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Living Large in a Tiny Place

by Kent Griswold on February 8th, 2011. 35 Comments

Guest Post By Matthew Hofmann

The reality of living in 160 sq.ft. Why would anyone choose this?

The nostalgic Airstream still gets grins from the gold era of travelers who trekked in Bonnieville station wagons towing their "drag-alongs." Today, this 1978 Airstream is the home, office and access to the great outdoors for an industrious 27-year old Santa Barbara-based architect.

Chances are good that your grandfather owned one of these ubiquitous travel trailers. Except for the iMac mounted on the wall and the hi-def printer in the drawer, they haven't changed much in the past 75 years.



Airstream's been around since 1936 when the smooth-skinned aluminum bodies rolled aerodynamically off the Chicago production line. They temporarily stopped production in 1938 when the new lightweight material was needed for World War II. Many are still on the road today.

"Ever since I was a kid building 7-story tree houses I've liked reusing old stuff and making it usable again," says its owner [Matthew Hofmann](#), owner and founder of [Hofmann Architecture](#), who spent the past eight months restoring the 25-footer. "It's not only beautiful, it's also useful." "I'm at a point

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in my life where I'm trying to live with less" says Hofmann, who parked the [Airstream](#) on a Montecito home site that burned down in the Tea Fire.



Two years ago I moved from a large house. Moving has a way of making you consider the value of possessions. I wondered, while looking at the massive truckload of things, how would I feel if this truck ran off a cliff and all was lost? My stuff was beginning to feel like a burden, like luggage. Things that I needed to take around with me wherever I went; a truckload sized ball and chain.

Here are a dozen real life reasons why living in 158 sq. ft. can be a very grand experience.

1. **Lower utility bills** - serious sustainability
2. **Quicker to clean** - 30 minutes tops
3. **Less maintenance** - Say "goodbye" to the chimney sweeper, garage door repairman, and gardener
4. **A lot less clutter** – I've reduced my paper use by 90%
5. **Better connected to my girlfriend** – the small space encourages us to interact and work out our problems – we no longer have our "caves" or sides of the house to escape to.
6. **I'm taking more trips to the farmers market** I'm purchasing more fresh fruits and vegetables. No excessive frig/freezer or pantry spaces stuffed with outdated food
7. **Discourages procrastination** – harder to ignore need-to-do's when they're staring right at you)
8. **Less stuff gets lost** - less places to hide, and when they do, they tend to surface a week later in a shirt pocket
9. **Impulse buys** – The question when purchasing an item "can I afford it." Has changed into "can I store it?"
10. **Fewer house guests** – Thanksgiving is a great time to spend time with your family, and so much better enjoyed when they stay at hotels.
11. **Simplified entertainment technology** – I sold and no longer own: A dvd player, audio receiver, 7 speaker surround sound, plasma tv, desktop PC, laptop computer, countless remote controls, wireless home speaker system, and portable radio. I then purchased: an IMac.
12. **I ended my dysfunctional relationship with Costco.** – I realize now that I don't really need a 5lb bag of peanuts or the treadmill that discourages me from ever leaving the confines of home. Though, I still enjoy accompanying a friend to the mega box store to try the free samples.



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photo: M Hofmann © 2010

"I enjoy working with clients who are willing to step boldly into the future with gutsy audacity," he says. "Events such as the Tea Fire remind us that life's too short not to overstep the boundaries of the ordinary and dream big." [Matthew Hofmann](#) is available to speak with to answer your questions and currently looking for new thoughtful and progressive architectural clients. Check out their website and blog at www.hofarc.com for more information.

