

A photograph of a white RV driving on a road, heavily blurred to convey a sense of speed. The background shows a line of evergreen trees under a clear blue sky. A black rectangular box with the word "SAMPLE" in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters is overlaid on the center of the image.

SAMPLE

Roamin' Holiday

The open road! Adventure! Your own bathroom!
Writer **Dick Teresi** trades the simplicity of tents for
RV splendor—and loves every insane minute
(well, except for those waste hookups)



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It was 90 degrees on a June Saturday afternoon, I had no air conditioning at home, and thus I found myself in line at the multiplex. I didn't care about the movie offerings. I cared about the advertised 68-degree climate control in the theater. When I got to the ticket window, I asked for "any movie that's starting *now*." There was but one, *RV*, an alleged comedy that combines two things whose appeal had always eluded me: recreational vehicles (too big) and Robin Williams (too hairy). I vacillated. I thought about Robin's hairy back. I thought about my sweaty back. Chalk up a victory for air conditioning.

I won't bore you with the plot. As I recall, good, or at least mediocrity, triumphs in the end. In the middle, Williams is in a desolate RV camp with his motor home's sewer hose in his hand. Predictable sloppy events ensue because he follows inept advice from his fellow RVers, all of whom are toothless imbeciles.

This took me aback. Yes, this is the long-running stereotype of an RVer: an RC Cola-slurping NASCAR

wannabe, a small evolutionary step up from a protozoan. We view even the well-heeled RV family with derision—people who fear the outdoors so much they take their bathroom, living room, and entertainment center along with them to encounter nature. But this wasn't jibing with the new images I'd been seeing. The Recreation Vehicle Industry Association (RVIA) Go RVing campaign focuses on the outdoors rather than the rolling equipment, and floods the airwaves with ads depicting upmarket thirty-something RVers. The dad is usually a rugged-looking professional. You assume the bulge in his pocket is an advance galley of Alan Greenspan's autobiography. The wife looks like a former supermodel, now spearheading the IPO of a nanotechnology firm. The kids are clearly auditioning to be in a Gap Kids catalog.

Who is the real RVer? The dentally challenged guys from the movie or the sophisticates of the Go RVing commercials? One of the few advantages of being a journalist is that you can beg for stuff in the interest of informing the public. I gave the RVIA a call. Could it help me design a tour through the Northeast that would put me in touch with the new suave RVer? The RVIA said "absolutely" and also persuaded Roadtrek, a Canadian company, to lend me a brand-new motor home for the trip.

What I didn't tell the RVIA is that I was the least likely candidate to give RVers a fair shake. My normal ride is a 3,600-pound stick shift, and last year I put 1,000 more miles on my bicycle than I did on the car. I live in a college town where burning fossil fuels is considered arson, and even our cats are vegetarians. RVers to me were gas-guzzling, spotted-owl-eating wusses...and worse. It was with this attitude that I set off on my trek.

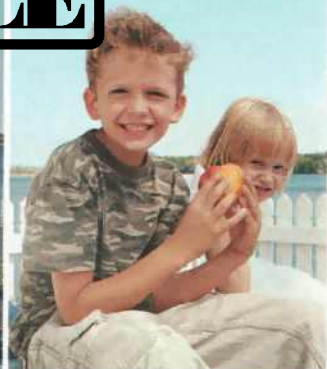
I chose a four-week period spanning August and September. I figured to catch a lot of full-timers in August (people who live in their RVs and spend summers in the North) and a lot of weekend warriors after Labor Day. After a 2,390-mile trek around the Northeast, I believe I know the American RVer pretty well. So who helped me empty my black-water tank? The drunken bumpkin or the radichio-eating CEO? Or is it remotely possible that the movie industry and the PR business both got it wrong? Let's find out.

