

A scenic landscape featuring a river flowing through a valley. In the foreground, there is a large pile of driftwood on a sandy bank. The river is surrounded by a dense forest of evergreen trees. In the background, there are large, rugged mountains with patches of snow or light-colored rock. The sky is a pale, hazy blue.

# The Ultimate Adventure:

what happens when you drive your marriage  
across the country

# *The Ultimate Adventure:*

what happens when you drive your  
marriage across the country

**Alyssa Padgett**

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Photo taken at Avalanche Lake, Glacier National Park, Montana

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Created in the United States of America

I've never been known to have crazy, adventurous ideas.

I did try to go camping once in college in an effort to be adventurous, but I lasted one night on the cold hard ground and woke up the next morning with the flu. Well, I don't know if woke up is the right phrase, because I'm certain that sleep never actually happened, but I was sick as a dog the next morning nonetheless. I considered the trip a success since I did at least sign up for the trip at all and sleep one night in a tent. Certainly that's more adventurous than most people.

But I quickly learned my lesson, tucking the experience back in my mind as a reminder the next time I had the inkling to go backpacking or hike Machu Picchu or try something daring.

I did read a book once where a man hiked to the bottom of the Grand Canyon and back even though he was overweight and out of shape. I thought that was really

inspiring. I could do that. It's just a lot of walking. But then he talked about how cold it was at the bottom of the canyon and how he thought his toes would freeze off and I remembered that night I tried camping.

Maybe those extreme adventures aren't for me.

Adventures for me could be more like going to the lake or road tripping down to San Marcos to float the river. Small adventures that make a weekend memorable, but don't push me too far out of my comfort zone. At least not like that weekend camping did.

I remember waking up the next morning and trying to tell my friends in the sleeping bags next to me that I didn't feel well in between spasms of coughing. I had some sips of hot water to soothe my throat, but I knew I couldn't backpack all day as I planned.

I felt a wave of relief wash over me as I told the leaders that I needed to go home, thanking my lucky stars that I volunteered to drive my own car. I concluded my adventurous weekend back on my couch with a Gossip Girl marathon, which is how I would've spent my entire weekend anyway if I hadn't decided to attempt adventure.

It's a nice escape to hear stories of people taking these amazing risks and completing insurmountable feats. Good for them. But I couldn't even camp for one measly night. I'd rather leave the big adventures to the people capable of actually finishing them, the people who are destined to lead fun, adventurous lives that can handle camping and the outdoors.

Then I met my husband.

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"I don't know if it's a good idea. You've only been dating for a week," my sister texted back to me.

Heath had just called inviting me to join his family in Colorado for a week of skiing, or snowboarding in my case. I quickly texted all of my closest friends, asking for their opinion. My sister had a point. A week is not a long time to suddenly spend a week in a cabin with your new boyfriend and his parents.

But I loved the thrill of it. My camping misadventure was months behind me now and the adventure bug caught up with me again. Besides, I would be sleeping in a real bed in the mountains, not a tent.

In less than 24 hours, I could buy a plane ticket and jet off to Denver for a week off of work to enjoy the slopes. Heath was a rather convincing guy. I let him borrow my favorite book on the long drive from Austin to Colorado—a book by the same author who hiked the Grand Canyon—and he used quotes from the story to squash my arguments against the adventure.

"All you have to do is ask your boss if you can have the rest of the week off," he challenged. "It's Spring Break! You're the only one working anyway. Just ask him, if that's what's holding you back. If he says no, that's fine, but don't be scared to ask."

He had a point. I didn't worry about the cost or the potential awkwardness of a week with relative strangers. I was more worried to abandon my new job. I had

responsibilities and duties. I couldn't just pick up and leave.

I wrote an email to my boss late that Sunday night, after a long persuasive conversation with Heath. I wrote that my family decided to go skiing for Spring Break and invited me spur of the moment. I suppose that white lie became self-fulfilling prophecy since by the end of the year, Heath proposed, inviting me into his family. But I was too chicken to tell my boss that my boyfriend of six days invited me on vacation with his family and I said yes. If I told him that, he would probably fire me on the spot for being insane! Or so I imagined.

The next morning in the office, after my boss kindly encouraged me to spend time with my family, I called my mom.

"Mom, I'm buying a ticket to Denver."

She laughed.

"Why?"