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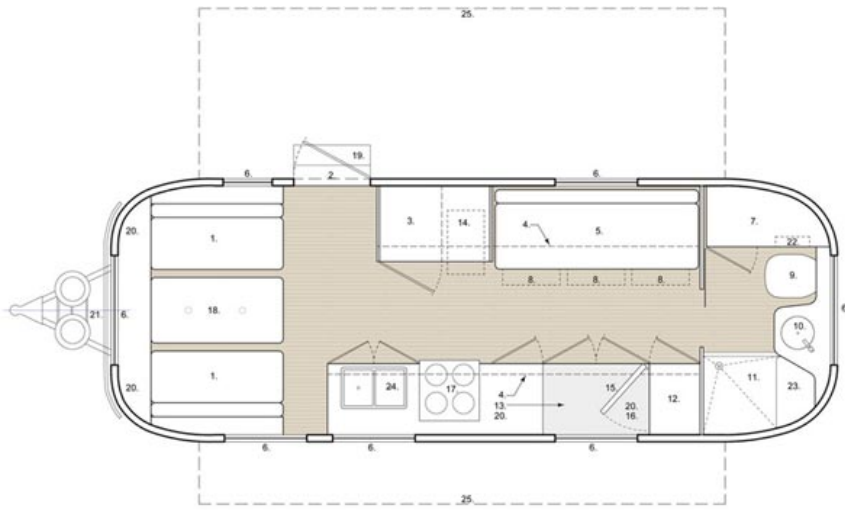
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Posted February 8th, 2011 by Kent Griswold and filed in [Travel Trailers](#)
[35 Comments](#)

35 Responses to “Living Large in a Tiny Place”



Barrett says:

February 8, 2011 at 7:32 am

Love it! I've thought about doing this, but I've got a few concerns: Where to keep it for extended periods of time? How to provide utilities? How well it could handle cold weather, ie. northern WI winters?

[Reply](#)



Matthew Hofmann says:

February 8, 2011 at 9:59 am

In Santa Barbara, CA, we recently had several wild fires that burned down approx. 200 + homes. The city has enacted an ordinance where individuals may keep and live in travel trailers on the property where a home burned down. As an architect, I am also able to keep the trailer on “job site” while designing a home/ under construction. I find clients are intrigued by this option. I have hopes that our local governments will realize that people everywhere are looking to “lighten up” and live in smaller, mobile, more practical spaces. Airstreams hold up rather well in cold climates, the propane heating systems are very capable. Condensation is the issue at large. There are several traditional and creative ways to mitigate condensation in cold environments.

[Reply](#)



ginmar says:

February 9, 2011 at 3:41 pm

I'd really like to hear more about the condensation issue. This isn't just an issue for metal trailers.

Aside from that....Damn, that's a lovely cozy trailer.

[Reply](#)



Lani says:

February 8, 2011 at 7:36 am

I love the interior and would love to see more pictures. We live in a 2008 Airstream and while I love my home, I'd also like to make some modifications. Great job!

[Reply](#)



Irene says:

February 8, 2011 at 7:37 am

Clean lines, bright and open, very nicely done! Thanks for showing us your way of living large (and small). And congrats on the purchase of the Mac; you'll be happy you did. 😊

[Reply](#)



Ben says:

February 8, 2011 at 7:37 am

Are all Airstreams that nice on the inside, or is that a totally custom job?

[Reply](#)



alfred says:

February 8, 2011 at 10:25 am

uh, totally custom doesn't even begin to capture it.

If you want to know what most older airstreams look like (especially inside), this is a great place to look:

<http://www.airstreamclassifieds.com/>

[Reply](#)



liz says:

February 8, 2011 at 8:16 am

Beautiful air stream!

nice article, but it leaves you wanting more. More pictures more details.

What other projects have you done or are you planning on doing for small home enthusiasts?

I would like to see those seven story tree houses you mentioned. Grin.

[Reply](#)



Matthew Hofmann says:

February 8, 2011 at 10:30 am

Liz – This will be a multi-part article. Keep checking back in the following weeks for more posts. Until then, you can see more photos of the project at <http://www.hofarc.com>.

