

Big House to Vanlife

Years 2 through 6



Tim & Cheryl Galyean

Big House to Vanlife Years 2-6

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Table of Contents

Book Overview. 2018 to 2024

Part 1. Van repairs & Maintenance

Chap 1. Van Maintenance

2. Check Engine Lights
3. Transmission Failure Education
4. Batteries, Brakes, & Tires

Part 2. RV Upgrades & Repairs

Chap 1. Lithium battery

2. Portable toilet
3. Ceiling fan for better heat circulation
4. New Air Conditioner
5. Front window Air vents
6. Swivel front seat.

Part 3. Kitchen, Cooking & Cleaning Up

Chap 1. Appliances

2. Fridge, Oven, Stove & Microwave
3. Clean up
4. Pots, Pans & cooking utensils
5. Food & Water
6. Double check before driving

Part 4. Funny stories.

- Chap 1. Kids: “Hey, got any Free Candy?
2. Roof Vent Fan Install Fail
3. Stuck in the Mud
4. Parking Ticket is cheaper
5. Watch out for the Treeee
6. How do you keep a woman in suspense?
7. Antenna Wire
8. Gonna need a new TV
9. Garage sales
10. Losing Stuff
11. Watch your Funny Bones
12. Smoke & Gas detector humor

Part 5. 2020 Covid year in a van.

- Chap 1. January & February 2020
2. March & April 2020
3. May & June 2020
4. July & August 2020
5. September & October 2020
6. November & December 2020

Part 6 People, Stories & Other

Part 7. Places Traveled to.

- Chap 1. Port Aransas, TX
2. Shell Island key boat trip Big Shell
3. Tarpon Springs
4. Florida Keys
5. Florida State Fair
6. Anna Maria Island

Part 8. Finding Overnight Parking Spots & Harvest Hosts

- Chap 1. Harvest Host Places stayed at
2. Maxwell Groves
3. Loghry Ranch
4. Mister Chris's Magical Coffee Depot
5. Sun City Stables
6. Paul's Ranch
7. Wintergarden Presbyterian Church
8. Waypoint Bar and Grill

Part 9 Income, Expenses, Business, Future

- Chap 1. Mobile Photography business
2. Internet Service
3. Living or parking at your place of employment
4. Pet and house sitting

5. Van Life Expenses

6. Our Future Van living plans

Book Overview

We published our first book *Big House to Vanlife*, in 2018 after 1 year of living in our van. We picked up our empty cargo van on August 11, 2017 and moved in to our RV van on August 31, 2017. Most people name their vans and we named ours Shelle, because we both like to hang out on the beach and collect sea shells.

Our plan was to live in the van for 1 year then go back to a regular house or tiny house. It's February 2024 now and our one year van living journey is now going on 7 years.

The first book covered our story from living good financially to our business income dropping like a rock. How we downsized from a 3500 square foot 3 level big house to a 84 square foot house. We explained in detail how we built the van and what it was like living in a van. Also included the first year of van living.

That book took us both several months to write, which is probably why we've been putting this updated book off for so long. We're not professional writers so our books are more like journals instead of a professional written book.

This book is divided into Parts/Sections with short stories/chapters in each part, and not always in date order. It makes it easier to skip around to parts of the book you are most interested in. There are lots of experiences and what we've learned over the last 6 years of living in our van. This book, like our last one will have some written by Tim, some by Cheryl and some by both of us.

There's some stories of the interesting people we've met during our travels and some funny events along the way like getting the van buried in mud at a NASCAR track parking lot. Our van motto

has become, “Sometimes you just gotta laugh”. And laughter is the best medicine.

Since we got our van in 2017 many things have happened, including the covid event starting in January of 2020. Big increases in the popularity of van living and van RVs in general. The vans like ours have doubled in price since 2017 and take up to year to get after ordering one. Supply and demand, shortage from covid and now inflation. Camper Vans are everywhere, in campgrounds, parking lots and van get-togethers all around the country.

Apparently RV living was popular back in the 1930’s depression as it was the only thing people could afford. Similar to these days, young and older, retired people alike can no longer afford housing costs. Many have no choice but to live in RVs with vans seeming to be the most popular.

In 2017 van living wasn’t as popular as it is now. The joke was about living down by the river in your van. Now 7 years later the the van campers outnumber the regular campers in campgrounds. From used home made custom vans to \$250,000 loaded ones. Off road and all wheel drive ones are really popular now.

The area that we spend most of our time in with our van is in a wealthy suburb in the Kansas City area. Laws and rules about living in a RV van either don’t exist or aren’t really known about. Things like voting, driver’s license, getting mail sent you a PO Box instead of a street address raises lots of questions and I don’t nos. Even social media sites require an address to become member of certain area groups.

To view pictures of how we built our van, view the van page on our website. TGFOTO.com Links to our first book are on there too. It’s on Amazon, Audible and Itunes also. Pictures and links to

where we bought our camping stuff and building stuff are on the website also. There are thousands of our van travel pictures on the website also that you can view or purchase.

We have written 2 others books on Amazon and Audible in our extra time. One is a Photography business book and the other a Self-Esteem motivational type book. There are a few other ones on the website that I have on PDF format that we have put together. Van living gives you time to do other things since you don't have grass to mow or house to fix up.

Part 1. Van Repairs & Maintenance

Shelle now has 115,000 miles on it as of this writing. We ordered her in May of 2017 from Ford. It has the extended roof and extended length. 3.7 V-6 engine and 6 speed transmission. So far we've had no major repairs. (Knock on wood) With shops charging \$250 an hour and higher, even small repairs and maintenance can be costly. We try to do as much maintenance and repairs as we can ourselves.

Chap 1. Van Maintenance

I change the oil and filter about every 4,000 to 5,000 miles using the Mobile 1 oil and filter. I installed a Fumoto oil drain valve where the drain plug goes. A great help in making the oil change easy and preventing a big mess. The manual I think says change the oil every 10,000 miles but 4-5,000 miles just sounds better to me.

As of now it still has the original belts and hoses and hasn't had a tune-up yet. At going on 7 years old it will be needing some of that stuff changed sooner or later. I carry the extra belts, hoses, throttle body and tune-up parts in the van just in case. After the parts shortage of the covid years I don't want to be out on the road and not be able to get basic parts.

The windshield on the Transit vans provide great visibility but they are big, and rock magnets. We carry one of those Rain-X Windshield Repair Kit so when we get a new rock chip we fix it

quickly before it cracks the whole windshield. The wiper blades we have replaced a couple of times.

Heater blower motor went out in December of 2021. Nobody had one at the local parts stores so I ordered one from Amazon and got in a couple of days. Install wasn't too bad, if you didn't mind being upside down under the dash.

Front-end steering rattles have showed up a couple of times. Replacing the outer tie-rod ends and sway bar links have stopped those rattles. A couple of months ago it's developed a new rattle which I haven't been able to locate. I had it checked out from a shop and they couldn't find it but said everything in the steering seems to be okay and not a safety issue. The snow and below zero temps hit us in Kansas City and they couldn't fully test every noise yet until the snow and ice melts. Update on the new rattle. When we got to Florida and 70 degree temperatures, the rattle went away. Still not sure what it is.

2. Check Engine Lights

In July of 2019, 31,000 miles, the check engine light came on and the van went into limp mode, which means it will idle but really doesn't want to go anywhere besides at idle speed. It gave the code for throttle body. I had a friend come out to the parking lot we were stranded in and read the codes and reset them. Then it drove fine. I took it to the dealer and they said, we can check it out but would be week or 2 before we could fix it. But since the problem wasn't there, then they couldn't fix anything. Ford said that sometimes the computer doesn't boot correctly then gives that code. After that I went out and got a OBD engine code reader so I can read codes and erase them. The same issue with the throttle body code

has happened 2 other times. Both times I read the codes, deleted them and then the van drives perfectly after that.

3. Transmission Failure Education

Transmission oil change, service. I have checked the transmission level but have never had the transmission oil changed or flushed. I've read that if you haven't had it serviced by 60,000 miles it's better if you don't have it serviced at all, until it gives out.

I've had one transmission problem but it's only happened once. In February of 2021 on the way back from Florida the service transmission light came on going down the highway and it started shifting weird and then went into a limp mode.

