

My First RV Trip

By Bob Payne

What's it really like to rent an RV? Our writer got behind the wheel and discovered the pleasures of a go-at-your-own-pace family vacation.

We were pulling onto the street in our rented RV to start a three-day excursion through New England. I had never driven an RV before. As I glanced nervously in the mirror to avoid clipping a stop sign, I felt as if I were maneuvering a hybrid minivan-Greyhound bus.

"Daddy," our 3-year-old daughter, Cleo, announced. "I have to go to the potty."

I wasn't convinced. From the moment Cleo had stepped into the 29-foot recreational vehicle, she'd been fascinated by its features—the compact kitchen, the scaled-down sleeping areas, and especially the toilet. It made a satisfyingly loud whoosh when we flushed it, and what she really wanted to do, I suspected, was explore the sound some more.

And why not let her? After all, when the hassles of flying prompted us to consider renting an RV, what attracted us most was the thought of setting our



HAIR AND MAKEUP BY GINA SANDLER FOR BEAUTY & PHOTO, USING MAC COSMETICS. STYLING BY LALA SLOTTMAN. ON MOM: JEANS BY JOE'S JEANS. SWEATER BY MARC JACOBS. SHOES BY MERRILL SHOES. ON DAD: SHOES BY CLARKS. ON GIRL: SWEATSHIRT BY SWEET HEARTS. SNEAKERS BY K-SWISS. RV COURTESY OF GOLF STREAM COACH.

Photographs by Misha Gravenor

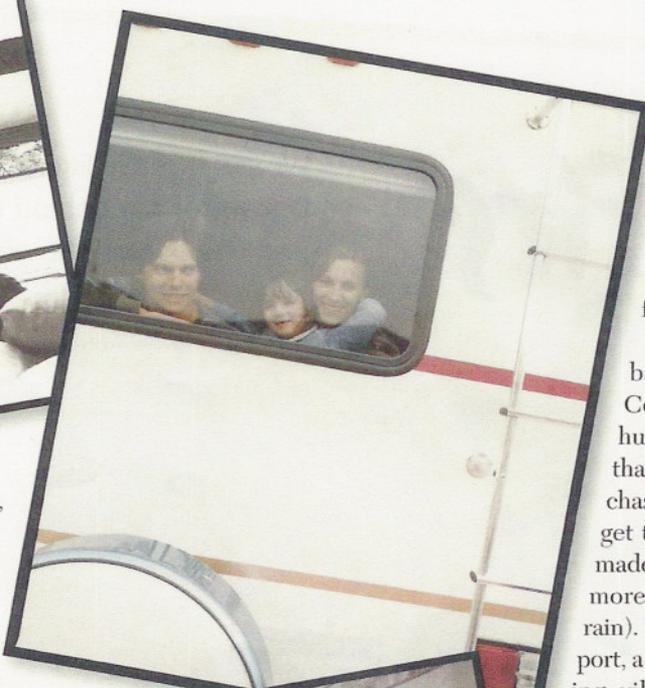


own travel schedule. So, a mere 90 feet from our home in Pelham, New York, we took our first rest stop. Sally, my wife, settled Cleo onto the potty for a session that, indeed, turned out to be a false alarm. Meanwhile, I poked around the RV, trying to remember everything the rental agent had told me during my orientation session. The main thing to remember, he'd explained, was to crank down the roof-mounted TV antenna. We knew we wouldn't forget to retract the push-out walls, since they'd block our view in the mirrors. Otherwise, the appliances and the hookups for water, sewage, and electricity seemed almost foolproof.

Only one thing really concerned me, though: handling the rig (I did all the driving). Thankfully, this turned out to be far easier than I'd imagined. After about 15 minutes of constantly glancing in the mirrors to make sure I wasn't taking out road signs or drifting into the passing lane, I found my comfort zone. Soon, I had myself convinced that I could drive an 18-wheeler—provided I didn't have to back it up.

Easy Does It

We headed through the scenic Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts. Cleo stayed securely restrained in her car seat whenever the RV was mov-



Soon, I had myself convinced that I could drive an 18-wheeler—provided I didn't have to back it up.

ing, while Sally was buckled into a dinette seat across from her and behind me. (The same seat-belt laws for cars apply to RVs.) Chalk it up to the wide windows, the roomy environment, or the newness of the experience, but Cleo hardly fussed at all.

Eventually, we pulled in to the Normandy Farms Campground, in Foxboro, Massachusetts, south of Boston. The campground was vast, and we were directed to our assigned spot like an airplane pulling

into the gate area. The wooded grounds included three swimming pools, a playground, and a well-equipped lodge—all great for families.

The next day, we drove the back roads of northeastern Connecticut and leisurely hunted for antiques. We knew that no matter how big our purchases were, we'd have room to get them home, and this insight made our pleasant pastime even more enjoyable (despite some rain). We ended up at Mystic Seaport, a historical 19th-century whaling village. There, we followed Cleo's lead as she scrambled in and around the tall ships and made crafts in the Discovery Barn. Then we headed to a nearby campground.

Family Time

The rain kept us from experiencing much of the camaraderie that we'd heard is a big part of the RV experience. But we had fun anyway. At home, our lives had gotten so hectic that spending a lot of time together had become nearly im-

possible. "Here, in a nice way, we're forced to be together," Sally said. When it rained, we lazed about. I read, Sally experimented with gourmet dishes in the tiny kitchen, and Cleo held long

conversations with her two favorite stuffed animals, Mia the Cat and Tape the Dog. When the clouds cleared, we took long walks through the landscaped campgrounds.

Weather aside, we did have a few concerns about the RV. For one, the only place to secure a forward-facing car seat properly was in one dinette seat. This meant not only that I needed to remove part of the table assembly with a screwdriver but that we couldn't have traveled safely with

more than one young child. Also, the bunk space over the cab was largely open. Before we'd let a child sleep up there, we'd need to attach a railing or netting. However, Cleo was bent on staying in the double bed with her mom, so I slept in the bunk.

As beginning RVers, we also found ourselves skipping a few attractions when we thought parking might be a problem. Likewise, we were tempted to pass up nearby activities once we'd set up camp. Driving anywhere meant disconnecting our hookups, including the intimidating length of

accordion-like hose that ran from the RV's waste-water tank into the campground's sewage-disposal system. We quickly realized why RV owners often tow a small car. (For renters, bicycles might be the solution.)

All in all, however, the chance to enjoy a vacation that combines ever-changing scenery with the need to unpack only once has made Sally and me think we might want to go RVing again. As for Cleo? When we arrived home, she refused to take her nap unless she could do it in the RV—her personal playhouse on wheels.
