

New Hampshire — where you can RV like you're out West

By Kathy Shiels Tully
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

A five-week RV trip out West was a trip of a lifetime for me and my family that opened our eyes to all the magnificent adventures waiting for us back home in New England.

Gorges, majestic mountains, caves. Stunning lakes, magnificent waterfalls, bears. A breathtaking aerial ride up a mountain, another heart-stopping mountain climb by train. A hot air balloon festival. Historic towns and national parks. Our Western adventures were all right here, throughout New England.

Using our trip as a guide, here's a New Hampshire-focused "Out West" RV trip along Interstate 93, clustered around three RV campgrounds.

GO CAVING

Out West: We went caving in Minnetonka Caves, Idaho.

N.H.: Lost River Gorge and Boulder Caves, North Woodstock.

No matter your age, there's adventure at Lost River: caves, a gorge, a waterfall, fauna, and wildlife to spot as you walk a boardwalk maze that leads you down and up and around the gorge. There's mining, too, for a young audience. Just don't get caught in the "Lemon Squeeze." 1712 Lost River Road, 603-745-8031, www.findlostriver.com

HIKE UP

Out West: We hiked a few mountains in Utah's Zion National Park, in more than 100-degree heat.

N.H.: Cannon Mountain, Franconia Notch State Park. Not only is it cooler, the views from Cannon's 4,080-foot summit are stunning. On a clear day, you can see four states' mountaintops and Canada. 603-823-8800, www.cannonmt.com/hiking.html

RIDE A GONDOLA

Out West: Telluride's gondola in Colorado.

N.H.: Cannon's Aerial Tramway. What better way to see the sights than from the air? In under 10 minutes, Cannon's 80-passenger cable car ascends to the 4,080-foot summit. Or hike up and ride down. Don't rush. Pack a picnic. There's much to see from the 360-degree observation deck. 603-823-8800, www.cannonmt.com/cannontram.html

TAKE A TRAIN UP A MOUNTAIN

Out West: Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, Colorado.

N.H.: Mount Washington Cog Railroad. Chug up to the summit of Mount Washington, the highest peak in New England, at 6,288 feet. It's a thrilling ride. *Base*



MOTURIS RV AND CAMPING WORLD

Wherever you go in an RV, out West or New Hampshire, you can pull over and gaze.

Station Road, Marshfield Station, 603-278-5404, www.thecog.com

PLAY IN A PICTURESQUE LAKE

Out West: Jenny Lake, Jackson Hole, Wyo.

N.H.: Echo Lake, Franconia Notch. Pedalboat, kayak, canoe, swim, or fish at the 25-acre Echo Lake. As you boat around, you see Bode Miller's beloved ski trails sloping right to the lake's edge, in the "notch" created by the Kinsman and Franconia ranges. *Cannon Mountain, 603-823-8800, www.cannonmt.com*

TAKE IN A HOT AIR BALLOON FESTIVAL

Out West: Panguitch Valley Balloon Rally, Panguitch, Utah.

N.H.: Hillsborough Balloon Festival & Fair.

Mark your calendar for mid-July, so you don't miss this annual event, only 30 minutes from Concord. *West Main Street, 603-464-5858, www.balloonfestival.com*

VISIT A PARK

Out West: Centers at Bryce, Zion, the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone National Park.

N.H.: Franconia State Park Visitors Center at the Flume Gorge. Before or after you explore the Flume, wander around the visitors center. Watch a 20-minute movie about the park, and enjoy views of Mount Liberty and Mount Flume. *Route 3, Lincoln, 603-745-8391, www.nhstateparks.com/franconia*

NO BISON, BUT BEARS

Out West: Bison roam freely

across roads into Yellowstone.

N.H.: Clark's Trading Post. I have had a black bear cross my path while driving home from Santa's Village in Jefferson. I prefer the trained black bears at Clark's. Since 1949, the Clark family has held countless bear shows for visitors to the White Mountains. Besides the bears, you can re-create almost an entire "out West" RV trip here, there's so much to do: a train ride, mining, a stroll down a Western-style downtown. A two-story rock-climbing tower, water blaster boats, and a new Segway park and "safari" keep teens occupied. *Route 3, Lincoln, 603-745-8913, www.clarktradingpost.com*

WALK UP A RIVER

Out West: The Narrows, in Zion National Park.

If you go . . .

Lost River Valley Campground
North Woodstock, N.H.
800-360-5678
www.lostriver.com

A private, wooded family campground with sites along the river. One mile down the hill from Lost River Gorge.

Echo Lake RV Park

Cannon Mountain
Franconia, N.H.
603-823-8800
www.reserveamerica.com
This is an RV-only campground, right in the Echo Lake parking lot, located at the northern end of Franconia Notch State Park.

Country Bumpkins Campgrounds and Cabins

Lincoln, N.H.
603-745-8837
www.countrybumpkins.com
The campground also has two travel trailer rentals, a cabin-like option, if you want to "test drive" RV camping. Close to Clark's Trading Post.

N.H.: The Flume Gorge.

We walked knee-deep in The Narrows, but at the Flume, you can keep your shoes dry, either walking through the Gorge, or leisurely on the boardwalk that meanders up, down, and around for a 2-mile loop, past waterfalls, covered bridges, and glacial boulders. *Route 3, Lincoln, 603-745-8391, www.nhstateparks.com/franconia, www.cannonmt.com/flumegorge.html*

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First time in an RV? First, prepare yourself

A home on wheels. That's what it's like to travel in a recreational vehicle.

A few years ago, our family took a five-week trip out West, our first RV experience. It was my husband's dream, so I agreed, but for months before we left, I secretly dreaded it.

I came back hooked. We all did.

