

On the road again

Fifty years on from the Summer of Love, Americans are moving back into their VWs – but modern road-tripping is a far cry from the old bell-bottoms and “Ban the bomb” signs. We take a look at the phenomenon that is #vanlife

Words  Nione Meakin



Search for the hashtag #vanlife on Instagram and you'll find nearly two million images posted from all over the world. There are campfires in the Swiss Alps, geysers in New Zealand, rocky Tasmanian rivers and a lot of beaches at sunset. Somewhere in nearly every shot is a photogenic camper van – vintage, naturally.

The term – a tongue-in-cheek twist on Tupac's "Thug Life" – was coined by photographer Foster Huntington when he quit his New York fashion job, hit the open road and began to document his nomadic adventures online. Since then, it's become one of the biggest lifestyle trends for the spirulina-sipping, downward-dogging twenty-something.

Huntington's seductive pictures of beaten-up vans in rugged locations – collated in books including *Home Is Where You Park It* and *Van Life* (out this month) – have inspired thousands to pursue a romantic lifestyle that harks back to 1960s bohemia. Their sun-drenched shots of surfboards and vans strung with dream catchers might look familiar, but these days, it's not just bona fide hippies on the trail. A new breed of media-

savvy professional traveller, plus give-it-a-go couples and even young families, are moving into their vehicles. What would once have been viewed as an "alternative" lifestyle is becoming a mainstream aspiration.

"There have been people travelling since there have been vehicles," says Huntington, over the phone from his self-built tree house in Skamania, Washington. "What's different now is that because of the dissemination of media – things like Instagram and Tumblr – it's become much easier to see it happening in real time. That's helped make it something more people get switched on to and decide to try for themselves."

For these 21st-century free spirits, a van isn't necessarily a means of escape – there is no longer any need to turn on, tune in and drop out. In fact, for many the appeal is that you can still log on.

Emily King and her partner Corey Smith are a case in point. They met Huntington on a surfing trip in Nicaragua, and soon had given up their home and most of their belongings to travel the United States in a vintage van. Their social media accounts depict an enviable life of outdoor yoga, starry skies and »

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& opposite
Erik, Joanna and their 1984 VW
Transporter Westfalia ("Popo")
have done 124,000km across
the US; Callum Creasey with the
contents of his VW T4, which have
travelled with him 190,000km



Clockwise from top
James Barkman's customised 1976 VW Westfalia even has its own stove; Megan Matthers' 1981 Volkswagon Vanagon Westfalia ("Poppy") at Cedar Breaks National Monument, Utah; Emily King and Corey Smith

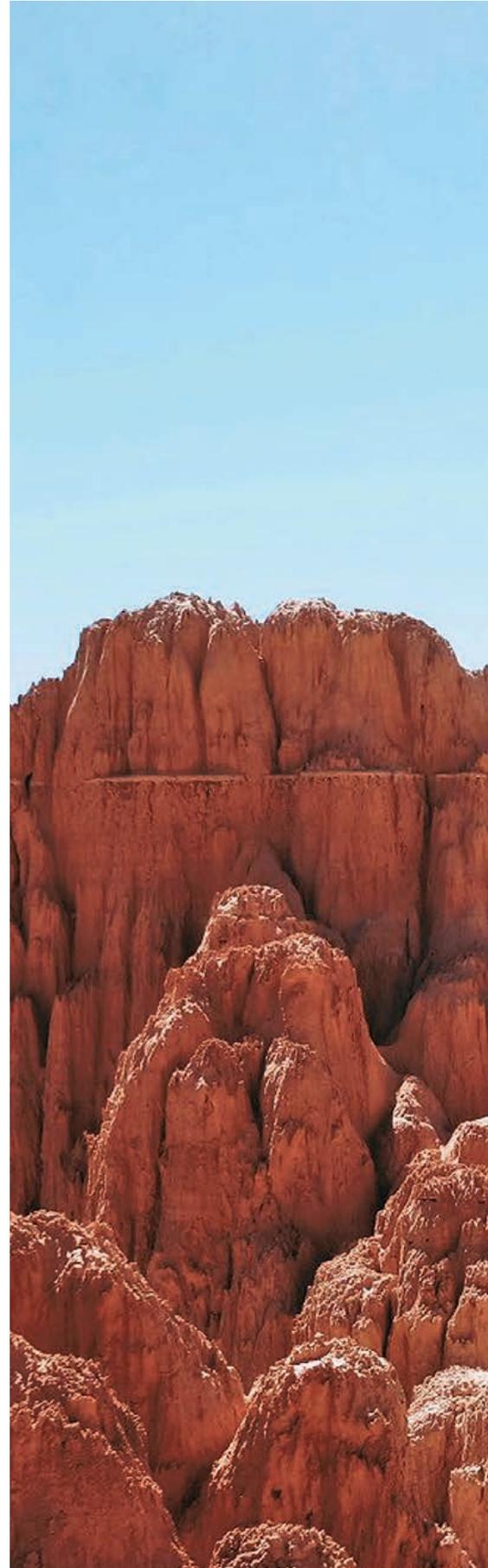
wild swimming – but the couple also run web-development agency Where's My Office Now? from their mobile home.

