

RV Renovation

Updating an RV gives it new life, with customized features that match the tastes and needs of the owner. Here's one couple's experiences.

By Kate Doherty, F499712

Three years ago, my husband and I began researching motorhomes. We knew we wanted at least a 40-foot diesel pusher, but that was about the limit of our knowledge. Flying our plane gave us the ability to visit dealerships, attend regional RV shows, listen, learn, and ask a ton of questions. As we continued to meet full-timers, one recommendation kept popping up: "You should take a tour of the Tiffin factory and watch a Tiffin motorhome being built. It's a real eye-opener."

We heeded their advice, contacted Tiffin Motorhomes Inc., and scheduled a visit to the company's factory in Red Bay, Alabama. While there, we learned a lot about what to look for when selecting an RV, as well as the myriad cottage industry facilities that support older motorhomes, travel trailers, and fifth-wheels.

In March we had the chance to talk with Tiffin CEO and founder Bob Tiffin, who explained more about the cottage RV industry and the qualified folks who work on motorhomes, trailers, and fifth-wheels. He rattled off 10 support facilities faster than I could write them down, mentioning the services they provide — everything on the inside as well as the roof, slideout toppers, and paint on the outside. Bob emphasized

the significance of an experienced cottage industry, which he said is wholeheartedly supported by Tiffin Motorhomes and its sister company, fifth-wheel producer Vanleigh RV. Many of these businesses were started by Tiffin employees, he noted, and some continue to work at Tiffin. “If you need something done for your home on wheels,” he said, “you’ll find it within 30 minutes of Red Bay.”

We purchased a used Phaeton diesel pusher and were fortunate to deal directly with Bob on a matter regarding our living area slideout and wet bay. He recommended we take our RV to Nathan Davidson, a former quality manager for Tiffin who founded Lakeshore Custom RV in Iuka, Mississippi, with Bryan Robinson, an active NHRA drag racer. More recently, Nathan opened Davidson RV in Belmont, Mississippi, not far from Red Bay. We headed directly to meet Nathan, first to have our RV inspected and serviced, and then to sit with him to glean ideas about customizing our new home on wheels to fit our lifestyle.

We’ve since renovated and updated almost everything important inside our motorhome — except the toilet! For example, one of my biggest requirements was creating a dedicated workspace. Nathan had the perfect solution in his bag of tricks — a custom cherry corner computer desk with pull-out printer and file drawers, along with a side cabinet for office supplies. He removed the second sleeper sofa in the coach to make room for it. Now we have a dedicated work area where our cat keeps me entertained, watching the comings and goings of daily life nearby.

When it comes to finding a qualified facility that performs RV renovations, Bob Tiffin emphasized service and experience. Floor-to-ceiling customizing of the RV

interior, including decorative accents, will give your RV a face-lift to better suit your lifestyle. As for experience, Nathan worked in every department at Tiffin, where he inspected and tested electrical and plumbing, structural frames, and cabinetry. He also set up service centers for chassis manufacturers.

As we began looking at customizing the interior of our RV, somehow incorporating my workspace at one end of the living area and placing an electric fireplace at the other, with a television lift in between, Nathan shared with us some other designs he completed.

One full-timer who was a music fan wanted more storage for his collection. Nathan worked with the cabinetmakers and replaced a second sofa with an entertainment center that perfectly matches the cabinets. It was built around the existing window, offering plenty of light when the television is not in use.

Another owner replaced the sleeper sofa with theater seating for two. Since the seats were not as wide as the sofa, the side cabinet was expanded to fill the gap and provide more storage for remotes and gadgets. The same owner replaced the dishwasher with two pull-out spice/pantry racks for additional cooking supplies.

Another full-timer installed laminate flooring throughout the RV, which is durable and easy to keep clean. Nathan mentioned it is a popular option for RVers with children and pets.

Because we were discussing a customized workspace with a fireplace, Nathan showed us energy-efficient, slim fireplaces that work well in the main living area and

bedroom of RVs. As a bonus, there's storage space behind these slim electric fireplaces. Mesmerizing, yet practical.

We had all the carpet replaced and changed the outlets to include USB plugs for charging today's electronic devices. We then looked at the lighting throughout — living area, kitchen, bath, bedroom, ceiling. We removed the outdated glass-globe teardrop lights and replaced them with brighter, more cost-efficient LED lights. In the bedroom, the outdated wall lamps were switched out with slim torchiere bright-white LEDs. Any remaining incandescent bulbs, from map lights to microwave, were replaced with LED bulbs.

LED bulbs are identified by color and temperature. Brighter LEDs are designated with high numbers, such as 5,000 or 6,000 for bright white; one with a 3,000 number indicates it is less bright and possibly slightly yellow in color. Switching to LED lights reduces your energy and inverter/battery usage; plus, they make that wake-up morning cup of coffee a brighter way to start your day.

Nathan mounts LED replacement lights on pieces of stained wood surrounded by decorative trim. We like the decorative molding, where the ornamental metal adds character. Customers also may choose the LED ceiling lights on a painted base to match the ceiling color if they prefer a simpler look.

It should be noted that decorative ceiling vents, lights, and molding require a special mastic, or adhesive, which is not typically available in big-box stores. So, unless you're very handy, this is not a DIY project.

Sans actual engine work, there's not much we haven't explored with Nathan and our coach, garnering new customization ideas each time we get together. Renovations never grow old. Perhaps it keeps us young. I know it has made an impact on us. After flying from destination to destination for so many years, my spouse wasn't sure he'd take to living on the road. But now, with a home customized to match our taste and needs, he says he wished we had made this lifestyle change a decade ago.

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