
Roll and go — a primer for taking an RV vacation

A home on wheels. That's what it's like to travel in a recreational vehicle.

A few years ago, our family took a five-week trip out West, our first RV experience. It was my husband's dream, so I agreed, but for months before we left, I secretly dreaded it.

I came back hooked. We all did.

Like tent camping, an RV puts you close-up to nature, while packing the creature comforts of home: beds, bathroom, a kitchen, stove, fridge, microwave, even air conditioning and heat, and a TV and DVD player. Once avid tent campers, my husband and I found we liked those creature comforts. Our kids did, too.

Many campgrounds throughout New England welcome RVs (or motorhomes). Scott Patsfield, owner of Northeast RV Rentals, says that 80 percent of his RV rentals in New England are for three to four days, up to one week. Joe Laing, marketing director of El Monte RV, headquartered in Sante Fe Springs, Calif., says the company's Boston rentals are up 38 percent over last year.

Interested? Before you roll consider these tips:

Most New England camp- grounds run May-Columbus Day. Book early, advises Julie Daly, station supervisor of Moturis of Boston in Rowley. By April is good, but reserve even sooner if you're planning to travel over Memorial Day, July 4th, or Labor Day, she says. Too many families wait until school closes, which is too late.

Compare plans. Three major names for RV rentals include: Cruise America, El Monte, and Moturis RV and Camping World. In New England, there are many "mom and pop" shops, such as Northeast RV Rentals, Forest Marine & RV Center, and New England RV Rental. Search "hot deals" listed on websites. Most rental plans include: insurance, where, if you were in an accident, you'd pay a deductible; 24-hour roadside assistance to answer technical questions by phone; and vehicle assistance, if you have a flat tire, need a tow, etc. Your auto insurance will not cover RV rentals.

Find and reserve the right RV campsite. What's important to you? A simple campsite, with a three-way hook-up (for water, electricity, and sewer), a picnic table, and fire ring? Or do you long for a swimming pool? Tennis courts? Lakes, rivers, and ponds for swimming, fishing, and boating? Many campground facilities include game rooms, playgrounds, Wi-Fi, and a laundry room, but ask.

Linda Lawless of Brockton, who's traveled by RV with her husband, Jim, over 40 years, says, "It's good to start locally and not go too far away." They've RV'd brookfront at Lost River Family Campground in North Woodstock, N.H., and canalside at Scusset Beach State Reservation on Cape Cod. For five-star camping, they recommend Normandy Farms Family Camping Resort in Foxborough, a luxury camping destination between Boston and the Cape.

If driving an RV intimidates you, consider renting one that stays parked at the campsite at Adventure Bound Campgrounds, in either North Truro or Ashland, N.H. This cabin-like option conveys a sense of RV living without having to drive one.

Visit an RV salesroom or camp ing show. Before our first trip, we visited Moturis RV and Camping World in Rowley. After spending time inside the 25-foot RV my husband had planned to book, we realized we wanted a little more space, and, for a bit more money, rented a 28-footer. Or attend a local RV & camping show.

Decide who's driving. To rent an RV, you must be 25 years or older, have a valid driver's license and a major credit card. Additional drivers must be present at the vehicle pickup. Let co-pilots help you back into parking spots.

Don't be scared by the size of the RV. It's comparable to driving a U-Haul, and after a while, handles like a car or mini-van, says Lisa Shaughnessy, RV rental manager of Forest Marine & RV Center in Tyngsboro, but with even more visibility.

Craig Schwarze of Melrose advises first-timers to make really wide turns and to use the mirrors. But don't park in cities, his wife, Kathleen, adds. Park outside the city and take public transportation.

You want to follow "truck routes," says Jim Lawless. Consider RV resources, like a GPS made for RVing or use "Trailer Life RV Park and Campground Directory," the "bible"

of experienced RVers, he says.

Map your trip. Estimate your daily and total mileage. How close is the campground to attractions, parks, and sites you plan to visit? Most rental plans are based on either 100 miles a day or a package, like 500 miles for the entire trip. It'll cost you if you go over. Balance out "big driving" days with longer stays in one spot. Buy two 500-mile packages, for example, if you plan to drive 1,000 miles total. Build in time upfront — for getting your rental, checking the operations out, and packing, and for flexibility to tweak your plan, if you find something interesting.
