

On a Roll

Two alums unpack the secrets of van life

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EMILY KING AND COREY SMITH POSE IN FRONT OF BOSCHA, THE NAME THEY GAVE TO THE 1987 VOLKSWAGEN VANAGON WHERE THEY LIVE AND WORK ON THE ROAD.

One van. Two people. Seventy-five square feet. More than ten-thousand miles. Welcome to life on the road with Emily King '06 and Corey Smith '08. "It started as a little experiment just for ourselves," says King, a business management major, who develops websites for small companies and works remotely for Cookson Strategies, a communications firm. "We wanted to see if we could combine a nomadic lifestyle with a 9-to-5 job." And so they bought a 1987 Volkswagen Vanagon on Craigslist, packed it with several thousand pounds of gear – including three bicycles and four surfboards, and left New Hampshire in a January snowstorm on a quest for simplicity and adventure.

They've been telling their story ever since on their blog, ["Where's My Office Now?,"](#) and on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#). And they've just launched a series of video webisodes. Today, a year after they first hit the road, they've got nearly 7,000 van-life enthusiasts following their progress and peppering them with questions: How do you store your food? How much does it cost? How do you work on the road? How do you keep from killing each other? "Everybody has a dream of hopping in their van and driving off into the sunset," says Smith, a biology major who's worked as a kayak guide and teacher and currently manages accounts for King's website business. "We're living the dream, and we want to share it with others."

Their blog is a record of their journey – and proof that, when your office window happens to be a giant windshield on the world, there are plenty of good reasons to procrastinate: A lone saguaro cactus, for example, backlit by the rising sun. Or a wash of deep blue surf curving along the Pacific coast. A cluster of snow-covered peaks. Or a grove of sky-high redwoods. Smith and King have been recording it all – the ups as well as the downs of the traveling life.



THE DAY BEGINS WITH BREAKFAST, WHICH COREY SMITH COOKS ON A TWO-BURNER STOVE.

For one thing, it turns out that living simply can actually be pretty complicated. Mornings start with pumping water for cold showers, followed by a complex routine that involves transforming the bed back into a couch – in order to make enough room to stand up, turn around, and cook breakfast on the two-burner stove. There's food buying and itinerary planning and, of course, van maintenance: replacing the fuel lines, greasing the CV joints, changing the coolant, updating the moldy plumbing pipes, installing an electric faucet – the list goes on. Smith has tackled just about everything on the list, and then explained it all on their "Vanagon How To" page for anyone else out there who needs advice.

They've also explained the challenges of working on the road. When the wireless connection is good (they use 4G LTE Mobile Hotspot), King works in the passenger

seat while Smith drives. Other times they settle in at the nearest café with wireless access. King estimates she puts in about 15 to 30 hours a week, making her own schedule, which she loves, and pulling in more than enough to cover the expenses of van life, which are about \$12,000 per year. Smith, meanwhile, is so busy with trip logistics and van maintenance that he puts in only minimal paid hours. But the equation works: a low cost of living means they can spend fewer hours at their “desks” and still save money to help pay off student loans.

“You can’t hold grudges when you live in such a small space,” they agree. “You just have to let things go.” If it’s relationship advice you’re after, they’ve got that, too. The couple, who worked together as kayak guides and then bonded over their love of surfing and travel, speak almost in unison: “You can’t hold grudges when you live in such a small space,” they agree. “You just have to let things go.” And, yes, sometimes it’s helpful to simply step outside – as long as you’re parked. Some lessons of the road have been discouraging: the amount of waste they’ve encountered, the extremes of wealth and poverty. “It’s made me a more compassionate person,” says King. “And helped me think about what is truly necessary to survive in this country.” And it’s strengthened their resolve to live lightly, using less and needing less.



WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT LIFE ON THE ROAD WITH KING AND SMITH? [CHECK OUT THEIR BLOG.](#)

“The thing that’s surprised me most, though,” says Smith, “is how awesome people in America are. It’s a story that needs to be told – it’s not what’s portrayed in the media at all.” He pauses for a minute and considers the stats: “One bad mechanic. That’s it. One difficult person in 12 months.” Meanwhile, they can’t begin to count the number of friends they’ve made and people who have helped them out. Like the guy on Instagram in Oregon, who responded, well, instantly and offered to store their van while Smith recovered from a broken collarbone. Or the local mechanic who went out of his way to help them after serious breakdown in Arizona. No power steering. No brakes. On a hill.

“It was scary,” says Smith, “but it wound up being a ‘Sedona moment’ – what people there call ‘synchronicity.’ Everything came together.” The travelers stayed seven weeks, made new friends, and created a website for the campground that hosted them. And then there was the girl with the handmade hats, the one who was following their adventure online and just showed up one day en route with warm gifts for their journey.



Van life is like that – full of surprises. “Just like the road we call life,” writes King in one blog entry. And there’s no end in site. The two say they’ll keep at it as long as it’s fun. And they’ll keep passing along what they learn, too. “Not a week goes by that we don’t receive an email from a follower on the verge of a daring leap into van life,” writes King. Thanks to their online storytelling, those who aren’t quite ready to make the leap can always hitch a ride – hopping into their virtual vans and heading off into the sunset.

Courtesy photos

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