“We realised we could take my website development work on the road and see more of our own country,” explains King. “As surfers and mountain bikers there are all these places you read about in magazines but don’t have time to experience on short trips.”

“We’re seeing a lot of so-called ‘alternative’ lifestyles becoming more popular because we have this beautiful thing called the internet,” adds Smith. “We can work wherever, we can keep in touch with our families, and if we break down there’s an app that helps us find people or shops where we can get help. It’s like having a huge community in close range.”

Not all modern vanlifters make a full-time commitment to the road. Since *Home Is Where You Park It* was published in 2014, the opportunities for short-term vehicle hire have boomed, meaning people can dip their toes without having to sell the house. One of the most popular places to road-test is America’s Pacific Northwest, with its moderate temperatures and abundance of open space.

“Most of the people who come to us are doing short-term trips,” says Harley Sitner, the laid-back owner of Seattle repair and hire company Peace Vans. “Our primary customers are families – two adults and two children is the perfect size for a van. We also get a lot of outdoorsy, adventuring couples. It’s basically for anyone who’s looking for a unique experience and is okay with a slower pace of travel. »





“A lot of ‘alternative’ lifestyles are becoming popular thanks to this beautiful thing called the internet”

ALL ABOUT THE WESTIE

While Volkswagen’s T2 Splitscreen camper came to symbolise the original hippy movement, the vanlifer’s vehicle of choice is the Westfalia Vanagon, known simply as a Vanagon or “Westie”.

“It’s the Swiss Army knife of vans,” says proud owner Corey Smith. “It’s literally the most utilitarian vehicle ever made. It has the ability to sleep four. It has a kitchen, cabinets, everything you need – minus a bathroom – in one compact package. They’re probably one of the most fun vehicles to drive because the engine is in the back so there’s virtually nothing between you and the road in front of you.”

The Westie’s practicality (and cult cachet) has made it the preferred vehicle for weekend dabblers as well as committed travellers. “It appeals to people from all walks of life,” adds Smith. “You sit around a bonfire on a campsite and one person will be a rock climber, another a mountain biker, some might have served in Iraq. Everyone brings their own story but you’re united by this vehicle.”



From left
Callie McMullin's 1977
Westie in Redwoods
State Park, California;
teatime onboard



“The first night will be a disaster... by the fourth night you’re trying to work out how to buy one of these vans”

“A van is the perfect way to get to know this area. The Northwest is still relatively un-built-up compared to say, California or the Northeast. It still has some pretty remote, wild areas. You can really get off-grid if you want to.”

Sitner used to take his own Westfalia Vanagon for repairs at Peace Vans before taking over the business a few years back. He now employs 16 people and runs a hire fleet of 15 vans. While committed vanlifters pride themselves on a knack for DIY mechanics, Peace Vans takes care of all that for a stress-free first-time experience.

“We go to extreme measures to make sure people are comfortable and feel taken care of,” says Sitner. “But you do need a spirit of adventure. We tell people that the first night will be a disaster – you don’t know where anything is; you doubt your decision. By the third night you’re thinking, ‘This is really fun’; by the fourth you’re trying to figure out how you can buy one of these vans.”

Every Vanagon owner comments on the sense of community that surrounds the vehicle. “We call it the Vanagon wave,” says Sitner, laughing. “We have to explain to first-time renters, ‘Don’t worry, there’s nothing wrong with the vehicle – they’re waving because you’re both in Vanagons.’”

Sitner says he never expected the vanlife craze to last as long as it has: “Trends come and go but the vanlife thing just seems to keep going. »

“It’s driven in part by millennials wanting to go on road trips, but also by people with two incomes and small children who have done well and can afford a vehicle for camping. They don’t want a big RV but a small footprint vehicle, and there’s nothing like the Westfalia. It taps into a sense of nostalgia, the romantic image of a VW bus. People want a more analogue, authentic experience and that’s just what travelling in a Vanagon offers.”

Huntington agrees it’s this sense of authenticity people crave – whether they’re doing yoga on top of their vans then going back to their day jobs, or they’ve given up four walls for good. “The world portrayed in the media is all about getting the nicest house, going on fancy vacations, having the most expensive things. Vanlife is an alternative to all that. It’s the opposite of the Kardashians. It’s real life.”

Van Life: Inspiration for your Home on the Road is published 10 October [instagram.com/fosterhunting](https://www.instagram.com/fosterhunting)



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“Vanlife is an alternative to all that... It’s the opposite of the Kardashians”



Popping the top for sunset on Logan Smith’s 1997 Volkswagen Eurovan in Pacific City, Washington

Park it here



OLYMPIC PENINSULA
Choose from around 15 campgrounds – from the super-remote Deer Park to the lush rainforests of Hoh River – in Washington State’s most popular national park. olympicpeninsula.org



MOUNT RAINIER
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CAPE DISAPPOINTMENT
Very rarely living up to its name, this spot – where the Columbia River meets the Pacific Ocean – is home to a famous lighthouse, tiny Waikiki Beach, and the spot where Lewis and Clark finished their famous 1804 expedition – #vanlife, 19th-century style. parks.state.wa.us