



The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America

# RICK'S ROADS

Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What



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VanFest, Melbourne, Florida



Some folks say that Florida is a good place to be in the wintertime. Some folks state the obvious. While my family and longtime friends in the northeast shiver and cling to their purported love of The Change Of Seasons, I, for one, am quite happy in my belief that 55 degrees is just too freaking cold.

I lived through many of them, and the only change I really relished was the one from spring into summer. The vernal equinox was still very much winter, and the autumnal version was all about death. Winter solstice? Ugh. Just the thought makes me cringe.

In this winter of '24-'25, I tuned myself in to the happy phenomenon of Van Festivals. Why I did not partake sooner, I have no idea, but I'm very sure I will keep on partaking. What great, relaxing weekends, with great, relaxed people.

I got my feet wet by hooking up with the Florida Van Gatherings of Facebook last spring. Ben Mac is our fearless leader, and he does a great job choosing cool locations and getting the word out.

My first FVG was an overnighter at Fort Myers Beach. There were about a dozen vans, we had a yum potluck supper, had the option of staying two nights, and Little Bird did some flying and got some beautiful sunset shots



*Above: Fort Myers Beach*

*Below: Sand Key*

My next one was a considerably larger gathering at Sand Key, just south of Saint Petersburg. Little Bird grabbed some sweet aerial views, Ben finagled us into the prime picnic area in the cool shade, and we had another crazy good potluck. This one was a single-day affair, so we all went our separate ways by sundown.

With a base camp at the end of the road, in Key West, any such meet-up is a multi-day, high-gas-expense event, but if I happen to be on the mainland and can turn one event into two or more, I'll do it every time.



## VanFest: LIFTOFF! February 6-9, Space Coast Daily Park, Melbourne



My first festival. At mid-morning on Thursday, I rendezvoused with several FVG colleagues in the sports complex across the street. Ben had arranged for us to enter a few hours early as a vanavan so we could all camp near one another.

SCDP is a wide open field with a gravelly dirt loop within it. We got choice spots, on the nice grass, right near the stage. I could see and hear the entertainers from my living room chair. Sweeeet.

The best entertainment of all, for me, though, was the other vehicles. With a couple

hundred vans already in attendance by late Friday, there was plenty to check out and plenty of like-minded people to kibbitz with. Add a tall bottle of Captain Morgan and a rack of Cokey-Colas to the party and the sociability was flowing.



*Blue Maxx looking all shiny at VanFest*

I'm sure I looked like a newbie. Just about everyone had an awning or a tent, or some sort of shady extension of the van. I was fortunate to have Blue Maxx facing north, so his big body blocked the afternoon sun and gave me some fine shade to chill in.

The Friday night band was a pretty mellow. I hung out on the edge of darkness and watched some people bounce and dance some. The most striking thing, though, was the planet. A big, inflatable Earth, tied down so it wouldn't roll away, and lit from within. Very cool.









*Friday night sunset*





*Blue Maxx showing off his RAM Pride*

Saturday was sunny and warm, a beautiful winter day. I slept late. It was a bright and clear morning outside, but pretty foggy inside my head. When I finally emerged from my tall, blue, metal shell, I noticed that the couple parked caddy-corner from me were returning to their van on small, 14"-wheel e-bikes.



Ooooh, I had been shopping those for a little while, but I was finding nothing that would work. I have 14" of space between my bed and my back door, but even the folding e-bikes do not fold up tightly enough; the narrowest I had found was still 16" wide when collapsed.

These ones, though, had a nice, short wheelbase that would fit in my space *without* folding. His name was Chad (I think) and he fielded my questions well, even offering to let me ride it around and see if I liked it. I did.



I had gotten a discount on my camping by agreeing to put Blue Maxx on display. *Of course*, I agreed to that. I *love* talking about my home sweet home! I even wrote up a Features & Accessories List and posted it on his windows for all to read. [A couple of people thought it was a For Sale sign. Ha. NFW.]



