

# Meet the NOMADS

BY ROBYN MACLARTY

Ever dreamt about ditching domestic life for the open road... indefinitely? We speak to three couples who did just that, kids and all. Prepare to be inspired!

Four kids and a bus: Sonja & Rheinholdt van In have been home schooling on the road since August 2020.







**Sonja & Rheinholdt van In  
+ Katie (8), Kaden (6), twins Kayla & Karlien (3)**

When Rheinholdt van In arrived home from work one Wednesday in mid-2019, his wife Sonja greeted him with eyes ablaze: ‘We have to buy a double-decker bus!’

Having given birth to twins, Sonja was on maternity leave and had been feeling dejected. ‘We’ve always loved travelling. Before we had kids, we’d always do an overseas trip for our anniversary, and local trips throughout the year. When our first child was born, we decided we would stop travelling, and that when our second child was two, we’d start again. Everything went according to plan: we had our daughter, Katie, and then our son,

Kaden, and when Kaden was two, we took a trip to Bali.’

On that same long-awaited jaunt, Sonja accidentally fell pregnant – with twins. ‘We had the twins, and I was feeling down because

it seemed it wasn’t going to be possible to travel again the way we used to... because who does that with so many kids?! Then I watched the Netflix show, *Tiny House Nation*, about how people build and live in



these tiny little homes, and one of the episodes featured a bus. The same day I watched that episode, a colleague suggested I watch a film called *Expedition Happiness*, about a German couple who set off in an old school bus to travel America and beyond. And that was it. My mind was made up.’

In a matter of days, the Van Ins had bought a double-decker bus. ‘Rheinholdt didn’t think we’d be able to find one, but after a quick internet search, we found three!’

The bus cost an initial R35 000, and after some renovations (such as closing the roof, which had been open, tour-bus style), upgrades and kitting it out with beds, solar panels, a kitchen



The Van In family have travelled through North West Province, the Free State, Northern, Eastern and Western Cape in their converted double decker bus. Next stop: Namibia!



and a bathroom – not to mention the annual licensing fee of about R19 000 – the total cost came to approximately R100 000.

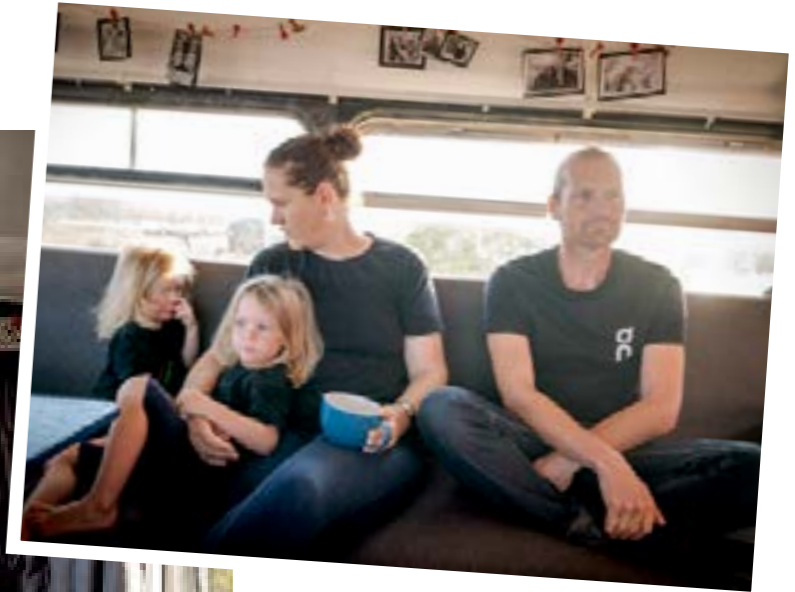
Alas, the pandemic hit before they were able to set off, but that just afforded them some extra time at home to work on the bus and get it in tip-top shape. ‘If it didn’t work out, we reckoned we could recoup some of our spend by selling the engine, parts and metal, if not the entire bus,’ says Rheinholdt.

By the time travel was again permitted in August 2020, they were ready. Sonja and Rheinholdt both resigned from their full-time





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'We left Joburg for North West Province, and from there we travelled to the Free State, Northern Cape, back to the Free State, the Eastern Cape, and now we're exploring the Western Cape. Our plan from here is to head up the West Coast to Namibia, then Botswana, and see how far we can take the bus there.'

Thanks to technology, Sonja is able to earn on the move. She still runs an aftercare centre she

established years ago in Jozi, which she manages remotely, and she teaches online, which covers their food, diesel and campsite expenses.

The Van In family also travels with a car, because using a double-decker bus to go grocery shopping, for example, can be somewhat tricky.

Do they have an end-date in mind for their nomadic life?