I meet the camp-ground manager when he yells to stop me from backing my RV into a tree.

the return trip. Built on a Chevrolet Express extended van, expanded sideways, vertically, and lengthwise, with a raised roof and a skylight, the RV looks like a van on steroids. The bulged-out sides make room in back for a king-size bed, an air conditioner, and a DVD player with a flat-screen TV, and, in the middle, a bathroom with a shower, across from a galley with a refriger-



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ator, a stove, a microwave, and a sink. The 210-Popular, my home for the next month, is more luxurious than the average house in Ulaanbaatar, and with 300 horsepower it can do better than 90 mph on the road. Not that I would ever drive that fast.

Wheel Life Top: No natural RVer, the author flashes the calves of a cyclist.

Above: Young kids have a blast in RV parks, but teens have a tendency to sulk.

Gordon had only two hours to bring me up to speed on my high-speed home: how to use the generator, water pump, water heater, furnace, and liquid-propane tank; how to fill the freshwater tanks, dump the black-water (toilet) and gray-water (sinks and shower) tanks; when to activate electricity and which modes (battery or AC) to use; when to run the refrigerator on gas or juice; and a dozen other things peculiar to a home on wheels.

He gave me tips on RVers themselves, warning me that they prefer nautical language. The cord for connecting to the AC electricity in an RV park, for instance, is called a shore line. Avast! I was reminded of John Belushi's fey pirate on *Saturday Night Live*: "Aye, we are manly men." Gordon also warned me that it was traditional to lie about one's gas mileage. Don't be surprised, he told me, if an RVer in a 40-foot motor home claims to get 18 mpg (probably closer to 6 mpg). RVers do their part for the environment by fibbing. For the record, the Roadtrek got 15 mpg (that converts to 42 mpg for my RV friends out there).

Weathering My First Storm Under way! I roll the Roadtrek out of the driveway to begin the 224-mile trip northwest to North Hero Island, Vermont, in Lake Champlain. The weight is a shock. I'm used to a little BMW, and here I am trundling down the road in a 10,000-pound studio apartment on wheels. The water tanks are sloshing, my inexpertly packed load is shifting, badly secured drawers and cabinet doors are opening and closing. I turn up the radio to drown out the noise.

I arrive at North Hero State Park campground around sunset. It is a beautiful site on Lake Champlain, with Canada north across the water. I back into my campsite, not without some difficulty, and find that my auxiliary battery is low, so I hit the button for the generator. It makes a horrendously loud noise, like Ethel Merman having an apnea attack. I feel like a lout, as my neighbors, regular tent campers who have just kayaked 15 miles around the island, are trying to enjoy a quiet evening around the campfire sans engine noises. By way of apology I carry over a six-pack of beer, plus salsa and chips, and meet the kayakers—three men, one woman. They actually request a tour of the Roadtrek, and love it. We spend hours around their fire, and I admire the “purity” of their camping compared with my newly discovered RV life. The next morning I awake to a rainstorm and the moans and cries of my neighbors as they break camp in the rain. It’s no fun taking down tents in a storm, stuffing them wet into sacks, or running 500 feet to the bathroom, soaking wet. I simply walk to the middle of the RV, use the bathroom, and go back to my warm, dry bed. I close the window vent so I don’t

Don't Get Burned
The price is right for a camping space, but many travelers complain about add-on charges for kids, pets, bikes, etc. Below: Enjoying summer fun in and around Maine's Acadia National Park.

have to hear my neighbors' cries of anguish. This RV life is okay.

Heather, the campground's assistant manager, tells me that the number of tent and RV campers is split fifty-fifty at North Hero, and there's generally no tension between the two groups. There is only “dry camping” for RVers, which means there are no electric, water, or sewer hookups, or other niceties such as TV/Internet cable. Gordon told me the Roadtrek can dry camp for three to five days, running off stored fresh water, battery power, propane, and large wastewater tanks.

