

## Virus Maroons Some Recreational-Vehicle Nomads

Many campgrounds restrict entries; Doug Creek ponders a summer in Gila Bend, Ariz.



*Cindy and Doug Creek - with their children, Dahlia and Adrian - are stranded at a campground in Gila Bend, Ariz.* PHOTO: TOMMY CREEK

By James R. Hagerty  
April 19, 2020 8:04 am ET

Living in a recreational vehicle might seem like the ideal way to ride out a pandemic—cocooned in your own aluminum box and free to wander. It isn't turning out that way for Cindy and Doug Creek.

Ten months ago, the couple, both around 40 years old and parents of two children, left Fairbanks, Alaska, and embarked on a freewheeling life as year-round recreational-vehicle nomads. After spending the winter at a KOA campground in Gila Bend, Ariz., they planned a leisurely tour of the American West this summer and fall, featuring stops in Oregon, Colorado and Texas.

That changed in March when many campgrounds around the country began restricting or barring new entries by leisure travelers to comply with state or local mandates and guidance aimed at reducing the spread of the novel coronavirus. Many campgrounds that remain open have sealed off swimming pools, playgrounds and shower rooms.

“We are not encouraging any leisure travel right now,” said Chris Cutler, a vice president at Recreational Adventures Co., Hill City, S.D., which operates campgrounds in 11 states.

So, for now, the Creeks are stuck in Gila Bend, whose population is around 2,100. They hope to resume travels soon, but Mr. Creek doesn’t rule out the possibility of a summer in Gila Bend, where July and August temperatures can exceed 110 degrees Fahrenheit. Just in case, he recently bought a third air-conditioning unit for his RV.

The owner of the Gila Bend KOA, Scott Swanson, is letting stranded travelers like the Creeks stay on and even giving them reduced rates. But he doesn’t want his campground to be seen as a refuge for anyone seeking a safer spot. “I do not want people to come down here to get away from it all,” he said, citing a need to protect his employees.

Some of the most hard-core nomads are marooned. For 14 years, Cherie Ve Ard and Chris Dunphy have been full-time travelers. They split their time between an RV and a 47-foot motor yacht.

When virus worries began growing earlier this year, Ms. Ve Ard and Mr. Dunphy hoped to continue their wandering. Then, noticing that marinas and RV parks were restricting entry, they quickly lined up a mooring in Sanford, Fla., where they plan to live on their boat—with their cat, Kiki—until travel becomes less perilous.

Trisha and Ben Genegabus, retired federal civil servants, have been living on the road in their RV since 2014. They planned to fly to Italy in early April to visit a daughter who is temporarily working there. The virus made that trip unthinkable. Now, like the Creeks, they are holed up at the KOA in Gila Bend.

Mr. and Ms. Genegabus consider Livingston, Texas, their home base and wanted to go back there, but the RV park where they planned to stay canceled their reservations April 9. To renew her prescriptions, Ms. Genegabus arranged for a video appointment with her doctor in Texas.

Leaving Gila Bend without a reservation would be risky. Aside from uncertainty about getting into parks, there is concern over the border checkpoints put up by some state and local officials to discourage leisure travel. “It would be a crapshoot,” Mr. Genegabus said.

The Creeks have about 420 square feet inside their RV for a family of four. It makes for a lot of togetherness as Mr. Creek does his job as a database programmer and his wife steers the kids through four or five hours a day of schoolwork. Their daughter, Dahlia, is learning to make quilts.

Still, the Creeks say they aren’t giving up on their nomadic lifestyle and dreams of exploring the U.S. “Not a bit,” said Mr. Creek. “Even if we get stuck here for the summer, it wouldn’t make me want to give up.”

The RV industry has taken a huge hit. The stock of Thor Industries, Inc. , North America’s largest maker of recreational vehicles, is down 28% so far this year, compared with an 11% drop in the S&P 500 index. Occupancy at campgrounds has plunged.

Campground operators are experimenting with social-distancing techniques, including remote completion of check-in procedures rather than inviting customers into reception areas. They hope an easing of restrictions will bring a rebound in traffic this summer. The Stella Mare RV Resort in Galveston, Texas, is offering 50% reductions in summer rates for people staying 30 days or more.

Josh Bell, whose family owns KOA campgrounds in California, Arizona and Missouri, thinks the business will benefit from pent-up demand. Once virus worries abate, “a lot of guests are going to be taking to the road,” he said. “They’re going to be really, really anxious to get outside.”

Zach Weiner, who heads RV park operations in several Western states for Boavida RV Parks & Resorts, is equally bullish. Americans will be wary of overseas flights, he said, and “nobody’s going to be jumping on a cruise ship.” With an RV, he said, “you’re in your own environment with your own cleanliness standards.”