

# MONKEYS ON THE ROAD

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ONE FAMILY'S VANLIFE ADVENTURE SOUTH  
IN SEARCH OF A SIMPLER LIFE

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## NOTE

All events in this book are true and happened to the author between 2017 and 2021. Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of those depicted. Dialogue has been re-created from memory.

To see photos of our adventures along the way, and for an interactive map of our route, go to [www.monkeysontheroad.com](http://www.monkeysontheroad.com)



**USA**

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## THE BEGINNING

I climb up into the passenger seat of our big white van and click my seat belt with trembling hands. My heart is pounding like a drum in my chest. I take a deep breath and turn to look at my husband, John, in the driver's seat. His grin is enormous, with just a touch of nervousness around his eyes, as he turns the key in the ignition. I don't know whether to laugh or cry... I think I do both.

Are we really going to drive thirty thousand miles across 20 countries? Will we make it? What will we do next?

Our six-year-old daughter, Lilly, simply looks out the window and says, "Okay, let's drive to Mexico." Like it's just another day!

On top of the excitement and nerves, I also feel relief. Relief to finally be on our way, after years of intense planning and preparation. It's like I've been standing at the top of a cliff, anxiously waiting to jump into a beautiful pool below me, and am finally free to just do it and stop worrying. But then again, the free-fall is the most terrifying part of the jump.

Only two weeks ago I was getting cold feet. John and I had already quit our jobs, rented out our house, and missed enrollment for the next year of Lilly's public school. But I was obsessively reading the news from Mexico, getting more and more concerned.

Highest number of homicides in 20 years! Mass graves discovered next to the road! Decapitated heads found in a cooler! Tourists poisoned at resorts! Are we completely insane to drive into this country with our little girl? I marked the dangerous areas on a large map of Mexico, assuring myself that we could weave a path around them.

But then, along came an abnormally strong set of hurricanes, hitting Mexico on both sides of the country. I don't want to imagine hunkering down in our little van, arms wrapped around Lilly in futile protection, while a hurricane bats us around. So I convinced myself hurricanes could be avoided by keeping a close eye on the forecasts.

And finally, only one week before we planned to cross the border, there was an 8.2 magnitude earthquake with epicenter in southern Mexico! It was the largest earthquake to hit Mexico in a *century*. Is someone trying to tell us something?

What if Lilly gets seriously hurt, or kidnapped by Mexican drug lords? Or we have a car crash, or the van is stolen? Or what if we survive the trip but then we can't find jobs when we return to the US? Or, one of us gets cancer and we can't get US health insurance? There are 101 reasons not to do this trip, and I started thinking about all of them.

Ultimately, I turned to logic and probabilities – yes, it is possible that any of those things happen to us, but it's more likely they won't. The most likely outcome is that we'll grow old and hope to have lived the lives we wanted. So we made the uncomfortably exciting choice to leave our safe path and venture into the unknown.

I remind myself of this as I turn around to check Lilly is buckled correctly into her car seat. For the third time.

We finally bump down the driveway away from our home, memories flooding past our windows, as the neighbors wave and cheer us on. My head is swimming with the to-do lists from the past few months, but at this point, it no longer matters what we forgot to do or pack or research. We are driving to South America! No turning back!

One mile down the road, I sheepishly turn to John, "I left all of our food in the fridge back at the house."

And thus begins our journey of 30,000 miles. With a U-turn.

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## THE REAL BEGINNING

**I**t seemed like I had it all. A loving husband and healthy, happy daughter. A fancy job at a hot tech company. A big house in a friendly neighborhood. How could I possibly complain?

But there was a nagging voice in the back of my mind telling me this was not how I wanted to spend another decade of my life. Impressive jobs come with a lot of stress, and mine was no exception. My day was spent running from problem to problem, barely finding the time to eat and often returning home headachey and short-tempered. In the evenings, I tried to focus on my daughter but always had one eye on my work phone, my brain still processing the day's unresolved issues. Heartburn often kept me from sleeping at night, and eventually my body protested with an allergic reaction of red hives, which my doctor couldn't attribute to anything besides stress.