I made a rule that I would not use the camper for local transportation. Instead I brought an old mountain bike, which on North Hero I rode the 19-mile roundtrip each morning to get coffee. On Monday I meet Ron, a Vermont retiree, whose 38-foot trailer is parked on North Hero Island, with a view of the Green Mountains, to the east across the lake he loves to fish. The economics make sense. Ron and his wife live most of the year in Middlebury, Vermont, then tow the trailer to King's Bay Campground on North Hero for the summer. He tells me they get full hookups for four months for \$950. A no-frills summer cabin on Lake Champlain runs from \$300,000 to \$600,000.

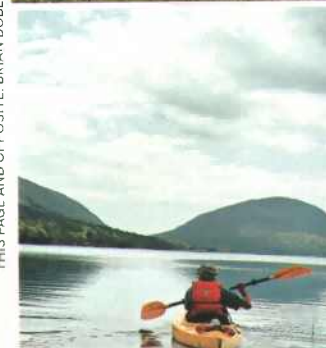
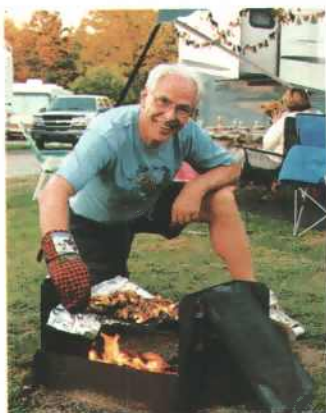
Special Toilet Paper—Who Knew? After an easy 140-mile drive, I find myself in Twin Mountain, New Hampshire, in my first dedicated RV camp, Beech Hill Campground. This is the Live Free or Die state, but whoever came up with that motto never owned a recreational vehicle. It is here, while trying to hook up, that I find I'm missing several key items: special toilet paper that degrades easily, a cable wire for the TV, disinfectant for the toilet, a 30/15-amp electrical adapter. I buy these items at the campground store, which is handy but expensive.

I wrestle with my first RV hookup. Somehow I envisioned a high-tech console with fancy switches and fittings like the space shuttle. This is more like Barney Rubble's car. The hookup is nothing but a stake in the ground with a water faucet attached, a cable wire, and a metal box with a 30-amp outlet. The sewer connection is a vertical pipe sticking out of the ground with a metal cover. You stick your black-water and gray-water hose into the pipe, hit the pump, and watch your business work its way through a white translucent hose. I have trouble hooking up everything but the poop hose, but eventually figure it out. I survey my work with pride and intone in my most somber voice: “Today I am a man.”

My fellow campers include Phil, a full-timer RVer from Minnesota (he lives only in his trailer, no house), and his wife, Joy, whose enormous Beanie Babies—and-stuffed-animal collection fills their 37-foot trailer. It rains all night, so I stay in and watch *About Schmidt* on the flat-screen. It's about a retired actuary on an RV journey. An RVer approaches Schmidt and says, “Ahoy, matie. Permission to come aboard, captain.” Roadtrek's Gordon was right about the nautical vocabulary. Schmidt's wife collects stuffed animals and other bric-a-brac.

Black-Water-Tank Tip A virgin RVer, I am besieged by veterans bearing tips. A guy named Ed tells me to put a tray of ice cubes down the toilet into the black-water tank after pumping out but before hitting the road. Seems the jiggling ice cleans up the tank.

The 225-mile drive to Bar Harbor, (continued on page 105)



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: BRIAN DOBEN

RV Travel

(continued from page 79)

Maine, is harrowing. Route 2 through the White Mountains is beautiful, but I am buffeted by a rainstorm. The RV has automatic transmission, and I have never owned such a thing. I am going up and down mountains freewheeling, with no stick to control this runaway 10,000 pounds. Semis are tailgating me, and the winds on overpasses sometimes throw me a third of a lane sideways. On the hills I hear my wastewater tanks sloshing. Is that the tinkling of ice cubes? Remember how your mom warned you to wear clean underpants in case you're in an accident? No longer a worry. If my black-water tank bursts in a crash, no one is going to comment on my underwear.