I explained the whole story, adding in that I lied to my boss, you know, just in case my boss called her and needed my story corroborated.

Much to my surprise, my mom said this, "If you have the money to fly up there and ski for a week, go for it! It sounds like a lot of fun."

Naturally, she then added, "Are you bringing him home for Easter? We want to meet this boy who is whisking you off to Colorado."

Heath and I fell in love that week. I'd like to think of that week as the defining moment of our lives together. I know it was love because he only laughed half of the time

when I fell off of the ski lift and the other half of the time he just smiled and threatened to video me falling the next time around—but he always helped me up to my feet.

Heath introduced me to a life of adventure—adventures sans tents and camping gear. That first adventure in the mountains was so spontaneous. So unexpected and so not me. I spent most of my time on my couch at home. But Heath drew out the part of me that desired adventure and whimsy.

In our brief time dating, we visited 14 states together. Now that I think of it, we visited every single southern state in between Florida and California. We even spent the week of Christmas exploring a snow-covered New York City.

We talked of one day becoming writers, a dream we both shared, and living a life that allowed us to travel whenever we wanted. But then we would look at our bank accounts, go back to our day jobs, and keep our dreams simmering on the back burner.

We hated those months working jobs that didn't fit us, doing work that was too mindless or boring. We wanted to do more! We were capable of more, dreaming of more. But looking back, we needed to fuel up on discontent. Discontent from working a boring, unfulfilling job. Discontent from not getting any closer to my dreams. Discontent from not having enough money or enough time to travel the way I wanted to. Discontent from feeling like everyone out there was just as discontent as me, but none of us knew our way out of it.

Discontent is a wonderful motivator, reminding us



constantly of the importance of dreaming. If I hadn't so many months of discontentment stored up, I would've quit on my dreams a long time ago. Probably once I realized the benefits of living your dream include happiness and never knowing if you can pay your bills.

But Heath pushed me to fight for my dreams and I encouraged him too. And that's where our adventures really begin.

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Months before he proposed marriage, Heath proposed moving to California. He popped the question on a 100+ degree day, a common experience during Texas summers. Citing the beaches and cooler temperatures, we pinky-promised. In one year, by July 2<sup>nd</sup>, we would be married and move to California.

It wasn't until Heath actually proposed that we began thinking of what moving to California would look like. Since our promise, we had heard lots of good things about Portland and Nashville, those could be great places to move also. Anywhere north of Dallas would really do the trick in our effort to ditch a triple digit summer.

Not wanting to limit ourselves, we came up with five possible states to live: California, Oregon, Colorado, Tennessee, and North Carolina. Each state offered either mountains or beaches to keep us cool and each state had a reputation for beauty. Any one of those five would be a great place to move.

In preparing for marriage at 23, our premarital

counselor encouraged our plans to move during our first year of marriage. A year far from the familiarity of family and the comfort of Austin would force us to grow together. All we needed to do now was pick a place.

Not one to compromise, Heath found a solution one afternoon in his office and gave me a call.

"Let's live in each place for one month. California in June after the wedding, then Oregon, Colorado, and across to Tennessee and North Carolina. Then we'll come back to Texas if we want, or move to whichever place we like the best. We can rent out Airbnbs or Homeaways for a month and then drive to the next place."

I'm not sure what made me agree that afternoon. Perhaps his well-thought-out proposition or the fact that he called me right before ducking into a meeting, not giving me time to argue. But I said yes.

A five-month adventure seemed perfect. We would be married in May, escape summer, and be home in time for Thanksgiving. We didn't know how we would pay for it, but we could get online jobs and work part-time to tithe us over for money. Any job we worked while living a life of adventure would be better than staying home and working 9-5 to start off marriage.

Heath and I both have long, lofty bucket lists. His list says terrifying things like skydiving and mine says ridiculous things like run a marathon. Heath wants to donate a million dollars all at once and I want to visit Pompeii in Italy.

As with most bucket lists, most of the things we listed

sound impossible or expensive. Between student loan debt and the fact that I've never run a day in my life, most things on our list appear out of reach.

Regardless of how likely everything on our list is, we aren't crossing it off until we accomplish it. We decided this one afternoon sitting on the patio of a Mexican restaurant sharing a bowl of queso. We want to be people of action. In our lives, and more importantly, together in our marriage, we want to act. We want to do and accomplish what feels impossible. That meant taking our bucket lists seriously and making conscious choices to help us accomplish those lofty goals, goals like filming a documentary, writing a book, and visiting all fifty states.

