

Ultimate Essential Packing List for Van Living

Taken from <https://childrenofwanderlust.com/ultimate-essential-packing-list-for-van-living/>

Introduction

Having spent a lot of the last year living and touring in our van (a classic Hymer motorhome from 1991), along with our 3 children, we now have a fairly good idea of which things are important to take and have away with you, for a smooth life on the road. A lot of these items will actually be relevant to a trip away of any length, though some of them are especially useful for longer term van living. Most of the things are also potentially useful for travellers of all kinds, with child specific items saved until the end of the list.

When you do get to start packing for a long trip, the temptation is to try and take everything. There are always so many 'nice to have' items. However, you need to always be thinking about the size and weight of each thing in turn. Most importantly, you need to ask yourself, "am I really going to *need* this?". It is surprising how little you actually require on a day-to-day basis, which can feel quite liberating. To try and live as sustainably as we can, I also try to source products that have a smaller environmental impact where possible. This is far from a dedicated eco-packing list, but you'll notice my preference for these types of products throughout.

In creating this list, I have tried to not include anything that is *too* obvious. You'll need something to wear, bedding for sleeping, something to wash with, something to eat, and something to eat it off. I'll let you work that out for yourself. Instead, I have preferred to list items that there's a chance you may not have thought of, or that could easily be forgotten. So, here it is, my ultimate essential packing list for van living...

Safety

- **High Vis** - A [high visibility vest](#) is essential for safety in the event of a breakdown (and a legal requirement for all passengers in many countries).
- **Warning Triangle** - Again, usually a legal requirement. We were glad of our [warning triangle](#) when we had to use it after breaking down around a blind bend high in Morocco's Atlas Mountains earlier this year.
- **First Aid Kit** - You are sure to need a first aid kit at some point. While a [full size kit](#) is a good idea, if space is an issue, you should at the least be carrying a mini, [travel-sized kit](#).
- **Carbon monoxide and smoke alarms** - [Carbon monoxide](#) can be a silent killer and should be taken seriously, especially if your van is equipped with any gas appliances (as most are). Fires can also take hold quickly in a vehicle fitted out with wooden fixtures, so a [smoke alarm](#) is also important.
- **Fire Blanket** - It is wise to keep a [fire blanket](#) within easy reach of the kitchen area, just in case a fire starts there while cooking.

- **Fire Extinguisher** - A fire extinguisher can be used to aid your escape from the vehicle in the event of a fire. This small, [non-toxic extinguisher](#) is perfect for use in a van.

Mobile Phone

- **Phone** - Like it or not, this has to now be the number one and most important travel companion. A navigation system, music and film library, photo and video camera, social media and teleconferencing device, internet and wifi hotspot - and, well... telephone, all in your pocket. Crazy really, when you stop to think about it.
- **Charger** - Any phone is useless without a charger. Ones with [extra long cables](#) can sometimes be useful for stretching inside the van.
- **USB sockets** - Somewhere to plug that charger into (as well as any other USB charged devices). It is a good idea to install some [USB sockets](#) into your van's 12v power system, if you don't already have some.
- **Solar phone charger** - If you don't have a permanent charging option (or for when your 12v battery is low), another option is a [portable solar charger](#), with inbuilt battery bank.

Outdoors

- **Picnic Rug** - Great for sitting out on at campsites, or for taking on days out. These [extra large rugs](#) with waterproof backing are perfect for family use
- **Beach Rug** - A picnic rug can double up for this purpose, but for something more lightweight and less likely to blow away in the wind, try a [large throw blanket](#) instead.
- **Beach umbrella** - If you're going anywhere sunny, you'll be sure to want an umbrella for shade as one of your essential beach accessories.
- **Cool Bag** - Great for keeping food and drink cool on days out, picnics or trips to the beach. This [family size cool bag](#) is perfect.
- **Lights** - Putting up [string lights](#) is nice if setting up camp somewhere for a few days and wanting to sit out and enjoy the evenings.
- **Mosquito candles** - As well as lights, candles can also be nice in the evening. [Citronella candles](#) have the added benefit of keeping mosquitoes and other annoying insects away.
- **Mosquito repellent** - If mosquitoes are a problem, you may need repellent. I try to avoid products with the chemical deet in, as it damages plastic and is generally pretty unpleasant. [Vape Derm](#) is the most effective natural product that I have come across, although it is not always readily available in the UK.
- **After Bite** - When you do inevitably get bitten by mosquitos (or bitten or stung by other insects), [After Bite](#) is an effective antidote (especially when applied immediately).
- **Table/Chairs** - You'll want somewhere to sit and eat outside. Some of the roll-up tables are neat, but we're big fans of the [Vango Woodland](#) set, which provides a decent, solid table and 4 chairs, together in a relatively small carry bag.