My site on Mount Desert Narrows Camping Resort is pretty. I have a view of the inlet and the bridge to Mount Desert Island. It's pricey, though. The campground charges \$80 per night for its best site. Sherry and Tom, a charming, friendly couple, are my next-door neighbors. They've been on the road in

a 30-foot motor home since January, when they sold their marketing company. They traveled all over the Far East for their business, but now they're enjoying America via RV. Tom shows me an international RV signal, an index finger pointed upward. This means "Hey, you forgot to lower your TV antenna." Tom says he's left four or five antennas in the trees. I show him a similar Sigma Chi finger signal. It means "Hey, there's a naked Pi Phi in the lounge."

I also spend time with Karen and Howard, who are "work campers." It sounds like a Nazi scheme ("*Arbeit macht frei!*"), but these are full-time RVers who barter their labor for a free campsite and a minimum wage. They both work 28 hours a week (Karen in the store, Howard doing physical work). Karen also has an impressive stuffed-animal collection.

I bicycle the 21-mile roundtrip into Acadia National Park and Bar Harbor. The latter is pretty but a tourist trap. I bought a one-scoop ice-cream cone, gave the guy a \$5 bill, and stuck my palm out for change. He put a nickel in it. I

waited for the rest. There was no rest. Bar Harbor: home of the \$4.95 ice-cream cone.

The campground manager is a full-timer. Her husband recently died, and she and I are the only single travelers. RVing is a "couples thing," she says. Couples may be heterosexual, gay or lesbian, brothers or sisters, whatever, but they still travel in twos.

The Land of the Fee From Maine I take Route 1, the long scenic route down the coast, to Barrington, New Hampshire, slightly northwest of Portsmouth. I stay at Barrington Shores, a family-style campground on a tiny lake. It is one of my least favorite camps. There are kids of all ages, but the adolescents and preadolescents look as if they would have been happier hanging out at the mall. They slouch about in small groups, looking sullen.

A group of RVers from Londonderry, New Hampshire, invite me to their campfire. John, their leader, admits that many of the kids would have rather stayed home. (continued on page 106)

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(continued from page 105)

RVing is big when the children are young, but the rig is often put in mothballs when the kids hit middle school. Couples put the motor home back into service when the children have left for college and elsewhere. Most of the empty nesters are tent campers who have grown old, have various aches and pains, and don't want to sleep on the ground anymore. The Londonderry RVers complain that the campgrounds are nickel-and-diming them. The nightly charges, they say, are only the beginning. Then it is often \$5 extra for each child, \$5 for each bicycle, etc. The RVIA tells me that the average RV campground charges \$20 per night, but I have yet to find any place that cheap.

A Journey Back in Time

Dry camping in various friends' driveways and pastures for four days, I meander southwest through New Hampshire and Massachusetts to the Saugerties/Woodstock KOA (Kamp-

grounds of America) in New York. Wayne, the manager, says he bought the Saugerties campground in 2006. I meet him when he yells to prevent me from backing the Roadtrek into a tree.

Next I bicycle seven miles up the road to Woodstock, where I am time-warped to 1969. The shops are the same: the Tibetan Emporium, Candlestock, Dharmaware, Annie's Down Home Stitchin'. You can still buy "Make Love Not War" T-shirts. I park the bike outside a coffeehouse. A table of eco-types are impressed I have pedaled my fat body up from Saugerties, but their smiles turn to horror when I reveal I am traveling in an RV. I am now Shiva, destroyer of worlds. I may as well have clubbed a baby harp seal in front of them.

Next stop, LeRoy, New York, near Rochester, and the Lei-Ti, Too! campground, a place the desk man tells me is "nobody's destination," just a convenient stop on the way to somewhere else. We are right next to the New York Thruway, and the constant vibration of tractor-trailers keeps my kidneys free of stones.