Luckily we were by an exit off 75 highway in Cordele, GA and got off there. Right at the end of the off ramp was a Ford dealer. It was a Sunday so we just camped in their lot until Monday morning.

It was 2021 and parts were still an issue to get for most any vehicle. A tech finally came out and read the codes and told it was the transmission overheat code. He said if it needs a transmission it would be at least 3 weeks before he could get one and be able to have time to work on it. That is a bad thing when it's your only car and it's your house also with all your stuff in it.

He cleared the codes and said you can try to drive it see what happens. We found a transmission shop in town and it made it to his place, Master Transmission in Cordele. The owner was great, he said it wasn't leaking, which is usually a reason for them to overheat due to low fluid.

He spent probably 30 minutes with us explaining about the new transmissions and government regulations. He said to get better

gas mileage the transmissions are constantly shifting which in turn wears them out starting at 60,000 miles or so.

I mentioned we were driving around 70 or so and in the traffic it was shifting lots between 5th and 6th gear. He said that was probably the problem and said to try and shift the gears manually with the button on the gear shift lever so it will not be constantly shifting.

So ever since February 2021 I have manually shifted it. Letting it shift automatically I noticed it could be in 5th gear while driving 25 miles an hour and then giving it a little gas it then downshifts to 3rd. Going 35 miles an hour it could be in the 6th gear overdrive. The constant shifting gets better gas mileage but wears out the valve body. So \$8000 for a new transmission I guess I will gamble on getting a little bit worse gas mileage. I have no idea if doing the manual shifting will prolong the life of the transmission, only time will tell.

4. Batteries, Brakes, & Tires

In December of 2022 we replaced the 2 AGM van batteries that came with the van and power the lights and typical vehicle electronics. They still worked fine but after 5 years it was probably just a matter of time before they died and I didn't want to do that job in the freezing cold of winter. They are located under the drivers seat. It was a job moving the seat out of the way then disconnecting the cables in a small amount of room.

I had the rear brake pads replaced at 36,000 miles. Sometimes taking vehicles into a shop can be a challenge, especially since I was a former ASE certified mechanic in my younger days. I took the van in to a shop to have the brakes checked as I could see the

rear pads were getting worn. They said no problem. Then after getting it in the shop they said that the rear calipers were both frozen and the original \$49 estimate pad replacement would be over \$800. And it will take at least 2 days to get the parts. I said put it back together and called a friend. He did it in his driveway in about 45 minutes and \$20 for a set of pads. No stuck calipers, they either didn't know how to do the brakes on it or were trying to sell me \$800 of not needed parts.

I had the front and rear brake pads done at 74,000 miles. 2nd time for the rear ones. At 115,000 miles now it's probably getting close for a new set of pads for at least the rear.

TIRES. They get rotated every 6,000 miles. Discount Tire rotates them for free. They also do free air pressure checks and free flat repairs for RVs.

The original tires were pretty well worn out at 36,000 miles so I replaced those with Michelin Agilis Cross Climate tires in 2019. They were new style of tires and nobody knew how long the Michelin tires would last. They lasted 75,000 miles. The tires were starting to crack after 4 years but they still had some tread on them.

A good thing happened when it came time to replace them. They had a recall on the tires. The tires were fine but they were just labeled wrong so they were replacing them for FREE! The only problem was that the new tires wouldn't be ready for several months. From July through November of 2024 we tried to drive as few miles as possible. But it was worth it, we got the new set of tires in November for free, including new warranty, balancing and valve stems. About a \$1400 savings.

Part 2. RV Upgrades & Repairs

We haven't done very many major changes to the RV build part of the van. It really has exceeded our expectations as a full time living van house. The plumbing remains pretty much the same.

The water filler hose looked like it had some nasty stuff in it so we replaced it a couple of times. The 12 volt water pumps that we have 3 of, have needed replacing a few times. They aren't very expensive, up until lately they were under \$20 each through Amazon.

We added two shelves for the laptop computers and a studio portrait backdrop holder. We use rolls of background paper to do headshot portraits in our van. The people just sit on the step right inside the van. It's perfect for headshot's.

We added some bookshelves to the ceiling over the bed by mounting some Plexiglas to the ceiling across the beams and then slide the books in the ends. We didn't add paneling to the walls and ceiling. This makes it really easy to modify the van insides. Much easier to find and repair any electrical and plumbing issues. Also we can use any cubby holes to store blankets,towels,hats etc.

Chap 1. Lithium battery

We replaced the RV section 3 AGM batteries after 4 years with 1 300Ah lithium battery. One third of the weight and less space taken by the one lithium battery. So far we've been much happier with the lithium battery except for the high price of it. It keeps the voltage higher and you can use more of the power of it compared to only 50% of the power of the AGM batteries.

2. Portable toilet

The first one was a Port-A-Jon that we bought on E-Bay. It worked pretty well but we ended up making our own toilet. We put the liquid tank in the front and used a bigger one.

We did the plumbing differently so now it holds more and is way easier to empty. We also mounted it on a board so it's easier to move around. When we take our showers we have to move it out of the bathroom. The bathroom is 2x3 feet. Pictures of it on the website. TGFOTO.COM

3. Ceiling fan for better heat circulation

This last year we figured out that if we use our ceiling fan at an angle pushing the hot air down then the van stays much more comfortable.

When we use the Heater Buddy the heat goes straight up to the ceiling. During the winter the lower half of the van is very cold and the upper half is very warm and this has been a real problem. Your feet would be freezing when standing and up in the bedroom area it would be really hot. Like a 30 degree difference.

Now we have the fan moving the warm air everywhere, it is really great. At first we would remove the portable ceiling fan during the Winter, now we leave it in all year long. In the Summer we added a another portable fan to sit in the bed at night. The fans have long cords and a cigarette lighter 12v type plug. We have several lighter plug in sockets around the van inside.

4. New Air Conditioner

Finally in the Summer of 2022 we added a portable Air Conditioner to help deal with the hot and muggy Kansas City nights. In the daytime we can find a shade tree to park under, open the doors and use fans. At night if we did that the van would be full of creepy bugs and mosquitos.

We got a ZERO BREEZE Mark 2 with a lithium battery that will run it for several hours. It can also plug in to house 120V plug and run off of our 2000 power inverter. It worked good to cool off and remove the humidity from our bedroom while sleeping at night.

It's not powerful enough to cool the whole van though. They are scheduled to have a new more powerful one shipping in April of 2024.

5. Front window Air vents

In 2018 we got vents for the front windows to let air in during the night. They can be used in the rain if needed. They work great keeping the bugs out and still getting in fresh air.

Used with the ceiling fan roof vent in the back of the van it makes for great air circulation throughout the whole van. They are made out of metal and fit with the windows in the window tracks. Pictures of them on the website.

6. Swivel front seat

We added a swivel seat to the front passenger side of the van. It's a swivel plate type deal that fits in between the original seat and the seat base. It works really good.

It was kind of like adding a new recliner to your living room. Now we have a front room and dining room/bedroom. It really opened up the whole front of the van!

Part 3. Kitchen, Cooking & Cleaning Up

When we first moved into the van I put all the things I thought I would need in there. After the first year I realized that a lot of the things I put in I could do without. I think I have just about everything I need to cook now. The best part is when we go visit or pet sit if that place doesn't have what I need or we are missing an ingredient I can always go out to the van and get it.

Chap 1. Appliances

I did also add some cool gadgets that I am very glad I have. Kitchen Aid makes a great battery powered rechargeable **hand mixer** that is battery operated. It is great because some of the places we pet sit don't have mixers or they are hard to get to. Now I can use my own. It comes in handy in the van when I make cookies.

I also have a rechargeable **hand blender**, it's great for smoothies and someday I am going to make fresh tomato soup with it. It does make quick whipped cream and shreds cranberries super fast. Kitchen Aid makes this too!

We used to have a fruit and vegetable **juicer** that was big and hard to clean so we quit using ours unless we were pet sitting. We found one that is tiny and easy to clean and it fits perfectly in our cabinet. It's called GDOR mini juicer and we got it on Amazon. It works great I can even save the pulp to use in this yummy muffin recipe I have.

