'Why we love our vintage trailers'

by Gillian - Saturday, September 21, 2013

http://3storymagazine.com/love-vintage-trailers/

They're a piece of Americana, and nobody can deny their charm. But with every vintage trailer comes a story. By Samantha Cummings. Cover photo courtesy of Shady Dell.

Photo courtesy of The Shady Dell

When crowds gather to celebrate the second annual Tucson Modernism Week, all eyes will be on the Vintage Trailer Show, where owners will flock from all over the state to show off their mid-century throwbacks.

“It’s Americana,” says Demion Clinco, President of the Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation, which is organizing Tucson Modernism Week. “Trailers, neon signs, classic cars – they all kind of represent this idyllic notion of what America was like in the 1950s and 60s. It represents this exuberance after World War II. It’s this idea of, ‘Let’s go see the future. Get in our cute little airplane designed little tin can and experience the United States’.”

But vintage trailers - especially nowadays - are not just for travel. We talked to four owners about why they love their piece of the past.
Doug Striggow and Doug Harbaugh are avid collectors of anything mid-century. One step into their home and you’d think you just traveled back in time.

With a room dedicated completely to Dr. Seuss memorabilia and a plethora of vintage finds, this couple was ready to crank their antiquing up a notch and purchase their largest mid-century find yet: a 1966 Airstream Caravel Land Yacht. Doug Harbaugh describes it as "the big piece of our funky collection".

The couple plans to use the Airstream as a guest quarters, and will possibly take it on a few camping trips. But first, they have to find out if they even like to camp. If they don’t it’s no sweat, because they already set up a campground of their own – one they know they’ll like.

Once they purchased the trailer for $6,500 from RV Oasis, located off the Benson Highway, the couple wasted no time creating their dream campground. Take three steps out of the trailer’s front door and a path of pavers leads you straight to their version of a ‘campfire’: bright, fun yellow plastic chairs, a red awning, and salvaged steel dividers.

“I just wanted a spot to roast marshmallows,” says Striggow.
With an appreciation for all things mid-century and wanting to stay true to the trailer’s origins, they made sure their renovations reflected just that. New curtains were made out of vintage 1960’s fabric, a reddish-orange countertop replaces the original white Formica, with new floor tiles to match, and new mustard yellow seat cushions pull the entire look together.

Doug and Doug’s renos stay true to the trailer’s roots. Photo by Samantha Cummings

Striggow, a visual display manager for Dillard’s, and Harbaugh, a former visual display manager and now a men’s supervisor for JC Penney, have yet to spend a night in their prized Land Yacht.

But, if the trailer never moves an inch, both agree it was still worth every penny. “At the end of the day, it’s perfect for us,” says Harbaugh.

"I want to leave the city and the time period behind."

When Alex Mastrangelo travels with his wife, Michelle Haller, and son Dash in their blue ‘59 Cadillac, towing their 1957 El Rey, heads are sure to turn.

The family of three typically travels in the 24 ft. trailer anywhere from five to eight times a year, having stayed in the El Rey for as long as twelve days at a time. “Dash grew up in the trailer,” says Alex. “He used to take baths in the sink.”
Dash and his trailer. Photo courtesy of Alex Mastrangelo

The trailer, an eBay buy for $2,300, was originally purchased with the intent to rarely move an inch. “When I first met my wife, she was living downtown and was going to make a house out of trailers,” says Alex. “So we were designing this house that was solely made out of travel trailers and this was actually going to be the bedroom and dressing room. It ended up she didn’t do that house, so we ended up traveling with it.”

Their one-bedroom home was designed to house a 35-foot Spartanette trailer next to it. Photo courtesy of Alex Mastrangelo

Instead the couple, in order to abide by building codes and regulations, built a one-bedroom home that was specifically designed to house a 35-foot Spartanette trailer next to it. The trailer provides an additional working bathroom, a bed, and living space. If the trailer is “travel ready,” it’s technically considered a vehicle - meaning they were able to circumvent permits for an addition or guest house.

Because of the home’s small size, Alex and Michelle use this house as a rental, and say that the Spartanette addition is a huge selling point to the right tenant.
Now the family of three resides in a traditional ranch-style home in Tucson. But Alex refers to the 1959 El Rey as their home on the road, providing his family with the opportunity to drink a lot of beer, eat a lot of food and just relax.

“I love to travel. Also, I’ve always really escaped to the past to take a vacation. My aesthetics have been that way since I was kid. I don’t like modern things at all, so when I go on a vacation I want to leave the city and leave the time period at the same time. I don’t think I could have the same amount of pleasure in a new trailer. Everything is very much authentic.”
He adds: “Trailer people are kind of like Civil War re-enactors, in their own way. They all go out to the battlefield and they try to get in the zone of what the soldier felt like in 1864. That’s what they’re doing, but just a much more modern time period. They are escaping from everything that’s driving them crazy at home. When I get in here, I can relax. For the most part, you can kind of forget that you’re in 2013.”

* If you want to check out Alex and Michelle’s trailer for yourself, catch him at the Vintage Trailer Show at Tucson Modernism Week on Saturday, October 5th and Sunday, October 6th. For more information and tickets, click here.