I've always had a strong relationship with John, but we didn't get enough quality time together, usually discussing child care logistics or other life admin in our rare moments alone. I desperately craved more time with him and our daughter Lilly, but it felt like life was flying by at top speed. It's already Christmas again? Lilly is turning five already?! If we didn't change our lifestyle, it seemed like I would blink and Lilly would be 18! We only have one child, and after three miscar-

riages we've decided not to have any more, so our time with her feels precious.

So John and I started to brainstorm how to make a significant change in our lives. We first considered moving to a smaller town in the mountains to make outdoor adventures more accessible and live in a community of like-minded people. Year after year we discussed this option, but the timing was always wrong for one of us to leave our career behind... I was ready but John had just gotten his start-up funded, then John was ready but I had just accepted a promotion at work, then I was ready but John had just sold his start-up and was contract-bound.

Finally, the stars aligned for both of us to leave our jobs at the same time. By this point, we felt so burned-out that we wanted a significant break before settling down in a new location. Simply moving our life to a new town didn't feel like enough – same life, different backdrop. So, we spent countless hours discussing ideas for a mega-adventure. I read dozens of books by people who'd pulled the trigger on a big life change – from the NY exec who quit her job to start an organic farm in Vermont to the young couple who sailed around the world after a weekend sailing class – I felt inspired by these real people who weren't famous or wealthy but had done such unique and risky things.

Initially we were both drawn to the idea of a physical challenge trip. Before Lilly was born, every vacation and weekend had revolved around physical adventure, usually rock climbing. John and I have both been climbing-obsessed “monkeys” since before we met. We come from very different backgrounds, but our love for rock climbing in Yosemite is what brought us together.

John is a self-proclaimed redneck from rural Washington state. He worked as a wildland firefighter for 10 years, spending months camping out in the wilderness every summer digging fire line and cutting down burning trees. He then used his tree experience and rope skills to land a job caring for the giant trees in Yosemite – the world capital of rock climbing. I'm a city girl from central London, England and had rarely even laid eyes on a tent when, by dumb luck, I got into a rural university in New Hampshire and discovered my love of the

outdoors. I then worked in consulting for a few years, saving money and adventuring on weekends, until I managed to get accepted on the Search and Rescue team in Yosemite and moved there full-time.

So Yosemite is where John and I met and where we were married three years later. When we decided we should get “real” jobs and move to San Francisco, we continued to retreat to Yosemite on weekends. When we decided to have a child, I kept climbing there until the week before Lilly was born, wearing a special harness to fit around my enormous belly as I waddled my way up the rock. But when we made the decision to quit our jobs, Lilly was only five years old – still too young for big vertical adventures – so we thought beyond climbing.

I’d done some bike touring in the past and I’d long been intrigued by the idea of bicycling the length of the Americas. We did a two-week test trip pulling Lilly in a trailer, but realized she would get bored sitting for so many hours a day, plus I didn’t like the idea of her bouncing along behind me on a one-lane road in the mountains of Ecuador. Ultimately, we were so enamored by the idea of traveling from our home all the way to the bottom of the world without ever getting on an airplane that we stuck with the idea, but, by van instead of bike. (And maybe our lazy, middle-aged bodies were glad to use Lilly as an excuse for traveling the more comfortable, easy way!)

We let this seed of an idea take root in the back of our minds, nurturing it over the following year. I put up huge maps of Central and South America on our bedroom wall as a constant reminder of our audacious plan. I created spreadsheets galore to analyze our likely expenses and our savings, and I painstakingly tracked our spending to get serious about a budget to maximize the time we could travel. Then I tackled homeschooling legalities and guessed my way into inventing a curriculum, researched border crossings and insurance for the van in a dozen-plus countries, figured out health insurance, read up on current events in each country... the to-do list was endless, but thrilling.

Meanwhile, John obsessively researched the right vehicle to buy. He decided on a 20-year-old Ford E350 diesel van, due to its apparently unbreakable engine. It was a gargantuan task to gut the van and build it out. Learning everything from online videos, he created an



electrical system with solar panels on the roof and batteries to power lights and a fridge; as well as a plumbing system with a water tank, sink and filtration for drinking and washing. He constructed wooden cabinets for storage, installed a heater and a fan, and built a small table for homeschooling in the back. Evenings and weekends for most of a year, John toiled away in our driveway until he had created the perfect little home for three. Lilly immediately named it Vancito. (The suffix *-cito* in Spanish means *small* but is also often added to names as a sign of affection.)

