

Airstream

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It has been featured in movies, from “What’s Eating Gilbert Grape” to “Legally Blonde,” and counts Matthew McConaughey, Sean Penn and Sandra Bullock among its fans.

President John F. Kennedy once used an Airstream as a mobile office in New Mexico.

Now, in the midst of a pandemic, it is receiving another boost, as Americans weather profound shifts in how — and where — they work and learn.

When her youngest child left for college, Amy Geren sold her house in suburban Portland, Maine and moved to a small condominium downtown, a few blocks from her job at a non profit. But life in the city didn’t suit her, so Geren put the home up for sale in March 2020, just weeks before the state shut down because of covid.

The uncertainty of the real estate market — and the world at large — pushed her to downsize again, this time keeping just what could fit into an Airstream, which she is now living, working and traveling for the foreseeable future.

“I love that it is so simple. Just a two-burner gas stove and mini fridge,” Geren says. “The only thing I would change on the layout is the ability to remove the dinette table so I could practice yoga inside on rainy days.”

Airstream dealerships closed their doors in March with full inventories — on average, about 40 vehicles. Now, many are down to just six or seven. It will take a year for the company to fulfill existing orders, said Wheeler. “That kind of backlog is unprecedented,” he said. “It’s like nothing I’ve seen in my 19 years at this company.”

The pandemic has also ushered in a new Airstream customer base. Many of its new customers — 56% during the past eight months — are new to RV life, said Wheeler. The vehicles have traditionally attracted couples and singles, but this year there were more families. In response to customer requests, Airstream is also building a variation of



An interior view of a refurbished Airstream camper at So Cal Vintage Trailer.

Sandy Huffaker/The Washington Post

its Flying Cloud model with a new floor plan. This one, says Wheeler, has a separate, tech-enabled office, including being wifi-ready and with hook ups for a computer and mounted monitor. The new model goes for \$107,000.

Giovanni Circella, director of 3 Revolutions Future Mobility Program at the University of California at Davis, has been studying how the pandemic has affected mobility and says the widespread adoption of remote work has enabled greater flexibility to travel — but not for everyone. “It’s true mostly for higher-income individuals and white-collar workers,” he says, noting that the option of remote work is far less prevalent among lower-income and minority employees, who are also more likely to be essential workers.

Airstream owners have an average income of at least about \$150,000,

according to the company. New Airstreams cost between \$39,000 and \$177,000.

And owning an Airstream can be more expensive than it looks.

Kate Oliver, 35, founder of The Modern Caravan, an Airstream renovation business, and her wife, Ellen Prasse, 34, renovated and lived in a 1957 Airstream Overlander, as well as other Airstreams, from 2016 until June 2020, when the couple bought their first house. The cost of gas, propane for heating and cooking, insurance and camping ground fees, among other expenses, can add up, she says.

“You could really go bare bones and yes, some do, but I think a lot of the people that choose to live this way are privileged to be able to make that choice,” said Oliver.

These are the kind of customers that come to Denny Stone, 62, owner and head of design for So Cal Vin-

tage Trailer in San Diego. The company offers high-end, bespoke renovations for Airstreams and similar vintage trailers.

A full renovation averages about \$125,000, says Stone, but can reach more than \$300,000 including disassembly of the trailer, structural repairs and the replacement of nearly all of its components — other than the aluminum exterior. More customers are now requesting new types of customizations, including fitting in an office or coffee station, he said.

Although business has been steadily increasing for years, when California implemented its stay-at-home orders, Stone was hit with a surge of calls and emails. “The increased demand was crazy,” he says.

Many of those calls were urgent, looking for finished, restored vintage trailers — something that could be bought off his lot, which Stone said he couldn’t provide. Those that ul-

timately became new customers — willing to wait three to six months to get their trailers into Stone’s shop — often had an interest in RVing and Airstreams, pre-pandemic. The coronavirus just pushed them to take the next step.

Finding an updated Airstream can be difficult. Ward Chandler, founder of Airstream Hunter, a community he started in 2016 for buying and selling Airstreams, says 2020 was his best year yet with transactions up about 250 percent compared with the previous year. “Demand far outstripped supply,” says Chandler. “And the thing people wanted more than ever before was an Airstream that was ready to use.”

Others are willing to wait. Emma Duerk, 27, and Mitch Budden, 28, were living in Ann Arbor, Mich. in 2019 when they decided to buy an RV and do some traveling, hoping to eventually transition to working remotely and living on the road full-time. They initially wanted an Airstream, but its high price tag made it unaffordable. At the end of January 2020, they bought a 2004 Fleetwood Jamboree, and Budden and his father began renovating it. But when the pandemic shut down Michigan, their timeline accelerated.

