



# The AMERICAN AIRSTREAM

**Join us on a factory tour where freedom rolls on in classic style**

*Story by • Kit Bernardi*



Plenty of inventions are trendy, but few stand the test of time to become cultural icons like the silver aluminum Airstream travel trailer. For generations of travelers worldwide, a sleek Airstream hitched to a family vehicle rolling down the open road represents freedom to roam with all the cozy comforts of home in tow.

Inventor Wally Byam started building travel trailers in his backyard in 1929, ultimately opening his first Airstream factory in Culver City, California, in 1931. Nearly a century later, Airstream's timeless, aerodynamic curvy design that blends function and beauty still turns heads and fuels wanderlust.

The first time I saw an Airstream I was a young Girl Scout hiking in the Indiana Dunes, now a National Park. Glistening in the afternoon sun, its shiny surface reflected the surrounding landscape's golden sand dunes and Lake Michigan's deep blue water. Our merry band of girl campers waved to the lucky owners of that dream machine.

I decided then and there that I would be an Airstreamer someday. Fast forward a few decades. Now, I travel across America with my husband Bob, with girlfriends and sometimes solo in my 19-foot Airstream Caravel hitched to a Ford F-150 pickup truck.

Like many dedicated Airstreamers, Bob and I recently made the pilgrimage to Airstream's headquarters in Jackson Center, Ohio. Visitors can tour the iconic brand's state-of-the-art production facilities where classic travel trailers, touring coaches and Basecamp units are hand-built. The travel trailer plant is connected to the airy, contemporary visitors center complex housing the new Airstream Heritage Center Museum, which displays historic Airstreams

The Airstream Heritage Center Museum showcases 90 years of Airstream's history building the world's most iconic trailer trailers.





This historical photo from 1936 shows Wally Byam (middle right) with his craftsmen and three travel trailers they hand-built.



dating back to the company's beginnings and memorabilia preserving Wally Byam's legacy.

**AIRSTREAM FACTORY TOURS**

Each year, as many as 10,000 visitors from around the world take hour-long guided tours of the 750,000-square-foot manufacturing facility employing as many as 500 craftspeople who hand-build all of Airstream's trailers. Each travel trailer takes an average of 350 hours to craft. For the United States market, the facility produces eight trailer models ranging in length from 16 to 33 feet available in 45 interior floor plans, in addition to three models for the European market plus commercial trailers.

Our tour guide, Dan Maul, worked on the production floor in the final finish departments before leading Airstream visitor experiences. Dan gives factory tours for up to 50 guests, organizes visitor center events and oversees the Heritage Center Museum's exhibit donations and archives.

"Airstream trailers are crafted from the outside in," Dan said. "The production process starts with a team of two craftsmen, one positioned on the outside of the aluminum shell, the other on the inside, working in sync buck riveting the trailer's exterior together," said Dan.

Rivets are an ancient building material first used by the Egyptians. Rivets became standard in Roman construction and were also employed by Viking boat builders. Today, buck riveting is an essential construction technique for building modern bridges, ships, airplanes and Airstreams. Every Airstream trailer has an average of 3,000 rivets in its walls, trim and some of the interior fixtures. Hence, the Airstream culture's motto, "Live Riveted."

Once the trailer's exterior is complete, skilled workers install interior wiring, plumbing, appliances, custom-milled cabinetry, built-in furniture, flooring made of recycled glass and plastic, upholstery and window coverings. Most trailer components are made in

Ohio. No matter the model, all Airstreams are equipped with the same signature, rounded-edged doors, panoramic front windows and pill-shaped windows.