While consumed with the logistics of making the trip happen, it was easy to push away thoughts of what we'll do after. We tell most people that we're doing a one-year road trip, but we both know that we're looking for more than that.

I secretly hope we'll discover some idyllic mountain town with a fascinating foreign culture but like-minded adventurous people, with a low cost of living but opportunities for interesting jobs, where we can live happily ever after raising Lilly as a bilingual child in a great local school. But I also recognize the foolishness of pinning my hopes on a mystical perfect location. I know that I thrive on change, and part of me wonders if I want this to be more than a one-off trip... maybe I want travel to *be* my life. I hesitate to admit that to all but my closest friends, knowing that most think we are crazy to be putting our successful lives on pause even for one year, so they would never understand the idea that this could be a permanent change. Or maybe this trip will maximize my change-o-meter and I'll be ready to settle down afterwards?

So we reassure our parents and work colleagues, and perhaps ourselves, that we'll likely return in a year to plug back into the rat race, all the while hoping it won't happen, and we set off into the unknown. Three "monkeys" on the road to the end of the world...

## LESSONS LEARNED IN THE FIRST 24 HOURS

**I**f the first night is any indication of the rest of our trip, we should turn around now.

The drive itself is beautiful and nostalgic. We don't leave home until late in the day, so we end up driving through Yosemite during the magic sunset hour. The alpenglow paints the familiar peaks orange, highlighting every detail on the granite faces in front of me. We stop briefly for a photo at the lake where we were married ten years prior, and I cement my last memories of Yosemite, pushing away the doubts that creep into my mind. Can we ever find a more beautiful place than this?

We find a deserted spot at the end of a dirt road on the shore of Mono Lake, just outside of Yosemite, and set up our camp for the first of hundreds of times. It's a process that soon becomes second nature to us, but at this point is new and confusing. We pull down our folding table and chairs from the roof and set them up next to the van, along with our portable camping stove, to make the outdoor kitchen. Then we raise the roof of the van from the inside, which unfolds tent fabric to open up an extra three feet of space, allowing us to stand comfortably inside. There are movable panels around chest-height that create an "upstairs" bed platform for sleeping, or can be stacked together to give

us room to walk around inside. Finally, we spin the two passenger chairs around 180° to face backwards, making a living room area. Hey presto, it's a house!

John and I are exhausted from the intense last few days of packing and preparation, but Lilly is so excited that she keeps leaping back and forth between her bed and our bed. The cold finally draws her into her sleeping bag and we all fall asleep.

It is a freezing night, literally – my water bottle freezes solid. Not long after I fall asleep, Lilly wakes up crying from the cold so we pull her into bed with us. That makes three bodies attempting to sleep in a space only a few inches wider than a single bed. As much as I love being close to my family, I tend to prefer sleeping without a knee denting my spine and my face pressed into a tent window zipper.

A couple hours of fitful sleep later, I am re-awoken by strange scuttling noises, and see John fiddling with his headlamp. He shines a light down and we both peer over the edge of our bed. Caught by surprise in the sudden beam of light is a cute little white mouse. For a split second, I see his red eyes looking up at us from the depths of our trash can, and then he vanishes under our bed. We start discussing traps or enticements to get the mouse out, but our half-asleep brains can't process such a tricky problem, so we just take the trash outside and fall back asleep, promising ourselves we'll solve it in the morning.

What feels like only moments after I fall asleep for the third time, I awake with a start at the sound of an engine approaching. Beams of light shine in through our windshield and bounce eerily around the fabric of our tent. I am not at all used to this idea of sleeping in a public place in the middle of the wilderness, so the arrival of a stranger in the night is intimidating. I push aside thoughts of theft or assault, and unzip my window and peer out. A beaten-up old car parks nearby. I wonder if I should go find the can of bear spray that is our only weapon, but I don't want to take my eyes off the vehicle. There is some movement and a headlamp beam flickers around. I watch as long as my weary eyes let me but eventually fall asleep again.

Dawn comes too soon, and I curse the bright sunlight for waking me so early. I feel the warm rays of the sun heating up our tent and I

reluctantly open my bleary eyes. My groggy brain remembers where I am and turns on in a flash.

Did the mouse eat all our food?

Has the mystery person outside stolen our camp chairs?

