Travel and the great outdoors are more or less my everything. With the former in a semi-indefinite holding pattern, the last year or so I found myself leaning on outdoor activities pretty hard for sanity. This prompted my girlfriend and I to start seriously entertaining the idea of a camper van as a means of both getting outside AND traveling in a self-contained and safer manner.

In the middle of our research, we stumbled across a company that provides an Airbnb-style rental service for camper vans, GoCamp (gocampcampervans.com). And because there’s a fleet of curated and vetted options up and down the west coast (and Denver), we figured we can try out a number of different models with alternate layouts and features, get some travel and camping in, and become better-informed consumers all at once.

So in January, we perused the GoCamp website and found our perfect match, a Mercedes Sprinter in Portland named Van’essa. And while the west side of the Cascades was still under its seasonal blanket of clouds, we headed for the dry side to check out the Cottonwood Canyon State Park near Wasco in Eastern Oregon for a quick overnighter.
John Day River in Cottonwood Canyon State Park
Opened in 2013, Cottonwood Canyon sits on the banks of the John Day River and is the second-largest state park in Oregon. The canyon is so deep that cell service is little more than a notion left behind ten miles before the park entrance. It is as remote as it is beautiful and seemed like the perfect place to get away and put Van’essa through her paces.

After a briefing from the van's owner and a run-through of the features and protocols, we left Portland and headed into the Columbia River Gorge. It was raining when we left town, and, as is often the case, it ceased around Hood River. After passing through the charming small town of Wasco we drove across an expansive, wide-open plateau that's home to rolling hills and more windmills than human souls. We were treated to clear views of a pair of Cascade volcanoes shortly before the highway took a slow, twisting descent into the canyon and delivered us into the state park. I am now convinced that State Route 206 might as well be the backdrop for every car commercial from this day forward.

We picked a cozy spot near the river and had that particular tent camping area completely to ourselves—a benefit of van camping in winter that we hadn’t considered. We checked out the day-use area
and took a remarkably scenic hike paralleling the John Day River. Back at camp, we divided and conquered the chores of making a fire and preparing dinner. The fully outfitted kitchen functioned like a champ. As the sun set in spectacular fashion, the wind picked up to the point that the warming power of our fire was nullified. So we retreated to the comfort of the van. We sipped whisky, played cards and greatly appreciated Van’essa’s heating system.

Before retiring for the evening, I stepped outside to take in the sort of star-filled sky that comes part and parcel with distant Oregon deserts. We slept well, and we slept in. Over breakfast, I enjoyed a realization or two—the happy results of an uncluttered mind. I know it’s a limited sample size so far, and I’ll need to try out a few more models and scenarios, but I sincerely feel like this #vanlife thing is for me and probably has been for some time. It’s a shame it took the rigors of 2020 to help me come to that realization. But in this case, I’ll gladly take better late than never. ☺️