Recently we found a **single slice toaster** at Walmart called My Mini. It really is perfect and also fits neatly in our cabinet. Since there is little space in the van if I add something I must either get

rid of something or find a space for the new thing. Everything has it's place. So out went the 2 slice toaster (that didn't work very well at all) in it's place went the 1 slice toaster.

In the beginning we would heat up water with the stove but we found this great **portable kettle** that you just have to plug in to get hot water. It is sealed and can't spill and the water heats up so fast. Sometimes you need warm water to wash your face or brush your teeth or take a little sink bath.

Some things that we use a lot that are battery powered (rechargeable) are Tim's water pick, small portable lanterns and portable light/bug zappers. The light/bugzapper is great for lighting but a must have for bugs. At night we hang one on the opposite side of our sleeping area to draw any bugs away from us. You can turn off the regular light and the zapper doesn't make any noise, just kills the bugs.

We both have rechargeable razors and Tim has a beard and hair rechargeable trimmer.

2. Fridge, Oven, Stove & Microwave

The fridge has to fit all the food we need so I do things like make ice cubes and put the frozen ones in a bag so they fit in the freezer with the other things we need in there. Some things we buy the big container and move it to several small containers. In the summer we do a quick defrost every few weeks to keep the fridge running at its best.

Our van has a 2 burner propane stove top. If you are used to an electric stove you might burn things at first. There must also be good ventilation.

It is small and I have found that square skillets work the best although I do have a cast iron tiny skillet. It works great for smaller meals. I have a stainless steel sauce pan with a lid that doubles as a colander. It's great for draining anything you might be cooking.

If there is any gas in your RV you should definitely have a propane gas leak detector. Tim has found gas leaks at two of our daughters houses, his dads house and one of our pet sitting houses.

When I need to bake something the toaster oven with a pizza drawer is my go to. It will bake anything that I need. It's great for pizza, frozen and home made. I can reheat stuff and cook casseroles and cookies. It's pretty multipurpose.

We have also put it outside on the picnic table at a campsite to bake with, but you have to watch the critters. I was baking cookies one day. Within 10 minutes we were surrounded by raccoons, a squirrel and some cardinals. Apparently they like the smell of homemade cookies.

We might use the microwave for popcorn or hot dogs while we are plugged in but it's mostly used as a bread box to store our bread and buns in.

Sometimes we use paper plates and plastic bowls. Sometimes we use regular melamine plates and bowls. I like having both because sometimes you just want a regular plate. Same with the silverware some things just aren't the same with plastic.

3. Clean up

I don't like to use a lot of harsh chemicals so I use essential oils mixed with witch hazel for sanitizing. Bleach and a small container

of Lysol wipes are the most harsh things I carry. I love my Norwex cloths and then there is no need for soap with them except to wash them.

The laundry soap is great now that they make this concentrated soap in a small bottle. Seventh generation is a great company and I like their products.

There are 2 brooms I use to sweep the floor, the telescoping rubber broom is perfect for big and small spaces. It even works for getting dirt off the solar panels, snow off the windshield. The other is a little whisk broom and dust pan it gets in the small spaces and also is great for sandy shoes.

We have a great little car vacuum that works for deep cleaning that I try to do every couple of months. It gets very dusty in this place but it is a small space so it doesn't take long to dust. It's 12v and plugs into any of our 12v cigarette lighter type plugs.

About a year ago we found these great pink bags to put things that might make the van smell bad if you couldn't throw out the trash right away. They are made for diapers and work like magic. We even used one on a sea shell that we didn't have time to air out. Until we took the shell out we couldn't even smell it.

When you are in a van it is tough to take a complete shower everyday. There are times when I do a sink bath or spit bath they call it with just my Norwex cloth and warm water which I heat in the Portable Kettle. I have also found that the Water Wipes you get in the baby section at Walmart work great for clean-up between showers. We have even washed our hair in the sink if we aren't ready to do a shower.

4. Pots, Pans & cooking utensils

I personally like my square pans with the small stove, but I also like the stainless steel with the pour spouts and drain lids. So I have the sauce pan that is for what ever isn't fried or cooked in the skillets.

We also keep stuff in the van for campfires because sometimes we use a campfire. That means the long tongs, a hot dog and marshmallow fork even the BBQ spatula.

My kitchen wouldn't be complete with out the mixing things for cookies. Mixing bowls, measuring cups and spoons. All this stuff fits neatly in 3 different places. Most of it is in a giant metal cabinet, some is in a storage under the bed and then under that is another storage area.

5. Food & Water

When we need filtered drinking water we fill our 3 gallon blue water jug at Walmart or a grocery store. For easier use we transfer the water to 2 liter pop bottles bottles.

Last year we decided to try freeze drying some meat to take on our Florida trip. We did 3 rotisserie chickens and several pounds of organic ground beef. It really works well it tastes the same you just use the ground beef in tacos or hamburger dish. We sometimes ate the chicken by it self. It's very tasty and quicker to cook and lasts much longer than the fresh or frozen.

When Tim makes bacon he cooks the whole package and then we put it in the fridge to eat on later days. That way you only mess up the stove once. It's the same for ground beef because I buy 1

pound and split it for two meals. I cook it all at once unless I make patties and freeze them.

Most things we eat are fresh or frozen or freeze dried. I do keep a few canned things in a storage bin under the bed/couch along with extra paper goods.

6. Double check before driving

We have a check off list before we drive the van. The reason we do this is mostly because of the crashes we hear as we start to drive away or the first big turn we make. This is what happened the first time we heard that awful crash driving down the road.

My daughter gave me this beautiful insulated tall cup for my water and my favorite spot to keep it when we are stopped is right over the fridge on a shelf. Well we are driving along and CRASH down it goes and yes it is full of water and that water flowed everywhere, under cabinets and water tanks, closet and the shower. It was wet all over, glad it was just water.

Sometimes we do hear a crash and try to guess what it was now it's mostly little things like my purse or the window covers. You would be surprised what different things sound like when they fall. We check the shelves and the refrigerator (yes that has come open before) cabinet locks and also the computer blocks before the van moves anywhere.

The best place to put phones to get Internet is above the drivers/passengers seat. If you can imagine as you are driving down the road concentrating on traffic and something falls in your lap or on your head. It really startles you! This is another place we now check before we start to drive.

Part 4. Funny stories

Living in a van instead of a normal house it helps to have a sense of humor to help you from going crazy and or being depressed. We do our best to turn potentially bad situations into funny reactions.

Like when I point to our van and tell someone “that’s our house we live in right there”. They usually laugh until we tell them we actually live in it. Then they stop laughing as we start laughing. Then usually end up giving them a tour of the van house. Majority of people then tell us that they have been thinking about that and now they know someone who actually does it and not just someone on TV.

Of course pretty much every friend you have on social media has to send you the video from Saturday Night Live . The one with the guy yelling at the kids about “if you don’t get a good education you will end up living in a van under a bridge”. I took a picture of our van after, under the bridge by the Mississippi river just so I could reply back to them. Six years later now I let them know if they save up their money they can have the freedom of living in one of these vans that now go for up to \$250,000 or so. Laughter is the best medicine.

Chap 1. Kids: “Hey, got any Free Candy?”

This story would be so much funnier if it was captured on video. We were parked under a shade tree last Summer in a local park by a baseball/softball field.

We were both in the front seat and getting ready to head out. The kids baseball game just got out, kids were probably 10 or 12 years

old. Some parents we're loading the equipment into their trunks and chatting with their friends, probably about 6 car lengths from us. When we hear one of the kids yell to us, "Hey, you got free candy and wifi in that thing"!? I looked over at the boys then looked at the orange Tic Tacs I keep by the cup holder.

I'm thinking, why not have some fun. So I grab the Tic Tacs and shake them out my window and yell back, "Yes I do, Orange Tic Tacs". They yelled back, "orange ones, those are the best" as they all came running to the van. The parents we're just laughing and shaking their heads, like, where did we go wrong. I poured them each a hand full of them and they said Thank You and headed back to their cars. We still laugh about that one.