**AIRSTREAM IS ABOUT THE PEOPLE**

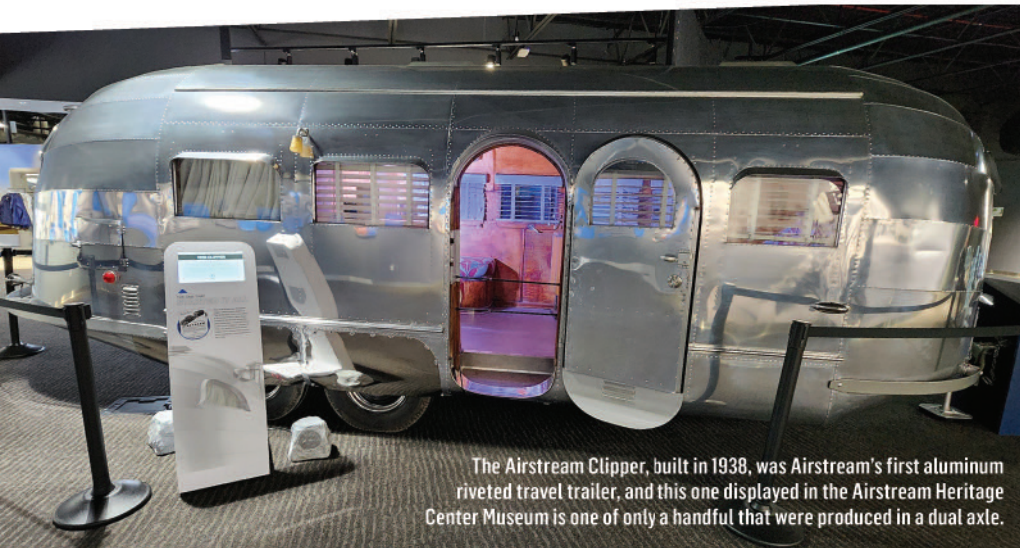
Airstream production line craftspeople operate cool machines. Computerized numerical control cutters make trailers' inside and outside aluminum walls. Acquired by Airstream in 1962, two hydraulic stretch form machines that originally fashioned airplane aluminum nose cones now make trailers' front and rear aluminum shell end caps.

My favorite factory tour stop was the water check booth. To test for leaks, trailers are wheeled into the 35-foot-long giant shower stall and pummeled for 30 minutes with 10,000 gallons of water, which is filtered and reused for more tests. Annually, the factory recycles around 1,300 tons of aluminum, as well as copper wire, plastics, wood, sawdust and pallets.

We headed up the stairs of an elevated, open platform centered above the factory floor. From this vantage point, Airstream's streamlined, human-powered production process is clearly visible. Dan said, "Visitors often are surprised when they do not see robots, only people, working on the floor."

Dan explained how Airstream's people-centric approach ultimately makes the production process more reliable, flexible and able to adjust to market demands. "To ensure the quality Airstream is known for, the company invests in developing peoples' skills and proprietary software, which operates plant manufacturing systems and multiple systems inside trailers," he said.

Because Airstream's riveted, aluminum exterior design has not changed much in four



The Airstream Clipper, built in 1938, was Airstream's first aluminum riveted travel trailer, and this one displayed in the Airstream Heritage Center Museum is one of only a handful that were produced in a dual axle.



decades, Dan said that many people tend to think of Airstream in a nostalgic, historical context, not realizing that thousands of new trailers are built every year.

“When well-maintained, an Airstream can have a lifespan on the road of more than 50 years thus making it a treasured family heirloom,” he said.

**AIRSTREAM HERITAGE CENTER MUSEUM**

The ethereal, glowing white neon sign, “Welcome to the Mothership,” greets guests entering the Airstream Heritage Center Museum, opened in 2021. There, we learned more about Wally Byam’s vision, Airstream’s global influence on travel and the brand’s impact on American culture.

