

Moving to Texas and Passing the Motorhome Driving Exam

After being gone for nearly eight years, we made the decision to move (back) to Texas for a variety of reasons. Our “domicile” (voter registration, car/motorhome plates, and driver’s license) was in Montana but we were not an LLC as many RVers are. This was June, the plates on our coach were good through December, but the car was expired. Actually, we both simply forgot about the car, those plates (registration) had expired in January, and now it was six months late. This was one of the reasons why we decided to move back to Texas.

We were told by the state licensing office in Montana that the federal government had required the states to “tighten up” on verifying residency. They wanted us to bring in a utility bill with our name on it. This also prompted our decision.

Back To Texas

I had talked with several individuals and traded e-mails with others on the process of licensing in Texas. There are lots of rumors but the bottom line is that you must have a CDL-B type of driver’s license to (A) drive non-commercial, personally-owned vehicles like a motorhome, (B) if that vehicle exceeds 26,000 pounds GVW, or (C) has air brakes. We met all three criteria. As a point of information, a CDL-A license would allow you to drive commercially—for pay.

As part of the process to get the license we needed, we had to take a driving test with a state examiner—in our motorhome. Rumors are rampant about the actual driving requirements during the test. For example, I was told by more than one person that during their test, they had to parallel park their motorhome (yes, traditional parallel parking). Is this nuts or what? If I were driving a smaller RV—Class B or C—I could understand that requirement but in a 42’ motorhome? That’s just nuts... and somewhat dangerous... and without someone guiding you from outside, is downright silly. I was also told by several RVers that they had to do an air brake test. Okay, I can

buy that, it makes sense, you ought to know how, and you ought to perform the test every once in a while if you have air brakes.

To smooth out the process, we decided to join the Escapees RV Club. This organization is headquartered in Livingston, Texas (about 40 miles north of Houston). If you are not aware of the Escapees, they focus on helping fulltimers. We are fulltimers and have been for eight years. However, we had not previously joined the Escapees since we could not take advantage of many of the services they offered. Now, we could and did.

Joining the Escapees—Step One

We called, they explained the process (all very simple), and we decided to drive to Livingston to get everything done there since we were on our way to Denton, Texas to visit family. Our assumption was that this relatively small city was used to dealing with motorhomes and RVers (because of the Escapees). Hopefully, we would not “stand out.” Also, hopefully, the driving examiner in Livingston would have enough experience and be so used to dealing with large motorhomes that they would not ask us to parallel park!

A few days later we pulled into Rainbow Park, the Escapees RV Park about five miles south of Livingston. Arriving about 4:00 PM, we were told that to get the member’s discount on the campsite, we would need to be members. We went to the national headquarters (a building inside the park), was shown right in, and went through the process of joining. It was quick and easy.

One of the advantages to joining the Escapees was that we get a real Texas address that can be used as a domicile—a “real” legal address used for residency. It was one of the primary things we needed. So, we ended up with an address that is something like...

Name
194 Rainbow Dr. #1234
Livingston, TX 77399-1094

The advantage of this type of address is that you can receive UPS and FedEx packages. Those two delivery services will not deliver to PO Boxes.

[Author Note... for years, all companies renting out “Private Mail Boxes” were required to show the renter’s address written such as “194 Rainbow Dr. PMB1234.” However, the US Post Office changed the requirement in (I believe) 2009 and now allow the “#” to be used in place of the “PMB.”]

A primary service of Escapees is their mail-forwarding. It is quite large and very busy. Your mail/packages come to your Livingston address. That mail is collected, held, and forwarded to you wherever you might be.

One of the processes we went through while joining was that the staff helped us fill out the correct US Post Office forms to establish our residency. Ultimately, the 30-or-so minutes it took us to join was effortless on our part. Suddenly, we were residents of Texas. However, we were not licensed to drive nor were our vehicles registered in Texas. The Escapees could not help us with those two processes.

The Texas Bureaucracy—Step Two

You have to deal with one private and two government entities in Texas for each of your vehicles. The local county Tax Office is responsible for the vehicle registration (plates) and the Department of Public Safety (DPS) is responsible for driver’s licenses (these are different entities and usually located in different buildings). The private entity is where you get your vehicle inspected—a licensed inspection station.

[Author Note... It was coincidence that my driver’s license—in the Texas computer system—was still in effect. It would have expired in September and this was June. Therefore, I had less paperwork to do than my wife. Her Texas driver’s license file had expired the previous February. They required extra paperwork from her including an original social security card or “official” replacement.]

I decided to only deal with the car, get it (and me) done, then deal with the coach (since it is still legal). Remember, the car’s Montana plates were expired, the coach’s Montana plates were good, my Montana driver’s license was good, and my Texas driver’s license was still “alive” in their system.

The following sequence is correct, was carefully explained to us by the Livingston DPS, and my understanding was that there is no circumventing the process for each vehicle. Simply, you do it in this order...

