

A nomad's life *for us*

A GROWING NUMBER OF COUPLES OVER 50+ ARE GIVING UP ON A LIFE IN BRICKS AND MORTAR FOR THE ADVENTURE OF THE OPEN ROAD. **SALLY HOWARD** SPEAKS TO GENERATION 'MOTOR-ROAM'.

Karen Davies, 54, was knee-deep in hay in rural Romania when she realised the gamble of packing in her corporate job to live full time in a motorhome with husband Myles, 53, had paid off. "I was taking pictures of a beautiful Thomas Hardy-like landscape at daybreak and this Romanian family was baling haystacks," she says. "So I just pitched in right then and there in my pyjamas, despite the fact we had no shared language. The sun was glorious and the landscape was dotted with these pretty little monasteries. It felt magical."

The Davies (below) took to the road in their motorhome, which they have nicknamed Scoobie, in 2016, after giving up their jobs on the Isle of Man. Their first taste of the freedom of the open road was in January, when they travelled around New Zealand in a camper van to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary.

"We had such a good time," Myles recalls. "When we came back to the UK we felt in limbo somehow. So, I turned to Karen and said: 'Why don't we just buy a motorhome and do this full-time?'"

Karen laughs as she picks up the story. "You almost had to pick me up off the floor, I was so shocked," she recalls. "I'd always been this rooted girl, you see. I thought I

needed bricks and mortar."

Care responsibilities, as with many midlifers, were also a consideration. Karen worried about the

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Searching #vanlife on Instagram turns up more than 12 million posts, proving the trend has exploded in popularity. Many are solo travellers or couples who are rejecting the norms of settling down.



The Davies' trusty camper van. **Below:** Karen and Myles.



elderly mother she'd be leaving back home. But a conversation the couple had with Karen's mum Anne, 79, based in Herefordshire, sealed the deal. "She told me that my dad had always wanted to go travelling long-term when he retired but that she'd been too scared to," Karen explains. "Mum told us to go for it. To not look back and have regrets."

Millions of over 50s live on the road full-time across the West, with the trend being particularly notable in the US and the Antipodes. In the US this nomadic 50+ community are dubbed 'snowbirds' for their seasonal journeys north-south across the US landmass from Alaska to New Mexico.

In Australia, there are annual meet-ups for vast communities of motorhomers known as the 'grey nomads' and in 2019 van-dwellers formed makeshift camps in New South Wales,»



People

helping communities to rebuild buildings and infrastructure razed by Australian wildfires.

The UK, says tourism researcher Rodney Caldicott, has historically been more of a domestic caravanning market where short holidays reigned. This, however, is changing as over 50s are more ambitious in both the nature of their four-wheeled vehicles and their overseas itineraries.

“The new motorhomers in the UK are more like those in Australia and the US,” Rodney says. “They see the European continent, and beyond, as their playground.”

There’s an obvious appeal, too, in travelling in one’s own discrete dwelling post-pandemic. Caravan and motorhome sales soared in 2021 as a result of the ‘staycation boom’, according to experts at British Car Auctions, with many buyers yearning for adventure after two years during which international borders have been closed.

Tiny living with the bare essentials was not, Karen reports, the Davies’ priority. “We’ve been married for almost 33 years, so to move into a really cramped space was not appealing,” she says.



“It was important to have a bedroom separate to the lounge so that we could have different zones and a bit of privacy.”

The couple plumped for a Pilote P740 Sensation, a European-style motorhome with a separate lounge-kitchen and bigger bedroom, with a second bed for guests to join them on the road. After handing in their notices at work, selling the home they had spent years renovating and bidding a nervous goodbye to friends and family they took to the road for an ‘epic’ year-long trip through France, Spain, Scandinavia, Germany and Italy. It was a trip that taught the couple a few lessons about the importance of pacing themselves, and curtail their ambitions.

“Unfortunately, in that first leg we overdid it out of excitement and thought we needed to cram everything in,” Karen says.

“That was a big lesson actually,” Myles continues. “We got halfway and realised we were shattered. We just put the handbrake on in Provence and collapsed for a month in the sunshine.”

Ulrike Gretzel studies RV and motorhoming communities in the US at the University of California. She says freedom is a big motivator for the over 50s who decide to go on the road full-time. “Freedom is absolutely the driving force,” she says.



