

Basic Boondocking

A Frugal Shunpiker's Guide



by Marianne Edwards

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Introduction

Boondocking (or dry camping) refers to staying in an RV, generally in a remote location, without being hooked up to water, power, or sewer. As far as we're concerned, that's why our RV has a deep-cycle battery and holding tanks. It's what it was built for. By not being "hooked up," a world of free camping possibilities opens up to us.

There are many levels and styles of boondocking. On our travels, we've met those who drive luxury RVs – large motorhomes or fifth wheels with three-piece bathrooms, full-sized kitchens, dining, living, and bed rooms. Many are equipped with generators, solar panels and satellite dishes. Some travel to one location where they can park, cover the tires, and settle in to their "home base" for several months.

When boondocking for a week or two at a time, no matter what size or type of RV, basic boondocking requires that you are self-sufficient. The key lies in planning and conservation.

Common methods of generating electricity are solar panels and gas generators, or, with a small RV like ours, just driving and recharging the house battery every few days. Most boondockers with larger rigs than ours use a combination of these methods. We've also met a few who supplement with a wind turbine.

Fresh water must be hauled in and waste hauled away. With modest conservation, most RVers will need to restock fresh water at least weekly and empty waste tanks bi-weekly. In most cases, these tasks entail moving the RV to the nearest RV dump station. To avoid this, some use their tow vehicle to haul water and take waste to the RV dump in a "Blue Boy". This portable waste tank is supplemental to the RV and sometime used in conjunction with a macerator pump.

While we're around these larger RVs all the time, I won't pretend to be an expert on the methods they use. Ours is generally the smallest rig in any camping area and we like it that way; we have all that we need and nothing more.

On the other end of the spectrum are those who would laugh to think we call our style *basic*. We've met boondockers who don't have a toilet in their rig and don't use the refrigerator they have. They conserve water so carefully that they use a spritzer bottle to wet their toothbrush and wash dishes. The lesson here is that everyone finds their own level of comfort and tolerance.

So, what's our style? We tend to move to a new location every few days. Even when we choose to stay put for a week or two, we drive our RV regularly (we don't have a tow vehicle) and our house battery is topped up as we're driving. Consequently, we've never needed a solar panel, wind turbine, generator, blue boy, or macerator. I don't pretend to know a lot about every style of dry camping but, for all the people who have asked how we do it, this guide provides the answers.

Our Camper

Our RV is a class b – a camper van (currently a 2002 Roadtrek). We named her *Sweet Surrender* (after the John Denver song). Don't know it? I'll sing you a bar.

*Lost and alone on some forgotten highway, traveled by many, remembered by few.
Looking for something that I can believe in. Looking for something that I'd like to do with
my life. There's nothing behind me and nothing that ties me to something that might have
been true yesterday. Tomorrow is open and right now it seems to be more than enough to
just be here today. Sweet, sweet surrender. Live, live without care. Like a fish in the
water, like a bird in the air.*



With that attitude, in this Roadtrek and its two predecessors, we've enjoyed more than 75,000 miles of shunpiking (traveling the back roads) across Canada and USA during the last fourteen years.

The RV is only 19' long but packed with all the amenities we need: a king bed (converts to twins), propane furnace, air conditioner, toilet, sink with hot and cold running water, two-burner propane stove, inside and outside shower, microwave oven, and a three-way fridge with freezer. The refrigerator runs on propane, 12-volt DC, or 120 volt AC(standard electric). There's a pop-up table for two near the front. The bed also

converts to a table with seating for four. Both front seats - driver and passenger - swing 180° around to become part of the living area when parked.

We also carry two folding lawn chairs, a folding table, and a portable propane barbecue. A large awning extends from the camper to provide shade and expand our outdoor space. We love the double doors at the side and back, providing a big opening to the world, grand views, and efficient air-circulation.



A few DIY modifications improved our storage situation. We replaced the closet rod with shelves (our travels simply don't require dress clothes). We don't carry a TV, so we installed shelves in the TV cabinet as well.

There's no wasted space and just enough room for two people to be comfortable. If you question that, please remember that, for the most part, we only sleep and prepare meals in the RV. The great outdoors is our living and dining room. It helps that we like each other (at least, on most days), of course.

Like turtles, our home is always with us and we make ourselves at home wherever we go. For us, the real benefit of a van-sized RV, besides the fuel cost, is the maneuverability. Unlike those with larger units, we don't worry about driving down a narrow road for fear we wouldn't be able to turn around.

