

Santa Monica Daily Press

Three Innocents Abroad

Longtime Santa Monican Charles Andrews is traveling across Europe in a camper van for one year, with his family

What you observe and what you experience when traveling depends a lot on your mode of travel.

It also hinges on things like your age, travel budget, linguistic abilities, personality, health, ethnicity, and sense of adventure and wonder. But especially on a long trip, mode may be the most important.

We're driving. In a 21-year-old VW camper van that's starting first time every time and running so smoothly that we've dubbed it Excalibur (also, musical reference, White Rabbit), in dramatic contrast to the Red Beast we suffered with for the first four months. (Thanks and praise to our van provider Tour-Europe, couldn't have done it without them, and especially our genial and genius German mechanic Sebastian, upon whom we have conferred sainthood. Too many miracles to recount.)

You can hike/train-bus-thumb/backpack/camp/hostel. Recommended for the young of years, not just of heart. You can, in Europe, Eurail Pass it (unlimited train connections for a specified period of time). Upscaling, you can fly or cruise between cities or take the train first-class or even sleeper car. You can go on a tour on a big bus with a big group of people just like you (and rarely meet locals or eat foreign food or communicate in anything but your language). Or book your big group on a cruise ship and see only a handful of port cities and NEVER meet/eat/communicate.

We knew we wanted to drive, and drive a small camper van, for many important reasons. Biggest reason: when you drive, you can go anywhere. No limits.

We drove to the uppermost northwest corner of Scotland, rarely seeing a car on the road, and were rewarded with stunning scenery. To the Sognefjord in Norway, ditto. We drove down the only street in Lin, a tiny fishing village in Albania, until it ended, with a Dutch family also traveling in their small camper for a year, and parked and stayed for two days we'll always treasure, welcomed by the locals and offered coffee and local liqueur and fish caught right in front of our vans, while our daughter Nicole taught the local kids the West African song-dance "Che Che Kule" that she

learned at SMASH. We drove far enough south in Morocco to skirt the Sahara and watch with delight and awe as a herd of 50-60 camels crossed the road in front of us. We parked (free) on beaches in south Portugal that, if there were a hotel there, you'd pay hundreds per night for the spectacular location.

We drove with white knuckles and frantic navigation through the hearts of Paris, Oslo, Amsterdam, Athens, Vienna and Salzburg, Tangier and Marrakesh, Lisbon, Budapest, Berlin and Dresden and Cologne, Krakow, Edinburgh and Inverness, Monaco, Madrid and Valencia and Barcelona, Liverpool, Zagreb, Brussels and Bruges, Prague, Copenhagen, Tirana, Florence and Milan, Dubrovnik – pointing and oo-ing and ahh-ing all the way like, well, tourists. You can't get that from train to train, airport to airport. Your tour bus won't go down the streets we went down (some intentionally, some not – “There are no wrong turns,” we decided, just more places you've never been). And I wouldn't have tried it in a big camper.

By choosing the VW we upped the ante on freedom; it's not any wider or much longer than an average American car, about the size of a small van. I knew from experience, from my previous year-long European sojourn in '72-'73, when I bought one brand-new from the factory in Germany, that I did not want to drive a big motorhome around the ancient cities and narrow back roads of Europe.

It's outfitted inside with double beds above and below, stove, fridge (with freezer), sink with faucet, kitchen table, heater, lights, curtains, storage cabinets and closets – all quite compact, of course, but so cleverly designed to fit together and disappear when not in use.

The one important thing it lacks is a bathroom – simply no room. The bigger campers have them, and a lot more space and seating for guests and... everything. And that's big deal. Not having our own bathroom has meant we've had to get creative many times about where we stop for the night. But the Big Guys are wide and long, sometimes ridiculously so. Their occupants are forced to drive only big highways between campgrounds or wide-open free-camping sites, very limiting. Sometimes I've looked at them with envy and longing, especially when relaxing inside someone's. But many, many more times I've been in a driving or parking situation where I reminded myself, Sure am glad I went with a little guy!

When we pass other motorhomes we usually wave – we're all in the same club, chucking routine, homeland, family and friends for the adventure the open road offers. But when we pass a VW – those are really our people. And almost every time one of the mega-camper owners comes over to chat he has a gleam in his eye and looks White Rabbit up and down, peeks inside, and often confides something like, I had one just like this in '78.... Never should have let it go!

You can follow the Andrews family's daily blog at anandrewsadventure.blogspot.com