

No Boundaries: Sharon Pieniak '89

At first glance snails and bears don't appear to have much in common, until we come upon **Sharon Pieniak '89**, a Bruin traveling the country in *The Silver Snail*, her 2007 20-foot Airstream Safari. Sharon is living her dream of being "location-independent" and knows no boundaries, except perhaps that pesky little thing called land. To fully understand her journey, we must first rewind the story a few years.

OPERATION SILVER SNAIL

Operation Silver Snail was conceived after Sharon took a solo road trip around the Canadian Maritimes with her dog Riley in the summer of 2007. They spent six weeks traveling coastal roads and camping outside or in the car, with an occasional hotel room thrown in for good measure. Sharon readily admits that the experience changed her life and made her hungry to see and do more around the country, including providing opportunities to pursue her passion for photography.

Luckily, Sharon had already structured her life in a way that was relatively "untethered," at least compared to most professionals. After Padua, she studied graphic design at Boston University and eventually resided in Portland, Maine, where she launched her graphic design business called Bluecat Media (www.bluecatmedia.com). Having traveled with her work before, Sharon knew that she could journey for longer periods of time without having to return to any particular home base. Instead, she would redefine home base to be wherever she happened to be at the time.

Upon returning from the Canadian Maritimes, Sharon first explored purchasing a sailboat, but found them to be beyond her price range. A friend suggested an RV, which Sharon decidedly rejected as not her style, until she thought about the possibility of an Airstream trailer. "I'd always loved those silver bullets



and, in my mind, they weren't really RVs, they were works of art. The Airstream trailer was an icon, a symbol of freedom – one that has inspired generations to not only travel, but to live passionately, with spirit and *style*." Less than a month later, Sharon was happily towing home her very own Airstream.

THE SNAIL TRAIL

Sharon chronicled the ups and downs of her two-year journey with Riley and her cat Peyote on

the "First Snail Trail" in her travel log *The Silver Snail* (www.thesilver-snail.com). "I considered this an experimental immersion course in the modern nomadic lifestyle," she said. The trio criss-crossed the country from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon, and what seemed like everything in between. Sharon particularly loves coastal areas, drawing both strength and peace from the ocean surroundings. The trip included exciting



adventures exploring new places and meeting new people, as well as hard times when long-time companion Riley passed away. “We were able to spend practically every minute of every day together. I am so thankful and lucky to have had him by my side for almost twelve years.” Toward the end of the trip, new canine pal Harley claimed his own spot in the Toyota 4Runner cab.

After wintering in Maine, Sharon is on the road again in a more permanent independent living arrangement. She improved the rig to a Nissan Titan King Cab 4x4, put her remaining apartment belongings in storage, arranged for residency and mail forwarding in Florida, and set out to enjoy her mobile home base. Sharon professes that she has a slightly different attitude this time around. “I’m familiar with the ropes now and don’t have an agenda or must-see list. Instead, it’s a lifestyle now.”

PERMANENT VACATION?

Though the modern nomadic lifestyle might feel to some like a permanent vacation, Sharon is quick to point out that work still gets in the way, no matter where you live. “I am extraordinarily lucky that I might get to work next to a beautiful lake or in a quiet campground, but I still have to pay the bills,” she explained. “I have flexibility to schedule my work, but it is still a priority in my life. I am not on vacation.” When not working on her media business, Sharon embraces the freedom to pursue freelance photography, an activity she considers to be the best of both worlds – one that is fun and a potential income stream at the same time.

Sharon laments one downside of the lifestyle, and that is connecting with people on the road. “I miss being able to call up close friends to meet me out for dinner one night. It is hard to form those relationships on the road when you aren’t in a particular locale for very long.” On the flip side, Sharon has met some wonderful people along the way, from locals, to short-term vacationers, to those who also share her location independence. “It can be very difficult to say goodbye to people I’ve really connected with,” she says. “It can be heartbreaking,



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Examples of Sharon’s photography can be found at www.tracesofplaces.com.

but it’s easy to stay in touch and chances are we’ll meet up again.”

Reveling in the ability to follow her wanderlust wherever it might take her, Sharon is bound only by the shores of North America (until that sailboat might someday become a reality). All in all, she wouldn’t trade her life for anything, as evidenced by a choice quote from Robert Frost on her travel log:

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood,
and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*