

Celebrating Life, Motorhome Style

France and Coe Betten used to take their nine children on long cross-country trips, packed inside one RV. Now, it's payback time.

By Ty Adams

With all 13 of us inside the motorhome, heading down the freeway, I am now officially afraid for my life. Before this moment, it was just a sort of general nervousness. But with wall to wall people, five brothers “helping” another brother to drive, a keg of beer in the kitchen and a malfunctioning air conditioner in the middle of Florida in the middle of August — I'm pretty sure the trip is going to end in Shakespearean fashion.

Now they've all started singing at the top of their lungs, “The piggily poor ol' sliggily slave has giggily gone to riggily rest!” I can see only two choices at this point: start praying or join in. Well, momma raised a good boy, but she didn't raise no fool. If I'm going to riggily rest, I'd rather go down singing. I pipe up just in time to join the chorus of “She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain.”

Allow me to explain: The sweating, singing people around me are all family — the Bettens: six brothers, three sisters, a mother, a father and an aunt. I'd written an article for *Lifestyles* about the parents, Monaco owners France and Coe Betten, describing how they'd been brave and insane enough to put all of their children inside a 24-foot motorhome for months at a time on several cross-country trips throughout the 1960s and 70s. Well, 15 motorhomes and many years later, the nine Betten “children” (now grown, some with children and grandchildren of their own) have decided to give their parents the ultimate gift — or maybe it would be better described as payback — a three-day re-creation of those infamous trips. They've invited me along to witness the chaos for a follow-up story.

They're calling it a Life Celebration, and they're doing it in grand fashion. The initial idea was to re-create a photo taken in 1964 for the *South Bend Tribune*. It was a shot of Coe, France, Aunt Kaye and eight Betten children on the way back to New Jersey from one of their extended trips to California. Now they'd like that to happen again.

“Actually, this has never happened,” says Terry (number one). “I was already out of the house when Brad came along, so this is the first time all nine of us have taken a trip together.”

In order to get everyone in Melbourne, Florida for the photo re-creation, Scott (number three) drove from Miami; Mark (number six) drove from Tampa; Cheryl (number two) flew in from Nebraska and Aunt Kaye flew in from California. But they didn't stop there. They kept the gathering from France and Coe as a surprise, telling their parents that they were sending them on a vacation to Rome (although they meant “roam.”)

The couple's 2003 Executive was packed in secret and taken to a private hanger at the airport. A limousine arrived for France and Coe, complete with a “personal travel

attendant,” who was really just a friend affecting a British accent. They all drove to the airport and were escorted into a private plane.

“They think they’re going to Rome to see the Pope,” said Chrissie (number seven). “But they’re mad. They said they’d rather go on a motorhome trip.”

And after a short taxi on the runway, France and Coe got their wish. The Executive, decorated in balloons and fully loaded with all of their children, emerged from a hangar and circled the parked plane. A decal on the front cap proclaimed, “Motorhome to Roam.”

The entire gang of 10 (plus an overwhelmed writer) piled out for a smile-filled reunion. It was like watching a co-ed football team take the field. They stepped out from oldest to youngest: Terry, Cheryl, Scott, Randy, Rick, Mark, Chrissie, Laura, and Brad — and then, of course, Auntie Kaye. They were dressed appropriately in the same clam diggers they had been made to wear as children, as well as “Betten Bunch” jerseys, numbered according to age. From there, we all got back into the Executive and began heading south on a road trip to Stuart, Florida.

The Heat is On

Randy, (number four) is the driver. I know from writing the last article that, as a kid, he spent most of his time in the back of the motorhome with his nose on the floor as punishment for raising hell. I’m soothed.

“Can you tell if the entry step ever went in?” he asks. I look. It didn’t.

“Well, just don’t get too close to anything on that side,” Mark jokes.

“Oh my gosh it’s hot in here,” Laura (number eight) says. “Can’t we get that air conditioner working?”

Rick (number five) sips from his plastic cup and points at me. “He was back there for thirty minutes trying to get it to work,” he says. “Let’s blame him.”

It’s true, as the official Monaco representative, I did stand at the inverter and switch every setting, acting like I might have a clue what I was doing, but for all I know I programmed the coach to self-destruct in five minutes, which could very well happen anyway if we don’t get some air on. I’m feeling the urge to sing again. Instead, the decision is made to pull over and call tech support. As Mark steps into the blazing heat with a cell phone, I’m really hoping that our tech support is as good as I’ve said it is in all that marketing material.

Mark is back in under three minutes. We’re saved. The tech knew just what the problem was, something about a fuse, and he guided Mark through the troubleshooting. I will never second-guess my own marketing again, especially when it comes to the techs. The

cool air begins to flow and now I'm ready to say a prayer – or at least a quick “thank you.”