'No! We'll keep going for as long as we feel the urge – there are still so many places we want to visit. We check in with the kids regularly, and if they are still happy to keep travelling, which they are, that's what we'll do, home-schooling on the go. They've been exposed to so much more than they would be in a classroom.'



teaching jobs and sold all non-essential belongings. Their Joburg home was subdivided and occupied by tenants. 'The rental income was enough to cover our bond, rates and taxes, as well as insurance and medical aid.' They put the pedal to the metal, so to speak, and haven't looked back.

*We'll keep going for as long as we feel the urge – there are still so many places we want to visit.*



Follow the Van Ins' adventures on Instagram (@4\_kids\_and\_a\_bus) and Facebook (facebook.com/4kidsandabus).



## *Erin & Matthew Gillman + Aimée (7) & Taylor (3)*

When I speak to Matthew and Erin Gillman via video call, they are not Zooming in from a far-flung campsite, but from their home in Pringle Bay. 'Matthew's father unexpectedly passed away recently,' says Erin, 'so we've had to hit the pause button on our travels for a while.'

They're champing at the bit to hit the road again, and will most likely be travelling by the time you're holding this magazine in your hands.

Like many who took stock of their lives during the pandemic, Matthew and Erin, parents to Aimée and Taylor, decided they needed to do something different, to 'do more life'. Their love of travel provided the inspiration.

'We bought and built a van, let out our home, and set out to live on the road on 2 November 2021. Initially we said we would do it for one year, but then we realised a year wasn't nearly enough!'

The Gillmans estimate their monthly expenses to be in the realm of R15 000 to R20 000, excluding insurance and medical aid. Matthew and Erin own a design agency together ([dorkyhero.co.za](http://dorkyhero.co.za)), which was relatively easy to adapt to nomadic life. 'I work on a project basis,' says Matthew, 'and so I'll work pretty intensively for a few weeks, when Erin mostly minds the kids, and then I'll have a chunk of time off, which is great.'

*'Initially we said we would do it for one year, but then we realised a year wasn't nearly enough!'*

In the lead-up to their departure, Matthew spent about six months plotting and planning their entire trip: where they would stay and for how many days. A few days in, though, it became clear this had been a pointless exercise. 'We quickly realised it was a terrible idea. Sometimes you can't get to places on the scheduled date, or you want to stay somewhere longer. Eventually we learnt to just take life as it

The Gillmans initially set out to travel for one year – but after a short while on the road, realised that wouldn't be nearly enough time!

## THE OPEN ROAD

The possibilities for kids' outdoor playtime are limitless.



and play outdoors. They've become different children. After we'd been on a few hikes, Taylor was walking three kilometres without needing to be picked up.'

If they know they're going to be somewhere for longer than a night or two, they'll set up a play tent for the kids, where they can play with their toys and make a mess.

The only downside? 'We really miss our friends back home,' says Erin. 'The kids too – though we've all made new friends along the way.'

Before they embark on the next chapter of their semi-nomadic life, the Gillmans are hoping to sell their current van and invest in a more off-road-friendly overlander vehicle, giving them a much wider field of range to explore every pocket of wonder South Africa has to offer.

comes. If your van breaks down, you deal with it. You have to roll with the punches.'

Thankfully the Gillmans haven't experienced any major calamities, such as breaking down in remote areas without a phone signal. They did, however, take an unintended nine-hour detour after Matthew accidentally turned on a feature that tells Google maps to avoid all highways and tolls.

While the Gillman children are home-schooled, the beauty of their lifestyle is that 'classroom time' is supplemented with education-by-astonishment. 'One of the biggest highlights for us is that the kids have become more aware of nature,' says Erin. 'They want to get dirty



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Follow the Gillmans' adventures on Instagram (@awesome\_roadtrip) and YouTube (DorkyHeroCreative).

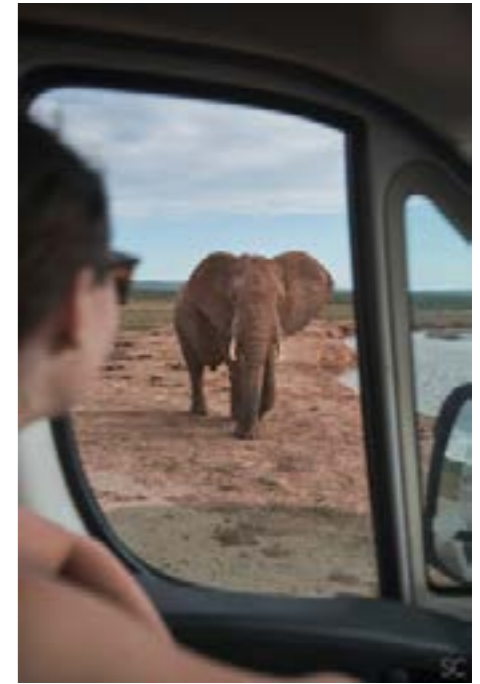


## Michael Monk & Acacia Denison (and their van Yeti)



Michael and Acacia say 'van life' has opened their eyes to the beauty of South Africa.

