-by-one.

Let's dive in!

WHAT RV SHOULD I BUY?

Everyone's first question before they start RVing full-time is the same: "What RV should I buy?"

To keep things simple, let's say there are three distinct types of RVs.

- Motorhomes
- Trailers
- Campers

Let's break down these three categories:

Motorhomes

Motorhomes are exactly what they sound like: homes with motors. This is the key distinction (and just so you know for later, if you want to tow a car, this is the type of rig for you). Please don't confuse motorhomes with mobile homes. They are completely different. Mobile homes are what you see riding on the back of "oversized loads" going down the highway.

Trailers

Trailers are motorless RVs that must be towed by a truck or some other heavy-duty vehicle.

Campers¹

Campers are everything that doesn't quite fall into these two options and are more designed for "weekenders" (i.e. people who don't use an RV as their primary residence, but use it purely for pleasure). Campers are typically smaller than trailers and more lightweight. You'll need to own a truck or just a large SUV for these.

Doesn't-Really-Fit-Anywhere-Else Secret Option #4: Toy Haulers

If you're into ATVs or motorcycles or extra space to convert into an office, consider a toy hauler. These are available as Class A motorhomes, travel trailers, Super C's, and mostly commonly in fifth wheels.

Now within these three types, there are quite a few different options. There are Class A's (or B's or C's). There are travel trailers and fifth wheels. Then there's always pop-up campers and truck campers. Or if you're really fancy, there are bus conversions and motorcoaches.

It starts getting confusing, doesn't it?

There's no single right answer to what RV is the best option. Different RVs are better for different people.

A Quick Look at Class A's

Average Length: 27 to 50 feet

Average Height: 11 feet to 13 foot 6 inches (industry maximum)

¹ Campers is my catch-all term for RVs that don't easily lend themselves to full-time travel. Many campers are technically trailers, but since they are not designed for full-time use, campers is a more appropriate term.

Average Cost (new): \$70K-\$1M+

PROS

- Ample living space
- Kitchen amenities: stove, oven, microwave, refrigerator
- Bathroom amenities: toilet, separated shower
- Sleeps 4+
- Inclusive
- Gas or diesel options available

CONS

- Expensive upfront costs
- Motor maintenance*
- Insurance costs (versus trailers)
- Length limits ability to travel certain place
- Need to tow a car for easier local travel

Motorhomes: Class A

Class A's are your classic motorhome. Heath and I have owned and loved our Class A Winnebago Brave for the past 18 months. When it comes to motorhomes, Class A's are your largest option. Generally speaking, they will have the highest-powered motors and offer the most space.

Class A's typically range between 27-45 feet long. Most A's will have at least one slide-out. The bigger the rig, the more specialty features you can expect. Our 33-foot rig with two slides (also referred to commonly as slide-outs or pop-outs) has a king-sized bed, a huge couch (that folds into a bed), dinette that seats four (and converts into a bed), a twin-size loft bed, and a removable coffee table.

Our rig sleeps five total, which is average for a Class A.

Layouts for Class A's will differ based on manufacturer and model. But 99% of Class A's will include a kitchen (refrigerator, sink, stove, oven,

microwave), a bathroom (toilet, sink, shower), a dining table or dining table/couch combo, and a bedroom.

Depending on the year, some models might not have showers, and ovens are typically considered a “specialty” feature. But overall, it has everything your home would have, including two A/C units. Because it includes two A/Cs (one for the living area, one for the bedroom), Class A’s run on 50 AMP power.

Most often, Class A’s are gas, but there are diesel options. Overall, they are the most expensive type of RV and offer a great deal of space.

A Quick Look at Class C’s

Average Length: 23 to 35 feet

Average Height: 10 to 11 feet

Average Cost (new): \$50K-\$120K

PROS

- Living space
- Kitchen amenities: stove, oven (in larger models), microwave, refrigerator
- Bathroom amenities: toilet, shower
- Sleeps 3+
- Inclusive

CONS

- Expensive upfront costs
- Motor maintenance
- Insurance costs (versus trailers)
- Need/want to tow a car for easier local travel (unless you’re comfortable driving the RV around)

- Less living space than Class A (even if rigs are the same length) because of the separated driving area

Motorhomes: Class C's

Class C motorhomes have a very distinct silhouette. While Class A's have giant windshields, Class C's have a loft above the cab. This loft is typically a bed or a storage option.

Class C's are generally shorter (in height and length) and smaller than Class A's. C's will have a kitchen and bathroom, but depending on the length, might not have a full bedroom. Your bed might be above the cab of the rig.

In general, you can expect less or smaller features in a C compared to an A. For example, no oven, a significantly smaller shower, and a kitchen table for two instead of four.

C's will run on 30 AMP power. Among other things, this means your C will have only one A/C unit. This also means you'll have better electric options when traveling. We often are forced to use 30 AMPs on our Class A because of lack of availability of 50 AMP sites at RV parks.

The biggest difference between the A & C are the driving areas. You will always step down into a C driving area, and you will have driver and passenger doors in addition to a main door. Because you step down into this area, the cab isn't "livable" space, while it typically can be in an A. This means that even though many Class A's and C's are the same length, A's have more living space.

Engines between these two classes are very similar and sometimes even the exact same. If you trust my RV salesman, supposedly Class A engines get better gas mileage, even if they are identical engines. (What am I saying? He probably made that up.) C's are great for fast or moderate-paced travel, regardless of gas mileage. Depending on the length of your C, you'll likely want to tow a car.

A Quick Look at Class B's

Average Length: 15 to 25 feet

Average Height: 9 to 10 feet

Average Cost (new): \$40K-\$125K

PROS

- Typically have the best engines (often built on Mercedes chassis)
- Small and easy to maneuver
- Great for fast-paced travel
- Sleeps 2(+)

CONS

- Small living area for more than two people
- Fewer amenities
- Motor maintenance
- Insurance costs
- Smallest amount of storage space in a motorhome
- They can often be as expensive as Class C's (but less space)

Motorhomes: Class B

Class B's are smaller than A's and smaller than C's.

"That's weird. Why aren't the motorhomes named based on size?" I DON'T KNOW. It would only make sense for B's to be the medium sized rig. But this is how it is.

Class B's are your smallest motorhome option. But don't discount these bad boys based on their size. Many B's are up to 25 ft long.

B's are generally luxury vehicles. Most are built on Mercedes chassis, so you'll have a diesel engines known for lasting. This means they can be pricey since you're paying for a diesel engine, but in addition to the strong engines, some of most beautiful RV interiors I've seen are inside B's.

B's will include a bathroom and kitchen, but with less amenities than larger rigs. You probably won't find an oven in B's and you might have a wet bath (meaning a combined shower and bathroom). And unlike A's and C's, Class B's generally will not have slide outs.

There will most likely be a bed, a couch that transforms into a bed or even a murphy bed. Unlike Class A's and C's which typically have a private bedroom, B's are more open, like a studio apartment.

Oh, and in case I didn't mention it yet, all RVs—motorhomes, campers and trailers—built in the past few years come with flat screen TVs. It is the 21st century after all.

A Quick Look at Super C's

So now you know what A, C, and B's are, and that they are named in a totally weird order. Just to make things crazy, let me teach you about Super C's.

Why Super?

A Super C is a Class C (same basic silhouette), BUT they have an 18-wheeler engine. Oh yeah. These big guys can haul. They are a great option if you're planning a lot of mountain travel, or if you want to tow a large vehicle behind your rig, like a truck.

According to my husband, these are the "sexiest" RVs. I don't want to know what that means. But if you're looking for a solid engine—and you can afford to pay top dollar for it—Super C is a great option.

Super C's will have all the amenities of a Class A or C, but because of their hefty price tag (you're paying for a diesel engine), they usually include extra features like washer/dryer hook ups or a fake fireplace.

A Quick Look at Buses and Motorcoaches

I'm going to avoid going into details on buses and motorcoaches for two reasons:

Buses: Most buses are projects. You buy an old bus and you have to build your rig yourself (or using a company). School bus conversions are becoming increasingly popular, but I know absolutely nothing about them. Want to customize your own RV? Buy an old bus. Check out a blog named Technomadia, if you want to see a really awesome bus conversion.

Motorcoaches: Are you a millionaire? Are you planning to open for Taylor Swift on her next tour? No? A motorcoach probably isn't right for you. They are huge, expensive, and difficult to maneuver. Plus, you'll have more money to spend on adventures if you don't invest it all in your coach.

A Quick Look at Fifth Wheels

Average Length: 22-40 feet

Average Height: 12 feet-13 foot 6 inches

Average Cost (new): \$25K-\$100K

PROS

- Amenities and layout most comparable to a house
- Largest kitchen option for any type of RV

- More privacy because bedrooms on opposite sides of rig (available on most two-bedroom layouts)
- Sleeps 4-8
- Price (more space for less money than motorhome)

CONS

- Need to purchase a heavy duty truck
- Outfitting truck bed for hitch
- Difficult of backing into RV sites, making u-turns, backing up
- Designed for a slower pace of travel (compared to motorhomes)
- Interior steps
- All of your travel will be in a truck (versus in a “home”, like with motorhomes)

Trailers: Fifth Wheels

Ah, fifth wheels. First thing you should know: fifth wheels are huge. HUGE. And as far as amenities go, I think fifth wheels have the best options.

This type of trailer is called a fifth wheel because the neck of the trailer (likely where your future bedroom is) will sit in the bed of your truck, so the rig will be towed from the bed of the truck instead of the hitch. Because of this, fifth wheels have two levels (which means extra stairs inside), so there is a little more privacy offered here.

In every fifth wheel I've been in, there was: a fake fireplace, a couch, possibly a second couch or two recliners, two A/C units, a kitchen table with four chairs, an island, and a fully stocked kitchen. This is the closest you will get to living in a moving house and will offer the most space and nicest amenities for the best price (generally speaking). Heck, some fifth wheels have fold-out raised patios just because they are so fancy. Depending on how fancy you want to be, you can find a new fifth wheel for anywhere from 30K-100K.

I've been in a lot of RVs in the past two years and I must say, as far as interiors go, fifth wheels have the best design. While motorhomes still seem to be lacking in style, fifth wheels are aesthetically designed for a newer generation of RVers. I'm still waiting to find a rig that doesn't look like the fabric patterns were picked by a color-blind man, but new fifth wheels do have your least unattractive options.

Fivers are nice (if you have a truck to tow it with) because you don't have to worry about engine maintenance on the actual rig. Plus, when your truck has engine problems, you can take it to any shop, whereas most motorhomes can only be serviced at RV-specific or engine-specific mechanics.

When we were first buying an RV, people described fifth wheels like this – if you're going to stay in a place for a week or several weeks, fifth wheels are a great option. If you want a faster pace of travel, you should go with a motorhome.

A Quick Look at Travel Trailers

Average Length: 12 to 35 feet

Average Height: 10 to 12 feet

Average Cost (new): \$12K-\$45K

PROS

- Open floor plan
- Sleeps 1-8 (depending on the length of your trailer)
- Able to be towed on the hitch of your vehicle (compared to fifth wheels)
- Price (even cheaper than 5th wheels)
- Great for families (and typically a popular choice for families)

CONS

- Need to purchase a truck or large SUV for towing
- Difficult of backing into RV sites, making u-turns, backing up
- All of your travel will be in a truck (versus in a “home” like with motorhomes)

Trailers: Travel Trailer

This is your classic pull-behind trailer. Of the options listed so far, this is the least expensive option. You have a great amount of space in travel trailers and you can expect the same amenities as a fifth wheel. However, because it is towed behind your vehicle, they are often shorter and smaller than fifth wheel trailers. In fact, you can buy trailers like Casitas or Scamps for as short as 12 feet.

Kitchen, bathroom, dining area, bedroom—it has them all, but typically isn't as classy as a fifth wheel might be. In my own shopping experience, I've found that travel trailers have the most layout options for bunk beds and room for kids. One trailer even had a room with four bunks, in case you have a large family.