Auxiliary Power

A separate battery runs the lights, fans, water pump, and all other electrical components of the camper. In larger rigs, there may be more than one house battery. Many RVers find they get good results with a series of golf-cart batteries but, for our needs and space constraints, one battery suffices.

Be sure this is a deep-cycle (marine) battery and, for optimal use, it should never be drawn down below half-capacity. We can survive 4 or 5 days without assistance from solar or other power sources before we risk this. Our battery is charged whenever we drive so we've never had a problem.

Even being cautious, the house battery gradually stops holding a charge for as long as it should. When it becomes noticeable, we replace it (every 3 or 4 years). You should be able to extend that if you don't travel as extensively or boondock as often as we do.

Here are some energy conservation tricks we use:

- ❑ It helps to have some knowledge of which appliances draw the most power so we ran a voltage meter test on every fixture to determine the draw. Even without that information, common sense dictates a fan will draw more power than a light bulb.
- ❑ Replace light bulbs with LED bulbs. They tend to be more expensive and some brands just don't cast enough light or last as long as claimed. Experiment and replace one at a time – start with the lights you use most regularly.
- ❑ Mount a few small battery-operated LED lights (available at dollar stores) in strategic locations where, at times, only minimal light is required. Use rechargeable batteries in them.
- ❑ Use a book light or headlamp with rechargeable batteries for reading.
- ❑ We run lights, radio, ceiling fan, water pump, and the laptop computer whenever we want without concern; however, if we've had to run the furnace more than minimally or are parked for more than three days consecutively without any driving, we check the battery level to ensure we're not depleting it below half.
- ❑ Find alternatives to electrical appliances. Old-fashioned tools such as a manual coffee grinder, stove-top coffee perk, hand-turned egg-beater, and wind-up alarm clock are good examples.
- ❑ Do your reading and other activities that require more light in daylight hours.

- ❑ Your water pump may draw power even when not in use. Consider switching it on only when needed.
- ❑ Air conditioners, microwave ovens, and other high-draw appliances such as coffee makers draw too much power for a 12-volt system and are virtually useless when boondocking unless you're running a generator. Our microwave is our breadbox. It's also handy for storing fruits and vegetables; the tight seal prevents fruit flies.
- ❑ When possible, park in the sun on cold days and in the shade on warm days. Extend awnings to help shade the walls of the camper.
- ❑ Open windows and doors to encourage a breeze before resorting to fans.
- ❑ We always run our refrigerator on the propane setting. If you choose to switch yours to 12-volt while in transit, be sure to set up a fool-proof reminder so you don't forget to switch back to propane as soon as you park. A fridge will draw a battery down very quickly!
- ❑ In moderate climates, a fridge should maintain at temperature for several hours as long as you don't open the door. (With the small fridge in our unit, we've found this is often not true.)
- ❑ The fan on the furnace is a big draw. Dress warmly, use extra blankets and wear a sleeping hat and wool socks to bed. If your head and feet are warm, you will be too. If needed, turn the furnace on only for a few minutes in the morning while you wash up and get dressed. One advantage of a small space is that it warms up quickly!
- ❑ Many avid boondockers use a portable catalytic heater that runs on propane without a fan. Be sure to follow all safety instructions and don't forget to open a window just a touch when you use it.
- ❑ We installed a small 200-watt inverter (many RVs will come with one). It lets us use regular AC-powered, small household appliances like a coffee grinder and stick blender. For the most part, though, we use it to charge camera batteries, the laptop, and the cell phone. When on the move, you could just plug those gadgets into the vehicle's dash to charge from the engine battery.

Tip: Sometimes our inverter isn't quite heavy enough to run an appliance with a slightly heavier draw. Turning the vehicle's engine on briefly while we run the appliance usually solves it.

If you have a separate tow vehicle, you'll want a spare house battery. Charge it every time you're driving, and swap it out every few days.

Many avid boondockers supplement their power with solar panels and generators. If you have a larger RV, plan to park for extended periods in one location, watch a lot of TV, or if you aren't into *roughing it* to the extent that we are, you may wish to check further into adding these. Since we have never used them, I won't pretend to be an expert but I can offer a couple of comments gleaned from fellow RVers we've met.

Solar technology is constantly evolving. Not many RVs come equipped with solar from the manufacturer and, if so, they're often not installed for optimum performance. Setting up a solar system can seem daunting but many RVers have learned to do it themselves and often report better results than expensive installations by professionals. If you go that route, be sure to do your research and choose one who specializes in RV installations. Our needs for boondocking are specific – not the same as those of a home-owner.

