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Losing Square Footage and Gaining Opportunity



BIGGER DOESN'T MEAN BETTER

By **ERIN ST. PIERRE** #172218

In 2022, our family of four sold our house and moved into an RV full-time. Though we'd decided to go tiny, we believed that when it came to RVs, bigger was better.

At RV shows, we ogled over the mega fifth wheels with multiple rooms, seemingly endless storage and giant residential refrigerators. But, after living in one of these large RVs, we quickly learned that bigger doesn't always mean better.

Our First RV

In April 2022, we sold our house and moved into a 43.5-foot Jayco North Point fifth wheel that we had purchased from a friend of a friend. It had five slides, two bedrooms and one-and-a-half bathrooms. It was a monster. My husband and I planned to wait a year to determine if the fifth wheel was working for us. We made it seven months.

After taking a few RV trips, we realized what a hassle it was to travel with something so huge. Setting up five slides and managing five wastewater tanks was more work than we expected. Since our plan was to travel full time, and move regularly, we wanted something smaller and easier to manage.

Learning How to Live in a Smaller Space

When we moved from a house into an RV in a little over two weeks, we were in too much of a hurry to struggle with downsizing. It was an “everything must go” kind of situation. We soon learned that moving from a 43.5-foot fifth wheel into a 31-foot travel trailer would feel more difficult.

I know this defies logic, but I believe it comes down to one thing. When we moved into our first RV, we already thought we’d dwindled our possessions down to the bare minimum. Now we had to get rid of more.

Though my husband had opened up to the idea of shedding additional items, my daughter was not on board. She had books and toys with which she didn’t want to part. I wrestled with downsizing our kitchenware, knowing I’d have to learn to cook with one pot and one pan for the foreseeable future.

Discovering Which Features We Needed and Which Ones We Didn’t

Living in our first RV allowed us to see what we needed in a home on wheels and what we didn’t need. I knew immediately after moving into our RV that my next one wouldn’t have a kitchen island. This feature took up a lot of precious space just to house the kitchen sink.

Of course, we wouldn’t have needed the island had it not been for the half bathroom in the bunkhouse. This bathroom cut into the kitchen space, creating the need for an island and forcing our kitchen storage space upward where we couldn’t reach anything.

The bunkhouse had the largest open floor space in the RV, but our kids didn’t use it. We spent our time outdoors and when we were inside, the kids hung out in their bunks or on the couch. The outdoor kitchen took up space in their room. And we didn’t even use the outdoor kitchen.

In the front of the RV, my husband and I struggled with sleeping arrangements. The RV queen bed had two nightstand tables

that jutted out into the bed. Most nights, we’d bump into these tables, which made the small bed feel even tinier. We planned for our next RV to have a king-sized bed.

In our fifth-wheel, I felt like we had a lot of features we didn’t want, while we lacked some of the things we needed. Here’s what we lost, and what we gained when we moved into a smaller RV.

What We Lost, What We Gained

We decreased the number of slides from five to one. By getting rid of the half bathroom, we also reduced one gray and one black tank. And without the outdoor kitchen we used to have, we eliminated yet another gray tank we didn’t need.

The new smaller refrigerator will take some getting used to, but upgrading to the king-sized bed has been nice. When we lessened our square footage, we lost a lot of storage, too. But the smaller size is worth it for what it’s allowed us to do.

The St. Pierre family, hiking near Blood Mountain, in Georgia.

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“Our biggest reason for downsizing our RV this soon came with remembering our “why,” the reason we chose this lifestyle.”



It's easier to drive the smaller, shorter RV. We have access to more roadways and campgrounds. Our travel trailer will provide us with more opportunities to boondock at Harvest Host locations, which we didn't even want to attempt with a fifth wheel where we couldn't access the interior without putting all the slides out. Only having to deal with one slide, and almost half the number of tanks has made it much easier to set-up and pack up the RV.

Why Did We Do It?

Our biggest reason for downsizing our RV this soon came with remembering our "why," the reason we chose this lifestyle. The entire point of moving into an RV was to travel, see new places, get outdoors, spend more time in nature and have new experiences we couldn't have had in our sticks and bricks house with two weeks of vacation per year.

With our first RV, I couldn't book certain campgrounds our family wanted to visit. Many of them didn't take campers over forty-feet-long. But it wasn't only about where we stayed, it was also about how we wanted to travel. My husband and I prefer to drive the back roads instead of the interstate. Our new lower clearance and lighter weight allows us to travel on roads we couldn't have taken before.

Finding a Unique Floor Plan

Once we decided what we wanted, it took a few months to actually find it. Almost all small travel trailers with a bunkhouse either have the bunks out in the open, or they're separated from the rest of the camper by a curtain. We wanted the kids to have their own room behind a closed door. And, the one place we found it was in a Heartland North Trail.

The North Trail has a bunkhouse model with a folding door, a unique feature among travel trailers. The other travel trailers that had a door to the bunkhouse were much longer than what we wanted.

What It's Really Like

Of course, it's not all roses adjusting to a 31 foot x 8 foot home with four people. The kids argue over who's taking up more table space while they do

their home school work. Having one bathroom means sometimes we have to wait. And we all had to let go of a few more things in order to fit into a smaller RV, which wasn't easy for anyone.

I make my bed each morning using ultra-specialized yoga techniques that I developed myself. This helps me to avoid a potential concussion from banging my head on the upper cabinets, which has happened a few dozen times, so far.

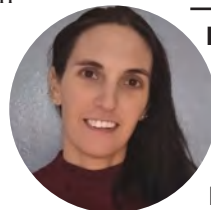
There are items to fix, quirks to get used to and new things to learn. But, we're getting there. I noticed a slight lean in our travel trailer the last time we took it on a trip. It's a reminder that it's not just about how much weight we have, but also how it's distributed in this lighter rig.

Our fifth-wheel had a gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) of 16,800 pounds, whereas the travel trailer's GVWR is 8,600 pounds. Despite this massive difference in size, both RVs have a similar cargo carrying capacity. Since the travel trailer is much lighter, we've had to learn how to pack the weight more evenly, which we didn't have to worry about before.

The minor inconveniences involved in moving into a smaller RV have already allowed us to schedule a last-minute trip we hadn't planned on. Without the hassle of having a large RV, we venture out more often.

Looking back, I don't think we could have moved into our travel trailer without having lived in the fifth wheel first. The experience created a transitional period that allowed us to adjust before pushing the limits of how small we could go.

Though moving and downsizing for the second time in a year was a lot of work, it was another step that gets us closer to reaching our goal of full-time travel. And it taught us that sometimes in life, size does matter. 🚐



ERIN ST. PIERRE #172218 lives in 31-foot travel trailer with her husband and two children. They have jumped into the RV life with both feet, operating a mobile RV repair business and blogging about their adventures. Now, Erin shares their experiences to help other families get on the road.