

IN A VAN DOWN BY THE BULL- WHEEL

BY HEATHER HANSMAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GRANT GUNDERSON & IAN COBLE

With few places to sleep at the hill, the ski areas of the Pacific Northwest foster a tight-knit community of skiers who believe the best slopeside accommodations roll in on four wheels.

SEXY REX IS HAVING A HARD TIME KEEPING HIS FEET UNDER HIM. HIS BALANCE IS NOT GREAT, AND HE’S SPIRALING TOWARD THE FIRE. HE’S NOT THE ONLY ONE.

On the other side of the flames, a man referred to by those nearby as Shorts-and-Socks Guy, who is too drunk to put words together and tell us his real name, is doing the same. It’s a rainy Saturday at the end of the season in the B Lot, the designated RV parking lot at Crystal Mountain. Rex is a regular here, enough to have a nickname. He and his family come up almost every weekend to ski. Shorts-and-Socks Guy, who makes only sporadic appearances to party throughout the season, is not, and the locals are getting annoyed by his belligerence. Rex is two years old and has most of a Snickers smeared on his face and his green puffy coat. And perhaps surprisingly, he—not the hammered guy—is typical of the people who live in the ski-area parking lots of the Pacific Northwest.

You’ll see stray campers and RVs parked at the bases of mountains in other parts of the country, but nowhere is parking-lot culture as thick as it is at the ski areas of the Pacific Northwest. Lot camping has been a part of PNW skiing since the beginning. Unlike Colorado, California, and Utah, where resort villages sprang up around the lifts, or New England, where many ski areas have towns nearby, most of the skiing in the Northwest happens on skinny parcels of Forest Service land. There’s little development around these resorts. At Crystal there are two hotels and a



few rental condos. Some of the other mountains, like Stevens Pass and Alpentel, have smatterings of private ski cabins and lodges around the base. But if you want to ski every weekend, to be there for first chair, and to have the chance to get snowed in, the parking lot is your best bet. That’s why so many people get into RVs here. They’re ski condos on wheels. It gets cultish.

Many of these people are diehards who drag their rigs up every weekend. They’re closer to their neighbors in the lot than they are to their neighbors in Tacoma or Seattle. Their kids grow up together, watching movies in the backs of buses, building forts in the head-high snowbanks, and skiing on each other’s hand-me-down planks. The scene isn’t exactly what you’d expect from people who spend 20-plus weekends a year living in a vehicle. It’s less unshowered bohemians than suburban families of four.

But it wasn’t always like that. John Kochevar, who oversees the Crystal lot with his wife Cheryl, has been RVing since he was in high school in the ’70s. He says van life started out rough. For a long time it was just the hardcore ski bums living in the backs of their trucks, skiing and drinking to stay warm. John and Cheryl both grew up with lot culture and met at Crystal. Together, they’ve graduated from rickety uninsulated vans, where they had to periodically turn on the stove at night to keep from freezing, into slightly bigger RVs. Their current motor home is cushy enough for them to comfortably live in full time, which they do. The Kochevars have passed down their old rigs to younger people who started coming up to stay. Eventually, the community got so big that the mountain installed power hookups and moved the RVs from the upper lot, right at the base of the lifts, to the B Lot, down the hill.

As parking-lot life grew more popular it split into two camps. There were people like the Kochevars, who skied every weekend, whose kids raced, and who had a community in the lot. Then there were the people who came up to rage in rented RVs and drove off on Sunday morning leaving piles of beer cans and beach chairs in their wake. “The drunks were getting so bad that people wouldn’t let their kids out at night,” John says.

Eventually it came to a head. At Crystal, the breaking point was New Year’s Eve five years ago. Someone overdosed, and there were major domestic-violence calls. The police had to break things up multiple times that night. “It was bad,” Cheryl Kochevar says. “Scott Bowen, the mountain manager, was out there plowing broken lawn furniture and hibachis the next morning.” The mountain threatened to ban overnight stays. Devastated, Cheryl sent around a survey to the regulars to prove that not everyone was in the lot just to party. She then passed it to John Kircher, Crystal’s owner and GM, who finally said RVs could stay if someone would monitor the lot. So the Kochevars became volunteer overseers. They live in the lot all winter with their two huge German shepherds, Ozzy and Zoe. They collect fees, try to keep the drama to a minimum, and help greenhorns maneuver their rigs into tight spots.

