

OPINION

Van life grows in housing-stressed Vancouver

**KERRY GOLD >**

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Jaden King, left, and Baylee Talan, right, with their 2004 Dodge Sprinter in Langley, B.C., on Nov. 27.

RAFAL GERSZAK/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Jaden King, 23, and his girlfriend Baylee Talan, 24, have just given up their North Vancouver, B.C., apartment so they can spend the next few months building out a van that will become their new home. They are both chemical engineers who work full-time and make good incomes, but they have decided to save money by living out of their van.

Mr. King and Ms. Talan are part of a well-documented movement of people who've actively chosen to be homeless, not because they can't afford permanent accommodation, but

because they want to save money so they can afford to own one day. Van living, or “van life,” as it’s more popularly known, is a lifestyle captured routinely on YouTube and in blogs.

Mr. King and his girlfriend, who are ardent outdoor enthusiasts, had been watching van life YouTube videos for a couple of years before they decided to try it themselves. Their favourite van life vlog, says Mr. King, is *Vanwives*, about a couple that live in a van with their dogs, based out of Toronto. Another is *Eamon and Bec*, a Toronto-based couple who live and travel in their converted Sprinter Van and who spent three years in Morocco. There are several van life vlogs from people based in Vancouver. This is a subculture that’s taken remote work to another level. Some make it look thrilling. Others discuss problems with mould, the lack of routine, feeling like an outsider, isolation, concerns about safety and what it’s like to wake up in a Walmart parking lot.



The van is parked at Mr. King's parents' home as they work on getting it ready to live in full time come spring.

RAFAL GERSZAK/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

But most of the people living in their vans aren't white-collar professionals like Mr. King and Ms. Talan.

"A lot of them probably aren't working full-time jobs, and are probably doing this to get away from that," Mr. King says. "Or they don't have that kind of income. So this is a last resort. I would say we are on the outside of normal. Our decision was made easier by the fact that it's low risk.

"If we really hate it, we can sell the van and get another apartment. We are out nothing. It's a low-risk, high-reward type of thing."

In Vancouver, the fact that a couple who are making very good incomes should choose to live in a van is also a symptom of a housing market that's shut so many out. Mr. King says the situation does tick him off. Until recently, the couple was paying \$2,244 a month to live in a 650-square-foot, one bedroom with den in North Vancouver. When they moved out, the landlord raised the rent to \$2,500 a month.

"It feels completely unrealistic, I have a friend who I went to school with and he and his wife bought on our street in North Vancouver, a replica of our apartment, a one-bedroom plus den, 650 square feet, and they paid \$720,000 a couple months ago.

"I'm not interested in getting myself into that much debt for a unit that I don't even want."

The plan is to spend as much time outside the city as possible. They've purchased a Starlink kit for their remote WiFi connection.



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It's one thing to park a van in a remote location, but urban van life is far more stressful because it's illegal, and most residents don't want vanners parked on their streets. Van owners resort to "stealth camping" and go to great lengths to avoid showing any clues that they are living in the van. Their vehicles avoid the outside appearance of a camper van and windows are kept covered when parked. They generally pull up late at night and leave first thing in the morning. They dread hearing a knock on the window, and must frequently change locations. And they are constantly on the lookout for a decent restroom and shower; all-night gyms, big box retailers or community centres are good options. Most vanners have car alarms because everything they own is in the van.

In the Lower Mainland there are many such vans parked throughout the city streets, or in beach parking areas, or industrial areas.

Mr. King says there is an obvious vanner parked outside his former apartment building, and there are several vanners parked in the industrial part of Burnaby where he works. Some

are full-sized campers that aren't even trying to be stealthy.

"There's a guy in a big full-size RV out front of [where I work]. He's a nicely dressed guy and he goes to work every day and he's permanently parked on this road," Mr. King says.

"We have scoped out a handful of spots where we think we will be able to get away with it, but the biggest thing is changing spots."



