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The long and expensive road Wanderlust lifestyle of Airstream fans faces headwinds

By John Detrixhe, Medill News Service

WASHINGTON (Medill News Service) -- Airstreamers, an international band of travel-trailer wanderers who tow their distinctive silver-shelled Airstreams behind them, are among the many motorists looking to adapt to high fuel costs.



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"We just finished our international convention in Bozeman, Mont. We had probably a 20% decrease in attendance because of fuel," said Jerry Larson, president of Wally Byam Caravan Club International Inc.



Airstream

"Some are traveling less. Some are reducing their speed," Larson said of the club's members. The Wally Byam Club calls itself the largest Airstream recreational vehicle club with about 14,000 members.

Writer Karen Catchpole and photographer Eric Mohl, both 42, have been on a trans-America journey since April 2006. They began towing an Airstream in June, and suggest that travelers rely on cruise control and use a GPS device that calculates the shortest route between two points if they want to reap the most savings while towing.

There are two main types of Airstreamers: full-time, usually retirees, and part-time, said Pete Daniel, president of the club's Washington unit. Both groups have made adjustments, but haven't given up the lifestyle, he said.

"Full-timers live in their Airstream. You're not seeing them move as much as they were. They're staying in one place, they're hanging out," Daniel said.

"The part-time people aren't traveling as far."

Adapting is essential because high gas prices are staying put as well.

Average unleaded gasoline prices will likely hover around \$3.75 per gallon for at least the next five to seven weeks, said energy strategist Mary Novak at independent research firm Global Insight Inc.

Catchpole and Mohl, who have been on their trans-America trip since 2006, have spent \$16,971 on fuel and have traveled 81,437 miles in the U.S., Canada and Mexico as of July 26, their Web site says.

"We came up with a budget, educated-guess style, way back in early 2006, based on what fuel prices were then," Catchpole said via telephone from Hood River, Ore. "Prices have practically doubled."

The self-employed journalists, who are documenting their experiences for publication, became Airstreamers on June 23 when the company sponsored their endeavor by loaning them a new travel trailer.

Taking a page from aircraft construction

Airstream travel trailers were the creation of the late founder Wally Byam, who started building the trailers in his Los Angeles backyard. Byam soon incorporated aircraft construction methods to improve the trailers' aerodynamics and strength-to-weight ratios. The company's trailers went into production in 1932.

The name Airstream was introduced in 1934 because Byam said the trailer glided down the road "like a stream of air." The trailers get their distinctive silver exterior from their aluminum semi-monocoque construction.

Airstream trailers are on display at the Smithsonian Institution and Henry Ford Museum. According to the Wally Byam Caravan Club International Inc., 60% of Airstreams ever built are still in use.

Though the company is best known for its travel trailers, it also produces a motor coach. Airstream Inc. is now a division of Jackson Center, Ohio-based Thor Industries Inc.

Now that they are towing the Airstream, the gas mileage Catchpole and Mohl are getting has dropped from about 17 miles-per-gallon to a little less than 14 miles-per-gallon. Catchpole said the mileage drop wasn't as severe as expected, which she credited in part to the Airstream's aerodynamics. The

trailer has also helped offset at least one other cost.

"We're not paying for terrible motels anymore," she said.

Conserving fuel

Some of Catchpole and Mohl's fuel saving techniques are the same as those taken by many others in the Airstream community, such as driving slower, being careful with acceleration, and using synthetic motor oil.

A year ago they would take 800-mile unplanned excursions, Mohl said. "It was much more whimsical. We definitely have curtailed a lot of that. We try to stay a little more focused."

The Airstream company itself has looked into ways to help mitigate higher fuel costs. Company spokesman Doug Froh said Airstream has investigated hybrid technology, though at this time hybrid vehicles do not have enough torque for towing.

"They don't have the range," Froh said of hybrids. "We were discussing a promo with Toyota but it fell through at the end."

Meanwhile, many Airstreamers have simply looked closer to home to satisfy their wanderlust. "

I think it just changes patterns," said Daniel, president of the Washington Wally Byam Unit, of higher fuels costs. "We're still trying to get out and meet people."