Water and Holding Tanks

Our RV is equipped with a twenty-five-gallon fresh water tank. We carry a separate four-gallon container exclusively for drinking water. That extra container is handy when we're not happy with the taste of the potable water in certain areas.

We've never had trouble finding free fresh water to fill our tanks; although, I sometimes wonder how long this will last in an era of drought and shortage. We've had good luck at town parks, gas stations, swimming pools, rest areas, visitor centers, and occasionally have even filled at the Wal-Mart Garden Center. If we see an accessible tap, we ask if the water is potable and then for permission to fill up. Generally, it's granted.

Always taste the water first. Once, we didn't do this until we'd filled. The water was so full of bromide and it didn't settle out after a couple of days so we dumped and replaced it at the first opportunity. Usually filtered water kiosks are plentiful in areas with poor water quality. The kiosks are much cheaper than bottled water –usually around 25¢ per gallon.

We have a few tricks to help stretch our water supply and we can go more than a week without replenishing.

- ❑ We make use of public rest rooms whenever possible.
- ❑ In remote, wilderness camping locations, we go for a walk with a small shovel (the same as those who are tenting would do). Bury human waste at least six inches but don't bury any toilet paper.
- ❑ All toilet paper is wrapped and goes into the garbage, not the RV toilet.
- ❑ We keep the pump turned off so, when we flush the toilet, there's no water used. Instead, we spritz the bowl with a half-vinegar, half-water solution and only turn on the pump to flush with water once or twice per day, using a brush to clean the toilet each time.

- ❑ The above measures also cut down greatly on the amount of chemicals required for the tank.
- ❑ To save the gray water tank capacity, we use a basin when washing dishes. We have one the exact size to fit inside our sink. This keeps the sink clean and makes it easy to throw the dish water either down the toilet to dilute the contents in the black tank or, when appropriate, throw it outside to water a thirsty plant.
- ❑ Use hand sanitizer instead of washing your hands and baby-wipes to wipe and sanitize surfaces.
- ❑ We don't rely on paper plates to cut down on dishes, although many travelers do. We don't use side plates or salad bowls – just one plate per person for a meal. We figure that the pots, pans, and utensils need washing anyway, so what real difference will washing two more plates make?
- ❑ We do, however, go through a lot of paper towels to wipe all food residues from the dishes immediately. They're almost clean when we start washing them so we use less water.
- ❑ Use non-toxic, vegetable-derived dish soap. We like the Green Works brand; it works well, is relatively inexpensive, available in most grocery stores, and allows us not to worry as much about thoroughly rinsing the dishes.
- ❑ Use less soap; you won't need to rinse as much.
- ❑ Buy easy-to-clean, non-stick pots and pans. We love our ceramic-lined Earth chef cookware.
- ❑ Steamed veggies use much less water than boiling.
- ❑ Reusable plastic ice cubes will chill your drinks without diluting them or using any water.
- ❑ Carry a couple of (collapsible) water containers in your tow vehicle so you're prepared to stock up whenever you stumble upon a source of fresh water.

Showers

When we tell people how we travel, one of the first questions they usually ask is, “What do you do about bathing?”

Most RVs have built-in showers but water conservation is always an issue. Although we have an indoor shower (in the galley hallway of our Roadtrek), we've never actually used it. If we're in a remote location with no neighbors, we may opt to use the outdoor shower

but only “navy-style”, which entails turning off the water between wetting down and rinsing off.

If you use your RV shower a lot, consider replacing the shower head with one that has an easy on/off switch to encourage navy-style. A kitchen-sink spray nozzle works well.

Big, fluffy bath towels are nice but not practical on the road. Use smaller, lower pile towels – they'll dry faster and your spare towels take up less storage.

There are options for public showers without paying \$35.00 for a campsite. Along the major routes, showers are available (although relatively expensive) at many truck stops (like Flying J, Loves, or TA). Marinas often have showers, as do public swimming pools. In some of the National and State Parks, you can access the shower facilities at the campgrounds, once you're in the park with a day-use pass. We'll often finish a day-hike in a park with a quick shower before heading to our boondocking location outside the park.

We do love a nice hot shower as much as anyone so, when we do splurge on a paid-for campsite, one of the criteria we look for is shower availability. For the most part, though, showers are just a treat. Our daily routine is the method our grandparents used – a sponge bath – accomplished with a washcloth, bar of soap, and just a small basin of water.