So, I hung around for a few hours, entertaining guests, as it were. Some came to find out, others came to share and compare notes. I answered questions about the build and gave everyone either a calling card or the QR code to [The Blue Maxx Project](#), my 242-page,





illustrated, step-by-step flipbook about how my rescue van Blue Maxx went from a naked cargo van to a full-time livable RV.

When I felt I had done my display duty, I wandered away, leaving my home wide open, and went to check out some skoolies.



The converted school busses ("schoolies" or "skoolies") really put an edge on the gathering. All the vans were great, but the folks who lived in these were another breed. I toured the inside of a few of those busses. One was done up like a well-to-do's living room, while another was more like a ne'er-do-well's crash pad. One even had a washer and dryer. WTF?!



They were all large, of course, but one totally stood out: Thunderbolt, the Wonder Bus. It was a large tour bus to begin with, and it was bright blue, with a dirt bike lashed to the front, but it had an addition that added both length and height.

I spoke briefly with the owner, a fairly small, kinda long-haired dude who looked to be in his late-thirties. Thunderbolt was the full-time home for him and his family. I asked how many people lived in there. He replied, matter-of-factly, "Seven, plus four pets: three dogs and a cat."

They were one of quite a few skoolie families who looked to be full-timers. One such group had three teenagers: two boys about 14-15 and a girl around 13. What is it like to grow up in that world??





I suppose when it's the only life you know, it just is what it is, and you don't think too much about it. Could be that they think it's the best life ever and they have the world beat. Maybe they're right.

There were several vendors with tents set up, some pitching VanLife products, and a few others dishing out victuals. I chatted with a guy selling a WiFi service thing, but I honestly had no interest in changing what I have; he just looked bored and lonely.





Naturally, there was a huge tent with tie-dyed clothes, bags, sarongs, curtains, and anything you could use a huge tie-dyed sheet for.









There was also a tent giving out FREE BOOZE! No, not a lot of it. Samples. Little plastic shot glasses of their product that you could try. You could try more than one (and I did), and they were pretty good. Their bottles certainly made for a colorful display.



Caribbean Moonshine was their brand name. My favorite was either the fifth one from the left or the second one from the right. I can't remember which. PB&C Cannonball it was called, and the pretty young woman pouring it into it as "starts like peanut butter and finishes like chocolate". And, to my surprise, she was spot-on. Good stuff. I meant to go back to Maxx and get some money and come back and buy some, but it slipped my mind till just now.

The afternoon entertainment had been going on all this time. A solo guy with a guitar had the late-afternoon, hot-sun shift. Then a young married couple took over for the tinted, sun-is-going-down time slot.

I took Little Bird to the west end of the park to get some aerial shots.





*Above: The FVG group, with Earth and stage on the far left  
 Next page, top: a long-range view of the park, with us way in the back  
 Next page, bottom: The FVG potluck supper, right outside Blue Maxx's door.*







The Saturday night band was the highlight of the weekend, though: *Smoking Jackets*. They were a six-man band with high energy. They rocked some Tom Petty, Bruce Springsteen, Pink Floyd, Elton John, Stones, CCR, Marshall Tucker, Eagles, The Band, Dire Straits, Van Morrison and more. Good show!!



They finished just after 10:00 and then an odd thing happened. I had gone back to Maxx for something (wink, wink) and when I came back, there was no music, but a couple dozen people were dancing around in front of the stage. They all wore headphones with green lights on the sides. It was quite a sight.

I quickly figured out that it was the Silent Dance Party. Dancers could tune in to whichever of a handful of feeds they preferred and just dance away without disturbing the late-night peace and quiet. I couldn't join in; all the headphones were taken.



The next day was Super Bowl Sunday. Someone had a projector and would be showing the game on the side of his white van. The festival fee included a Sunday night stay, but I opted to leave in mid-afternoon and go watch the game with my besties, B&J, in Cape Coral. Judging by the many vacated parking spots, it seems as though quite a few others departed with similar intentions.