roughly equal to the costs of living in a house: money that previously went towards rent now goes towards petrol and campsite fees. 'The costs depend on how you travel: it is much more affordable to stay at a campsite for an entire month – a fee that can usually be secured for a discounted rate of around R2 500 to R6 000 – than only few nights,' says Michael. 'And living in a van helps you save money in ways you wouldn't expect: we can pull over and cook up a tasty lunch that's far



Experiencing all that the country has to offer...



cheaper than a roadside eatery. The van conversion itself is also much more cost-effective you might think. Since we built it ourselves, we saved on labour and learnt so much. The van cost us R160 000 and the conversion cost R30 000 – so it was roughly R200 000 in total, which is less than the average middle-class Saffer spends on a car.'

Both Michael and Acacia agree that 'van life' has opened their eyes to the beauty of South Africa and its people. 'We had a lot of concerns about safety, our vehicle of choice and the fact that life on the road isn't very common here. But we knew we wanted to travel our home country and experience all that it has to offer before we explore the rest of the world. We've learnt to trust the road and see where it takes us; there are so many friendly people willing to assist!'

The intrepid couple encountered one of their biggest challenges to date recently when their van broke down. 'The clutch stopped working,' says Michael. 'We found a mechanic who could fix it, but this meant our van – our only home – had to be towed away for a few days! This threw a large spanner in

We had no prior experience in converting a camper van; we learnt everything from YouTube, and trial and error,' says Michael Monk. He and his partner, Acacia Denison, set off to tour the country in their Suzuki Jimny in May 2021, and in October 2021 they finally found the perfect van: a 2016 Fiat Ducato, which they promptly dubbed Yeti ('because it's so large and white!'). The only catch? It had a completely empty cargo. 'We spent

two months travelling with a half-built van with only a bed, an old desk and a fridge. It wasn't until February 2022 that we spent a month converting the van into our tiny dream home on wheels.' Fresh out of varsity, Michael and Acacia were not shy about taking big strides towards their ideal lifestyle. 'Michael had finished his three-year cinematography degree at AFDA, and I had completed a one-year higher certificate degree at branding and design school Vega, both in Durban,' says Acacia. 'While

studying, we were simultaneously running our production company, Salty-C Productions (saltycpro.com). When we were notified that the house we were renting had been sold and we'd have to vacate, we knew it was the perfect opportunity to make a change. We found that our work was taking us across the country, so we sold and gave away all but our most important belongings, and decided to take our business out on the road. That was our first year focusing on our company full time.' For the couple, living on the road is







Living in a van helps save money in ways one might not expect.

the works as we had to postpone a location-based work project and find alternative accommodation until we got our home back.

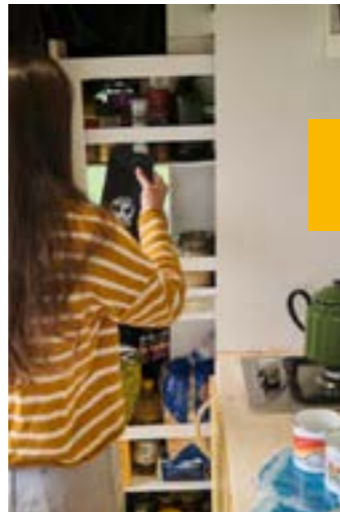
It also meant relying on an unknown mechanic to work on the van – we usually have all our services done by the same, trusted mechanic.

‘Another challenge of working and travelling full time is receiving deliveries on the road.

Since we have no physical address, we have products sent all across the country, depending on where we will be in the coming weeks.’

For Michael and Acacia, the pros far outweigh the cons when it comes to the freedom of life on the road and spending time in spectacular natural settings throughout the country.

‘There’s no better feeling than opening the van’s back doors to savour new views from the comfort of our own bed. Living in a small space really makes you appreciate what you have.’ ❖



### Did you know?

In 2022, South Africa had its very first Vanfest. The four-night family-friendly event took place at lodge and campsite Buccaneers on the Beach on the Wild Coast, with attendees from far and wide in all sorts of quirky rigs, from old VW Kombis to modern vans and 4x4 overlanders. Highlights included live music, a communal bonfire, an outdoor movie night, a volleyball competition and a pool party. Vanfest 2023 is scheduled for 17–21 March 2023. Follow @vanfest-southafrica on Instagram to find out more, and for provisional Vanfest 2024 dates – you have plenty of time to prepare!

*‘We’ve learnt to trust the road and see where it takes us.’*



PHOTOGRAPHS: LIZA VAN DEVENTER

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Follow Michael and Acacia’s adventures on Instagram (@yeti.the.van) and YouTube (MichaelMonk).