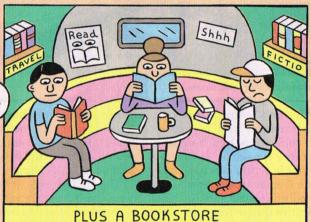


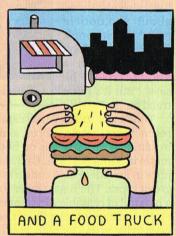
MOMENTUM GOING

BY CLAIRE SUDDATH

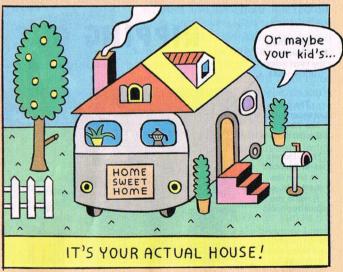












ordan Menzel had separated from his wife two years ago when he sold his Salt Lake City house for \$350,000 and needed a place to live. "I didn't want to buy a home again, and I didn't want to spend obscene amounts on rent, either," he says. Biking through town one day, he saw a 1976 silver Airstream for sale on the side of the road. Menzel had never owned an RV nor been inside an Airstream before, but with "danger-

ously little foresight," he says, he bought the trailer for \$4,000. Menzel, 31, spent three months tearing out the 40-year-old shag

carpet and junking outdated appliances. Then he parked it in a friend's 40-acre field. He's still therewell, technically he's moved to a nearby yard-and when he's not, he rents his Airstream out on Airbnb for \$100 a night. Menzel, who works in software marketing, estimates he's already saved about \$40,000 in rent. "At first people thought, Oh, Jordan's going through a midlife crisis," he says. "But it's not a trend for me."

That's not to say Airstreams haven't become trendy. In recent years, hotels, offices, and restaurants have cropped up in stationary Airstreams on both coasts. Five have become a motel in Santa Barbara, Calif. Another five sell ice cream and juice in Seaside, Fla. A concert venue in Austin uses one for its green room. The B-52s singer Kate Pierson-the redhead-has a handful of rentable Airstreams outside Joshua Tree National Park. And Zappos.com Chief Executive Officer Tony Hsieh has been living in one for nine months. He recently bought 20 more to create his own Airstream trailer park for the aspiring tech

bros he's importing to redevelop downtown Las Vegas. "It's by far my favorite place to live," Hsieh says. "It has more amenities than the average hotel room."

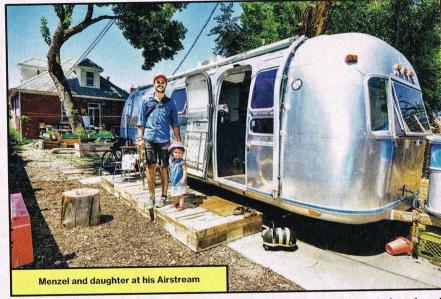
So many people are buying Airstreams that the company says it's selling five times as many as it did in 2009. (And that doesn't count vintage models like Menzel's.) Airstream won't disclose revenue, but its parent company, Thor Industries, sold more than \$3.5 billion worth of recreational vehicles last year. "The question I used to get most often was: 'Airstream, you still make those things?" says Bob Wheeler, Airstream's president. "People had no idea we even still existed."

Since 1952 the company has been headquartered in a former World War II bazooka factory in Jackson Center, Ohio, a one-stoplight town 75 miles northwest of Columbus. There, Airstream makes about 60 towable trailers a week in models ranging from the 16-foot Bambi (\$44,000) to the 28-foot Land Yacht (\$146,000) to a touring coach built

on a Mercedes-Benz chassis (\$155,000), which the rich use when they want to

ride in style. Everything is handmade-the rivets fastened, the aluminum cut, the furniture sanded-by the company's 560 employees. This year, Airstream spent \$6 million to build new office space and expand its factory by several thousand square feet. It also hired 130 people to catch up with demand.

The RV industry only recently recovered from the last recession. People are vacationing again, but less elaboratelythat's why about 380,000 motor homes and trailers will be sold this year, according to the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association, 7 percent more than in 2014. Retirees purchase





Designer Christopher Deam on his long-overdue overhaul

The old fluorescents were like those at a dentist's office

The first thing

he did was strip

the vinyl siding

off the walls

The windows weren't placed to let in the most light, so it made you claustrophobic

Beige carpeting and blond wood cabinets felt instantly dated





The furniture's clean lines eliminate bulk

AFTER

Wood

floors!

aluminum on the interior, which bounces natural light better Deam also

He added

removed the plastic casing from all the windows: "It calmed the aesthetic down," he says

The dinette has a bench you can see underneath, to make the floor area seem larger

Modern, miniappliances are easily accessed but not obtrusive

"It's a l
"Trailer
The
trends:
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most of them, but younger folks have gotten into them, too. "It's a lifestyle shift," says Kevin Broom, RVIA's spokesman. "Trailers make for good weekend trips."