LeRoy is a destination for me. It is the birthplace of Jell-O and home to the Jell-O Museum. I bicycle to the museum, where longtime company spokesperson Bill Cosby is worshiped as a god, then take the tour with the Irondequoit chapter of the Red Hat Society and a troop of sullen, slutty-looking Girl Scouts from Rochester. We learn that Jell-O is not made of horse hooves but rather from collagen from the hides of cows and pigs, and that lime Jell-O emits the same EEGs as the human brain.

I head south, 300 miles to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to a KOA near the Civil War battlefield. I was last here back in the '50s for a Boy Scout Jamboree. Camping in the Roadtrek is more comfortable, and the battlefield is better viewed by bike than by foot. I make friends with a couple in another Roadtrek, Fred and Lorraine, from LaFayette, New York. We discuss eating out on the road, and Fred, an RVer for more than 30 years, confirms my suspicion: there is very little good local cooking in America. The rap on RVers is that they never leave

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home, cuisine-wise, instead eating at chains—McDonald's, Denny's, KFC, and the like. I had promised myself that I would eat at least one meal per day in a local, nonfranchised restaurant. In Bar Harbor I splurged on a \$20 lunch, a "lobster roll," which turned out to be lobster detritus served on a cold, stale hot dog bun. I had a western omelet in LeRoy that should have moved west long ago. A frittata somewhere in New York State actually frightened me. So now when I see a McDonald's or a Friendly's, I hit the brakes. Fred says one of the joys of RVing when he started was "trying food that was different." No more.

Two bikers in the adjoining campsite, Mike and Jim, arrive in an unusual RV built by Jim: a converted box trailer with minimal living quarters that leaves room for their two V-twin motorcycles. Mike and Jim say that RVers and bikers are much the same: friendly, open. Mike's brother died on a motorcycle, so Mike hides his bike from his aging mother. He enjoys the RV for camping and the V-twin for its freedom. "All your life you basically do what your wife wants you to do," he says. "Go where she wants to go. Socialize with friends she approves of. She tells me I am going to die on this bike. Well, so be it."

Mike and Jim are typical of many RVers I meet. In better physical shape than most Americans, and with old-economy, skilled blue-collar jobs. Jim is a pipeline troubleshooter; Mike used to drive a fuel truck with 13,000 gallons of gas onboard. Fred maintained jet engines. Then there's Bill, who came out of retirement last year to operate a snowplow for New York State because there weren't enough employees who knew how to operate heavy equipment. The people I meet are not day traders. But you could probably borrow a miter saw from any of them.

Too Close for Comfort
Hershey, Pennsylvania! Home of Hershey's Kisses and site of the annual Pennsylvania RV & Camping Show, a huge RV consumer show: 1,300 RVs at the Giant Center. I am camped at the Hershey Highmeadow Campground, a couple miles away. The other RVers agree that the campground sucks. The RVs are *(continued on page 108)*

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jammed in so closely that my picnic table is just a few feet from my neighbor's sewage hose and hookup.

The big new thing at the show is SURVs, sport-utility recreational vehicles, a.k.a. toy boxes. They're built to carry motorcycles, Jet Skis, ATVs, etc. When the toys come out, beds lower down from the ceiling or out from the walls to transform the space. Meanwhile, at the Winnebago display, a dealer brags that each Winnebago is hoisted three feet above the pavement with a crane, then dropped. I ask him if Winnebagos are often attacked by cranes.

Back at the campground, I visit Gloria and Ed, full-time RVers who have come to the show to give seminars. Members of the Escapees—an RV club with 34,000 members—they've been traveling for the past 12 years. They cover 10,000 miles per year and have RV'd on six of the seven continents (hookups in Antarctica are clearly not up to snuff). Living full-time on the road, even with high gas prices, runs 50 to 70 percent of

what it costs to retire to a "stick house," as they call it. Gloria says she has even cut down on her clothes budget. "You go to a different church every week," she says. "You need fewer outfits."

