

FRIENDSHIP ON THE ROAD

Article and photos by Julie Bennett #121165



Building a Community

One of my biggest concerns about full-time RVing was how I would cope with not having my friends around. I'm an extrovert and I love being with people, so I was worried about potentially losing connections with my friends back home. I also wondered about how my husband, Marc, and I would build quality friendships on the road if we were constantly moving.

The thought of leaving behind our home, friends, family and neighborhood communities to head off into the unknown was a big concern for both of us. We like to surround ourselves with people who share our values. We seek out people we enjoy getting

to know beyond mere surface-level chitchat and enjoy exchanges that are interesting and meaningful.

To be honest, my biggest fear was the prospect of having the same boring conversation over and over with different people everywhere we

went. You know, conversations with questions such as: Where are you from? What do you do? Where have you been? The thought of that kind of repetitive and uninspiring encounter left me feeling empty.

While social chitchat obviously has its place, we both receive more enjoyment from asking, and answering, "meaty" and thoughtful questions that can lead to a more authentic and in-depth dialog. We've been pleased to find plenty of those great encounters since hitting the road.

Continued »»

Previous page: Marc and Julie of RVLove.com enjoying a campfire with friends in Bar Harbor, Maine. Left to right: Marc and Julie Bennett, Jen Nealy (nealysowheels.com), Nancy Walters, Deas Nealy, Ann and Dave Ducharme and Betsy Dresser (rvagogo.blogspot.com). **Below:** "We met JC and Angie at a café in Bar Harbor, Maine, in August 2015 and have since reconnected with them in Key West and Colorado Springs." **Julie**



Building Connections

We quickly learned that when you're an RVer, strangers don't stay strangers very long because they're people like us. They're choosing to live the RV lifestyle and to engage in a community that fosters openness, generosity and trust. It took about three or four months of full-time RVing before we fully recognized the potential to build more than fleeting connections. With a little time, patience and a willingness to put ourselves out there, we began to open up conversations on a variety of subjects. We engaged in communications that opened the door to knowing people on a deeper and more interesting level.

Somehow and somewhere along the road, we found our tribe. A few of these connections have evolved into, ongoing friendships. There are now several people that we continue to stay in touch with along the way.

Broader Network of Friends

We love that our new network of friends includes couples and solo travelers and families, ranging in age from their 20s to their 70s. Their backgrounds, careers and life circumstances vary widely, opening up our

world to people we would never have otherwise had the opportunity to meet.

We learn and grow from every encounter and truly feel like we have friends almost everywhere we go. We make plans to meet up with them at various places around the country and find it easy to pick up right where we left off, or start a whole new thread of conversation.

Of course, we also enjoy the occasional light chitchat that we encounter with people whose paths we may never cross again. These meetings are without expecting, wanting or needing it to be any more than what it is—a moment in time. But we found that even some of those conversations can be enriching because we meet so many interesting people.

Common Ground

It wasn't long before we began to realize we had more common ground with the people we meet on the road than we ever imagined. We can easily bond with others who've embarked on our similar nomadic journey and have stepped off the treadmill of life, taken a risk and made a huge life change.

There's an instant sense of camaraderie among RVers. We aren't

stressed out by busy schedules, work commutes or a long list of household chores, so we take the time to stop and say hello. We invite people to happy hour and, instead of people only talking about getting together sometime (as often happened in our "old life"), RVers make dinner plans that actually happen. We never really know if or when we'll see them again. So, we seize the moment for a fascinating opportunity to get to know people from all walks of life that we would never have otherwise had the good fortune to meet. In the RV world, the playing field is leveled somewhat, with less obvious class distinctions compared to what you'd find living in the suburbs or cities. Certainly, they exist, but not nearly as obviously as in a stick-and-brick environment in neighborhoods.

Helping Each Another

RVers share the common ups and downs that accompany life on the road, and we eagerly swap stories, tips and experiences to help one another. We feel safe among like-minded souls, and trust is more easily built. Oftentimes we'll share stories and experiences with relative strangers

more easily than we would with others we've known for years. It's easier to be your authentic self because you're not trying to fit in with people's preconceived notion of who you have historically been. You can relax and simply be "you."