Like tent camping, an RV puts you close-up to nature, while packing the creature comforts of home: beds, bathroom, a kitchen, stove, fridge, microwave, even air conditioning and heat, and a TV and DVD player. Once avid tent campers, my husband and I found we liked those creature comforts. Our kids did, too.

Many campgrounds throughout New England welcome RVs (or motorhomes). Scott Patsfield, owner of Northeast RV Rentals, says that 80 percent of his RV rentals in New England are for three to four days, up to one week. Joe Laing, marketing director of El Monte RV, headquartered in Sante Fe Springs, Calif., says the company's Boston rentals are up 38 percent over last year.

Interested? Before you roll consider these tips:

Most New England campgrounds run May-Columbus Day. Book early, advises Julie Daly, station supervisor of Moturis of Boston in Rowley. By April is good, but reserve even sooner if you're planning to travel over Memorial Day, July 4th, or Labor Day, she says. Too many families wait until school

closes, which is too late.

Compare plans. Three major names for RV rentals include: Cruise America, El Monte, and Moturis RV and Camping World. In New England, there are many "mom and pop" shops, such as Northeast RV Rentals, Forest Marine & RV Center, and New England RV Rental. Search "hot deals" listed on websites. Most rental plans include: insurance, where, if you were in an accident, you'd pay a deductible; 24-hour roadside assistance to answer technical questions by phone; and vehicle assistance, if you have a flat tire, need a tow, etc. Your auto insurance will not cover RV rentals.

Find and reserve the right RV campsite. What's important to you? A simple campsite, with a three-way hook-up (for water, electricity, and sewer), a picnic table, and fire ring? Or do you long for a swimming pool? Tennis courts? Lakes, rivers, and ponds for swimming, fishing, and boating? Many campground facilities include game rooms, playgrounds, Wi-Fi, and a laundry room, but ask.

Linda Lawless of Brockton, who's traveled by RV with her husband, Jim, over 40 years, says, "It's good to start locally and not go too far away." They've RV'd brookfront at Lost River Family Campground in North Woodstock, N.H., and canalside at Scusset Beach State Reservation on Cape Cod. For five-star camping, they recommend Normandy Farms Family



MOTURIS RV AND CAMPING WORLD

Spend time outside your RV where you stay — at the picnic table, exploring the campground, around the fire at night.

Camping Resort in Foxborough, a luxury camping destination between Boston and the Cape.

If driving an RV intimidates you, consider renting one that stays parked at the campsite at Adventure Bound Campgrounds, in either North Truro or Ashland, N.H. This cabin-like option conveys a sense of RV living without having to drive one.

Visit an RV salesroom or camping show. Before our first trip, we visited Moturis RV and Camping World in Rowley. After spending time inside the 25-foot RV my husband had planned to book, we realized we wanted a little more space, and, for a bit more money, rented a

28-footer. Or attend a local RV & camping show.

Decide who's driving. To rent an RV, you must be 25 years or older, have a valid driver's license and a major credit card. Additional drivers must be present at the vehicle pickup. Let co-pilots help you back into parking spots.

Don't be scared by the size of the RV. It's comparable to driving a U-Haul, and after a while, handles like a car or mini-van, says Lisa Shaughnessy, RV rental manager of Forest Marine & RV Center in Tyngsboro, but with even more visibility.

Craig Schwarze of Melrose advises first-timers to make really wide turns and to use the mirrors. But don't park in cit-

ies, his wife, Kathleen, adds. Park outside the city and take public transportation.

You want to follow "truck routes," says Jim Lawless. Consider RV resources, like a GPS made for RVing or use "Trailer Life RV Park and Campground Directory," the "bible" of experienced RVers, he says.

Map your trip. Estimate your daily and total mileage. How close is the campground to attractions, parks, and sites you plan to visit? Most rental plans are based on either 100 miles a day or a package, like 500 miles for the entire trip. It'll cost you if you go over. Balance out "big driving" days with longer stays in one spot. Buy two 500-mile packages, for example, if you plan to drive 1,000 miles total. Build in time upfront — for getting your rental, checking the operations out, and packing, and for flexibility to tweak your plan, if you find something interesting.

Involve the kids. Kids love that if they're hungry, need a nap or rest stop, you can park the RV. My kids even enjoyed cleaning it. It was like a blow-up dollhouse. Sleeping in the queen-size "loft" above the driver's seat is a thrill; also sleeping on, what had been at dinner time, the kitchen table. If this is your kids' first experience camping, think about packing sleeping bags and a tent, says Eric Nyland of Melrose, whose family of four has RV'd from Camden, Maine, to Napa, Calif.

Rent the movie. Before you leave, watch "RV" with Robin Williams. (Don't let the scene of emptying the "dirty water" scare you.) Avoid "cabin fever" by giving everyone their personal space. Stay outside the RV as much as possible — explore the campgrounds, eat, read, play games at the picnic table outside, sit around the fire at night.

Practice driving and parking. Before leaving the rental company's parking lot, have each driver practice driving and parking. Or pick your RV up one day earlier, suggests Rooker Price of Melrose. Before taking his family of four on a five-day trip to the Cape, he parked the RV in his driveway to go over the operations, load it with gear, bikes, chairs, etc. After letting his twin daughters sleep overnight in the RV, they couldn't wait to get on the road in the morning.

Check pet policies. Traveling with pets is easy with an RV, as long as you clean up after them. A cleanup fee may be included in your rental policy. Check if your campground is pet-friendly, too.

Seek advice from RVers, your rental company, and campground staff. Rental company staff are happy to recommend local attractions and driving loops for first-timers. Campground neighbors and staff, too, seem to go out of their way to help RVers.

KATHY SHIELS TULLY

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