

LEARNING MADE EASY



# RVs & Campers

for  
**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
A Wiley Brand



Select the RV or camper  
that fits your travel needs

Pick the perfect spot that  
fits your camper

Take charge of maintaining  
your RV or camper

**Christopher Hodapp**  
**Alice Von Kannon**



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**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
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# RVs & Campers

**by Christopher Hodapp  
and Alice Von Kannon**

**for  
dummies®**  
A Wiley Brand

## **RVs & Campers For Dummies®**

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# Introduction

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One afternoon in late summer of 2020, our friend and neighbor Lora knocked on our door to tell us out of the clear blue sky that she was selling her house and everything in it and hitting the road in an RV. Her teenage daughter had gone off to college earlier in the year. Their huge five-bedroom house was way too big, way too expensive, and way too empty for a woman living all by herself to maintain. So, she sold it in the midst of the real estate boom of COVID-19, and she held a huge garage sale to get rid of her unneeded furniture and a lifetime of assorted accumulated stuff.

It all happened so fast that we couldn't quite believe it. Later that week, she pulled into our driveway with the used Class C motorhome she'd bought and christened "Big Betty." She was headed first for Salem, Massachusetts, a place she'd always wanted to see, with her two giant sheepdogs, her small auxiliary dog, and a cat. A small party formed in the rain in our driveway, friends and neighbors seeing her off. Lora is a pretty, upscale sort of lady, gregarious and caring, and she'd seen many of us through some major crises. The entire neighborhood hated seeing her go.

There was no route she intended to follow, no trail leading her to some destination, no deadline to get anywhere by some specific date. The five of them — Lora and her four furry companions — were going out to see the country; meet new people; discover new cities, villages, and landscapes; and go wherever her whims and Big Betty carried her. With no more mortgage payment, property taxes, insurance, homeowner's association fees, utility payments, lawn care, or other assorted home maintenance to pay for, suddenly being on the road meant she could afford this lifestyle almost indefinitely. "I'll try it for a couple of months and see if I like it," she cheerily said as she left town. As of this writing, Lora has been gone almost eight months, and she's still traveling.

When history books get written about the 21st century, we suspect there will be a big fat asterisk at the natural demarcation point of the year 2020 — before COVID and after COVID. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to come up with a single event, industry, or activity that wasn't dramatically altered by the national and global shutdowns that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic. That included the world of recreational vehicles (RVs). The RV business had already been enjoying an uptick in sales and interest for several years, but when every other form of vacation travel shut down because of pandemic restrictions, RV dealerships sold

out of nearly everything on their lots in record time, and parks and campgrounds in all 50 states were packed solid. And in 2021, the RV industry anticipated manufacturing well over half a million new trailers, motorhomes, and campers — the highest annual number in recorded history.

We may know our friend as Lora, but her name is Legion, to paraphrase a famous parable, and she is many. More than 11 million American households own an RV today, and over a million Americans are living in an RV full-time. It's for Lora and all those other new, first-time RVers like her that we decided to write this book.

With so many millions of people of all ages setting out on their first RV vacation each year, our goal is to give you enough knowledge that you won't feel overwhelmed by the vocabulary, the equipment, and the written and unwritten rules of the road. Whether you're planning to take the occasional weekend adventure, or you've got itchy feet to go and keep right on going, owning an RV should be a fun experience. But to keep it fun, there is a lot to be aware of before you even set foot on a dealership's parking lot and even more when you take your first trip. All the things we learned the hard way are in this book, in the hope that you'll never panic and just keep on rolling.

## About This Book

Shopping for and camping in an RV is supposed to be fun, so we want you to feel informed and confident from the first time you enter a dealership to the time you leave on your inaugural camping trip. In this book, we acquaint you with the types and sizes of every RV imaginable — what they're called and what makes them ideal or unsuitable for your situation. We help you decide whether your rig should tow or be towed, and we even tell you what a *toad* is. We arm you with RV driving tips and explain the mystic forces of weight distribution. You get the lowdown on your RV's systems for power, gas, heating, and air conditioning, and we even give you the straight scoop about water and poop.