With any trailer, you'll need to own a truck and you'll need to start practicing backing up with a trailer. Many RV parks offer pull-thru RV sites, but more often than not, you'll need to back your trailer into its nightly home. If, like me, parking in reverse makes you sweat bullets, I wouldn't recommend a trailer if you're planning on fast-paced travel.

One of the biggest drawbacks to trailers of any kind is that on “drive days” you are stuck inside a truck all day. In our motorhome, I can stretch my legs, watch TV, work at the desk or kitchen table, nap in bed, make food, stare blankly into fridge trying to find something to eat, and in general keep myself entertained while traveling. This is a huge plus for motorhomes if you ask me!

A Quick Look at Truck Campers

Average Floor Length: 6 to 12 feet

Average Height: 10 to 12 feet

Average Cost (new): \$15K-\$45K

PROS

- Easy to maneuver
- Lightweight
- Sleeps 2-3
- Designed to travel almost anywhere
- Designed for a faster paced travel

CONS

- Fewer amenities
- Need to purchase a truck
- Need to outfit bed of truck to handle weight
- Some RV parks don't allow truck campers (these rigs are most often seen boondocking anyway)
- All of your travel will be in a truck (versus in a "home" like with motorhomes)

Campers: Truck Camper

Little known secret: Before we bought our first RV (we chose a Class C, in case you were wondering), we considered a truck camper. We decided against a truck camper when we realized it would actually be more expensive than buying a Class C motorhome and less than half of the living space.

Truck campers are the most compact length option for full-time travel, unless you want to sleep in the backseat of your car.

Truck campers will have: a small kitchen (two-burner stove, sink, a fridge), a dining room table that can double as a guest bed, a bathroom (which is most likely a wet bath, meaning you shower where the toilet and sink are), and a bed. If you don't mind occasionally waking up and hitting your head on the ceiling, a truck camper is a great option if you want to visit places off the map or fit down small roads.

A Quick Look at Pop-Ups Campers

Average Length: 10-27 feet (open or "popped")

Average Height: 8-9 feet (open)

Average Cost (new): \$10K-\$25K

PROS

- Easy to maneuver
- Lightweight
- Designed for travel anywhere
- Price

CONS

- Sleeps 1-2
- Some of them do not have A/C
- Few amenities
- No bathroom or shower

Campers: Pop-Up Camper

Don't live full-time in a pop-up camper.

Oops, sorry. There I go spouting my opinion.

My husband almost tricked me into a pop-up camper. Then I realized a HUGE deal breaker: no A/C (at least the one we were looking at).

Pop-ups usually do not have much kitchen space or a bathroom. Some will have a mini fridge and a sink, but that's not a guarantee! Overall, they are light-weight and easy to tow behind most SUVs, but I wouldn't recommend them for full-time travel unless you'll be in ideal climates or unless you really, and I mean really, like the camping and the outdoors.

However, if you want to just weekend travel for a while, pop-ups are a fairly inexpensive option to test out of the RV life without committing.

A Quick Look at Teardrops

Average Length: Less than 13 feet

Average Height: Less than 6 feet

Average Cost (new): \$12K-\$25K

PROS

- Easy to maneuver
- Lightweight
- Designed for weekend camping trips

CONS

- Sleeps 1-2
- No A/C (typically)
- Few amenities
- No indoor bathroom or shower
- Outdoor kitchen

Campers: Teardrops

Again, teardrops—like pop-ups—are not designed for full-timers. They are, however, super cute! Teardrops are becoming an increasingly popular option among RVers who want a retro camper-vibe. A typical Teardrop camper will have similar amenities to a popup camper, but less than a trailer.

I've never met anyone who lives full-time in a teardrop trailer. They are most often used by weekenders or part-timers who particularly love the outdoors. The good thing about a tiny rig like this is that you can take it virtually anywhere! (Plus, everyone will ask to check out your super cute tiny trailer.)

Picking Your Rig

Ultimately, there are a lot of factors to decide on when picking your first RV. Buying an RV is a mix of extreme excitement and a lot of stress in making the right decision.

At the campground we are currently parked at my neighbor has a 45' Class A rig. They are married couple in their 50s. My other neighbor has a 25' Class C rig. They are married in their 50s. The couple in their 50s across the way has a 40' fifth wheel.

The point here is this: Choose your RV based on what is best for you. I'll get into more factors for you to consider in the next chapter.

Choose your RV based on how you plan to live and travel in it.

THE 3 BIGGEST FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING AN RV

Now that we've gone over what each rig is like, you've likely narrowed down your options based on your needs.

When we were shopping for our first RV, I was overwhelmed looking at motorhomes. Aside from knowing nothing about engines, how do you even know what a good length is for an RV? What's a good layout? And how exactly do slide outs work? They looked like just one more thing that could break to me.

These are some of the most important factors to consider before choosing your home on wheels. Let's break down length, slides, and height to help you make the best decision:

Length

Choosing the length of your rig depends on a lot of factors, but it boils down to two important details: **weight and floor plan**.

Weight

Weight is especially important if you're planning on purchasing a trailer or camper. You'll need to look closely at the towing capacity on your truck and the GVW (gross vehicle weight) of the rig.

If you're looking at motorhomes, this is less important—especially if you buy a diesel pusher.

But if you plan on towing a car behind your rig (we tow a Honda CR-V), you'll want to look at the towing capacity of the motorhome. If you don't want to tow at all and use a motorhome as your primary vehicle, you'll probably want to look at buying a smaller rig. (See Chapter 4 for more on towing)

Floor Plan

Weight is an important detail to note when deciding your ideal length for an RV, but floor plan is typically the deciding factor for choosing length. Think about your must haves in your rig. Maybe you know you 100% need an oven or two bathrooms or sleeping space for eight.

For us, we knew we wanted a floor plan that allowed two table tops for work space, plus an oven and plenty of counter space in the kitchen. With only two people in our household, a rig between 30-35 feet would be ideal for us.

To get an idea of what length of rig you'll need, check out floor plans on manufacturer's websites. Many sites like Winnebago also offer virtual tours of their RVs so you can get a real feel for the space in each RV.

Slide-Outs

I mentioned slide outs, earlier but haven't explained what they are. Slide outs (sometimes called pop outs or just slides) are portions of your RV that slide out when you're parked to increase living space. (If you're thinking "Alyssa, that's the stupidest definition I've ever heard," you're probably right. BUT I've had to explain slides to a lot of confused people who actually thought my RV was 12 feet wide when I drove it down the highway. Oy vey.)

Long story short: Slides are the best way to gain more living space. This is great if you want a shorter rig with ample space.

Slides are most commonly offered on class A's, C's, super C's, fifth wheels, and travel trailers. Slides can be electric or hydraulic, depending on the manufacturer. In a motorhome, you will still be able to walk around the RV with the slides in. This is typically not possible in fifth wheels and some trailers.

We have two slides: One that's about three feet deep and contains our dinette, and one that spans the entire length of house and is about 18 inches deep.

These two opposing slides are fantastic for opening up the room and giving us a lot of floor space. I've seen very few other rigs with enough floor space to set up a stand up desk and a yoga mat at the same time. If you prefer a more open concept RV, finding a rig with opposing slides is key.

You can expect to have issues with your slides at some point in your life time. They are known to be finicky, but the space is worth it. We've had issues with our slides on four occasions.

After purchasing our rig, we heard a few negative comments and reviews of full-length slides. We have had our large slide worked on three times in the past 18 months. In each instance, the slide was not coming in correctly. The front would come in faster than the back, or vice versa. Once the difference was so bad, our slide was out 6 inches in the back and not at all in the front. It was a nightmare!

The mechanic said this is called being "out of time." He re-timed the motors in the front and back of the slide so that they would start operating at the same speeds again. He said this happens often, especially with larger slides carrying a lot of weight.

My biggest slide tip: Unless you're buying a fifth wheel which are properly outfitted for excess weight, do **NOT** buy a rig with a refrigerator in the slide. I've heard horror stories.

Height

You have the least amount of control over the height of your RV. (I noted average heights for each type of rig in the first chapter for reference.)

Here's the deal with height: It is not a huge deal. Low clearances are rare, especially in the west and in the south. It likely will never effect visiting a specific destination, though it may alter your route.

Between All Stays, Co-Pilot, and our Rand McNally GPS, we never worry about running into low clearances. I recommend using at least one of these to check your route for clearances. Our Rand McNally GPS is built into our RV and our specs are programmed in, so we can trust it to never take us down roads we can't handle.

In three years of full-timing, we've only found ourselves in one terrible must-u-turn-now situation with low clearances. We were driving the I-95 from Connecticut to NYC and Heath took a wrong exit, one with about fifty WARNING: 8 FOOT CLEARANCE AHEAD signs. (He told me he saw none of them.)

A nice guy in a pick up flagged us down and said that if we wanted to keep our roof, we should follow him back to the interstate. We made it back on track in no time and I'm now a queen at backseat driving to make sure we never find ourselves in another heart-stopping situation like this!

WHERE TO BUY YOUR RV

You have a few options when it comes to buying your RV: a dealer, Craigslist, the side of the road, and in some cases you can even buy direct from the manufacturer.

People usually ask what is the best place for the best price (which is probably going to be the side of the road, those people are ready to sell!), but it all comes down to where you feel comfortable shopping. You'll find the lowest prices buying direct from a seller.

We bought our first RV through Craigslist. He took us to 48 states and only broke down once! Plus, we bought the 20-year-old rig for \$11,500 and sold him 20K miles later for \$9,750. He was the perfect first rig for us!

We bought our current rig from a dealer. Personally, I loved having a warranty for the peace of mind.

There are two big factors in deciding where to buy your RV: the year of the RV and finances.

Buying New

Obviously if you want something brand new, you'll need to visit a dealer.

My two cents: Don't buy new. Not because of price (although price is big consideration!), but because rigs "off the line" are often riddled with problems. I've heard this about every manufacturer, though some are better than others. Most full-timers I know recommend buying something at least two years old (as someone else has worked out the kinks).

We heard this multiple times before buying our brand new Winnebago and I regret not listening to their advice! Armed with this knowledge, we expected a few visits for service, and we've made over a dozen in the past 18 months. It's been incredibly frustrating, [especially when service departments aren't known for great service](#). Trust me, don't buy new! Plus, with the rapid depreciation of RVs, it's less of a financial burden to buy used.

My two cents: Avoid Camping World like the plague. I've literally never heard a good thing about Camping World. When it comes to buying your rig, getting it serviced, or finding parts, I strongly advise taking your business elsewhere.

Buying Used

You can find great deals on used RVs online—especially if you want a fixer upper and you're willing to take a small risk. Check out RVTrader.com. This is great index of rigs across the country and you can filter results based on what you're looking for.

If you're worried about buying a used rig off Craigslist or from a private seller that might not pass inspection or might have leaks or other issues, you'd probably be most comfortable buying from a dealer. Dealers are required to put in enough maintenance to pass inspection before selling you the vehicle. This won't mean that it will be free of issues, but it will at least protect the basics. Plus you can likely get a warranty for a used rig using this method as well.

As far as price goes, dealers will generally be more expensive than private sellers. The best place to look for private sellers is Craigslist, but we've seen a lot of great deals on the side of the road or parked in neighborhoods too.

Getting a Loan

Buying an RV is considered a luxury expense, which means it's difficult to find a loan. At 24 and self-employed, we really struggled to buy our Winnebago from a dealer. We used savings to buy our first RV from Craigslist, but we certainly hadn't saved up \$125K to buy our Brave with cash.

This is where going through a dealer can be an advantage. They will have access and information regarding best practices for securing an RV loan.

You cannot legally co-sign on an RV but you can do something called co-buying. (Literally the same thing, but with a legal loophole and a synonymous name.) I won't get into the technical details here, but you can [read more on co-buying here](#).