2. Roof Vent Fan Install Fail.

Cheryl told this story in the first book now it's my turn. We installed a roof vent with a fan in the back of the van on the roof. The vent is right above the bed on Cheryl's side. Pretty nice since she gets the fan right over her on the warm Summer nights. Everything went good and I got it sealed up with lots of of sealant so it wouldn't leak. So I thought.

A few days later, about 2:00 in the morning we get a nice thunderstorm. Rainy nights are the best in a van, the rain on the metal roof is so relaxing and puts you right to sleep. But not this time. I was awoken to a mad wife thrashing to get out from under the down-pour that was now landing on her and her side of the bed. She was not a happy camper, I couldn't stop laughing inside and trying not to show it.

The leak was fixed first thing the next morning with lots of sealer and hasn't leaked since.

3. Stuck in the Mud

We went to the Kansas Speedway to watch the NASCAR races in May after the spring rains. The guy parking vehicles in the grass parking lot said to park over there. We said that our RV was very heavy and it will get stuck in grassy mud areas. The rear shock mounts are real low to the ground and if the van sinks a few inches into mud it ain't going anywhere. He said it will be fine, you can just drive down that hill in front of your spot and get right out! So in we drive just following directions. As we pull into the space the van sunk... a bunch. We tried to back out but it was not going anywhere in the wet muddy ground. There was a steep hill down in front of us at the bottom was a small stream before you got to the street. No way the van would make it down the hill with out getting stuck at the bottom in the stream. If we had a 4 wheel drive pickup it might have worked, but not in a 10,000 pound RV Van.

We have a friend who works at the speedway and he sent the tow truck company over to us. They said we can't get the tow truck in that area because it will get stuck. Finally 3 off road 4 wheel drive tow vehicles pulled up and hooked up to each other and then our van. They were able to get drag us out of our spot and to a regular driveway Let's just say we didn't watch the race that day and we learned a lesson. Go with our gut instinct and not the parking guy's directions.

4. Parking Ticket is cheaper

We heard on the Internet that you could park overnight near the beach on a certain street. At 9:00 PM they shut off the meters and if you leave by 7:00 AM before they start up in the mornings it's free. Just to be sure, we checked with a local Sheriff to see if it was true. He said "no, it's a \$500 fine for parking overnight there, BUT, if you do park there we aren't going to check on you and won't bother you about it."

Cool great quiet place to park, that worked well for us a few nights that January of 2019. The next year we came back to the same spot and there were a few vans parked there so we parked there again. The next morning there was a ticket on the windshield. We weren't very happy about getting a ticket and having to pay a fine when they said we could park there.

We looked around for No Parking signs and there were none. After talking with the lady at the ticket place we found out the ticket was \$30. Then we laughed and said it's \$35 to stay at the local campground, and we just saved \$5 for parking by the beach. Just for fun we stayed there again the next night, but, we pulled out at 4AM and as we pulled out we saw the ticket officer 4 vans behind us writing tickets. Sometimes you just gotta laugh.

5. Watch out for the Treeee

3 sides to every story, so I'm (Tim) writing this one because it's the correct version. :) We are staying at our favorite campground in Florida. The spots are great, each one is a tight fit, trees on both sides, and limbs above to watch out for. Also the electrical box, water spigot, BBQ and picnic table to watch for. And the road/

driveway to get to the spots is a small one lane drive so it's not much room for error when backing into your spot.

As usual I get out before I start backing to make my plan of action to back in without hitting any obstacles. I get back in with my plan of action and I'm backing in and the navigator (Cheryl) and the one who helps to watch for obstacles says, "why don't you back it more over by the picnic table".

I give her the that's a dumb idea look, and then start backing over towards the picnic table, watching it now instead of my original backing plan. Then all of the sudden the van stops with a big thud. My exact words were "what the hell was that"!? Cheryl says, "that was a palm tree you just backed into".

I'm really happy by that point, she is supposed to be watching, and we have a back up camera she can see from the passenger seat, but nope, not a word. I get out and survey the damage. It put a nice dent in one of the back doors but just barley missed breaking the back window by about an inch.

After awhile I make her do the Vanna White pose by the back dented up door. She says, "wait, why am I the one posing by the dent, you were the one driving"? Me, just smile and pose for the picture, because it's your fault for distracting me. Then she gave me the look, like that will never hold up in court. LOL

6. How do you keep a woman in suspense?

A guy last year on the beach in Florida comes up to us and asks "Do you know how to keep a woman in suspense?" I said "I don't know, how?" He just asked me another question. :) He was very funny and reminded me of a guy on the Dick Vandyke show. Any-

way we ran into him on the beach this year again. I know this because he asked me the same question. I said I remember you!

He said that he had another joke to tell. Then he held out his hand and said “do you know what this is?” I said “It’s your hand” he said “no it’s the other side of this” as he flipped his hand over and said “ do you know what this is?” I said “the other side of that” he said “no it’s my hand, what is wrong with you?” By then we were all laughing.

We always run into lots of fun happy people in Florida on the beach. Laughter is the best medicine.

7. Antenna Wire

So we haven’t watched much TV since we moved into the van. Mostly we watch the Hallmark channel when we are pet sitting. Also we really haven’t found an antenna that will get in any channels, forget that you have to reset the TV every time you move the van. The first TV and antenna just didn’t work very well.

One night I wanted to watch The Rookie (big Nathan Fillion Fan) so Tim was taking pictures at a football game and I was trying to get my show to quit lagging. I tried the antenna which at the time it was a long wire and if you put the exposed wire end on metal the TV would play pretty good. When it got to the good part of the show everything froze so with growing frustration I stuck the wire on my forehead and you guessed it I had a clear channel. So there I sat, watching The Rookie with the antenna stuck to my forehead! Update, we did find a antenna that works much better last year (2023)

8. Gonna need a new TV

Tim's story of frying the old TV. We needed a fan to cool off the back of the fridge during the summer so Tim used the plug from our TV he just cut it off and added it to the little computer fan behind the fridge. He then went and bought a new plug for the TV and wired it up and I guess one wire is positive and one is negative. (news to me) The next step is to plug in the TV and when he did that the TV just went poof and some smoke, and this is why we have a new and better TV.

Needless to say we now have a good TV and a great antenna that is attached to the top of the roof. We still don't watch a lot of TV but it is always great to watch the Kansas City Chiefs play. Win Win I think.

9. Garage sales

During the spring and fall we love to go to garage sales. One of the first times we did this with the van we were out in the country and as soon as we got out the people having the sale asked "are you guys the pickers? Apparently our van looks just like theirs. At that point we had to explain that the van was our house and we weren't the pickers. A while later we pulled up to a garage sale that had a beautiful oak dining room set. The guy told us that it would fit just fine in the van, I said we live in that van and the set was too big. He told us he would give us a good deal on it if we took everything. Anyway we did end up taking the dining set for my daughter but we had to dismantle the table to make it fit.

10. Losing Stuff

You would think that in 84 feet of living space it would be impossible to lose anything. Well we are getting better but at first we packed everything we needed in the van and everything had its place. That is all well and good except when you forget where that place is exactly. For example for cooking I knew what I needed to pack and cook comfortably. Some things you don't use every day and when I needed a certain thing I knew was here I couldn't find the place I put it.

I have since added things I needed and taken out things I never use. There are so many storage nooks and crannies in this van sometimes things just seem to disappear. We have lost a couple things out the door during one stop my favorite mop head and fly swatter were last seen by the big side door during rest stops and are nowhere to be found now. :(

One day my pink tweezers fell and they just disappeared! I looked everywhere took stuff apart and couldn't find them, I just gave up looking after a while. A few months later when I was sweeping and doing a real deep clean of corners there it was wedged between the water tank and the wall. I'm not sure how it could have landed in that place but there it was.

11. Watch your Funny Bones

I'm not sure who named it Funny bone, but it's definitely not funny for the person who hits their funny bone. We have learned not to move too fast in the van.

A few times I have bumped an arm or leg and the older you get the more it swells and longer it takes to heal. The walls in the van are very sturdy and don't give much.

On several occasions Tim has threatened to bubble wrap me if I didn't stop bumping into things. At first there were some sharp edges on the corners of walls and table areas. After causing some bruises we sanded and softened all of the rough edges. It was much easier than the bubble wrap.