Back on the freeway, they still haven't told France and Coe the details about our destination. What I know is that we're headed for a house on an island, apparently a large house because there is no way we'll all be able to sleep in the Executive. Laura had joked that, “The question for the weekend is, who's going to get voted off the island first?” All I know is there's no immunity for the guy who couldn't fix the inverter.

After many more rounds of elbow-to-elbow singing and storytelling, we've arrived ... somewhere. Randy maneuvers the Executive down narrow residential roads, joking with France that he's lost. “Wouldn't be the first time,” France says.

A wrought iron gate presents the next challenge. We're so close. We can see the house across the moat that surrounds it, but the opening in the gate comes after a sharp left turn and it's barely wider than the motorhome. Like a SWAT team taking positions, the brothers file out of the coach to begin the guiding process, except Rick, who stands behind Randy for play-by-play moral support. We inch forward, then back out. Randy cranks the wheel hard left, and then is instructed to crank it to the right and back out again.

“What do you want me to do?” he asks, as Scott makes vigorous gestures in front of the coach. “What does that mean?”

Mark raps urgently on the outside of the coach several times during the inch forward/back out process. The edge of the gate must be just as close as it looks from inside. Finally, after gentle conversation is exchanged between Rick and Randy inside the coach, the decision is made to disconnect the tow vehicle and give it another shot. It works. We've landed.

Once parked, the rest of us climb out like astronauts back on solid ground after a dicey landing. I congratulate Randy on his skill behind the wheel. “Well, you haven't seen the dent yet,” he says. “Just don't tell my parents. We'll break it to them slow.”

But judging from France's stories of bent tail pipes igniting the rear of one motorhome and a second motorhome stuck in a ditch while Christmas tree hunting in Georgia, I'm not sure it would have been a true Betten adventure without the dent.

The Executive is unpacked, those staying inside the house are shown our rooms, and then we do our best to duplicate the famous photo of 1964. For the remainder of the time, they've spared no expense, including meals provided by a private chef and catering staff and a night of live entertainment. Let the reminiscing begin.

Gifts Given

In addition to the trip itself, the airplane, the beautiful house and the catered food, the Betten children have more surprises planned for France and Coe, including a story about

this celebration in their hometown newspaper in Ridgewood, New Jersey, and a DVD collection compiled from over 100 of the family's old 8mm films, edited together and put to music.

The images of their lives flash on the screen, including the many destinations they visited on those cross-country trips: riding horses in Yosemite, pointing at the faces of Mount Rushmore, driving through Redwoods, watching Old Faithful geyser, feeding a wild bear cub. Wait a minute—feeding a wild bear cub? I begin counting appendages. How could all of these people come out of their childhood alive, much less with all their fingers and toes?

I'm also amazed at how integral motorhomes have been to every aspect of their lives. From their beverage truck business, Betten Trucks, to the more usual uses like visiting their 24 grandchildren and six great grandchildren, France and Coe did it all with motorhomes.

Recently, when Cheryl was severely ill with West Nile Virus, it was the motorhome that allowed France and Coe to make the trip from Florida to Nebraska to support their daughter and her family. "She was in a coma and they had administered last rites, but she came out of it," Coe says. "We stayed up there [in the coach] for two months."

No Turning Back

Something happens to me as the weekend progresses. I'm becoming one of them. I find myself wrapped up in intense games of Liar's Dice until three in the morning, fully involved in a traditional egg cracking contest and the Betten whiffleball golf tournament, and tiptoeing around minor family scraps. As Brad says, "You put nine of anything together and see what happens. Put nine cats in a box. There's going to be a little friction." It feels just like home.

I know there's no turning back when Laura hands me one of the matching striped shirts they're all wearing on day three. As kids, if they were going somewhere with big crowds, Coe would dress them all this way so she could find them easily. I think this means that the tribe has accepted me, which is great because the Betten way of life is contagious. It's a lot of fun, and most of all, I'm touched by their extreme gratitude for what they have and their passion for celebrating life.

"We've had a couple close calls, but for the most part, we've been so fortunate when it comes to health." France says. "What a blessing it is that we're all here alive and well 42 years later. That's not something you can take for granted."

France had a close call of his own at the beginning of 2006. He was hospitalized and placed in the intensive care unit after a severe reaction to medication. Doctors were not hopeful for a recovery and told the family to prepare for the worst. Once again, the Bettens gathered for support in a time when death seemed imminent, but France regained his health.

“I think a lot about the fact that we almost lost our father a few months ago, and this is a second chance,” Mark says. “Most people don’t have the opportunity to have their life pass before their eyes this way. He literally gets to write his final chapter.”

In an interview for the story, I ask Coe to recall one of the best times she’s ever had on a motorhome trip. “This weekend,” she says. “Today.”

So that’s what it is to live in the moment. And as we get back in the motorhome for the rollicking ride home, I’m beginning to understand something that the Bettens obviously figured out a long time ago: living for the moment is what the RV lifestyle is all about.