

# Competitive camping

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Published April 2018 in *New Philosopher*, Issue 20, pp.109-111.

I recently fell down the social media rabbit hole that is the *Vanlife* hashtag. In it, girl-next-door models pose casually with expensive coffee pots in reclaimed-wood-lined campervans in front of iconic, North American national park views. Accompanying images depict the same women in bikinis doing yoga on beaches, soulful, woodsy men hunched over guitars, and, often, an aerial drone shot of the entirety of the (young, straight, white, het, cis, educated, beautiful, rich) couple's possessions neatly laid out around the van. These photos depict high-end wetsuits, surfboards, MacBooks, retro kitchen gear, and, always —apparently there is a *Vanlife* by-law about this— a southwest serape blanket. Ostensibly about minimalism and rejecting wage-slavery, *Vanlife* as constructed on social media is about yearning for a certain kind of high-end *stuff* and the financial wherewithal to roam freely.

The campervan I recently converted from a former electrician's van looks nothing like the *Vanlife* images. I built it myself, using YouTube instructional videos, grit and determination, sweat and tears. There are many rough edges. Its look is rather more crafty DIY and rather less *Monocle* magazine. And, just as my van looks different, I don't resemble the *Vanlife* models: I'm twice their age and I'm not half of a young, beautiful, straight, white couple.

But the differences go beyond aesthetics. My van is smaller than most campervans: I drive and park in a city and I need maneuverability rather than an apartment-like dwelling on wheels. Unlike many *Vanlifers*, I'm neither 'location independent' nor a trustafarian: I can only get so far on the weekends and I only have so much time off work. One day, one day, I want to take my van overland: around Australia and across Asia. One day, one day. But until then my little van gets me out of town. It gives me space to read, write, and think. It lets me access hiking trails, swim in wild rivers, and camp safely, as a woman alone, when my foot injury is playing up and I can't hike far enough out from a trailhead to feel safe in a tent. Put simply, my van is functional. It lets me *be*. But when I look at *#Vanlife*, I feel my van is lacking.

Like Diderot's new dressing gown, which caused him to find fault in his shabby old furnishings, my van's fairy lights only highlight how un-Instagrammable the rest of it is. Its walls are cheap marine ply, its floor is the vinyl I could afford, and overall it's really too small for a 'lifestyle interiors' shot. It's basically a bed and a kitchen. (Criminally, also, I don't have a serape.)

Luckily, I can look at this lacking lackadaisically. In Australia, there is a strong culture of grey nomads: people my age —as well as those much, much older— who traverse the country in all manner of homespun rigs including cars and tents as well as campervans (and also luxurious caravans and motorhomes, too). Many go alone or with dogs. Most do not care about design-ier-than-thou Instagram aesthetics. Many do not surf. None are bikini-clad *Vanlife* models.

*These* are the people that inspire me; *these* are my people, although they lack a hashtag. (Indeed, I suspect most grey nomads would not know what a hashtag actually is.)

The grey nomad aesthetic is practical: why have an achingly trendy, exclusive coffee pot when a \$10 Kmart one will do? Why put your budget into the look of your vehicle when its mechanical soundness will be what keeps you out of outback breakdowns? Please note that I'm not advocating meanness or petty cheapness here. It is good to buy the best stuff you can afford, but better to focus on the functional than the fabulous.

However, the *Vanlife* images are part of paradoxical consumerism. What looks like a drive for minimalism and an anti-consumerist ethos is, in fact, about curating and coveting a certain type of lifestyle. Like Corona touting Mexican beaches as 'where you'd rather be', *Vanlife* imaginaries construct a desirable, exclusive lifestyle of leisure. A powerful brand emerges. Dig only slightly deeper to find articles on how to monetize *Vanlife* blogging as a 'social media influencer' through advertising and corporate sponsorship.

The selling may thus be subtle, but *Vanlife* is a detriment to happiness through the constant rattling of the stick in the swill bucket (which is all advertising is). The point is to portray the desirable through a tasteful, airbrushed cyber-glow, to have consumers notice that their own lived realities are lesser, and to sell us stuff that will get us closer to the hashtagged imaginary. To make us want, first there is a need to create the perception of a problem with what we already have.

An apocryphal story from sales recruiting goes like this. In sales interviews, would-be salespeople are handed a pen, an iPhone, or sunglasses –whatever is on the table– and told, 'sell me this'. The beginners talk up the attributes of the thing: 'the sunglasses are polarized; they look good on you'. The intermediate salesperson asks the would-be buyer what she needs and addresses that need. 'You need sunglasses that say "stylish" on the weekend and "corporate" during the week? Here's why these ones work.' But here's the technique for the advanced salesperson. Pick up the iPhone and shine its torch in the customer's eyes. 'Now, see? You need sunglasses. Want to buy these ones?' The most effective sales technique is not to talk up the product or identify a need. You must *create* the need.

This is what *Vanlife* does. It sets up a yearning for something few of us will ever have: the fantasy lifestyle of free roaming with a perfectly airbrushed partner, a campervan straight out of a design magazine, and the financial and emotional wherewithal to weather life's responsibilities and curveballs without a regular source of income. This is very far from most people's reality of working and adulting, and holding it together when life gives us lemons. Those clean, Scandinavian lines come to symbolize the privileges of a leisured class of beautiful people traveling indefinitely. We admire them. And we envy them.

But envy, with its foundational perception of lacking, is the opposite of happiness, a cornerstone of which is flow. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (Hungarian

psychologist and the bane of spell-checkers everywhere) writes that flow is 'being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost.' For me, flow emerges when I potter about in camp, setting out my little van's awning and gathering together the morning necessities: the kettle and cup, the coffee, the milk. In China, you see Taoist monks practicing flow. Often, this means doing beautiful calligraphy or bird-flower paintings using water as 'paint' on paving stones. The point is to be absolutely in the moment rather than producing something perfect for posterity. To photograph these creations is to miss the point entirely.

We need to start recognizing the difficulty of being in 'flow', and of thus finding happiness, if our focus is on wanting what we don't have. 'Flow' is also hard to inhabit if, staging a seemingly casual selfie, we're mainly imagining how the scene will be seen. In this way, *Vanlife* problematically puts happiness on a pedestal marked 'if only I had...' or 'if only I were more...'. Paradoxically, the campervan, which is literally a vehicle about minimalism and getting closer to nature, has become a metaphorical vehicle for making us want the trappings of how the beautiful people live on Instagram.

This is not an argument against simplicity (although note that Marie Kondo got rich from sparking joy; it is a paradox that even simplicity itself can now be monetized). Instead, this is a call for moment-to-moment van living. Henry Thoreau famously pared back his world to Walden Pond, John Steinbeck lived in a DIY campervan as he travelled the USA, and Gandhi's autobiography speaks deeply to the theme of simplicity. None subscribed to *Vanlife*. None needed to. All found gentle, meditative happiness in valuing what they had. All their writings have absorbed the gas-lit evenings of their authors' slower paced lives. All found flow.

Instead of the paradoxical consumerism implicated in the *Vanlife* hashtag and the wealth, leisure, and taste it holds up as desirable, we should celebrate those who find happiness in their doing and their being: people who may not be young, white, straight, model-like, or coupled, but who nevertheless find joy and flow in hiking, river swimming, or kicking back in nature with a glass of wine and a good book. This has a different ethos entirely. It is about hanging out with Mother Nature and being in the moment. It is about enjoyment and contentment: having enough but most importantly *being* enough.