



MY SPACE

If you step into the van, you'd better learn the rules

IN MY 31 YEARS, I'VE LEARNED only three types of partners really matter: climbing partners, love partners, and the oft-underrecognized road-trip partners. In a perfect world, you'd have one person to fulfill all three roles—less logistical hassle that way, and less stuff to load in the car. But we don't live in a perfect world.

Last spring, after too many hours drooling over destination articles, I decided to get the hell out of my home—Boulder, Colorado. I hadn't been on a road trip that lasted more than 10 days in a decade and I was single, had a mobile job, and a triple set of cams. Moreover, long tired of stop-drop-rolling into a tent, I'd finally bowed to the Man and gotten a home on wheels: a white 1997 VW Eurovan, the climber's dream vehicle. This, in turn, made me the dream road-trip partner, as evidenced by the plethora of offers to join me.

After buying "Elvira," I learned everything I could about her within my first few days: how much water and propane she held (12 and 4.7 gallons, respectively), how to fill and drain the 21.1-gallon gas tank, and how to work the 12-volt auxiliary battery to run the heater and stereo, and power my laptop and coffee grinder. I practiced cornering and parking, passed people in the canyon with my V6 engine, and then pulled over to brew tea on the two-burner, 13,000-BTU propane stove. I dry-ran the pop-top/bed setup until I could go from parked to horizontal in two minutes. By August 29, when I officially hit the road, I was ready.

Cathy Flannagan, arguably the most psyched rock climber to voluntarily live in Anchorage, Alaska, was my first partner. We met in Leavenworth, Washington, but she didn't "move in" until Squamish. (I'd driven up from Colorado, and we'd stayed with friends for a few days before crossing into Canada.) As we readied to leave, Cathy dragged her bulging duffel into my rig; I wondered if it would be too much to ask that she strap it to the roof. By evening, I had my solution: van initiation. I laid down the law over sweet green curry and a dry pinot noir at the

Squamish campground.

"Can we talk a bit about living in the van?" I started benignly enough. Cathy has known me eight years and knew what I really meant was, "Now I'm going to tell you how we'll live in the van."

I outlined the dishwashing and sleeping arrangements, and made Cathy do a fire drill of turning the passenger seat around... twice. "It's not that I'm particular about this," I said, trailing off because we both knew I was lying.

The climbing end was easily sorted out: Cathy had the rack, I had the rope, and we would do *Freeway Lite*, a six-pitch 5.11 Chief classic. How we would properly dispose of coffee grounds, however, deserved more-serious scrutiny.

I HOPE I WASN'T ALWAYS LIKE THIS. However, as a kid at slumber parties, I remember being the one who waited until everyone else slept to roll out my sleeping bag. (I didn't want anyone stepping on its brown-and-green jungle print—their feet had different germs.) And though, as an adult, there was that one

tense conversation with a boyfriend, Lucien, after I reorganized a dishwasher he'd already loaded, and another awkward moment with my mother when I watched her shelve my books in non-alphabetical order, I like to think my pathological need for neatness has mellowed.

Still, any what-me-worry tolerance born of my years dirtbagging vanished with the first application of non-slip mesh to the van's laminate cupboards. Back home in Colorado, I'd also added a rug, a doormat, a paper-towel holder, and a teal teakettle... a place for everything and everything in its place. My systems were perfect, my organization supreme, and under my dictatorship, Cathy and I lived in perfect harmony. In fact, five days into our blissful cohabitation, I even had a chance to revel in our superior symbiosis after picking up two young guys hitchhiking at the Squamish grocery.

"I'm Dave," said the dark-haired one, once we were rolling.

"And I am John-o," said the blond, bowing his head. "Peace be with us today." Dave rolled his eyes.

I asked them if they'd been traveling together long.

"2,283 miles," said Dave.

Since they'd started in Alaska, Dave had listened to John-o bestow peace to all 24 of their rides. He'd had enough. When we dropped them off, I looked at Cathy and laughed. "Thank God we're not like them," I said.

IN NORMAL ROAD-TRIP LIFE, in a car and with a tent, you don't get to display your home-life neuroses quite so clearly. However, with a 17.5-square-foot home on wheels, it did not take long for these to crystallize. After a week with Cathy, I wanted to "talk" about everything: *Can we talk about what to do when the teakettle is boiling over? Can we talk about where to store the empty wine bottles? Maybe we should talk about how to plug in the iPod.* ...Fortunately, Cathy has

quirks of her own and countered by mandating we only use one sandwich apiece for the week. When I lost mine partway through, she made me wrap my ham-on-rye in toilet paper.

I rotated partners over the six-week Western odyssey, each greenhorn a fresh opportunity to explain the regulations. Ben plunged the coffee too soon and spilled it on the carpet, and Kristie reorganized my shelves while I waited in line with a dozen Japanese tourists to use the pit toilet at the Needles (California). But it was Corbin who finally held up the mirror to my obsessive behavior.

Corbin was not even a road-trip partner, technically. He was climbing with James, Kristie, and I—with only Kristie and I living in the van. However, snow covered the Needles campground, and Elvira had two perfectly nice extra seats—thus he and James joined the team for a long September night. Without a nod to the need for an initiation ritual, the two suddenly occupied “My Space.” Corbin, thinking he was being generous, even offered to do the dishes.

I watched in horror as he dripped water onto the rug, and sticky bits of rice went unnoticed on the plates. Nevermind that the kid free-solos 5.12—he couldn’t wash forks worth a damn. He didn’t understand soap application; he did not dry. My hands twitched in anticipation of taking over the task and doing it correctly. I saw James and Kristie, already indoctrinated into my particularities, looking on with morbid fascination.

“Uh... Corbin?” I asked.

“What up?” he replied.

Suddenly, I saw myself as an old-lady road tripper, living in the van with my 13 cats. I’d be parked in 29 Palms, a glow-in-the-dark No Trespassing sign taped to the sliding door, having installed a foot-pump

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to raise the pop-top. But wait, I’m allergic to cats...and maybe also to 29 Palms. I took a deep breath. “Peace be with us today,” I said.

Corbin, Kristie, and James stared at me. Corbin broke the silence first. “Right on, dude,” he said.

I would be lying if I said I didn’t rewash the dishes after everyone filed out that night. But I did so with a vow to start letting go. I took small steps at first: not restuffing my sleeping bag each morning, letting recycling and trash temporarily commingle, and walking inside the van with my shoes. By the end, I even left a yogurt-encrusted dish in the sink for two days. (Of course, I did power-wash the van back home.)

Still, I’d like to think I became a better road-trip partner. I even thought this until, two weeks later, when barely out of Boulder on a



two-day trip to Shelf Road, I turned down the music, cleared my throat, and asked my unsuspecting partner, “Can we talk about living in the van?”

Senior Contributing Editor Majka Burhardt is undergoing extensive meditation therapy in anticipation of a summer road trip.

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