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For weeks, I kept hearing about this book called *Packing Light* on Twitter. I saw a tweet saying "Download for free from NoiseTrade, today only!" and decided to figure out what the hype was all about. I downloaded the audio book, and began listening while I drove.

I immediately resonated with the author. Reserved, dreaming of adventure but not adventurous, loved to write, and stuck working a job that didn't fulfill her. This was a book by me! An adventurous friend suggested the two of them go on a road trip to all fifty states and after talking herself out of it half a dozen times, the duo eventually hit the road and toured the country over the next six months.

I felt like I was reading the story of my life, except she was living the adventure. She visited all of the places I'd

only seen photos of on Pinterest. She talked about camping out and I shuddered at the thought of sleeping in tents, but admired her guts. She wasn't an adventurer before, but she became one.

When I finished the book, I thought I'd hear about how during her months of blogging on the road, her writing talent was discovered, and she landed her book deal. She admitted that she imagined it would happen that way too. Instead, she found herself back home in Portland, collecting food stamps, and working at Starbucks trying to make ends meet.

Her ending gave me overflowing confidence. Obviously her hard work in writing a book finally paid off eventually, otherwise I couldn't have read it. Her success didn't come quickly and easily, but now she's living her dream as a writer.

If Heath and I took five months to live in a few states across the country, the worst that I could imagine happening is us living on food stamps, working part time jobs, and fighting to make ends meet. Life wouldn't be as easy or comfortable as it was when we both worked full-time, but the worst-case scenario sounded better than living our lives away chained to desks and file folders.

Once I accepted this fate, I made a decision. Heath and I would go to all fifty states. A few months of adventure would far surpass the possible outcome. Fear wouldn't hold me back this time. I could see the worst that could happen and if this author could make it through food stamps and moving back home, we could make it too.

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“What if instead,” I asked nervously, “we just went to all fifty states?”

“All fifty?”

“Yeah. The way you planned it, we’d be driving from Oregon to North Carolina, we might as well hit every state in between. When else would we ever go to North Dakota?” I reasoned. “We both want to go to all 50 states together, why not do it now? What do you think?”

Heath agreed with excitement. I loved that about him. He’s always excited. I would’ve need more convincing, but Heath was eager to jump into our marriage with adventure.

After reading *Packing Light*, I knew traveling to all fifty states during our first year of marriage would be an easy accomplishment. The only thing we truly needed was money and time.

After quitting our office jobs to chase our adventure, we had plenty of time to spare, but no income. Suddenly without work two months out from our wedding, it struck us. Traveling across all fifty states for 200 days could get boring. That’s how long I calculated that it would take to drive the lower 48—seven whole months. If we left a couple days after our wedding day in May, we would be back in Texas just in time for Christmas. We had no idea how we would visit Hawaii and Alaska, but those would be the reward states to visit after our long road trip.

We needed a mission for our travels. Adventure for adventure’s sake can only take you so far. We needed a

larger goal than just crossing visiting 50 states off our bucket list.

“What if I worked a different job in all fifty states?” Heath asked me one day.

“This is our honeymoon, Heath. You can’t work through our entire honeymoon!” I argued. Our honeymoon would be unorthodox, but I certainly didn’t want it to be filled with long hours and the monotony of work. It needed to be risky and full of excitement!

So Heath took his idea to work across the country and turned it into the premise for a documentary that we would film together. He would work one job for one day in each state and I would film the adventure of it all. He even found us a sponsor to provide the finances to keep us on the road. We didn’t know much about film or much about how to work across the country, but it was another adventure to pursue together.

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I’m not sure where the idea of an RV came into the picture. It might’ve been when I realized that if we wanted to take my car to save money, then we would have to sleep in the car or in a tent, because we couldn’t afford hotels. We could try couch surfing, but that sounded like a terrible way to spend your first seven months of marriage.

I didn’t know anything about RVs. Once when I was probably seven or so, I rode in my grandparents RV from Dallas all the way to Georgia where my mom’s family all lived. I don’t remember much except that I slept like a baby

in the bed even though my grandpa drove us all through the night. Plus, it was cool that you could go to the bathroom while you were driving down the road.