Kitchen/cooking

- **Barbecue** - When the weather is nice, it's great to be able to cook outside. While I love a proper charcoal BBQ, if using it everyday, you can't beat the convenience of gas. The [Cadac Safari Chef II](#) is a neat, portable and lightweight option.
- **Wok with lid** - Sometimes cooking hobs (or gas BBQs) can lack the power of a hob at home, slowing cooking times. Therefore, a large saucepan or [wok with a lid](#) is essential for speeding things along.
- **Griddle pan** - Not all vans come equipped with a grill (or they can be slow and inefficient if they do). A [griddle pan](#) is very versatile for a lot of different cooking and does a surprisingly good job of making toast or toasted sandwiches on the hob.
- **Ice blocks** - Re-usable [ice blocks](#) can be useful to keep in the freezer (if you have one). As well as using in a cool bag on days out, they can be frozen overnight and kept in the fridge during the day if you find your fridge is struggling to cope in very hot temperatures.
- **Refillable bottles** - Cut down on endless plastic (at least, in countries with tap drinking water available), with metal refillable bottles. [Chilly's Bottles](#) are vacuum insulated to keep your drinks cold all day. [Onegreen Bottle](#) do nice colourful small ones with sports tops which are great for kids.
- **Bamboo crockery** - Tired of everything being plastic? Bamboo crockery makes a nice alternative. For example, this cute [serving bowl](#).
- **Food storage tubs** - We never like to throw food away if we can help it, so always need [storage tubs](#) for leftovers. Stacking food in tubs also makes navigating a full fridge a lot easier.
- **Portable draining rack** - If you plan on washing dishes onboard, a [folding draining rack](#) can be a useful addition for stacking them while they dry.
- **Bottle opener & Corkscrew** - Obvious maybe, but in my world at least, absolute essentials!

Bathroom

- **Toilet chemicals** - With a Thetford toilet onboard, you'll likely want some chemicals in it to stop it smelling (especially in hot weather). I try to avoid the standard blue stuff and instead look for [organic eco-friendly liquid](#) when I can. A cheaper alternative (that is still effective) is to use biological washing liquid tabs instead.
- **Anti bac cleaner** - Topical right now in this age of Covid-19, but also useful to have onboard.
- **Wash bag** - You'll need a wash bag for keeping your stuff together on those inevitable trips to campsite shower blocks.
- **Sun cream** - Essential for visiting hot countries. I find that [Garnier Delial spray](#) is easiest to apply (especially to wriggling children). It feels light, but still offers good protection.
- **After sun** - Obviously, it's best to avoid getting burnt in the first place. It happens to us all though, so good to have some [aloe vera after sun](#) with you just in case.
- **Toothbrushes** - Consider [bamboo toothbrushes](#) as a great alternative to throwaway plastic ones.
- **Towels** - Microfibre ones are great for packing up small. These cute [poncho towels](#) are really versatile for kids and pack into their own drawstring bag.

- **Scrubba** - If you want to be able to do some of your own clothes washing, but don't want to be carrying a bulky portable washing machine, consider the [Scrubba](#). It does a surprisingly good job of washing a few items at a time.
- **Washing powder/softener** - having your own with you is cheaper than buying small doses from campsites or laundrettes.

