

RVERS FOCUS ON SMILES PER GALLON

Originally published in *The Blade* on Sunday, August 3, 2008

BY RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Jody and Kathy McCollum heard all the talk about rising gas prices and travelers staying close to home this summer. They looked at their 37-foot-long motor home, which gets about eight miles per gallon and costs more than \$300 to fill up.

Then they got in and drove away.

"People always say, 'Oh my god, how can you afford it?'" said Mr. McCollum, a Springfield Township father of four whose RV logged 2,200 miles on a vacation to the East Coast in June. The real question, he said, ought to be, "How can we afford to fly and get a hotel?"

The economy may have hit some road bumps, but it hasn't been enough to force many RVers off the highways or out of the lifestyle they've come to love. Nationally, even though sales are down, RV rentals are up 18 percent and campground bookings are up 23 percent, according to Kevin Broom, spokesman for the Recreation Vehicle Industry Association, which represents RV manufacturers.

That's no surprise to Bob Labadie, president of Labadie RV on Airport Highway, even though business is a little slower than last year.

"I don't think anybody's going to cheat themselves out of a vacation," he said. "They might not go as far, but they're still going to go."

So while five years ago people were renting RVs for big trips to Yellowstone National Park and other distant locales, now more are headed to upstate New York or Michigan's Upper Peninsula, he said.

That's exactly how Stephanie Brown, of Ypsilanti, Mich., has reacted. A couple of years ago, she and her husband took a three-month trip to Alaska. Not this year.

"No long trips are in our plans until gas comes down," she said.

Last week, their 35-foot motor home was parked at the Monroe County KOA campground near Petersburg, Mich., just off U.S. 23. It wasn't an exotic, faraway destination, but as her grandchildren colored on a nearby picnic table, it was obvious why RVs still are so attractive to Mrs. Brown and others.

Just take a peek inside: There's a master bedroom with a TV, there's a microwave, stove, shower, bathroom, and most of the other comforts of home. Then, if you stop at a campground like this one, there's miniature golf, swimming, fishing, everything you could want — including other sociable campers.

One of them on this day happened to be Kathy Hassett, here with her mother and daughter. She has no plans to give up RVing, despite the economy. Already this summer the Westland, Mich. woman has been to Indiana and soon she'll be on her way to the Great Smoky Mountains in Tennessee.

"We're gone every weekend," she said.

She likes the fact that it's a comfortable way to see the country and more cost-effective than many alternatives. A survey conducted this spring by PKF Consulting confirmed her opinion, finding that fuel prices would have to more than double for typical motor home vacations to become more expensive than other forms of travel.

For the McCollums, this was the third straight summer they took a trip since buying their motor home. The first



Clockwise from bottom left: Brionna Smith, 14; Susan Gotts and daughter Taylor Gotts, 13; Stephanie Brown, and Dylan Gotts, 9, at the Monroe County KOA. (THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON)

two took them out West on family adventures that would have been difficult to duplicate by other means.

"The kids love it. ... We've had a lot of memorable things that have happened," said Mrs. McCollum, whose children range in age from 8 to 16. "We wanted to do some longer family vacations with them before they all kind of head out of the house."

Of course, if they were making the decision about whether to buy an RV in today's economic climate, who knows what they might do, she said. Others certainly have been scared off.

Dennis Oswalt, sales manager at All American Coach Co. on Alexis Road, said business is down a bit, as would be expected when money isn't as free-flowing for area residents.

"Unlike an automobile, this is a want item, not a need item," he said.

And unlike a car, a motor home isn't going to get great mileage. But don't bother bringing up the subject with Ms. Hassett. Wearing a pink "What Happens RVing ... Stays RVing" T-shirt and enjoying a warm, sunny day, she wasn't about to worry about something like how many miles per gallon their RV gets.

"We don't have a clue, and we don't want to know," she said. "How many smiles out of it? Thousands."

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

[< previous](#)

[next >](#)