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Jessica Bruder

The New Nomads: Living Full-Time on the Road

A new kind of wandering tribe¹ is emerging. They're giving up traditional houses and apartments to live in what some call "wheel estate"².

In Drayton, North Dakota, a former San Francisco cabdriver, 67, labors at the annual sugar beet harvest. He works from sunrise until after sunset in temperatures that dip below freezing, helping trucks that roll in from the fields disgorge³ multi-ton loads of beets. At night he sleeps in the van that is his home.

5 In New Bern, North Carolina, a woman whose home is a teardrop-style trailer – so small it can be pulled with a motorcycle – is couch surfing with a friend while hunting for work. Even with a master's degree⁴, the 38-year-old Nebraska native can't find a job despite filling out hundreds of applications in the past month alone. [...]

10 There have always been itinerants⁵, drifters, hobos, restless souls. But now, in the third millennium, a new kind of wandering tribe is emerging. People who never imagined being nomads are hitting the road. They're giving up traditional houses and apartments to live in what some call "wheel estate" – vans, secondhand RVs, school buses, pickup campers, travel trailers, and plain old sedans. They are driving away from the impossible
15 choices that face what used to be the middle class. Decisions like: *Would you rather have food or dental work? Pay your mortgage or your electric bill? Make a car payment or buy medicine? Cover rent or student loans? Purchase warm clothes or gas for your commute⁶?*



For many, the answer seemed radical at first.

20 *You can't give yourself a raise, but what about cutting your biggest expense? Trading a stick-and-brick domicile⁷ for life on wheels?*

¹ (her) gruppering i samfundet

² *wheel estate*: (her) hus-på-hjul

³ læsse af

⁴ *master's degree*: kandidatgrad

⁵ omrejsende

⁶ daglige transport

⁷ *stick-and-brick domicile*: (her) traditionel fast bolig

Some call them “homeless.” The new nomads reject that label. Equipped with both shelter and transportation, they’ve adopted a different word. They refer to themselves, quite simply, as “houseless.”

25 From a distance, many of them could be mistaken for carefree
retired RVers⁸. On occasions when they treat themselves to a
movie or dinner at a restaurant, they blend with the crowd. In
mindset and appearance, they are largely middle class. They
wash their clothes at laundromats and join fitness clubs to use
30 the showers. Many took to the road after their savings were
obliterated by the Great Recession⁹. To keep their gas tanks and
bellies full, they work long hours at hard, physical jobs. In a time
of flat wages and rising housing costs, they have unshackled
themselves¹⁰ from rent and mortgages as a way to get by. They are surviving America. [...]



35 As it happens, some of those strangers are nomads, too. When they meet – online, or at a job, or
camping way off the grid¹¹ – tribes begin to form. There’s a common understanding, a kinship. When
someone’s van breaks down, they pass the hat¹². There’s a contagious feeling: Something big is
happening. The country is changing rapidly, the old structures crumbling away, and they’re at the
epicenter of something new. Around a shared campfire, in the middle of the night, it can feel like a
40 glimpse of utopia.

As I write, it is autumn. Soon winter will come. Routine layoffs will start at the seasonal jobs. The
nomads will pack up camp and return to their real home – the road – moving like blood cells through the
veins of the country. [...] The roadside reels¹³ past, through the day and into darkness, until fatigue sets
in. Bleary-eyed, they find places to pull off the road and rest. In Walmart parking lots. On quiet suburban
45 streets. At truck stops, amid the lullaby of idling engines. Then in the early-morning hours – before
anyone notices – they’re back on the highway. Driving on, they’re secure in this knowledge:

The last free place in America is a parking spot.

There’s no clear count of how many people live nomadically in America. Full-time travelers are a
demographer’s¹⁴ nightmare. Statistically, they blend in with the rest of the population, since the law
50 requires them to maintain fixed – in other words, fake – addresses. [...]

Many of these people call themselves *workampers*. [...]

Workampers are plug-and-play¹⁵ labor, the epitome of convenience¹⁶ for employers in search of
seasonal staffing. They appear where and when they are needed. They bring their own homes,

⁸ (her) folk, som bor i autocampere

⁹ the Great Recession: (her) den økonomiske krise i 2008

¹⁰ unshackled themselves: frigjort sig fra lænkerne

¹¹ off the grid: (her) uden for det etablerede samfundssystem

¹² pass the hat: samler ind

¹³ (her) flyver

¹⁴ befolkningsstatistikere

¹⁵ plug-and-play labor: (her) lettilgængelig tidsbegrænset arbejdskraft

¹⁶ the epitome of convenience: (her) den suverænt mest bekvemme løsning

transforming trailer parks into ephemeral¹⁷ company towns that empty out once the jobs are gone. They
55 aren't around long enough to unionize¹⁸. On jobs that are physically difficult, many are too tired even to
socialize after their shifts. [...]

Millions of Americans are wrestling with the impossibility of a traditional middle-class existence. In
homes across the country, kitchen tables are strewn with unpaid bills. Lights burn late into the night.
The same calculations get performed again and again, over and over, through exhaustion and
60 sometimes tears. Wages minus grocery receipts. Minus medical bills. Minus credit card debt. Minus
utility fees¹⁹. Minus student loan and car payments. Minus the biggest expense of all: rent. [...]

These indignities underscore a larger question: *When do impossible choices start to tear people – a
society – apart?*

It's already happening. The cause of the unmanageable household math that's keeping people up at
65 night is no secret. The top 1 percent now makes 81 times what those in the bottom half do, when you
compare average earnings. For American adults on the lower half of the income ladder – some 117
million of them – earnings haven't changed since the 1970s. [...]

The most widely accepted measure for calculating income inequality is a century-old formula called the
Gini coefficient²⁰. [...] What it reveals is startling. Today, the United States has the most unequal society
70 of all developed nations. America's level of inequality is comparable to that of Russia, China, Argentina,
and the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo.

And as bad as the situation is now, it's likely to get worse. That makes me wonder: *What further
contortions²¹ – or even mutations – of the social order will appear in years to come? How many people
will get crushed by the system? How many will find a way to escape it?*

(2018)

¹⁷ (her) midlertidige

¹⁸ blive medlemmer af en fagforening

¹⁹ utility fees: faste udgifter

²⁰ Gini coefficient: model til beregning af økonomisk ulighed

²¹ forskydninger