The costs of van life can be considerably lower than a mortgage, but you’ll have to consider the upfront payments to get you set up. You could spend perhaps £8,000–£12,000 on a van with decent mileage and storage space. Factor in fuel bills and costs such as gym memberships so you can have access to showers.

“People have worked all their lives and now they want to let go of family and financial obligations.”

Often, Ulrike adds, snowbirds don’t have a fixed destination in mind. “Maybe they’ll have a vague idea of being in Alaska by the summer,” she adds, “but it’s more about being able to go anywhere on the spur of the moment than having a set destination in view.”

Dr Anne Hardy also studies the grey nomad phenomenon at the University of Tasmania. She adds that the trend has an aspect of later-life rebellion to it. “For older women especially, some are refusing to stay put and do the grandma thing of looking after any grandkids,” she says.

“And many of these nomads say that they’re doing this to find themselves, or at least look for something on the open road.”

Jenella Loye, 69, and husband Scott Carroll, 62, are Californian biologists who have enjoyed motorhoming throughout their married lives. In the ‘80s, they travelled around Australia in a rustic set-up that, Jenella recalls, ‘was just a bunch of boxes made out of plywood in a Volkswagen’.

Now, the couple have upgraded to a ‘fancy’ Sprinter recreational vehicle with running hot and cold water and electricity and are soon to set off again, travelling across the US and into Mexico. For Jenella, much of the joy of motorhoming is forging a new and evolving community.

“I can’t wait to hit the road again and start chatting to people,” she

says. “These days you have all of these Facebook sites where van people arrange to meet up and it’s so much fun.”

Anne Hardy points out that the digital competence of the 50+ travellers helps with the sense of connectedness in nomadic lifestyles that could otherwise be quite tough and isolated. “In our interviews [for Anne’s research work] we found that grey nomads were very digitally savvy and connected »



Jenella enjoys life on the road along with her husband Scott.

“People have worked all their lives and now they want to let go of family and financial obligations.”



Van living doesn't have to mean stuffy conditions and dodgy decor. A paint job and clever touches with soft furnishings can create gorgeous tranquility and comfort.



through groups such as the Good Sam Club in the US," she says. "Van dwellers have to be pretty mechanically savvy too."

The Davies' note van life is not for everyone; especially on a rainy day when you're stuck inside your tiny home. "We've come up with some unspoken rules," Karen laughs. "We each have our own office space; having more than one person in the kitchen is a yellow card offence and getting out for fresh air daily is a really important goal."

During the pandemic, the couple temporarily moved back to the UK to

be near their family. Soon, however, the couple, who run a blog about their adventures under the pseudonym The Motoroamers, will head to Scotland, before driving down to Spain and then over to Morocco to while away the winter months in the '30-degree desert sun'.

They face the next leg of their adventures, they explain, with a new philosophy. "We plan to travel more slowly, spend less time blogging and take it a bit easier," Karen says.

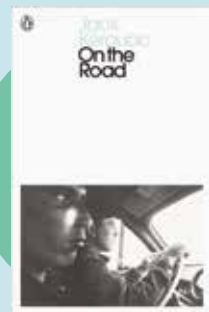
"After all, the world isn't going anywhere," Myles adds. Follow the Davies' adventures: motoroaming.com

The four-wheeled life on page and screen...



NOMADLAND, 2021

This Oscar-nominated outing from director Chloé Zhao features Frances McDormand as Fern, a 61-year-old widow who embarks on the van-dwelling life after the shuttering of Empire, the United States Gypsum Corporation's company town in Nevada, where she and her late husband lived and worked.



ON THE ROAD, 1957

by Jack Kerouac, £8.99, Amazon
This era-defining Beat classic documents the travels of Kerouac and his friends across the United States with a backdrop of poetry, jazz and recreational drugs. It kick-started the popular mythology of seeking freedom and kicks on the legendary highway Route 66.



THELMA AND LOUISE, 1991

This much-loved American female buddy movie, directed by Ridley Scott, sees midlife best friends Thelma Dickinson (Geena Davis) and Louise Sawyer (Susan Sarandon) take to the road to escape their dreary lives in suburban Arkansas. ■