

How to Take the Best Road Trip of Your Life, According to a Couple That's Been on the Road for 11 Years



Courtesy of Eric Mohl, Trans-Americas Journey

"It's going to take longer than you think."

GWEN MCCLURE MARCH 15, 2018

In 2006, travel journalist Karen Catchpole and photographer Eric Mohl packed up their New York City apartment, jumped in a Chevy Silverado, and made a beeline to New Orleans for Jazz Fest.

After more than a decade on the road, they've traveled through 16 countries across North, Central, and South America. And they have no plans of stopping

any time soon. The pair freelance for travel publications and run their own blog, Trans-Americas Journey. We called them in Lima, Peru, to talk about how it all started, (not) sleeping in their car, and taking vacations away from the road trip.

Gwen McClure: What you're doing is a dream for a lot of people. You packed up, quit your jobs, and left.

Karen Catchpole: "Yeah, although we took our jobs with us, so it is a little bit different than what most people do. We knew we wanted this to be years and years, [and] we knew we weren't going to bail out. We spent six years planning this as a way...to take our jobs with us from the very beginning. This [required] many years of planning. So not just the dreaming part, not just the fun part, but the responsible I'm-a-grown-up part — all of that had to be done as well."
You planned for six years — how did the idea for the trip begin?

Eric Mohl: "I had given up law, and [from] 1995 to 1999 we were backpacking in Asia. It was somewhere in the midst of that trip that the Internet started to become a viable way to communicate with people. We thought Africa was going to be next."

"September 11 [happened] a year and a half or so later, and we thought, 'why do we always travel so far?' and decided maybe we needed to explore more locally — our own country and our neighbors — and that's where the specifics of this journey came from."

At that point, were you already thinking this could be more than a vacation? A lifestyle, if that's the right word?

EM: "Coming back from Asia in 1999 we realized it [was] possible to make this a lifestyle and that was the goal from the outset. Somewhere along the line we realized we needed to go home, gather funds, and plan this out a bit more, but the goal [was] to make this self-sustainable, and make it our lifestyle."

KC: "We really don't even describe it as a trip, it really is just our everyday reality. It's just that our every day reality is different every day. This is our lifestyle now. It's 10-plus years in. It's what we do."

From a practical standpoint, how do you make this work?

KC: "We don't plan that far ahead."

EM: "We consider 'plan' a four-letter word. We try to keep it as completely free and open as possible. Sometimes you have to plan out a week or two in advance, but it rarely goes beyond that."

"But the day-to-day, we have to figure out where we're heading, do a little research, see what there is, if there are hotels we want to check out — or anything we want to focus on. Then there's organizing, there's also processing my photos or Karen's stories, and creating pitches. Then there's doing the stories and there's actually getting in the car and driving. It really is like four or five separate jobs that we have in keeping all of this going on a day in, day out basis."

KC: "[There's] a constant churn of plan, execute, research, report, pitch, write, repeat."

In terms of the logistics, do you sleep in your Silverado every night?

KC: "We don't sleep in the truck. We slept in the cab one night [during] the entire journey. We have a lot of camping equipment that we used a lot in North America, but generally the majority of where we're sleeping is affordable, local guest houses that have a parking lot that we can fit our truck. The truck is the main thing that we consider when we're deciding where to sleep because we can't leave it on the street. And it's a big truck — it doesn't fit everywhere."

What items do you always keep in the truck?

KC: "Anybody who is going on any road trip of any length should have [these things] with them in the vehicle: a Hydro Flask stainless steel water bottle with

the straw top, because you can drink from it when you're driving and it's not going to spill. If you want to keep something hot, it keeps it hot. If you want to keep something cold, it keeps it cold."

"We obviously rely on things like Google Maps and Maps.me. I drill right down to really pedantic stuff like hand sanitizer, and lip balm with SPF. We always have a Brinno time lapse camera on our dashboard and it takes nifty time lapse videos of everywhere we drive."

Snacks are key to a good road trip. What are your must-haves?

KC: "We generally always have Trader Joe's dry roasted unsalted almonds in the truck because that is the perfect antidote [for] anyone who's getting hangry — which happens on the road."

EM: "Any nuts are really the ultimate road trip snacks. Protein just fills you up when you can't find any other food [and they're] healthy."

