

TRAVEL 2023



LETTER FROM...
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WHEN VANLIFE IS THE RIGHT LIFE



We've all seen the photos on Instagram. A beautifully built-out space, uncluttered, clean and bright, with clean-shaven and freshly washed inhabitants brewing coffee on a mountainside while they watch a glorious sunrise from their spacious abode, doors flung wide open. The pictures offer a sense of peace and belonging, space but connection.

I don't want to ruin the image for anyone because, as a full-time #vanlifer, I've had some unforgettable moments. However, in my experience over the last few years of living full-time in a van, the #vanlife

movement is built on an ideal perception rather than reality. Those Instagram shots are brief moments and more of an exception than the rule. The bubble burst comes when you realise that full-time vanlife quickly loses its glamour and becomes, well, just life.

Me and my Hustla

I never intended to live in my van (named Hustla) full-time. She was supposed to be for weekend getaways; a way to enable the lifestyle I wanted while working full-time at an office. I built out Hustla on my own. I did everything, from cutting holes for windows

▲ HUSTLING FOR AIRTIME

Liz Dengler kiting next to her partner's van, Atlantis. And right, the view from Hustla's back window; and Hustla camped up for the night
Photos: Gary Waterman / Liz Dengler

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to wiring electrical (dimmer lights, please) to running plumbing. I, quite literally, put my blood, sweat, and tears into the project. She is small but feisty, and when I finally moved out of the overpriced room I rented in Boulder, Colorado, she was ready to adventure. Of course, for the first year, when I still needed to show face at an office, half of our adventuring was finding stealth sleep spots around a town that hates vagrants.

When not living in Hustla, I was cosied up in my partner's "deluxe" Sprinter van, sharing 90 square feet with him and a dog. Three years of living in small quarters with two other beings is a challenge on its own. Throw in the breakdowns, the heater failing in winter, the water lines freezing, and the endless dust, and you will quickly learn what it really means to #vanlife.

Vanlife is not easy, and the challenges range from the mundane, like cold dishwater, to the extreme, like your engine dying. I speak on both from experience. Hustla, my precious home/car/identity, with nearly 250,000 miles on the engine, finally left me stranded in the mountains of Colorado – at 9,200 feet (2,800m) – at night at the start of winter. The #vanlife photo that influencers

will never post is heartbreak on the owner's face when a mechanic tells them they need to spend \$10,000US to replace an engine.

Home is home

So, why have I maintained the lifestyle for so long if it doesn't match the influencer pictures? Why take the risk of living in a van if it can spontaneously die on you?

Imagine rolling up to a camp spot at night at the edge of a cliff. In the morning, you're awoken by the light of dawn. Lifting your head from your pillow, you can see the windsocks showing it's blowing in perfectly, and there is already a pilot or two in the air soaring. You crawl out of bed, pull out your wing, launch into butter-smooth air, and watch the sunrise from your seat in the sky as the earth fills with golden light.

Are you not sold? How about an evening hike-and-fly soaring session? You launch into an epic glass-off and soar wingtip to wingtip with friends over the lakes and mountains of Colorado and watch the sunset. As the sun dips down, you land at your camp (read: van) to enjoy camaraderie before crawling into bed. The next day, the same site is forecast to work for the morning cook or a midday send.

These are the pilot "Instagram" moments that I #vanlife for. These moments keep me coming back again and again – refills for days. Sleeping at launches and LZs, or having my home and gear with me should I pass a site along the way, is the drive that keeps me on the road. As hard as it can be, the benefits of vanlife make the challenges worth tackling. The breakdowns, sleeping at truckstops, and the sweltering nights at summer comps in Chelan, Washington, all fade away when compared to the joys of waking up at launch on a flyable day.

Vanlife is a means to an end. It's not always pretty or comfortable, but home is home. My van, despite her current non-operable state, is part of me. My home and trusty vehicle, she's taken me and my paraglider on countless adventures. Without Hustla, I feel like I've lost a dear friend and part of my identity. As she sits in the shop, I contemplate: Do I fix her or move on to a new design? Either way, the one thing I know is that I love what vanlife offers. It enables my paragliding goals. Even as life evolves and lifestyles change, I don't think I'll ever completely be able to walk away. Whatever I decide, I'll see you on the road. 🏠

