

Basecamp: Airstream mystique, packed tight

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN
Special to The Washington Post

The object of my desire was silver and riveted.

A decade ago, Airstream introduced a small, utilitarian trailer called the Basecamp. The beautiful, streamlined pod turned heads on the highway. Inside, it had no bathroom but the easy-to-clean, minimalist interior was perfect for muddy and sandy gear. The recession-era trailer was in production all of two years. The company built a couple hundred units and stopped in 2008 because of the slowing economy.

When I visited the Airstream factory in Jackson Center, Ohio, four years ago, I saw a Basecamp on the lot and fell in love. Back home in the District, I scoured

AIRSTREAM CONTINUED ON F3

Rustic luxury in the rearview

AIRSTREAM FROM F1

the Internet for one, but before I found my dream trailer used, Airstream announced that the Basecamp was coming back new. The company introduced an updated version, hoping for a more receptive market.

The 2016 Basecamp (MSRP \$35,900) is 16 feet long and weighs in at just 2,585 pounds, the lightest in Airstream's fleet. In October, the first units rolled through the doors of dealerships, and there's been a wait list ever since.

I wanted to give it a whirl, so I coordinated with Airstream. At Safford RV in Thornburg, Va., my friend Greg and I picked up the trailer, which looked like a distant, futuristic cousin of the iconic Airstream. Unlike the earlier Basecamp, it has a full bathroom, water tank and all sorts of innovative features, including solar panels on the roof to fuel the battery and an interior shower head that snakes outside for a rustic cleansing. A technician set the thermostat and explained that as we drove, the propane tanks would essentially preheat our living quarters. He showed us the USB ports, lock box for our valuables and Bose Bluetooth speaker that detects music-playing devices.

"For the gl camper in all of us," Greg quipped.

Almost 20 years ago, we spent a month together in Patagonia; he was competing in the Camel Trophy adventure race and I was covering it. I didn't know him well until we reconnected a couple of years ago and relived our adventures: pitching tents in snow, wearing the same clothes for weeks, driving Land Rovers over rocks and through mud. So when Airstream asked me what kind of tow vehicle I'd like to borrow, for old time's sake, I chose a Land Rover.

A mountain retreat

Greg took the wheel, and we left the dealership in Land Rover's Range Rover Supercharged LWB with a beagle and two bikes in the back, the Basecamp in tow. We had planned a fall weekend of camping, cycling and paddling in North Carolina's Outer Banks, but Hurricane Matthew foiled our plans. At the last minute, we set our sights on the West Virginia mountains.

By the time we arrived at Canaan Valley Resort State Park in the northeastern part of the state, it was dark. We unhitched and leveled the trailer, connected its electrical cable, switched on the lights and moved into our home away from home for the next three nights. After firing up the gas stove for hot chocolate with mac and cheese, we awkwardly converted our dining-room table and benches to a platform for our two sleeping bags. We could have fit a third, cozily.

It was a clear, chilly night, and as we walked to the campground facilities with toothbrushes, we looked up to see the Milky Way.

"It's not quite Patagonia," Greg said. "But it's pretty nice."

On our walk, we laughed about the luxurious, semi-automated Range Rover and wondered how it would do off-road. Maybe Land

Rover had gotten soft over the years. But then, so had we. Instead of melting snow for our hot water, we turned a knob on the kitchen counter. Greg drew the line at some luxuries. He made it clear that, even in the middle of the night, he wouldn't use the trailer bathroom. I, on the other hand, had no problem with our push facilities.

In the morning, the blackout curtains and tinted windows let me sleep two hours later than usual. I woke to the sound of rain pattering on the roof and RVs pulling out of the campground, their drivers protesting the foul weather. I was thankful for our climate-controlled refuge as I looked out the panoramic windows to the dripping-wet fall colors.

Although the mod Basecamp was built with many convenienc-

es (a two-burner cooktop, a full bathroom, LED lighting), it blessedly doesn't have extravagances such as a flat-screen TV or fitted sheets. The trailer is meant to be more rugged than its brethren silver trailers, and it passed the test in several categories, but not all. The gray-and-red color scheme is well-suited to hide the dirt from the outdoors. The rear cargo hatch ostensibly makes it easier to load gear such as bikes and surfboards, although we never figured out where that gear would go once the space was filled with humans. The interior is full of handy cargo nets and bungee cords for storage. But one overhead net zipper broke on its first use (stowing part of the convertible bed, as the technician showed us) and made me wish that Airstream had skipped the

cute outdoor kit with a compass, binoculars and a headlamp to invest more on durability.

Weathering the climate

It was a good day to stay in sleeping bags. I read for a couple of hours, then we played backgammon and finally got geared up for the outdoors at noon, using the tiny bathroom as a changing area. We had given up on cycling because of the rain. Instead, we drove down the street to hike at Blackwater Falls State Park and then eat lunch at Hellbender Burritos in Davis.

That night, I used the Basecamp's microwave to heat leftovers, the aluminum walls reflecting the tiny lights on appliances and glowing like a spaceship. At 3 a.m., I heard Greg opening the bathroom door. He responded before I'd had a

chance to ask the obvious question.

"I didn't want to track mud inside," he said. I snickered into my sleeping bag and fell back asleep.

The rest of the weekend, we made peace with the wet weather and split our time between the trailer and other indoor lures — the resort hot tub next to the campground, hot drinks at Tip-Top in Thomas and dinner down the street at Front Street Grocers, my friend Justin's new store and cafe. I showed him a picture of the trailer. His eyes widened, and he exclaimed: "RoboCop!"

On our final morning, we packed up before daybreak and I insisted on re-hitching the trailer myself. A couple of years ago, I struggled with the hitch on a 22-foot model, but this one is

more user-friendly. It took nearly 30 minutes of repositioning the SUV by fractions of an inch to align the parts, but that would get easier with time. My confidence was restored.

Driving out of the mountains, I was amazed by how many times I forgot about what I was towing behind me. I barely noticed its weight when I turned or braked.

Unhitching the Basecamp at the dealership, I felt a wave of gloom, like I was returning a toy with which I hadn't finished playing. I drove out of the parking lot slowly, considering turning back. It would be so easy now, I thought, to add my name to the waiting list.

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PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP: Airstream rolled out its 16-foot Basecamp last fall, the updated version of a short-lived utilitarian trailer that the company first built a decade ago; the back of the trailer opens for loading gear, such as kayaks, bikes and boards; the interior feels spacious, at least without bags and gear, among dining tables that lower to be come the base for a bed, as well as bench cushions that unfold to act as a mattress.