

the guardian

Living the stream: glamping in an American Airstream trailer ... in Somerset



Airstream caravan Beth, at Brookover Farm, Somerset

We check out a lovingly restored classic caravan on a quiet farm – but they can also be taken out on the road or to a festival

“They changed my life,” says Nick Mongston, surveying his restored Airstream trailers proudly.

There’s no doubt the vintage caravans look superb in the Somerset landscape, with barbecue, loungers and fire pits, and some horses grazing nearby. But Nick isn’t just having a pleasant glamping experience – he really has turned his life upside down for these shiny trailers.

Five years ago Nick was an IT manager in London who had spent several decades working in software. Then he went to a festival and fell in love.



View from one of the Airstreams

“I got to the age when I didn’t want to be on the ground any more when I was camping – I needed to elevate myself and have a few creature comforts,” he says. “But I didn’t want some crappy plastic-trim caravan with flimsy floorboards. Then I saw one of these at a festival and had an epiphany. An Airstream was exactly what I wanted – sleek and beautiful design, aluminium chassis and that 50s Americana cool.”

The trouble was that a new Airstream comes in at a not-so-cool \$100,000-plus. So Nick went searching in Florida for old ones that he could ship over and restore instead.



Nick Mongston. Photograph: Hugh Thomson

“It was easy for me because my dad, Ken, has been living there for years, near Fort Lauderdale, which is where they used to make Airstreams. So I went over to visit him and borrowed his vintage green convertible Jaguar to go on a tour of the boondocks to see if there were any old Airstreams for sale. The Florida sun is very good at conserving them – although I did buy one that had bullet holes in it.”

It wasn't always easy to get negotiations started, though: “I felt a bit embarrassed driving up to some old boy on a porch in a green Jag and with my English accent – ‘Goddamn you talk funny, boy’ – so it took a while to put them at ease.”

Nick, a burly and jovial giant himself, clearly managed to work his charm and ended up with a fleet of Airstreams, which he shipped back to England.

“They were too big for a container so I had to pay for ‘roll on/roll off’ to Southampton – but at least, because they don’t have an engine, there was very little import duty.”



Old Airstream, as found by Nick, in Florida.

Then he rolled up his sleeves and got to work restoring them. “I left my IT job and started renting out the Airstreams for festivals.” Because of their aerodynamic shape and lightweight aluminium body, they are particularly good for towing.

When the pandemic hit, however, the bottom dropped out of the festivals market. Nick decided to move to Somerset and install two Airstreams more permanently at [Brookover Farm](#) near Frome as a glamping experience – calling it, inevitably, [GlamStreams](#).



Airstreams in situ. Photograph: Hugh Thomson

I'm in a nine-metre blue one called Beth, after the woman in Florida Nick bought it from when he saw it sitting abandoned in her field. The feel of the riveted blue aluminium reminds me of a small plane. Inside, the Airstream immediately seems more spacious than your average caravan, with a great deal more headroom. With the oval shape, it avoids that boxy feeling I remember from my experiences of a British caravan in Suffolk – along with those laminated plastic strips that always came unstuck from the inside walls.

Every few years the Airstreams need polishing, like silverware, to restore their patina

Nick has installed solar panels and low-voltage electricity and followed rigorous ecological principles. His aim has been to produce vans that can be off-grid to minimise their impact. All the Airstreams have water-free composting toilets so that you can take them to remote places (or, for that matter, festivals).

When restoring them, he used only recycled original parts from other Airstreams – such as the instantly recognisable aluminium panels – rather than new parts. Any wood products, such as worktops, have come from FSC-certified suppliers, and he has paid for appliances that are built to last on the grounds that “in-built obsolescence is immoral”. Even the frying pans have plant-based coatings and are recyclable. The furniture is all secondhand, with a 50s and 60s vibe.



Airstream interior. Photograph: Hugh Thomson

Nick also set up workshops to restore and maintain the trailers, choosing to use derelict farm buildings that did not need any new building. Every few years the Airstreams need polishing, like silverware, to restore their patina.

It makes for a quite delightful camping experience – I certainly don't feel like trailer trash, more trailer royalty. There's the small [River Mells](#) nearby, with pleasant walks and swimming spots, while [Orchardleigh](#) estate and lake are close, along with the [Macmillan Way](#), Bath, Glastonbury and Wells.

But while there is plenty to do during the day, nothing beats coming back in the evening to a field of Airstreams glistening beside the nightlights, as if a little bit of Texas had suddenly come to Somerset. Nick has thoughtfully provided the trailers with cocktail shakers and a Bluetooth system, so you can mix a dry martini and toast both the sunset and Wally Byam, the man who designed these "land yachts and travel trailers" in the 30s (as the brass plaque beside the door tells you). Perhaps with Elvis crooning *I Just Can't Help Believing* over the stereo.

Hugh Thomson