Duerk’s job at an organizational development consultancy became remote, and then she was furloughed because of the pandemic. Budden had left his job in tech the month before pandemic shutdowns began and was already working from home as a freelancer, designing websites and writing custom code. She and Budden decided to take the plunge and live full-time in the RV, relying on the money they had been saving for extended trips.

“My last day at work, we began driving west,” says Duerk.

“We both recognize how lucky we are that we can do this,” says Budden. “Obviously, I would never have wished for a pandemic, but it wound up being a good year for us. It put everything in a different perspective.”

The couple will soon move to Denver to work for a few years — and save up to buy their own Airstream.

Staycations

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The report found that more than a third of vacationers want to travel this year specifically to reconnect with friends and family, and that more than half preferred a domestic or local destination.

Vrbo had similar results in its own 2021 travel report.

“Vrbo’s newest top emerging destinations align with shifts in family travel behavior due to the pandemic, such as vacationing closer to home and embracing the great outdoors,” Melanie Fish, a travel expert at Vrbo, said in a statement. “Booking a Vrbo in these off-the-beaten-path locales means families can enjoy the privacy and comforts of home while reaping the mental health benefits of being in a new environment, and spend quality time together exploring places they may have otherwise overlooked.”

Both Airbnb and Vrbo saw demand spike in vacation spots close to natural amenities. Airbnb said places like Rodanthe, North Carolina and Forks, Washington, saw surges in reservations for 2021. Vrbo reported that Emory, Texas, Smithville, Missouri and Slade, Kentucky were the

site’s top emerging destinations for this year.

How this has changed real estate

The real estate market has been unusually busy throughout the pandemic, a trend that has extended to vacation communities.

“The buying and selling of the homes did not stop because of the pandemic,” said Rob Johnson, a Coppel, Texas-based Realtor with RE/MAX who serves a number of communities, including Emory. He said people these days are more likely to look for vacation spots closer to their primary homes.

“I believe there’s definitely pandemic-related motivations. Just the need to do something with the family or to get away, you can just drive and not have to worry about flying.”

Anecdotally, he said, sales for vacation homes in the communities where he works are definitely spiking. Recently one office he works with on closings in a small town processed 28 transactions in one week — five or six times the normal rate.

Johnson expects that vacation homes in towns like Emory will remain especially popular even after the pandemic subsides.

“The demand is there and as more

and more people get vaccinated, I think we’re going to find that more and more people are interested in doing this sort of thing,” he said. “They’ve seen the future and this is a piece of it for sure.”

What makes a good vacation rental

If you already own a home in an area where people might want to come to escape the city, you could be sitting on your own personal piggy bank.

“I have an associate who owns a vacation home in Colorado where he does use Vrbo but he also owns a lake house in East Texas,” Johnson said. “He’s considering making it a Vrbo-available short-term rental because he’s had so many inquiries.”

As demand for this kind of accommodation rises, you could make a little extra income by renting out your own property. Johnson said he understands from his clients that having a clean home and enough space are the keys to success in the vacation rental market.

“Everybody likes clean, everybody likes space. They don’t necessarily want to be away from their technology all the way, they want to be able to connect,” so you’ll want to make sure you have a stable internet

hookup.

Also, it’s important to know why people are coming to your area. Emory, for example, is situated between two lakes and is known for its fishing and other watersports. So, the most popular vacation rentals are close to those activities.

“If you’re wanting to lease or rent a property for the short term, you’re certainly going to want to have access to the water,” Johnson said.

In other places, the main draw might be the ocean, a ski mountain or hiking trails. Vacationers usually want to stay in a property that is close to whatever attraction they’re visiting.

Tips for investing in real estate

If you don’t have a vacation home now, it could be a great time to think about buying one. Especially as demand for rentals in vacation communities spike, you may be able to cover your costs more easily than you think.

Here are some key things to consider before buying a second property:

- Make sure you know what you can afford. Factor in potential rental income as you think about your mortgage payments, but remember

lenders usually won’t take that into account unless you have a signed, long-term lease.

- Familiarize yourself with the area where you want to buy. It’s good to know what the local real estate market is like and what the top attractions are. The closer your property is to those, the better.

- If you plan to use it for short-term rentals, make sure the property has enough space for visitors and a versatile layout. And make sure local regulations support your plans. Buying a vacation home you plan to rent isn’t the same as buying it for yourself. The property needs to feel comfortable for lots of different people.

Bottom line

Changing travel demands mean more people than ever are looking to vacation closer to home. That can be a great opportunity for second homeowners to make a little extra income by renting their property out. It also means prospective real estate investors may have more chances to profitably get into the market. Above all, if you want to start renting space to vacationers, make sure your house is clean, spacious and close to whatever attractions they may be looking to visit.



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