**Road Trip Diaries**

*Four girls, one Harry Styles cardboard cutout (2013 era), and a blue camper van with the fifty states embossed on the side in varying shades of spray paint. What could possibly go wrong?*

By Katherine Burns

At some point the security team at Hoover Dam realized that my friends and I weren’t a threat. Maybe it was the coloring books, maybe it was the unicorn pillow pet, or maybe it was the folded Harry Styles cardboard cut-out in the backseat. If a life-sized Harry Styles isn’t in your road trip essentials list, I’d urge you to reconsider. It’s a great conversation starter. Whipping him out at state lines to take photos, or bringing him to campsite fires made us some new friends. Then again, it also attracted stares. It was really a roll of the dice.

Our road trip was one of shenanigans, goofy laughs and games of group Solitaire and M.A.S.H. It was myself, my two roommates Abigail and Emma, and our friend Frances. We were recent college graduates from Loyola University Maryland, and new van lifers.

Our bright blue camper van ambled through to the parking lot of Hoover Dam, attracting attention from fellow tourists and “Dam” workers. We’d rented from Escape Campervans, picking up the vehicle at our first stop in Phoenix. The van had each of the United States written on it, from headlights to bumper. There had already been many awkward run-ins at gas stations, where people wanted to know if we were visiting all 50 states. We usually said yes, but sometimes we were honest, instead. In truth, our trip was a Phoenix-to-Seattle adventure with a bunch of stops along the way.

My only previous knowledge of Hoover Dam was from *The Titan’s Curse*—the third book in Rick Riordan’s Percy Jackson series. I didn’t want to base my first impression on a fictional battle between mythical creatures, so I was excited to see the Dam and create my own impression of the place.

“Think Nic Cage could make that jump?” I asked Emma as we walked onto the bridge that overlooked the dam’s massive reservoir. I was referencing the epic scene from *National Treasure*, in which Cage’s character Ben Gates jumps into the Hudson River to escape the FBI.

“Yes,” Emma said, half-seriously. Because, you know, what can’t Nic Cage do?

Hoover Dam was an impromptu stop on our road trip. We wanted to take a few pictures and make some “dam” jokes and puns (“Dam, Harry Styles looks good in this landscape!”). Our true destination for that night was Death Valley, California.

After filling up our water containers at a town civic center, we headed out to camp on BLM land. For those not in the know, BLM stands for Bureau of Land Management, which is a facet of the United States Department of Interior that is responsible for millions of acres of public land. We stayed on both BLM land and at private campgrounds on our adventure; camping on BLM land allowed us to have some of the most beautiful nature-based experiences of our trip, while camping at established campgrounds allowed us to sometimes have bathrooms and, on occasion, showers.

Death Valley lived up to the charm of its name. It was stupid hot. The wind was roaring. At our campsite, it seemed like there was nobody around for miles. I made an eventually successful attempt to cook pasta on the propane stove while the wind whipped around us, and we shoveled some of the delicious ratatouille that Emma had made the night before on top.

With dinner successfully made and consumed, it was time to get some rest. But because it was so windy, Abigail and Emma were afraid to open the rooftop tent that they’d been using throughout the course of the trip. We all crammed into the bed that Frances and I had been sharing inside the van, feet sticking in the air. I think I ended up sleeping on top of the suitcases in the trunk at one point. We laughed our asses off, though.

We were camping outside of Zion National Park one night when we met a guy who was also camping in an Escape Campervan, but instead of a cute travel motif, his was covered with a massive painting of a sword-fighting knight. It looked like Lancelot.

“Wanna trade?” he shouted.

It was a firm no.

He introduced himself as Dan, but told us that his friends called him “Dancelot.” I really didn’t think anyone called him that, but I appreciated the play on words.

We were dubious about this camping spot because of a tip we had gotten from the Campendium app. For those of you who are unfamiliar, Campendium offers updates and tidbits about RV parks and campgrounds across the United States. This particular campground was on BLM land, but that designation was only applicable if you drove past a certain point. We had driven along windy roads, past desert hills, and past other campers and their vehicles, until we’d reached a point where we could not take the van any farther. The person who’d left the tip on Campendium had stated that they were booted off of our campsite by the police at around 9 p.m.

We did debate leaving. We truly did. We packed up the entirety of the van, and we said goodbye to Dancelot & Co. The idea of driving the van around like this in the dark didn’t seem optimal, and we didn’t want to have to scramble to find another campsite on such short notice, but we headed out anyway. On our way out, we ran into a park ranger type. Honestly, I’m not even sure if he worked at Zion, but he looked official. He assured us that he’d seen people camping in this spot many times before. So, to minimize hassle, we decided to stay.

We were deep in a campfire discussion about the “Now That's What I Call Music!” album compilations (Harry Styles was oddly quiet during this conversation—probably just playing it cool) when the cops pulled up. They very kindly rattled off some campsites that we could go to, which Emma and Abigail quickly took note of and, once again, we piled into the van and got moving. We skirted through some more winding roads and desert hills before we arrived at the new campsite. Upon arrival, I immediately leaped out of the van because I had to go to the bathroom. Long story short, I ended up walking into a cactus, and getting needles stuck in my feet. My foot stung and itched, but I was able to push the needles out without leaving a lasting impact, and I managed to get to sleep. And, cactus and all, waking up surrounded by desert beauty the next morning was much preferable to the Walmart parking lot we’d planned on sleeping in if we hadn’t been able to find this place. Note: you don’t necessarily know if last-minute campsites will pan out, so it’s always good to have a plan B!

If I were to give any suggestions, advice, or words of wisdom to first-time van lifers, it would be to embrace every second—every adventure, every landscape and every setback. Although it’s inevitable that shit will hit the fan (Frances and I almost hit the ceiling every time the van went over a bump!), it’s truly a unique experience.

If you’re packing for a van life experience, I would recommend taking a notebook for journaling, a book or two for reading, a pack of cards, and a good selection of gas station snacks. And of course, a cardboard Harry Styles.

The GasBuddy app is your friend when it comes to scouting out cheap gas prices. Campendium is a trusty guide for camp spots and RV parking. But what becomes most valuable on a trip like this are the people you choose to surround yourself with. I’m lucky enough to have amazing friends, and being able to go on a trip like this, living in such close quarters, was definitely the bonding experience of a lifetime.

This story is featured in the October/November issue of [ROVA Magazine](https://rovamag.com/new-products/rova-adventure-twenty-sevenoctobernovember-2021).