How much are you actually driving and how much are you planted in one location?

EM: "The first year we drove over 40,000 miles. Now, we drive [about] 15,000 every year — not very much."

"We're spending six months in one country and then we have to leave because of visa stuff. We'll go to the neighboring country or to two neighboring countries usually, then circle back to where we began and do another six months there. We generally just do small circles, and there's not that much driving."

KC: "We are traveling much more slowly than we did at the beginning and part of that is just the amount of drivable roads — [it's] enormous in the United States and Canada, it's enormous in Mexico. Not so much in Central America. And in plenty of South American countries, there are vast stretches of the country that don't have a road, so the amount of miles you can conceivably do becomes smaller and smaller."

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What about the language — did you speak much Spanish before you left?

EM: "I'd gone down to Mexico a few times and communicated really poorly, but I wouldn't consider myself able to speak Spanish prior to this."

KC: "We have an ugly confession to make: we still really only speak in present tense. We have a fantastic vocabulary, we understand what people are saying to us, they can use any tense they want, [but] when we speak it is almost exclusively in present tense. That's the dirty little secret of the Trans-Americas Journey."

Your primary mode of transport has been your car. Have you been on a plane since you left?

KC: "We've been to the Galápagos Islands three times."

EM: "Every 18 to 24 months we'll go home for a month in December or whatever, just to visit friends and family, but we do not really fly between destinations."

So you take vacations from your trip?

KC: "Exactly. When we go back to the States, that's the 'time off' part. We see friends, we catch up with family, we do all the stuff that takes us out of our real life. And then we come back to Latin America and it's back to the grindstone."

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Is there such a thing as a typical day for you?

EM: "Probably one of 12 typical days."

KC: "There's the day when we know we're going to be driving all day. There's the day like now, in Lima, when we know the focus is [to] plow through this long list

of things that has been on the list for far too long."

EM: "And there are full-on reporting days or just [days] wandering around seeing things."

KC: "But every day has an element of that because at the end of the day, we are in a place that we weren't born in and every day, there's something new about the place we're in."

What's been the most challenging part of making this journey successful?

KC: "Getting enough work. That's the biggest challenge. The rest, somehow, either we've gotten good at it over the years or it's just easier, but that piece of our lives is really a big challenge and it is for every freelancer I know. I don't necessarily think we're special in that regard, but the remote part of the way we work adds just one more challenge to that."

Do you have any fool-proof tips for not getting sick of your travel partner on a road trip?

KC: "Be flexible. Allow for time doing separate things. Maybe one of you is a shopper and the other one isn't, so this afternoon you do things separately. You're on vacation, theoretically, and you're just supposed to be having fun."

EM: "I don't think there is a perfect recipe for that, but having shared interests helps and having some space in your itinerary to do things separately also helps. And you have to come to an understanding of what kind of trip it's going to be. You know, compromise. It's the rule of relationships and life — even more so when you're in tiny spaces."

What's your best piece of advice for someone who wants to do something like this?

KC: "Be clear about what 'this' really is."

EM: "People say, 'Oh I wish I could do that.' Be clear. A working road trip is a working road trip. Do you want to travel? Or do you want to make this a lifestyle? That's the first thing. [If] you want to save up money and go off for a year or two traveling, do that."

KC: "That's fabulous. But do you want a traveling lifestyle? That's a completely different animal."

And more generally — what's your best road trip tip?

KC: "It's going to take longer than you think and you're going to want to stop more than you think, and the worst feeling in the world on a road trip is to be in a hurry."

"[And] I always think that a road trip benefits from having a loose theme. Maybe you're interested in state parks you've never visited before, or maybe you're interested in sports stadiums."

EM: "It's not just about driving. I think many people just don't think about what's in between and you wind up missing a lot. Someone says 'Oh, did you go here?' and it's like 'Wait — I just missed the biggest ball of twine in the universe?'"

"Really what makes the road interesting is all of these things you didn't know about that surprise you; and surprise your friends when you tell them."

KC: "The key is stopping and talking to people who live there. Get a Coke from a little store and start talking to the woman who sold it to you, because that's how you're going to find out about the largest ball of twine — or the really cool museum, or the parade."