11 THINGS YOU MUST KNOW BEFORE YOU BUY A USED RV

When we bought Franklin over three years ago, we were less than equipped to be RV shopping. In fact, before buying Franklin, we only looked at one other Class C motorhome. We bought the 20-year-old rig the same day we saw him—and that rig took us 20,000 miles across 48 states before we sold him to upgrade our RV.

He was a great purchase, but he wouldn't have been if we hadn't called Heath's grandpa every five minutes asking for RV advice. When given the chance, it's always best to hear advice from a fellow full-timer, someone who knows what it's like to live on a house on wheels and what parts of the RV need your attention.

Finding a good used RV can sometimes feel like searching for a needle in a haystack. Here's a few things to keep in mind when you're shopping:

1. Does the person showing you the RV actually own it?

First and foremost, make sure your contact is actually the owner of the RV. The first Class C motorhome we looked at was shown to us by the father of the man who owned the rig. He didn't have answers to our questions nor did he have any control over the cost of the RV. He wasn't able to tell us how it was stored (very important), how often it had been driven, or show us any of the maintenance records.

Unless the owner is deceased or you're buying from a used RV dealer, make sure you are able to ask the owner questions directly.

2. How many people have owned this RV, and how often have you driven it?

We were the fourth owners of Franklin. An older man bought him new, then a younger guy owned him for less than two years, then a family of four used it for regular camping trips. We purchased the rig from the family after they relocated from California to Texas.

Here's how we knew this was a good sign:

A) the rig had made it from California to Texas and was still running

B) the owners have kids, which meant they would be more careful in maintaining a rig trusted to drive their little ones

We didn't know much about the previous owners' use of the RV, but we knew that at least recently, the RV was kept up and used regularly.

Note: When buying a used RV, lower mileage isn't necessarily a good thing. When someone is driving an RV often, it usually means it's being well maintained. Lower mileage when buying a used RV could mean it's been sitting on an empty lot somewhere and you can wind up with a lot of issues.

3. Do you have maintenance records?

Maintenance records are the holy grail of buying a used RV. We were instantly told that the transmission was replaced in 2012 and that the cab of the RV sustained leak damage and was fully replaced.

Every previous owner of the RV had meticulously documented all of the maintenance records. This showed us that they were responsible

enough to have things fixed (as well as keep the records) and gave us confidence knowing things were okay.

4. How many miles are on the tires and when were they last replaced?

If you attain maintenance records from the previous owner, you can probably learn this quite easily.

This is especially important if you're looking at buying a used Class A RV. Class A rigs have extremely expensive tires and replacing them is akin to a college tuition.

Last summer, we noticed that due to an alignment issue from the factory, our front two tires were wearing unevenly and needed to be replaced immediately. Fortunately this was all under warranty, because the bill came to a whopping \$300/tire. Ugh. Check the tires carefully! This is less of an issue with Class C's, B's, or trailers that have similar tires to trucks, but still a large expense.

Even if you don't know much about tires, checking the tread is quite easy. Do they look worn out and have sun damage? If so, they probably don't have much life left in them. Do some research on how much it would cost to replace all necessary tires and then ask for that amount discounted from the price of the RV.

5. Check EVERYWHERE for water damage.

Inspect the roof and around all windows. Press on the walls and feel for soft spots that may indicate previous or continuous water damage. Water damage—in my opinion—is the number one reason not to buy a used RV. If an RV has water damage, save yourself now and do not buy it.

The reason why? Often times it's hard to see exactly how bad the water damage is until you start digging into the wall. One little soft spot could actually be much more damage than you realize.

After buying our RV, we found a soft spot in the bottom left corner of a window, back behind the dining room chair. It was impossible to spot since the chair consistently blocked this area, but after a major rainstorm in Nebraska, we noticed a small puddle of water on the floor. This leak became a constant headache for us and a major lesson in properly sealing the RV. (We highly recommend all RVers travel with [Eternabond tape](#), the sealant of the gods.)

6. Press all the buttons.

Turn on the engine (when applicable). Turn on every light. Check the clearance lights and brake lights outside. Turn on the generator (when applicable). Level the jacks. Turn on the hot water heater. Try the water pump. Turn on all the faucets. Test every feature to make sure they work. The last thing you want is to boondock one weekend and find out your water pump is broken.

7. Stand in the shower.

I'm actually serious on this one. I never showered in Franklin unless it was a necessity. The shower was way too small to be comfortable. Plus, [my first shower experience](#) was less than stellar and I hereby swore off the shower from then on. Stand in the shower and see if you can handle it. While it may sound vain now, you'll be glad to have a rig with a good shower after three months out on the road, trust me.

8. Check under the unit for damage, rust, etc.

On Franklin, we (mostly Heath, ahem) scraped our back end on so many sloped driveways that we busted the metal wheels designed to keep your back end from dragging. The wheels were nothing but semi-circles when we sold our RV. While not a deal breaker for the

buyer, be sure to take note of the undercarriage of the RV and how it's been taken care of. Look for rust, cracks, blatantly broken wheels, etc.

9. Ask what animals have lived in the RV and for how long.

Heath is very allergic to cats, so this is a must for us. You can usually pick up on this from smells, but it's imperative to ask if you have allergies. I also always ask about smokers, since I'm allergic to smoke.

10. Ask for a test drive.

Most owners will let you take the rig for a test drive. If they don't, do not buy it. Major red flag. Take the rig on open roads (especially if this is your first time driving an RV!) and gun it. See how the rig handles various speeds, how it handles turns, braking, swerving, etc.

Plus, see how you handle driving it. Does it feel much too big for you, or is it something you can adjust to? If you plan on taking the rig to national parks with mountains, take it up a few hills and listen to the engine (specific to motorhomes). Does it get too hot or whine in protest? Remember that the rig you test drive is likely empty and will be much heavier when it's carrying all your belongings, family, and full tanks.

Listen (or have whoever looks at the rig with you listen) for things that are rattling and moving while the rig moves. While not a deal breaker, this can be frustrating. I do know one couple who purchased a Thor and had an entire cabinet detach from the ceiling and crash to the ground while they were driving. So listening to these noises can be important!

11. Ask for an inspection.

Worth every penny—and likely less than \$200. Ask the owner if you can have the rig professionally inspected before buying. We didn't buy a

truck camper because we made this request and were vehemently denied. If the owner isn't hiding anything, they'll likely acquiesce.

This is good mostly for your peace of mind about buying a used RV. If your rig passes the third-party inspection, I'd say you're ready to start negotiating on the price! Which I know nothing about, cause I make Heath do all that stuff.

TOWING

A tow vehicle—often called a toad, because RVers name things in weird ways—is a huge decision for RVers.

If you choose a trailer or camper, you'll buy a truck or a heavy-duty SUV. The size and model of the truck should be decided based on the size and weight of your rig. You can find all of this info in your owner's manuals.

Make sure your rig's GVWR doesn't exceed your truck's towing capacity. I wish it wasn't necessary to say this, as it should be common sense. But it's worth saying again. **Make sure your rig's GVWR doesn't exceed your truck's towing capacity.**

If you choose a fifth wheel or truck camper, you'll need to get your truck bed outfitted with a heavy duty hitch.

With motorhomes, you have more towing options. With a Class B, you won't need to tow anything, since they are typically small enough to fit anywhere (and most likely their engines can handle towing anyway).

But with Class C's and A's, it gets a little more gray.

If we do tow, should we get a tow dolly or tow four wheels down? If we tow four wheels down, what kind of tow package should we get?

What's least expensive? What's safest? Should I tow a car behind my RV at all?

The past three years has been an extensive testing ground for all motorhome towing scenarios. Recently, we found what we believe is the best setup for our ideal form of travel: towing our Honda CR-V (automatic transmission) behind our Winnebago Brave "flat" or "four-on-the-floor."

Here is a scenic view of our current setup:



Before you make a decision on whether you should or shouldn't tow, I wanted to share a few of our towing experiences from the past two years.

Driving Without a Tow Vehicle or “Toad”

Our first year RVing, we drove our 1994 Class C motorhome to 48 states without a tow vehicle. This meant Heath drove our rig through cities like Austin, Los Angeles, New York City, Cleveland, San Francisco, and many others.

What We Liked About NOT Having a Tow Car:

- We saved a couple thousand dollars by not having to buy a tow package or tow dolly.
- Driving without a tow car was one less stress factor as a new RVer.
- We saved a few minutes of time when leaving campgrounds and arriving by not having to hook up a tow car.
- Better gas mileage.
- Able to visit more places. For example, if we towed a car, we wouldn't have been able to take the Pacific Coast Highway all the way from LA to Portland because of the 30-foot limit.

The Downside of Not Towing a Car:

- If we wanted to visit major cities, we had to drive our RV into downtown areas.
- Trying to find a 29 foot parking spot was always stressful.
- Our RV was our only vehicle for errands. If we wanted to make a quick run to the grocery store, we had to pack everything up and move.

Conclusion: Driving a 29-foot RV through big cities is not fun.

Overall, the experience of driving our RV without a tow car was incredibly inconvenient. While it gave us one less thing to do when packing up our RV to leave a campsite, it also caused a lot of stress

and limitations when we wanted to do simple things like run to grocery store because we ran out of milk.

Plus, if there were vehicle limitations for roads, we had to avoid those areas all together. For example, during our first trip to Glacier National Park we missed driving the famed Going to the Sun Road because there is a 24-foot limit. And in Big Bend, we couldn't visit a whole section of the park because of another 24-foot limit.

Driving Our RV With a Tow Dolly

A tow dolly is a trailer that allows you to tow with your front two wheels or all four wheels on top of a trailer. We used a tow dolly for only one day before we abandoned it in west Texas (long story), but we tried again a year later with slightly better luck.

What We Liked About the Tow Dolly:

- We finally had a vehicle to explore local areas, without having to bring the RV along.
- The tow dolly was free, since we were borrowing it from a family member. Tow dollies are quite expensive if you buy one new (and can be more expensive than a tow kit).

What We Didn't Like About the Tow Dolly:

- The straps on the tow dolly were a point of constant stress. They had to constantly be adjusted and would come loose during travel.
- It took a lot of time to hook up the car to the dolly.
- Driving the car onto the tow dolly trailer was a little unnerving. I never drove it off the front, but it's something we've seen many people accidentally do while using a tow dolly and it always terrified me.
- I was constantly worried about the car falling off the tow dolly.

- It was difficult to find a place to store the dolly if we stayed at a campground for more than a week.

Conclusion: Great having an extra vehicle, but the dolly was more stress than it was worth.

Overall, the largest benefit to having the tow dolly was having access to our car. However, the stress caused by the difficulty of hooking up and unhooking the car from the dolly was not worth it. If it hadn't been completely free to use, I wouldn't personally recommend one.

Towing Flat Behind Our Brave

Heath recently installed a Blue Ox Base Plate and Blue Ox Tow Bar so that we could tow our 2002 Honda CR-V behind our Brave. Instead of dealing with the stress of driving our RV through big cities or worry about messing around with a tow dolly, we have the comfort of towing our CR-V with four wheels down.

The past month and a half we've covered several thousand miles with our new towing setup. I wish we would have done this from the very beginning. I was worried about the cost and difficulty of hooking up and unhooking the car from the RV. However, it takes just a few minutes to hook up our Honda CR-V behind our Brave.

What We Like About Flat Towing:

- It just takes a minute to hook up the car for towing (plus a couple minutes of running the engine).
- We have a much better turn radius while flat towing versus the dolly.
- I'm not worried about our car falling off the tow dolly and smashing into someone.

- It's less stressful knowing we have a [Brake Buddy auxiliary braking system](#) that will pump the brakes when we drive downhill and stop the car should it, for whatever reason, detach from the tow bar.

Conclusion: Towing flat behind the RV is our clear winner, because we can't think of any cons.

Towing our Honda CR-V with four wheels down has turned out to be the best set up. It takes just a few minutes before each drive to set everything up. Plus, the car follows nicely behind the motorhome and it's easy to forget it's even there (AKA it doesn't add more stress even though we're longer).

