

Subject:

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## RV Trip Planning: Where to Next?

By Stephanie and Jeremy Puglisi  
September 28, 2018

**The secret to planning successful RV trips is simple: make campground reservations, book bucket-list experiences and leave plenty of time for road-trip kismet**

**RVers love planning trips.** Think for a moment about the endless and exciting possibilities. There are countless must-see destinations across North America, and thousands of RV parks and public campgrounds. When RV enthusiasts strike up a friendly conversation, it's never long before they're swapping travel recommendations and campground reviews. For many seasoned RVers, their favorite question is, "Where to next?"

Now, some folks might have the notion that RV travel is all about spontaneity. You hitch up your rig and hit the road with nothing but a full tank of fuel and a love of adventure. It's a nice idea in theory, but in reality, a completely unplanned RV trip can lead to stress and disappointment. After all, RVing is more popular than ever right now, and many campsites are booked a year or more in advance, especially during peak seasons.

Making plans in advance not only confirms you'll have a place to stay, it lets you take advantage of all the great crowdsourced information now available online and learn helpful details like the quirky hours of a craft brewery or discounted weekday tickets at a museum. We've found that trying to achieve balance works best: plan ahead but leave plenty of room for spontaneous experiences and relaxation.

### **Know Yourself... and Your Budget**

Remember all those options that were available when you were RV shopping? Whether you bought a teardrop trailer with a wet bath or a luxury fifth-wheel with massaging theater seats, you had to figure out what you wanted from the RV experience. Similarly, before planning any trips, you should have a good idea of your personal travel style and what you are looking to get from an RV vacation.

The most important thing to know is how many hours you are comfortable driving on any given day. If you like to drive no more than five hours at a stretch, choose locations that are closer to home or plan plenty of interesting stops along the route. If you're a road warrior who can clock 12 hours behind the wheel without stopping for a cup of coffee, it'll be much easier to reach those far-away destinations.

Another point to consider is how often you like to break camp. Travel days can be tiring with all the packing, hitching up and driving, and then setting up at a new campground. Some folks are happiest doing this only one time on an RV trip and opt for single-destination travel. Others love to see as many places as possible on a trip and will relocate every few days.

We love picking a few destinations within a region and staying at each place for three or four

nights. However, we know plenty of others who are content to spend an entire two-week vacation at a single RV resort. Finding your own rhythm will make those RV trips as amazing as you always dreamed they would be.

Finally, you have to know your budget. There is no such thing as the average cost of an RV vacation. Expenses vary tremendously depending on how far you drive, the destinations you visit and the types of campgrounds you book. Remember that the more you drive, the more you will spend on fuel, and that can be a big expense when hauling a large RV with a powerful tow vehicle.

To complicate things further, campground costs are all over the map. We've paid \$20 a night for a remote state-park campsite with no hookups and \$120 a night for a waterfront-resort site with a custom stone firepit. You can plan an RV trip at virtually any price point, but you'll likely be happier if you aren't blowing the family budget.

### **Choose the Ideal Destination**

If you want to plan a truly memorable RV vacation, you have to pick a destination that ticks off all your travel boxes. Of course, people rave about the beauty of the Grand Canyon, but if you hate heat, crowds and hiking, it's probably not a good choice for your summer trip.

To limit our choices, we usually decide on the type of destination first. For instance, we'll pick between the beach, the mountains, the city or the tourist attraction. We'll decide whether we want to be active, take it easy or a combination of both. We'll discuss whether we want it to be an educational trip for our kids or just a chance to relax and unwind as a family. Then we'll look at the options within our preferred traveling distance.

One of our favorite things about the RV lifestyle is that we can comfortably enjoy any type of destination, whether it's Olympic National Park or the Big Apple. The best RV trips happen when we pick a destination that suits the season and our mood.

### **Find the Perfect Campground**

Once we decide on a destination, we dive into campground research. Finding the most suitable campground is more of an art than a science, simply because everyone has different ideals. While there is no such thing as one perfect campground for all of us, there are perfect campgrounds for you. With a bit of research and reconnaissance, you can find them.

It's important to know the basic amenities that you want in a campground. Some RVers prefer a huge site with no hookups and a whole lot of peace and quiet. Others are looking for a heated swimming pool, modern playground and planned activities. Well-reviewed resorts, no matter how lovely, will not be a good fit if you prefer rustic state parks. It's important to seek out recommendations and reviews, but then do your due diligence to find your own campsite nirvana. And if you're traveling with a pet, never forget to double-check campground policies.