And, is Lilly frozen to death in her sleeping bag?

I turn to face John so I can throw these concerns at him. I see one eye peering out at me from under his sleeping bag. It does not look like a happy, well-rested eye, so I leave it alone and climb out of bed. Lilly is buried so far into her sleeping bag that I can't see her. In a motion that is to become a regular habit on this trip when we reach colder climates, I poke the pile of fluff to elicit sufficient movement to confirm life. Yes, being a mother makes you weird.

I open the door to check on our various belongings strewn around outside and see a figure wrapped in a sleeping bag lying in the dirt. He sits up and greets me when he hears my door open, "I think I have frostbite, could you take a look at my foot?"

And that's the first of hundreds of chance meetings that form the true backbone of this story.

Seventy-one-year-old Joe had been camping up in the mountains by himself. The cold front caught him by surprise, so he'd hiked out in the night to his car, driving only a short way before seeing our van and deciding he was too tired to continue.

"I haven't slept under a roof since April," he assures us. (It's now late September.) He explains that he only sleeps in his home during winters, and isn't going to let this cold front stop him adventuring outdoors for another couple of months. It's so inspiring to meet someone of his age who can hike into the high Sierra by himself, sleep outside, wake up and plan his next trip. *Wow, I think, can I be like Joe when I grow up?*

He tells me that he hasn't been able to feel his toes for almost 24 hours. I gingerly peel back a white, cotton sock from a wrinkled, leathery leg. The foot underneath appears almost white in color, and is swollen hard to the touch. I dig out my wilderness medicine notebook from our first aid kit, (didn't think I'd be using it less than 24 hours into the trip), and try to compare photos and descriptions. "If it's badly

frostbitten then you should leave it frozen and get to a hospital. If not, just let it warm up and it'll be fine." But how to tell the difference? I'm no expert and there's no cell reception to do more research.

We invite Joe to share our breakfast, glad now that we splurged on *four* plates instead of only three when we packed the van. Yes, those are the kinds of big decisions you make when you have a tiny home! He is grateful for the scrambled eggs and coffee, but he won't listen to my advice to go to the hospital. It's the typical US problem – he doesn't have insurance so can't risk getting slapped with a crippling bill. He simply puts his shoe on and drives away. Ironically, after we cross the border to enter the "developing" world, no one we meet worries about health care costs.

I think about Joe over the next few days, wondering what became of him. He wrote down our blog website but he didn't even own a cell phone, so I don't expect to ever hear from him. It is our first experience of having a personal encounter with someone whom we'll likely never see again. Welcome to vanlife – this is going to happen to us hundreds more times.

We watch Joe drive away down the dirt road back to the highway, then look around at our new home in disbelief. This time yesterday we were normal people in a normal house. Now, just 24 hours later, we are living – sleeping, cooking, homeschooling – on a wide, sandy beach in front of a glassy lake, with nobody in sight. It feels surreal. Are we really doing this?!

I sit at our fold-up table outside, guiding Lilly through her reading lessons, while I watch seagulls cruise over the mirror-like water in front of me. John stands barefoot in the sand at our stove, preparing lunch. We explore the limestone tufa formations, noticing osprey nests balanced on top of the larger ones, for a break between reading and math classes. I could get used to this.

Except for the not-sleeping-all-night part.

Postscript: A couple weeks later I got a mysterious message via our blog's Contact Us page. It was from a nurse who was treating a patient

who'd asked her to send us a message. He wanted to let us know that his toes were damaged but he was going to be ok. She assumed we must be his family since we were the only people he was contacting. At that point we were well into Mexico. I responded asking if we could help in any way, but never heard back.

I like to imagine I'll be as tough and adventurous as Joe when I am in my 70s. But I hope not as alone.