Campsite

- **Electrical cable** - For plugging into the electric hook-up (ehu), where available. A [long cable](#) is recommended as sometimes it can be a stretch to reach the socket.
- **Electrical adapters** - Not all ehU sockets are the European standard, so a [continental converter](#) (for a 2 pin socket) is recommended.
- **Hosepipe** - For filling the fresh water tank (as not always provided). Any will do, but a [flat food grade hose](#) is good for saving space when packed away.
- **Hose connectors** - Hazelock type connectors for attaching a hose to a threaded tap. The standard size is $\frac{3}{4}$ " , but sometimes you'll need a $\frac{1}{2}$ " or 1 " instead.
- **Levelling ramps** - It's rare you'll be parked on totally flat ground so levelling ramps are a real must-have. Larger ramps can cope with larger gradients, but also take up for space. A decent compromise are these [Fiamma Level Up](#) ramps.
- **Gas** - When travelling through different countries, gas bottles are sadly not all the same. Therefore you will have to keep switching as you go, and may also require different regulators. To avoid this, a worthwhile upgrade is to install a [refillable LPG gas system](#), that can be filled up from the LPG pumps at selected petrol stations. You'll still need a [set of adapters](#) for use in different European countries.
- **Clothes line** - Essential for drying wet clothes. A simple nylon rope will do, but these [retractable clothes lines](#) are quite neat. These [folding clothes racks](#) can be hung outside from a van window, making them useful for setting up quickly for drying a few items. You'll also need some pegs - [recycled plastic pegs](#) are ideal.

Electrical

- **Portable / Bluetooth speaker** - Who doesn't love a bit of music? I've been impressed with the [Ultimate Ears Boom 3](#) - the battery life and sound quality are decent, and it is rugged and waterproof (which helps with kids around!).
- **Fans** - Living in a van can get really hot in summer. If no air-con, fans are essential. These [dashboard fans](#) can be hard-wired into your van's 12V system. Alternatively, the [Endless Breeze](#) is probably the best for plugging into a socket (and use a surprisingly low power draw). Or, just some rechargeable [hand held fans](#) can still make a difference.
- **Solar and controller** - Roof mounted solar panels are another worthwhile upgrade to ensure onboard power even when static and not plugged in for a few days. A MPPT solar controller also ensures that any panels are working effectively. If looking for an installer in the UK, [Bimble Solar](#) come recommended.
- **Inverter** - If living off-grid (usually with the aid of solar power), an inverter allows you to run 240V appliances off your 12V system. Power hungry appliances (like hair

dryers) will require very large inverters to run. For other things, a [smaller inverter](#) should suffice.

- **12V extension cable** - [An extension cable](#) can be useful if you want to use any 12V devices outside of the van.
- **Sat Nav** - Personally, I've always managed navigation just with my mobile phone. Some Sat Navs can be configured for larger vehicles though, which can be useful for avoiding getting stuck in any tight spaces! See this roundup of [Sat Navs for motorhomes](#), for suggestions for some of the best.
- **Electrical wire/cable** - It is useful to carry a [small roll of cable](#) with you, for any spontaneous repairs or improvements that you may want to make to your van's electrics while away.
- **Connector blocks** - For [joining cables](#) when making electrical repairs / installations.

Mechanical / Technical

- **Cable ties** - What can't be fixed with [cable ties](#)? Not much in my experience (sure, sometimes only temporarily). Admittedly, being single-use means they're not great for the environment, but sometimes nothing else will work. Never leave on a long trip without some.
- **Spare parts** - Depending on your available space and tolerance to risk, this will vary a lot between people. Some will take nothing, some a spare for every eventuality. Some key things that people like to have are headlight bulbs, fan belt and anything else specific that you know may be hard to source for your vehicle.
- **Tool kit** - Absolutely essential. Again, size and weight is a consideration, but a selection of [screwdrivers](#), [pliers](#), a large [adjustable spanner](#) and can of [WD40](#) will always come in handy.
- **Multimeter** - If anything goes wrong electrically, either under the bonnet or on the habitation side, you'll be glad of a [multimeter](#) to be able to trace the fault.
- **Oil** - It's a good idea to carry a little spare engine oil, in case it ever needs topping up.
- **Petrol / Diesel** - Likewise, with petrol/diesel, in case you ever run out. It's never happened to me yet, but I've come worryingly close!
- **Washer fluid** - [Windscreen washer fluid](#), as you want to be able to see where you're going.
- **Coolant** - If you have an older engine that is liable to overheating (as ours can be!), carrying some spare [coolant antifreeze](#) for topping up is a good idea.
- **Fuses** - Handy to have some spare, in case any blow. Style can vary, but [blade type fuses](#) are usually most common.
- **Spare Tyre and Jack** - Should be in all vehicles as standard, but worth checking as you never know when you could get a flat tyre.
- **Tyre Inflator** - If you ever do have to change a flat tyre, having a [12V plug-in inflator](#) means you can get back on the road safely in no time.

