

# A **Kombi** adventure across the Americas

Follow one American family's endeavour to make their dream a reality to escape the rat race and embark on the ultimate road trip adventure in a 1971 Volkswagen Kombi

Words and photography by Jason Rehm



Driving the Cascade Mountain Range in Washington, USA

**O**n his fourth birthday, our son blew out the candles on his cake and made a wish. When we asked what he wished for, he plaintively said “that dad wouldn’t have to leave for work every day.” It didn’t take long for us to realise that his simple request would be the final catalyst to completely change our family’s lives. After living in the San Francisco Bay Area for the past 10 years, we knew we needed to escape the big city rat race and regain some perspective. We finally decided to do it.

Like many before us, we came to a familiar conclusion: road trip! Not the stereotypical booze-fuelled university student hijinks, but something on a grander scale. We wanted an epic adventure that would take us across continents and potentially around the world. We immediately began researching countries, selling our belongings, and invested in a uniquely practical vehicle – a 1971 Volkswagen Kombi – to take us to South America.

After probably too little preparation, we were off... though not quickly. Our old Volksie doesn’t go very fast, but it has personality. Style.

### **CALIFORNIA AND NORTHWARD BOUND**

We started by driving up the Sierra Nevada mountain range and passed through abandoned mining towns, wine country, and verdant farmland. Despite living in California for a decade, we hadn’t ever had the time to explore its farthest reaches. The state is utterly beautiful. It’s also more rural than Hollywood or Arnold Schwarzenegger would have anyone believe. We attended county fairs with tractor races, pig and chicken shows, and pie-eating contests. Prizes were awarded for largest pumpkins, prettiest hens and most daring cowboy.

It didn’t take long for us to learn that our vintage VW gained us entrance into an age-old exclusive club of travellers and wanderers with hilarious and amazing stories. Just driving our kombi into town was enough to stir up nostalgia in folk everywhere we went. All we had to do was park the bus and someone would come running out to greet us and eagerly tell their personal Volksie story. Usually, it started with “Back in ’69 my buddies and I piled into our VW...” and ended with a new friendship. All of them perfect strangers we would have never met if it were not for our vehicle.

### **HOT SPRINGS AND HOT BATHS**

We continued north through Oregon and saw giant waterfalls, misty beaches, volcanic craters, orchards, and ranches scattered all over the state. One little-known place, Bagby Hot Springs, turned out to be a gem and one of our favourite stops. Here, 100km from the nearest town and a 5km hike into the forest, were hundred-year-old tubs carved from the trunks of massive fallen >



The abandoned mining town of Bodie, California, USA

redwood trees. Hot springs have been routed through smaller hollow logs and branches to reach each tub. Miles from anywhere, we relaxed in our own steaming wooden baths in a misty forest with a smattering of snow dust on the ground. It was a magical experience.

As we made our way up the Pacific Northwest coast, we couldn't help but notice that this particular area of the country is a haven for vintage Volkswagens. We even invented a fairly accurate rule of thumb: two VW Kombis always attract a third. Without fail, each time we've met another Kombi driver, yet another would drive by and flash a peace sign or pull up beside us to say hello. We're all part of the same family.

### **PASTRIES IN PORTLAND**

Portland is known for its creative residents, independent thinkers and generally liberal leanings. It's also known as a foodie town, but manages it without being pretentious. People line up around the block each morning for gourmet pastries with names like Tangfastic and The Dirty Snowball at Voodoo Doughnuts.

### **MIGRATING SOUTH**

Our forty-year-old Kombi had no trouble taking us up the still smouldering volcano of Mount St Helens or the drive up the base of Mount Rainier. We continued north towards British Columbia and put the bus on a ferry to Vancouver Island, Canada. Although the temperature continued to drop, we found an idyllic beach near the sleepy town of Tofino. Here, we could park the bus right on the beach and camp at a coldwater surfing Mecca. People come from all over the world to put on their 7mm wetsuits (and dry suits) and surf the perfect frigid breaks.

We spent several weeks in Canada continuing northward until the winter snow storms chased us out. The heater in the old Volksie leaves a bit to be desired in this climate, so we followed the birds and migrated south. Back in the U.S. we panned for sapphires in

Montana and camped among wild moose, bison, and elk in Yellowstone National Park. We drove for days through empty prairie land to reach New York City and then followed the eastern coast down to warmer weather in Florida.

As we drove south, the accents got thicker and the people became friendlier. We camped with 50 other vintage Kombis in North Carolina, shared moonshine (possibly illegal home-brewed liquor) and had a memorable time with this bunch of fun-loving Southerners. We saw the still-present hurricane wreckage in New Orleans and witnessed the residents' resilience in slowly rebuilding their city.

From there, we continued across the Southwest through funky artist enclaves like Marfa, Texas and through the picturesque painted hills of Sedona, Arizona. We drove all the way back across the U.S. to California again in order to enter Mexico on the Baja peninsula.

### **BASKING IN BAJA, MEXICO**

The Baja is unique in that it is one of the most sparsely populated areas in Mexico. It's almost entirely desert that is surrounded by

The reward for us has been meeting so many amazing people and realising that every day is a new adventure. We probably exercise more creative thinking and problem solving skills now than we ever did in our professional lives.



A giant kombi at a Volkswagen bus gathering in Lake Havasu, Arizona, USA


the cold Pacific Ocean on one side and the warm Sea of Cortez on the other. There is excellent surfing, fishing and beach boondocking down the entire 1 250km length. There were a few surprises along the way as well, like an iron church designed by Eiffel, an oasis filled with dates, and densely populated grey whale breeding waters. We spent an entire month exploring isolated beaches, watching the whales spout and breach offshore daily, and filling ourselves with some of Baja's most famous and inexpensive delicacies – fish and shrimp tacos smothered in avocado and spicy salsa.

Once we reached the tip of Baja, we ferried the Kombi to mainland Mexico and continued pushing south. Despite our lack of Spanish language skills, we've managed fairly well and have had only a few problems in Mexico. All of the people we've met have been kind and generous and eager to help us on our journey. Since Mexico manufactured the air-cooled VWs longer than almost anywhere else in the world, they love their "Vochos" too. More than once we have been approached by someone who appreciated the condition of our bus enough to offer to buy it on the street – sometimes running their hands along it saying "bonita"!

We've been meandering the Americas for over six months and have only managed to reach central Mexico thus far. We continually remind ourselves that we are not in a hurry. We've slept in sub-freezing blizzards, been eaten by tropical insects and prepared entire family meals in a coffee pot (or worse). We don't miss any of our old personal belongings, but some people have told us they just love their material things too much to leave them behind. It's understandable that this sort of journey is not for everyone.

The reward for us has been meeting so many amazing people and realising that every day is a new adventure. We have no routines or conveniences and we heavily rely on each other amid the continual uncertainty. This new life has bonded our small family in unimaginable ways.

Life in our Kombi has been an exhilarating experience and we're not nearly finished yet. Over the next six months, we will take immersion language classes and live with a local family before

heading farther south to Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and beyond. Since there is no road connecting the two continents, we will have to ship our Kombi to Colombia in order to continue toward the tip of Argentina. Afterward, the rest of the world awaits. 

*Jason is a former rocket scientist and current kombi nut. This trip is funded by the seat of their pants. Follow their adventure daily at [www.BodesWell.com](http://www.BodesWell.com)*



A day of rest in the wine country of Northern California, USA



The desert landscape of Baja, Mexico