O river trip wanderlust begins with a deeply ingrained curiosity. Two pre-retirement boomers, travelling with our dog, in a decked-out camper van, going with the wind. We both read voraciously and are obsessed with current events as well as how the arc of history has impacted the land and people we encounter. As professional writers (and one of us a musician), we almost always travel on a shoestring budget, with writing assignments in hand and a mission in our back pocket.

Over the past five years, we’ve driven our camper van through the eastern parts of Canada, and criss-crossed the United States, especially during the chilly winter months. We’re drawn to beautiful natural surroundings, historical sights, and a mission in our back pocket.

Why we love it: The Gunnison River (nicknamed the “Gunny”) showcases the extraordinary power of water to sculpt a landscape. This dark grey schist and gneiss are the “basement rocks” of the Precambrian era. Think very old rocks that are extremely hard and resistant to the erosive effects of water and wind. Think Black Canyon. Now the name makes sense.

Rutert National Forest Service Campground, Wyoming
Why we love it: It was just chance that we happened upon a fantastic National Forest Service campground just north of Sundance, Wyoming (yes, the Sundance Kid was named after this spot). It’s quiet, secluded and perfectly situated.

City of Rocks State Park, New Mexico
Why we love it: We were originally planning a quick drive through to look at the park’s balanced rock formations. About two minutes in we were smitten, changed plans and booked a site. The desert campground is about 45 minutes south of Silver City, the skies are incredibly dark (they host a nighttime astronomy program) and the setting – the rocks, open desert, mountains in the distance – is unbeatable.

Chiricahua National Monument, Arizona
Why we love it: This has turned out to be one of our all-time favourite campgrounds. It’s got everything – it’s on the ocean, there is a palm-lined beach and it’s close to the lovely town of Beaufort (never sheltered during the Civil War, so think of it as Charleston SC on a smaller, easily walkable scale). Close to the state park there are docks where the shrimp boats come in, including Gay Fish Company, where parts of the movie Forrest Gump was filmed. We ate our weight in shrimp while we camped here.

Chaco Culture National Historical Park, New Mexico
Why we love it: One of the most remote and least-visited national parks in the lower 48 states, Chaco has it all (well, not quite – it’s a long drive to get gas, food and services). In the black nighttime skies, a small observatory and astronomy program, a high desert canyon landscape that appears largely untouched, and some of the most archaeologically significant Puebloan ruins in the nation. Spiritual is the best way to describe Chaco.

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In our travels, we've found some remarkable campgrounds where we've parked our tires for a longer stay. We admit to a bias for public parks (national, state, provincial) rather than private campgrounds. We're looking for secluded spots surrounded by nature and as far away from retail and Seventies-era RV parks as possible. These are some of our favourites:

Hunting Island State Park, South Carolina
Why we love it: This has turned out to be one of our all-time favourite campgrounds. It’s got everything – it’s on the ocean, there is a palm-lined beach and it’s close to the lovely town of Beaufort (never sheltered during the Civil War, so think of it as Charleston SC on a smaller, easily walkable scale). Close to the state park there are docks where the shrimp boats come in, including Gay Fish Company, where parts of the movie Forrest Gump was filmed. We ate our weight in shrimp while we camped here.

Bayou Segnette State Park, Louisiana
Why we love it: It's just across the river from New Orleans, so you can get to the French Quarter in about 20 minutes. The sites are well spaced, you can have the placidness of NOLA without the downtown city craziness. And the on-site laundry and safe place to pull over and sleep while we’re away or, more likely, we just need a cheap, quiet and safe place to pull over and sleep while we’re getting from A to B.

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Gulf Islands National Seashore, Florida
Why we love it: It’s a short drive to the postcard-perfect town of Woodstock and a 10-minute walk from the campground to the Barnard General Store, including Gay Fish Company, where parts of the movie Forrest Gump was filmed. We ate our weight in shrimp while we camped here.

Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park, Florida
Why we love it: Who would have thought that right smack in the middle of Florida you’d find a wide swath of undeveloped park? Just on the edge of Gainesville, Paynes’ Prairie has well-
for a visit to the nearby Devil's Tower National Monument, Steven Spielberg’s location choice for his blockbuster film Close Encounters of the Third Kind.

**Lazydays KOA, Arizona**

*Why we love it:* This KOA cracked our aversion to the large scale campgrounds aimed at RVers. The spotless property turned out to be a great base for exploring Tucson and the surrounding Sonoran Desert. It’s a popular winter campground for long-stay snowbirds. Loved the park’s lemon and grapefruit trees (guests are encouraged to pick the fruit).

**Sugar Hollow Park, Virginia**

*Why we love it:* It’s part of the city of Bristol, without ever feeling like you’re in the city. When we pulled in to register and asked about Internet connections, the elderly ranger turned pleasantly gruff and told us: “Wi-Fi, Hi-Fi. Nobody wants to go camping anymore!” Of course, it had a ring of truth. Hard to argue.


**Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado**

*Why we love it:* Visiting Mesa Verde on a day trip is spellbinding enough, but staying overnight atop the mesa notches up the experience tenfold. When the day visitors to the cliff dwelling ruins have cleared out, the park becomes quieter and more intimate. The deer come out to graze, the stars pop out overhead and there’s something magical about knowing it happened this same way for the Puebloan people who lived here a thousand years ago.

**Yellowstone National Park (various campgrounds), Wyoming**

*Why we love it:* We joke about Yellowstone being an “Acts of God Theme Park.”

Yellowstone is the first U.S. National Park, established in 1872 by President Ulysses S. Grant. It’s got elevation, so not the best choice for the winter months but a great place to camp from late spring through early fall. The massive park is world famous for its wildlife and geothermal sites including Old Faithful, just one of 10,000 geothermal volcanic vents in the parklands.