[Reply](#)



ginmar says:

February 9, 2011 at 4:06 pm

I was just musing on my blog about how Americans are confused about what constitutes satisfying space—we need more than we're getting because we don't know what we want. Privacy and renewal and refuge and yet the ability to have certain things are necessary for happiness. I think we do tend to have too much stuff, but I also think if we had the right spaces, and the right stuff, we'd have far more satisfying lives. I still think the ideal house is some kind of bungalow—not that I'm biased, having lived in them since I was kid!—with all the incredible built-in storage and dual-purpose furniture and glass-doored bookshelves and nooks and crannies. The next best thing are these tiny houses or trailers, where every inch is a marvel of craftsmanship and consideration. Sometimes I look at one of these posts, about one of these amazing little creations, and I want to jump through the page like it's...Narnia or

something. It's the American dream: packing up and taking off, free as you please.

[Reply](#)



Deek says:

February 8, 2011 at 8:24 am

Damn gorgeous- love the glass sink/tile work in the can too!

-Deek

Relaxshacks.com

[Reply](#)



Kelly Kleiner says:

February 8, 2011 at 9:00 am

Ben--this airstream has been remodeled. my best guesses-- everything was painted; interior shell, dividers, cabinets (that might even be a new bank of cabinets). new cabinet hardware, and faucet. i think one divider was removed, and one was cut down, new counter top and tile back splash added, and counter top was put over the fridge. the seating has been reupholstered. new flooring. roll down shades on the windows. the bathroom was tiled, there is a new top and bowl for the vanity (maybe a whole new vanity), and new faucets for sink and shower. a really great job. i would love to see more pictures

[Reply](#)

◦ *Kent Griswold* says:

February 8, 2011 at 9:02 am

Click on the links above to go to Matthew's website and you can see more pictures. Also Matthew will be following up with a few more posts.

[Reply](#)



▪ *Kelly Kleiner* says:

February 8, 2011 at 9:37 am

thank you

[Reply](#)



Mark Pelletier says:

February 8, 2011 at 10:29 am

I appreciate small homes, I have lived small for a number of years (currently living in a 650 sq.ft. However I must argue, that for many, they burn out on really tiny living. And getting burned out is never a good thing. I have a couple of friends in Maine that have lived in 9'x10' homes but in the end could never entertain folks or store things (snow). In the end they had to build larger (700 s.f). I think that there is a big difference between small and tiny as far as livability. You can check out my blog to see what I call a small home and how I design for adjust-ability, and possible growth.

[Reply](#)



alfred says:

February 8, 2011 at 10:45 am

Mr. Hoffman has done a marvelous job, and I admire both the resulting product as well as his goals and intentions.

As someone who has lived in an airstream for a number of years (as a full time residence in a fixed location), a number of comments:

1) Mr. Hoffman has spent a great deal of time, money, and effort on this project, and it shows. Those without similar resources can expect to achieve lesser results.

2) Montecito, is a fantastic locale with great weather. It is also a fairly toney community (to say the least). I wonder what Santa Barbara County has to say about this "trailer" and its use.

3) The weather in California helps, as there isn't much insulation in airstreams (and its hard to

put more in, except underneath). One needs both heat and air-conditioning, just like a house. Even with both, I was cold in winter and hot in summer in Arizona.

4) The result here is both eye catching and effective – its a great advertisement for his practice! However, my guess is, it is not something than can be easily towed (but then again, if you are in Montecito where could you possibly wish to go?), nor (permitting issues and planning and zoning department requirements aside), is it probably the most cost effective way of achieving such stunning results.

One final point – if he is ever of a mind to sell it, there is probably a ready market (not something that can be said about every tiny home).

And none of this 'reality talk' above should be taken as criticism – the project is just marvelous!

[Reply](#)



Matthew Hofmann says:

February 13, 2011 at 10:23 pm

Thank you for taking the time to provide some very helpful feedback!

[Reply](#)



SoPasCat says:

February 8, 2011 at 11:00 am

Awesome Trailer !...Would love to have one of those but with a small flat TV w/a dvd player (BlockBuster/NetFlix), And a place to put a few books (enjoy reading).

How much did it all cost to renovate !