12. Smoke & Gas detector humor

We had a smoke alarm near the kitchen when we first put the van together thinking that would be a good idea. We had visited a RV Junkyard before we started building ours and the majority of them in there had been on fire.

Unfortunately every time Cheryl started cooking something the fire alarm would start screaming in this angry woman's voice, FIRE!! FIRE!! FIRE!! Which wasn't bad if nobody was around but we were in a parking lot once and it went off. The people next to us left in a hurry.

We learned about poison gas detectors and that they should be located lower to the floor and not at....waist level. We had one mounted waist level and every now and then it would go off for no reason. We have an electronic gas leak detector and could never find any reason for it to be going off. Then one of us was standing by it and passed a good one. The poison gas detector immediately. We both started laughing as we realized what was setting it off. It got relocated the next day to near the floor.

Part 5. Covid year 2020 living adventures in a van

Chap 1. January & February 2020

Covid wasn't a big thing yet in January. We started our year off by going to Florida to the beach. What is more healthy than sand and sun. Next stop Universal Studios, I know it's pricey but I love Harry Potter so we had to go to both parks to see all the good stuff. Best birthday present ever! If you are a Harry Potter fan this place is a must see! I got to do my thing so the next day was Tim's turn. We spent the day at Celebration station on the go-carts. Tim really had a great time I realized that the older you get the less your body tolerates being slammed around so I didn't ride as much as he did. Tampa has the best RV show and we try not to miss it, there are so many neat things to see and ideas to check out.

Kansas City was calling us home for some pet sitting and portraits around the end of January. The first week of February we watched the Super Bowl on a giant screen TV while the owners of the house were on the phone getting play by play of the Chiefs winning from Tim. They were out of the country and the Internet didn't work there. One of the perks of pet sitting.

Tim was still working part time at the local Amazon warehouse so we still have a place to park the van at night.

After Tim was done taking pictures at some high school basketball games we headed down to Texas. We can't go thru Texas without visiting our son's house to see the kids and grand kids. Then it was on to see Port Aransas where we love to park on the beach and jetty. Our favorite way to pass the time is to watch and take pictures of the giant ships that come into port and watch the turtles and dolphins play. The pictures are posted on our tgfoto website.

2. March & April 2020

After getting our beach fix in Texas we had to head back to KC for Tim to go back to Amazon. He was required to wear a mask and get his temperature taken every day before working. He wasn't very happy about that. We didn't believe in all the fear they were spreading so we never shut down our photography business or stopped working at Amazon. The photo business slowed down a bit. We took the necessary staying healthy precautions and just went along with our lives without the fear and worrying.

For awhile at Amazon it seemed like every other package coming down the belt was toilet paper. Who would have thought there would be toilet paper hoarding and shortage for a respiratory type virus. The good thing about working at Amazon during the covid year was that they had lots of pay bonuses for showing up to work.

Forced mask wearing was starting in all the businesses. Restaurants that we used to go to were closing, our van doesn't fit through the drive-thru lanes at fast food places so the places we used to go to now we couldn't. The ones that were open didn't have enough help so service was not good.

3. May & June 2020

The first of May we wanted to go to Port Aransas and were all packed and ready to go. Tim had just got off his shift at Amazon and we got a call from a friend. He wanted to know if we could do pictures at a funeral. This funeral was for a Overland Park Police Officer that was shot and killed in Overland Park on his way to work. We were put in touch with the people in charge and they needed coverage for 3 full days starting in 4 days. Tim would be

the official photographer to cover all services including a horse drawn carriage ride from the funeral to the cemetery. Since all the Great Clips and hair cutting places were shut down here in Kansas, we drove to Oklahoma so Tim could get a hair cut. After the hair cut we went and visited with the kids in Texas for a couple days and then back to Kansas for the funeral.

We had a pet sitting job for a couple days then on June 9th we left for Colorado. So here are two people very afraid of heights and we decided to go to the Royal Gorge and walk across this crazy bridge. It was so high the train at the bottom looked about 1 inch tall. You could see through the boards to the bottom and just when we thought we were safe a Jeep comes driving across now we had to go to the side and couldn't keep walking down the middle. Terrifying going across but now we have to go back and it's starting to get a little windy. It was beautiful but I'm not sure if I would do it again.

After we left there we wanted to check out that little 1 inch train and made it just in time for the last run. The trip in the canyon was awesome and so cool. There is so much history there. The bridge also looks very small from the bottom of the canyon. In Colorado we stay the nights at Bass Pro Shops and go to the many parks in the area of Colorado Springs. We had to head back to KC for some pet sitting. Most had canceled but a few still stuck.

4. July & August 2020

Lots of things were happening during this time quite a few of our pet sitting jobs canceled due to flight restrictions.

Tim's mom was locked in her room at her senior living building so the grand kids would visit her at her window. She just tore out the screen because she had dementia so she couldn't understand why no one could visit and why they just left her food trays at her door.

At the end of July Tim did pictures at a High School Graduation. They had a giant Plexiglas sheet between the students and principal and the principal gave the kids a fist bump as they crossed the stage. A lot of the schools just didn't have a ceremony at all.

Taking our van home with us, we went to Yellowstone in August. Lots of really amazing pictures are on our website. Tgfoto.com .

Our oldest daughter home schools her kids and asked if she and the kids could tag along. During the day we all went different ways to explore and at night we camped together.

It was such a great trip. There is so much to see there and so much beauty and power. Just glancing around it is hard to believe that you are actually in a giant volcano. That's right the valley is a huge bowl of a volcano. There are so many different areas from dry desert to beautiful mountains, streams and lakes.

Our daughter had originally planned to sleep in her SUV at night and she did the first night. It gets very cold even in August up there so after that first night we made some adjustments. The next night was much warmer for her and the kiddos. When we got back in town to Kansas City we went to Lakeside Speedway to watch the car races. No masks required there. They might have been required but hardly anybody wore them.

5. September & October 2020

In September we watched some of the grand kids while their parents went to a wedding. By then the schools were done over the computer. I am very slow on the computer and there were 4 kids face timing their classes. Lets just say it was crazy and I'm not sure how the teachers did it. I'm also not sure how much the kids actually learned. Football games got delayed until they could figure out social distancing. So we decided to check out Route 66.

There are so many fun attractions and towns on the route from Missouri through Kansas and then to Oklahoma. We saw drive in theaters, giant tee-pees, a giant whale, a great old Sinclair gas station. There are even parts of the original road and some original bridges.

In Carthage there is a little city that most of the old buildings were moved there to preserve them. Galena is the town that claims that the movie Cars was about there is a Mater and other characters in the town. Baxter Springs claims that its their town that Cars was written about too. I'm not taking sides. Going on towards Oklahoma the city of Chelsea has a tunnel with great paintings that actually goes under the road. The J.M. Davis Arms and history museum was so cool. There were so many old guns, swords and things to see. It's in Claremore, OK and if you are every in the area I recommend it.

Kansas high school football finally got started in October. A month later than usual and with a limited schedule. It was limited to parents only with no fans. Tim was allowed to do the action pictures at the games. We actually had some pet sitting and senior portraits to do in October. Believe it or not Tim photographed a senior surfing in a lake behind a boat in Kansas! Coming from California

it was hard for me to understand how. But they actually have a boat that makes a wave in its wake that the senior was surfing on. She was really great, even had some trophy's for doing just that. Pretty cool.

6. November & December 2020

The first of November we went back to the Port Aransas Beach in Texas for our postponed May trip. We took lots of neat wildlife and dolphin pictures. Facebook is nice to share pictures to in the local areas that we visit. Several people from Port A requested albums of the pictures that we took and enjoyed looking at them on our on-line website albums.

Amazon offers a leave of absence for their part timers so Tim could take 3 months off and not lose any of his benefits or pay grades. Their peak busy season starts around Thanksgiving so he went back to work then. He could work up to 60 hours a week and then starting in January take another leave of absence so we could go to Florida then. If you could survive the long hours it was great for the overtime pay and bonuses.

Towards the end of November we found out that Tim's brother had terminal cancer. We postponed our January Florida trip and were able to stay and visit with him until we passed away at his home in January. Another good thing about the van life is it gives you the freedom of making and changing your own work and travel schedule.

