

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

LEARNING HOW TO LIVE IN A VAN



Home away from home

“One person in a van is a tramp, but two is an adventure.”

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY **SARAH STIRLING**

I'LL ALWAYS remember the day Sam said that. It was an unlikely friendship — he was a recovering drug addict who liked his space, I was a clean-living outdoor girl hitching in his van — but somehow it worked. We were both sat on a wall, sketching. I was drawing the beach. Sam was facing the other way, resolutely sketching some bins.

We'd met in Raglan, New Zealand, one of those surf towns where life seems too perfect to be real. Everyone was happy and nice. The baristas were dedicated. The surf was always on. The food was organic. Soulful bands jammed the nights away in small bars. I walked the sun-soaked streets barefoot and blissful, till Sam arrived.

A postie from Nottingham, he'd never left the city until, one day, he'd got addicted to selling stuff. He'd even eBayed his doors and carpets. When he owned nothing except a guitar, on which he could only play 'Where is my mind' by the Pixies, he'd set off abroad for the first time and got hooked on budget travelling.

At first we hadn't hit it off. He later confessed I'd seemed "a bit stuck up". I'd thought he was a people-pleaser. When I

coaxed that story out of him, though, I was impressed and amused in equal measure, and he said: "I just had my first real conversation in Raglan." I sat quietly, realising that I had, too, and that I was young and full of myself sometimes.

Sam was gangly like a spider on a surfboard, and he behaved like a drug — pulling you high as a kite, laughing, or down with his grumps. Samba music always flows gently through Raglan. Once he drowned it out with Iron Maiden on the car stereo, then stalled the engine. "Put your shades on," he instructed. "We can pull this off."

For Sam, Raglan was too perfect. "I feel like I'm in a theme park," he'd declared, and left for Australia, to buy his first van. His words broke the spell for me, too. It rained torrentially for a month. Then I booked a ticket for Australia as well. When I landed I received this text:

“Hi Sarah, sorry driving to Wollongong as Sydney is doing my head in as it's to busy. Have fun on your travels!”

Panicking, I wheedled Sam round, and he arrived, arms dangling, smiling, apologetic: he'd arrived to pick me up, then lost his temper because there was nowhere to park in Sydney. Then I nearly ruined it. I wanted a surfboard. "Let's have a policy of honesty," he said. "I hate shopping, and I don't want to stay here tonight. If you pay for my night in a hostel, I'll wait for you." I smiled. I like honesty. Now we were really getting somewhere.

In the end I found a board quickly, and we headed up the coast, then turned off for Palm Beach because it sounded nice. Sam creaked open the back doors of his van and got a simple gas-powered hob out. It was always different, but that night the setting sun was tucked in pink candyfloss, and the dark sea was shimmering with pale blue sparkles.

We brewed tea in a saucepan, added cartons of UHT milk nicked from a cafe, and it was somehow a lot more exciting that way than made in a kettle indoors. "I have a tin of steak and vegetables I can share with you," said Sam. "And some mushrooms. I call this dish 'rubbish in a can with veg.'"

"Cool," I said, smiling at Australia, Sam and



Determined to master those green waves!



Sarah hangs her washing in a tree



"Where is my mind?"



Morning coffee while checking out the waves

the world in general. The van didn't have a fridge, but things taste better outdoors, so it didn't matter that we weren't eating à la carte. Then he went for a moonlit walk over the rocks while I ran, swam, and started sketching. When Sam came back he joined me, and had something to say.

"It was fun on my own," he said. "I'd play some guitar, drink a bottle of wine, pass out; you know, it was quite entertaining. But I'm glad you're here. Sometimes I just get wound up and want to leave on my own. Anyway," he added, grinning. "I've been thinking and realised that one person in a van is a tramp, but two is an adventure."

Already slipping into a natural rhythm, I'd grown tired as the sun sank and the air chilled. Sam settled to play guitar and smoke on a blue-striped deckchair. I was just thinking that I wouldn't be able to sleep in a mini-van with no curtains and Sam playing the same song over and over, then I woke, refreshed, with the sun.

Together, we learnt how to live life at its simplest, and how to compromise, as we surfed our way from Sydney to the Great Barrier Reef, parking on beaches. I'd thought van life meant you had to be dirty, but there

were always showers and toilets on the bigger ones. I had no mirror, and went au naturel. We only had one set of cutlery, so we'd take it in turns with the fork and knife or the spoon. Breakfast was interesting.