RVers tend to be adventurous in spirit and willingly share tales from their own journey. Because we're all constantly traveling, we love to share recommendations and tips for our favorite places, RV parks, recommended routes, hikes and even restaurants to try when we visit new areas. With access to travel experts at every campground, we're covered. It can make travel planning so much easier.

The RVing community gives us ideas for new places to go and things to see and do. For example, we would never have known about the big Solarfest event of 2017 if fellow RVers hadn't mentioned it on our social media pages. That chance comment led to our signing up to co-host the Xscapers Convergence with another couple in Madras, Oregon, in August. (See page 44 for more information about Xscapers Convergences.)

Of course, RVers tend to follow the weather, so we'll catch up with our RVing friends in the North, during summer and reconnect down South in the winter. Then we'll congregate in the Southwest or Southeast, as hun-

dreds of thousands of snowbirds do in the colder months.

Back in our stick-and-brick home, winter was a time for us to hibernate and snuggle up watching movies under a blanket, waiting for the snow to melt. But these days, winter has become an incredibly social time for us, with so many of our RVing friends right at our doorstep. Now that the weather is much warmer, it's easier to be out and about, taking part in activities and connecting with people instead of staying inside.

Patience, Explore and Connect

Of course, like anything in life, we'll get out of our RVing community what we put into it. If you're the type of person who sits at home waiting for people to come to you, it's probably not going to happen. But if you are willing to put in a little time and energy, you'll be rewarded with an amazing new community of like-minded people. People who share a sense of spirited freedom and fun

Remember, they also had the courage to radically change their lives and head out, travel and explore.

It takes time to build deep and lasting relationships, so be patient. Don't be afraid to initiate a conversation and explore new ways to connect with others while out on the road. Soon enough, you'll find your "tribe." 🚐

Marc and Julie Bennett are full-time RVers and content creators who live, work and travel full-time from their motorhome while exploring North America and the world. They provide inspiration and practical advice to empower, entertain and educate others considering the RV lifestyle. You can learn more about Marc and Julie at their website www.RVLove.com and YouTube Channel RVLoveTV.



It's a big step to leave behind a network of family and friends that you've known for decades in order to hit the road and embrace the RV lifestyle. Pulling up the anchors can be a little scary, but heading off into the unknown can be less daunting if you know how to start building a new support network of friends while on the road.

THE NEXT PAGE LISTS 10 WAYS WE'VE FOUND TO MAKE NEW FRIENDS.

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10 WAYS TO BUILD YOUR RV

By Julie and Marc Bennett #121165, www.RVLove.com

1 ATTEND RV RALLIES AND EVENTS

One of the best ways to make new friends is by attending RV rallies and events. Since joining Escapees and becoming involved in Xscapers a couple of years ago, we've built a fantastic network of RVing friends with whom we regularly connect and have a blast. There are many RVer events and rallies organized by other groups, too, such as FMCA, RV owners

groups, single RVer groups and Full-time Families, to name a few. And, if you attend an Escapees RVers' Boot Camp, you'll be meeting with other RVing newbies, too.

You can also join one of the many Escapees chapters and attend their rallies, or join Escapees BoF (Birds of a Feather) special-interest groups. We've found Escapees members to be the most socially active and supportive RVers out there.

2 JOIN RVILLAGE

RVillage.com is a social network specifically for RVers. Whether you're a newbie, full-time, part-time, seasonal or a wannabe RVer, everyone is welcome to join for free. Our common bond is an interest in the RV lifestyle. RVillage is a great place to connect with other RVers, virtually and in person. You can browse and send friend requests

to people you think are compatible with you and your traveling companions. You can join special-interest groups, start discussions, contribute to forums, ask questions and get answers. Check into RV parks and see who else is there, read their profiles and arrange to meet up if there's a common interest. And, when you're planning your route, you can even check to see where other RVillagers are located on the map for a potential get-together along the way.

3 BECOME A WORKAMPER

Work-camping is a great way to meet people in campgrounds, RV parks and state and national parks around the country. Whether you're a retiree wanting to volunteer, or an RVer looking for income on the road, work-camping is a great way to work and play while traveling.