Natural hot springs – for those times when you just crave a bath!

Hot Water

Since we don't take many showers, we can't justify the propane it takes to keep hot water ready all day long. We generally turn off and disconnect our water heater altogether. Instead, we heat a kettle on the stovetop for our dishes and sponge baths. One full kettle of warm water will do a hair wash. We use environmentally friendly shampoo and try to wash our hair outdoors whenever possible. Consider a short hair style; it's easier to manage and requires less water and shampoo.

Laundry

We don't attempt to do laundry the way our grandparents did. It takes too much time and too much water to do a good job and laundromats are everywhere and easy to find. We pack extra underwear and socks. These take up very little space yet extend the time between laundry days.



Sometimes laundry is just part of the adventure. At this "mom and pop" operation on Route 66 in Grants, NM, the owners were super friendly and even let us fill our fresh water tanks while doing our wash.

Hints for the Bedroom

Although we're happy to live with just the basics, one necessity is a good night's sleep. In that respect, consistently sleeping in the same bed every night is brilliant! It's a benefit

that all RV owners have over those who travel by car and sleep in motels. Here are a few other things we do in the bedroom:

- ❑ Instead of blankets or a comforter, we use our unzipped sleeping bags. We have them with us anyway in case we do any backpacking. Cold nights call for both sleeping bags.
- ❑ We don't carry spare sheets. The one set is washed every time we do laundry.
- ❑ We wear earplugs to bed, eliminating unfamiliar sounds that might wake us.
- ❑ On cold nights, we turn the furnace on but set it to minimum. Often it doesn't turn on until morning.
- ❑ If you can keep your head and feet warm the rest of your body will stay warm. We wear wool socks and a sleeping hat to bed. (Reminds me of the line "Mamma in her kerchief and I in my cap" from the poem 'Twas the Night before Christmas.) No kerchiefs for me. We use toques.
- ❑ On our travels, we're just as likely to encounter hot nights as cold. In a small RV, it can be a challenge to have enough airflow while keeping everything securely locked down. Park in the shade whenever possible and keep all windows and doors open until you lock up for the night.
- ❑ We set our rooftop vent fan (Fantastic brand) to run automatically based on temperature. We also have a small 12-volt fan directed to our heads at the foot of the bed.

Tip: Screens on all windows will allow air flow without bugs but sometimes the RV manufacturer has only installed them on select windows.

To make them yourself for any window in your camper, buy flexible soft mesh screening. Cut the screen into window-sized pieces with about 2 ½ inches extra on all four sides. Sew small magnets or magnet strips into a hem on each side. If using individual magnets, sew around each one to secure it in place. When finished, the entire screen should be large enough to cover the window, overlapping by at least one inch on each side of the surrounding doorframe. When not in use, the screens come down easily and can be folded and put away. Small individual magnets are better for folding than magnet strips.



When traveling, the bed becomes a king with extra storage underneath.

Our bed converts into a table with bench seats for four so, if we have company on a rainy day, we can accommodate them inside. We try to entertain outdoors so, on most trips, we never convert the bed into a table even once. When we eat indoors, the small table at the front of the van is quite adequate for two.

Closet Space

There's no way around it. Since we travel through various climates, we're forced to bring more clothes than we'd like. Over several trips we've learned to trim down what we pack.

Even though we're often leaving home in the dead of winter, we leave winter coats behind and opt for a waterproof jacket with zip-off sleeves plus a light shell that scrunches up to almost nothing for hiking. If it's really cold, wear both and layer a sweater or two underneath.

On our first trip, I brought a little black dress and heels ... just in case. Although went to a few dances and, sometimes, out for dinner, the dress never came out of the closet. A good pair of jeans and a pretty top does the trick and is much more "who I am". I might add a scarf or a string of beads once in a while. Should we somehow get invited to a royal gala, it will be an excuse to go shopping. So far, that hasn't happened.

The usual packing rule applies: Decide what you want, then bring half of it.

Tip: Roll clothes instead of folding them. This reduces wrinkles. Now stack them on shelves or in a hamper with the ends facing out so you can easily find and pull out each item without disturbing the rest.

Shoes are always an issue. They're so bulky and we can't seem to get away with less than four pairs each – hiking boots, running/walking shoes, sandals, and water shoes. Even with one pair on our feet, it still leaves 12 shoes to be stored! Thank goodness Randy is not a size 13! A plastic clothes hamper under the bed conveniently holds them all.

