

Imagine waking up in your own bed, making some coffee, and opening your door to a view of the ocean, the sound of waves crashing, and the warm, salty breeze filling your home. The next morning, you wake up in that same bed, make coffee, and open your door to a view of the mountains, the sound of birds chirping, and the cool, clear air filling your home. Now repeat this scene in the desert, the forest, a city. This is not a mental exercise for a quick money-making pyramid scheme, or a page from a billionaire's biography. This is the idealized concept behind Van Life, a growing subculture of transient individuals who choose to live in their vehicle. The movement values living a non-traditional life, one that emphasizes minimalism and experiences over materialism and routine. For climbers, it is a way to visit a world-class climbing area, spend an entire season there, and then move on to the next one.

Living in your car is not a new concept, but typically the car dwellers were forced into it because of their economic situation. Others might have done it as an act of protest against society, or the person is older and retired and chooses to spend her time traveling. The idea of van life is not much different, but the demographic has shifted. Modern van lifers come from all different backgrounds, but one commonality is that they are young adults on the cusp of entering the "real world." Some might have just graduated from university and must decide what to do with their lives, while others might have spent a few years working on their chosen career path and are feeling jaded by the monotony or pointlessness of it. They are not on board with one of the guiding principles of modern society: work hard to make money so you can have all the trappings of a comfortable life, such as a big house, nice car, and fun vacations. Many van lifers do it as a way to reject that way of life, to choose a more simple, balanced lifestyle in its stead. The idea is that without rent or a mortgage, utilities, a car payment, and other normal expenses, you can spend less time working and more time traveling and climbing. The small living space also forces you to pare your belongings down to the absolute essentials.

Although "van life" became the popularized term, it really means living in any type of automobile, whether it is a station wagon, pickup truck, or Smart car. The rigs can vary from old conversion vans that cost a few hundred dollars to vintage Volkswagen buses to brand-new, tricked-out Mercedes Sprinters. Many climbers go with any rig that offers high clearance and four-wheel drive for off-roading capabilities so they can get to

hard-to-reach climbing areas. Some setups have simple two-burner propane stoves that can be easily moved outside to a campsite's picnic table, and others have three-burner oven ranges for baking fresh cookies or roasting a whole chicken. There are vans whose buildouts are centered around the storage for gear and toys—mountain bikes, kayaks, climbing equipment—and others that favor livability, with a nice couch, comfy bed, and a table. You can choose to buy a vehicle and build it out yourself, or you can hire someone else to do it. With the popularity of this movement, there are now custom van builders all over the world who will convert your vehicle to whatever specifications you can dream up (and afford). Some of these rigs have full plumbing setups, with running water, a shower, and gray water storage, and solar power systems that provide electricity for lights, fans, computers, and a refrigerator.

"Where do you go to the bathroom?" might be the most common question asked to van lifers. The response will vary, but typically van lifers go to the bathroom wherever one might go while on a climbing road trip: gas stations, rest stops, campgrounds, trail-heads, restaurants, coffee shops, large grocery stores, and big-box stores. Some vans might have a composting toilet that is on wheels and compact enough to be rolled away under a bed or in a cabinet when not in use. Most van lifers, males and females, have some sort of pee jar or pee bottle for going number 1 in the middle of the night. If you are someone who has a constitutional every morning right on schedule, it helps to put some forethought into where you park for the night. That way a flushable toilet is just minutes away when you wake up and *gotta go*. The real crux of the bathroom situation is when you must do some "urban camping." It is not glamorous, but it is a necessary element to living on the road. The reality of van life is not all beautiful mountain views and oceanside parking spots. If you decide to move around a lot, you will inevitably end up spending many nights in more populated areas, parking on the side of a street in a big city or staying overnight in a large parking lot where you will not be noticed. You can't exactly wander off, dig a hole, and poop surrounded by trees and forest animals, and you definitely cannot just empty your pee bottle by throwing it into the dirt outside your van. Instead, you have to be strategic about where you park. Most businesses are not thrilled at the idea of a bunch of van-dwelling transients living outside their establishments, so people must be cognizant of where they can and cannot

park. Most van folks have had at least one experience where they got a loud knock in the middle of the night, were told they could not stay there, and had to move.

"How do you make money?" might be the second-most common question asked of van lifers. The response varies much more in this case, as is also the case with people who do not live in a car. Some people save up as much money as they can before they begin van life, treating it as a temporary situation where they will be spending money but not making it, much like a long vacation. Others will go into it thinking it is temporary, really enjoy it, and have to figure out a way to make money on the road to keep it going. Then a third group might already have a job that allows them to work remotely, as many companies are now offering that option to their employees. Seasonal work (commercial fisherman, wildland firefighter, camp counselor), creative freelance gigs (writing, photography, videography), self-employment (marketing, business consulting, coding), and careers like travel nurse and computer programmer are popular in the van life community. Some van lifers find a way to make money off living in a van itself, by partnering with companies and brands, writing blogs and books about van life, and building large social media followings.

Getting sick, running out of water, not finding a place to park, and having your van break down are all crappy parts of van life. If done solo, living on the road can feel quite lonely and frustrating at times. If it is hot outside, it is probably hot in your van. When it is cold, it is cold. You must often go days or weeks without a shower, and you must battle a constant flow of dirt into your home on wheels. You might go crazy in such a small space, or yearn for the comforts of a real house. Every mundane task takes longer when living in a van—cooking, cleaning, dealing with hygiene—and there are specific van life chores that will eat up any extra time: filling water, emptying gray water, finding places to park, putting everything away any time you need to drive, pulling those same things out again, keeping everything organized. But if you can stand all that, van life can be the most rewarding experience. You will get to travel as much as you want, meet new people, and see new places. You can climb every day, and leave one crag for the next as soon as the weather turns. Van life has become a community in itself, with regular meetups and organized groups, and it is now a way to meet people in climbing area parking lots around the world.

**THE MOVEMENT VALUES LIVING A NON-TRADITIONAL LIFE, ONE THAT EMPHASIZES MINIMALISM AND EXPERIENCES OVER MATERIALISM AND ROUTINE. FOR CLIMBERS, IT IS A WAY TO VISIT A WORLD-CLASS CLIMBING AREA, SPEND AN ENTIRE SEASON THERE, AND THEN MOVE ON TO THE NEXT ONE.**



↑ Above Melissa McGibbon has a moment with Lizzie while van camping in southwest Colorado. ← Left Alton Richardson keeps his gear organized out the back of his van named Bertha. ↓ Below Van life is all about community, where traditional neighbors are replaced by fellow van dwellers who park together.