When making reservations, remember that even the best campgrounds have some less-than-ideal campsites. Everyone loves the convenience of online booking, but we believe that calling the campground and discussing our preferences often lands us the best sites. Not every campground will guarantee a particular campsite, but we take advantage when they do.

### **Plan the Best Itinerary**

There's a well-worn joke about folks needing vacations to recover from their vacations. We actually think RV travel is uniquely suited for combining fun and adventure with rest and relaxation. This is on account of two things: traveling with all the comforts of home and enjoying the benefits of campground culture.

While we love to get out and explore new destinations, we schedule plenty of downtime at the campground. This works perfectly for our family and seems to be a tried-and-true strategy of seasoned RVers.

We generally look to plan a single outing or excursion per day, whether it's a hike, a guided kayaking tour or a visit to the local botanical garden. This means we don't rush from one thing to the next, and we never get burned out halfway through our trip. It also allows room to squeeze in unexpected finds or recommendations. We're pretty sure one of the reasons we have such unforgettable vacations is that we're always asking locals and fellow RVers for suggestions.

Before we arrive at any vacation destination, we make a list of must-do activities and

attractions for the trip. We research days and hours of operation in advance, and make sure to buy tickets for anything that requires reservations. So many people are devastated when they find out that all the tours of Alcatraz Island are booked or that they needed to enter the permit lottery to visit parts of Zion National Park. We'll never forget the time we tried to bring our children to the top of the Washington Monument only to find the reservation system had been changed. We don't make that mistake anymore. Do your homework and don't miss out for lack of planning.

### **Map the Right Route**

The best part of trip planning might be researching destinations, campgrounds and attractions, but there are a few other (perhaps less exciting) items that should be on your trip-planning checklist as well.

The most important of these might be planning the route. When towing an RV, you want to make sure not to end up on a road with low clearances, steep inclines or narrow passes. Many of us rely on smartphone navigation for everyday driving directions. When planning an RV trip, take the time to plot your route in advance, and download maps and directions so they are available even if you lose cellular service.

You should also look for resources that help with finding RV-friendly gas stations and rest stops. Apps like Next Exit and GasBuddy offer information about nearby gas stations, including fuel prices and crowd-sourced photos. We love the myPilot app, which gives information about Pilot and Flying J stations, many of which have dedicated RV gas lanes, propane for sale and dump stations.

### **Get Ready to Go**

Nothing can ruin the vibe of a great vacation more than an emergency maintenance issue with your tow vehicle or RV. Planning ahead will give you the best chance of arriving at your destination without incident.

We always double-check our tow vehicle in advance, making sure any scheduled maintenance has been addressed, including oil, other fluids and brakes. We take care of our travel trailer, regularly maintaining the axles, wheel bearings and tires. Our trip-planning checklist extends to a review of auto and RV insurance and roadside-assistance policies.

Lastly, you need to plan ahead for your sticks-and-bricks abode. Advances in smartphone technology offer RVers the opportunity to keep an eye on their homes, even while thousands of miles away. If you don't have an app that lets you turn interior and exterior lights on and off remotely, set some timers on them. Make arrangements to pause newspaper delivery, have the post office hold your mail, and ask a neighbor or friend to check on the house periodically and remove those unwanted flyers left at the front door.

The RV industry has exploded in the past few years, and that means it's more important than ever to do at least a bit of trip planning before you hit the open road with your rig. Last year we witnessed RVers being turned away at more than one campground office simply because there were no sites available. Booking your stay in advance will make sure that doesn't happen to you.

## **10-Minute Tech: If the Shoe Fits**

By Larry MacDonald  
September 27, 2018

**Most trailers have folding steps outside the entry door.** If you dislike tracking water and dirt inside or just want to reduce the number of shoes in the RV, consider making a portable outside shoe shelf under the extended steps. I made mine from 1/8-inch-thick plywood that's 12 inches by 26½ inches and fits snugly on the existing angle irons underneath our trailer's steps. A piece of corrugated plastic or Plexiglas could also work. Before getting under way, we remove the shelf and store it inside the entry door, ready for our next stop.

## **PREPARE YOUR RV FOR FALL & WINTER CAMPING**

by Mark Polk

As we head toward colder temperatures I would like to suggest a few preventive maintenance checks to help prepare your RV for the fall and winter camping seasons. Please do not confuse these cold weather RV checks with winterizing or storing your RV.