TV and Entertainment

Our laptop doubles as our TV receiver. We have a Kworld USB Hybrid TV Stick to deliver a local TV signal which is picked up by a Wyngard Razr indoor antenna. Although we watch very little television, this works well when we're within range of a signal and both items are compact and require negligible storage space.



Wyngard indoor antenna – only 14" by 13", lightweight and paper-thin

When in town, we often treat ourselves to a DVD movie rental (usually at a Redbox) – convenient and inexpensive and we can play it on the laptop. Randy brings his small travel guitar; his strumming entertains both of us at times when I'm working on the computer.

The Library

We love to read but the weight of carrying more than a few books is just not feasible. We limit what we bring and rely more and more on our e-reader for pleasure reading and the Internet for information. If we do bring a book, we donate it to a local library or thrift store when we're finished with it. Depending on your tastes, some used bookstores may take it off your hands and even offer you a credit toward your next book.

Tip: Thank goodness for bungee cords. Books (and other items) tend to shift as you drive but a bungee cord hooked into 2 eyehooks across the front of the bookshelf does the trick so they won't fly off the shelf. Two bungees also solved the problem of where to store the guitar: it's in a lightweight cloth case, strapped to the ceiling over the bed.

The Kitchen

RV refrigerators aren't as consistent as a home fridge, especially when traveling in extreme hot or cold temperatures. A wireless indoor-outdoor thermometer (available at a hardware store or Walmart) allows us to monitor the inside fridge temperature. No more wondering how the fridge is doing and opening the door to check it (allowing cool air to escape).



Our galley kitchen

Meals

To keep costs down, we only visit restaurants on special occasions. But we love good food, simply prepared. We follow many of our favorite recipes when we're on the road. In fact, we prepare most of the same meals as at home. The only exception is that we don't have an oven.

When we barbecue, we often fill the entire grill and freeze extra portions for easy meals later in the week. This saves both time and propane.

We rarely eat out when we travel so our kitchen is well-stocked. Roadtreks don't usually have enough space dedicated for food and cookware to suit our needs so using the microwave and TV cabinet for food storage helps.

Even on the road, we like to take advantage of sales to stock up a bit. One way we conserve space is by throwing away all bulky packaging immediately. We use a few different sizes of quality zip-lock freezer bags and transfer all dry foods such as rice, pasta, cereal, and pancake mix into them. The labeled bags are used over and over and will only take up as much space as their actual contents.

When we buy meat, we throw out all foam trays and repackage it into meal-portion-sized bags to go in the freezer.

Our fridge is much smaller but, with careful organizing, can hold the same items that our home fridge does with a few exceptions: We keep fresh vegetables and fruit in a separate cooler bag with a freezer pack that we replace daily. It keeps these items just cool enough, freeing up fridge space at the same time.

We don't mind using powdered milk, making up only as much as we need for a meal. This also prevents spills from an open container in the fridge while in transit.



How do we survive in such a small space? What do you mean? Look at the size of our dining room!

Shopping

Except for groceries, we don't do much shopping on our trips. As tourists we do some window-shopping and browsing but don't buy much, if anything, in the way of souvenirs. It helps when you just don't have space to carry extra stuff.

We've pretty much got grocery shopping down to a science. Like most people, we have our list of food staples that we always keep on hand. While local produce stands and fresh food markets becomes part of the traveling experience, stocking up on staples can be boring and is much faster at chain stores. These stores are great for travelers because, across the country, the layout hardly varies. Usually, you'll know exactly where to find

the regular items on your list so you can get on with your day. Prices also tend to be consistent; although, not always the least expensive.

If you don't mind investing the time, you might save a few dollars. Find out what the local options are. Ask locals where they shop and, if possible, track down a copy of the weekly flyers. Some visitor centers carry them. Many grocery stores now match competitors' advertised sale prices but you'll have to ask for the adjustment at the check-out.

Free Camping

For us, free camping is the key to extending a trip without blowing our budget. Because we're in a fully-equipped small RV, we're able to take advantage of many free overnight situations that we couldn't use if we were tenting.

Public land, such as National and State Forests, Bureau of Land Management, Corps of Engineers, and Wilderness Reserves are usually set up for free public use.

Benchmark and *Delorme* are two good regional state map books that show public land boundaries (approximately \$15.00 each). Most National Forest and BLM district offices now offer free Motor Vehicle Use Maps with excellent detail of dirt roads in each district. Stop at the public land offices to ask for them. Sometimes suggested free campsites (they call them dispersed camping areas) are even marked on the maps. Ask about it; each district may use a different symbol to mark them.