The manual in our CR-V gives us a simple set of directions and rules for towing which makes the process easy.

The rules are pretty easy. We aren't allowed to drive over 65 mph and before towing, we have to run the gears through a special sequence to lube the transmission. If we drive for more than eight hours in one day, which we never do, then we need to work through the sequence again.)

How We Picked a Tow Package

Ultimately, there are two main companies who manufacture tow bars, Blue Ox and Roadmaster. After looking through multiple online forums that compared both companies, they both seemed like fairly even products. Some people preferred Blue Ox, some people preferred Roadmaster. There wasn't a lot of differentiating factors with either tow bar as far as we could tell.

We went with Blue OX because we were on a time crunch and we found a local dealer who could get us all the parts in time.

Note: Neither company sells direct. You'll have to find a local dealer on their website or on Amazon. We chose Amazon because it's cheaper and we're all about Prime two-day shipping.

What We Had to Buy for Flat Towing

There were several different components we had to buy before setting up our Honda CR-V for flat towing.

Here's the list of big items we had to purchase:

- [A Blue Ox Alpha Tow Bar](#)

This tow bar is rated to tow up to 6,500 lbs. and inserts into the trailer hitch on our RV. At the time of writing, this bar is on Amazon for \$543.00, which is \$150 less than local dealer prices.

- [A Blue OX Base Plate](#)

Note: base plates must be ordered specific to your vehicle's model and year. If you buy on Amazon, they have great filters for this.

We had to find a base plate that specifically fit the specs of my 2002 Honda CR-V. We couldn't find a seller on Amazon, so we ordered through a local dealer for this part and paid around \$320.

Most dealerships charge several hundred dollars for this kind of installation, but luckily we had a friend who was willing to help guide Heath through the process. They spent three days drilling holes in the frame of our CR-V, removing our front bumper, watching Youtube videos for guidance and attaching the base plate.

Blue OX also sent step by step directions for installing this base plate onto the front of our CR-V which proved incredibly helpful. If you have a few days and don't mind a bit of manual labor, I recommend doing the install on your own.

- [A Blue OX light kit](#)

I'm sure any light kit would work. Just to make it easy, we ordered the Blue OX light kit to make sure that everything would work properly and it was around \$45.

- [A Brake Buddy](#)

An auxiliary braking system is designed to brake your vehicle for you as you tow it. Many states have towing laws that regulate whether or not you need some type of auxiliary braking system. You can find a complete state-by-state list of those [regulations here](#). If you plan on traveling to Canada, it is required by law, hence why we bought one.

Brake Buddy, the most popular auxiliary braking system will run you around \$1,000. It is extremely pricey, BUT definitely makes us feel more at peace and safer knowing that if something goes wrong, the Brake Buddy will take control of the car.

Before you buy anything...

This is a great time to read your car's manual. All cars can be towed in some capacity, and the manual will tell you the best way.

Most people, us included, prefer towing "four-on-the-floor." It's worth saying again, you must check your manual before trying this option. Not all vehicles can safely be towed four on the floor. A typical "tow kit" will cost at least \$1,000. A tow kit will include a base plate and a tow bar.

If your car cannot be towed flat, you can tow any vehicle with a dolly (with 2 tires up) or on a flat bed trailer (all 4 tires up) depending on what the manual for your vehicle recommends. On average, a tow dolly or trailer will cost the same or more than installing a tow kit on your vehicle.



PART 2

TRANSITIONING INTO RV LIFE

Now that you know all of your RV and towing options, you likely have a decent idea of what type of rig you want to purchase. If you haven't yet, I recommend going RV shopping a few times so you can get a feel for what life is like in a tiny home. (This is literally Heath's favorite "date" we go on!)

Transporting your entire life into a home on wheels can be stressful and difficult. There's a few major areas of your life that are about to change or become little more confusing.

In this next section, we'll talk about your major logistical questions concerning life in an RV.

We'll stick to the basics like:

- RV Insurance
- Healthcare
- Mail
- Internet
- Cell Coverage
- GPS

RV INSURANCE

The first thing you'll need to do after buying your rig is to buy RV insurance and register your vehicle. This can be tricky! Vehicle registration and insurance **MUST** be in your state of residency. (I'll talk more about establishing your residency, or domicile, in chapter 8.)

If you've been alive for any period of time, you know that insurance can be a real pain in the neck and that is especially true when it comes to RVs. Here's the most important thing to know: **Not all insurance companies will cover full-time RVers.**

If you plan on full-timing in your RV, you need to explicitly say this to your insurance agent. I do believe the insurance definition of full-timing is spending more than six months of the year in your RV (but this could change at any given time).

To make things more complicated, it is not uncommon for an insurance company to tell you they do not offer full-timer insurance, when you know for certain that they do. (I'm looking at you, Progressive.)

We decided to go through Good Sam² to find our insurance. They made the process much easier for newbies like us, since they will look at multiple insurance companies and give you options.

² Good Sam doesn't seem to have a great reputation among RVers, but we've had nothing but good experiences with them. They do not pay us to say nice things about them...but they should.

Our current policy is through Allied Insurance. We've used them for three years and they've been great.

People often worry about what happens when your RV is in the shop and you suddenly don't have a place to sleep. While most mechanics will let you stay in your RV overnight, many full-timer insurance plans have an allowance for hotel nights for this purpose. We've used this once when we broke down just south of the Grand Canyon.

Allied reimbursed us for the hotel quickly and easily. I love the peace of mind knowing that if we end up homeless for a night, we will still be able to find a place to sleep.

One thing you will definitely need on the road as part of your insurance package is roadside assistance. I would not travel without it.

We've used Good Sam's Roadside Assistance. It costs less than \$100/year and they really saved us when we had a tire blowout on our tow dolly in middle-of-nowhere California. They blew us out of the water with their customer service and they went above and beyond to help us find the right tire.

HEALTHCARE FOR RVERS

& WHY WE DON'T HAVE HEALTH INSURANCE

Ah, healthcare. This is probably my least favorite subject to talk about. It invites so much controversy, confusion, and rip-your-hair-out hassle. Not to mention finding healthcare for RVerS is ten times more complicated than it is for sticks-n-bricks people.

We've been RVing for three years and have tried quite a few options for coverage on the road. We've actually used something different every year because until this year, we have not been happy with our options.

When you're rarely in your home state or domicile state, it's hard to find healthcare coverage that will take care of you when you're off exploring Denali National Park.

In this chapter, I'll talk about our own experience with insurance on the road.

Note: I'm no expert in healthcare because let's be real, the rules change too much for anyone to be an expert. This is purely our own experiences. If you're looking for medical advice, you've come to the wrong place.

2014: Obamacare/Affordable Care Act

Before Heath and I were married in 2014, I was on Obamacare and Heath was on his parent's insurance plan. (It's worth noting that after we were married, Heath stayed on his parent's insurance plan until his 26th birthday last year.)

At the time, I was paying \$4.87/month for health coverage with Blue Cross Blue Shield. I had a terrible catastrophic plan with a super high deductible.

This was while we filmed Hourly America and were making very little money our first year on the road. Since our only income was through sponsorship and it took until October before we started finding freelance clients on the road, paying \$5 for health insurance was about all we could afford.

Of course, if anything happened to me, this type of plan wouldn't provide much financial support. And with the ever-changing landscape of healthcare in America, I don't think many places like this are readily available.

2015: No Healthcare

Despite making very little our first year on the road, we did not qualify for Affordable Healthcare in 2015. I imagine this was mostly because we are self-employed. Since we didn't receive any government subsidies and because our business was just getting started, we couldn't afford to shell out \$200/month or more for health insurance, period.

All of the plans we looked at were over \$200 to insure just me. At 24 and self-employed while also paying down student debt, there was no chance we could swing that.

Choosing to not sign up for healthcare was a huge point of stress for us, but financially it was our only option.

Since we were young and in good health, we felt dropping our coverage wasn't too big a risk and we did our best to not get me pregnant.

We did have to pay the 1% of our income penalty for not having insurance, but this was still significantly less than how much it would've cost to insure me for the year. I, however, do not recommend this course of action.

2016: RVer Insurance

In 2016 we signed up for my health insurance through RVer Insurance Exchange.

Signing up with RVer Insurance was a little complicated and confusing, but offered a lot of peace of mind since they specialize in finding health insurance coverage for RVer and up until this point, we were researching health plans ourselves.

We called and talked to Colleen, explained our situation, and told her what we were looking for. We filled out some forms—which we had to print out, fill out by hand, and then fax back to them like it's 1987—and she called us back the next day with multiple options.

Colleen found me a plan that would cover me across all of America with Scott and White Health Plan. It was a whopping \$265 a month for just me. Talk about a kick to the gut. And that was the cheapest plan she found for me.

I argued with Heath that we couldn't afford that, however, he (and everyone who knew I wasn't covered in 2015) insisted that I get healthcare in 2016, so I did. Never used it once, but paid a pretty penny for it.

If you are looking for traditional health insurance, I highly recommend going through the agents at RVer Insurance so you can be sure you're finding a plan that will allow you to access healthcare wherever you are traveling. They also offer a lot of options for telemedicine, which can be a great option if you can't find a doctor wherever you are in your travels.

2017: Liberty Healthshare

Earlier this year we signed up for Liberty Healthshare as our healthcare provider. It is easily my favorite option for RVers so far.

Liberty Healthshare isn't health insurance, it's a health care sharing ministry.

If you haven't heard of healthsharing, let the internet explain what it is.

"A health care sharing ministry is an organization that facilitates sharing of health care costs among individual members, in the United States, who have common ethical or religious beliefs." (Wikipedia)

If your first thought is "Huh?" let me put it layman's terms.

Instead of paying an insurance company each month, you pay other people's medical bills. And when you make a claim, instead of an insurance company paying the claim, other people in your healthsharing community pay for your bills.

This means a few things:

- You're working with a 501(c)3 non-profit, not an insurance company.
- You can actually see where your money is going, because it goes toward individuals. (Liberty automatically charges my credit card each month, but online I can see that last month our money went to David & Elizabeth.)

- You don't have to worry about finding a specific provider when looking for care.
- It's significantly cheaper than insurance.
- It is exempt under ACA requirements, so you do not have to pay a penalty.

I would be skeptical about joining a healthshare ministry, but before signing up we talked to several people who have used healthsharing and raved about it (including my parents).

My parents, fellow entrepreneurs, joined Samaritan Ministries after the Affordable Healthcare Act passed, making traditional healthcare unaffordable for them. This is a pain point for many of our self-employed friends. My family has claimed several procedures and doctors visits over the years and have had nothing but good things to say.

We would've joined Samaritan years ago, however, you are required to have a pastor's signature and sign a statement of faith. It's hard to have a "home church" when you're never in a place longer than a month, so we were unable to join. (Remember the foundation of healthsharing is that you share medical costs with a group of individuals with **common ethical or religious beliefs.**)

This year, we chose Liberty Healthshare (on the recommendation of Michelle from [Making Sense of Cents](#)). Liberty is religiously affiliated like all healthsharing organizations, but does not require you to be religious. You do sign a statement of good faith that basically says I'm a good person and uphold the aforementioned common ethical beliefs.

Liberty Healthshare has an affiliate program (you earn \$100 for every person you refer) so I tweeted at Michelle and she sent Liberty my phone number and email address.

They called me (the call was less than three minutes), emailed over a few forms I could fill out online, and we were done!

Plus, since everything is internal (versus calling RVers Insurance and them looking around at all other providers for plans), we looked at the chart on their website and picked our plan in 5.2 seconds.

Since we are under 30, we pay \$249 for coverage for Heath and I. That's \$16 less than health insurance for just me in 2016 AND the coverage is better.

Honestly, this was a no-brainer for us. And while we of course hope to never have to file claims for medical expenses, I feel confident that Liberty will take care of us.

If you want to go through RVer Insurance to have an agent help you find a plan that's right for you, they now offer healthsharing plans in addition to other insurances.

