



Roam sweet home

Do you dream of having a big adventure and seeing the world? A motorhome may be just the ticket. Meet some of the Grey Nomads who've swapped the security of humdrum bricks and mortar for a life on the open road

Words **Michael Wright** Illustration **Ed McLachlan**

Home exerts an almost gravitational pull upon human beings, for we are attached to the idea of having a base-camp for our lives. More and more, however, perfectly sensible grown-ups, old enough to know better, are rejecting golf, gardening and home comforts in favour of a life on the open road. We're not talking here about a '49 Hudson like

Jack Kerouac in *On the Road*, nor a horse-drawn caravan 'with white dimity curtains festooning the windows', like the Christian lady in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. No, the vehicle of choice for these Grey Nomads is the modern motorhome, with its fuel-efficient engine, comfy berths and enough fridge-space for plenty of Lidl Riesling.

Thousands of these Senior Globetreckers are out there now,

piloting their motorhomes all over Britain, Europe and beyond. Many of them do so for several months at a stretch, while the full-timers or '365ers' sell their houses and head off for years at a time. And there's a welter of blogs and websites dedicated to chronicling the wanderings of this new generation of unshackled Shackletons.

Retired nurse Maggie Mepstead, 65, from Berkshire, is well into her

fourth month of touring Europe in a motorhome called ROX1. For her, being a baby-boomer attuned her to the *carpe diem* appeal of hitting the open road. 'I vividly remember the Cold War, and how it overshadowed our lives as youngsters,' she says, sipping wine in a campsite near Cap d'Agde in the south of France. 'For me and a lot of my friends, there was this sense that the worst may well happen soon... so we had better >

◁ get on and do things *now*. Today, with cheaper travel and the communications boom, many of us want to get out there and visit these places we've heard so much about.

'Travelling alone has been no problem. I was widowed when my kids were small and am used to my own company, though I found it reassuring at my second campsite to meet another woman who'd been travelling for ten years on her own.

'We are much younger in our outlook than the previous generation, and have a longer life expectancy, too. So I don't want to waste that time sitting watching daytime TV and going into decline. I want to grow old *disgracefully*.'

I blame the snail. Ever since the humble gastropod first came up with the idea of travelling very slowly with your house on your back, humans have been doing their best to follow suit. And while caravans are derided as either uncool or dangerous – or both – the luxury motorhome has come into its own as a viable means, not just of spending a quiet weekend camping in the rain, but of heading off to explore the big, wide world.

In 2012, even Her Majesty the Queen, not known for her membership of the Caravan Club, visited the Bailey motorhome and caravan factory in Bristol with Prince Philip. The Royal couple took a short trip in a Bailey Approach SE 760, and pronounced it 'a real home from home, very nice'.

Last year saw a record attendance at the Motorhome and Caravan Show, when more than 100,000 people came to gawp at the latest models from more than 400 exhibitors. There are now 175,000 motorhomes on the road in Britain and, according to the European Caravan Federation, registrations of new campervans and motorhomes on the UK register in the first six months of 2014 were up a whopping 16% on the same period in 2013.

Exactly how many of them are being bought for global touring is hard to quantify. Yet a glance into the Tardis-like interiors of some of



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FREEWHEELING Maggie Mepstead on the road in France in ROXI

the latest models does make the idea of living in one for an extended period seem less like a prison sentence on wheels than one might perhaps imagine.

'More than anything, it's the sense of freedom that makes it special,' says Donna Garner, 46, a former accountant who lived on a yacht for six years with her husband Phil, 72, and their teenage children, before downsizing five years ago to a motorhome called Monty and becoming a travel writer at the same time.

'When you're just touring for a week or two, or even if you're away for a month, you're so very limited in what you can do. Whereas we're doing this over such a long period of time that we can do everything at a much more leisurely pace.' She smiles at the thought. 'We tend to decide where we're going in the morning, but by the time we've come out of the supermarket, quite often we've made a new plan to go completely in the opposite direction.'

