

Cuddle Up in This

A Passion for Vintage Trailers

By STEVEN KURUTZ NOV. 5, 2014

Sitting in a tiny room wrapped in birchwood the color of honey on a rainy afternoon last week, Kelle Arvay had a look of deep contentment. “It’s hard to describe the feeling of being inside here,” Ms. Arvay said. “It’s comfortable. It’s a real safe-feeling space.”

Ms. Arvay wasn’t describing her two-story house just north of Toledo, Ohio, which she said she finds too big. Instead, she had invited a visitor into her little domestic getaway: a 1955 Bellwood travel trailer. The 13-foot-long trailer sits under a carport in Ms. Arvay’s side yard, its rounded aluminum shell exemplifying all that is sleek and sturdy about midcentury design.

“Sleeping in one of these is just great,” she said, nestled into the trailer’s dinette, which has booth seats and a foldable table that convert into a bed. “Especially at night, if it starts raining. It’s a great sound, the rain on the roof.”

Ms. Arvay, 44, bought the Bellwood for \$3,500 from someone in Arizona and had it shipped to her home. Her interest in trailers started six years ago, when she purchased a 1968 Shasta Compact from a couple in Indiana. She had planned to buy a new R.V. to go camping with her husband and three children. But the Shasta’s diminutive size (just 10 feet long) and vintage styling, she said, “instantly spoke to me.”

It wasn’t long before she was buying more trailers to refurbish and decorate (and sometimes sell), and chronicling it all on her blog, littlevintagetrailer.com. Fellow trailer enthusiasts wrote to ask questions or share stories and post ads for models they were selling, and a community formed. Ms. Arvay, it turns out, was early to what has lately become a travel trailer craze.

These days, design blogs are full of photos of vintage trailers gleaming in the sun, decorated in styles ranging from high-end modern to retro kitsch. On Pinterest, one trailer in particular, a 1957 Sprite painted green and white and photographed in an English garden, has achieved fantasy-object status, appearing on dozens of users' pinboards.

Originally intended for camping, vintage trailers are being repurposed in all kinds of ways: as a roadside bakery stand, as vacation homes on a rustic piece of land, as backyard writing or painting studios.

J. Wes Yoder, a writer who lives in Nashville, bought a '63 Shasta on eBay for \$1,900, fixed it up and parked it in his backyard as a little guesthouse. He began renting the trailer on Airbnb, and it has been booked nearly every day this year, he said.

"A lot of people who stay here talk about how simple it is," said Mr. Yoder, 35. "No TV, no Internet. It's something different."

Anna Scribner, 38, who runs Flyte Camp, a Bend, Ore.-based vintage trailer restoration shop with her husband, Justin, credits the Tiny House movement that grew out of the financial crisis for sparking the comeback, in part.

"People love the idea that they own something that nobody can take away from them," Ms. Scribner said. No matter how small it is.

Ms. Arvay, who owns a vacation property in northern Michigan that contains three tiny houses, also sees similarities between them and travel trailers. "It has to do with the small, cozy feel they give you," she said.

With their propane stoves, lofted beds and mini iceboxes, trailers make clever use of limited space. "Everything you would need if you were living in it is there," she said.

This fall, in one sign of the renewed popularity, Shasta reissued its 1961 AirFlyte, a model well known among trailer aficionados for its chrome wings and "canned ham" shape. The Indiana company has updated the appliances and added a bathroom (many older, smaller trailers lack a toilet), but has preserved the classic styling, said Mark Lucas, Shasta's president.

That's because for many people, vintage trailers (or vintage-looking ones) are something of a time capsule. "They're trying to replicate a lifestyle they grew up with," Mr. Lucas said. "Or get back to a simpler time."

That was how Ms. Scribner and her husband found the trailer world. Mr.

Scribner, 42, grew up camping with his family in trailers; soon after the couple married, in 1998, he surprised his wife with a '58 Shasta AirFlyte.

"I wasn't sure if it was a good surprise or a bad surprise," Ms. Scribner recalled. "I thought trailers were trashy."

But she had always appreciated vintage design, and very quickly, she said: "I fell in love with the cool lines. It had incredible drawer pulls, and the upholstery on the booth seats was original."

In addition to owning Flyte Camp, the Scribners are the stars of "Flippin' RVs," a new reality show on the Great American Country network. Viewers follow the couple as they meticulously restore rare trailers for themselves and for clients. Like the 41-foot, double-decker trailer from 1956 that Ms. Scribner found languishing in a field and bought over her husband's objections to its size. (She called it "a great party pad.")

The business and TV show grew out of the couple's trailer-collecting hobby, Mr. Scribner said: "I was buying these things for \$500 or \$600, fixing them up and posting them online. They sold in two or three days. It dawned on us that other people appreciated these trailers, too. It's amazing how fast it grew."