Finding coverage across the country from an insurance company you can trust is extremely difficult right now. Based on our experience in the past few years, I recommend Liberty Healthshare for getting the best coverage for your money.

However, you should do your own research, call RVers Insurance if you have specific questions, and always choose what is best for your specific situation. That, and take a deep breath and don't let finding health insurance stress you out too much!

If you want to hear more about other full-timers' experiences with health insurance, here's a few more articles to read:

[We No Longer Have Traditional Health Insurance - Liberty HealthShare Review](#) by Michelle of Making Sense of Cents

[Healthcare & Health Insurance for Full Time RVers](#) by Technomadia

[Finally Insured! Our Simple, Affordable RV Healthcare](#) by Gone with the Wynn's

GETTING MAIL & ESTABLISHING YOUR DOMICILE

The first question people always ask when they learn I live in an RV is always incredibly boring: "How do you get your mail?"

Mail can be especially tricky if you'll be full-timing, and there are few different options. First things first, you'll need a permanent address and that means establishing your domicile.

Why you need to establish your domicile

In the US, you need a permanent address for everything—even RV parks will even ask for this info!—which is difficult when you live on wheels and no longer have a "permanent residence." Having a permanent address is necessary for registration, voting, insurance, taxes (and so on and so forth), which is why you'll need to set up a domicile before you hit the road.

Your domicile is essentially your new home address and there are three key states that make great domiciles: Texas, South Dakota, and Florida.

Picking your domicile state

If you're already from one of these three RV friendly states, then you're lucky! That's how we ended up choosing Texas.

But the state you choose is totally up to you! Since laws are different from state-to-state, here are a few of the main factors to consider when picking your state:

- Taxes (Income, sales, vehicle, etc.)
- Vehicle inspection and registration laws
- Homeschooling laws (if you have kids on the road!)
- Driver's license renewals
- Jury duty
- Where you plan to travel

Where you plan to travel is important if the state you choose requires annual visits. We have to visit Texas every year to update our vehicle inspection. This isn't a big deal since we visit our families at least once a year, but it can be a hassle depending on where you plan on traveling.

A lawyer told me that when picking your domicile, what you really are doing is crafting your story. Maybe your story is that you decided to move to South Dakota until they finally finish the Crazy Horse monument, or maybe you're snow birding in Florida like all the retirees. Your story is simply a way to tie you back to your new home state.

This story is important in a few instances, like when you get pulled over by the cops for example. I had a cop pull me over earlier this year for a brake light being out in my car. After looking at my ID, he asked why I was in town. I told him I was on way to a film shoot. Because I was so far from home, he advised me that it's illegal to have an out-of-date address on my ID and that I needed to update my address in the next 30 days.

Sigh. This is why your story is important. There's nothing illegal about establishing your domicile and traveling full-time. Knowing your story (and the law) is key!

So, how do you actually establish your domicile?

There are services that will set up your domicile for you. Our favorite is [Escapees](#) because they can set you up in any of the three states, and they do a lot more than just mail forwarding. [St Brendan's Isle](#) is highly recommended for Florida and [My Dakota Address](#) for South Dakota.

Escapees will establish a domicile for you, give you a permanent mailing address, and even forward your mail to you on the road (while filtering out the junk!). Once you find a service that you like, getting your mail on the road is extremely easy.

Once your address is set up, you'll get to go through the super fun process of changing your address on everything. Driver's license, bank accounts, bills, insurance, etc.

I highly recommend going through a service, because they can easily walk you through all these steps. You can read more on how to [get started with Escapees here](#).

Receiving packages on the road

Amazon Prime is the best invention of the decade and an RVer's best friend. We often have packages sent to RV parks, and with two day shipping guaranteed, we've never had any issues!

If you're trying to receive any type of package on the road, the easiest way to do so is to ship it to the RV park where you are staying. We usually let the campground know ahead of time that we are expecting a package. They will accept the mail for you and call you when it's in (in our experience).

This is incredibly common and easy. Just make sure your address label looks something like this:

Name of Campground
C/o Alyssa Padgett Site #52
Address
City, ST Zip

Including your name is important for both USPS and the campground receiving your package. Don't forget this step!

If you're boondocking or not staying in a campground, you can have your package shipped to the post office or a UPS store. I had to pay \$5 to pick up a box from the UPS store while we were camping in the Tetons. The fee is annoying, but it's a good option if you don't have a physical address to ship to.

If you choose to ship to a post office, you'll want to send your mail "general delivery." Or like this:

Alyssa Padgett
General Delivery
City, ST Zip

I personally prefer to send all mail and packages directly to our campground so there's less of a chance it gets lost in the shuffle. Like I said before, we use Amazon frequently on the road and so far (knock on wood) we've never had a package get lost or miss us on the road.

INTERNET FOR THE ROAD

If you're planning on working on the road, your first thought is probably, how in the heck am I going to get internet?

Relax everyone, most RV parks have wifi and 85% of the time, it's free. And if you don't mind waiting 10 minutes for your email to load, RV park wifi will treat you just fine.

But if like most people, you want/need/can't live without the Internet, you'll need to buy an unlimited cell plan.

We've used two unlimited cell plans in our time RVing: Verizon and AT&T.

Let's start with Verizon.

If you're looking for in-depth, tech details that go over my head, check out RVmobileinternet.com.

When we had Verizon, we used a Verizon Jetpack (This jetpack does not allow you to fly through the air. This jetpack is a mobile hotspot that creates an internet connection for you). We used our jetpack for two years.

We loved Verizon because they have great coverage across the country. The only places we didn't have coverage: west Texas and remote parts of national parks.

We ran our entire business off this device: streaming video calls with clients, recording podcasts, uploading videos to Youtube, etc. It handled everything like a pro.

Now Verizon is known for being pricy and if you get a plan through them, you'll pay monthly for data. And it will be incredibly expensive... unless you find an unlimited plan.

Initially we paid out of pocket for 20 GBs of monthly data and we still spent a lot of time in coffee shops because of our limit. (Along with our two phones, this was \$220/month.)

So, Heath and I went to the black market to snag ourselves an unlimited data plan. Looking back, I have no idea how we survived working our first year on the road without it.

With our unlimited plan, we can work freely without worrying about using all our data or needing to go to a coffeeshop to download files. Plus, we can stream Youtube, Netflix, and podcasts easily. Which sometimes means way less productivity in the Padgett RV, but also means we could start [our Youtube channel](#) and Heath can continue his podcast.

Our unlimited Verizon plan cost \$140/month. If you're looking to connect with someone who can give you an unlimited plan, send me an email and I can connect you.

Now onto AT&T.

We just started our AT&T plan in May of 2017 when Verizon cracked down on unlimited plans. Losing our Verizon plan was heartbreaking,

especially since Verizon has way better countrywide coverage than AT&T. (This meant our Verizon contact's plans raised to \$180/month.)

But we are traveling on the east coast this year, and AT&T has good coverage on the east coast anyway, so we made the switch. We still have a bootleg plan, from the same guy who supplied our Verizon plan, and it's been good so far...and by good so far I mean we've streamed Netflix basically every day and we've watched a LOT of Youtube videos with ease.

We use the Unite Explore AC815S device. It cost us \$140 for the device (one-time) and \$100 monthly for unlimited data. Our Verizon plan cost us \$140 monthly for unlimited data. I don't remember how much we purchased our jetpack for, but the price is comparable to AT&T.

If you choose either of these two options for internet on the road, you will be fine. I would not travel full-time without an unlimited internet plan like what we have now. We couldn't run our business!

One way to make sure that you always have service is to invest in a cell booster. A cell booster has the ability to heavily boost your cell signal while camping in remote areas. [Weboost](#) is the brand of booster who we use and they make units specifically for RVs. If you need a guarantee that you will have cell service, a cell booster is worth the investment!

RV Park Wi-Fi

Once in South Dakota, Heath and I extended our stay at an RV park for three extra days because they had real wifi. I could instantly load a page and everything! We celebrated by streaming Gladiator on Netflix.

Most RV parks do have internet, but if you're planning on working on the road, **do not rely on this**. You can likely check your email and maybe your Facebook. But it won't lend itself to much more.

CHOOSING YOUR CELL PROVIDER

You probably own a cell phone. (If you don't, how do you survive?!)

You probably have had the same plan for a few years, but you don't know if that same plan will support you on the road as well as it does in your hometown.

A lot of RVers I know use T-mobile because it's typically your cheapest option for a cell phone plan. But (and this is a huge but) those are the people who complain about not getting good coverage. T-mobile is great for out of the country use—in case you're headed to Canada or Mexico—but notoriously bad in the states.

What's more important: saving money or being able to call roadside assistance when you're on the side of the interstate?

I'm in favor of paying more for better service. If you're planning on full-time RV travel, I recommend Verizon or AT&T. And I highly recommend using the opposite service of whichever you choose for internet. Then you have really good chances of always having signal.

We've used Verizon for our phones with no complaints. I switched from Sprint, which offered me signal basically no where, but they like T-mobile have much cheaper options.

Personal observation: 80% of RVers I meet use Verizon, especially those who work on the road.

THE RIGHT TYPE OF GPS

One of [my most popular blogs of all time](#) included a huge fight between Heath and I involving our GPS.

It was all caught on camera, and in retrospect, it was completely ridiculous and NOT AT ALL MY FAULT that the GPS suggested two consecutive u-turns.

Most GPS units won't know that you're driving your house down the road, which can make navigation frustrating. You'll need a special GPS, one designed for truckers or RVs.

Our Winnebago came with a built-in Rand McNally GPS that has our specs integrated into it, so it knows to avoid low clearances and small roads. If you buy a brand new motorhome, you'll likely have a GPS included. If not, Camping World and RV dealers will have multiple GPS options for you to consider.

However, since it's 2017, many of us prefer using our phone as a GPS.


We recently started using CoPilot app, an app that downloads all North American maps to your phone so that it doesn't need data or cell service to operate.

It costs roughly \$50 for the app and will take up 2 GBs of space on your phone. If you're planning visiting remote places without cell

service or want to make sure you always have map access, this is a great option.

If you're not into paying for a specialty GPS, you can always use Google Maps on your phone for free, which is updated regularly and is a good option. Just pay close attention to watch for low clearances and weight limits on roads, since Google maps will not warn you about these!

Even if you do buy an RV or trucker GPS, you should 100% buy an atlas. We've used ours multiple times, mostly in situations where construction, low bridges, or tunnels have ruined our travel plans. It was a lifesaver when we tried to navigate the George Washington Bridge out of Manhattan and something we always keep on hand.



PART 3

**BEFORE YOUR
MAIDEN VOYAGE**

Now that you've figured out the main logistical hurdles to life on the road, let's look at getting to know your life and understanding what life on the road is actually like.

Adjusting to RV life is mentally taxing. You've likely spent your entire life in a house. And in a house, there's always electricity. Water instantly comes out of the faucets and toilets flush your waste away, never to be thought of again (hopefully). Life is pretty automated and simple.

In an RV, you have to think about all these things. You will need to learn how to get electricity to your rig and best practices to do so. You'll need to understand what happens with your water after you use it and how to manage those tanks. One thing you've likely never worried about in your life—sleeping on level ground—will become of the utmost importance.

And then there's pesky things like how to find RV parks and how to save money on said RV parks and BONUS in this section, I even reveal a membership that will help you find local wines. Priorities, right?

ELECTRICITY & POWER

I'm not an electrician and I can't explain the ins and outs of electricity in your rig...also that would be incredibly boring. But I can tell you a little something about getting power to your rig.

Shore Power

When you plug your RV into electricity at an RV park, this is called shore power. Odds are, your rig will pull 30 or 50 amps, depending mostly on the number of A/C units on your rig.

If you have two A/C units, you will have a 50 amp rig. Typically this means smaller rigs like travel trailers and Class C's pull 30 amps, while fifth wheels and Class A's pull 50. Some pop-ups and small trailers will only require 20 amps.

