

PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

King of the road in P.E.I.

Tips for the ultimate family RV road trip



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Travelling Prince Edward Island by RV

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P.E.I.'s New Glasgow Lobster Suppers stocks 9,000 kilos of lobster in its tanks throughout the summer. PETER GILBERT PHOTO/Special to QMI Agency

For those moms and dads considering a first-time family vacation in a recreational vehicle (RV) -- aka motor home -- here are 10 tips that will make this ultimate family road trip a relatively smooth one!

My travel tips are gleaned from six nights and seven days prattling around on the narrow red roads of Prince Edward Island with my husband and two kids under 10 -- a first-time RV family bonding adventure that proved to be educational, exhilarating and ultimately, unforgettable.

1. Ask questions: Start planning your first-time RV road trip by visiting a site like GoRVing.ca, a Canada-based online guide to motor home rentals and vacations. The site has a helpful FAQ section. It also hooks you up with reputable RV rental agencies across Canada, who, in turn, will politely and patiently spend ages talking you through the logistics of a first-time motor home rental.

2. Listen carefully: For our trip to P.E.I., we chose a handy CanaDream rental shop in Dartmouth, N.S. They picked us up at the airport, walked us through the rig, and in the space of an hour, tried hard to school us in how to travel in a massive, 8.5-metre two-bedroom motor home fully-equipped with everything from sheets, blankets and towels to dishes,

cutlery, fridge, freezer, microwave, hot running water and -- eureka! -- a fully functional washroom with shower. Think: House on wheels. My advice: During the walk-through, listen carefully. Take notes if you can. Rental agents rattle off terms like grey water, black water, mileage limits and three-way hook ups faster than you can tie your shoes. If you're not paying attention you could miss the scoop on how to rid your RV of, ahem, poop.

3. Get cozy: A recreational vehicle is no Maserati; it's more Beverly Hillbillies. On the road an RV prattles and grates, shimmies and shakes. At one point my husband said, "It's like travelling with your own percussion section!"

4. Book -- or not: As a country music festival was entertaining the island at the point of our visit, Tourism P.E.I. advised us to pre-book our campsites. Good advice during busy periods, but otherwise, don't bother. Part of the fun in RVing is in hittin' the road with no real agenda. Plus (important to know) most campgrounds do not offer refunds, so if you get caught up at a particularly nice beach and just can't make it to your pre-booked site that night, you're outta luck. You lose not just a deposit, but the entire night's fee. It's not as high as the cost of a hotel -- average campground rates for fully equipped RVs range from \$25-\$35 per night, including water, power and sewage hook-ups (aka three-way hook ups), but still...

5. Choose campsites carefully: We chose two provincial park campgrounds for our stays: Brudenell River and Cabot Beach. In our experience, provincial parks are clean, well-staffed, showers are free and the park offices are open all night. Some have heated pools. Others have activity centres staffed by camp councillors where kids can play board games, paint shells, build sand castles and make new campground friends. If you do your research, you'll have the knowledge necessary to request an ideal spot to park your rig--by a river, in the trees, or near the beach. Beware: Choice campsites are snapped up quickly.

6. Watch your mileage: As with rental cars, motor home rentals may be subject to mileage limits. You're asked to estimate your mileage and pre-pay. If you go over your limit you're hit with a surcharge. It's not easy to guess how many kilometres you'll travel, especially if you're wanderers like us who turn down country roads just to see where they end up so be generous with your estimates and if you do have to pay a surcharge, don't let it ruin your experience.

7. Shop smart, eat well: The first stop we made after picking up our RV was at a supermarket. We loaded up the fridge with burgers, dogs, buns, cereal, cookies -- big mistake. We bought far too much food. While it's essential to have breakfast and sandwich makings, don't pre-plan every meal. On P.E.I. we fell into the easy habit of stopping by farmers' markets, bakeries and seafood stands to stock up on fresh-baked bread, fresh mussels and fresh Malpeque oysters. My husband spent more than an hour one night patiently learning to shuck oysters while the kids toasted marshmallows and I sipped a cool one. Heaven.

8. Meet the locals: At campsites, be prepared to meet welcoming, interesting people. Strolling by campfires at night we met friendly Europeans, Americans, Australians, Ontarians, Albertans -- even vacationing Islanders whose homes were only 2 km down the road. Our most interesting encounter was with a local farmer who happened to be co-owner of the famed local restaurant: New Glasgow Lobster Suppers. Eighty-something Sterling MacRae took us on an impromptu tour of his community lobster joint, where we saw giant steamers and icy-cold tanks housing hundreds of fresh P.E.I. lobsters. Our lobster dinner there was epic: Lobster plus all-you-can-eat mussels, clam chowder, salad and at least five kinds of just out-of-the-oven pie.

9. Keep plans vague: In case you haven't got the message, in my view RVing is about freewheeling. The fewer plans the better. Our No. 1 day on P.E.I. was spent heading in the vague direction of Greenwich Beach National Park -- one of Canada's most beautiful. In the morning I stressed over packing sunscreen, bathing suits and lunches until my husband pointed out I didn't need to pack anything. Wherever we went, all our stuff went -- period. That concept was so freeing. We stopped for an impromptu seafood picnic at Rick's Fish and Chips in nearby St. Peter's, we climbed an observation tower, learned about sand dunes and walked a massive-yet-empty red sandy Greenwich beach for hours with no worries about missing snack times, nap times or anything else.

10. Let kids be kids: It took me too long to realize my kids did not care about P.E.I. scenery. I grew hoarse telling them to look out the window to "See that cow!" or "Look at that red cliff!" or "Check out that old fishing village!" While driving, they were more interested in their Nintendos. Once parked, however, they did a ton of enthusiastic exploring of beaches and parks. Outside Expeditions taught them how to sea kayak on the inlet at North Rustico and how to swim with the jelly fish. At Cavendish they explored the Haunted Woods around Anne Shirley's Green Gables. Still, ask them their No.1

favourite aspect of our vacation, they'll answer: "The RV!" And I have to agree. It's a ton of fun playing house for a week in the ultimate crib on wheels -- a recreational vehicle.

IF YOU GO

For more information on renting an RV, see GoRVing.ca. For travel information on Prince Edward Island, see TourismPEI.com.

loriknowles.com

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