

READY TO TRAVEL

WHY AND WHY NOT A Tale of Turbo Diesel Vagabonds by Jeannette and Bob Vallier

Embroidered on the T-shirt in the window of the curio shop, in big letters are the words “Sí, como no,” which, translated from Spanish, means “Yes, Why Not?” Think about it: well, it might be a little risqué. There is one place, however, where this message (and the T-shirt) is totally appropriate: in Why, which is a remote desert village in the state of Arizona. Why not, indeed! Many city dwellers would say that there is nothing at Why. And, truth to tell, we call it “The Big Empty.” What Why is empty of, is the hubbub of too much civilization. This isolated outpost is located 120 miles west of Tucson across the spectacularly arid Sonoran desert, on the far edge of the vast Tohono O’odham Indian Reservation, 26 miles from an out-of-the-way border crossing into the most sparsely populated region of Mexico.

For the past decade Why has been our personal winter getaway. Friends and relatives who live in northern climes scoff: “What do you guys need a winter getaway for? You already live in southern Arizona, for Heaven’s sake.” True, we do; but a break from even low 40-degree temperatures is welcome, and we’ve grown obsessively fond of this empty spot where nothing much ever happens and winter weather is mighty nice.



“The Big Empty” —the view south across the Why desert towards Mexico.

Why is the site of what is certainly the tiniest Indian casino in the West. Attached to a convenience store, it features slot machines and, on Saturday nights, a coterie of gringos and Mexican nationals, all mesmerized by the lighted screens and hoping to make their fortunes. Within walking distance of the casino, but far enough away that the quiet is undisturbed, is the Hickiwan Trails RV Park, presided over by Ray and Marsha Radtke, who manage it for the Hickiwan District of the Tohono O’odham nation.

Ray and Marsha, the very embodiment of friendliness, delight in putting on musical entertainments for their visitors, which they call Native American Fiestas, featuring fry bread and other traditional “fast foods,” native dancers from the rural schools in the area, and charmingly naïve craft booths. They also play host to convoys of motor homes and trailers headed to or returning from Mexico. Yes, my fellow TDR members, there are still Americans, savvy and long-experienced travelers, who don’t give a second thought to driving their RVs south to Mexican adventure. So, in winter the park is a bustling hive, with RVs wandering in every afternoon and often leaving at sunrise, headed for who-knows-where.

Also, and much more interesting to the two of us, are the Snow Birds, voyagers from colder latitudes who come to Why and stay for months on end in the winter, to drive the back trails or hike the solitary desert by day and gather at a campfire and sing-along at night. It is about as comfortable an RV campground as you’re likely to find. We were surprised to discover that an ambulance service has a base at the RV Park, mostly designed to serve the Indians scattered sparsely over the arid desert surrounding, but very handy for any winter visitor who might need medical help.

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Roger and Janet Dexter

With such a mixed flow of campers, the Hickiwan Trails RV Park in Why, Arizona, is a great place to meet and greet fellow TDR Vagabonds. Over the years we've made a host of new friends, some of whom we see year after year here. Some unforgettable characters. For example, there are the "cat people," who each winter share their RV with 8 felines. And an eighty-five year old who hikes miles every day. On this trip we lucked out and found ourselves parked next to Roger and Janet Dexter, an extraordinarily winning couple whose home base is Baker City, Oregon; and we are nominating them as stars in our roster of TDR Vagabonds.

The Dexters own a 2004 Turbo Diesel 2500, 4-door crew cab with automatic transmission and 4-wheel drive: "Bone stock," in Roger's words. This is the second Ram they've owned. The first was a 2001 long bed, long wheelbase standard transmission Turbo Diesel, with which they were perfectly happy, except for the fact that Roger spends time in the backcountry up north elk hunting and gathering firewood. Janet appreciates the automatic transmission, even though she did drive the stick shift with aplomb, according to Roger who admits he himself prefers the automatic for all driving applications, once he was willing to give up the fun of manhandling the gears. They bought both vehicles from the same dealership, Frontier Motors in Island City, Oregon, a "suburb" of La Grande. Roger highly recommends the dealer for honesty and good service.



Roger and Janet Dexter and their "rescue dog" Lucy. We signed them up on the spot as TDR members.

Roger does his own minor service, and is a stickler for regular maintenance, especially keeping fresh filters. He once worked for a Mack Truck dealership, and the drivers he met, even back then, always stressed the importance of fresh filters. Roger says he knows of a lot of people who got into trouble because they didn't maintain their filters. (He is, in fact, changing his oil next to our rig, as we write these words on our laptop.)

The Turbo Diesel pulls a 26-foot Arctic Fox trailer, which Roger estimates weighs 11,000–12,000 lbs empty, and maybe 15,000 when fully loaded. In one of his previous lives, Roger worked with

RV dealerships and so can give us an insider's recommendation of the Arctic Fox for its solid construction and impeccable finish. After 25,000 miles of pretty heavy use, his unit is still in virtually mint condition. In contrast, the trailer they owned previously from 2001–2004 was showing signs of wear when they traded it in with fewer miles. For trailering, a feature of the Turbo Diesel they really like is the Tow/Haul, both for the uphill pull and for the engine braking effect on the downhill. Janet says it is "just marvelous." Roger chimes in with "It's a cinch."