This information is vital because every single time you camp at a campground, they will ask. Many campgrounds divide their sites by what type of outlets are offered at each electrical post. So you'll need to be armed with this information.

So what if you get to an RV park and they are all out of 50 amp sites and that's what you need?

I recommend all RVers travel with electrical adapters. We carry an adapter and a 25-foot 30 AMP extension cord that we use incredibly often. (You can see exactly what we use in the Resources section).

Should you find yourself camping at a friend's house or a Harvest Host's location or anywhere without the corresponding outlets, you can use adapters and extension cords to plug into to a normal 15 amp outlet. Sometimes this looks like a 50-to-30 adapter to a 30 amp extension cord to a 30-to-15 adapter. This isn't ideal, but it is possible if you really need electricity.

The most important thing to know if you are using adapters like is how many amps you are pulling. Our rig has a screen that will tell us how much we are using and has a failsafe that will turn off outlets before blow a breaker.

How many amps am I using?

- Microwave: 12-15 amps
- A/C: 7-15 amps per unit
- Space heater: 8-12 amps
- Refrigerator: 1 amp
- Lights: less than 1 amp, especially with LED lights
- Coffeepot: 8-10 amps
- Chargers for phones & computers: 1 amp

If you are worried about overloading, the best thing to do is to avoid running any heating or cooling systems and don't use the microwave.

If you are "moochdocking" in someone's driveway or on a farm and really need to run the A/C for example, it would be best to crank on the generator to ensure you have plenty of power going to the rig.

Speaking of generators...

Additional Power Sources

Generators

If you buy a motorhome, there will likely be a generator built into your rig. If you buy a trailer, you will likely need to buy your own for an additional power source.

Why do you need additional power sources?

An additional power source is necessary if you plan on dry camping or boondocking.

Dry camping: This is where you camp with "no hook ups" meaning you don't have shore power, water, or sewer. Typically one refers to dry camping when camping at state or national parks. You usually still have to pay fees for dry camping.

Boondocking: The definition of boondocking is different depending on who you talk to. There are a few aspects to it:

1. You must be dry camping.
2. It's free. You can boondock in Walmart parking lots, rest areas, or the side of the road.
3. (Debatable) You're far from other people or RVers, typically in the wilderness or on free public lands.

For most RVers, camping like this is a huge draw to the lifestyle. It's where you find the most freedom and have the best views. It also means no electrical hookups to power your A/C under the summer sun and no means of cranking on your morning coffee pot, unless you have an additional power source like solar.

If you ever plan on staying at a national park campground or in the middle of the desert, you'll need an extra power source, like a generator or solar, to power your rig.

Generators for Motorhomes

Generators are the most common supplemental power source because they are built into most motorhomes and they are incredibly easy to use. In our Winnebago, we simply hold down a start button, conveniently located next to our refrigerator, and the generator will crank itself on.

Our generator can handle 46 amps, and it's likely that whatever generator is built into your rig can handle the same amount of pull as shore power. If you're looking for a power source that can easily run your microwave or your A/C units, this is your best option.

In motorhomes, the generator will likely be connected to your fuel line. So if you have a gas rig, your generator will pull gas from your tank. If you have a diesel pusher, it will pull diesel from your tank.

In this case, there is a failsafe in the generator that will turn itself off if your fuel level dips below 1/4 of a tank. That way you don't run out of gas and end up stranded anywhere.

Generators for Trailers and Campers

Since your rig likely won't come equipped with a generator, you'll need to consider if purchasing one is necessary. I'll outline two additional power sources below as options.

Typically a new generator will run about \$1,000 and you'll need to carry additional gasoline (or diesel or propane, depending on the generator) for fuel. Propane generators are becoming increasingly popular, but gas generators are the most common.

The con for generators is the carbon footprint. You will be burning gas and creating toxic fumes. The only time our carbon monoxide detector has ever gone off was when we left the windows open while our generator was running. (Yep, don't do that!) Environmentally speaking, this isn't the best option. But it will provide you with the most power

and because of how little gas it uses, it can be the most economical option.

Batteries & Inverters

Underneath our couch are three heavy-duty marine batteries that connect to an inverter that powers our rig.

While we are driving, our house batteries³ and inverter will run our fridge and our outlets. This means I can charge my phone, or laptop, watch TV, or even run my blender.

An inverter is great for this type of usage. While it can shoulder the heavy pull of our coffee maker or the microwave, it will zap a lot of your available amps and wear down the batteries.

Without an inverter, there will be no power to your rig while you are driving or boondocking. In our first RV, we would need to crank on the generator just to charge our laptops for an hour. Our house battery could only handle powering the lights.

The additional batteries and the inverter mean we can use all of our outlets at any time.

Plus, since our Winnebago is equipped with a residential fridge instead of a two-way or three-way powered RV fridge⁴, the inverter is necessary. Without it, we would constantly need to run the generator or be plugged into power.

³ Motorhomes have at least two batteries: coach, for the engine, and house, mostly used to feed power to the lights, refrigerator, generator, and furnace.

⁴ A two-way or three-way fridge are the types of refrigerators most commonly found in RVs. They are smaller than a residential fridge, but can be powered by propane, shore power, or 12V power (aka your house battery).

However, an inverter is not a sustainable power source. Our batteries recharge in three ways: running the engine, running the generator, or plugging into shore power.

We can typically boondock one night on our batteries before we need to turn on our generator to recharge them.

Based on the cost of the batteries + the inverter + the work to install them into an RV, I would never add this to my RV as a main power course, especially if I didn't need it to power a residential fridge.

Solar

We live in the age were solar for RVs is become more and more common. More and more rigs are becoming "solar ready," which I think is just the manufacturers way of saying that you can add solar to the rig if you want to, but they aren't going to shoulder that expense. Not many American manufacturers are producing rigs already equipped with solar just yet.

A solar set up can be costly, usually upwards of \$1,000, and depending on the part of the country, it may not even be useful.

In fact, after telling friends that we planned on spending time on the east coast in the mountains, they advised us against solar, because large trees will block our power source.

Based on what we've learned from other RVers, I would invest in solar only if you plan on doing mostly boondocking and if you're planning on keeping your RV for an extended period of time (long enough to get the value after the upfront investment).

JACKS & THE ELUSIVE LEVEL CAMPING SITE

Modern large RVs are equipped with leveling jacks. Your jacks may be hydraulic or electric depending on the make of your RV. Jacks are helpful for a number of reasons:

1. Many RV parks do not have level sites. This is a constant headache for RVers, literally. From experience, if you sleep with your rig unlevel and your head is below your feet while sleeping, you'll wake up with a wicked hangover. Jacks will save you from this horror.
2. Jacks keep your RV more stable, so it doesn't rock as much as you're moving around (or, ya know – moving around).
3. Jacks can help save your tires, by relieving pressure on them when you're parked.

Jacks in every rig are a little different, so you'll need to consult the manual or the previous owner to learn how to operate them. Our first rig had two buttons and joystick to control the jacks. Our current rig has a button that says "Autolevel" and it is amazing.

You will want to level your RV every time you park overnight and any time you pop out your slides.

In addition to your jacks, it's a good idea to carry leveling blocks that you can place under the jacks or under the tires. We once had our jacks slip on a gravel site and our RV came crashing back down to the ground. Okay it only fell like 1/2 an inch, but it felt scarier.

Leveling blocks will also help you when you get stuck with a particularly unlevel site. Say, for example, you level your RV with your jacks and you notice your front two tires are off the ground. This is not good. It means two things: You've likely fully extended your front two jacks (bad) and they are bearing the full weight of the rig, instead of distributing the weight across the jacks and the tires (bad!).

If you level your RV and find that any of your tires are off the ground, pull up the jacks, add leveling blocks under the necessary tires and re-level your jacks. Bringing your tires off the ground will add unnecessary strain to the jacks and is a recipe for disaster.

Some RVers will chock the wheels after leveling their rig, but this isn't necessary for motorhomes the way it is for trailers.

If you buy a smaller or older RV that isn't equipped with jacks, leveling blocks under the tires will help level your rig. We use Lynx leveling blocks, which are basically adult legos, for leveling and they're extremely sturdy. Some old school RVers use 2x4s or blocks of wood instead.

Why you should always level your RV

In 2014, we parked our RV on a driveway that was slightly slanted while we stayed in a friend's house. We didn't lower our jacks since we were housesitting and didn't want to scuff their driveway with our metal jacks. So our RV was unlevel for a few nights while we enjoyed endless hot water.

And our propane fridge...BLEW UP.

Yes, this is a thing. Check the fine print, many propane refrigerators have a 3° margin between normal operation and catastrophe.

When unlevel, the flow of chemicals behind the fridge is disrupted causing them to mix improperly and likely creating a nasty chemical leak. It wasn't pretty back there, trust me.

If you are unlevel, make sure you switch the fridge to run off electrical or battery power to prevent this. If you run into this same issue and blow up the back of your fridge, there is one, simple, possible solution: it's called burping. Actually if your propane fridge ever stops working, this is a likely solution.

Remove your fridge and turn it upside down on it's head. Let it sit for 24 hours. This will help the fridge redistribute the chemicals properly. Then flip it back over and hook it up. Wait a couple hours and check to see if the unit is cooling again.

Flipping the fridge isn't easy and it's definitely a two-man job. Really. Cause I tried to help Heath and I totally dropped my side. He asked some guys in the RV park for help.

Our burp didn't work, likely because we didn't try this solution until a full week after our incident. So definitely try this right away if you want to save your fridge. Or just park on level ground!

TANKS: NO ONE'S GOING TO DUMP THEM FOR YOU

You have four major tanks in your rig: fresh, grey, black, and propane. I'll explain propane first, since it's the simplest.

Propane Tank

Your propane tank powers your furnace, stove, hot water heater, and likely your fridge (unless your rig has a residential fridge).

As full-timers, we refill our propane tank every 3-4 months for roughly \$50. (If we were to stay in wintry locations, we'd burn through propane faster. But we don't do that, because why would you be in an RV and intentionally visit the cold?)

Your propane tank is most likely underneath your rig and will be the one door in your storage bays that will not lock, for safety purposes. Trailers will store propane tanks often on the tongue of the trailer.

All RVs are equipped with carbon monoxide detectors so you don't have to worry about gas leaks. (Ask me to tell you sometime about the time Heath accidentally broke our propane gas line. Ah, death-defying times.)

Only certified people can fill propane tanks, which can make fueling up on this gas difficult. Some RV parks offer propane on site, but we most often fill up at truck stops or large gas stations.

If you plan on being parked in one place for an extended period of time, many RV parks have a “propane guy.” For some reason this is how all RV parks refer to this person. But this guy will drive to your site and fill up your tank from a tank on his truck. This can be an expensive service if you call them yourself, so ask the RV park where you are staying if they offer this. Many parks will have the propane guy come by regularly for this service.

Fresh Water Holding Tank

Your fresh water tank holds your clean water. The key word here is hold. You'll only use water from this tank if you are NOT hooked up to water at a campsite, but instead using water you've stored onboard.

Your rig will come equipped with a water pump, which will pump water from your tank to your faucets. This is what you'll use for washing your hands, showering, everything. Generally, it isn't recommended that you drink this water, depending on the age of your holding tank and how long the water has been stored.

You'll use water from this tank on drive days or when you're dry camping.

We try to never fill our fresh water tank all the way, because of the sheer weight of water. Driving with a full tank will lower your gas mileage and make towing more difficult. For us, a full tank weighs 483 lbs.

On drive days, we typically fill up our tank less than 1/4 full so we have enough water to boondocks overnight if necessary. A full tank of water will last us an entire week—if we don't shower.

Grey Tank

Your grey tank collects all the water that drains from your sinks and shower. This tank will be roughly the same size as your fresh water tank.

Your grey, since it contains a mixture of soapy water, dirt, and food scraps that make it through your drain, rarely smells, but can sometimes leave a sweaty odor. You'll want to dump your grey tank every couple days while traveling, remembering to always dump your grey after your black.