Gloria and Ed are techno-RVers, using a satellite to connect to the Internet and TV. They don't like to dry camp at truck stops or Wal-Marts—some of which offer free RV parking—so they go on the Web and find no-pay places to camp. Full-timers, in addition to work-camping, can also get part-time work: pumpkin sales in October, tree sales at Christmas, even circus work. Ed is a retired engineer; Gloria, a retired cable-TV executive. They are taken aback when I ask about their careers. To a full-timer, they explain, past professions are irrelevant. They live in the moment.

At long last, I weave my way slowly back home, staying at a fancy Outdoor World campground in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, with all the amenities, but mostly I'm dry camping on friends' properties or at truck stops. Most RVers don't like the latter because truckers run their diesels all night. But my last night on the road—my RV nes-

tled between a Freightliner and a Peterbilt at the Whately (Massachusetts) Truck Stop and Diner—I sleep soundly, the rumbling of 45 diesels acting like a white noise generator.

As I drive home, I have only one regret. I had assumed something disastrous, à la Robin Williams in *RV*, would happen. The van would fall over, or the black-water pump would activate in reverse and blow sewage all over the inside. Bad luck always adds drama and humor to an article. As it turned out, the RV performed flawlessly. Any time I had a problem in a campground, fellow RVers jumped in to make it go away.

Roll of a Lifetime As a reporter, one has to compare one's anecdotal experiences against the rest of the universe. In a 2,390-mile, month-long trip through seven states, did I see a representative sampling of the RV world? Or did I dip into the meaty part of the stew and miss the celery?

David Humphreys, former president of the RVIA, claims that the ten-year-old Go RVing program has roped in a whole new market of younger RVers, the 35-to-55-year-old demographic. If there are 35-year-old RVers traveling en masse, they are avoiding Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, where I spent four weeks. In general the people I met on the road were about my age, 61, and loved nature, camping, meeting other people, and doing things physical. They were neither the dimwits of Robin Williams's movie nor the sanitized families of the Go RVing commercials. The reality is much better than advertised.

I have one piece of advice before you hit the road: load up on firewood. Every night I built a fire, and every night fellow campers gathered around to share their stories—though they usually left for bed by 9:30. To all my newfound friends out there in RV Land: may the wind be at your back, and may the ice cubes tinkle merrily in your holding tank. ■

Dick Teresi is the author of five books on science and technology, most recently Lost Discoveries: The Ancient Roots of Modern Science—from the Babylonians to the Maya (Simon & Schuster, 2003).

So You're Ready to Drive an RV...

Are they hard to handle? "It's different—not difficult," says Kevin Broom, a Recreation Vehicle Industry Association spokesperson. "Today's motor homes come with automatic transmission, power steering, and power brakes."

Are all motor homes the same? Nope. There are three types. Type A looks like a bus. Type B (such as the one used by our writer) resembles a tricked-out van. Type C is a truck-motor home hybrid. Mileage is between 5 and 18 mpg.

How do I find a rental outlet? Check the yellow pages or visit www.rvra.org for a searchable online rental directory.

How much will it cost? Luxury rigs range from \$90 to \$200 per day; more modest travel trailers run \$28 to \$85. Multiday deals are usually available. You'll pay a fee for the number of miles you drive (some companies sell miles as a package), and you'll pay for

your own gas. Generators (used in places without electrical hookups) cost about \$3 per hour. Thinking about buying? "A new RV will cost anywhere from \$4,000 to \$400,000 depending on size and amenities," says Broom, "but you can often find good deals on used RVs."

What about campgrounds? Campgrounds range between \$10 and \$50 per night, though five-star digs charge up to \$200. For holidays, book well in advance. Carry a good campground guide such as *Woodall's North American Campground Directory, 2007* (\$23.95 at bookstores; \$11.95 at www.woodalls.com).

How do I get started? Call 888-467-8464 and order a free getting-started DVD or CD-ROM. The 40-minute program walks newcomers through the basics of renting, trip planning, and campground amenities. Or go to www.GoRVing.com, a one-stop website for novices. —*Laura Daily*