### **1. Inspect your RV batteries**

Check all battery connections for secure mounting. Clean the batteries with a 50/50 mixture of baking soda and water, if necessary. If you have lead-acid batteries check the electrolyte level in each cell and add distilled water as needed. Many older converter chargers provide a constant charge of approximately 13.5 volts, which is too high for fully-charged batteries, and can cause the electrolyte to boil off resulting in an early death for the batteries if water levels are not maintained.

Check water levels weekly, at a minimum, when using the RV. Test the battery state-of-charge and charge any batteries that are at or below 80 percent. A discharged or partially-charged battery will freeze much faster than a fully-charged battery. Use a digital voltmeter to measure voltage for a quick picture of the batteries' depth of discharge. If you don't feel comfortable working on or around batteries have a reputable RV service center perform battery maintenance for you.

**Note:** A 12-volt battery that is charged should read 12.7 volts. Readings less than 12.5 indicate the battery state of charge is below 80 percent and the battery needs to be charged. A 6-volt battery that is charged should read 6.37 volts. Readings below 6.25 indicate the battery state of charge is below 80 percent and the battery needs to be charged.

### **2. Test automotive antifreeze**

The antifreeze in your tow vehicle or motorhome's radiator should always have a 50- to 70-percent concentration of antifreeze to water. Water does a good job helping cool an engine, but it freezes quickly during cold winter temperatures. Water can also cause certain metals to rust and corrode over time. The proper concentration of antifreeze is necessary to provide freeze protection and chemical protection against corrosion.

**Note:** To test the automotive antifreeze, use quality test strips, a float-type hydrometer or a refractometer. A refractometer is the most accurate testing device.

Inspect all coolant hoses for signs of damage or leaks. Coolant hoses deteriorate from the inside out. Inspect all hoses for wear, cracks, soft spots, brittle areas and leaks. Inspect hose clamps for secure mounting and replace any damaged coolant hoses or clamps as required.

### **3. Use a fuel stabilizer product like STA-BIL**

Fuel stabilizers provide excellent protection against stale fuel during periods of storage. They contain corrosion inhibitors, remove water and help clean fuel injectors. There are fuel stabilizers designed for use with gasoline and diesel engines. I use a fuel stabilizer in gas-powered lawn equipment, ATVs, boats and motorcycles too.

### **4. Furnace checkup**

One LP-gas appliance that gets overlooked during warm weather is the forced-air furnace. Most service requirements for the furnace need to be accomplished by a reputable RV service center, but there are a few things the owner can do to prepare the furnace for cold-weather operation.

The battery plays an important role in the proper operation of the furnace. Keeping lead-acid batteries watered and fully charged will prevent many furnace-related problems. Inspect furnace ducting that is above floor level for damage, such as crushed ducting or obstructions that could affect furnace operation. Make sure the furnace air return is not blocked or restricted. Test the operation of the furnace before the day arrives when you actually need it. Have a certified technician test your LP-gas system annually for proper appliance operating pressure and leaks.

### **5. Inspect all safety devices and replace all dry-cell batteries**

Carbon monoxide is deadly. Test the CO detector, LP-gas leak detector and smoke alarm for proper operation every time you use your RV. Instruct individuals on symptoms and what to do if they are exposed to carbon monoxide or if they hear LP-gas leak detector alarms. Replace all dry-cell batteries when you change the settings on your clocks in the spring and fall. Make sure you have a charged fire extinguisher on hand and that you and other adults know how to operate it.

## 6. Clean, inspect and reseal your RV roof

Not that this is directly related to fall or winter use, but I like to inspect the roof twice a year, at a minimum, and I think spring and fall are good times of the year to make these checks.

**Note:** Exercise caution any time you work on the roof of your RV. The roof's surface can be slippery and a fall can result in serious injury, or worse.

Clean your roof with an approved cleaner for the type of roofing material your RV has. Every time you clean the roof inspect the sealants around all of the openings and the seams on the roof. Water will take the path of least resistance, and if there is the smallest opening it will find it. Thoroughly inspect the roof sealants for potential leaks and reseal any areas of the roof seams and around openings where you suspect a leak. Make sure you use sealants compatible with your roofing material. Keep in mind that your warranty can be voided if you fail to perform some of these required inspections. Check your RV owner's manual for roof inspection intervals.

