

RV 101: Don't be a babe in the woods

Rental inexperience can be costly; take a few tips



On Travel
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If you rent an RV this summer, don't get ripped off.

And by "ripped off," I mean don't let your inexperience cost you extra money.

It almost happened to me when I rented a 24-foot Coachmen Leprechaun in California. As we cruised along Highway 101 toward Santa Rosa, I heard a loud thump.

I pulled over and discovered that a panel next to the generator was gone.

Turns out I'd forgotten to secure the latch. The panel bobbed up and down at 70 mph before colliding with a traffic cone and getting ripped off. I was afraid that the rental company might charge me several hundred dollars to replace the panel. Fortunately, insurance covered the damage.

But I also mean ripped off in the traditional sense: Renting or sharing an RV means you have to navigate owners' demands and the fine print of contracts. There are several ways you can lose money on an RV rental, including when you get a price quote, having to deal with a frivolous damage claim and failing to plan your RV vacation adequately.

Let's be honest: It could happen to you because everyone seems to be trying to find an RV this summer.

What's behind the RV rental craze? It's a combination of lingering health and safety concerns and a desire to escape the crowds.

Since the pandemic started, 18 million people have tried RVing for the first time, according to a national survey by Rvezy, an RV rental platform. A separate poll by the RV Industry Association predicts that 56 million Americans will take

an RV vacation this summer. That's an increase of 31 million people from 2019.

How much does rental really cost?

The price you're quoted for an RV rental or RV share is rarely what you end up paying. "Variable costs like online service fee, insurance, mileage and generator use can add up and make your trip prohibitively expensive," says Stewart Gold, publisher of the RV site BeginRV.

I found a 2016 Forest River Salem Lite camper for \$121 a night for a week on a popular RV sharing site. But that was before it added a \$50 cleaning fee, mandatory rental insurance (\$15), a service fee (\$81) and taxes. By the final booking screen, the RV costs \$1,200, which comes to a little more than \$171 per night. Consumer advocates refer to this addition of unavoidable extras as "drip" pricing, and it's illegal in some countries.

By the way, insurance isn't necessarily a rip-off, but you'll want to review the policy carefully. It may not cover everything you need, particularly a trip cancellation.

"For example, if your child gets sick on the trip and needs medical attention, then all of your prepaid expenses such as campground permits, food and activities purchased like amusement park tickets would be eligible for reimbursement – but only if you have the right insurance coverage," says Bailey Foster, vice president of trip cancellation at Trawick International. "The right insurance would also cover doctor visits and associated medical treatment costs."

When you rent, have a plan

Even if you can avoid the up-front costs, other expenses await. Leaving a latch open is one of the many mistakes an inexperienced RV traveler can make.

"A checklist will help you remember to do the multitude of little tasks involved in RVing before you drive away, potentially saving you thousands in RV



Make campsite reservations as soon as possible. GETTY IMAGES

repairs," says J.P. Smith, who helped create the Ultimate RV Checklist app.

A checklist could do more than help you avoid repair costs. "Creating a list can help ensure that you don't forget any important items," says Daniel Durazo, a spokesman for Allianz Travel. "You can't call down to the front desk if you forget something."

Take 'before' photos

"Always do a walk-around inspection on your RV before departing," says Cliff Millender, an experienced RVer and founder of Country Bumpkin, an outdoor clothing line. If you see any damage, note it right then and there, just as you would with any other rental car. If possible, ask for a different RV. Your RV rental company or owner may assume that you caused the damage unless you can prove otherwise.

Millender says you should continue doing your careful inspections (notice a theme here?).

"You'll hear horror stories of people driving off with awnings out, hoses and cables still plugged in, sewer lines still hooked up, satellites up and stairs out," he says. "Take it slow."

Don't forget to reserve a campsite

What's the biggest mistake that newbie campers make when they go RVing? "They show up to a campground

without a reservation," says Diana Hansen, who publishes the camping advice site Let's Camp S'more.

This summer, if you rent or RV-share, make campsite reservations as soon as possible. Failing to have a place to camp could ruin your entire vacation, and that could be the most expensive mistake when you rent an RV this summer.

Before you drive your rental rig anywhere, don't forget to take lots of photos. Make sure you have campsite reservations and a checklist of things you need for your vacation, including insurance. And one more thing: Batten down the hatches before you head out on the highway.

Pro tips for rental RV vacation

Cast a wide net: Don't limit your search to one source. You can find RVs on Rvezy, Outdoorsy, RVShare and Ruckify. If you don't find what you're looking for, wait. RV owners constantly add inventory as demand increases. "It's similar to Airbnb," explains Matthew Bailey, founder of the site Must Do Canada. "RV owners can list their rig and make quite a bit of money over the summer."

Download the top RV apps: Those are Allstays, Campendium and iOverlander. "Use them to find backup locations where you can camp for free," says Robyn Robledo, who writes the RV blog Nomads With a Purpose. Her favorite free campsites include the Bighorn Mountains in Wyoming, the Black Hills of South Dakota and around Hungry Horse Reservoir outside West Glacier.

Think small: Though the larger RVs get all the attention, this may be the year to think smaller and consider a camper van rental – especially if you're not used to driving large vehicles. Larger RVs are more expensive, consume more fuel and have more bells and whistles that can break. "Most also need campground hookups to power their large array of electronics," says Matt Felsler, co-founder of Dave & Matt Vans, a company that customizes vans.