

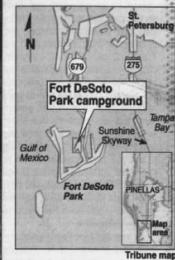


FRED FOX/Tribune photos

Dale Overholt from Morristown, Tenn., and friends sit outside his \$226,000 motor home at Fort DeSoto Park.

“These people, what they want to do is they want to travel. They want to see parts of the United States they've never seen before. But they're spoiled. They don't want to lose the luxury of their homes.”

Trevor Spink
Park ranger



Tribune map

RVs uproot old-fashioned campers

TIERRA VERDE — Americans spent \$1.23 billion on RVs in 1997; the vehicles tend to be most popular among retirees.

By CARLOS MONCADA
of The Tampa Tribune

When Pat and Catti Blaney go camping, they don't travel in a recreational vehicle with television, a microwave and comfortable beds. Instead, they sleep in a tent.

But the Safety Harbor couple were among the few purists camping the old-fashioned way at Pinellas County's Fort DeSoto Park last week.

Most of their fellow campers were dedicated motor-homers, fifth-wheelers and travel-trailer tapers hauling just about every one of life's conveniences to the great outdoors in a home-on-wheels.

“When we were here Thanksgiving Day, there was a guy out here with a satellite dish,” Catti Blaney said. “Now, why would you need that? I mean, obviously you watch football. I guess. But what's the point?”

“If I were dying to watch football on Thanksgiving, I'd be home or at a pub,” Pat Blaney chimed in. “I wouldn't be out here.”

But the kind of camping most people do here has little to do with camping as the Blaneys understand it. Most aren't trying to “get away from it all” when they leave home. In fact, they try to take as much of it with them as possible.

Take Dale Overholt, a real estate agent from Morristown, Tenn. He and his wife, Betty, pulled up to the campground two weeks ago in a \$226,000 rolling palace with a tag that read, “16 Tons of Fun.”

The lumbering behemoth — Fleetwood's 39-foot American Dream — is replete with amenities such as cedar-lined wardrobes, ceramic-tile floors in the galley and bath areas and a 20-inch color TV that rises on a motorized lift in the living room. There's also a washer/dryer, microwave and a queen-size bed.

“Yeah, I guess it is,” Overholt, 73, said with a laugh. “It's a campground. It's kind of what we call ‘roughing it.’ Yeah, I still call it camping.”

He's not alone. Industry figures show there are more than 9 million RVs on the road; 25 million Americans call themselves RV enthusiasts. Last year, Americans spent a record \$12.3 billion on RVs. The vehicles tend to be most popular

among retirees but are catching on with baby boomers who are entering their 50s.

This time of year, many Northerners are towing trailers, or “towing,” as they call it, in the bed of a pickup truck or driving self-contained motor homes south to Florida. And Fort DeSoto Park is a popular place to park an RV or, to a lesser extent, pitch a tent.

The 900-acre park, with a beach ranked among the nation's top 10, is made up of five islands at the southern tip of the state's most densely developed county. It's the only county park that allows overnight camping.

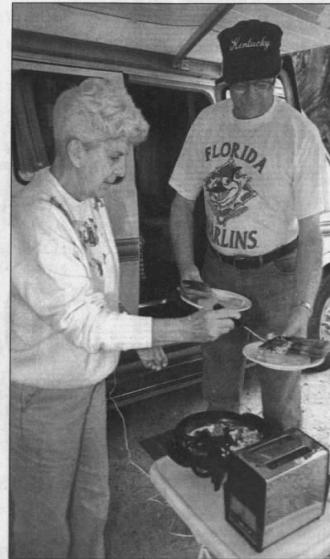
The peak camping season begins after Christmas and runs through Easter, at which point the snowbirds leave and are replaced by local residents.

This is the ideal time to visit the campground — before the return of the oppressive summer heat and humidity. When cool winter breezes make mosquitoes

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Ranger Trevor Spink, above, points out a feature of the park for camper David Hill of Orlando. Left, Dot Dreher puts scrambled eggs on husband Bob Dreher's plate on their journey from Paducah, Ky. Below, a customer entering the campground office gets important information from signs near the doors.



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