"A lot of people have stayed here that I don’t think I would have ever met... we've become close friends."

A night at The Shady Dell in Bisbee, a former mining town two hours south of Tucson, is the closest thing to actually teleporting back to 1950.

One step into the 1951 Mansion, a Spartan classic, and you are greeted with a leopard print rug, two martini glasses and a 1955 University yearbook.

Justin and Jennifer Luria are the third set of owners to take over the campground, comprised entirely of vintage trailers. It dates all the way back to 1927, where fatigued travelers on Highway 80 used to rest and set up camp.
The Shady Dell, Bisbee, AZ. Photo by Samantha Cummings

Now, the couple welcomes guests from all over the world who are craving the romantic and mystique experience of 1950's Americana. You can choose from nine fully restored vintage trailers. Their collection ranges anywhere from a 1957 Airfloat to a restored 1947 'Tiki Bus'. 
“The Airfloat is neat,” says Justin. “That was pretty luxurious back then. Nobody could afford that except for celebrities and movie stars.”

Jennifer, a former graphic designer, and Justin, who graduated from Arizona State University with a degree in Hospitality and Tourism, both fit right in with their vintage settings. Both have a ’50s look to them, she with her short bangs and bright red lipstick, he in plaid shirt and jeans.

But never did they think they would end up in a place with a population of 5,600.

“I’ve wanted to work at a hotel or have a little hotel in Central America or another country,” says Justin. “All I wanted was to get out of Arizona, and then I was like, ‘How’d I end up in this small town in the middle of nowhere?’ But I’m five miles from Mexico. Almost got there!”
While Justin is responsible for most of the landscaping and maintenance duties, Jennifer enjoys rummaging through Bisbee’s vintage shops for finds to show off in each trailer (and it doesn’t hurt that it’s a business write-off).

“She sometimes people leave things,” says Jennifer. “I’ll be like, ‘I don’t remember picking this up.’ They’ll also send stuff, because it’s been sitting in their closet for years. So, we’ll put it on display so everybody can see it. It’s nice to be able to do that.”

Because Justin and Jennifer run everything completely by themselves - except for some cleaning help on the weekends - they have decided to go seasonal. The Shady Dell is open during Fall and Spring and closed for several months during the summer. This gives the couple the opportunity to make necessary improvements, and time to recuperate.

“We’ve met people from all over the world,” says Justin. “Really interesting people - a lot of people who have stayed here, that I don’t think I would have ever met, that we’ve become really close friends with.”

“Sometimes it’s like Groundhog Day,” says Jennifer of the steady stream of visitors. “I try to remember everybody’s names, but it’s hard because somebody new is coming in every day.”

One couple who made their mark was Alex Mastrangelo and Michelle Haller (mentioned above), who rented out the entire park for their wedding ceremony and reception. Guests were able to mingle at the common area and then at the end of the night were able to return to their own trailer.
Jennifer and Justin are currently living in the back of the main office with their two dogs. They plan to build a house adjacent to the property. Steps towards creating an outdoor movie theatre are also already in the works, where they will use their 1957 Dot’s Diner (sadly, out of commission as a diner) as a place for guests to purchase concessions.

Says Jennifer: “To be able to be surrounded by this stuff that we love everyday... we like the style, we like the period. That’s our job, and that’s what we love.”

"There's an emotional aspect to this. It's sentimental."
We know. It's pushing it a little to call this last trailer vintage; it was made in 1979. But we loved this story so much, we had to squeeze it in.

When Susan Delaney knew her snowbird parents from New England were moving into her family of three’s Tucson home for the winter, she and husband Michael thought they’d renovate the two-bedroom house.

Their plans to add onto the home fell through, so Susan decided to move her parents into the master bedroom and convert the Arizona room into a third bedroom. But in doing so, Susan’s already tiny house just got smaller.

The solution: a 1979 Silver Streak that not only provides extra space - acting as an extra wing on their house, - but will be a place where the family can escape and spend quality time together.

“There’s an emotional aspect to this. It’s sentimental. Life goes fast and you should try to at least stay a little near your family,” she says.

For Susan, a clay artist, half the fun has been finding vintage items to fill the trailer, which they bought

1979 Silver Streak. Photo by Samantha Cummings
for $5,700 on Craigslist. On the table lies a 1978 version of The Mad Magazine Game and Bonkers. Old cassettes and books are lined up under the window and a stack of Arizona Highway magazines are near the beds.

“I must say though, you try to stay hip about it, but in this trailer you definitely find yourself listening to Hank Williams and Patsy Cline,” says Susan.

Interior of the Delaneys' 1979 Silver Streak. Photo by Samantha Cummings

With the Internet connection reaching out to the trailer, her son Spencer, 13, and his friend had no issue being guinea pigs and testing out the trailer for a night. Although Susan thinks more YouTube videos were watched than actual board games were played, she’s happy to see her son be able to claim a little space of his own.

Because of the trailer’s pristine condition, Susan wants to leave the Silver Streak as is and just slightly change and add to its original 1979 décor. This means a lot of burnt orange and avocado green - cheesy, but she loves it. “I graduated from high school in 1978, so that’s kind of fun,” says Susan. “I was a freshman in college when this came out, so I have some fun memories.”