Another reason to stop at these offices is to ask about current road conditions. We often ask the staff for their personal free camping recommendations in the area.

Signage to indicate which parcels are public land is often small or non-existent. Watch for small signs, perhaps on fence posts, which may show the name or emblem of the various public land offices. Another indication of public land is road signs themselves. Roads in the National Forest are usually numbered roads (not names) and on dark brown signs. When private land is next to public land, the owners usually let you know by posting "no trespassing" signs.

When we know from the maps and signage that we're on public land, we drive down a few dirt roads and look for fire rings. These indicate that others have been here and camped before us. It's a courtesy to use established sites but, if they don't exist, try to leave as little evidence of your stay as possible.



One of our favorite free campsites (it's in the Arizona guide)

Finding established sites with fire rings usually means there's firewood around and we can collect wood and have a campfire ourselves. At some times of year, fire bans are in effect. Especially in summer, it's important to check with the local visitor centers to find out what the status is.

We don't bother carrying any firewood with us. It requires too much space, often there are regulations about transporting it from one forest to another, and, generally, we can find some downed wood when we want it. In established campgrounds, we wander around to the unoccupied sites; previous campers may have left some behind.

When driving on narrow, dirt roads, one of the hazards you can expect is occasional "pin striping" of your vehicle. Thin scratches caused by thorny bushes and trees that may graze the sides of the RV can often be removed using a good buffing compound. It's certainly nothing we worry about. We've had more damage from car doors being opened carelessly in parking lots. I guess if we wanted to keep the RV in pristine shape, we should keep it parked in the driveway at home.



This is boondocking.



This is the view from our patio doors when we're boondocking.



This is the view from our patio doors in a \$40.00 per night campground.

Even urban settings may have boondocking available. Since 2012, you can take advantage of free overnight stops at the homes of fellow RVers. My daughter and I own the web site, www.boondockerswelcome.com, where we facilitate invitations between members.

Some small towns encourage RVs to spend the night and may even provide parking in the town park – usually, the smaller the town, the more likely. Even if it's not a formal policy, ask locals if there's anywhere nearby where you can “safely just pull in and park for the night”. Being self-contained is good that way. Being “parked overnight” always sounds and looks different and less imposing than “setting up camp”.

Specific, legal boondocking locations that we've discovered and used ourselves, complete with directions, GPS coordinates, and photos, as well as information on many worthwhile local attractions is detailed in the Frugal Shunpiker's RV Boondocking Guides for each state.

Social Life

What about a social life on the road? If you want one, you'll have it. If you don't, you can find plenty of privacy. That's the nice thing about being on the road.

We find it's actually easier to meet people when we travel than when we are at home. Fellow RVers are always friendly and you don't have to be camped in a pay-campground to make friends.

Boondockers are a particularly interesting breed of RVers. We've never met any who aren't willing to share information about where to go, what to see, and how to save money doing it.

You're also bound to meet people who are full-time RVers, having given up their sticks and bricks home to live and travel by RV. We've met people of all ages and nationalities who are on the road full-time – even families who are home schooling their children. Everyone you meet will have something to teach you.

In our experience, the common bond of being on the road, generally overrides any status differences. The value, age, or size of your RV may be of interest but make very little difference to most fellow RVers. They'll invite you to join them for happy hour or a campfire regardless. Background, occupation, and income also carry far less weight than in the world we all left behind. The fact that we're all on the road and on a similar adventure is important – not how each of us managed to make it happen.

Locals are also easy to meet; they're often curious about where we're from, where we've been, and what boondocking is all about. And, if you should end up with a neighbor who's annoying, you can just move on. You can't do that so easily in your neighborhood at home, now can you?

Active Lifestyle

Our outdoor lifestyle provides constant opportunities to explore. We're avid hikers but we also carry a two-man inflatable kayak – [a Sea Eagle](#). When collapsed, it fits nicely under the bed in the RV.

We used to carry bicycles but found we generally chose hiking over riding. In our situation, the bicycle rack also impeded opening the back door of the camper. On subsequent trips, the bikes got left behind.

We use hiking poles (two each) and highly recommend them for stability and to protect your knees and other joints. Our Swiss Gear poles (\$10.00 each at Walmart) were inexpensive but work just fine and have held up for years.



