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Democracy Dies in Darkness

WONKBLOG

1 million Americans live in RVs. Meet the ‘modern nomads.’

Couples who have ditched houses for the open road say it has made them happier — and improved their marriages.



By [Heather Long](#)

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When Robert and Jessica Meinhofer told friends they were moving into an RV in 2015, most thought they were crazy.

The questions poured in: How could they go from living in a 2,000-square-foot home to living in a 250-square-foot trailer? What would they do with their stuff? What would their children, ages 6 and 9, do for school? Was this a midlife crisis? The hardest people to convince were Jessica’s parents, who grew up in an impoverished Latino neighborhood in the Bronx and worked hard so their daughter could have a better life. They couldn’t understand why the couple wanted to live like migrant laborers.

The Meinhofers are doing this by choice, not financial desperation. They are part of a movement of people ditching “sticks and bricks” homes that have long embodied the American Dream and embracing a life of travel, minimal belongings and working when they want.

“We’re a family of four redefining what the American Dream means. It’s happiness, not a four-bedroom house with a two-car garage,” said Robert Meinhofer, who is 45.

The Meinhofers and a dozen others who spoke with The Washington Post about this modern nomadic lifestyle said living in 200 to 400 square feet has improved their marriages and made them happier, even if they’re earning less. There’s no official term for this lifestyle, but most refer to themselves as “full-time RVers,” “digital nomads” or “workampers.”

Most modern nomads need jobs to fund their travels. Jessica Meinhofer works remotely as a government contractor, simply logging in from the RV. Others pick up “gig work” cleaning campsites, harvesting on farms or in vineyards, or filling in as security guards. People learn about gigs by word of mouth, on [Workamper News](#) or Facebook groups like one for [Workampers](#) with more than 30,000 members. Big companies such as Amazon and J.C. Penney even have programs specifically recruiting RVers to help at warehouses during the peak holiday season.

A million Americans live full-time in RVs, according to the RV Industry Association. Some have to do it because they can't afford other options, but many do it by choice. Last year was a record for RV sales, according to the data firm Statistical Surveys. More than 10.5 million households own at least one RV, a jump from 2005 when 7.5 million households had RVs, according to RVIA.

Interest in “RVing” — either full time or on weekends — appears to be picking up, especially among young couples. Half of new sales are going to Americans under 45, and purchases by people of color are rising, RVIA found in its 2016 surveys, a change from the 20th century, when white retirees dominated campsites.

Below, four families — with members ranging in age from 2 to 84 — share their experience of life on the road.

Penni Brink (62) and Chip Litchfield (59) have a “Welcome to Margaritaville” sign outside their RV and the kind of easygoing spirit that immediately draws you in. The couple met in the late 1980s when they were working in the same business complex in Vermont, but Chip was married to someone else at the time. Their paths crossed again a few years ago at a craft fair and as their relationship blossomed, Chip suggested they travel in an RV. Penni was apprehensive at first.

Current location: Tennessee.

Vehicle: 2004 Tiffin Phaeton (They bought it used for \$67,000).

“I made it clear I needed a big fridge in the RV because I like to cook,” Penni said. “And I needed more than a tiny little bathroom.”

Chip took Penni to a used RV lot just to “check it out” in 2015, but they ended up buying a 395-square foot camper they call “Daisy.” They say they love this lifestyle now and have no plans to return to a typical home. Penni is selling her condo in Montpelier because they don’t think they’ll need it anymore. They track how many states they have been to on a map on the side of their RV. The current tally is 25.

“Our goal is to be able to travel and work at the places we travel to so we can stay in areas long enough to get to know a place and see America,” Chip said. “There is so much work out there for us, and we don’t have to make a lot of money.”

Penni hung a “less is more” sign in the RV and has become an expert at cooking on a stove top that’s about a third the size of a typical range. She used to run a small business in Vermont making drapes, blinds and other home decor and still does some work for clients in the RV. She sets up a folding card table for her sewing machine and sends Chip outside to clean the vehicle so she can have more space.

As they travel, they often pick up jobs to earn money since they don't want to tap their modest retirement savings, which they dipped into to buy the RV. Right now, they are working in the Amazon CamperForce program that hires about 700 people for warehouse jobs and pays their campsite fees. It's hard labor — they often go to bed rubbing each other's feet — but the money they earn from September to Dec. 23 is enough to allow them to take the winter and spring off. (Amazon founder and chief executive Jeffrey P. Bezos owns The Washington Post.)

“Being able to travel in my 60s and see all the things I missed in my younger years is the best part of this lifestyle,” Penni said.

Robert Meinhofer (45) and Jessica Meinhofer (40) have been living in their RV for three years and don't have any plans to return to their old life in suburbia.