Now a neat row of motor homes, Airstreams, and vans lines the edge of B Lot. There

are neighborhoods and a social structure: the old-timers, the partiers, the racers, and the young families. You can walk up to pretty much any bonfire and get handed a beer, but the regulars say there are defined cliques. According to Cheryl, the lot crowd is 10 percent retired people and 25 percent single guys. The rest are families. But they all have a fanatical dedication to skiing that justifies the hassle of living with wet ski gear and trying to sleep through cold nights. When it dumps, they shovel off roofs, dig out wheel wells, and watch it come down, knowing they’ll be the first in line tomorrow.

Liz Morton, a former bikini downhill queen at Crystal, started RVing with her family after her second kid was born four years ago. She and her husband both grew up skiing at Crystal, and they wanted their kids to do the same, but schlepping them

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up every weekend from their home in Gig Harbor seemed like too much work. So without ever having driven a motor home, they bought one. Sitting in the sun on the patio at the base lodge with a bunch of the other lot families she counts among her closest friends, Liz says it’s the best decision they’ve ever made. Babies get passed around so parents can ski, kids swirl in and out, and it’s not entirely clear whose children are whose. Rex toddles between picnic tables, and other kids his age do the same, getting their



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Taking in the view; man’s best friend in man’s best chance to score freshies; roots run deep in the lot; Sexy Rex and family, Ben and Elaine Warren; Cheryl and John Kochevar in front of their home on wheels.



Kathy and Dan Vanucie (left) during the early days.



noses wiped and hats adjusted by whichever parent happens to be closest.

There are characters too. Cheryl brings me into a huge Class A RV (the biggest kind), where 69-year-old Fran Cella serves us martinis. She got the nickname Fran in the Van in the '80s, when she would come up on her own in a Ford Econoline conversion van. She's upgraded her rig, but she's still doing it on her own, 30 years later. "I have stories, but they're off-color," she says. "This motor home has dents in the floor from dancing."

Fran is ballsy. She takes no shit. You have to be pretty independent and handy to manage an RV in the winter. And because you're driving your house up the mountain every weekend, things go wrong. Frames crack in the cold, the steering goes out halfway down the mountain on an icy night, water heaters bust. Luckily, your neighbors are sympathetic. They'll tow you back up the hill or let you crash in their rig when your heat goes out.

They'll do more than that too. When Toni Quandy's husband was killed in an avalanche at Crystal, a memorial service was held in the parking lot. When she was prepared to go to the site of the slide, ski patrol took her and a few friends up to the mountain and let them sit there until long after the lifts closed, drinking his preferred cocktail of root beer and bourbon. Now, back down in B Lot, everyone pitches in when her rig needs some work.

"We have spread so many friends' ashes up on the mountain," Cheryl says. "It's where we all want to end up. Otherwise we'd be alone."

That's what everyone says is the best part of RV-ing: the sense of community. In the lot, neighbors have your back, and doors stay unlocked. In a weird way it feels like an idyllic '50s neighborhood. There

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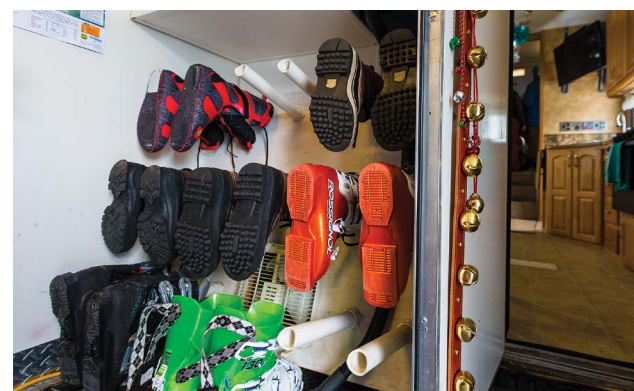
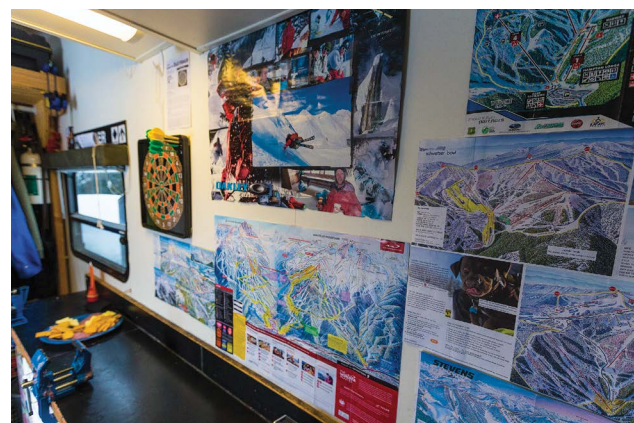
are potlucks, and families hang out together. Kids play outside, and no one worries if they disappear for a few hours, because there isn't anywhere they can go.

