

## Escapes

# Happy trails! Adventures in RV shopping.

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

I flop down on the thin mattress and close my eyes, imagining myself in this bed, elsewhere. I picture rolling over each morning to peer out the window: What breathtaking view shall I muse over today? Rugged coastline or majestic peak? I smile as I float farther into fantasyland. Then I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with the sharp scent of . . . vinyl?

The new-car smell shouldn't surprise me. After all, I'm in a motor home, on a sales lot just north of Frederick. I get up from the bed and stroll through the lounge, past the flat-screen TV and into the kitchen. I run my hand over the faux-granite countertop and try to take in all the RV bling.

That's right — I'm RV shopping. I was considering travel plans for the coming year, and the notion of having my own portable dwelling somehow wormed its way into my mind. I liked the idea of traveling without reservations. And never again, I thought, would I find myself in the middle of nowhere, forced to depend on Motel 6 for a bed and on truck stops for nourishment.

But other than the appeal of driving off into the sunset with a home on my tail, I didn't know much about RVs. The last time I'd hung out in a recreational vehicle was when my parents owned a Coleman pop-up — a jack-in-the-box-like trailer that morphs into a tiny house. We must have used it for camping at some point, but my sister and I only remember having it popped up in our suburban carport. With the luxury of indoor plumbing and a stocked kitchen only steps away, we would host friends for sleepovers, staying up late playing Uno and truth or dare. I also remember that the cushions were rust-colored. Certainly, RVs have changed since then. Right?

Driving up Route 15, it's hard to miss Beckley's Camping Center. I see RVs in all shapes and sizes, lined up behind a fence along the highway like puppies at a shelter. Pick me! Pick me!

In the showroom, a woman named Sherri describes the two basic types of RVs. Motor homes range from van campers to bus-sized, and towing options include expandable trailers, truck campers and toy haulers, which have built-in garages for things such as dirt bikes and kayaks. RVs cost anywhere from \$5,000 to \$500,000, and if you have to ask about gas mileage, you probably can't afford it.

Sherri tells me that the couple of hundred RVs in the lot are unlocked, and she sends me out to explore. It's a weekday, and I seem to have the place to myself. I meander around, stepping into RVs with names like Raptor, Cougar and Cyclone. Some pop up, some stretch out and most look far too wide for a city



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**Silver lining: Safford RV is the only dealer in the area that carries Airstreams, including the 16-foot Sport.**

street, let alone the interstate. I see signs reminding me that I can ask for a test drive, which I had every intention of doing. Now, I think it would be easier to steer a submarine.

I walk up to the Winnebago Journey, a 36-foot, \$264,000 mobile McMansion, which has side mirrors the size of solar panels. There are six stairs to reach the driver's seat. I slip behind the steering

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wheel and sink into a comfy white leather chair. In front of me are enough controls that I should be able to fly. My seat is far enough away from the passenger's that I question the feasibility of sharing snacks. Above the windshield is a 40-inch Samsung flat-screen, one of three. In the kitchen I find a full-sized KitchenAid stainless-steel fridge — some serious camper cred.

After a dozen RVs, all the floor plans and ways to avoid roughing it (pendant lights, laundry chutes, fireplaces, surround-sound stereos, spice racks) blur

together. But it's clear that one thing hasn't changed much since my family camping days: the color palette. Taupe, tan, auburn, chocolate, khaki, coffee — no matter what you call it, and how fancy the material, it's all brown. Brown tile, brown carpet, brown brocade sofas, brown bedspreads, brown window treatments. Somehow, I don't imagine that the people living in these vehicles are so filthy and

unkempt that they're leaving traces of dirt in their path. Why so brown?

On the far side of the lot, I find RVs that are more my size — and shape. The ALiner is a sweet little pop-up A-frame — a triangle in a land of rectangles. The smallest size, which can be towed by a motorcycle, looks like a white gingerbread house. Little Guy makes an adorable, brightly colored teardrop trailer called the T@B. Other teardrop models have hidden kitchens on the exterior. You can't stand up inside, and crawling in is only slightly less unsettling than being

rolled into an MRI chamber. But it's beautifully utilitarian. And it's not brown.

In search of other colors, I head to Safford RV in Virginia. It carries only a handful of brands — and no teardrops — but most importantly, this is the region's lone Airstream dealership. Sure, they look like giant aluminum hot dog buns, but I figure that if any manufacturer could fuse bold style and trailering, it's Airstream, the granddaddy of the industry.

And I'm not disappointed. In the showroom, I walk into a \$91,000 trailer from Airstream's designer line and gasp. I feel as if I'm boarding a Virgin America flight after a lifetime amid generic cabin decor. There's purple carpet, a black leather couch, sleek drawer handles, LED lighting and metal surfaces. It's the perfect combination of American retro and Scandinavian cool.

Outside, surrounded by about 300 RVs on a gravel lot, I have eyes only for the Airstreams. A salesman named Ricky drives me around in a golf cart. He unlocks the door to Airstream's 16-foot Sport, an orb of a trailer on sale for \$41,000. "Is this what it's like to sleep in a space capsule?" I ask Ricky as I check out

### IF YOU GO

#### GETTING THERE

Beckley's Camping Center in Thurmont, Md., and Safford RV in Thornburg, Va., are both about an hour outside Washington. To reach Beckley's, take Interstate 270 north, which becomes US-15 in Frederick. Follow 15 for another 10 miles, then turn right onto Angleberger Road. To reach Safford, take I-95 south to exit 118 and turn left on Mudd Tavern Road. Make your first right onto Mallard Road; the lot will be on your left.

#### WHERE TO SHOP

##### Beckley's Camping Center

11109 Angleberger Rd.  
Thurmont, Md.  
800-615-6171  
[www.beckleysrvs.com](http://www.beckleysrvs.com)  
Good selection of RVs, from teardrop trailers to giant motor homes. About 10 miles north of Frederick.

##### Safford Recreational Vehicles

6101 Mallard Rd.  
Thornburg, Va.  
540-735-1100  
[www.saffordrv.com](http://www.saffordrv.com)  
The only Airstream dealership in the Mid-Atlantic. Carries other major brands of large motor homes and trailers. Located 16 miles south of Fredericksburg.

#### INFORMATION

[www.rvia.org](http://www.rvia.org)

— M.D.G.K.

the rounded bedroom. We walk through a few more trailers, and I entertain the thought of selling my house to buy one of these beauts.

Back in the showroom, I chicken out on asking Ricky the tough RV questions, such as on the topic of human waste. Instead I ask, what's up with all the brown? "I guess if it's functional," he says, "why change it up?"

At home on Capitol Hill, I confess my little trailer crush to my neighbor. In the same way that urbanites fantasize about raising chickens or honeybees, we agree that it would be really far-out to pull a teardrop into one of our tiny back yards. It would serve as a spare room for visitors and an outdoor escape for homeowners.

Only later do I realize that this idea is so appealing because it's reminiscent of my Coleman days in the carport. Then I consider all the money I'd save in gas, all the urban critters I could see and hear, all the bathroom challenges I'd avoid. The opportunities for adventure in my back yard are boundless. All I need now is a deck of Uno cards.

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