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The Allure of ALUMINUM CAMPERS

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OUTDOOR AND MORE | The Allure of Aluminum Campers

Riveted aluminum campers are rooted in innovative transportation design. First created in the 1930s by travelers seeking a more comfortable way to rest and sleep while exploring America's newly paved roads, these campers, and their iconic design, have stood the test of time.

Wally Byam is one inventor who wanted to make camping more comfortable. Inspired by his wife's comfort wishes, he first tried using a canvas on a Model T in 1929. That idea failed. His next attempt — a teardrop-shaped plywood trailer called the Torpedo Car Cruiser — was far more successful. In fact, it made history, putting Byam on the path to founding Airstream, the only manufacturer to continuously produce the iconic, bullet-shaped, riveted aluminum trailer (except during World War II), since opening its Culver City, California, plant in 1931.

In 1936, the riveted aluminum Airstream Clipper was introduced. Its name and design were inspired by Pan Am's Clipper — a long-range luxury flying-boat aircraft that symbolized innovation, speed and modern travel. At the height of the Great Depression, Americans were captivated by technology, aerodynamics and forward-looking design, making the Airstream Clipper a pure expression of Modernism. That same Streamline Moderne influence of the 1930s

continues to define Airstream's iconic design today.

"I thought their trailer was the coolest thing on the planet," Kevin Mueller, second vice president of Michigan Airstream Club #052 says, "As an eight- or nine-year-old kid, my grandparents' Airstream was like a spaceship."

Mueller has always wanted an Airstream, and recently purchased a 2016, 30-foot Classic from Tennessee. He loves the timeless style, quality construction, aerodynamic design for ease of towing and gas mileage, and enjoys belonging to an Airstream Club and attending rallies.

"A lot of people belong to Airstream Club International and then choose an affiliate club," Mueller says.

"Camaraderie is part of the fun of having an Airstream and people can join multiple affiliates."

Michigan has two affiliate Airstream Clubs: the Michigan Airstream Club #052 and the Southeastern



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ranges from \$69,000 to over \$186,000. Another company, Bowlus, offers shiny, luxury aluminum campers with models starting at \$138,000 and ranging up to over \$250,000. Airstream and Bowlus dealers also sell pre-owned models. Vintage camper groups and online sources such as Facebook Marketplace and Craigslist may list vintage campers, but it's wise to do your homework before making a purchase.

While Airstream may be the longest-running aluminum camper company, many brands have built aluminum-skinned campers throughout history, and vintage models offer another way to enjoy the iconic look. Joining Tin Can Tourists (TinCanTourists.com) provides one way of learning about vintage campers. For one Michigan couple, attending several years of open houses was a great way to learn from people who love to show their restored vintage campers to the public.

"You had better know wiring, plumbing and carpentry if you are going to do it yourself," Russ Pline advises. "People worry about the frames that need welding and it's not difficult to find a welder who can do that."

Pline and his wife, Vicki, restored a 26-foot 1961 Airstream Overlander and have a few other rescues waiting their turn. They suggest talking to people, attending vintage camper shows and bringing a notebook. Groups like Tin Can Tourists can also suggest proven restoration companies if you want to rescue a vintage camper but do not have the skillset to do it yourself.

"Spend a little more money at the beginning, and you'll save even more," Pline says. "We love the labor of love to breathe life into something discarded. You bring it back to life and share it with other people." □

Michigan Airstream Club. And yes, you need to own an Airstream to join, but there are events when a club member can invite non-Airstream owners to join the fun.

"Airstream inspires people to dream, and we don't really have that in our modern life," Jay Cullis, Airstream content manager, says. "When you are thinking about buying, it can be hard to see past the price, but the thing you discover is it's truly a lifestyle, and there's such a deep history."

Cullis says one of the best ways to learn about Airstream is through the company's website. In addition to visits to the Heritage Center and factory in Jackson Center, Ohio, Airstream's blog and YouTube channel share stories from devoted "Airstreamers," while details on the nine silver bullet models currently in production provide the facts and figures potential buyers need.

Buying new is just one option, and as of this writing, the price of a new Airstream camper



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Treasure-hunting ideas for riveted aluminum campers no longer made but might be waiting to be rescued:

- Avion
- Owosso Coach Company
- Spartan Aircraft Company
- Westcraft Travel Trailer
- Curtiss Aerocar
- Streamline Travel Trailer
- Silver Streak Trailer Company
- Curtis Wright Trailers
- Boles-Aero Travel Trailer

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