Nor is it simply the ability to choose the next destination that lends a sense of liberty. 'What has been so freeing is that we got rid of lots and lots of stuff when we sold our house,' Donna says. 'So I don't have the dozens of pairs of shoes ▷

Things we have learned

MAGGIE MEPSTEAD 'I am much more adventurous and determined than I thought, though apparently I'm the last person to acknowledge this.'

JASON BUCKLEY 'One unexpected experience on our trip was meeting so many individuals and couples who'd found ways to travel without going broke. They taught us to understand money, in particular how to invest it. On the flip side, we learnt that living on a tight budget is, for us, also something of a release. We no longer make any attempt to keep up with technology, a big home, cars, motorbikes, hot tubs, TV packages, expensive supermarkets and the like. Travelling changed our status from "professional middle class" to "unemployed travellers" overnight.

'Unable to speak the language where we were, sometimes struggling with local customs, often not feeling entirely secure – it kind of reset our baseline of how we see ourselves. On our return this has come into its own, enabling us to put aside lots of material things, to see our goals in life more clearly, and to attack them with more motivation than we have ever had before.'

DONNA GARNER 'Self-sufficiency, more resilience, a go-with-the-flow attitude and never to judge people at first glance.'

RICK HOWE 'People are people, wherever you find them. In every one of the 54 countries we have visited to date, we have met friendly, generous people. And we have almost never met the opposite. We know the less friendly or less generous people must be around, that's just human nature. But the ones we come in contact with from day to day are almost universally great folks who go out of their way to make us feel welcome.'



◁ I considered essential when I worked in an office. On a day-to-day level, we have become less materialistic – although we do still have a small storage unit in Plymouth – and we don't have the hassles that go with owning a house.'

Nevertheless, the depreciation costs on a new motorhome hardly make such vehicles as sound an investment as bricks and mortar. And complicated machines can, as every car owner knows, prove very costly to fix. For Donna and Phil, the experience of 'literally gallons' of rainwater pouring through their motorhome's leaky roof, and dripping via a light-fitting on to their bed, was enough to force them to make a sudden dash back from southern Spain to Cheshire to have it repaired.

Rick and Kathy Howe, currently spending their fifth year motorhoming around Europe, after nine years spent exploring North and South America, had a similar experience in a remote part of southern Chile, when their Chevrolet motorhome suddenly lost power and defaulted into what Rick describes as 'limp mode'. 'We could coax it up to about 12 miles per hour, but that was it. The nearest town was 150 miles away, via tracks across mountainous terrain.' After two marathon journeys on the back of flatbed trucks, followed by a 24-hour ferry ride, they finally reached the nearest Chevrolet

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TRAVELLING LIGHT Phil and Donna with Monty near Lisbon

dealer – only to find that the parts they needed would have to come from the US. A whole month later, they were finally on their way again.

Yet despite such cautionary tales of en-route emergencies to be faced in a foreign language far from home, Howe, 67, remains adamant that the experience of swapping their home and property management business for a life of adventure has been wonderfully liberating.

'By selling our home and selling or giving away most of our belongings we have learnt how little we need to lead healthy, happy, interesting lives,' he says. 'When we look back on life in a fixed place with all that entails – the expenses, the furniture, the tendency to shop all the time for things for the house, the two cars we had so we could both go to work – it goes on and on. By not having a fixed residence we've freed ourselves, not only financially, but also psychologically, ▷

Words of advice

DONNA GARNER 'Don't buy on a whim. It's really worth hiring before buying. Consider the fact that a motorhome you happily holiday in may be quite different from a vehicle that will become your home for much longer. On holiday, for example, you may eat out a lot. As a full-timer, you probably won't. Having said that, don't assume you need an enormous vehicle – think of manoeuvrability. An eight-metre van obviously won't fit into the same space as a six-metre one.

'Some motorhomes have "permanent" beds; in others, the bed folds away. When you have to make your bed up every day, it needs to be easy to do.

'If you fancy taking to the road, consider renting out your house and trying it, before making it a more permanent thing.

'There would be nothing worse than looking back in 20 years and saying, "I wish I had". We always have more regrets about the things we wish we'd done, than about the things that didn't turn out quite right.'

