

DRIVING THAT RV FOR THE 1ST TIME

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The first time I had to drive an RV, it was a 40 foot long Class A, and I was driving from Corona, California to San Francisco, by myself. I was really excited, but also nervous. 40 feet doesn't sound that big, but when I stood next to the RV that I had to drive, it might as well have been 100 feet long.

Next was my lesson on everything in the driver's seat. This particular RV didn't

have a gear shift, rather buttons on the left side arm rest marked D (drive), R (reverse), N (neutral). My first thought was, where is Park? There is no park, you have to put it in neutral and put on the parking brake. The rest was pretty simple, wipers, turn signal, etc. was just like a car. Plus it had not only a rear camera, but side cameras as well. I didn't realize just how necessary those would be!



My instructor told me 2 things not to forget, go slow, and use the cameras.

Now I was set to hit the road. When I made a left out of the driveway, I went a little too fast and the RV rocked side to side, making all the glasses and dishes knock together. I was sure they were all broken! I was able to get onto the freeway easily enough, maneuvered through traffic with ease, thanks to the side cameras. I was thinking "this isn't so bad".

Once I got past the traffic and over 30 mph, my grip on the steering wheel got tighter and tighter. It's hard to keep that big RV in the lane, plus it was windy that day. So I'm weaving all over the lane, and I keep repeating in my head what the instructor told me "go slow, go slow, go slow". So I drove about 50-55 mph, the semi-trucks were passing me by, but I didn't care.

I faced 2 big obstacles on this trip, I needed gas, and since I didn't think to pack food with me, I needed to stop to eat. Going through a fast food drive thru was obviously out, so now came the tedious task of finding a place with a parking lot big enough for me to get in and out of.

Luckily the route I took was frequented by large trucks, so it was big rig friendly and I only had to go a few blocks off the freeway to find somewhere. The entire last row of parking stalls was empty so I pulled in and took them all, leaving a few in front of me so I had enough room to get out. It looked like I had enough space to basically make a big U turn in that parking lot. Until I got back to the RV and someone had parked right where I needed to go – of course.

I decided on a different, slightly narrower path, terrified the entire time, and constantly checking my mirrors. I inched my way through, I never fully took my foot off the brake, almost took out a trash can, scared a few other drivers who thought I was going to drive over their cars, but I made it!

Next stop, gas station. This was the biggest pain, because not only does the station have to have diesel fuel (harder to find than I thought it would be) but it needed to be big enough for me to comfortably drive in and out of, and I didn't want to have to turn left into it. I think it took 4 tries of getting off the freeway, and deciding that the particular station I had spotted from the road didn't look big enough. I finally found one I thought I could get in to.



I pull in, very slowly pull next to the pump, and get out finding the gas cap is 4 feet from the pump. So I get back in and tried again. The tank takes a bit to fill, it holds a lot of fuel. And I find that people are either giving me looks of annoyance for being so big and taking up so much space, or people come up and ask 20 questions about the RV. Most of which I don't know – I'd only been driving it for 6 hours, have never slept in it, don't know where it was manufactured (honestly, someone asked me that). Here's a hint about paying for your gas with a debit or credit card. The fuel pump will only let you fill up to a certain dollar limit – I hit \$115 and the pump stopped. You need to go in and let the station attendant know you are going to fill up your RV and you aren't sure how much it will take but it could take up to \$200.

Okay, the RV is filled up, I make it out of the gas station without incident, and I am back on the road, heading to the campground in San Francisco. The drive to San Francisco is quite pretty and I have huge windows all around me, so I'm trying to sightsee while driving a big RV. Not a good idea, I came very close to crunching a convertible. Definitely no texting while driving, I don't think I even answered my phone.

When I got to the campground, I begged the man who checked me in to help guide me into the spot, because I was afraid I'd hit something, like someone else's RV. Luckily I had a pull thru site and I parked with no problems. It is now dark, which I'm grateful for. I may have to lug a flashlight with me, but at least my neighbors can't laugh at me while I try to hook the RV up for the very first time (luckily I took very good notes!). It was all over, I made it! I didn't damage anything, or run anyone off the road. My instructor said it would take 8 hours, it took me 12, I called that a learning curve.