By the time you finish this book, you'll be able to hitch up, hit the road without it hitting back, and set up camp like you've been doing it for years. Most important, we help you decide whether the RV lifestyle is for you — whether you intend on camping for a few weeks a year, living on the road full time, or something in between.

Because of the way this book is laid out for beginners, seasoned RVers may think there's nothing here for them. But there's a use for it you may not have considered: Perhaps you're the captain of your rig, the master of all you survey from the throne of your driver's seat. But if you're traveling with a spouse, a friend, a partner, or perhaps your teenage kids who don't know how your RV operates, we hope you'll pass this book to them before your next big trip. Life on the road is so much easier when you have a helping hand or two to keep things running smoothly. If you don't have the time, patience, or opportunity to teach your traveling companions how to operate or troubleshoot your RV and its systems, let us do it for you!

There's a practical side to sharing this book with your traveling companion, too: Unexpected accidents can happen on the road. RVers and campers frequently seek out the perfect spot in the wilderness, far from civilization. But no one is indestructible or entirely bulletproof. If something were to happen to you as the principal driver and your traveling partner had to take over the steering wheel suddenly, they would need to know the basics of how everything in your rig works.

Within this book, you may note that some web addresses break across two lines of text. If you're reading this book in print and want to visit one of these web pages, simply key in the web address exactly as it's noted in the text, pretending as though the line break doesn't exist. If you're reading this as an e-book, you've got it easy — just click the web address to be taken directly to the web page.

## Foolish Assumptions

*RVs & Campers For Dummies* starts from scratch, as though you know almost nothing about RVs, so we make a couple of presumptuous assumptions:

- » We assume you're toying with the notion of having an RV of your own, or at least renting one to see if you like it.
- » We assume you've at least owned your own automobile and know how to drive, but we don't assume you've ever towed anything in your life.
- » We don't assume you know your Class B from your fifth wheel or your fresh water from your black water (and trust us, you don't want to mix them up).
- » We don't assume you're mechanically inclined or that you know which end of the hammer gets used for installing screws.

# Icons Used in This Book

Throughout this book, you'll find *icons* (little pictures in the margin) that will help you spot material of special interest. Here's a guide to what the icons mean:



TIP

Anything marked with the Tip icon is a bit of advice that's handy or helpful to know, like a shortcut or a practical suggestion to save you time, effort, money, or a headache. Owning your rig makes you part of the rolling confraternity of fellow RVers, and we all like to share our hard-won tips and experiences "for those who may follow."



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

The Technical Stuff icon points out interesting information but not essential to understanding the subject at hand. If you're in a hurry, you can skip anything marked with this icon.



REMEMBER

The Remember icon marks stuff you probably should commit to memory or at least write on the back of your hand.



WARNING

Anything marked with the Warning icon is important enough to warrant either a "Don't do this!" or "Be sure to. . . ." We probably learned it the hard way, so you're the lucky beneficiary of our bungling.

## Beyond the Book

In addition to the material in the print or e-book you're reading right now, this product also comes with some access-anywhere goodies on the web. Check out the free Cheat Sheet for a quick rundown of the different types of RVs and campers, tips on renting an RV, advice on what you can and can't do in rest areas, and information on where to come for free. To access the Cheat Sheet, go to [www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com) and type **RVs & Campers For Dummies Cheat Sheet** in the Search box.

Visit our Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/rvsfordummies](http://www.facebook.com/rvsfordummies) for updates, videos, tips, tricks, and more.

# Where to Go from Here

Like all *For Dummies* books, ours is designed so you can read it from cover to cover. (We always advise everyone to buy one copy for every bathroom.) Or you can head straight for the topics you're most interested in — use the table of contents and index to find what you need.

If you're looking at motorhomes, you won't need to read Chapter 7 on tow vehicles. If you're already familiar with the various types of RVs that are available, Chapter 2 may bore you to smithereens. If you climb into your rig, turn on the power, and nothing happens, sit down at the picnic table and thumb your way to Chapter 14 about electrical systems. It's your book now, so use it as you see fit! There's a lot of information stuffed into these pages.

