Sales of recreational vehicles have increased year after year as they appeal to an ever younger group of staycationers. Moreover, the popularity of RVs, and life on the road in general extends well beyond vacationing alone as more and more people abandon their homes and hit the road. Are these neo-hippies really chasing their dreams or merely making the most of their dire circumstances?

In 2016, RV shipments in the U.S. saw a total of 430,691 units (i.e. equalling USD15bn) which meant a 15.1% increase over 2015 and the seventh consecutive annual increase. The U.K. saw a similar increase in RV registrations. Chinese tourists increasingly prefer RVs to discover the U.S. with and RVs are growing more popular in domestic tourism in China as well (2,000 campgrounds will be added towards 2020). Supposedly, this rise was inspired by the 1999 film Be There or Be Square in which a Beijing native lives out of an RV in Los Angeles. In 2012 American Foster Huntington decided to live out of a van permanently, coined the hashtags #vanlife (used in 1.2 million Instagram posts) and #homeiswhereyouparkit and he became a social media superhero. In his footsteps several other #vanlifers (e.g. this couple) can make a living off ads and sponsorship deals from (outdoor) niche brands mostly.

The popularity of vanlife is also attributed to rising student debts. The average debt of graduates in the U.S. has risen from USD17.5k in 2004 to USD27k in 2014. The autobiography Walden on Wheels recounts the attempts of an MA student to avoid such debts and live in a van.

Modern man has always felt the urge to escape the ‘artificiality’ or ‘social pressure’ of urban life and retreat to the beauty and silence of the great outdoors. This is, for instance, reflected in the popularity of hiking videos on YouTube or TV personalities such as Bear Grills. However, in real life most of us prefer higher levels of safety and comfort and RVs allow the not-so-adventurous to visit, and sleep at, spectacular sites off the beaten track without sacrificing a basic level of comfort.

However, the popularity of the wider #vanlife movement also suggests that many feel a more profound desire to lead a different kind of life. Writers such as Jack Kerouac popularized life ‘on the road’ and festivals like Burning Man, touring rock stars and other nomadic professionals (e.g. pro-cyclists) provide additional inspiration. Recent films (e.g. American Honey and Captain Fantastic) also embrace this post-material American Dream that includes ideas about personal freedom, hypermobility and a radical retreat from the, supposedly, rotten economic system.

A more critical perspective on this trend is that these vanlifers simply try to make the most of an otherwise peculiar situation of low-incomes and high debts in which home ownership is not even an option. With the development of the so-called gig-economy, vanlife may truly become a common practice. In fact, in the early 20th century, mobile homes were invented for leisurely trips, but they were soon adopted by travelling artists and businessmen and construction workers as well. The latter simply moved wherever they could find a job. With further flexibilization of work today, we may very well see similar practices among millennials who were born too late to ever enjoy the luxuries of the job-for-life.

The outdoor sector in general and especially those companies that offer the #vanlife experience for the younger generations (e.g. RV rentals for millennials).

Mixes of urban and #vanlife lifestyles. Possibly offered by some sort of ‘permanent festivals’, akin to Burning Man’s year-round location.