If you're parked in your RV for days or weeks at a time, always leave this tank open to prevent flooding.

A short story about flooding:

Should you go too long without dumping your tanks, the grey water will come up through the lowest drain, typically your shower. How do I know this? HOW DO I KNOW THIS?!

Fortunately Heath did this when I was not in the RV. But still, ew.

Black Tank (Or your septic tank)

Your black tank contains waste only from your toilet(s).

You will need to always have toilet deodorant handy, because this is the stinky tank. Toilet deodorant (which you can find in the RV section at Walmart) will neutralize the odors in the tank and help disintegrate toilet paper.

To keep your black tank from clogging, use septic safe toilet paper. Cheap store brands or Angel Soft work well. Dump your black tank regularly to prevent odor and after closing your black tank, add deodorant. This is typically when the smell is at its worst.

As I said before, always dump your black tank first and your grey tank second. In that way, your grey tank will flush out anything your black tank may have left in the sewer line.

Never under any circumstances leave your grey and black tanks open at the same time. This will cause the tanks to mix, which would be catastrophic.

How to Unclog Your Toilet

The culprit to most toilet clogs is your toilet paper. If you frequently have issues with this, switch your toilet paper brand to something that will better disintegrate. Or maybe see a doctor, I don't know.

Unclogging an RV toilet can be pretty simple: Boil a pot (or 2, or 3) of hot water and pour it down your drain. This will breakdown the toilet paper and help clear the drain. Hold your breath while doing this folks, so as to not pass out from the foul stench it unleashes.

If this doesn't work, toss some baking soda and vinegar into the toilet bowl and flush it down, then pour the boiling water down the drain.

RV CLUBS & MEMBERSHIPS

Before we started RVing, I didn't know RV memberships were a thing. Really, I didn't know full-time RVing before retirement was a thing.

We jumped into full-timing with little knowledge or experience in the RV world. Our goal was not to be RVers. Our goal was to visit all fifty states. Turns out, buying an RV was the most affordable way to make this happen. And so we bought a fixer upper off of Craigslist, planned our route, and took off four days after our wedding.

Because it took us so long to pack up the RV and hit the road on that first day, we knew we wouldn't end up arriving at a campground until after camp offices closed at five pm. Instantly we were faced with an unforeseen problem: How do you check into a campground if there is no one there?

Before we left Texas to head west, we joined only one RV membership at the suggestion of a friend: Passport America. We had no idea how to use it or how it all worked.

I found a campground near our destination using Passport America's app and gave them a call. The woman in the office told me to find any open site and set up camp for the night. She said to drop by in the morning after the office opened and pay for our stay. We were shocked by this for a few reasons:

She wasn't worried at all about us not paying.

She accepted our Passport America discount (50% off) without asking for a member number.

This campground with wifi, a heated pool, and a hot tub cost \$19. Instantly, I fell in love with Passport America. (Really I'll fall in love with any campground that offers a hot tub).

I'm all about saving money on the road, so RV memberships are high on my list of things worth paying for each year. In this post, I'll break down the most popular five RV memberships, their benefits, how much they cost, and if I think they are worth it.

The Top Five RV Memberships (based on popularity)

- Good Sam
- Passport America
- Escapees
- Thousand Trails
- Harvest Hosts

Good Sam Club

Good Sam Club is Good Sam's reward program (a separate fee from their insurance, roadside assistance, and any other services).

Benefits

- 10% off camping fees at participating campgrounds
- Over 2,100 participating campgrounds
- Up to 30% savings at Camping World
- 3¢ off the gallon at Pilot and Flying J

Cost

- \$27 annually
- \$50 for two years
- \$69 for three years

The Problem with Good Sam

Good Sam is one of those companies people love to talk crap about. This is especially true with RV park owners. As a user, I'm grateful that most RV parks right off the highway are part of Good Sam. The discount isn't much, but having the little Good Sam icon on their RV park makes me more likely to choose that park over other nearby campgrounds.

However, here's what I've heard from park owners: RV park owners pay thousands of dollars to be listed on Good Sam Club's website and in their phone book of listings. Not even for big ads promoting the park, just to have their name as part of the database. That's RIDICULOUS amounts of money parks are conned into paying—especially since most RVers do not go to [GoodSamClub.com/travel/campgroundsandrmparks](https://www.GoodSamClub.com/travel/campgroundsandrmparks) to search for a place to stay.

Here's where it gets worse: GS assigns a three-part ranking to every participating park. It rates the facilities, the restrooms, and the appeal. After talking to multiple RV park owners, these numbers directly correlate to how much the RV park pays Good Sam for advertising.

Take the ratings at a recent park we visited, for example:



Good Sam says this park should be super awesome, but the reviews by actual RVers are terrible. Basically, Good Sam is the Yelp of the RV world.

Oh, my other problem with Good Sam: they send you mail. Like, a TON of mail. All of which are trying to upsell you on their other services—even services you already use. They send me mail at least once a week trying to sell me products of theirs that I already own and trying to convince me to buy more. SO ANNOYING.

Is Good Sam Club worth it?

If the average price of an RV park is \$35, you save \$3.50 per night with Good Sam. This means you'll need to use your GS membership discount for at least a week of camping to make back your investment before you actually start saving money.

We used our Good Sam discount for less than ten nights this past summer—most notably for a week-long stay at Nugget RV Park. While we loved this particular RV park and have stayed here twice after leaving Glacier National Park, when it comes to saving money on the road, Good Sam isn't a great investment.

We've used Good Sam for nearly three years and I highly doubt it's saved us more than \$5 in that time frame. The 10% discount isn't

enough to make a huge difference. (However, I definitely recommend Good Sam's Roadside Assistance which has saved us hundreds of dollars.)

Passport America

Passport America is the 50% Discount Camping Club.

Benefits

- 50% off camping fees at participating campgrounds
- Nearly 2,000 participating campgrounds
- Easy-to-use mobile app
- Affiliate referral program

Cost

- \$44 annually
- \$79 for two years
- \$109 for three years

The Problem with Passport America

Passport America parks have a reputation for not being very nice. We've definitely stayed at some trashy \$12 parking lots that call themselves RV parks. However, we've also stayed at a bunch of RV resorts with pools, hot tubs, good wifi, game rooms, and all the perks that come with resort RV parks. The good thing about Passport America is that you can really easily view amenities. You cannot however see real reviews like you can with Good Sam.


Here's Passport America's webpage for Valencia Travel Village, the RV park where we always stay when we visit LA:

Valencia Travel Village

27946 Henry Mayo Rd (Hwy 126)
Castaic, CA 91384
US
No Toll Free Number
Local: (661) 257-3333

Normal Price(s): \$55.00 *
PA rate(s): \$27.50 *

Join Now and Start Saving!

 1.76 miles from exit
173 from I-5

*Note: This is the closest exit based on our data. [CLICK HERE](#) to view the RV Park's directions.



Valencia Travel Village Amenities



I can easily see on their website (or on their app) that this park has a pool, hot tub, golf, tennis, a playground, and more. They even offer security, so I know this will be nicer than most RV parks out there. If you pay attention to these icons, you can get a good idea of what an RV park will be like before you arrive.

But again, PA does not have any reviews or any way to directly read real customer reviews to give you a better sense of what the RV park is like.

Is Passport America worth it?

Passport America pays for itself in two nights, or even with one use if you use it in California where it pays for itself pretty much instantly. Hands down, every single RVer should join Passport America. We've saved hundreds of dollars over the past 2+ years because of PA.

But you shouldn't just join Passport America to save money. PA is also a great way to make money on the road.

Passport America offers \$10 affiliate commissions for all referrals. So, if you [use my link to sign up for Passport America](#), I earn \$10 for referring you. For Heath and I, this is a great way for us to promote a product we use constantly and also make a little extra cash. Plus, if you sign up a campground for Passport America, you can earn up to \$100 for the referral (but Heath and I have never done this). Anyone who uses PA will have their own affiliate link, so you can make money this way too!

If you want join Passport America and start saving money on camping fees, I'd be over the moon if you [used our referral link here](#).

Escapees

Escapees RV Club is a support network for Rvers.

Benefits

- Support network with answers to basic RVer questions
- Travel guides
- Job center for finding work on the road
- Mail service & domicile options (additional fee)
- Rallies

Cost

- \$39.95/annually
- \$850 for lifetime

The Problem with Escapees

I joined Escapees thinking that it was another RV park discount program. They do have some RV parks that offer Escapees members discounts, but Escapees is more about community and life on the road than about saving money.

If you're looking for another discount program, this is not the place to look. Here's what their website says: There are nineteen Escapees parks located from Washington State to Florida with unique options and nearly 1,000 commercial RV parks that offer a 15-50% discount.

However, I couldn't easily find a place where these RV parks are listed and found this confusing.

Is Escapees worth it?

Finding community and connecting to other RVers on the road is not easy. We are often asked how to meet other RVers and how to combat loneliness on the road.

Escapees offers meet-ups and rallies all across the country as a way to help connect RVers. There are 11 rallies being hosted this month alone.

Plus, they have hundreds of articles and videos on their website to answer all of your RV-related questions—which is great for new RVers. This is especially helpful when it comes to needing quick maintenance advice you can trust.

If you are new to RVing, Escapees is a great membership for helping you learn more about the ins and outs of RVing and connect with other full-timers.

Plus, they also have “Xcapers” for younguns like Heath and I. If you’re a “young” RVer (basically if you’re under 50, you’re young) then this is another great way to meet RVers who are not retirees. No offense retirees, but it’s nice to meet working-age RVers too 😊

*If you join Escapees, will you let them know we referred you? When signing up, just choose “Heath and Alyssa Padgett” from the drop down menu.

[You can snag an Escapees membership here.](#)

Thousand Trails

Thousand Trails offers a slightly different kind of membership club. For a larger upfront fee, you can camp without charge for up to 14 or 30 days at a time (depending on the level of membership you purchase) at participating Thousand Trails campgrounds.

Benefits

- 86 campgrounds in five “zones” across the country
- “Free” camping in your selected zone

Cost

- \$545 annually

The Problem with Thousand Trails

Just to upfront here: I rarely heard a good thing about Thousand Trails. I’ve heard it can difficult to work with, confusing, poor customer service, and not great parks.

In fact, we recently met with a few members of the PR team at Equity Lifestyle Properties, the company who owns Thousand Trails and Encore Resorts. They let us know they are in the process of renovating and updating many of their parks to make them better destinations.

We visited three of their parks during our recent visit to the Florida Keys and they were all amazing. Hopefully this means that the brand is improving as a whole and will be a better deal for RVers in the future.

Is Thousand Trails worth it?

Probably not. The idea behind Thousand Trails is awesome. You pay an annual fee, you can at their locations for free all year, you save thousands of dollars on lodging and save time researching campgrounds.

It sounds like a great way to save money, and if the company was more well-run, then it might be. However, I do not recommend buying Thousand Trails, just based on the current reviews.

[Here is more in depth review on Thousand Trails](#) from some friends at Ditching Suburbia who we know and trust.

Harvest Hosts

Harvest Hosts is a unique RV membership that allows campers to park their RV for free (for one night) at select wineries, vineyards, breweries, farms and museums.

Benefits

- One free night of camping
- Good way to meet locals
- 500+ locations

Cost

- \$40 annually

The Problem with Harvest Hosts

When you're parking at HH sites, you likely won't have hookups of any kind. Plus, in accordance with Harvest Hosts setup, participating business owners typically will only allow you to stay for one night.

However, I know from lots of friends that the nicer you are (and the more wine, beer, etc. you buy), the more likely it is that you'll be allowed to stay longer.

Is Harvest Hosts worth it?

In one night, Harvest Hosts theoretically pays for itself.

However, the idea behind HH is that you camp for free (saving yourself at least \$35) in exchange for purchasing products. Since most participating HH businesses are wineries or breweries, this is a great way to immerse yourself in the local area and try local flavors.