Finally, before we jump in, a word of caution about this or any other book about RV ownership: Never make a potentially expensive purchase based solely on something you read in a book or online. Depending on your personal circumstances, investing in an expensive RV may very well be the biggest purchase you'll ever make, with the possible exception of a house. We know everybody has their moments of weakness and susceptibility to pretty looks and a smooth line of patter, and your first RV can be a lot like your first teenage romantic crush: The heart wants what it wants. But throughout this book, we repeatedly urge you to avoid impulse buying and do lots of research before you hand over your hard-earned cash. You'll be glad you did. Happy travels!



# 1

## **Getting Started with RVs and Campers**

### **IN THIS PART . . .**

Discover the world of recreational vehicles (RVs) and life on the road.

Learn the difference between a trailer, a motorhome, a fifth wheel, and more.

Choose the rig that's right for you, factoring in size, shape, arrangement, and price.



- » Becoming an American nomad
- » Finding your *kumpania*
- » Getting your kicks on Route 66

## Chapter 1

# Joining the Cavalcade of Rolling Nomads

**T**hey've been known by different names over the last hundred years: campers, caravans, tin cans, trailers, Winnebagos, motorhomes, and RVs. There are teardrops and minis, pop-ups and tagalongs, fifth wheels and toy haulers, and motorhomes as small as vans and as big as buses.

When we were growing up, *camper* was the word for a shell on a pickup truck, while *recreational vehicle* (RV) was strictly something with its own engine, like a motorhome, and no single word fit everything you could camp in. Nowadays, both words are used more loosely. We had to pick one, and in this book, we chose to use *RV* as the best overall term for anything with wheels that you can eat and sleep and have fun in, including motorhomes, trailers, fifth wheels, and truck campers.

So, what sort of people have an RV? People just like you — and almost anybody else. Identifying a cross-section of RVers in order to define some “average” owner is as futile as trying to nail Jell-O to a wall. RVs are owned by campers and glampers, nomads and full-timers, homeschoolers and gig workers, loners and families, retirees and newlyweds, weekend warriors and tailgaters. Super-rich, middle-class, and flat-broke campers park side-by-side in campgrounds every day and then sit around each other's campfires and share in the fellowship of RV life.

All the other chapters in this book are the how-to's of RVing, from buying to boondocking to plumbing. But this first chapter is an overview of who's RVing, why they're doing it, and what effect it's having on the culture. Friends and family, even acquaintances, ask us all the time, "What kind of people go RVing?" And, more commonly, "Why would you even *consider* living full time in an RV?" In this chapter, we try to answer both.

RVing is wrapped up with the romance of the open road. Sooner or later, the majority of RVers you encounter will say that they hit the highway because they wanted to actually see and explore the country around them. So, we talk about how and why those highways came about, why Route 66 is such a big deal to RVers, and why the United States, in particular, really is the land of the RV.

## Everybody's Doing It

Perhaps life on the road as a modern nomad sounds like an exciting adventure you'd like to attempt. Or maybe you want to take your kids on one last great adventure as a family before your oldest goes off to college. Or if you're older, maybe you want to bond with your grandkids by exploring the country together. Maybe you just saw a magazine photo of a couple gazing out the back window of their RV at the morning sunrise over a bucolic brook and started wishing it was you instead of them.

Despite a commonplace media image of RVers as either a vast platoon of elderly retirees or out-of-work, flinty nomads chasing day-labor jobs like the Oakies in the 1930s, the truth is that RVers come from every age, income, education level, and socioeconomic status.

Whether they intend to use an RV only for a couple of getaway weekends a year, live in one year-round, or anything in between, everybody has their own very personal reason for buying a trailer or motorhome. Over the years, we've heard these reasons most often:

- » You fondly recall a wonderful summer trip to the Grand Canyon as a child, when your family borrowed your uncle's motorhome.
- » You're getting close to retirement age and suddenly that three-bedroom house seems like way too much expense and responsibility to hang onto anymore.
- » You despise the four months of cold weather and shoveling 10 inches of partly cloudy off your front stoop every time it snows, but you otherwise love your sticks-and-bricks home the rest of the year.

