

Journal from a Magic Glass Bus— The Adventures of Brian Mortensen and Kati O’Meara

Text and Photography by Kati O’Meara

My boyfriend Brian Mortensen and I were ready to leave Alaska for the glass adventure of a lifetime. Brian had converted a twenty-six-foot shuttle bus into a mobile glass studio, and we left to travel the West Coast for the next seven months. We got our tickets booked for the ferry and packed the bus with glass, torches, tools, and a freezer full of fresh Alaskan fish and shrimp. Our primary goals were to have fun, share our glass, and learn from and with other incredible glass artists. Sure, we had a few stops already planned, but for the most part our destination was yet to be determined.

Late October 2007

We left Sitka, Alaska, and our first stop was three days on the Alaska Marine Highway System until we reached Prince Rupert, Canada. What an adventure for an artist like me who is inspired by the sea to spend three beautiful days on the ocean watching whales and seeing my first icebergs. While relaxing on the ferry, we also had our first opportunity to share our art and teach new people something fun about glass.

One afternoon one of the ship’s crew came over and asked what I was looking at. I showed him the box of pendants I had made and was sorting through, and he was so interested in our story and adventure that he purchased glass goodies for his family for Christmas. Brian and I earned enough money on the ferry to pay for our gas through Canada to our next stop in Sedro Woolley, Washington. We spent the rest of October in Washington staying with friends and modifying the bus for further travel. Brian built a few more storage compartments during the days, and in the evenings we had the honor of working at the torch and showing friends what we do for a living.



November 2007

Leaving Sedro Woolley, a town full of incredible woodwork, we headed to the coast for our next stop, a visit to Nicole Brown in beautiful Port Townsend, Washington, where we visited her studio and spent a wonderful day lounging by the water. Just down the 101 from Nicole lived longtime friends of my family. We called them out of the blue and offered to cook them a meal of fresh Alaskan fish, and in return we were generously offered accommodations at their lovely beach home. Again we were able to share our art with wonderful people whom I had not seen for a long time.

Next was a stop to visit a wonderful family Brian had know for many years in Belfair, Washington. Their handcrafted home sits off in the forest where the stars are bright almost every night and the deer come to play in the yard each day. We played with the dogs and worked around the house, helping out with projects like setting the new flagstone entry. And in the afternoons, once all the homework was done, Brian and I got to teach their ten-year-old son Luke how to melt and form glass for the first time. What a joy it is to inspire the artistic and creative side of a child. He was able to make pendants for his mom and teacher and was so proud to show them off at school. What fun it was to be inspired by a child and see glass anew through his eyes. Together we made seascapes and fish, and Luke helped Brian make some amazing vortex marbles.

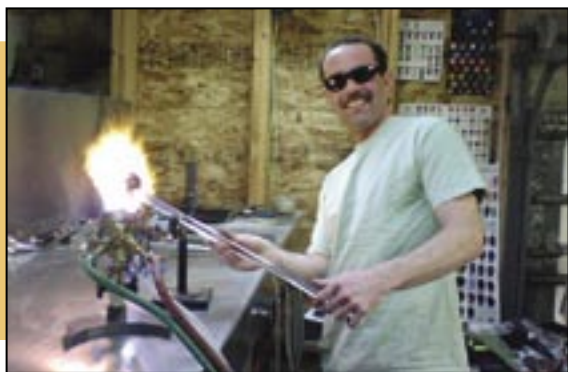
Next we decided to head to Seattle to visit more friends, but since it was on the way, a stop in Linwood, Washington, at the Momka Glass Factory was in order. We arrived at Momka’s unannounced, and who could have imagined a warmer greeting? We walked in and asked, “Is Momka Here?” The man at the desk replied, “No, she just went to the bank. She’ll be back in about ten minutes. Want to come in the back and pull some glass while you wait?” Within moments of our arrival we were escorted into the back where we met Momka’s son Geo and were taught all about how boro rod is pulled. They even took pictures of us pulling glass in their shop. What a blast to be able to see how the glass we use everyday is made.



Momka arrived shortly after and gave us a full tour of her facility. We in turn gave her a full tour of the bus and told her of our adventures and our intentions of visiting other glass artists. She gifted us with sample packs to pass out along the way. From Seattle we headed to Portland, Oregon, where we thought we would visit the amazing Henry and Susan of Glass Alchemy and Abe and Nancy at Northstar Glassworks. We were not at all surprised to be greeted as warmly as we were at Momka's. All of the factories gifted us with stickers and banners to adorn our bus while it traveled the rest of the West Coast.

From Portland we decided to head back to the coast to visit longtime friends and fellow glass artists in Newport, Oregon. We spent a week with Shawn and Ari Tucker. Ari and I made beads and shared color secrets and lots of laughs and tricks, while Brian watched Shawn torch, production style, as he cranked out perfume bottles and jars adorned with frogs, lizards, and cute little critters.

Thanksgiving was spent with dear friends at The Glass Hive in South Beach, Oregon, where the ubertalented Deb and Mike Crowley reside. Another longtime friend, Pam Pitts, happened to be visiting the Crowleys at the same time, so we girls torched in Deb's loft while Mike and Brian blew glass in the hot shop. We took a trip to the local mushroom farm and made mushroom and smoked cheddar-stuffed salmon fillets, then melted glass until the wee hours of the night.