## 7. Plan for non-use

If you don't plan to use your RV over the fall and winter months, winterize the plumbing system to prevent freezing, and prepare all other systems for short or long-term storage.

There are other checks you could make, but this is a good start to prepare your RV for some cold weather camping.

# The Danger Of An Un-Level Gooseneck Trailer

**Why should a trailer be level?** For a horse trailer to avoid overloading one of the four tires or possibly breaking one of the axles, it must be level when hitched to a tow vehicle. What we mean by "being level" is that the weight of the trailer should be sitting evenly on both axles and all four tires. Since each tire and axle is rated to sustain up to a specific maximum weight, any weight over that specific weight will overload the tire and result in a blow-out or a broken axle. With most horse trailers today being equipped with rubber torsion axles, weight shifts from one axle to another rather quickly when raising or lowering the nose, making it even more critical to insure that the trailer is level.

## LEVELING A HORSE TRAILER.

**Preparation:** Check each tire's pressure to ensure that they are all the same. This is important to achieve a correct level. I suggest filling them to the maximum pounds per square inch (psi) – they will flex less, ride cooler, and less apt to blow. You can locate the psi of the tires on the side wall.

**Bumper Pull Trailers:** To correctly set the level of your bumper pull trailer, park the trailer and tow vehicle on a flat surface. If the trailer is blatantly un-level when hooked to the tow vehicle, unhitch the trailer and raise or lower it so that the trailer is level. Since fenders, running boards, and other flat spots on the trailer may not be straight, using a level on one of these areas may not give you accurate information.

The best way to determine the trailer's levelness is to first, stand a distance from the trailer and observe by sight if it looks as if it is sitting level. Then look at the tires to determine if they are equally flat rather than one tire being rounded. The rounded tire means there is little or no weight on it. The next step is to determine how to achieve the correct trailer height when the trailer is hitched to the tow vehicle. This can be achieved in two ways. EquiSpirit has an adjustable coupler on all its bumper pulls so with a wrench, you can adjust the trailer coupler up or down to the height of the ball mount on the tow vehicle. Most other bumper pull trailers do not have this feature, so you will need to choose a ball mount with the right height to keep the trailer level when hitched up. Ball mounts will have what is called "drops" (0", 2", 4" 6") so depending on the height of your tow vehicle, you will need acquire the proper ball mount. You may not get the level exact, but close is okay as long as there is flatness on both tires. If the level is slightly off, have the nose a bit up rather than a bit down – it will track better.

**Gooseneck Trailers:** The gooseneck trailer should be unhitched from the tow vehicle and parked on a flat, level surface. Observe the trailer to see if it looks level and to determine that the tires (tires need to have the correct psi) are equally flat on the bottom rather than one being

more rounded and the other more flat.

Once you determine that the trailer is level, measure from the ground to the lowest part of the gooseneck. Then measure from the ground to the top of the tailgate or side of the bed of your truck. Subtract that distance from the distance from the ground to the top of the gooseneck. The amount will be the clearance you will have from the top of the tail gate to the bottom of the gooseneck with the trailer sitting level. It should be at least six inches – preferably seven or eight so that the trailer does not hit the tail gate or sides of the truck when going over uneven terrain. If you prefer not to pre-measure, with the trailer sitting level, drive your truck under the gooseneck (make sure your tailgate is down). If the clearance from the bottom of the gooseneck to the top of the tailgate and sides of the truck is under six inches, there will not be enough clearance to safely pull the trailer. The gooseneck will most likely hit the tailgate or the sides of the truck bed, especially on uneven terrain. If your tow vehicle adequately clears the truck bed while the trailer is sitting level, you can adjust the coupler up or down to meet the ball while the trailer remains level.

**Note:** Most all gooseneck couplers are adjustable by loosening or removing a couple bolts and sliding the coupler up or down. It's important to note that the adjustable coupler does not raise the whole trailer up and down, just the nose. So if the clearance from the top your tailgate (and sides of your bed) to the bottom of the gooseneck is less than 6" while the trailer is sitting level, raising the coupler will only raise the nose of the trailer, shifting weight onto the rear axles and tires. The adjustable coupler's purpose is to adjust for different height truck beds such as a four wheel drive as opposed to two. If your trailer does not have the proper clearance over the truck bed, your options are limited. You can purchase a trailer that will fit your current truck, purchase a truck that has a lower truck bed (two wheel drive as opposed to four), or you can have the axles blocked up 4" by your local service center.