The same thing happens at Stevens Pass, where the RV culture is just as

strong. On the last day of night skiing at Stevens, Dan Vanucie is getting sentimental. The Vanucies have been RVing and racing at Stevens for most of their lives. After this season the daughter, Hannah, is moving to California to live with her boyfriend. Before she goes skiing that night she flips open the photo album they keep in the RV and pages through pictures of birthday parties and pee wee races. There's a photo of Dan and his wife, Kathy, when they first met. They have headbands and mullets, and they're standing outside a rickety '70s camper. "Yup," Hannah says, "this is where I come from." Then she buckles her boots, grabs her skis, and heads out. Dan steps outside to give her a hug, and they're gone for a while. He comes back choked up. "I just don't know when we're all going to be in the RV together again," he says. *[Editor's Note: By press time, all was well: Hannah decided to return and coach at Stevens.]*

Down the row from the Vanucies, Steve Lowe has what everyone else says is the most styled-out RV in the lot. He calls it the Garage Mahal. The front part is spacious, with ceilings that seem higher than my apartment's, and the back half has been converted into a wax room that looks fit for the World Cup. Inside, his teenage daughter, Teegan, who races for the Stevens Pass Alpine Club, is scraping her skis under a collage of resort maps. A crew of us pile into the back of the rig, because you tend to collect a crowd in the lot, and Steve's wife, Ann, comes around with a plate of cheese and sausage and starts pouring shots of whiskey. "This is nothing," she says. "One year after a race we had 30 people and a keg in here." She says they're in the RV most weekends of the year.

Kids have been conceived in these rolling homes—including the Kochevars' daughter Kristen, they think—and romances have bloomed. The Vanucies, like the Kochevars, met on the hill. Seventeen-year-old Crystal racer Nick Lyon has an RVing girlfriend, and everyone in the lot seems to know about it. Kathy Vanucie says it's because you have more in common with the people you RV with than with anyone else.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: Staying warm; RV boot room; wax dojo in the Garage Mahal; Steve Lowe and Adam U; Staying warm part deux; Paul and Nick Lyon.

At night, standing around a fire, or squished into the living room of a rig drinking homemade moonshine, it's almost easy to forget that you're at a mountain, and that skiing is the binding tie. It feels more like a ragtag family reunion with drunken uncles and a pack of kids roaming around, but some of the best skiers to come out of Washington were born from the RV lots. Ingrid Backstrom grew up spending weekends sleeping in a repurposed bookmobile in Crystal's B Lot. On the same stretch of gravel, Tyler Ceccanti's grandparents George and Carolyn Gius have been RVing since way before they were grandparents. "He had to make sure I could ski before we got married," Carolyn says.

The culture has changed since the Giuses started, and the biggest difference is that these lots are getting crowded. "Five years ago you could just come up at nine on Friday; now we can be full on Thursdays," Cheryl says. During Christmas week B Lot takes reservations, and John has to go out and help the newbs park their RVs close enough to each other. At Stevens, the mountain has started to monitor the lot at night, to make sure people are paying their fees and playing by the rules. That grinds on the regulars a bit, especially when it means they might get boxed out of a spot, or that their neighborhood might change.

After a few fire beers the van people start to get cagey.

Don't tell anyone about RVing, they say. Tell them about how the pipes freeze. Tell them that if something catches fire, a rig will burn to ash in minutes. Tell them that they're hard to back up, that they break down, that they're effing expensive.

But then they put back some homemade booze, called apple something, and ease off. They go back to bragging about lot life, about how it's turned them into who they are, and how they hope their kids will grow up to be van people too. How when a storm really comes in and the road closes down, they get the mountain to themselves.

Because it's the Northwest, it has started to rain a little harder, so people put up their hoods and pull closer to the fire. Rex is chasing a slightly older kid on a bike, stumbling through puddles. Shorts-and-Socks Guy has passed out somewhere. Cheryl cracks open the door of the RV, lets the dogs out, and yells to the crowd around the fire, "Hey, what are we making for dinner?" ♦

Heather Hansman, *Skiing's* former online editor, now calls Seattle, Washington, home. You can find her on double chairs and at parking-lot bonfires throughout the Cascades.