Another box to check on my "bucket list", able to drive an RV!

LESSONS LEARNED

Lessons I Learned Driving RVs

RVing is one of the best ways to have an “all American style” vacation. It’s a road trip without being crammed in a car, and not having to pull over every 20 minutes because someone needs to go to the bathroom. Campers are some of the friendliest people you’ll meet, and since they come from all over the US, and even international, think of all the amazing people you can meet!

I spent last summer doing RV rentals, which required getting to know RVs inside and out, and driving several different RVs long distances. I hadn’t driven an RV before, so it was a brand new world for me. So if this will be your first RV trip, I’ve been where you are.

You know that old saying “learn from my mistakes”? Well I made plenty of them, and am passing on some of my experience to you.

Lesson One: Take lots of notes!! When you first get in an RV, you’re flooded with information not only on how to drive it, but how to use it as a temporary home too. Hookups and hoses, generators and control panels, who can remember all of that stuff in a 45 minute cram session? Take lots of notes, I guarantee you will be using them. When I was giving instructions to people, some of them took video as well, very smart. A good instructor will go over every inch of the RV, whether or not you will actually have to do anything with it, such as showing you where the water heater is. You don’t need to do anything with the water heater, but it’s not a bad idea to know where it is located. Pay very close attention when going over the Control Panel, this is the main hub of the RV. The Control Panel will show you the battery power to the RV, how many amps the RV is running, in some RVs this is where you will check how full the tanks are and control the awnings. Be sure to ask where the breaker box is, should something go wrong and you need to call the rental company, they may need you access it.



Lesson Two: Don’t over pack. Ladies I know it’s hard to survive without our blow dryers, flat irons, and small suitcase of makeup, not to mention that small children require more suitcases than adults because of all the toys and favorite blankets that cannot be left behind. However, RVs only have so much storage, and keep in mind some of that you will need for food. I’ve seen families come with so much luggage I had to wonder if they left anything at home, and for only a one week trip! Once a couple brought so much luggage with them, by the time they unpacked all of their stuff they had no room for their empty suitcases, so I ended up bringing them home with me for the duration of their trip. Not everyone will be so accommodating. The same rule also goes for food. If you’re going on a one week trip, you don’t need to shop for a whole week. Campgrounds usually have small stores that stock essentials; you can easily replace items then. And for more specific items, you can pick them up either along your trip, or when you stop at the campground you can go into the nearest town and find a store.

Lesson Three: Know where your gas tank is. A few of the RVs I drove had access on both sides, but I don't think that's common. It's quite annoying and very embarrassing, to pull an RV into a busy gas station just to get out and find that it's on the opposite side. RV's don't have that "dummy" symbol that cars have pointing you to where the tank is, so write a little note and stick it on the dashboard or instrument panel.

Lesson Four: A quick but important one. Disconnect the sewer hose from the RV first, then let the fluid inside drain out into the sewer drain, and disconnect the hose from the ground connection last. This will prevent the fluid inside the hose from spilling all over the ground, which I promise is no fun to clean up, and very, very embarrassing.

Lesson Five: Don't panic. That first drive in the RV can be a bit overwhelming, it was for me. However, that feeling soon passed and the more I drove the more comfortable I became. My first drive there was no radio on, and I wouldn't answer my phone. Two weeks later, I'm chatting away on my phone, blasting my favorite tunes, and playing a fun game I invented blocking in annoying little cars between my RV and a big semi-truck so they couldn't pass by (I don't recommend this game, it probably wasn't the safest thing I ever did, but it was very amusing!).

If you ever get stumped, campground employees and other campers are very friendly, just ask for help! I've had help getting out of campsites, pulling into campsites, hooking up hoses, one camper even gave me a roll of duct tape when one of my hoses had a small tear, saving me the cost of buying a new hose!