- A. you must have your vehicle inspected
- B. then registration and temporary plates at the Tax Office
- C. then the written driver's test at DPS
- D. we were told that they will only schedule your test with a driving examiner if you pass the written test (here in Livingston)
- E. finally, the actual driving exam.

On a side note, when you apply for the license, you are asked if you also want to apply for voter registration. We did and it is automatic. Very convenient.

The Process—Step Three

We did the car inspection first. No problem. From there, we went to the Tax Office and, although it took some time, we walked out of there with temporary tags for the car and the promise that plates would arrive in the mail in a week or so (and they did).

The next day I went to the DPS to take the written CDL test. This is where it got tricky. While filling out the forms, I carefully marked (circled) the type of license I wanted. The only two choices were... CDL-A or CDL-B. I carefully circled the "CDL" and the "B" and the DPS person checked this and verified that was correct and that I was going to be driving a motorhome. Great, so far.

[Author Note... When I originally called the DPS, we were up north traveling. I was told to download the CDL Handbook, was given the website, and did so.

When I arrived at the DPS office in Livingston, I was given a new book (revised October 2008). It's different than the online version. You will likely be handed the new book, too. We were told to focus our studies solely on Chapter 15 (Special Requirements).]

Being pretty comfortable with my driving knowledge, I went in and took the written test—a 20-question, multiple choice—focusing solely on Chapter 15. I finished and read back to review the questions to help find answers to a couple I wasn't sure of. I changed a couple of answers to correct them. Ultimately, I missed three and passed. I came home and marked what I could remember in the book for Sandy.

[Author Note... If you plan to take this test, note that there were a couple of questions that, in no way, applied to motorhomes. One dealt with taxicabs only and the other dealt with farm tractors (slow moving vehicles).]

Since I passed (the DPS person graded the test with me standing there), she set me up with an appointment for a driving examiner. It happened that this was a Thursday and the first opening was the following Tuesday. At the Livingston DPS, they only do driving exams on certain days. Okay, I'm locked in.

Sandy went in the next day to take the written test. She also marked her application for the CDL-B choice, took the test, passed, and was scheduled for a driving examiner just after mine on Tuesday. This is working out since we want to get it done smoothly and head to north Texas to visit family.

The Coach—Step Four

Monday, we called for an appointment to get the coach inspected. The recommended inspection place in Livingston had plenty of room for any size RV. Our thinking is we will do the inspection Monday afternoon, hook up electric for Monday night, do the driving test Tuesday, and head north that afternoon. Sounds like a plan.

On Monday, the inspection goes just fine and everything is great. The fellow asked me to drive it down a tiny side street, told me to get up to about 20 mph, and hit the brakes (but not hard enough to launch anything). He waited and watched me. I went around the block, came back, and stayed in the coach following his instructions regarding checking lights, signals, horn, etc. Everything was fine. His most adamant instruction was NOT to fold the inspection form he gave us. He said they would turn it down at the Tax Office if folded! Don't you just love a bureaucracy!

Tuesday—The Driving Test

Sandy and I have developed a habit over the years of fulltiming that if one of us can see the coach driving off, we automatically look at the lights, tires, roof, etc.—just to make sure everything is good. Sandy followed me to the DPS, we parked on the street as directed, and I went inside. The examiner came out with me, checked my Montana license (it was still good because I did not have a Texas license yet) and insurance card. She told me she would signal me on a light check. Out she went.

She signaled me to turn on the front driver-side turn signal. I turned it on, it was blinking on the dash, and she looked at me. Then she pointed at the same light again. I nod. Now, she's looking at me shaking her head no. I don't believe it. I get out and sure enough, there's no turn signal, period. \$(*#^*#@#!!!

The woman tells me she can give me a half-hour to fix the problem. I pull out the bulb and although it looks okay, send Sandy to a close-by auto parts store for a replacement. She gets back in record time, I put it in, and still no light. None. Nada.

There's no choice, we have to cancel both driving tests. What a pain! So, we go in to see about rescheduling the test (hopefully, the next day). Then the surprise... one of the two women in the Livingston DPS office is going on vacation, they don't know about any replacement help coming in, and it could be two weeks before we can reschedule!!! There's no way we can wait that long.

Thinking, Thinking!

We came back to the campground and I searched for another DPS office (between Livingston and Denton—about 250 miles) to get a driving test. I called the DPS in Bryan, Texas and they have a walk in, first-come-first-served, driving test. The lady (I'll call her Mary) seemed really nice and helpful on the phone. Why did we select Bryan? Simply, it was on our route and open when we needed it.

It turned out that our turn signal had a bad connector on the ground wire. We took it to the shop that inspected it, he fixed it in about 20 minutes and didn't want to charge us anything! We gave him some money and off we went to Bryan.

[Author Note... Apparently all these DPS offices have flexibility to set their own hours (some are open until 7:00 PM), some are closed different days during the week, some you set an appointment ahead of time for the driving exam (as in Livingston), and others (such as Bryan) are a stand-in-line. Interesting. So, you must to call the individual office to know their local rules.]

