



Airstream Heritage Center

Rolling Down the Line

RV manufacturing plants offer behind-the-scenes tours

BY KIT BERNARDI

The Midwest is the epicenter of America's recreational vehicle (RV) industry. Airstream is headquartered in western Ohio, and 80 percent of the nation's RVs are produced in northwest Indiana, earning it the title of "RV Capital of the World."

If you own a recreational vehicle or are simply curious about the craftsmanship employed by teams of skilled artisans, an RV manufacturing plant tour offers a behind-the-scenes look. >



RV/MH HALL OF FAME

At Elkhart's national RV/MH Hall of Fame complex, a collection of 50 camper cars, trailers, vans and motorhomes trace the RV industry's evolution beginning in the 1920s.

View actress Mae West's 1931 Chevrolet House car and the 1935 Bowlus Road Chief Trailer. Historic RV brands' units exhibited include Jayco, Coachmen, E-Z Kamper, Kit Teardrop, Shasta, GMC, Airstream and Winnebago.

RV enthusiasts will love browsing the library's periodicals and archives.

Campers at RV/MH Hall of Fame

AIRSTREAM**Jackson Center, Ohio**

Inside Airstream's spacious, 750,000-square-foot production facility, shiny aluminum trailers glisten like giant pieces of jewelry. Approximately 500 skilled workers craft eight towable travel trailer models in 45 floor plans for the domestic market and three models for the European market.

Located 56 miles northeast of Dayton, Airstream employs 1,300 people and hosts nearly 10,000 visitors annually who join free, hour-long guided tours of three manufacturing facilities producing the brand's iconic travel trailers, touring coaches and Basecamp units. Visitor experience coordinator Dan Maul facilitates all tours, as well as manages the company's archives and Heritage Center.

"Around 200 craftspeople, between parts manufacturing and a completed trailer build, are involved in the production of each travel trailer, which takes approximately 350 hours total," Maul says.

Along the 40-section production line, workers buck rivet each trailer's curved, aluminum outer exterior and interior. From a viewing platform above the factory floor, visitors watch production line craftspeople install electrical wiring, plumbing, heating, air conditioning, solar panel hookups, propane tanks and other components. Most of Airstream's cabinetry, windows and doors are made onsite, as are window treatments and some upholstered pieces.

Lastly, quality control staff conducts a 1,600-point inspection before shipping trailers to 70 dealers across the U.S. and Canada and another 12 internationally.

"Our design team consistently monitors trends, tech developments, and consumers' interests in not only the RV market, but in the boating and home design industries to ensure we are creating a more comfortable and inviting travel trailer experience," Maul says.

The Heritage Center displays restored Airstreams presented in a walkable timeline. The collection's newest addition is a 1936 Airstream Clipper, the first all-aluminum, riveted travel trailer ever made.

**JAYCO****Middlebury, Ind.**

There are nearly 70 RV production plants, parts suppliers, service and repair facilities in Elkhart County, Ind., and a dozen more operate in neighboring LaGrange County. Northwest Indiana hosts many of the nation's biggest RV rallies and is home to the third-largest Amish community in the country, with many working in the RV industry.

Thor Industries, the world's largest RV manufacturer and Elkhart County's biggest employer, owns and operates Jayco, Inc. in Middlebury, about 130 miles southeast of Chicago. Jayco produces 357 models of travel trailers, fifth-wheels, Class A and Class C motorhomes and Class B camper vans at a 720-acre campus employing approximately 2,700 people.

A free 90-minute tour of the motorhome and luxury fifth-wheel factories starts at Jayco's visitors center, a renovated 1880s Amish farmhouse adjacent to a grassy lot displaying the latest models that guests walk through. A brief film covers the history of the company, which started in 1968 when Mennonite couple Lloyd and Bertha Bontrager built the first Jayco-branded, canvas-sided, fold-down camper trailers in the family's

John McDonald leads a tour at the Jayco factory.

hobby barn.

A vintage trolley ride takes you to the manufacturing plant, where craftspeople assemble insulated sidewalls, wood floor frames and Magnum Truss Roof System roofs, sew window treatments and upholster furniture.

Sounds of beeping forklifts and whirring, popping power tools fill the brightly lit luxury fifth wheel plant. Sleek Pinnacle, North Point and Seismic Toy Hauler models, hand-built by 160 craftspeople, roll down the 36-station production line. It takes an average of three days to build a fifth wheel RV.

Woodworkers on the plant's mezzanine level mill all hardwood cabinetry. Final production steps include a thorough cleaning, inspection of 29 system functions and a rain test (motorhomes get road tested) before Jayco ships to more than 400 dealers in the U.S. and abroad.

"Starting in May each year, tour guests watch skilled workers hand-build the next year's models," says John McDonald, Jayco's corporate brand ambassador and factory tour guide.