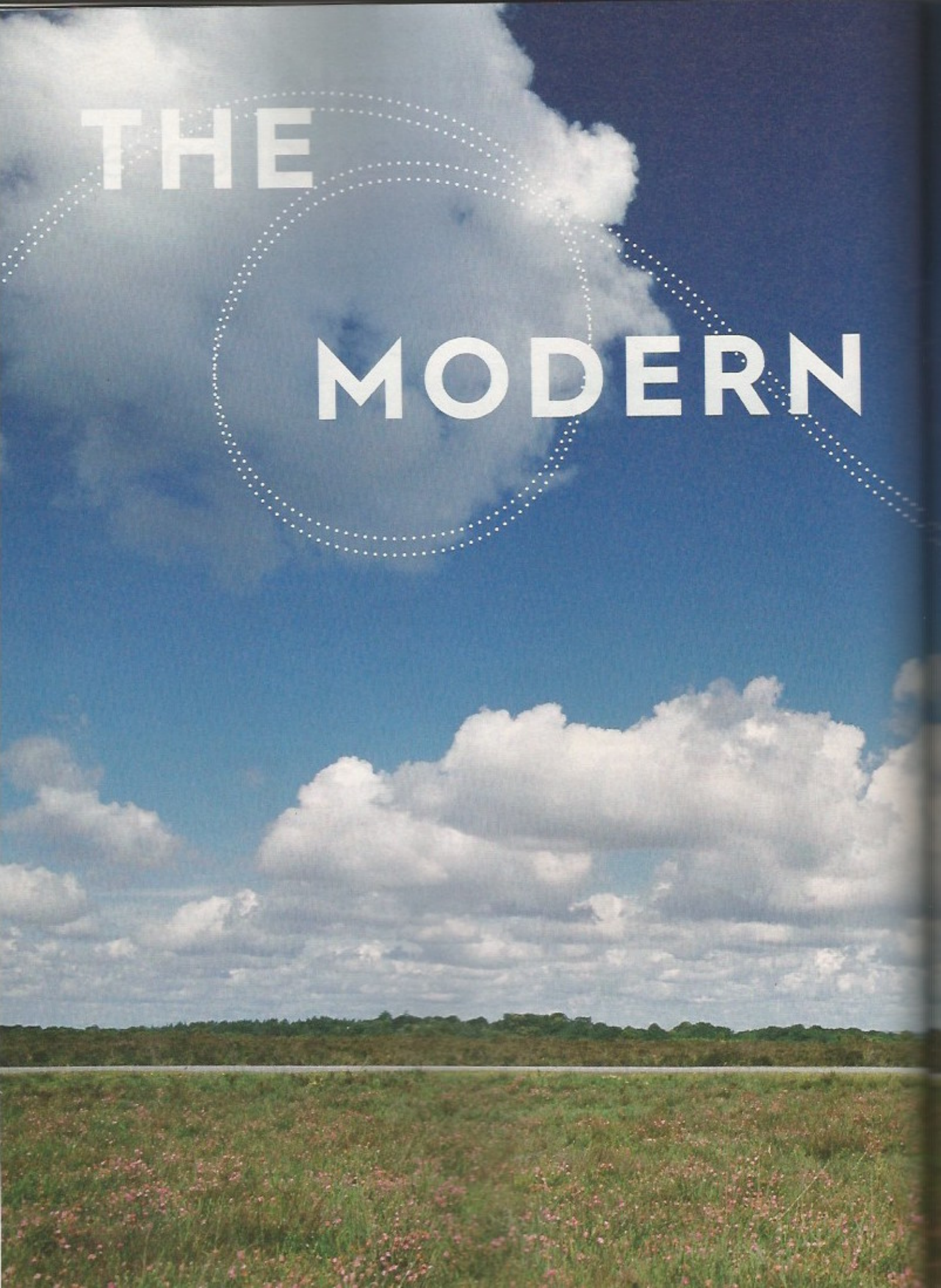


THE

MODERN



NOMAD

As more of us embrace van life, *Stylist* hires an old VW campervan and heads out into the wild...

WORDS: HANNAH SUMMERS

MOVEMENT



"ON THE ROAD AGAIN,
JUST CAN'T WAIT TO GET
ON THE ROAD AGAIN..."

That day's shower was a cold one. Freezing, in fact. No shower gel or razor (my legs had been hairy for weeks). We stripped off and ran screaming into the water, dunking our bodies for a second before the chill of the North Atlantic sea took hold. We sprinted back to the beach, grabbed our shared, slightly musty towel and dived into the cosy comfort of our camper van.

Perhaps you're wondering how me and my relatively new boyfriend, Jon, had ended up here, naked and parked up in a gusty field in the Outer Hebrides, with a graveyard on one side and turquoise water on another. Isn't living in a small confined space with only your partner as company a recipe for disaster? Or is it all skinny-dipping romance? We'd decided to find out.