I was desperate to learn to surf, but Sam preferred just bobbing on his board out back, because everyone was equal there. Then he'd read *Watership Down* and make sure I didn't drown. He loved "Checkin' up on them rabbits," and when I got out, he'd always say, "You'll never guess what that Clover's been up to now!"

We hardly spent any money. Time passes differently in a van. Days whiled away gently. At night I'd dream of the sea, and at daybreak it would lap me back in, pink-tinted, sometimes with dolphins. That was ten years ago, and I remember it all in the detail you preserve when you live slowly but fully. Since then, I'd thought often about getting a van.

Then, last year, suddenly it felt like the right time. A friend asked me to spend a month in a van in the Pyrenees, running and climbing and wild swimming. While soaking up the arid cliffs and green mountains and rivers of Spain, I remembered how fun and free it is to holiday that way. At the end of the trip, I asked for her advice. She wrote:

VW Transporter: more expensive than other makes, but drive like cars and keep their value.

Tailgate: useful for sheltering under when cooking, and hanging a shower from.

2.5 litre engine: to power you up steep mountain roads.

Look for one with less than 100,000 miles on the clock and a good service history.

Tinted windows allow light in while maintaining privacy.

That evening, my last in the Pyrenees, we drove past a van with a 'For Sale' sign on it. It was a VW Transporter with tinted windows and a tailgate. It was even red, my favourite colour. The price was 4800 euros. All the similar ones we'd looked at on Autotrader that day had been between 6000 and 10,000.

The door was opened by a friendly English lady, and a fat golden retriever with a teddy bear in his mouth. The van had a full service history, and had been well looked after for most of its life by her engineer husband. My friend needed to hit the road. "You can stay with us while we sort out the paperwork," offered the English couple.

Things just got real. I was going to have to learn how to drive a left-hooker across France, and then figure out how to convert the thing...

HOW TO CONVERT YOUR FIRST VAN

If you're a glamper, this conversion isn't for you. If, like me, you'd prefer to leave normal life behind and get back to basics on van holidays, well then listen up! The whole job took us two long weekends.

THE INFORMATION swirled and tea-stained around me on the floor is gold. Several times I've asked a vannie for conversion tips. It's like asking someone for directions, except much worse. Hours later, I'd have forgotten everything except the last three instructions. This time I've managed to write it all down. It's a treasure map to portable adventures.

We started by measuring the van, then went to a DIY store to buy the stuff needed for insulation, varnish and painting; to a timber merchant to buy the wood for the wall panels, floor, ceiling and furniture; to a fabric shop for the curtain material, and ordered the things needed for the electrics online. Then we arranged to borrow a friend's workshop.



1 Insulation stage. For this you will need:

Several reels of builder's roof flashing. Enough loft insulation to cover the ceiling and walls, and double the amount of thermal reflective insulation (a.k.a. tinfoil bubblewrap). Heatproof spray glue (so everything doesn't fall off!).



2 Strip everything off and add roof flashing

Starting from behind the front seats, peel off all the plastic panels and strip anything else like seatbelts, then sweep thoroughly. Builder's roof flashing is great for dampening noise! Liberally stick strips across the floor and wheel arches.



3 Tinfoil bubblewrap and loft insulation

Stick the former to the walls and ceiling wherever you'll wood-panel. It repels moisture and reflects heat. Next glue on a layer of loft insulation (synthetic won't go mouldy if damp) then add another layer of tinfoil bubblewrap.



4 Floor, walls and roof. You will need:

Enough 6mm plywood to cover the floor and walls. Because we have windows, we panelled from below these to the floor, and left bare metal above. Tape measure, pen, paper, calculator, saw, self-tapping screws (these create their own hole), screwdriver, lino.



5 Floor and walls

Stick two layers of tinfoil bubble wrap on the floor. Cut plywood panels to fit floor and walls, and attach with self-tapping screws. You can buy ready made 'ply lining kits' for most vans on the internet if you prefer. We then added lino and varnished the walls; some prefer stretch carpet.



6 The roof

We cut tongue and groove to fit the roof and screwed it up with self-tappers. It was a bit fiddly, but looks great. Don't forget to cut out holes for the lights if you are putting downlighters in, and wait till these are wired in (step 10) before screwing the roof in place.