Thursday—The Driving Test

We drove to Bryan on Wednesday, got a campground near the DPS office, and drove the car that evening to check out where everything was located. This was a big DPS office and even had three designated parking spaces for big rigs.

We had to get in line early at the Bryan Office. The woman had told me to be in line at the door by 7:30 AM or I probably wouldn't get an appointment for the driving test that day.

So Thursday morning, we were parked at the Bryan DPS and standing in line by 7:15 AM and we were the fifth in line. I was told they opened at 7:45 AM but they opened at 8:00 AM sharp! We made it inside. Remember I had previously talked with Mary and she told me to ask for her when we arrived. We got right in to see her. Mary knew her stuff and was really helpful. She was one of those people you occasionally find in a bureaucracy that know the system, can guide you through it, and is willing to do so.

An Oops!

When Mary called us up in the computer, she found that Livingston DPS had marked Sandy for a CD-A license and me for a CD-D—and neither of these designations is a valid license—actually they don't exist in the computer system! So, Mary can't correct it in the computer. Mary even called the programmer in Austin to have someone change it through the back door. No luck.

So, Mary says she will have to delete all the paperwork in our files and essentially start over BUT she didn't want us to miss out on our driving exam today so she signed us both up to drive this afternoon. By then, she will redo the paperwork.

My exam is scheduled for 2:20 PM and Sandy's is 3:00 PM. Those were the next two appointments available that day. We decide just to sit there in the DPS parking lot (we were in a designated area for big rigs so no problem and no other big rigs), killed time, went out for breakfast, and hung around the coach with our generator running all day for the air conditioner. It's hot in Texas.

Driving, Driving

They had told us to wait in the coach and we did. At 2:20 PM, no one showed up. We waited 20 more minutes. Sandy went inside to check and I waited with the coach (hey, I'm trying to follow their instructions). They were running late and the woman came out about 3:15 PM.

[Author Note... I haven't been with a driving examiner since 1958 so I wasn't sure how to handle it. Maturity will always get you ahead of the game. So I decided to just ask/tell the examiner anything I wanted/needed to know during the test.

I got in the coach and she went out to check the lights—they all worked (thankfully). I told her how to put out the step-well cover (ours is electric). This makes for a far more comfortable ride for the passenger.

At her instruction, I started the engine to build up my air pressure and asked her if she wanted me to do an air brake test. She said no, just drive. Remember that we had been there all day so I had checked earlier and found that we were on a very slight incline—enough to make the coach roll in neutral. If she had wanted the air brake test, I would have gotten out and chocked my wheels first.]

After checking my (current, good, Montana) driver's license, insurance card, headlights (bright and dim), all turn-signals, and brake lights, we started our 20-30 minute drive—with nothing tricky, nothing weird, no air brake test, and no parallel parking. Just driving the frontage roads, some highway, lots of lane changing, several merges, a couple of medium-tight turns, and had to back straight about two coach-lengths. After merging onto one road, I had no idea what the speed limit was so I asked her. She told me.

There was one thing (I thought it was really unusual)... she told me (and Sandy later) to make sure we moved our head in sort of an abnormal, exaggerated movement when we looked in the rear-view mirrors so that she could verify we were actually looking. I normally move my eyes only—I don't need to move my head to look in the driver mirror nor the rear-camera monitor—so I got downgraded for this. I also forgot to turn off a turn signal after changing lanes and that also cost me.

The bottom line is that you can lose 30 points and pass. I lost 18 and Sandy lost 15. So, we passed. That was the goal.

I finished. The examiner told me to go inside to get Sandy (who was scheduled next). I did and they drove away.

After my driving test, I waited for Sandy to return so we could go tackle the paperwork together. Then, we went back inside to see Mary again. She had cleaned up our records and everything was right in the system. After a few minutes, fresh pictures and signatures, we are both good to go with a temporary Texas CDL driver's license in our hands and were told the final one would be mailed to us.

[Author Note... Remember that we had filled out those forms and carefully marked the "CDL-B" choice. Okay, this doesn't exist in their computer system either—only on those paper forms. Thankfully, Mary also straightened this out. The actual designation on our driver's license is printed as: "Class: B License Type: DL"]

Welcome to Texas

So everything is done. We are officially Texas residents again with licensing and voter registration in place.

I'm sorry to say that the knowledge required for the written test was nearly useless. It's almost like learning trivia so you can impress your friends. Knowing that your front clearance lights are amber and rear ones are red does not help you become a safer driver.

Also note that I am a proponent of RVers taking some type of driving instruction. We did (the rvschool.com) and have sat through Barney Alexander's Driving Confidence Course (at Lazydays in Florida) a couple of times. All good stuff and I recommend it.

[Author Note... You must call the individual DPS office to find what hours they are open, when and if they offer actual driving examinations, on what days, and (if all that works out) how do you actually schedule the driving exam. I strongly recommend you not just show up or it may be a wasted trip.]

While it was a bit of a hassle, we had allocated a week to complete the process and it took that long. If you are considering Texas as your residence, I would also recommend joining the Escapees.