A few months earlier I'd been sitting at my desk at work doing that 'mulling over the future' thing. I'd handed in my notice to go freelance, lured by flexibility (if I had a laptop I could work from anywhere, right?). London was feeling increasingly hectic and overwhelming, and, in all honesty, I just wanted a break. I thought back to something I'd read about people in America giving up 'safe' jobs to live in a van. Vanlifers, they were called, collectively. They were a good-looking bunch of people and, scrolling through the Instagram hashtag, there seemed to be thousands of them.

I got lost in a mass of people living the #vanlife dream. There were heavily photoshopped pictures of old-school VW campervans against magenta sunsets, svelte yoga devotees with insanely pert bums, tanned surfer dudes and a shaggy dog or two thrown in for good measure. Of course, I knew that people had been travelling in campers for decades but vanning now seemed to be 'rad' (embrace vans and the surfer slang will get you in the end). There are now over 2 million posts with the #vanlife hashtag, and delving deeper, it became clear that there was more to living in a van than showing off your perfect 'nuevo boho' life. It looked exciting and freedom-filled. An alternative way to live. I wanted in.

Now a true vanlifer would buy an old builder's VW Transporter and spend months tating it up into something pretty, cosy and Instagrammable (#builtnotbought). Bill Goddard, who runs Rustic Campers, a van conversion company, receives several serious enquiries a week. "The growth has been unbelievable, particularly helped by Instagram and Pinterest. You're looking at £14k for a basic, but bespoke, overhaul of an old van, although things like swivel seats and solar panels will cost more." Can't afford it? No problem – Bill gives tips to aspiring vanlifers

who don't have the funds to commit to a transformation. (Bill, I might add, was parked up on a surf beach in southern Portugal with his wife, Beck, when we spoke.)

I didn't have the time, money, or, if I'm totally honest, the patience for all that van refurbishing. So I borrowed one. Our VW California, a little bigger, taller and longer than a hatchback, was kitted out with everything we'd need for six weeks on the road. A small hob, a fridge, a pop-up roof that meant we could have our living space below, and our tent-like bed up top. The great outdoors became our toilet. At £51,000 a go, they're not the most affordable camper on the road, but with sales

ferries and in waiting rooms? Me. And honestly, they were some of the best showers of my life. Hot, powerful and gratefully received. Sleeping was sometimes an issue. Wild camping in England is illegal, limiting us to campsites: Nant-y-Big, overlooking a quiet bay near Abersoch in Wales, was really special, and Hooks House Farm, with views of Robin Hood's Bay in Yorkshire, was extremely pretty (pretty enough to forget spending an hour digging the van out of mud in the lashing rain).

In Scotland, however, you have free reign to camp on unenclosed land. We'd park up next to gorgeous isolated beaches – the Outer Hebrides has some of the best I've seen – and

often we wouldn't see another soul for 24 hours. But there is a vulnerability of parking in a van in the middle of nowhere: I slept restlessly many nights, convinced that we'd be murdered or get blown off a cliff by the wind. And we did find ourselves down a pitch-black lane with some doggers one night. Hey ho: #homeiswhereyouparkit.

The ideal vanlife scenario has you working on the move, enabling you to travel for longer. I'd had visions of Jon dropping me off at a cosy pub, me nursing a local ale and writing features while he went fishing. Or something. The reality was me cross-legged in the passenger seat bashing away at my keyboard while he drove along the M1/M6/M4.

That's not to say it's not doable, you just have to find your way. Many vanlifers have created huge social media followings. Some will make money from products created around their new lifestyle. Others will make cash from subtle, and not-so-subtle, sponsorship and product placement opportunities – forget celebrity endorsements, brands are increasingly looking to influential #vanlife accounts to help promote their flasks/toothpaste/crisps. Check out @wheresmyofficenow – an American couple with a huge following who say they like to sprinkle Kettle Chips on their salads...

Of course, finding a flexible job and ditching your home for a life on the road is kind of a big deal, so many compromise. Quirky Campers – a campervan rental company – was set up by Lindsay Berresford, who decided to rent out her converted Mercedes Sprinter, Bella. Today, the site features 36 cool converted campers dotted across the UK. "The number of campervans we list has doubled every year – with us turning away about three-quarters of people who get in touch," she says. "We have another 450 people who have registered their interest in hiring out their camper via the site." In the age of the sharing economy, if you can't permanently live on the road, then owning, and occasionally renting out your van seems to be a lucrative option. And if you want



VANLIFER HANNAH
SUMMERS AT TRWYN DU
LIGHTHOUSE ON ANGLESEY

figures up 29% in the last year, and 57% in three years, the convenience and cool factor makes it a favourite with time-poor, cash-rich travellers. Throw in some armchair-style seats, automatic gearbox and sat nav, and it was a doddle to drive.

But where would we go? While the temperate climate of the California coastline has lured surfer types and vanlifers to its shores for decades (in the States many people convert old school buses instead of vans as they offer

"We'd park up next to gorgeous isolated beaches – the Outer Hebrides has some of the best I've seen"

more space), that felt like a trip for another time. Europe was an option, and the vanlife scene there is booming – scroll through Insta accounts such as @vanlifediaries and you're sure to find a campervan get-together in Berlin, coastal Sweden or rural Spain. All very tempting, but in the end it was the great British seaside that won, and a trip that would allow us to discover more of our own coastline

So how is life on the road, really? Well, have you ever wondered who uses those grubby-looking public showers in service stations, on



→ a taste of the vanlife freedom, hiring someone else's pea-green VW is a great place to start.

