



“...we must look deep within ourselves to find the source and wellspring for our own personal fulfillment, and sometimes we need to put a few miles under our wheels first.”

# A FULL-TIME RVER'S METAMORPHOSIS

Article and photos by Emily Fagan #99408

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While my husband, Mark, and I were boondocking in Arizona, we got a huge kick out of seeing all the different kinds of RVs that people were living in around us. There were little vans, huge diesel pushers and a host of other types of RVs in between.

But when a mammoth Freightliner truck showed up towing both a big Alpenlite fifth-wheel trailer and a small pickup truck behind it, we craned our necks out the windows to gawk. But staring was hardly enough. We knew these folks must have a great story to tell, and we rushed over to meet them and find out.

A kindly looking man came to the door, introduced himself as Phil, and immediately insisted that we come inside and see their rig. What luck! We never turn down an invitation like that, and we soon found ourselves standing in their living room and shaking hands with Ann, his petite and soft-spoken wife.

Taking a quick glance around the room, we were floored to see two huge residential leather recliners, a generous residential sofa, an exotic driftwood dining table and an oversized, flat-screen TV showing the news. These folks were hardly “camping,” and their rig was as unusual on the inside as it was on the outside.

“You can do anything with your rig you want,” Ann was saying to me as she gestured around the room. “You can have any kind of furniture. Look at this!” She reached behind me and raised and lowered the custom-installed Levelor blinds on a window. “And this!” She pointed to the pretty,

wooden floors that flowed seamlessly into the big slideouts on either side.

Wow. Our full-time RVing rig is lovely, and it’s home, but we’ve kept it pretty stock. However, Phil and Ann Botnick are inventive people, and they are both very handy. Their beautifully customized RV is a testament to the creative way they have lived their lives, evolving and growing and transforming their lifestyle as they have lived full-time in an RV for the past 26 years.

### Starting Out

Now 63 and 68 years old, Phil and Ann’s full-time RVing adventures started in 1988 in New Jersey when they were in their late 30s and early 40s. Phil was a professional diesel mechanic, and he owned a diesel engine repair and used truck sales business. New EPA regulations for plants and employees that had just gone into effect were making business difficult, and the young couple was

ready for a change. “I wanted out!” Ann says. They owned a 1984 Camper Special GMC 6.2 diesel turbo pickup truck and they bought a 1988 35-foot Elkhart Traveler fifth-wheel. The fiver weighed in at 17,000 lbs and, unlike modern equivalents, was stick-built and made of wood.

On their maiden voyage with their slick new rig, they had gone only five miles when Ann noticed Phil looking concerned. “What’s the matter?” she asked. “We need a bigger truck,” he said glumly.

I had to laugh as they shared this story because that’s an experience so many new RVers go through, ourselves included. It is heartening to know that even the most seasoned veterans were once newbies, too. But rather than simply getting a bigger truck, Phil took a 1980 Ford LN7000 truck with a Caterpillar engine and Allison transmission that he had for sale in his shop, and he created one of the first medium-duty haulers.

He cut down the truck box from 18 foot long to just eight foot long, built up the inside with shelves and storage and filled it with tools from his shop. Then he let his employees go, liquidated the business and he and Ann hit the road—free at last.

### The Grand Plan

They were going adventuring, in part to find themselves, but they needed to work as they traveled, too. Their “grand plan” to keep food on the table and fuel in the truck was to do computer-generated engraving at flea markets. Equipped with a special engraving machine, they hit a few flea markets to sell their wares and suddenly realized that this kind of work wasn’t for them.

And that’s the point in their story where they really drew me in. It is so easy, before starting a full-timing lifestyle, to think that life on the road is going to be static, that everything will be “just so” and that things won’t change. The “start date” and getting out the door and away from conven-



Phil and Ann Botnicks' heavy-duty truck and fifth-wheel trailer.

tional life is all that matters. However, once on the road, most long-term full-time RVers end up changing rigs, changing their daily activities and developing and growing as people as the years go by. And so it was for Phil and Ann.

### Finding Their Niche

Phil's background was diesel mechanics, and at one point in his career he had been part of a design team for diesel fuel filters for pickups and motorhomes. The early models of these vehicles had inadequate fuel filters, and they didn't come with a warranty for bad fuel, so he found a great market niche assembling and selling fuel filters for \$500 apiece.

He also found work building custom Freightliner trucks like his own. Just as it caught my eye, his truck was the talk of any RV park he visited. He would have his customers buy their own truck, and then he would build the eight-foot square box, mount the fifth-wheel hitch in the bed and do the wiring for them. Ann installed groovy vinyl stripes on the sides.

After traveling for a while, though, Phil realized he would be happiest if he had some roots and a place to come home to. So, in 1990 they bought six acres in North Carolina and built a 15-site RV park and called it Phil and Ann's RV. For the next 18 years, they lived in their fiver each summer at their park, and Phil made an extra income doing RV repair for guests that stayed at the park.