The high school basketball season started in late December and Tim was the only photographer allowed in besides the players and

staff. No parents or fans were allowed in for the first few games so Tim would take pictures and post them for the family and friends.

Part 6. People, Stories, & Other

Some conversations and stories from our travels around the country. Having a stealth van camper always makes a good conversation piece. Traveling to different places and meeting people can also be interesting and educational. We have met people from all over the US and quite a few people from Canada.

In January 2024 we ran into this couple walking on the beach. The woman said to us hey I know you! She then explained that her and her husband met us a couple of years before when they were renting a van to camp in and after seeing our van they went home and built their own. It was so cool they actually used a neat antique baking cabinet as their main storage. Anyway they are traveling around in a great van that they built themselves and loving life.

One of our photo customers kids saw our van before she went to New Zealand for her new job as a water rafter teacher. When she got over there she bought a van to live in it while she is there. So part of the year she lives in New Zealand in her van then comes to Colorado to work here in the states and leaves the van over there. Sounds like a great deal to me!

As we were walking around our campground one day we met this great lady traveling in her van. She told us she was a retired CEO of a big hospital. The one thing she said as a warning “Never, Never, ever leave a loved one in the hospital alone”. Too many mistakes happen in hospitals is what she explained. It’s always good to have a second pair of eyes on you when you are not thinking or feeling well.

During one of our Harvest Host stays we met a neat couple that were bird photographers. They lived in Florida but traveled everywhere. Their fifth wheel trailer had at least 10 of solar panels on it.

They told us about their trip to South Dakota where they were driving and came around a corner and there was a low overpass bridge. He had a special GPS Map App that warned about low overpasses because his rig was so tall. There was no warning about the this one and he had no time to stop. He hit the low bridge and took off all the panels and the roof of his RV!

The local RV repair place said they get many of those towed in each year. He since then started using a better, truckers type map app that shows low clearance bridges, tunnels and overpasses.

One day we were stopped at a red light on a very busy road. The light changed to green every one went except the little car in front of us. Tim honked and the car ahead started backing up (no reverse light came on) but we were on a slight incline so it came back pretty fast and ran into us. I called 911 because I wasn't sure what was happening. Was this person crazy or had a heart attack? Finally the car started moving forward and turning towards the side of the road. I was still talking to 911 and was told there was an officer in route. We both pulled into a safe place and the driver got out and was clearly upset, asking if we were OK. He said his electric car just quit everything went dead. It wouldn't start or brake or anything. He was freaked out didn't want to drive it home. When the officer got there we told him what happened and he said Oh yeah my electric car did that the other day. I know I won't be driving electric cars ever!

This nice gentleman asked me if he could give me a unique shell since he noticed I was collecting shells. I said sure! He handed me

a beautiful white hand painted shell with a sail boat and sunset on it. How sweet he obviously had made it, I keep it with my new plant as a pot decoration.

Tim was walking down the beach with his bucket of sand dollars and asked this lady if she wanted any she said No thank you it's the finding them that's fun.

People like meeting real van lifers, they are always interested in how long we have been in the van and how we like living this way. There have been a few people that want to check out the van to see how It looks inside. You usually get one of two reactions 1. I could never do that! 2. I'm jealous I wish I could do that. It's not so hard to get by on just a few things once you set your mind to it. Travel while you can before you are stuck in one place because of your health or other reasons.

In May 2023 we found out Tim's uncle in Illinois had cancer. They never had any kids to help take care of him. Since we were living in the van with a flexible schedule we had time to spend with him getting his affairs in order.

His wish was to stay in his home until the end. It was a real blessing that we could do that for him. He got to visit with all his friends, neighbors and family. We stayed with him as long as we could then hired a full time nurse so we knew he was in good hands. There were some obligations in KC that we had to take care of and during that time he went to be with the Lord. Tim's sister and Tim and I did an estate sale because he had so many great old items to re home. Plus we had to get the place ready to sell since it was out of state and to far to just run up to take care of business. It was amazing how many nice people we met there. At least 90% of the people at the sale knew his uncle.

Part 7 Fun Places Visited

Some of the places and trips that we have taken in our van in the last 6 years and a half years. Read the Covid year Part 5 also as we did lots of traveling that year. Our website has pictures of most of them that you can view and or purchase for your own uses.

Chap 1. Port Aransas, Texas

A very dear friend of ours was getting married in Port Aransas, TX and asked Tim if he would take the pictures. We have known her for a very long time so naturally we agreed. Hard to say no to a friend and a beach wedding. She lives there so she bought us a year long pass so we could park and camp right on the beach. The wedding was beautiful just like the beautiful family this wedding brought together.

After the wedding we camped right on the beach, waves all night are so relaxing. We spent the next few times down there exploring the fun town of Port A. Some times we would spend the whole day backed up to the jetty where the giant tankers go in and out of port. The dolphins jump and race the ships it really is exciting. When the ships aren't there I love to watch the sea turtles play and eat along that same jetty. One way onto the island is by ferry it is pretty cool but also scary driving your whole house onto a boat that could potentially sink.

You won't find big chain businesses there only the cool mom and pop stores. There is a great shop called Gratitude (the owner is a huge KC Chiefs fan) she has great inspirational gifts and goodies in her store. For lunch and sometimes dinner we go to a great pizza place with a yummy pizza/salad/soup bar and great desserts too.

2. Shell Island key boat trip Big Shell

It has been a while since we have been to Shell Island, so this year(2024) we decided to go over and check it out. Shell Island Key is in Florida's Fort Desoto Park. They now drop you off at the other end of the island more south instead of the north back side. As usual there were lots of cool whole shells.

We wanted to walk the whole front of the island and we were getting pretty close to the point and noticed that the bushes ran all the way to the shore and I didn't want to get into the water so I was checking the beach above the shoreline.

That's when I spotted this giant horse conch (13 inches) wedged high up in the sand upside down and clearly dead. I had to check it out so out of the sand it came. When I showed it to Tim we rinsed all the dry sand off in the water. And I was thinking it would be great to keep it but it was very smelly!

It wouldn't fit in a plastic bag without ripping apart so we put it in a cloth bag that Tim conned me into putting in the backpack. He said just in case and we don't ever use this bag anyway. When we showed the captain of the boat at first she was saying " that's cool" and then she said "Whew it's sure dead". On the way back to the dock she told us that people use salt to get the critter out or boiling.

First we tried the salt and that worked for a lot of the chunks and smell. There seemed to be one chunk that was stuck so we then got a roasting pan and put it across the 2 burner stove and boiled it for 15 minutes. We used a piece of foil for a lid. After it cooled down Tim shook it and this chunk about the size and shape of a mans finger fell out but not the piece that was stuck before. It was good to see that the pointed end came out so we thought that no meat was left in the top of the shell just that one by the middle of the

shell. After pulling and shaking and prodding it wouldn't move. In frustration Tim added some more salt and that piece finally fell out! Yeah and also 3 more little chunks fell out with it. Whew it is finally all cleaned out and just smells like a shell. All we have to do is set it in the sun to dry out and we will have a great decoration and story to share.

3. Tarpon Springs

During our stay in January 2022 Florida we visited a place called Tarpon Springs. It is a sponge diving town mostly inhabited by Greek families who's ancestors immigrated here back in the 1800's. Greece had a big sponge industry and when the immigrants came over here and found out about the sponging here some of them established businesses in Tarpon Springs.

It is a beautiful town with many great restaurants, bakeries and shopping areas. When we arrived there we knew it was a small town so we were wondering where we could park Shell-e. We stopped at the first lot with a giant parking sign out front.

This wonderful gentleman told us he would make us a deal for parking and we could even park overnight! He was very helpful offering suggestions about where to shop and eat and even the best place to learn about sponges. We spent the day walking around this wonderful place and learned a lot about sponges. Also the food is amazing here! We can't wait to come visit again.

4. Florida Keys

January of 2022 we also went to the Florida Keys. Our longtime friend told us she was staying on Isla Morada in the Keys and asked us to meet her there. How do you say no to that. On the way

down you go through Alligator Alley and there are two rest areas and we stopped at the first one(its a long way down) to rest and some security guy said we couldn't stay longer than 2 hours so we just headed to the next one 40 miles away. Got all settled in for a much needed rest and who was at the door knocking? The same "Barney Fife" as Tim called him shows up to send us on our way he said something about a Florida law and rest stops??? So at 3am we finally found a truck stop/gas station where the Sheriff was parked and spent the night there.