December 2007

As any child knows, it's best to not disappoint a mother. We realized with the arrival of December that we must make haste to make our first planned stop, Christmas in San Diego with my mother as promised, so we left Newport and made our way to Corvallis, Oregon. There we spent an evening with glass-and-wood artists Chris and Ardie Andrews. Chris showed us how he makes round wood marbles.

Next, we decided to make a stop in Eugene to visit Hugh Salkind at the Eugene Glass School. The staff of the school gave us a full tour of the facility and asked for a tour of the bus before we made our way over to visit Dave and the gang at Winship Designs. Then off to Grants Pass, Oregon, where we spent a few days with more friends and got to pan for gold. Brian's friend, Craig, had all of the gear we needed, so after learning that we could fume gold in the flame to add color effects to our glass, he took us to the local river to pan for gold.

We left Grants Pass and decided to head for the 101, taking the slow road down the coast and stopping along the way to view the wildlife; the redwood forest with its massive trees, elk, and deer just strolling by the road; and the amazing cliffs of the California coast. We spent several days making our way to San Francisco, California,

where we met up with my brother Rudi and his wife Stephanie for dinner. We'd have loved to have stayed and visited longer, but parking a twenty-six-foot bus in the city can be a bit of a challenge. So off to Solvang, California, to see friends from Sitka who invited us to visit their winter home. What a treat to sit among the grapevines and eat some of the best danish you've ever had made at the Danish bakeries for which Solvang is famous. We even found one perfect for Brian—Mortensen's Danish Bakery.

The next stop was Fountain Valley, California, to visit a favorite glass artist friend of mine, Loco, who specializes in fantastic fantasy sculptures and bizarre hollow beads. Loco's husband Neil is an avid fisherman, so I knew he and Brian would get along great. After a few days it was time to head to San Diego, California, to see my family. It's always good to be home.



January 2008

The New Year had arrived and we were invited back to Fountain Valley. I got to torch with Loco while Neil took Brian to Catalina Island for lobster fishing. After a few days it was time to decide where to go next, as we had three months left until we had to be back in Sitka. Brian's parents have a winter place near Quartzsite, Arizona, so we decided to pay them a visit. What a fun drive from San Diego to Arizona—so much incredible landscape. We spent a week with his parents exploring the area with off-road vehicles. Such inspiring landscapes and colors with the desert in bloom!



We set up the bus and demonstrated our glass for all their friends. Teaching people about art glass is so much fun. Everyday we got to show someone new what we do. We decided to go back to San Diego for a while and work with some of my original glass buddies. Artist and friend, Pam Pitts, let us park our bus at her house so we could have two studios in one place. We'd invite friends over and work on collaborations with other artist friends, Ryan Alan, Brandon Lerma, Toni Lalande, and the incredible Ozzy dog.

February 2008

February was fun and included another visit to Quartsite on our way to the Best Bead Show in Tuscon, Arizona. Artist Margaret Zinser was kind enough to offer us a parking space for the bus in her driveway, so in return we cooked a fish BBQ dinner for her and her guests after the show. It was parked in Margaret's driveway with twenty or so incredible glass artists hanging out, and we decided it would be fun to have them all sign our mobile studio. What a hoot watching some of my favorite glass artists with their heads tipped back, arm up in the air, trying to sign the roof of our bus.

Andy Ray also hosted a dinner for thirty artists in Tucson, and we got to watch and play as many of them constructed a glass erector set that covered Andy's studio bench from one end to the other. A video of the event can be seen on youtube.com as "Project WTF." Several days later, with the events in Tucson winding down, we decided to head back to San Diego via Quartzsite to see our moms again. After all, to a mom you can never have too many visits. Once back in San Diego, Brian and Ryan spent time working on collaborations while Pam and I made beautiful beads and pendants.



March 2008

This was one of my favorite months, because we got to see tons of glass friends. First a visit to the southern California ISGB chapter meeting of The Flame Surfers. Then a weekend back at Loco's for the Los Angeles Marble Show. One last stop in San Diego, and it's off to the Glass Craft and Bead Expo in Las Vegas, Nevada. Glass Craft feels like being home with friends again. Every year that show gets better and better. Our friend, Craig, offered his house to host a backyard fish BBQ. Glass Craft is one of our favorite shows each year. But then, Brian and I are a little partial to it since that is where we met. It was also another opportunity for us to collect more signatures on the bus and share our adventures with others. We even had glass artist friends from Israel sign the bus.



April 2008

With our time to travel coming to an end, we knew we must start making our way back north. We decided to cut inland and stop in Grand Junction, Colorado, to visit family including my grandmother, who will be celebrating her ninetieth birthday this year. She had seen some of my work but had never had the opportunity to see Brian or me working. What fun it was to watch her face light up when she realized I work with actual fire.

While in Grand Junction we were invited to demo and exhibit our work at both the Blue Pig Gallery and the Grand Junction Art Center. We left Grand Junction and decided to head for Hamilton, Montana, to visit Brian's hometown. It was his turn to show his family how he does what he does. Watching him with his family was such a treat. From Montana we decided to visit the coast one last time and headed back to Eugene. A visit with Josh and Eli Mazet was in order, since we missed spending time with them on the way down. And we had to make one more stop at Winship for supplies before we headed back to our Alaskan island paradise.

It was finally time to end the adventure for the year and head back home, but we were already talking about where to take the bus for the winter of 2008-2009. Texas and New Mexico are on the top of our list. But for the next three days I relaxed again on the ferry and counted the fifty-three artists' signatures we collected as we traveled the western United States.

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