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## Is there a green way to tow?

BY JANE MCGRATH

You may do your part every day to watch your step on the environment and avoid leaving a carbon footprint. But some days, going green is harder than others. Sure, you may recycle your grocery bags, ride the bus to work and buy organic, but when green guilt starts foiling your vacation plans, who's to say where to draw the line?

After waiting all year to take your new boat out, it strikes you that towing it for the long trip will effectively drop an anvil on your hybrid car's sky-high MPG. Not only do you feel your wallet shrinking by the second, but your green conscience is now burdened with the guilt that your vacation will now sap up gas and release carbon emissions.

Should you shed that shiny new boat from your vacation plans? Or is there a greener way to tow short of going Flintstones-style and literally pulling our own weight? The heavier the load on a vehicle, the more power, and therefore fuel, it will need to move. Nevertheless, although hybrid cars aren't known for their heavy towing capacities, you shouldn't necessarily feel pressured to forego the boat or the trailer for fear of green guilt.

In fact, as stellar gas mileage becomes more popular among consumers, companies seeking the green market are working to equip towing vehicles with higher MPGs. Ford, for example, promises about 20 MPG for its 2009 F-150 truck [source: Carty]. Likewise, companies seeking the blue-collar, boating and camping markets are working to equip hybrids with better towing capacities. For instance, GMC has come out with a 2009 Yukon Hybrid that can tow up to 6,000 pounds (2721.6 kilograms) [source: Edmunds]. These kinds of options are ideal for a person who wants one vehicle to drive to work on a daily basis and economically handle towing a trailer on the annual road trip.

There's no reason you should feel powerless in the plight to save gas with that boat in tow. By becoming a smarter consumer and a smarter driver, your towing vehicle can be an efficient green machine. We'll go over some of the most important tips for better towing gas mileage next.

### **Towing Gas Mileage: Getting the Best Gas Mileage While Towing**

Fortunately, there are ways you can indulge your love of the outdoors or boating without sacrificing green ideals. Consider these tips to conserve gas while towing.

First and foremost, experts recommend to get rid of any excess weight you may be carrying in your vehicle you probably won't need. Tow more weight, and you'll consume more fuel. So go Thoreau and "simplify, simplify."

If you haven't yet bought either the towing vehicle or the towed vehicle, you have the advantage of shopping with an eye toward fuel economy. When buying a camper, the lighter the better. Dealers now sell **ultra-light trailers** with aluminum frames, which can also expand your towing vehicle options [source: CampingEarth.com].

While shopping for a towing vehicle, the most important thing is to make sure you get one with the appropriate **towing capacity** -- the maximum weight a vehicle can tow. Getting more tons of towing capacity than you need will most likely be a waste of fuel and make for an uncomfortable ride.

On the other hand, if you need to handle a very heavy load like a fifth-wheel trailer, you might consider a diesel truck. In some circumstances, a diesel-powered vehicle could prove to be about 15 to 20 percent more fuel-efficient [source: Arrais].

Another aspect to consider when searching for a towing vehicle is the **axle ratio**. This refers to the number of revolutions the driveshaft makes in order to make a wheel revolve once [source: Jeep.com]. An economy axle ratio will be low (3:1 or lower), and a performance axle ratio will be high (4:1 or higher) [source: ConsumerGuide]. You'll want to look for a moderate axle ratio that's neither very high nor very low as a compromise for both fuel economy and towing performance.

It'll also help to consider the most aerodynamic options. Even if you have a light load and a fuel-efficient vehicle, wind and air resistance can still do a number on your fuel economy. You can do things to minimize this effect as much as possible. For instance, if you're towing a boat or an open platform trailer, putting a cover on it will reduce aerodynamic drag.

Not only what you drive, but the way you drive can also have a significant impact on your fuel economy. For instance, sudden stops and accelerated starts will always hurt your gas mileage. When towing heavy loads, it's wise not to put the pedal to the metal anyway. Sticking with moderate speeds will improve fuel economy and be safer all around, considering that towing will increase your stopping distance. Not only that, but if you need to brake hard in an emergency situation, you could cause your vehicle to skid and possibly jackknife. Depending on the make, your vehicle could have an overdrive gear -- shifting out of this into a lower gear over hills and rough terrain could improve fuel efficiency as well [source: Neura].

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