Two-man Sea Eagle kayak folds to fit under the RV's bed



Our favorite frugal activity: a scenic hike

ET...Call Home

So far, we've resisted buying a smart phone and the monthly contract that goes with it. We do carry a cell phone but hope we never need to use it. We've had the same \$10.00-per-month plan with Bell Mobility since 2004.

I know, most of you will be in a different category and already have a plan that you hope to use nationwide. Not all phones are accessible across the Canadian/USA border so be sure to ask. Even if they are, roaming charges are generally very high.

As Canadians facing high roaming charges, we only use our cell phone for emergency calls and as a message center linked to home. We give the number to our immediate family, ask them to call only in an emergency, and tell them not to expect us to pick up when they do. They can leave a message and we'll call them back. We turn the phone on briefly only once a day to check for messages. If there are none, it costs nothing to know that everything is fine at home.

By not leaving the phone on all day or using it at all, it's amazing how long we can go without charging that battery: often only once in a five-month period.

Previously, we found pay phones and made calls on a calling card connected to our home phone plan. Payphones, which still exist in Canada, are now almost impossible to find in

the USA. Wifi is increasingly more available, however, so we make calls over skype (to computers) or gmail (to phones). Both are free.

Email

Email is our main communication mode with family and friends when we travel. Virtually every library in the country provides Internet access – mostly for free. If you don't carry your own laptop, you can use the library's computers.

For those with a laptop, free wi-fi access is becoming more available all the time. Public libraries are always a reliable source for this and, in some states, you can count on wi-fi at visitor centers and highway rest areas. Coffee shops and fast food chains are usually a good bet as well many other stores. Sometimes you can pick up a signal from the comfort of your vehicle by simply parking near a hotel, library, restaurant, hospital, or other public building. Here's a web site with a list of wi-fi hot spots:

<http://www.wififreespot.com>

Fuel Consumption (Gas Mileage)

With very low, overnight, camping expenses, the biggest cost of our travels is fuel.

Almost all vehicles manage their best highway mileage (in our case approximately 14 miles to a US gallon or 18 miles to a Canadian gallon) while driving 55 miles (90 km) per hour –so that's the speed we drive. It's just one more reason to shun the pikes and stick to the lesser highways.

Another secret to getting the best value for your fuel dollar is staying away from home longer. How does that make sense? It takes the same amount of fuel for us to go to California and back if we go for one week as it does for six months. A vast difference when you calculate the cost-per-day!

A Canadian can legally stay in the USA for six months of each year without a visa. If money is an issue and your life will allow it, rather than go away every year for three months, why not go every-other year for six months? It would mean the equivalent of one free trip over two years as far as fuel consumption is concerned.

RV Repairs

Driving an older vehicle, now and then, we do run into problems and repairs. In fourteen years of travel, always in an "older model" RV, we've had our share but they've all turned into good experiences.

Avoid real headaches by taking a few simple precautions:

- Do a thorough check of the RV before you leave home.

- ❑ Purchase an adequate roadside assistance plan.
- ❑ Know and use free resources while traveling – you can find information on the Internet and ask advice from staff at auto parts stores. Most RVers are resourceful and may be able to help you diagnose a problem.
- ❑ Carry tools and the Hanes repair manual for your vehicle. Even if you can't do the repair yourself, when you're stranded by the side of the road, someone who stops, may be able to help if they have the tools.
- ❑ When it comes to vehicle repairs, unless covered by a manufacturer's warranty, whenever possible, deal with a privately owned, small repair shop.



Poncho's "Open Air" Garage

We've found that using a small, privately-owned repair shop tends to save us money. While waiting for parts or a repair that takes longer than a day, we've always been granted permission to spend the night in the parking lot. A big city dealership would probably not be as accommodating.

When our fuel pump needed replacing in Hatch, New Mexico, we asked around and found Poncho – the only mechanic in town. He even allowed Randy to pull on his coveralls and help with the job. Of course, this saved us time and money (and Randy made a new friend and learned something in the process).

Getting Along With Your Partner

I'm first to admit that relationship advice is totally out of my area of expertise. The only reason I'm including this section is because it seems to be another one of the questions that people keep asking us. "How do you do it? Spend that much time together for months at a time and not kill each other?"

Perhaps you're a couple wanting to travel together but are afraid so much time in tight quarters would ruin your relationship. I guess I might as well share with you the few things that Randy and I had to learn the hard way.