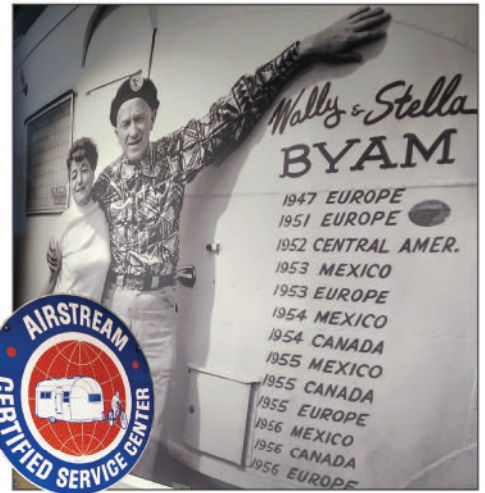
Seated in vintage lawn chairs surrounding a faux campfire, guests watched an engaging film covering Airstream’s riveting history. The museum’s spacious exhibit space laid out in a timeline of many impeccably



Travel journalist Kit Bernardi road trips across America in her Airstream Caravel, pictured here in New Mexico’s White Sands National Park (above).

restored, historic trailers trace Byam’s iconic invention’s evolution.

The museum recently acquired Airstream’s first-ever, all-aluminum riveted travel trailer made in 1936 called the Airstream Clipper. Besides being a skilled craftsman and engineer, Byam was a consummate marketer naming his trailer models after styles of inter-



nationally known ships. Byam’s love for the outdoors fueled his travel trailer inventions. He frequently camped as a kid, and in his youth worked on seafaring vessels. Early in Wally’s trailer-building years, his first wife’s desire to have a camping experience that provided more homey comforts while still enjoying outdoor adventure inspired his designs. During his storied career, Byam also worked in the advertising, marketing and aircraft manufacturing industries. All these experiences he leveraged while building his company Airstream.

Exhibits throughout the museum display how Airstream is embedded in American culture. Airstreams have played starring roles in Hollywood films, pop culture and NASA’s space exploration history starting in the 1960s during the Apollo missions.

Airstreamers from all over the world donate travel memorabilia to the museum. These treasures appear periodically in carefully curated, rotating exhibits. I loved learning about global Airstream caravan group tours Byam led through archival photography and journal entries written by fellow caravanners.

**PLAN A TRIP**

Whether one is an Airstream owner or not, to spend time on the factory floor and in the museum is to take an inspiring tour through an authentic American success story. As stated in what Wally Byam called his personal creed outlining his life’s dream, Airstream’s inventor and founder promises, “To place the great wide world at your doorstep for you who yearn to travel with all the comforts of home.” For more information, visit [airstream.com](http://airstream.com). &

**GO BEYOND THE MOTHERSHIP**



➔ Airstream factory tours are one of several transportation-related tourism experiences visitors can enjoy in rural communities within a 60-mile radius of Jackson Center.

Karen Eylon, director of Union County Tourism, said, “Ohio’s leadership in transportation innovations is showcased in this region’s attractions, while our agricultural bounty promises delicious dining and our many lakeside parks offer plenty of outdoor fun.”

Visit the Honda Heritage Center in Marysville, a central base to explore the region. Stay at cozy B&Bs, standard hotels and leafy campgrounds. The Wright brothers’ innovations leading to the beginnings of human flight are commemorated at the Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park.

Astronaut Neil Armstrong was from Wapakoneta, home of the Armstrong Air

& Space Museum. The museum complex showcases the state of Ohio’s many contributions to aviation and space exploration, rocks from Armstrong’s Apollo 11 mission and Gemini VIII spacecraft.

Travelers come from across the U.S. to road trip along the region’s scenic, historic Covered Bridge Trail. Stop often at roadside farm stands for fresh baked goods and fruits. Families enjoy u-pick fruit farms and local favorite, Benny’s Pizza, a family-friendly roadhouse staging live music and dishing crispy crust pizzas and house-made root beer.

On this Airstream road trip to The Mothership, and all my other travels, I practiced Wally Byam’s travel philosophy —“Keep your eyes on the stars, and the stars in your eyes...see if you can find what’s over the next hill, and the next one after that.” —Kit Bernardi