- » You realized during the COVID-19 pandemic that you really can work from anywhere with a Wi-Fi connection, and you'd like to see the rest of the country.
- » The idea of waking up to a new and different view outside your window every morning seems too romantic for your soul to pass up.

In short, there are as many reasons as there are people, and there are literally millions of RV owners on the road today, chasing their dreams and loving the lifestyle.



If statistics are your thing, chew on these: A recent study found that RV ownership has increased over 62 percent since the year 2001, and the record 11.2 million RV-owning households are split almost evenly between those *over* and *under* the age of 55. The biggest increase was among 18- to 34-year-olds, who now make up almost a quarter of the market. An incredible 9.6 million *more* households intend to buy an RV within the next five years. And among existing owners, 84 percent of 18- to 34-year-olds said they intend to buy *another* RV in the next five years, while 78 percent of them would prefer to buy a new model instead of used.

In the following sections, we walk you through the main groups of people who are RVing these days. Don't see yourself in one of these categories? See yourself in more than one? You're not alone!

## Weekenders and vacationers

The biggest group of RVers you'll find on the road are the weekenders and vacationers. The industry says that the majority of RV owners are these types of campers. Most are still working for a living, and loads of them have families. They live in traditional houses, condos, or apartments year-round, but they use their RVs to get away for short breaks.

Because of that, the traditional travel trailer is generally designed and constructed for occasional use, and that's partially why you see such a wide range of options and prices for them. Because of that wide financial spread, you should probably look upon a weekend travel trailer and a well-equipped one for full-time living with two very different levels of expectation in price, quality, features, and longevity. What you choose should be dictated by how you intend to use it. (We give you lots of information about picking and choosing a rig to best suit your needs in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.)

## Snowbirds and retirees

There's no denying that a substantial number of RVers on the road are seniors 55 and up. They make up about half of all RV owners in the United States. Like migrating birds, seniors have been fleeing from wintertime weather since the dawn of time, or at least since the founding of Miami Beach and the invention of the umbrella drink. These *snowbirds*, as they're commonly called, flee their chilly, snowy, northern states to Florida, Alabama, Texas, and the other Gulf states east of the Rockies, or Arizona, New Mexico, and Nevada in the West. In fact, a big swath of Canadian snowbirds cross the border every year in their RVs to head for the very same places. That's why you hear a lot of *ehs* in Tucson every January.

The explosive sales of RVs has helped make warm-weather chasing a truly mass, mobile movement. But unlike the snowbirds of old who bought timeshares or vacation homes, RVs give them the ability to go wherever they like. Retirees like waking up to a new view out the front door every day, too, and RVs represent freedom of mobility and travel that airplanes and timeshare contracts can't offer. And retirement generally means there's more discretionary time and money than an average family has.



TIP

Throughout the warm-weather states, there has been a growing clamor for elaborate and huge luxury RV resorts. They often have hundreds of RV parking spaces to accommodate the largest motorhomes, fifth wheels, and other rigs, with full hookups. The best ones have pools, shops, restaurants, social rooms, laundry facilities, and much more. Prices are high, but most offer monthly rates for extended stays. And if you get sick of being in your RV after a while, many also offer small one-bedroom cabins or villas for rent or purchase.

## Full-timers

The number of RV owners who choose to live on the road 365 days a year is growing dramatically. According to the RV Industry Association (RVIA), 450,000 people were living in RVs in 2010; as of 2021, that figure is over a million. RV manufacturers have responded by offering models with as much living space as possible, using slide-outs that expand when you're parked. More and more rigs are equipped with residential-grade appliances like refrigerators, dishwashers, and washer/dryer units — items that would have only been found in the most expensive units until recently. The largest fifth-wheel trailers and motorhomes feel more like a house than an RV.

On the other hand are “minimalist” full-timers in vans and Class Bs, with variations in between. Our parents once wisely cautioned us against being owned by our possessions. Singles and empty-nesters alike can feel overwhelmed by the costs, daily care, and maintenance of a house. Yet, a 25- to 40-foot-long home on

wheels can be kept neat and orderly with a minimum of effort and expense. It can be incredibly liberating.



