The lure of the tiny house is huge. These small homes, less than 200 square feet and often on wheels, appeal to the minimalist, the environmentalist and the frugalist. Certainly, living in a space smaller than some bathrooms is not for everyone, but during the past few years I’ve found myself in countless conversations with like-minded small-dwelling enthusiasts. We’ll talk about the idea of paring down and living more simply and affordably. After all, when I’m on the road for extended periods, I’m content with my itty-bitty existence — that which I can fit in my car. Time and again, I return home and shake my head at all the possessions I’d left behind.

In my journey to self-educate about small living, I made multiple visits to a tiny-house community in Northeast Washington (since disbanded) and watched a tiny-house documentary. I’ve fantasized about buying one as a second home, towing it to locales with dreamy views. When my last partner and I had casually discussed cohabitating and talked about tiny houses, I insisted we’d need a flock of them—his, hers, one for my office, one for entertaining and one that housed all our recreational gear. That defeats the purpose, he said earnestly. I sighed, exaggeratedly, sitting in my spacious 900-square-foot...
rowhouse.

Given the robust tiny-house movement (to wit: a handful of TV shows, DIY workshops, tiny-house kits, an annual conference and countless books and blogs), it’s surprising that so few of them exist legally. Although cities don’t spend much time hunting down tiny-house dwellers, the structures violate building code in most jurisdictions, because they don’t meet the square footage requirement for permanent residences. Hence the house-on-wheels regulatory loophole: If folks complain about your house, simply tow it to another spot.

Plenty of people offer tiny houses as vacation rentals, but leave it to progressive Portland to introduce the first tiny-house hotel. The Oregon city has not only legalized accessory dwelling units, also called ADUs (small living quarters on the same lot as a larger home), the city embraces and incentivizes smaller-scale living. This approach helped make it possible for Deb Delman and Kol Peterson to open Caravan, which they say is the first legal commercial application of tiny houses in the United States. The houses are hooked up to the electric grid and the city water and sewer systems (sorry, compost-toilet devotees).

Since Caravan’s opening in 2013, WeeCasa has opened in the small mountain town of Lyons, Colo., with 11 tiny houses, partly inspired by Caravan. The owners promote the resort as a learning center and place to “try before you buy”; they also have a dealership for purchasing blueprints or finished houses.

Next year, a tiny-home inn called Understory will open in Thomas, Va., with structures made using natural earth, reclaimed materials and off-grid technologies.

“People think nothing of spending hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars building a tiny house, but very few people have been inside a tiny house,” Delman said. She and Peterson, who seem more at ease as small-living activists and educators than hoteliers, regularly open the tiny houses for tours, which can attract upward of 100 people. Delman says three-quarters want to build a tiny house, but a show of hands tells her that typically only one or two have ever spent the night in one.

Guests either leave Caravan thinking “No way,” or their visit fortifies their dream. “Some are really here investigating and measuring,” Delman said, “or, they never thought about living in one but, staying here, they realize they can downsize.”

I planned part of my recent cross-country drive around a stay at Caravan, which tends to book a couple months out. I wove it in Portland’s Alberta Arts District, the tiny houses are fenced inside a lot accessed by a keypad, so guests enjoy the privacy of a tiny house and the coziness of an enclosed community, yet they’re surrounded by night-life and they’re steps from a vibrant strip of indie shops and bars.

My beagle and I checked into a house called Rosebud: 120 square feet with a rocking chair on the (tiny) porch and ladder up to a loft sleeping space. On a bookshelf, I found titles such as “The Big Tiny,” a memoir by tiny-house pioneer Dee Williams, and “Curious Gorge,” about hiking the Columbia River Gorge. A booklet told the stories of each of the six tiny homes, some of which were built specifically for Caravan. Mine was leased from its builder, made largely from recycled materials and lit by Mason jar lights. Inside the closet was wallpaper that looks like a bookshelf, left over from the “Portlandia” skit shot here.