Lessons learned during our first few days of vanlife:

1. Make slow, careful movements inside our tiny home. We've moved from a 2,000 square feet house to a 70 square feet van. Consequently, in the first few weeks we are constantly stubbing our toes, hitting our heads, and banging our knees.
2. Sleep without moving. John and I have slept hanging from rock faces in Yosemite and in small tents on the ground, but for most of our 15 years together we've slept in a queen-sized bed. This barely-larger-than-a-single-bed thing is going to take some getting used to. I wake up with an aching back the first few weeks, but my body soon adjusts.
3. You don't need more than three shirts! I loved selling/giving/throwing away most of our belongings in preparation for this trip. Now we each have only one drawer for clothes, and we know the location of every little thing in the van. If we don't use it regularly, it's gone. I love the feeling of having less, and using every single thing we have.
4. We have a great kid along for this crazy ride. Lilly's bed is basically just a shelf, barely wider and longer than she is, and we only let her bring a small handful of her favorite toys along. But the first morning she woke up and said with a big grin on her face, "I don't want to go home, I want to sleep in the van again!" I'd call that success.

# MEXICO

*We drove 4,250 miles over 11 weeks in Mexico.  
September to December, 2017.*



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## WELCOME TO MEXICO

**W**e turn south and head for the border, with a few stops on the way to visit friends and explore the spine of jagged peaks that line the highway in the Eastern Sierra.

Crossing the border feels momentous. I've been to Mexico several times, even entered via land borders before, but I've always returned within days. This time, as I explain with great enthusiasm to the border guard, we will not be returning to the US – we'll be exiting Mexico on the other end of the country into Belize! He's not impressed, and simply stamps our passports for a standard six-month visa.

The guards searching the vehicles have much more enthusiasm for their work. We watch as the cars in front of us are entered by multiple men – trunks opened, back seats tipped down, engine examined – and we initiate a performance that we are to repeat dozens of times over the next three years:

Step 1: John smiles broadly from the driver's seat and cries, "Buenos dias" to the approaching police officer, whose face is fluctuating between distrust and curiosity. We have about ten seconds before he makes up his mind whether we are friend or foe.



Step 2: Lilly leans over John's shoulder to smile at the police officer through the window and shout, "Hola!"

Step 3: John reclines back in the driver's seat and I lean over to talk in Spanish. I tell the police officer about our trip and ask for recommendations of where to camp safely that night.

Step 4: Police officer peers briefly over John's shoulder into the back of the van at Lilly and waves us on, "Buen viaje."

Aspiring drug smugglers take note: if you have a small child and can learn to speak Spanish, you could have a successful career.

A moment later, we're driving through the town of Mexicali. I can't believe we are really here! For the first of a dozen times to come, I am reminded of the power of this man-made line in the sand. People are suddenly shorter and darker skinned, there is a vibrant feeling of life and color and noise all around us, and of course everything is in Spanish. We focus on the basics – find an ATM to get local currency (pesos) and then get far away from the border area before looking for a place to camp.

Our excitement and feeling of freedom is overwhelming. We had planned to go to a pay campsite for our first night in Mexico to get our bearings, but the web of dirt roads by the coast is irresistible. I zoom in on Google maps satellite photos and search for a break in the hillside of cactus that could get us out to the ocean. I trace a faint line with my finger on the screen that seems to reach all the way to the ocean from the highway. Let's try it!

A couple of failed attempts later, we arrive at a wide open beach with nobody in sight. The dirt road we've been following ends when it reaches the sand, but we see myriad tracks that extend out closer to the water. John states the obvious, "I bet we could drive the van closer to the water to camp for the night."

I heartily agree.

We confirm that we're still above the high tide line, then John shifts into 4WD to follow one of the tracks into the sand. We get about 20 feet before the tires start spinning helplessly. We try backing up and get stuck again.

## *Monkeys on the Road*

I hop out and look at the van. “Yup, it’s stuck,” I helpfully shout to John. What would he do without me?

Lilly climbs out and starts playing in the warm sand as the sun starts to set around us. It’s a novel feeling to carry our entire home with us – we have food and shelter and the equipment to get ourselves unstuck, so there’s no sense of urgency.

I dig a track in front of and behind each wheel and John makes a little forward progress by rolling back and forth in the space I’ve dug. We repeat the process a dozen times until we’re finally back onto harder sand. It’s now dark and I call Lilly over as we set up camp for the night. She’s barefoot of course, and we don’t find her flip-flops until the next morning. My raised-on-a-farm husband looks at all our tracks, smiles and says, “Damn, it feels good to be a redneck.”

We sleep warm in our beds that night, listening to nature’s sound machine of endless crashing waves.