Now a new generation of fans is beginning to appreciate the same virtues that he and his wife recognized 15 years ago, Mr. Scribner said. "People are thinking: 'Look how cool I can make it, and I can personalize it. And I can do it right in my driveway.' "

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Refurbishing a vintage trailer can be fairly easy or a work-intensive grind. Pete Whitley discovered this after he saw a Craigslist ad for a 1964 Shasta AstroFlyte (which is similar to the AirFlyte, but with a cab-over bunk) and paid \$1,000, sight-unseen.

Even well-preserved trailers can have body dents and water damage from sitting for years. But when Mr. Whitley's new trailer arrived at his house near Atlanta, he said: "There were dead mice in the drawers and damage where water had leaked through the back window. I got a crowbar and started ripping into it, rotten piece of wood after rotten piece of wood. Next thing I know, I had the whole back end off."

Mr. Whitley, 50, a mechanic for Delta Air Lines, consulted online forums like Repairing Yesterday's Trailers, and had the original aqua paint color matched at

Sherwin-Williams. A year and a half and \$6,000 later, he and his wife and two children were taking the trailer on camping trips to the north Georgia woods.

In the end, Mr. Whitley said, his Shasta was cheaper to restore than a vintage car would have been, and turns more heads on the highway. “Trailers are like a little house — nothing is that expensive,” he said. And “you see a lot of vintage cars around. This is still an unusual piece.”

As with vintage cars, there seem to be two schools of thought about vintage trailers: keep them original or transform an old shell into something new.

Mandi Gubler took the latter approach with the 1972 Bell trailer that she bought last April and named the Nugget, because, as she put it, “It’s just so teeny and adorable.”

Ms. Gubler, 31, was captivated by the vintage trailers she saw on Pinterest, which evoked “a different time period and a life that seems really charming.” When she found the Bell after an extensive search, she was won over by its tiny house-like footprint and, on a practical level, its roadworthy condition.

Remaking the interior has been “pure excitement,” she said. “The pattern I did on the walls is this white-diamond geometric shape from the ’60s. I have penny tile in there. The stove I had painted in a two-toned color, white and cantaloupe. You walk in and it’s almost like you’re in another world.”

Since she writes a D.I.Y. blog, Vintage Revivals, Ms. Gubler was no stranger to renovation projects. Still, she said, the Nugget presented unfamiliar challenges. She had to be mindful not to add too much weight, which would make it unsafe to tow. “I handmade this amazing wood floor,” she said. “And instead of using a heavier type of wood, I used pine, because it’s lightweight.”

For the last six months, the Nugget has been parked in Ms. Gubler’s driveway in Utah, but now that it’s done, she plans to take it to her family’s cabin and rent it for photo shoots: “I just want it to be available for whatever people can dream up using it for.”

That adaptability explains much of the appeal. Consider what Marsha Heckman, a decorating writer in Mill Valley, Calif., dreamed up for the 29-foot 1969 Airstream International that she and her husband found in Northern California, way up a dirt road.

“It really came out of a creative way to expand the space in our home without building an addition,” Ms. Heckman, 68, said. “We were asking ourselves, ‘Should

we add on? Go up with a dome?’ It was just so expensive.”

One night at dinner, she recalled, “My son said, ‘We could put a trailer back there.’ ” Ms. Heckman had never owned a trailer and didn’t want to, she said, unless it met a specific condition: “I wanted an Airstream.”

The Heckmans hired a crane to airlift their trailer over two neighboring houses and into their yard, and Ms. Heckman’s son and husband, Floyd, a retired contractor, gut renovated the dingy interior, while she handled the décor.

“I have decorated other people’s houses and I never, ever had so much fun,” Ms. Heckman said. “I could do exactly what I wanted. I did a red kitchen, because every girl wants red shoes and, once in her life, a red kitchen.”

Like Mr. Yoder, Ms. Heckman is now renting the trailer on Airbnb — in her case, for supplemental retirement income — and she couldn’t be happier with the sight of it in her yard. “It looks like a streamliner train pulling into a station,” she said. “The Airstream has so much movement in the design.”

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Vintage trailers, Airstream or otherwise, can become addictive.

Ms. Scribner, who runs the restoration shop, estimates that she and her husband have owned some 50 trailers over the years (they’re currently at three, with six more waiting to be restored). Mr. Whitley is renovating his second, a 1956 Silver Dome, which is roomier and rarer than his Shasta.

And Ms. Arvay, the blogger who has bought, renovated and sold several trailers over the years, recently bought another, a ’63 Yellowstone. While she has kept her ’55 Bellwood spare and original-looking, she tricked out the slightly larger Yellowstone, installing a retro-style tile floor and filling it with kitschy accessories like a canned-ham tin.

Her 5-year-old son, Trace, loves the trailer so much, Ms. Arvay said, that the two of them will hang out there on a Saturday night. “We’ll get the Kindle and watch a movie,” she said, “and just camp out.”

Standing in front of her latest acquisition, Ms. Arvay admitted it wasn’t easy to keep her trailer-buying habit in check. “The saving grace is, I don’t have any more room,” she said. “So two is my limit.”

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