Jaden King was the first in line to buy the 2004 Sprinter van, and the seller, who wanted \$20,000, accepted his offer of \$19,500.

RAFAL GERSZAK/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

He is considering parking in North Vancouver, or outside his workplace, although it depends on how his employer feels about that. His colleagues know about his van living plan and they're supportive, he says.

"Pretty much everyone at work knows now, and people have come up to me and said, 'I'll teach you how to weld.' Everyone seems to be rooting for us."

That includes his parents, who support his decision, he says. They'll be living at his parents' house in Langley, B.C., while they rebuild the interior of their 2004 Sprinter, which has a high roof so they can stand up inside without crouching.

The T1N Sprinter, intended as a commercial vehicle, is a particularly desirable model for vanners. When he went to buy his, around 50 more people showed up. Luckily, he was the first in line and the seller, who wanted \$20,000, accepted his offer of \$19,500.

Mr. King suspects he paid a premium but the price of these older model vans has risen because of this new market for them – which makes them an unlikely housing submarket, under pressure due to demand.

Mr. King says he has seen Sprinter vans for sale online for as much as \$149,000. Another he saw was listed at \$49,000 and sold for \$52,000. Some of the vans are so well designed that the interiors look like studio micro apartments. The Sprinter van is nicknamed the “million mile sprinter,” because of significant mileage that it's achieved, Mr. King says.

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“We looked for a couple of months. With the rise of the van life trend, people know what they have now, so all of them are wildly expensive,” he says.

Mr. King only wants to put about \$15,000 into the rebuild and then he's in it for \$34,500. Considering their rent of \$2,244, after about 15 months they'll start to get ahead on shelter costs and start saving.

For the couple, living out of a van isn't a huge departure from their current lifestyle.

Mr. King said they were always camping and spent little time in the apartment anyway, which he found too confining. When they do buy something, it will be a vacant lot somewhere they can build a tiny house.

“The biggest thing about not doing any old RV for us is we do a lot of logging road driving and I wanted something reasonably capable. Those big RVs are hard to take places. The van is not as capable as my truck, obviously, but it will handle logging roads fine, and this van is a diesel so even better on fuel than my truck.”

Meagan and Justin Tolentino are selling their converted Sprinter on Craigslist for \$39,000. Mr. King has seen pictures of their van's interior and he says it's similar to what he and his girlfriend plan to do.



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MEAGAN TOLENTINO/MEAGAN TOLENTINO



The van has 428,000 km on it, but they say it could go a lot further. About 75 per cent of people who have viewed the van plan on living in it, they say.

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When the pandemic hit the Tolentinos bought the Sprinter and put \$25,000 into transforming the empty commercial vehicle into a micro studio suite, complete with two skylights, kitchen with fresh water and grey water tanks, induction cooktop, fridge and freezer, surround sound speakers, convertible bed/couch, diesel heater, 32-inch TV, waterproof shower, composting toilet and hot-water heater. They filmed the rebuild and plan to publish it on YouTube one day.

Ms. Tolentino said there's a strong market for the vans, which hold their value. Also, they didn't want a "cookie cutter" camper, but something bespoke.

"I think social media and COVID definitely spiked everybody's interest in it."

They lived out of the van for a few months and put 15,000 kilometres on it, but never as a full-time home. The van has 428,000 kms on it, but they say it could go a lot further.

About 75 per cent of people who've viewed the van plan on living in it, they say. Ms. Tolentino says she can relate.

The couple, who are in their early 30s, are selling the van so they can return to Asia.

"Back in 2018, we sold all of our belongings and quit our jobs and left our apartments. We changed our lives completely from nine-to-five and a two-week vacation to an alternative nomadic lifestyle. And I think it's just growing in popularity more and more, especially with the remote jobs people can do."

This week, Ms. Tolentino said she was negotiating with a fourth-year medical student for the purchase of the van, which she plans to live in.