In the morning, I peek out of my window to discover the ocean has disappeared! The tide has gone out and it’s now a quarter mile from the van to the water’s edge. It’s an endless playground for Lilly – tide pools to catch hermit crabs, sand islands to run between, and knee-deep warm water to splash in. We walk far down the beach to explore and find an enormous, dead turtle. I sit next to him on the warm, wet sand, studying this interesting body that I’ve never seen so close before, thinking about how he ended up here.

By late morning we’ve finished Lilly’s school lessons for the day and it’s high tide. Lilly is absolutely delighted to be playing in the shallow, warm ocean – she can’t stop jumping and laughing as she splashes in the water. And John declares, “I’m not going to wear a shirt again until 2018.” But we need to get moving if we’re going to find another safe place to camp before dark tonight.

That’s when I have a revelation. We don’t *have* to move on today. We don’t *need* to get further south every day. We’re not in a hurry anymore!

After 10 years of Silicon Valley living, it’s strange not to have a deadline or a goal. Yes, we’re going to Argentina, but it’s not a race, it

doesn't even matter if we don't get there. This is our experience, now. It's not about rushing to the next place.

So, we stay another night. And then another. No list of tourist sights to check off. Just a deserted beach with our little family and no other humans for miles. Delighted by passing dolphins, surprised by visiting stingrays, entertained by hundreds of hermit crabs. Taking our time to cook good food and not feeling impatient with homeschooling. Listening to Lilly's imaginative stories, drawing and coloring with her, reading her story after story. It's so rare for us to have time to just be together. And it's so liberating to travel in a van so we don't have to commit to any schedule – we only leave when we run out of water and food.

Mexico swoops down from the US like a backwards J, but on the west side of the country is the 760 mile-long Baja peninsula reaching down into the Pacific ocean. We're driving down the east coast of this peninsula, rather than the Pacific side, hence enjoying calm water and sunrises rather than big waves and sunsets.

About a third of the way down Baja, we decide it's time for our first shower since crossing the border. We've been "wild camping" so far, meaning that we just park in the middle of nowhere for the night, so there are no facilities like bathrooms. It does feel slightly unnerving to set up our beds and kitchen out in the public thoroughfare, with no idea of who might pass by, but it's worth it to camp in such beautiful locations.

We cruise down a roller coaster hill into the little village of Bahia de Los Angeles and pay for a *palapa* (open shade structure) on the sand with shared bathrooms. Our palapa neighbors are also overlanders, Canadian Brad and Argentine Viky driving from Canada to Argentina with their two-year-old son. They suggest that we join them the next day on a boat trip to see the largest fish on Earth – whale sharks – so we sign up for the \$30 tour.

The next morning, we pile into a small motor boat with three other couples, including our new overlanding friends, and bounce over the small waves into the calm bay. Cutting the engine, the driver points to a floppy dark fin rising out of the water ahead of us. Not the stiff, gray,

shiny fin from horror movies, but still very clearly the fin of an enormous shark. I have barely enough time to register the immense dark shape lurking in the water beneath the fin, when the driver shouts, “Go!” and I leap off the boat.

In the two seconds that my eyes are closed while I jump into the water and right myself, my imagination goes wild. The shark has approached and opened its jaws wide to devour me whole, and when I open my eyes, my last sight on this Earth will be its teeth. And, John will have recorded the whole incident on his camera.

I open my eyes to see the fin rising out of the waves at the height of my face just a few feet away, and swim toward it, against every instinct. Appearing out of the depths of the ocean is an endless fish body, with a huge shark tail waving at the top. I have to swim fast to catch up to his head, but then I cruise through the water accompanying this enormous, gentle creature. I don’t know if he even notices or cares that I’m there, but, for a few precious moments, I am right alongside him as we travel together, in parallel, through the warm ocean.

I study his enormous oval mouth, his oddly small eye, his deep gills, his patterned and scarred body. I keep kicking to stay alongside him, experiencing this crazy sensation of travelling like a giant fish through the endless ocean, never looking ahead of me, only to my left to watch this incredible body as it moves effortlessly through the water. Eventually I’m so out of breath from trying to keep up that I stop kicking and watch him disappear into the distance. Wow!

On an adrenaline high, we stop to snorkel in a peaceful bay on the way back to shore. We spy hundreds of open clam shells on the ocean floor, but none that still house their original residents. John dives to the bottom and scrabbles with his fingers in the coarse, brown sand. He surfaces with a triumphant smile and a heavy, sealed, pair of clamshells in his hand. The rest of us join in and it doesn’t take long before we have a full bag.