The website **www.workamping.com** connects RVers with potential employers. While a free, or subsidized, campsite and sometimes a salary are the initial perks, the added bonus of meeting people while volunteering and/or working is a benefit that can be personally rewarding. Some work-camping gigs last for a season, while others can be year-round. This gives you time to get to know people and build lasting connections.

4 JOIN RV GROUPS ON FACEBOOK

There are scores of RV interest groups on Facebook. Some groups, like our RVLove page, are open to everyone, while others require approval before you can join.

We've found some groups to be a great support network and resource, while others can be full of

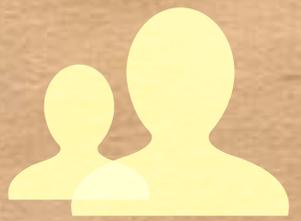
drama and negativity. Life's too short to spend time on sites that suck your time and energy, so be discerning and focus your time and effort on engaging with the groups and people who are a fit for you, your interests and your values. Ask questions and offer answers, and you may soon start crossing paths with compatible RVers who you can eventually meet in person.

5 SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

If you like engaging with people online, then social media is a great way to find fellow RVers. If you're a visual person, you'll probably love Instagram, Pinterest or YouTube, whereas Twitter is perfect for those who enjoy brief encounters. Getting to know RVing folks via their social media

pages first is an excellent warm-up to potentially meeting them in person, since you'll feel like you know each other already. Of course, signing up for social media accounts and following others is completely free, and you are able to select whose messages, photos and videos show up in your feed. So, you can pick and choose those who resonate with you the most.

NETWORK OF FRIENDS



MEMBER-BASED RV NETWORK

We have found that member-based campgrounds are probably the friendliest. Because everyone is invested in the system by paying membership dues, they tend to be more actively engaged in their local campground community. When staying at Escapees parks, we've found everyone exceptionally warm and welcoming. Likewise, we've made many great friends through our

Thousand Trails (TT) membership. We joined the TT camping network for the sole purpose of saving on camping fees; however, we quickly discovered an unexpected benefit—the community! We often cross paths with the same people at many campgrounds, deepening our friendships each time. This has become one of our biggest avenues for making new RV friends.

CREATE YOUR OWN BLOG, PAGE OR CHANNEL

If the idea of sharing your travels is appealing, and you enjoy the creative challenge of producing your own content, then carving out your own stake on the Interwebs may be worthwhile. While starting a blog or YouTube channel and consistently producing content takes time and effort, it can be rewarding. We hear from a number of people who have found

our website and YouTube channel, and they express their appreciation for our articles and tips. Some of those connections have evolved into friendships. If you have neither the time nor interest in setting up a blog or channel, then creating your own Facebook Group or Fan Page can be a great way to chronicle your travels and build a community of your own.

LET FURRY FRIENDS LEAD THE WAY

Pets are a great way to open the door to meeting new people and opening up a dialog. We've met many great people at RV park dog runs or simply while taking our dog for a walk around the campground. Taking pets out for a walk will get you outside more often. This is great exercise and it opens up many more opportunities to see and interact with your fellow pet lovers.

You'll find a friendly and active online RVing community on the Escapees Discussion Forum (www.rvnetwork.com) or look for Escapees RV Club on social media to connect with other members and learn more about RVing.



DECORATE WITH SIGNS OR DECALS

Many RVers place a sign with their names and where they are from outside their RV. These signs are a great conversation starter, especially if you're sitting outside on your patio as people walk by. Signs and decals on your RV can be warm and welcoming and send the message that you're approachable; likewise, if you have your blog name and URL on your RV. This gives people

a chance to look you up online. If they like what they see, it's an opportunity for them to strike up a conversation about your latest blog post or video. You may gain some new followers and make new friends as a result. That's certainly been the case for us.

KEEP AN OPEN MIND

Full-time RVing keeps us in a constant state of curiosity and openness. We've met and made friends in the most random and unusual ways. We have continued to stay in touch and meet up with many of them as we've traveled around the country. These are only a handful of the many unplanned and serendipitous meetings that we never expected would

lead to such wonderful new connections. And there's really nothing you can do to make them happen. Stay open, curious and friendly, and don't be afraid to initiate a conversation and see where it leads. Relax, be yourself and allow the magic to unfold. For us, it is these chance meetings that are the most fun encounters of all. 