Documents

These are often a legal requirement to be carried in many countries. Originals are usually required, not photocopies.

- **Logbook** - Proof of ownership for your vehicle.
- **Insurance** - Vehicle insurance.
- **EHIC (Now GHIC in the UK)** - In the Europe Union, a European Health Insurance Card allows fellow EU residents to receive emergency medical care. For UK residents post-Brexit, this has now been replaced by the Global Health Insurance Card.
- **Travel Insurance** - Full insurance for better medical cover is always recommended. [Alpha Insurance](#) offer single trip policies for extended trips (that are often not covered by others).
- **Camping Cards** - Some countries utilise camping card schemes, meaning these cards are required to be able to access the sites there (so should be got beforehand). Scandinavian countries, in particular, seem to be fans of these. Some aires (camper stops) in France also require a specific card to use.

Sport & Leisure

- **Bikes** - Fun, but also great for getting around on. For those not wanting to put the effort in, electric bikes and electric scooters now seem to be all the rage.
- **Bike Cover** - If taking an extended trip and carrying bikes externally on a bike rack, a waterproof [bike cover](#) helps to prevent them going rusty and getting ruined by the rain (speaking from experience!).
- **Bike lock** - For keeping those bikes safe, both on and off the bike rack.
- **Football** - Small and forever versatile. Who doesn't love a [football](#) to play with?
- **Sports/walking shoes** - Going for walks/hikes is a fun and healthy way to keep children entertained. If unsure of what you'll need, take a look at this great roundup of the best [hiking gear for kids](#).
- **Swimwear**
- **Arm bands** - For keeping any little non-swimmers afloat, [arm bands](#) are always a good idea.
- **Macs** - Sadly, it can't be sunny all the time. A good [waterproof coat](#) is a must.
- **Wellies** - When it's wet, your feet get wet (or muddy), so be sure to have some waterproof footwear as well. [Wellington boots](#) are ideal.
- **Jewellery Bag** - Amazingly, occasionally I do get the chance to wear some. A good, portable [jewellery bag](#) is a great way of keeping it all organised and together, without taking up too much space.

Children

- **Pushchair / Stroller** - If your children are small enough to need one, choose wisely. You'll likely only want to have one of them getting in the way. If planning on cycling while away, a good idea is a [bike trailer](#) that can also be used as a stroller - giving you extra flexibility all in one package.
- **Toys** - A lack of space will mean that you'll likely need to keep these to a minimum. A selection of favourites is always welcome though for keeping the kids happy. Beach & Pool toys, a box of [Duplo](#) (or Lego) pieces, and a [pop-up play tent](#) have been

enduringly popular with my children. A good [storage box](#) (preferably from recycled plastic, like this one) is a good idea for keeping them all together.

- **Games** - Games are a great way for getting together and enjoying family time while away. Here are our [top 5 compact travel games for children](#).
- **Art & Craft** - It's always useful to have some other fun activities on hand to keep children entertained. I like to choose travel themed things when I can, to match our current lifestyle. For ideas, see my [top 10 activities for inspiring wanderlust in children](#).
- **iPad / Amazon Fire** - While you don't want kids looking at screens the whole time, they can be useful for keeping them entertained on journeys. They can even be a force for good, if being used for some of the [best apps for early years homeschooling](#).
- **Scooters** - Useful for children to get around on when out for an urban walk, and quicker to access and get ready than bikes. Ours have always got on well with these from [iScoot](#). They fold up easily to save on space, and the kids love the flashing LED wheels!
- **Paddling pool** - You won't want anything too large of course, but a small [paddling pool](#) can be a nice idea to have on a campsite pitch for keeping kids cool on a hot day.

In Summary

Phew... what a lot of stuff! It's amazing what you can fit into a small box on wheels. Granted, you may not need it all. You may well also think of something else that I've forgotten. I hope this handy pdf has given you a good starting point in any case, by providing you with a useful packing list for essentials to take away with you, whether you are going on holiday, or switching to a new life of van living.