However, buying a couple bottles of wine will easily run you more than the cost of campsite.

For just saving money, this isn't the best membership. Your lodging costs will go down, but your spending will likely go up. However, for meeting people, exploring a local area, and having a good night of food and drink, HH is awesome!

PACKING LIST

Let's make this RV feel homey! You're probably moving out of what we full-timers call a "sticks-n-bricks", AKA a building with walls and a foundation. You will have to store, sell, donate, or trash a lot of your belongs. I know, it's hard. But it's worth it.

When Heath first moved into our RV, he filled every cabinet on his own. This was after selling, donating, and taking stuff back to his parents house.

Then he remembered he still had a wife to move in (and that she would be supplying everything for the kitchen). He had to take out all of his belongings and cut the pile in half. This is typical for most people moving into an RV. You own more than you think and you need less than you think.

Downsizing can be a long, emotional process for many people.

To make your life easier, I've included a packing list based on two people. This will help you trim the fat of what you do and don't need.

KITCHEN

Utensils

- Pot with lid (1)
- Skillets (1 large, 1 small)
- 9x13 cake pan
- Pizza pan (Standard cookie sheet will likely be too large for an RV oven)
- Bread pan/Casserole dish
- Mixing bowls (2)
- Colander
- Cutting board
- Spatulas (2)
- Mixing spoons (2)
- Tongs (2)
- Whisk
- Set of measuring cups and spoons (1)
- Pizza cutter
- Peeler
- Wine/bottle opener
- Wine stopper
- Basic silverware set for eight
- Oven mitts (2)
- Food storage clips (4)
- Plates (6)
- Bowls (6)
- Coffee mugs (4)
- Travel tumblers (4)
- Cups (8)
- Reusable water bottles (2)
- Tupperware, assorted sizes (12)
- Ziploc bags - sandwich and gallon size

Cleaning Supplies

- Dish rack
- Paper towel holder

- Paper towels (2)
- Dish soap
- Dish brush
- Sponge
- Kitchen towels (8)
- Fly swatter

Appliances

- Coffee maker (We use an espresso machine and a French press for when we don't have electric hook ups)
- Blender
- Electric can opener
- Toaster
- Slow cooker or [InstaPot](#)

Staples

- Basic spices (Salt, garlic, cumin, etc.)
- Oil
- Vinegar
- Baking Soda
- Sugar
- Coffee
- Tea

Etc, etc, based on your family's dietary preferences.

BATHROOM

The Basics

- Shampoo (1)⁵
- Conditioner (1)
- Body wash (his and hers)
- Lotion
- Hair spray
- Washcloths (4)
- Towels (6)

⁵ If you don't plan on showering in your RV, I recommend two sets of shampoo and conditioner, one for each spouse when using bathhouses.

- Beach towels (2)
- Baby wipes
- Shaving cream
- Razor(s)
- Tooth brushes
- Toothpaste
- First aid kit
- Hair dryer
- Cotton balls and cotton swabs
- Hand soap
- Sunscreen

Cleaning Supplies

- Toilet cleaner (septic safe)
- [Toilet deodorizer](#)
- All-purpose cleaner
- Trash can
- Toilet brush

LIVING/DINING ROOM

Entertainment/Hobbies

- Books⁶
- Movies (packed in a CD case)
- Extra cords (USB, iPhone, etc.)
- Atlas
- Atomic clock
- Suitcases (2)⁷

Basic Office Supplies

- Envelopes
- Thank you cards
- Printer paper
- Spiral notebook
- Tape (masking, duct, scotch)
- Pens
- Dry erase markers
- Scissors
- Headphones

- Hard drives

Important Records

- Passports
- Tax files
- Insurance paperwork
- Vehicle registration
- Maintenance records

BEDROOM

- Bedding
- Pillows
- Throw blankets (2)
- [Mattress topper](#), RV mattresses are seriously bad
- Backpack/laptop bag (2)
- Duffel bag
- Clothing
- Battery powered fan (for boondocking)
- Space heater

What NOT to Pack

You know what clothes and essentials you'll need. Here's what you really don't need:

- More than one coat
- More than one sweatshirt
- More than one suit
- More than one nice dress
- More than one pair of high heels
- More than two purses
- More than two swimsuits

⁶ We carry some physical books, but rely primarily on our Kindles.

⁷ We store our suitcases under our booth. Under the bed is another good option.

Under storage

- [Drinking water hose](#) (50 ft)
- [Sewer hoses](#) (3, assorted lengths)
- [Sewage Tracks](#)
- [30 AMP extension cord](#)
- [50/30 AMP adapter](#)
- Tool box
- Extra screwdrivers
- Tire pressure gauge
- Poncho
- Folding chairs (4)
- [Leveling blocks for your jacks](#)
- Water shoes

Required for Extra Fun:

- Bicycles
- [Kayaks, inflatable](#) for easy storage
- Grill
- [Hammock](#)
- [A good camera](#)



EPILOGUE

Sometimes I can't believe that I live and travel in an RV full-time. Sometimes my parents can't believe it either.

Traveling these past three years with Heath, we've had the best time of our lives. We visited over a dozen national parks, many of which we had never heard of before. We've swam in the Pacific and the Atlantic and we even dipped our toes in the glacial lakes of northern Canada.

We've done so many things that never would've been possible without our RV and a little sense of wanderlust.

If you're thinking about RV travel, just do it. Do it now so that like us, you can make all the retirees in the RV park scratch their heads and assume we are some weird online millionaires or hippies (I'm happily neither).

I've heard a lot of opinions on my lifestyle in the past few years, but this comment—that I hear often—is my favorite:

“You're so smart to do this now. I wish I had started sooner.”

Start sooner. Jump in. Take a risk. You're already better off than me, the girl who blew up her fridge.



RAPID FIRE Q&A

In case I didn't mention it or you just need a refresher, here's 24 quick answers to the top questions people ask us.

1. What RV should I buy?

I don't care. Whatever one you like. It's your house dude.

2. What manufacturer should I buy? Which ones should I avoid?

Winnebago and Coachman are the brands we've purchased and both are high quality and highly durable. Thor has the worst reputation (and the best prices, of course) and I would never recommend them. (My friend's cabinets literally fell from the ceiling and crashed into his floor while he was driving. They are cheap for a reason, folks.)

3. Why did you choose a motorhome?

We didn't own a truck to tow a trailer and we didn't want a truck payment. Plus since we visited all 50 states in our first year, we wanted something that was easy to get up and go. That meant a Class C rig with no slide-outs.

4. Did Winnebago give you your RV for free?

No. I wish.

5. How can I convince [RV manufacturer] to give me a free RV?

You won't. Most companies ignore these types of requests. Heck, Winnebago turned down the Kardashians. If they aren't getting a free rig, you won't either.

6. How do you get packages?

I send them to the RV park here I'm staying when applicable, or to the UPS store for pick up (\$5 fee).

7. How do you receive checks or get paid?

When people pay us by check, we give them my parents' address. I wouldn't risk sending checks to an RV park unless I know we are going to be there for a while. (Why is it that it takes longer for checks to arrive than any other mail?!)

If a physical check isn't necessary, we have clients pay us via Paypal, Cash app, or Venmo.

8. How do you get internet?

Black market. Let me know if you need a hook up at info@heathandalysa.com.

9. How do you watch the Cowboys' games?

I don't think I ever covered cable hook ups in this guide, probably because it's not 2002 and I don't watch live television. Most RVs will have a coax cable hookup and an antenna. 99% of RV parks will offer basic cable, and some will offer more. You'll need to supply your own cable cord, but you'll be able to watch football all weekend long.

10. What's your MPG?

Depressing, that's what it is. Somewhere in the 7-9 range.

11. Does your RV have a bathroom?

Would I live in it if it didn't?

12. A shower?

See above.

13. How do you do laundry?

I've never visited an RV park without laundry services available. Many campgrounds offer this too. I once watched a moose and her two babies walk by while washing clothes in Denali National Park.

14. Do you need a special license to drive a motorhome?

For most rigs, no. It has to do with weight and state law. Likely, you won't have to worry about this.

15. How do you cook meals?

Our rig has a three-burner stove and an oven big enough to fit a 13x9 pan. I can cook anything in our rig, including roasting a whole chicken, steaming vegetables, popping homemade popcorn, and making lots and lots of tacos. So far the only thing I haven't mastered is chocolate chip cookies. I did make a killer funfetti cake last week for our anniversary, so it's time I give cookies another try. The key is to line the bottom of your pan with foil so the flame of the propane oven doesn't crisp the bottom of your food!

16. Do you ever feel unsafe?

Nah. RV parks are different than trailer parks. RV parks are typically destinations for retirees or families. The most unsafe I have ever felt was when we camped in Yellowstone with all our windows open and I was pretty sure a bear was going to smell me and break down the door to eat me. Never happened though.

17. Where do you park the RV when you fly?

[I wrote a whole post on this](#), because there are a lot of options and I know the secret to free RV storage.

18. Do you really stay in Walmart parking lots?

Yep, typically when we are breaking up drive days and can't find an RV park. You can level the jacks, pop out the slides, invite 20 friends over

for a BBQ, and Walmart could care less. The law on this, however, is county based. There will be posted signs if you cannot stay overnight. All Stays is a great (\$10) app that will let you know about Walmarts, Cabelas, Sam's, Kmarts, Lowes, etc. that allow overnight parking in your area.

19. What do you to make money on the road?

I run our blog, Youtube channel, and video production company. I do a lot of freelance film editing in addition to bringing on clients for film work. Heath runs [The RV Entrepreneur podcast](#) and is launching [CampgroundBooking.com](#) a software startup.

20. Can you take [insert job here] on the road?

Probably, yes. Unless you're a nanny. That would be kidnapping.

For more on working on the road and how to do it, check out Heath's podcast where he [interviews entrepreneurs who travel full-time in their RV](#).

21. Do you ever get tired of living in a small space?

I miss a bathtub and dishwasher, but the small space has never bothered me.

22. How often do you boondock versus staying in RV parks?

Totally depends on the part of the country. Boondocking is easier in the west and the south where there are more wide open places. We love boondocking, but sometimes it's nice to have electricity and endless water. However, we've spent the past two months in RV parks, and we are beyond ready for some open spaces on BLM land.

23. Where can you boondock?

Here's two resources that will help:

- **All Stays app.**

It'll cost \$10 and save you that money a million times over.

• [Campendium.com](https://www.campendium.com)

This is a free website that will give you reviews and coordinates of free (and paid) sites. There are RV park listings here too, but it's the best place I've found for reliable listings for BLM (Bureau of Land Management) or National Forest land.

24. How do you stay in shape on the road?

We had a Planet Fitness membership during our first year on the road because they have the most locations nationwide and it's only \$20/month to access all their gyms. Now we have our kayaks and bikes and hiking boots to keep us active!

25. Will you travel when you have kids?

I don't know the future.

26. How long do you stay in one place?

It totally depends. We usually move every three to four nights or weekly during the summer and opt for 1-3 month stays in the fall and winter months.

27. What's your favorite state?

California is the most beautiful AND the most RV-unfriendly. But they have the perfect blend of ocean, mountains, and desert. Runners up are: Alaska, Vermont, and Maine.

28. What's the best road trip in America?

1. The Florida Keys
2. The Road to Alaska
3. Pacific Coast Highway



**FOR MORE
RVING INFO,**

**CHECK OUT OUR WEBSITE:
HEATHANDALYSSA.COM**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In 2014, my husband Heath somehow convinced me to move into an RV with him after I convinced him to travel to all 50 states with me. That's how we've spent our entire marriage.

I'm a film producer, travel blogger, and the chief navigator and co-pilot of our Winnebago. I won't get out of bed until Heath brings me coffee and I eat at least one taco a day. I love hiking, kayaking, and never spending more than a week with the same view out my bedroom window.

I fully plan on RVing world-wide and I have no plans on stopping traveling any time soon.

Want to stay in touch? Here's a few ways we can connect:

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