So when Heath said we could afford to buy an RV on Craigslist, I didn't know what to think. A house on wheels seemed expensive and like a lot of work. Plus, no part of me wanted to drive a house on wheels, or a 'wheel home' as my niece affectionately calls them.

Heath, whose grandparents also traveled in an RV, constantly called his papa for advice while he scoured the Internet for a deal. Finally, after weeks of searching on one rainy, cold morning in April, we found the ideal RV posted on Craigslist, right in our price range. No leak damage, a new transmission, but most importantly, the owners had two young kids who they took camping often, which meant they kept the rig in good condition.

After taking the wheel home for a test drive and deciding we would need to add a mattress to our wedding registry, we struck a deal with the owners and went to the bank to withdraw the cash. All in less than six hours.

If our RV would've died on our trip, we would've cursed our hasty purchase. I had never spent so much money in my life, let alone all in one day on one thing. But Franklin, as we named our wheel home, stayed good to us on the road, racking up only a couple grand in repairs, despite being over 20 years old.

He was an investment. The road ahead would be full of adventure, but also full of newlywed fights and breakdowns. But we invested in an RV to keep us going

when the roads were rough. (Which by the way, the roads in New Jersey are *very* rough.)

When I went camping, I left the next morning with a cough and back pain from sleeping on the ground. I was camping only a couple hours away from my apartment and the weekend trip cost me a mere \$25. It was an easy decision to drive home that morning and forego the rest of the weekend.

Franklin would keep us going when the thrill of adventure wore off and we were left sitting in a thunderstorm in Omaha for the third night in a row. We invested thousands of dollars in our RV. It wasn't the prettiest RV or the newest, but it was our home. Our home that would take us across the country.

Our wedding day was only a month away when Franklin found us, leaving us with only a few weeks to finish planning the wedding, move all of our stuff together into the RV, and get ready for our honeymoon.

"Seven months in an RV?" People questioned.

"Are you really going to *all* fifty states?" Our friends asked with disbelief.

"What about money? And jobs?" My mom said frantically when I first told her our plan.

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I don't know what most marriages look like when they start. I imagine it's a lot of moving boxes and asking your husband to hang mirrors and picture frames around your new home.



But our marriage started differently. All of those moving boxes didn't move into our home, but into our parents' homes. The shiny KitchenAid mixer. The Pyrex dishes. The beautiful throw pillows. All of our wedding gifts and most of our personal belongings were packed up and shipped home.

We didn't start our marriage with much more than clothes and some dishes. The RV couldn't fit too much more. I think that was a good decision. Less baggage that way.

Instead, we stored up memories. Like when we raced the waves on the beaches in California, or when we broke down ten days into our trip in the desert of Arizona. Or when we hiked to see the waterfalls in Montana and visited Disneyworld for Thanksgiving. Every day was a chance to make a new, lasting memory.

Just like during our spur of the moment week together in Colorado, we fell in love as we traveled thousands of miles of interstate together.

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"We're out of time, but I have to ask real quick. Has this helped or hurt your marriage?"

We crammed everything stressful into our life on the road: traveling full time, learning to live with a new spouse in a small space, learning to work together, and always wondering if you'll make enough money this month to put gas in the RV. But that's what we jumped into during our first year of marriage. It challenged us, it challenged our

marriage, but it forced us to grow together.

Before we even hit the road, people already asked us when we would be back home, back in Texas. After 200 days of travel and new experiences, we made a decision. Actually, after about two weeks of travel, we had made our decision.

We don't want to stop RVing for a long time. It makes us better people. It teaches us to live simply and embrace collecting memories instead of collecting possessions.

The RV can take us anywhere. Our scenery is always changing and as we move, we're reminded that there is adventure everywhere.

So when the news anchor asked us how traveling across the country in an RV for our honeymoon had impacted our marriage, we smiled and said in unison, "Helped!"

## About the Author

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Alyssa Padgett is a writer and film maker. In the past year, Alyssa quit her office job, married her husband, Heath, bought an RV, traveled to 49 of the 50 states of America for her honeymoon. (Alaska June 2015) She picked up a

camera for the first time to film a full-length documentary, *Hourly America*, where her husband worked a differently hourly job in each state. Her story and videos have been featured on CNN, Yahoo, Huffington Post, and Fox News.

You can follow more adventures and stories from Alyssa by subscribing on her website, [alyssapadgett.com](http://alyssapadgett.com).