The ten of us from the boat trip cook a feast for dinner that night. We boil ocean water in a big pot to cook the clams, and fry butter and garlic with mushrooms for a dip. I didn’t think too much of the clams, but John ate several dozen. The next morning, arising with the sun over

the calm waters, he was running to the toilet clutching his belly. He spent most of the day there. Maybe eating shellfish that you dug out of the sand with your toes and then cooked in seawater isn't the best idea?

Your picture postcard beach view is palm trees and sunset. Here, we have neither. Instead, we get the magic of a full moon rising over a calm, still ocean. An entirely new experience for me.

As luck would have it, we hit the peak full moon while camped here with our new friends. One by one, we stop talking and stare in amazement as an enormous yellow-orange ball crests the horizon. It seems to fill half the sky. And the color is such a strong yellow-orange, nothing like the usual white I usually see. How can that possibly be our moon?

Its reflection on the calm ocean in front of us grows longer and brighter as the moon rises higher. Unlike the moon itself, its reflection is totally white. It paints clear, shimmering, white ripples on the distant ocean, in a triangular shape narrowing toward the sandy shore where I'm sitting, like it's pointing at us. As it gets higher into the sky, the whole beach starts to light up as if it were day. I can see my long shadow gradually get shorter and shorter as if the sun were rising overhead. It's so bright we can walk around with no flashlights and easily see the path between the rocks, even in bare feet. I can clearly see Lilly's face as she sits playing in the sand next to me.

My favorite part of this spectacle is that 12 hours later, I'm sitting in the same spot on the sand, again watching an orange ball cresting the same horizon in almost exactly the same location. But, this time it's the sun. I've always preferred west-facing coasts for sunset-watching, but I'm learning a thing or two about the beauty of moon- and sun-rise.

Heading south from our whale shark camp, we inch our way down the coast from one remote beach to the next, never traveling more than a few dozen miles each day. At each wild camp, the ocean is so still and clear that we can stand in the shallows and see colorful fish swarming our ankles. They bump into my feet when I stand still. When I dive down into them, they don't even swim away from me. It really feels like we've jumped into a giant aquarium.

Unsurprisingly, southern Baja is where Lilly has her snorkeling

breakthrough, so we all get to swim together marveling at the fish, rather than one of us babysitting Lilly while the other snorkels alone. It's wonderful to hear her muffled cries of wonder through the snorkel and see her excited splashes as she points out fish in this magical underwater world for the first time.

Between the wide open sandy beaches with their infinite wild camping opportunities, and the web of dirt roads where we rarely see another car, Baja is the perfect introduction to overlanding for us newbies. We learn to pay attention to our four key systems: water, food, toilet, and trash. As the water and food levels diminish, conversely our toilet and trash fill up. The food effectively moves from the fridge to the toilet, with a short detour inside of our bodies. It's such a simple equation that I never paid attention to while living in a city, but now it dictates when we need to move on.

The other surprising change in our lifestyle is that we now sleep and wake with the sun. When the sun sets, we eat dinner and read books and tuck into bed. We sleep with all the windows open, and wake up to a fuzzy orange glow across the horizon. I watch through the window as the light rays gradually stretch their way across the glassy water, eventually reaching all the way to the sand where we are parked. The seagulls start their loud chorus of calling to each other as soon as the sun touches the shore where they are sleeping, and it's impossible to sleep through them. What a change from waking up bleary-eyed to a beeping alarm clock.

We haven't been overlanding very long, but I'm already enamored by the freedom of this low-cost, simple lifestyle, and am determined to figure out how to maintain it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mary is passionate about travel and the outdoors. Originally from England, she moved to California for its rock climbing and sunshine, worked a season on the Yosemite Search and Rescue team, but then ended up climbing the corporate ladder at Google for a decade to fund her travel obsession.

She has bicycled across Central America, motorcycled across Mexico, driven the length of Australia, and backpacked around Europe, S.E. Asia, and Africa – all as a prelude to the epic drive through the Americas that is the subject of this book. She’s written for travel, climbing, and retirement magazines, and this is her first foray into a full-length book.

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