Current location: Georgia. (Last year they traveled from Maine to Florida for six months).

Vehicle: 2016 Forest River Grey Wolf 26DBH Travel Trailer. (They bought it for \$22,000 and tow it behind a truck).

As they started having kids, Robert and Jessica wanted more time with them than a typical day job would allow. They watched a YouTube video of a family that traveled the country in an RV and thought, why not us?

“We both had full-time jobs. We were doing the 9 to 5 grind. We had the house, but it just didn't fit us quite right. We were just working, working working,” Jessica said. “We were longing for freedom.”

When Robert was offered a job in Atlanta working for an airline, they didn't think they had enough money to buy a “proper house” for their two kids, their dog and their cats. So they decided to take the plunge on the RV lifestyle. Jessica convinced her company to let her work remotely so she could home-school their children and work in the RV anywhere in America. Robert works four days at the airline and then gets four days off, which he spends with his family in the RV.

Jessica warns it's not all fun on the road. “Instead of mowing the lawn, we do maintenance on the RV. Things don't last as long as they do in a house. The level of chores is about the same,” she said, adding that they have to go to the laundromat now. “But it gives us the freedom to be by the beach one day, a mountain the next or a lake. It's made all the difference for us.”

The Meinhofers have met a lot of families with kids on the road, but they haven't encountered many other Latinos. They think there's a perception in some communities of color that doing this means you are destitute. They are trying to inspire others to join them with their YouTube channel, [Exploring the Local Life](#), which has become so popular it is making them money.

Joyce Ann Seid (84) and Steven Seid (77) bought their first RV in 2001 to travel on weekends to see the grandkids and visit casinos and parks. By 2010, they moved into the RV full-time. “We rented our house and wound up getting a bigger RV and then we wound up living in it because we liked it so much,” Steven said. “If we don't like our neighbors, we just pack up and leave.”

Current location: Wichita

Vehicle: 2012 Tiffin Allegro RED Diesel. (They paid \$150,000 at an RV show in 2014).

The couple drive around the country in the warm months and spend the winter in Arizona where they own a lot in a gated RV community.

Steven wanted to go on the road for years, but Joyce said she wouldn't do it unless he made her a home office where she could write a book. Steven gutted the little room in the RV that had a bunk bed and turned it into an office for Joyce that even has a sliding door. Together they remodeled much of the interior, adding sunflowers, a reminder of Joyce's home state of Kansas, and their RV has a washer and dryer.

They mostly live off their retirement money, but they pick up various jobs to help pay for vehicle insurance and RV repairs. Steven worked several years in the Amazon CamperForce program, priding himself on being one of the oldest in the warehouse.

"We're old people, but we hate being retired. We like working," Steven said.

Joyce, a retired professor, jokes that her husband is earning her "Bingo money." She's played — and won — plenty of games in Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma and is quick to point out there is free parking, even for RVs, at many casinos.

The Seids say they love it on the road. When Joyce had a stroke two years ago, friends in the campsite pitched in immediately to help and they were able to get to a hospital quickly.

"This is a great life. We meet the nicest people," Steven said.

Richard Booher (58) and Miranda Booher were debating doing the "small home" lifestyle when a friend advised them, "you don't want a small home, you want an RV." They had never even been in an RV before, but they bought a Hitchhiker in 2016 that attaches to their pickup truck and took their family — five kids and a 10-year-old dog — on the road.

Current location: Tennessee.

Vehicle: 1999 NuWa Hitchhiker Premier (Bought for \$10,000).

"It's been awesome," Richard said as he watched his 5-year-old son Teddy bike around the campsite waving at new neighbors. Later the kids, ranging from 2 to 10, went to the campsite pool and quickly made friends with other families.

The Boohers wanted to show their kids more of America and get closer as a family. Accumulating stuff stopped mattering to them. Instead, they wanted to accumulate experiences. Miranda teaches the kids and is a coach for a Christian organization called Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS) that helps bring moms of young children together for support and fellowship. The Boohers get plugged into a church wherever they go and find lots of activities for the kids between church and the campsites. Teddy and Amy, 7, are eager to show off the Macarena dance skills they picked up at a recent kids party at a campsite.

Richard is working at with the Amazon CamperForce program for the second year. He'll be at the warehouse from September to December. It's very different from his career in IT, but the income allows the family to live this nomadic lifestyle. He earned \$11.50 an hour at a fulfillment center in Murfreesboro, Tenn., which went to \$15 an hour in November.

When the job ends on Christmas Eve, the family heads to Dade City, Fla., to be near old friends for a few weeks before figuring out their next steps. Earlier this year, Richard had a job offer to work at an Amazon return center in Kentucky, so they headed there for a few months.

"The kids have so many friends everywhere we go," Richard said. "You can definitely do this with kids."