### The Joy of Boondocking

In the winters, they would hitch up and head to the Southwest, and, like many full-time RVers, they discovered the joy of boondocking. In 1997 they upgraded their rig with the addition of 400 watts of solar power, a 2,500-watt inverter and 30-amp charge controller. This was a big solar power system for the time (although he has upgraded to even bigger components since then), but Phil likes things to be heavy duty for the task at hand.

As the years passed, they found that being surrounded by happy vacationing RVers at their park all summer long made them wish they could get out and have some summertime RVing fun, too. One weekend, they hitched up the fifth-wheel, left the park in the hands of a trusted, long-term customer and went to the Outerbanks to get some fresh ocean breezes. What a shock it was to discover that the sand was too soft for their heavy rig and that it was so big they would be charged for two campsites.

That glitch didn't deter them, however. Homeowners often have weekend getaway cabins, so why can't full-time RVers? They bought a little Falcon class-B, set it up for boondocking, just like its big fifth-wheel brother, and turned it into their summer weekend home for excursions to the beach.

### Perfecting and Upgrading

Continuing to perfect their rig setup as the years went by, they eventually decided it was time to upgrade their digs, so in 2004 they moved out of their original 1988 Elkhart fifth-wheel and into a 2002 Alpenlite 36-foot fifth-wheel. They went to town customizing their new home, focusing on fundamentals first. Phil says their most important upgrade was to add much heavier suspension and to upgrade the wheels and tires to 17.5 inches. He also upgraded the rig to hold 200 gallons of fresh water to make boondocking stopovers even more comfortable.

When the year 2008 arrived, Phil and Ann had been living in an RV for two decades. That year became a transitional one for them as they decided to make some big changes to how they spent their time on a daily basis.

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Phil and Ann Botnick #26436.

One thing that is hard to imagine before beginning a life of full-time RVing is to visualize exactly what you will do all day long, even if you aren't going to make a living on the road. Sightsee? Read? Visit family? Take photos of cool places? It seems that, in many cases, what you do in the first years of full-time RVing is often quite different from what you do in later years down the road.

### Mixing It Up Again

After 20 years of cruising around the Southwestern states in the winter, working at their RV park in the summer and building and selling diesel fuel filters from their mobile workshop on their Freightliner truck whenever opportunity struck, Phil and Ann were ready to mix it up again.

Phil wasn't keen on having dirty hands all the time from his diesel fuel-filter work, and the prices for the parts in his filters had skyrocketed. His one-time \$500 fuel filter now had to fetch a price of \$1,200 to cover costs. Also, for years they had been fixing and upgrading rigs for other RVers who were headed out on exciting adventures to Alaska and Mexico, and they were both eager to travel without having a home port any more. Like divine providence, the faltering economy

stepped in to give them an extra push. In September of that year, when they left North Carolina, they closed their RV park for the last time.

Hurricane Ike was making a mess of the Southern states, so they high-tailed it to the Gypsy Journal rally in Ohio. Arriving on fumes, there was no fuel available in the mountains because of the hurricane, and they discovered not only a welcoming community at the rally, but a great opportunity to provide mobile RV repair services. A new idea was born, and they have been following the major RV rallies around the country offering mobile RV repair service ever since.

Of course, diesel mechanic work is a breeze for him, but Phil has specialized in electrical systems, as he has discovered that electrical systems are often the weak link in many RVs. He installs solar power systems and upgrades for folks that want to dry-camp, and he sells LED lights as well.

They have found that this kind of work is most profitable if they attend two rallies in nearby places back to back, reducing travel expenses and keeping their own personal energy high. When we chatted



Emily and Mark Fagan have been traveling full-time since 2007. Until recently, they split their time between their fifth-wheel trailer and their sailboat, but now they are back on the road full-time. They chronicle their journey with beautiful photos and fun stories at [roadslesstraveled.us](http://roadslesstraveled.us), and their site also includes many pages of tips about the RVing lifestyle.

together in Arizona in late winter, they had a final rally on their schedule in April and were planning to take the summer off to enjoy a little sight-seeing before setting up shop once again at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta in October.

### Coming Full Circle

As Phil and Ann shared their story with me, and as I wandered through nearly three decades of RVing with them, I realized that in many ways they had come full circle. When they set off on their adventures as a pair of younger adults in 1988, they envisioned doing engravings at flea markets as a way to get by. After traveling a circuitous route, they have ended up providing mobile RV repair services at RV rallies. The notion of selling their wares at public gatherings has been a consistent theme for them. They just had to find what was best to sell (mechanical and electrical skills Phil has honed since their pre-RV days), and where best to sell it (at RV rallies where they meet like-minded people who need their services).

I think casting off the dock lines to embark on a life of travel involves lots of bravery and an adventurous spirit. But in the end, we take ourselves and our own likes and dislikes and our unique skills and personalities with us when we leave home. If we are going to find joy, happiness and even an income on the road, we must look deep within ourselves to find the source and wellspring for our own personal fulfillment, and sometimes we need to put a few miles under our wheels first.

Phil and Ann say there is no end to their RV travels in sight, and I'm sure if we check in with them again, in another few decades, we will find their journey has continued to take them on an interesting and winding road. 🚐