First of all: two things to think about before you even begin to plan this type of trip:

- ❑ If you don't get along at home, you likely won't get along on the road either.
- ❑ If you think traveling and going on a real adventure might bring you closer together, you might be right.

Now, a few tips for your road trip:

- ❑ In a small space, you need to take turns or you'll always be bumping into each other. Allow whoever gets up first to get washed, dressed, etc. before the other person even attempts to start their process. If cooking is usually a shared activity, take turns instead. Randy has meals that he prepares. I have mine. It's okay to ask for a hand but, in general, two cooks in a tiny kitchen is one too many.
- ❑ In daily tasks, dinner, cleanup, etc., divide chores and develop routines. Life is easier if each person knows what to expect. For example, when we do the dishes, I always wash and he always dries.
- ❑ Do many things together.
- ❑ Do many things separately – schedule a day regularly to be apart.
- ❑ You may not want to visit the same places or see and do the same things on your travels. Take turns wearing the compromising hat.
- ❑ To make the most of a true shunpiking trip, you need to be flexible. If you're a person that needs to have a plan and your partner wants to "wing it," perhaps you can compromise by developing a loose plan with options to change it as opportunities present themselves.
- ❑ Even when you're together, you don't have to be in each other's space all the time. If you've had a fight, chances are you wouldn't talk for a whole day. Instead, why not just skip the fight but schedule a day where you

agree not to talk. Instead of talking, do other things together quietly – walk, read, write, sunbathe, nap.

Insurance

Most Canadian and American auto insurance does not cover your vehicle for driving in Mexico. You can buy special Mexican insurance coverage at the border or, in some cases, have it added to your policy in advance. We've walked across the border into Mexico for a day but have never taken our vehicle. A trusted insurance broker is Sanborns who have offices on the American side at most border crossings into Mexico.

Canadian vehicle insurers will only cover you for six consecutive months outside your home province. We were totally unaware of this restriction ourselves on our first long trip which lasted 12 months. Unknown to us, we were driving uninsured the last six. Read the fine print of your policy, check with your agent, and be sure you'll be covered if you're planning any extended travel.

Canadians need to arrange extended out-of-province health insurance coverage before leaving their province of residence. This is for expenses over and above what your provincial plan covers. You may not think it necessary but a friend of ours, who didn't buy it, spent \$50,000 for USA medical bills after a minor accident. Are you usually a big gambler? If not, then consider this insurance of only a few dollars per day a good investment.

We like our roadside assistance plan. In our case, it's CAA (the Canadian equivalent to AAA), which has paid for itself a couple of times on our trips. If you drive an older vehicle like we do, it can be "peace of mind" insurance. I also call it "stupidity insurance" since it covers things such as running out of gas, locking your keys in the vehicle, and running the battery down by leaving the lights on. As insurance goes, it's the one we use most often (What does that say about us?) Ours is good for four occurrences per year and, unlike auto insurance, there's no deductible and the rates don't go up when we make a claim.

Exemptions for Canadian Health Plans

Most Canadian travelers know that, depending on your province of residence, your Provincial Health Insurance Plan is only valid for only six or seven months absence per year. But not many people know that, in many provinces, everyone is also allowed an exemption to this rule.

In Ontario, we were able to apply for an exemption of up to two years outside the province while remaining covered under OHIP. At the time, this was a once-in-a-lifetime offer and we used one of our years in 2000 so we're entitled to the same privilege at least once more.

We had to apply for the exemption in advance, the process took several weeks, and we were given a new, temporary health card for the duration. Upon our return, we needed to report to the health office immediately to prove we were back and to have our old insurance card reinstated.

Each Canadian province has slightly different limitations. For full details, visit <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/>.

One Final Warning

This type of travel could become addictive – especially when you find yourself in settings like this:



We started in 2000 with a once-in-a-lifetime trip of one-year duration. When we discovered how to do it – the frugal shunpiker way – we realized we could repeat the experience more often. We've gone from once-in a lifetime to a lifestyle! We were on the road for five months in 2004, another five months in 2006, again for five months in 2008, six month in 2011, five months in 2013, and have no plans to stop anytime soon.

We sometimes wonder if we should share our secrets for fear too many people will start traveling this way. Who will pay the taxes to keep the roads up? But some things are just too good not to share. I hope you'll gain some benefit from learning how we travel and the hints contained in this guide. I hope you'll enjoy the specific guides I've written for each region and recommend them to others you might meet in your travels.

I'd love to hear from you. Please send your comments through the website at www.frugal-rv-travel.com. Happy Shunpiking!