On Alberta Street, I stopped at Case Study, a bow-tie coffee shop, built with wood and steel, for a locally made, small-batch black tea chai. I then convinced myself that citywide tax-free shopping was reason enough to buy souvenirs. A hemp-and-organic-cotton dress and some locally made ruffled pants later, I chuckled at the hypocrisy: succumbing to consumerism during a minimalist living experiment. With the contents of my cart, my shopping bags and my bike, I’d covered most of the tiny house floor space.

That night, I met some Portland friends for dinner around the corner, at an edgy vegan spot called Bye and Bye. We sat on the patio and shared vegetable and noodle bowls, a vegan meatball sub and soft-pretzel knots. Over drinks, we realized that our group of four consisted of a gay guy with a husband and a straight gal who calls her significant other her “partner.” We laughed about this new era in which we live.

We all returned to Caravan and gathered around the fire pit, and I glanced at the houses around us. One looked like a covered wagon, another was made with corrugated metal and wood shingles. Armed with s’mores ingredients, we set to work at the fire, raindrops tapping on the tent overhead.

I met some of the other guests: A Portland couple celebrating a birthday and dreaming about building a tiny house; a single woman traveling from British Columbia; a road-trip ping couple who had seen Caravan on Portlandia, and a writer who lives in a tiny house-on-wheels. Armed with a camera, he planned to visit Ohio after watching “Tiny House Nation.” A photographer who had just finished a campfire photo shoot hung around and offered his expertise on marshmallow roasting.

As guests retreated to their tiny abodes, those of us remaining had a serious conversation about milk vs. dark chocolate (both were on hand for s’mores, in mini, organic, fair-trade-bar form).

The photographer and I closed down the fire pit, and I invited him into my well-lit house so he could point out some routes on a Portland bike map. We sat in the tiny space, knees touching, the map spread out between...
on a May evening, the Robin Jackson Band performed at Caravan in Portland, Ore. In the summer, the tiny-house hotel offers local music, a bonfire and s'mores.

Chatting with Philips, I learned how drastic the city’s change has been. Whereas once bars had to serve food and/or be frequented the glammy Polynesian-inspired party spots in California in the 1950s. The decor at this hip basement bar is an eclectic mix of vintage knickknacks, denim jackets and industrial tools. Select from grilled cheese varieties such as the classic Vermont cheddar, $8; and Georgia Bowl, $9. Cocktails include Threeamigos (sambuca, mezcal, tequila, lime, grapefruit), $13. The bar is a study in retro kitsch: crocheted blankets, tacy ceramic statues and an attic’s worth of trinkets.

Perfect for a low-key gathering is WeeCasa, a weekend, including a summit, ADU tour and other events included. Tours on select Sundays, $10. On Nov. 6, the nonprofit will host the First Annual ADU Week-end, featuring tours and workshops. 

At 717 square feet, the Kangaroo is the biggest house of the sky of the city of Portland. Portland is home to what Carman’s ownsmen say is the first legal commercial application of tiny houses.

One woman grabbed a pen and a napkin and asked if I knew a Bar manager in the city of Portland. She had heard a rumor that there was a new bar opening soon, and she wanted to meet its owner. She said she had been a bartender for many years and had a good idea of what it would be like.

I opened the book in the center of the room and looked at the menu. The bar had several small tables and bars. The drinks were well aged, the garnishes a generous.

Sundae's Place is an old school bus. Select from grilled cheese varieties such as the classic Vermont cheddar, $8; and Georgia Bowl, $9. Cocktails include Threeamigos (sambuca, mezcal, tequila, lime, grapefruit), $13. The bar is a study in retro kitsch: crocheted blankets, tacy ceramic statues and an attic’s worth of trinkets.

Unlike the vibe in other cities, there’s no preciosity and no exclusivity at these hideaways. The drinks are serious business. The over-

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