We spent a couple nights with our friends in Isla Morada and took a day trip to Key West all the way to the 0 Mile Marker. There is an actual marker and people stand in line to get a picture. There are so many cool places on the way down but we really didn't have time to stop.

The funniest thing we saw when we got to Key West were the chickens! Yes they do run the streets, we were at a stop light and this rooster crossed right in front of the van just like a human. (I have a video)He waited for the light then crossed!

I couldn't go to Key west and not have a Key Lime Pie it was delicious. On the way back we stopped to look at this cool beach and I found a cool bowl sponge and ran into a huge iguana it was pretty cold and the news said they were falling out of trees. Not this one he ran away pretty fast. We ran into a visiting nurse that was in a van RV and she shared some crazy stories about covid. Interesting talking to the people who saw things first hand.

5. Florida State Fair

Usually we go to the RV show every year and it is a lot of fun. We get a lot of ideas and get to see the latest RV stuff. This year(2024) we decided to pass on the RV show and only do the Fair. I love the food but it's always a blast to see the goodies they sell.

We picked up the coolest stool for the van. Right now all we have is a tripod type stool that goes under the table it works well for me but Tim never did like it. The new one is blue and it's kind of like one of those cups that telescoped and went back into the container only bigger. So it can be tall(17") or short, and it can hold up to 450 pounds. It's very cool.

As I was going to order my steak sundae a guy from the local news station came up and asked how fast the girl can make one of the sundaes and they were filming, she did it in 10 seconds then he asked what did I order filmed the sundae and was gone. When I looked down where Tim was ordering his mini donuts the news guy was there filming too. We can't find any of the clips online so maybe we were edited. :(

The fair has this great building that is about insects of all kinds. We went in and the first thing inside is about mosquitos creepy but interesting. These guys were a little obsessed but to each their own. One of them asked where we were from and when we told him we live in our van he told us about his parents. They lived in their van for about 6 years here in the states then went over to France and got a van and a visa to go over and stay for a while. They can only stay for a certain amount of time there and then they come home for a bit then go back over. Sounds pretty cool.

6. Anna Maria Island

In January 2024 we visited Anna Maria Island for the first time. You will find the island in Florida on the Gulf side just west of Bradenton. The beaches were beautiful and there are 3 main beaches but you could walk the whole island.

Parking is free and so is the trolley that runs everywhere. You can get on and off any where you want. We walked up the beach about 2 miles then stopped at our favorite pick your own toppings donut shop then took the trolley back to our van.

There are so many cool places to see. The pier has a hands on Marine biology center where you can learn about local animal life. Live nightly entertainment at one of the beach parks, lots of sand dollars to pick up on the beach we even saw a guy catch a baby bonnethead shark off the beach.

We did see some giant (think large pizza) jelly fish and small ones too. The sand is so white and the water so clear and don't forget the incredible sunsets. There are so many little shops everywhere you look. That free trolley can get you there so there are no crazy traffic jams to sit in. We spent the days on the island but there is no over night camping so at night we went into Bradenton to stay at Lowe's one night then Cracker Barrel a couple nights.

Part 8 Finding Overnight Parking Spots & Harvest Hosts

Parking overnight is different than camping overnight. Parking is just pulling up to a spot, like a parking lot and going to sleep, or not setting up a campsite with all your stuff. Camping is when you set out your stuff like chairs, BBQ, etc. Our van is what they used to call a stealth camper van. It doesn't have the awnings, extra windows, air conditioner unit on top and stuff like that. So it's usually easier to find a parking spot and fit in as a work van or commercial type vehicle and not get harassed to move on.

There are many places to stay overnight when you don't have a regular spot to park. If the weather get to extreme there is always a hotel for the night. Here is a list of places we have stayed or have heard are good places to stay. Bass Pro shops, Cabelas, highway rest areas, Walmart, Sam's Club, Cracker Barrell, Truck Stops, Lowes, I 70 Speedway, New Smyrna Speedway, Sebring Raceway, Kansas Speedway. You can always ask the manager about parking, if the lot is big enough. The worst that could happen is they might say no. Be respectful so it won't ruin it for the rest of the people. These are not camping spots just a place to park for the night.

We do have a great place at my daughters house to park. We must make sure that we don't wear out our welcome though. One of our pet sitting people even said anytime we need a place their drive is OK.

While we were pet sitting in New Smyrna FL area Tim noticed that they have a great hometown speedway. He asked the track if he could get a pass to take pictures and they agreed. It was a week long event and there was camping so we just stayed the whole

week and Tim got some awesome pictures. Racing people are so great they just welcome you as family.

Our viper racing friends always race in January at Sebring FL. This track is so cool and very large. It has lots of room to camp overnight, there is electricity for a fee. Fortunately we have our solar panels so we don't need to hook up. We have spent many a night there, it's pretty cool to wake up to the sound of roaring engines! Mind you it's not something I always want to wake up to but for a few days it's pretty awesome.

Chap 1. Harvest Host Places stayed

If you want a fun off the beaten path place to stay in your RV check out Harvest Hosts. It's an app for people with RV's that want to see the US in more than just campground. We have really had a blast checking out places like ranches, coffee houses, mom and pop Orange groves. If its a business you can purchase \$20 in stuff or they will take a \$20 donation if you want. Some of them don't want any donations.

2. Maxwell Groves

The first place we went was Maxwell Groves we stayed 2 nights. The first night was quiet and when we woke up we went inside and got some key lime ice cream, yummy. After checking out the beautiful town of Avon Park we camped over in the same place. That night we heard gunshots then saw the police drive by around 10 but then there was nothing. In the morning we heard the rest of the

story. What the owners forgot to tell us was that the old bombing range down the street is where the local police practice at night.

Update 2024 We stayed here this year same great ice cream and orange juice. This time it was very quiet stay and very well lit.

The next place we stayed was Turn 2 a brewing company this is funny because neither one of us drinks. We tasted some of the hard cider but opted to get a couple of sodas and leave a donation. It was pretty quiet after the refrigerated truck in the parking lot stopped.

3. Loghry Ranch

Loghry Ranch was the next stop. WOW what a beautiful place right on the lake for a perfect sunset! This was a working cattle ranch that also bred Labradors. The dad owned the property of 60 acres and his kids lived at the ends of the land. They even had a little area that you could hit golf balls. Dogs, cattle, horses, donkeys, chickens a really nice ranch with the nicest of hosts.

4. Mister Chris's Magical Coffee Depot

After a great nights sleep we headed for our next destination Mister Chris's Magical Coffee Depot. It is actually in the city's old train depot right next to the tracks of a train that runs by twice a day. We had a yummy breakfast and a great cup of coffee! This was very close to a beautiful lake that we walked down to. Then walked around the town it is such a nice quiet town. That night was the community get together/bon fire held at the depot what a cool event. They had a great band and hot dogs and a lot of people. The

giant oak trees were all lit up with white lights and the moss hanging down was so magical.

5. Sun City Stables

Sun City Stables was our next host. As we pull up Cal (the owner) greets us with his kids, he opens up the gate and says park over there. We drove thru the gate and stopped because a line of small goats had taken over the front of the van. It is a big flat area fenced and surrounded by horse stalls and animals. They have a petting zoo and it is very busy. In the afternoon we decided to walk up front and ask about getting some fresh eggs.

When we found Cal he was barbecuing hot dogs for all the kids and right next to him was Friday a 300 lb pot bellied pig. I fed him a Cheeto he was pretty happy with that. Cal told us the two tiny pigs in the crate they found yesterday out in the woods. They were so cute and tiny. What a great place to be a kid with all the critters around. Horses,pigs,chickens,emu's,goats,rabbits and donkeys. Well, it's pretty cool if you're and adult too!

6. Paul's Ranch

Paul's Ranch is a beautiful 5 acre place with great shade trees and a little spot with a picnic table for the guests. He was a great host and so nice shared with us his plans for the property. Can't wait to come back next year to see the updates. We met the nicest couple that are bird photographers and they shared some great photos.