RICK HOWE 'Don't think up excuses. It's easy to make a list of reasons why you shouldn't go: I don't speak the language, the roads are bad, I'm afraid of this, that, or the other thing. What if I get ill? What if the motorhome breaks down? If you want to travel to out-of-the-way places, you simply have to decide that these things won't stop you.

'You can't gain a working knowledge of every language you might encounter. If things go wrong with your vehicle, you just deal with them as they occur.

'Australian friends of ours came up with a title for their website that I have always admired: dare2Go. And that, ultimately, is all it comes down to. If you are drawn to travel without the safety net of an organised tour, then at some point you just have to decide to do it. We don't consider ourselves especially brave or daring, but we've gone off to a lot of places, just the two of us in our motorhome, and we've done just fine.'



◁ to be able to go where we want, when we want. We travel at our own pace and see the things we want to see. We wouldn't trade it for anything.'

Like the Howes and the Garners, Jason and Julie Buckley became '365ers', leaving their home in the Midlands to tour Europe, Morocco and the Ukraine in a motorhome called Dave for two years and 20,000 miles. Younger than most 365ers at just 42, the Bucleys planned their adventure as a mid-life career break: Julie was a marketing manager and Jason an IT project manager.

Their journey is a reminder that going away invariably has a corollary: coming home. Jason describes this as the 'dark side' of motorhoming. 'It was very difficult,' recalls Julie, 'more so for Jason than for me, perhaps, because I'd done the budgets, so I always knew we'd have to come home at some point.'

Did being away for so long change them? 'We didn't think we'd changed until we came back,' Julie says. 'And then we found we had. Everything was as we had left it; people were living *exactly* the same lives, except their children were slightly older. It was surreal. The lure of further adventures will always be there.'

But is it really an adventure, sleeping every night in the same bed in the same familiar vehicle? Doesn't living in a motorhome

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WANDERLUST Jason and Julie Buckley took off for two years in Dave

somehow insulate one from foreign countries in a way that staying in local accommodation doesn't? 'Anything outside your comfort zone is an adventure,' replies Julie, 'so everyone has their own level of what counts as adventurous.' Jason nods. 'I'll never forget sleeping among a pack of wild dogs on a lava field near the old cable-car station on Vesuvius. Or sleeping under palms in the oases of North Africa.'

What appears to unite the disparate souls who become Grey Nomads is an unusual combination of gritty practicality and a certain wistfulness; the ability to dream big dreams. Thus many of the online blogs include lengthy lists of tips on LPG hose-converters, thermal windscreen covers, scooter ramps and dongles, yet Rick Howe also appears to speak for many when he declares, with misty-eyed fervour: 'Every country, state and region we have visited has rewarded us with experiences and memories. The pleasure just never seems to end. This life on the road has been everything we ever hoped for and we see no end in sight.' ◆

Things we miss

DONNA GARNER 'Phil sometimes misses his own garden, to sit in and to have barbecues. We sometimes miss the consistency of friends. Without regular contact, we have lost touch with or grown apart from friends because of our nomadic lifestyle.'

RICK HOWE 'Nothing really. Morning and evening soaks in our hot tub? The hardest thing I had to give up was a large record and CD collection along with an excellent stereo system, but I can't say I really miss those things.'

'The most common reason folks mention to us for not travelling full-time is children, grandchildren or elderly parents. These are all good reasons for keeping a fixed residence. What we do is definitely not for everyone.'

JASON BUCKLEY 'We missed non-stop water. In some places, such as the Mani peninsula in Greece, there was no water available to refill the tank so we didn't want to waste it. When we hit campsites we spent hours in the shower.'



FOLLOW OUR INTREPID TRAVELLERS ONLINE

Maggie Mepstead

nomaggsrush.wordpress.com

Donna Garner montystravels.com

Rick Howe travelin-tortuga.com

Jason and Julie Buckley ourtour.co.uk

TEMPTED?

Saga motorhome insurance gives you cover in the EU for an unlimited period as standard: saga.co.uk/insurance. There's a great packing check-list at ourtour.co.uk.

Had a great Grey Nomad travel adventure?

Tell us about it! Write to the address on page 11 or email editor@saga.co.uk. We'll feature the best in the magazine and/or on facebook.com/saga