The Airstream boom dovetails with a few other lifestyle trends: First, many Americans have become obsessed with decluttering, moving into so-called tiny homes and reading best-selling books like Marie Kondo's *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. Second, room-sharing services such as Airbnb have made it cool to stay in atypical accommodations. Finally, in most U.S. cities, food trucks are still thriving; many Airstreams have windows that open outward to form a counter. "We just fell right into that one," Wheeler says.

Then, of course, there's the ongoing fixation with all things nostalgic, whether it's heritage-inspired fashion, midcentury modern furniture, or Prohibition-era cocktails. Airstream for a little more than a decade and almost ran it out of business. When Indiana-based Thor Industries bought the ailing brand in 1980, it didn't even have to make a down payment, because Beatrice was desperate to unload it. Thor doubled down on Airstream's classic silver trailers but had trouble attracting younger buyers. "Our interiors looked like your grandmother's kitchen," says Wheeler, who came on board in 2002.

That started changing in 2000, when San Francisco architect Christopher Deam renovated the interior of a vintage one to look both retro and futuristic, like something out of *The Jetsons*. He contacted Airstream with the idea of forming a partnership but couldn't get anyone to return his calls. "That's not our customer," Airstream eventually told Deam. So he designed one himself and took it to the high-end International Contemporary Furniture Fair. "We called him back after that," Wheeler says.

"DRIVE ONE DOWN THE ROAD, AND YOU'LL SEE. PEOPLE ALWAYS TURN THEIR HEAD FOR AN AIRSTREAM"

is basically the same thing on wheels. There are pictures of John F. Kennedy using one as a mobile office and of the *Apollo 11* astronauts being quarantined in one after returning from the moon. Many brands turn to Airstream when they want to push their own vintage-inspired goods. The company worked with Fender on a mobile recording booth and loaned a few to Levi's, which used them as gift-wrapping stations. "People contact us

out of the blue," says Mollie Hansen, Airstream's vice president for marketing. "It's free publicity. We almost never refuse."

Airstream was founded in 1932 by Wally Byam, a California outdoorsman who designed a teardrop-shaped wooden trailer for his wife, Marion, after she complained about camping in tents. He named it Airstream because he wanted it to sound fast and aerodynamic, even though neither applied at the time. Soon after, Byam bought out one of his competitors, William Hawley Bowlus, an aeronautical engineer who was selling aluminum trailers that borrowed from airplane aesthetics. Byam reconfigured the shiny trailer, renamed it the Airstream Flying Cloud, and sold it for \$1,200 (about \$20,600 today). That was considered expensive, so Airstream made a trailer only after someone ordered one, a practice the company

maintains today. The exterior hasn't changed much. "They still look so modern," says Ryan Miller, 25, who co-founded Santa Barbara's all-Airstream motel, Autocamp, in 2012; it will expand to San Francisco next year. "Drive one down the road, and you'll see. People always turn their head for an Airstream," he says.

Sales took off as the expanding middle class bought cars and trailers to hitch to those cars. But after Byam died in 1962, Airstream stagnated. The conglomerate Beatrice Foods owned it After, Deam designed a line of sleek interiors that resembled a tiny Ikea showroom. His models now make up about 25 percent of the company's sales. The rest of Airstream's trailers look more like they're from a discount furniture store, which the company says recent retirees still prefer.

Many people who buy Airstreams don't live in them. And Wheeler admits his company hasn't figured out the "alter-

nate-use movement," as he calls it. When people purchase a trailer for road trips, they want the newest model. But when the trailer is part of a kitschy hotel concept or a tech company's office décor, the buyers often go vintage—which doesn't make the company money. Craigslist and EBay are awash with models dating to the 1950s. Airstream estimates 70 percent of all the trailers it's ever made are still in use.

Wheeler also has a hard time recruiting young employees. Few recent college graduates want to live in an 800-person town in Ohio. "The only millennials we have here are interns," he says. "That's a problem. We need them to help us figure out the future." Wheeler recently built a fitness center to woo junior staff, yet "it's still 30 minutes to the nearest grocery store," says Matthew Robison, 21, a Columbus College of Art and Design student who's interning there now. He

Santa Barbara's Autocamp motel

has no plans to stay for a full-time job.

This summer the corporate office is moving from an old building with plywood walls into a new, shiny aluminum space, though Wheeler remains hesitant to expand too quickly. He knows the hip ideas propping up Airstream could quickly become lame. He doesn't want to be left with an enormous factory, tons of employees, and a product no one wants. "That's what I wake up at 2 a.m. thinking about," he says. "Is it all a fad?" •