They take the rig everywhere with full confidence. Roger says, "You probably remember that long, steep pull coming east out of Austin, Nevada? No problem." On the same tour they pulled into Ely, Nevada, plowing through six inches of snow—Janet was driving. And with the 4-wheel drive, they felt comfortable pulling out through a snowdrift the next day, trailer in tow.

They love Mexico—which, aside from their devotion to Why, is the other reason we found them here. They've traveled extensively south of the border in their Ram and trailer, and have done so for many years, spending several months there at a time. Among many other fascinating places, driving as far as 1,000–1,200 miles from the border. They always travel alone, unconcerned about their safety, even in these times. They avoid parking their rig unattended on streets of towns they pass through and take other commonsense precautions, and they are careful to avoid certain trouble spots the U.S. State Department warns against, such as the infamous Juarez. They have perfect confidence in their vehicle, which is a big part of their carefree spirit—never had any trouble. A side note: they burn Mexican diesel fuel with no problem, but they've heard that 2007 and later models have had some fuel issues.

On a personal note (and he is such a hail-well-met guy that we felt like buddies before we knew it), Roger recounted that in his youth he served as an officer in the Navy for 5 years, including 3 tours in Vietnam. His "ground" job was Squadron Legal Officer (although he's not an attorney), but his main job was as Tactical Coordinator on Antisubmarine Patrol Aircraft, first on a P5, which he considered a piece of junk, and later on a P3, a 4-engine turbo-prop which he liked. He got out of the Navy at Moffat Field, and finished his degree (accounting) at San Jose State. In a versatile professional career, he has served as City Treasurer for the city of Boise, Idaho, and as Finance Director for Sandpoint, Idaho, and Ontario and Baker City in Oregon, where he retired some 11 years ago.

One of Roger's avocations is elk hunting, and there's an interesting Ram anecdote connected with that. He and four buddies were hunting out of Burns, Oregon, and evidently were very successful at it. They each got an elk and four of the five were loaded into Roger's truck, the other rigs not being up to the job. But it was evidently no problem for the Ram, going cross-country (no roads) through a foot of snow with 16 elk legs sticking up out of the bed.

Another passion is his Harley Davidson motorcycle. He and Janet have made the pilgrimage to the Sturgis, South Dakota, Harley Rally, arrayed in full road regalia; and, what's more, they've toured the whole length of both islands of New Zealand on their bikes. Janet's last cycle was a Kawasaki Vulcan 500cc, which she recently retired because she has come to prefer riding in the saddle behind Roger.

Janet herself is a retired math teacher, an avid birder, and once upon a time was a welfare caseworker in Newark, New Jersey, which tells you something about her grit. Her résumé would also reveal that she worked for Honda Motors in Gardena, California, writing for The Wrench, an in-house publication. Janet drives the Turbo Diesel, including pulling the trailer, especially since they got the automatic transmission. She drove solo from Baker City to Mount Hood pulling the trailer while Roger was riding his Harley. But, in her words, she "doesn't do reverse!"

We asked Roger what singular advice he might share with us on "What Every Turbo Diesel Owner Should Know." Without hesitation he confided words of wisdom especially for those regularly pulling a heavy trailer: namely, regular replacement of the axle lube, something he knows that many operators neglect. Every 20,000 miles Roger takes the plates off the differentials and gets his hands in there to swab out the interior with rags to get rid of any debris before refilling with Amsoil synthetic, which he highly recommends.

While our rigs were camped side by side we talked about the TDR magazine, the membership, and the website. Roger pored over back issues of the magazine with keen interest. He was particularly impressed by the article on oil filters in Issue #71. "TDR tells it like it is!" he exclaimed: "I really appreciate and respect that." We signed up the Dexters on the spot as new members. Incidentally, it turns out that Roger is related to TDR writer Scott Dagleish, and regaled us with some family stories. It's a small world.

Returning home to Oracle, we are leaving the Dexters to enjoy Why till spring, when they will return to Oregon; but it won't be too long till the four of us are back in Why, "The Big Empty," where the scenery, stark, arid, and dramatic, would put Ansel Adams to shame; and where the starry night skies might be rivaled only if you could hitch your RV to the Hubble satellite. We admit we are a little hesitant to spread the word about Why; but we figure it is okay to share it with TDR members. Will we see you there too? "Yes, Why Not?"

Jeannette and Bob Vallier
TDR Writers



Delma Garcia, Tohono O'odham district chairperson, presides over the performance of native ceremonial at a Native American fiesta in the RV campground in Why.



Tohono O'odham Indian maidens perform the traditional basket dance for the delight of campers and Reservation officials at Hickiwan RV Park in Why.



Eric Nafziger's Third Generation truck.



Gary Croyle's Third Generation truck.