WARNING

Living perpetually on the road is a big commitment to change. It comes with its own challenges, and much of that stems from the problem of establishing a legal *domicile* (a permanent mailing address for everything from health insurance to filing taxes and voting). RV-friendly states like Florida, South Dakota, and Texas make it simpler to establish a legal domicile, but in most cases, you have to visit your home base at least once a year to stay legal.



TIP

Escapees RV Club ([www.escapees.com](http://www.escapees.com)) is a major provider of services for full-timers, like mail forwarding and roadside assistance. Their Xcapers group within the club is geared to helping full-timers. They even have their own annual gathering each year, called Convergence.

## Traveling workers and the gig economy

Internet connectivity and a smartphone in everybody's pocket has nurtured the gig economy. If you can work from home, it doesn't matter where home is, and the COVID-19 shutdowns brought that sharply into focus. Home can just as easily be a place on wheels wherever the Wi-Fi works.

There's no sense in denying that living and working in an RV can be a very attractive choice for economic reasons, regardless of someone's age. On the road, we've met plenty of twentysomethings who wanted out of Mom and Dad's house, and an RV was the only way they could afford it. We've encountered several folks who inherited an RV, and living in it seemed more attractive than paying for an overpriced apartment. But whatever the reason they started, these RVers eventually decided they loved it and had no intention of "escaping" the road and returning to an anchored life.

## Women on the road

The original RV full-timers were people following a mobile job. But the newest full-timers in the RV landscape are the growing number of women. We've talked with women RVing alone, single women, as well as widows and divorcees who are either childless or empty-nesters. The lure of the adventure of the open road is common, and the ongoing development of lighter, towable trailers and smaller, easier-to-manuever motorhomes has made it far less daunting for anyone to indulge their dream.

Sometimes the women we talked to had been unhappy, trapped in a little apartment and an unfulfilling 9-to-5. But more than a few we've met found themselves trying to care for a 3,000-square-foot house with a big yard, and couldn't

figure out why they were doing it. A 30-foot universe is a universe that can be handled. A condo or even a retirement community is an option, but it can seem like a retreat from life, with more potential for loneliness.

This was the situation with Lora, our friend and neighbor, the first person we personally knew who told us, with no warning, that she was selling her large suburban house and most of the stuff in it to hit the road in an RV. Lora is a bright, happy woman with all sorts of choices. She wasn't destitute or desperate when she made this one. And this is the ultimate point — most of us are out here RVing because we *want* to be. We want to see the world and experience life on a higher plane. We're living a fun life that's much cheaper than the old-style suburban house, car, and 9-to-5 job. We're here, out on the road, because we're nomads by nature. And when we pull up stakes to move on, we don't ever say "goodbye," we say, "See you down the road!"

## Workampers

The sudden about-face in the economy in 2020, compelled millions of Americans to change their lifestyle dramatically almost overnight. Sales of RVs to people no longer able to afford their homes, or who have become work nomads pursuing jobs in the gig economy, are also at an all-time high. For a big group of retirees, day-to-day living on a paltry Social Security check is nearly impossible. As full-time RVers, they can subsidize their retirement by seeking part-time jobs and traveling to wherever the work is. Many RVers pick up jobs as campground hosts, Amazon workers, seasonal tourist attraction or resort employees, and sugar beet harvesters in Nebraska and North Dakota (or other agricultural jobs).

For many years, Amazon has employed thousands of transient workers (many of them retirees) living in trailers, who chase seasonal warehouse jobs across the country. The Amazon CamperForce program arranges for campground sites so these temporary workers have a place to park their rigs while working for several months at a time. Wages are low, hours are long, and the work itself can be tedious and exhausting, but Amazon's appetite for workers is inexhaustible. It's entirely possible that the box that arrived this morning with your favorite tea, a bargain box of soap bars, and a Frisbee for the dog was packed by a CamperForce RVer.

More and more companies are beginning to realize the benefits of these types of mobile employees. Some openly prefer older workers, who tend to be more dependable. Workers on Wheels ([www.work-for-rvers-and-campers.com](http://www.work-for-rvers-and-campers.com)) and Workamper News (<https://workamper.com>) are two websites for connecting RVers and employers. They let you subscribe to a free daily email newsletter with job listings and opportunities.