

## Worldly Road Warriors

*RVers are becoming an ever sophisticated group, with many taking 'grown-up vacations' through California's world-renowned wine country.*

By: Erin Simpson  
For GoodTimes Promotions

Despite a deep recession that has consumers pinching their pennies and business owners worrying about how to make payroll, Vineyard RV Park manager Meaghan Bertram wasn't surprised when a caravan of custom-built, million-dollar recreational vehicles recently rolled into her Vacaville facility.

With many vacationers staying closer to home in order to save a few bucks, RVing has become an increasingly alluring option for people with sophisticated tastes to indulge in their pastimes, Bertram said. In her neck of the woods, many of those rolling bon vivants are focused on one thing: Wine.

"About 25 percent of people we see are specifically coming to see the Napa and Sonoma valleys," Bertram said, "(With the economy), more people are traveling from closer destinations – people from L.A. or parts of the Bay Area are doing a local trip. A lot of people have lived here their whole life and have not spent time in the wine country."

Bill Munde, along with his brother Ken, opened the Wine Country RV Park in Paso Robles six years ago. They figured that between Hearst Castle, the Central Coast and the area's wine country, there was a lot of business to be had. Catering to RVers who want to taste at the region's increasingly popular wineries has become a large part of their business.

"That's been our main customer since we opened," Bill Munde said. The Mundees offer wine tasting at the park, point oenophiles to good wineries and are even thinking of starting a shuttle service to take RVers on wine tours.

Business is good, Munde said. On the weekends when wine festivals pepper area parks and downtowns, his facility will be sold out months in advance.

Though he hasn't been in the business for that long, Munde thinks it's fair to say RV culture has grown more sophisticated.

"They want a place to sleep. They want wi-fi," he said. "They want to drink wine."

Mike Nohr, manager of the 21st Annual Manufacturers' RV and Boat Show, said he's noticed the growing sophistication of RVers as well, and sees it as a market he can tap. At his Pleasanton RV show, for instance, consumers will be able to purchase hot tubs and customized kitchens – luxuries that would never have popped up at his shows a decade ago.

"The old RV stereotype has definitely changed. These are cultured people with distinctive tastes," said Nohr, whose show is slated to open at the Alameda County fairgrounds on May 15 and run through May 24. "I've noticed more and more RVers focusing their trips on exploring our region's wine country – which is a great thing."

Case in point: Suzanne and Bob Wilkinson, who love to travel to the Paso Robles RV park and taste what the region has to offer. After buying their first tent trailer years ago to camp with the

kids, they upgraded in 2005 to a Holiday Rambler Savoy travel trailer and now say they go wine tasting four or five days a month.

The couple from Wood Ranch in Southern California find taking their RV for weekends in Paso Robles is the perfect way to find new wineries and taste new wines – a pastime they've enjoyed for a decade.

"The RV allows us to go where the functions are and enjoy the functions to the fullest without worrying about being on the road and the distance," said Suzanne Wilkinson, 51. "And we get to meet other people that enjoy the same passion."

They do run into many like-minded RVers on the wine trail.

"It used to be what I would see was dirt bikes and beer," said Bob Wilkinson, 58. "This isn't that at all. It's very much more sophisticated than the camping I used to do years ago."

The Wilkinsons enjoy the convenience, freedom and romance that traveling with their RV gives them.

"It's a grown-up getaway," Suzanne Wilkinson said.

Many people, like the Wilkinsons, choose to RV because of the convenience of having a "home on wheels," said Vineyard RV Park employee Elena Brown. There is never the disappointment of finding out the room is much smaller than it looked on the hotel Web site, no hassles with disinterested clerks and no need to pack and repack at different stops along the way.

What's more, there is a definite cost-savings to RVing. A recent study for the Recreation Vehicle Industry Association showed that typical family RV camping vacations on average are 27 to 61 percent less expensive on a per-day basis than other types of vacations.

"Traveling is more economical that way," Brown said, "and there is a greater population of people who own these (RVs) now."

[21st Annual Manufacturers' RV and Boat Show:](#)

May 15-24

Alameda County Fairgrounds

4501 Pleasanton Avenue

Pleasanton, California