I recommend it. And I promise, all the 'annoying' logistics become part of the fun. Jon and I, despite some #vanstrife bickering in the first week, got on far better than I ever thought we could. He did the cooking, I did the laundry. He drove, I planned. We fell in tune with each other's moods and habits, and laughed. A lot.

The setting helped. On a bright blue day, and even on the grey, rainy ones, Britain is truly beautiful. We walked to battered lighthouses, lost our change in arcades and drank flasks of tea on empty pebble beaches. I'm already wondering where we can go next, because being cooped up in the van with Jon really was one of the best trips of my life. I know, pass the (pee) bucket. Yep, we had one. You won't find that on Instagram...

Below, three more vanlifers offer their best tips for happy camping.

ALLY MUNARRIZ, 36

Not all vanlifers are Insta addicts. Take Ally Munarriz, who's more likely to take an occasional picture of her Yorkshire terrier, Alfie, or her husband, Andy, than a pretty van and sunset. The couple enlisted the help of a specialist company called Dirty Weekenders and spent close to £60k converting a new T6 VW Transporter van into their retro blue-and-white-striped camper, which has already clocked up 13,000 miles in a year. "Vanlife is totally addictive," says Munarriz. "It is the best way to de-stress and enjoy the simple things in life – I even like washing-up when I am away as it's outdoors and there is no kitchen to clean and tidy." Camping Igueldo, just outside

of San Sebastián, Spain, is a favourite (she recommends Bar Goiz Argi for pintxos in the city) and the couple also love parking up at Camping Les Mûres on the south coast of France. "You're seconds from the beach, and can get dressed up and take a boat across the bay to St Tropez." And while beaches and camper vans are the natural fit, that's not the only option: "We love Camping Paris Bois de Boulogne, it's just 40 minutes by public transport into the city." Paris in a campervan? You betcha.



GAIL BURTON, 29

Gail and her boyfriend Simon had their Nissan NV200 camper passed down from Simon's parents. The part-time vanlifers (Gail teaches yoga and is a ski and snowboard instructor and web developer) started off with an easy one-night trip to Brighton and have since explored most of the UK and parts of Europe, including Norway. "Travelling in a campervan is great in a really expensive country like that," she says. "I made meal plans before we went, and cooking in the



van became a really big, fun part of the trip." The freedom and flexibility is what appeals. "I love that we can just set off on a Friday night and end up somewhere. The van has made the UK so accessible and we never feel like we 'need a holiday', because the campervan trips satisfy that 'awayness' that I think people crave." Favourite spots include Rhossili Bay, on the Gower Peninsula in Wales, and Sykeside campsite in the Lake District for mountain views and a pub on site – always handy when your home is on wheels.

CALUM CREASEY AND LAUREN SMITH, 27

Calum Creasey and Lauren Smith bought their 1996 VW T4 van seven years ago, and started converting the small space into something homey and liveable.

They're old-schoolers – the couple were on the road for five years before setting up their Instagram account @therollinghome. Two years and 206,000 followers later (a growth which Calum himself admits is "crazy and weird" – it's not unusual for these #vanlife celebs to be recognised on a beach), the couple now produce *The Rolling Home Journal*, a coffee table book full of beautiful photography and tales from their travels. "It's a very aesthetically pleasing movement," Calum admits, "but of course that's not always the reality." The couple tend to spend long stints in the van and occasionally decamp to a room (they'll be spending the winter in a house share in Cornwall), depending on how funds are looking. "It's the easiest and cheapest way to get away. Go on eBay and you could have a van in a day. Chuck a blow-up mattress in the back and see how you like it."

A life on the open road

Haven't got time to do up a vintage model? Here's our pick of modern vans that are ready to roll



VW CALIFORNIA OCEAN, FROM £51,733

The VW camper has evolved over the decades into the very cool VW California. The basic, and less expensive, Beach model comes without a kitchen so it's worth spending more on the fully loaded Ocean, complete with hob, water supply, fridge and table, plus sleeping room for four.



MERCEDES-BENZ MARCO POLO, FROM £53,180

This camper goes for swankiness over coolness. Yes, it does look a bit like a posh taxi, and the interiors are very grey and corporate, but the function is there – with a hob, fridge and pop-up roof. Like the VW California, it's compact enough to use as your everyday car.



AUTOTRAIL TRIBUTE 669, FROM £41,300

You're veering into retiree territory with this camper, but the plus side is you have an onboard shower and loo – a rare find with most 'cool' campers. It also comes with a hell of a lot of space – including a living room and bunk beds, making it a great choice for group trips.



SSANGYONG TURISMO TOURIST, FROM £29,995

This isn't for serious long-term tours, as it's more of a camper car than a campervan. That said, when the seats are flattened, you're left with a 2m-long bed, which is a rarity in most campers, and there's also a hob and fridge (albeit one that's a bit tricky to use in the confined space).