[Reply](#)



SoPasCat says:

February 8, 2011 at 11:01 am

Oooops ! – I didn't put the question mark (?) at the end of my question...sorry 😊

[Reply](#)



ginmar says:

February 9, 2011 at 4:10 pm

If you go to his site, there's a picture of some kind of flat screen TV. Under the benches, there's a DVD player. And then there's electronic books and movies stored in digital form. I'm converting my movie inventory to digital and clearing my shelves of the DVDs. More more portable! Or you could toss the sleeves and keep the DVDs themselves in wallets.

[Reply](#)



Anne says:

February 8, 2011 at 11:33 am

The best bath I have ever seen in an RV... Lovely reno. Brilliant pantry.

[Reply](#)



Debra says:

February 8, 2011 at 12:55 pm

This is just beautiful. The trick to living in a small home for us is to not have as much stuff, and be clever as to storage solutions. I love your reasons for enjoying your space – I second them! Very well put.

[Reply](#)



B. says:

February 8, 2011 at 1:33 pm

I love that bathroom so much!

[Reply](#)



Dennis Scott says:

February 8, 2011 at 5:26 pm

If you are going to live this small you should live well! Fantastic!

[Reply](#)



BenBrown says:

February 8, 2011 at 5:32 pm

I wish there was a Progressive X Prize for retrofitting mobile trailers like Air Streams and making them passivhaus efficient.

Nevertheless, what was done with this one looks really cool. You did good job.

[Reply](#)



BenBrown says:

February 8, 2011 at 5:36 pm

Opps! ...I wanted to add it is within my own cultural stories that families lived in mobile spaces slightly bigger than this for part of each year without feeling deprived or being deprived. I don't wonder if cultural expectations reflect how we live in relationship to the earth.

[Reply](#)



Bill says:

February 8, 2011 at 6:49 pm

Nice work on the trailer. It looks like it fits your needs just fine.

[Reply](#)



et says:

February 9, 2011 at 8:46 am

It's beautiful but I wonder how they do with hot and cold weather and what it like during heavy rains.

[Reply](#)



stpaulgirlmn says:

February 9, 2011 at 4:24 pm

well, as I mentioned in the Airstream blogpost LAST WEEK, I do love a beautiful Airstream.

I admit, I'm a little confused as to the sudden focus on the archetypical silver bullet, which economically is somewhat antithetical to the professed tenets of the tiny house movement.

I'm wondering if Airstream has provided some funding to our fearless blog leader? Not that it would necessarily be a bad thing, if any such funding were disclosed.

Mr. Griswold?

[Reply](#)



ginmar says:

February 11, 2011 at 2:50 am

What a nasty insinuation.

[Reply](#)



Ed says:

February 10, 2011 at 11:55 am

Excellent remodel from a current Airstream owner; two questions:

1. What is the GVWR after the remodel?
2. What is your tow vehicle?

I know several parties that live full time in an Airstream. Wife and I are going to be doing it in

about 2 years!

Ed

[Reply](#)



Anne says:

[February 11, 2011 at 6:44 am](#)

stpaulgirlmn, have you never seen the blog header? There has been a trailer there for as long as I have visited... Don't confuse Jay's version of 'tiny house' with the movement... which is much older and more all-encompassing.

[Reply](#)



Rose says:

[February 11, 2011 at 5:14 pm](#)

Can I just say, I saw this post and was wondering if you have any friends? a brother? You are hot and your trailer is uber hot.

By the by, I am totally on your page about your life style and have been designing one similar for the last couple years. It is finally coming to fruition!

[Reply](#)



Chandra says:

[February 12, 2011 at 1:30 pm](#)

Thats absolutely beautiful. You did everything perfect to that space. I bet it is an amazing place to live.

(Btw, um, I kind of have to agree with Rose) ;D

[Reply](#)



Maureen Ciemian says:

[February 13, 2011 at 6:43 pm](#)

Matthew,

Love the remodel! My husband and I spend about four months a year in our 23' Safari. I agree with all of your benefits although we haven't given up Costco when we are at home – I've found room to store 4 rolls of toilet paper and 4 rolls of paper towels when we head out on the road!

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