7. Wintergarden Presbyterian Church

Wintergarden Presbyterian Church motto is “Feed the People”. They had the coolest gardens some were raised beds and trees with bananas, mangos and arches filled with passion fruits. It was so peaceful and quite with the nicest people. They said if its ripe to help ourselves. Of course we didn’t need any produce and since we didn’t help grow it I couldn’t bring myself to take anything.

We didn’t stay at this Harvest host but I did make Tim stop to check out Maria's Garden. They had the coolest plants that reminded me of the Mandrakes in Harry Potter. The owner was an older lady and so sweet she transplanted one for me in the right size pot.

It was so cute and supposed to have black flowers. After buying this little desert rose I did some research turns out they are poisonous hence the name Killer. (Tim thinks I’m going to poison him)

Anyway the sweet lady told me that it will be dormant for a month or so and to only water it when it rains hopefully I can keep it alive until we move into a regular house.

8. Waypoint Bar and Grill

We stayed at the Waypoint Bar and Grill, it is a great spot right on the Tamiami Trail (it starts in Tampa and ends in Miami) highway that leads towards Anna Maria Island. After leaving the fair we headed straight here and found a great parking place and great food. We got to eat outside where there is even a stage for entertainment on the weekend.

Also there is a great place to play games and smaller tables for the kids to sit and play. This Saturday there is and Artisan Fair so I

guess we will stay to see that. The people are so nice here and great food what's not to like. We asked to stay another day and it was a great idea. The craft fair was very cool there was something for everyone. I got a beautiful hand made wooden turtle and some organic immune system elixir. No colds for me this year!

Part 9 Income, Expenses, Business, Future

Someone taught me that it's not always how much you earn, but how much you spend. For the first time in, forever it seems like, we are debt free with no house or car payments. That's a good feeling. Not sure how long it will last with the cost of everything going up but it feels good right now. We save about \$4,000 a month in expenses by living in a van RV compared to our house with extra vehicles.

We are both in our 60's so we both get Social Security as of this year. That helps but isn't enough to go out and buy a house with. Working most of our lives with our own photography business and not for a big company doesn't lead to a good retirement fund. Which is fine right now as we don't plan on ever retiring fully.

It's a great time to be living in a van. With all the new camping stuff available, you can have most stuff that you could have in a regular home in your van. Small battery powered items are perfect for RV living and or camping.

Covid taught the world that many jobs can be done remotely with the aid of the Internet. We took our photography business totally remote in 2017 when we moved into our van. That was after 30 years of having it in retail locations and our 2 acre portrait park.

We have ran into and talked with a few young professionals that live in their vans and do their jobs using the Internet.

Chap 1. Mobile Photography business

With our website and Internet we have sold pictures and our books all over the world. When we do portraits we set up the appointments over the Internet or Cell phone. Digital files are sent

over the Internet. Any additional prints ordered are usually done over Email. Prints are sent directly from our professional photo lab to the customer. If we're in Florida, or anywhere, and we get a print order from someone in Kansas, the customer usually has the finished prints delivered to their home within 2 weeks.

When we are traveling we set up photo session appointments for when we get back. We can be on the beach with our cell phones and not miss a call or text. People are always amazed when they call us that a photography business actually answered their phone and/or returned their call shortly after leaving a message.

We also carry backgrounds so that we can do business profile headshot's on location in our van. We can go to their business if they have several people they need photos of. We also meet customers at locations close by to where we are or they are. There are sample pictures on our website's headshot tgfoto.com page on how we do portraits in our van. We do have a storage unit for extra backgrounds, and light stands for when we do studio set ups on location.

2. Internet Service

Sometimes finding good cell service is a challenge. We run our computer Internet from our phone hotspot service. It's important to have good service as we upload lots of large size digital photos for our customers. Sometimes you just have to drive around and look for the cell towers and find a place to park by them if you need good fast service.

Many are starting to use and are happy with the new Starlink RV service. We haven't tried it yet as we usually don't have the need

for it so far, for the places that we park at. Or when pet sitting we can use the home Internet service.

When we first started full time van living we would use restaurants for their Internet. Really nice in the Summer, go in and get some air-conditioning, a meal, and do your Internet work. The local Library is also handy for that. We kept a list of places and locations to go or park that had good Internet service.

It's smart to have access to Internet and weather app's to watch for incoming bad weather since we don't have a garage. This way you can watch for bad weather and get out in front of a storm or wait till it passes.

3. Living or parking at your place of employment

Another option of living in a van but working for a company is what we did while working part time at a local KC Amazon warehouse. I got the idea of asking from another full time RV person who asked his store if he could park his RV in the parking lot to sleep, camp out. Camping and parking are 2 different things. Parking you just stop and sleep, rest and eat in your RV. Camping is when you get your chairs out, your BBQ, and camp.

At Amazon I asked if there were any rules about getting to work early for our 5 AM shift. Like, 7 or 8 hours early. Boss said not a problem getting to work early. So for the first 4 years of van living we parked in the Amazon four nights a week, 6 during peak time of year. Well lit parking lot and security guard.

4. Pet and house sitting

We've done lots of pet sitting the last few years. We stay in people's homes in our area and take care of their home's and pets. It's a win, win deal for us and the home owners. Since we don't have full time jobs to go to all day, we usually spend the majority of our time in their homes with their pets. It's really nice in the heat of Summer and cold of Winter.

The last couple of years we have done more just house sitting jobs. House sitting is when you just live in and watch their homes for them, no pets, while the home owners are out of town.

Home owners can get updates on their home, packages, and not have to worry about anything going wrong at their home. In the Midwest this is kind of nice. When you leave on a trip it might be 70 degrees outside and then the next day it's 5 below zero with ice and or a snow storm.

5. Van Life Expenses

A big one is eating out too much instead of planning and making your own meals. Especially with the prices of everything that have seemed to have doubled or tripled the last 3 years. Sometimes we will buy stuff like a watermelon and then give half of it away. Only half will fit in our fridge but it's usually cheaper to buy a whole one than a cut up one.

With gas going up and van repair cost going up, sometimes less driving can save you money. Plan trips so you drive fewer miles when possible. We have a stand up shower in our van that we use but many either don't have one or choose not to use theirs. Many

sign up for health club memberships and shower there. Some truck stops have showers also to use.

Another good thing about van living, is that you don't buy as much stuff that you don't really need. Because there isn't any room to put it in your van. Buying stuff just because it's fun or makes you feel good becomes hard to do in a van.

Amazon is handy to have to order pretty much everything off of. Especially to shop prices. And they have tons of stuff RV and camping related. We have links to many of the things that we buy from Amazon on our TGFOTO.com website. Things that we use everyday and the items that we used when we build our van RV.

Another income opportunity is affiliate programs like Amazon offers. If someone buys something on Amazon from a link on my website then we get some money from it. It's not very much but I've heard that some people make lots of money by doing that full time from different companies.

6. Our Future Van living plans

At this time we will probably get a place in the Midwest since this is where most of our family is. Then continue to do the Snowbird thing in the Winters to Florida or somewhere warm. Our ideal place would be like a smaller Park Model type house on a small property. And maybe a place with a garage to put the car in.

There's lots of options, even renting a small piece of land and parking the van on it to live in. Things seem to be changing fast so not really in to make major long term 25 year plans.

These days if you make it to 50 or 60 years old each day that you get up on the right side of the dirt is reason enough to be happy. In the last 3 years both of Tim's brothers, his Mom, 2 uncles and aunt have passed away. Cheryl's Dad passed away at age 55. No guarantees for tomorrow so we want to enjoy each day like it's our last.

Doing the minimalist RV living gives you the Freedom of doing what you want. Including income and job options. Having a \$300,000 plus home, payment, cuts our options down as to what we can do. We would both need 40 hour a week jobs to pay for it. And jobs that if we didn't like, we couldn't just walk away from if our house payment depended on the job. Right now with our business, if there is a job we don't want to do, we just decline it.

For any questions or comments

Contact Email tim@tgfoto.com

For items that we use and built our van with visit our website.

Travel Pictures and Van build pictures also on the website.

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