

A Silver Cigar, Trailer-Made for Toting Stogies

By Tom Bentley

For over 75 years, Airstreams have offered their owners variations on the concept of freedom. Now, for a certain select few, an Airstream offers the freedom to ... smoke cigars.

That freedom comes to you courtesy of the Florida-based Mobile Cigar Lounge, an exotically converted 1969 31-foot Sovereign that takes the notion of having a pleasant puff on a good stogie to new heights.

The concept for the lounge was prompted by a celebration; specifically one inspired by the winning of the National Hockey League's Stanley Cup. As many professional (and amateur) sports celebrants are inclined to do, members of the Tampa Bay Lightning wanted to punctuate their success on the ice with some fine cigars. But as Stan Neckar, then a Lightning player, and one of the founders of the Mobile Cigar Lounge explains, "We won the Stanley Cup and had to go outside to smoke cigars. When you win something big, the cigars are always part of that. You want to celebrate, but we couldn't smoke inside."

Teaming up with cigar industry veteran Juan Guillen, Neckar and another former Lightning player, Dave Andreychuk, the three came up with an antidote to the increasingly stringent anti-smoking laws across the country: the Mobile Cigar Lounge. As to why an Airstream, Neckar explains, "We present luxury, and Airstream is a luxury item, like a Mercedes, BMW or Cadillac. It has a nice shape; it almost looks like a cigar. We go to a lot of upscale events, golf tournaments, weddings. We want to make sure that when we park the trailer by the tent or the clubhouse, it looks nice. And Airstreams last forever. We refinished this one, and it looks like it's only a few years old. Why keep an old Airstream behind your house when you can do something good with it?"

Doing something good with it, in the case of the Mobile Cigar Lounge, means some "minor" modifications, like gutting it to the shell and having the sub-floor reinforced and re-welded to withstand heavy traffic. Then, for a little atmosphere, they added cherry cabinetry, parquet floors, granite counters, ostrich-leather seating, a massive, well-stocked humidor, crystal ashtrays, a wine cellar, beverage refrigerator, hand-hammered copper sink, espresso bar, and five flat screen televisions.

That didn't happen overnight: Neckar did the original makeover on a computer, but the initial attempt at the rebuild didn't measure up to their ideal, so they took everything out and essentially started over. The second time around was a cigar-chomping charm.

Neckar is particularly proud of the efficiency of his ventilation system. "A spa hired us for their anniversary, a party for 300 women. The women that went inside, some of whom had never smoked before, started smoking cigars, and they were amazed when they walked out that they didn't smell of cigars. People who don't like to smoke or to smoke cigars told me we had an amazing air-circulation system."

Air circulation isn't the only bit of amazement associated with the lounge. Lounge events also include cigaristas, hostesses who are fully knowledgeable about the smoking arts. "Our hostess will ask you if you want something light or strong, and if it's your first cigar she'll show how to cut it and light it. All

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the hostesses know what they are talking about when it comes to cigars," said Neckar. The lounge carries 35-40 premium cigar brands, including heavyweights like Romeo & Juliet, Montecristo and Cohiba, though none of those are their Cuban brethren. "If you want to smoke expensive cigars, you want to be in a nice environment, not sitting outside a bar in the rain or the hot sun," said Neckar.

But if it's fresh cigars that are desired, the Mobile Cigar Lounge can do one better than a store-bought brand. Clients can also request the lounge's cigar roller to come to the event, and roll up a fresh bomber right on the spot. Neckar explains: "We have our own cigar rollers available for events and we make our own blends in various sizes, such as Churchills, robustos, and toros. The tobacco is Dominican, Nicaraguan and Honduran, producing a quality long-filler cigar. However, we don't think of selling the cigars as our real business—our main operation is to rent the lounge."

Companies of every stripe have rented the lounge, including the Outback Pro-Am Golf Tournament, Alltel, Brighthouse Networks, and Jr. Achievement. Neckar says that 60 to 70 percent of lounge use so far has been for cigar-smoking events, but increasing business is coming from businesses like liquor, clothing and software companies who use it to promote their products. The flat-screen TVs are ideal for running promotional pieces while potential customers relax in the lounge. Pricing starts at \$475 an hour, with a three-hour minimum, though the company has various discount levels for returning customers and longer events. They stage up to week-long events; at this writing, the Airstream had just returned from a five-day event in Nashville.

But the company has been getting calls to bring the lounge up to New York, out to Los Angeles, and even up into Canada. Even though the Airstream has held up fantastically in its three-and-a-half years of operation, and the Ford F-150 that



UPPER PHOTO: Mobile Cigar Lounge events can include the company's custom cigar roller, who is seen here on the right. **LOWER PHOTO:** Cigar lounge visitors can settle deeply into the ostrich-leather seating and breathe easy: special filtration units keep the air fresh.



UPPER PHOTO: The humidor for the Mobile Cigar Lounge is filled with a selection of premium cigars. The company also produces custom cigars that can be labeled for specific events. **LOWER PHOTO:** Five flat-panel televisions grace the custom interior of the trailer, allowing for lounge clients to run promo DVDs about their businesses.

tows it is purring along, giant leaps across the country aren't what the partners had in mind. What they do have in mind now is franchising the operation. Forty people are on a list of potential franchisees, and Neckar says that ten call about it regularly. Thus, the lounge partners are working with a franchise company to put more Mobile Cigar Lounges on the road. All Airstreams, of course.

"We've been thinking about what size Airstream might be the best for franchising, but we like the 31-footers because you can still pretty much park anywhere, and longer is a problem. We will probably have a set price for the franchisee and we will provide

everything, including a custom-made generator and a truck to tow it. We want it to be one big package. We don't want the franchisee to do any customization, because we want to be able to maintain them to our standards," said Neckar.

Neckar feels the franchising is still in the concept phase, because of the complicated research that needs to be done on legal issues. "We want to come out strongly so that the people who sign a deal with us are the right people. Some locations might not work," he said. The differing state issues on smoking alone are tangled. They are shooting for 2012 for the franchising operation, since Neckar also thinks the economy will be back on the right track by then.

The partners all enjoy the fact that the business can be used in street shows or trade shows, small event or large, to promote products or celebrate an event. As Neckar puts it, "You don't wait for customers to come to you, you come to them. This is something people can offer their clients that's different." One thing that's always going to be the same, no matter the difference: Airstream. Neckar says it directly: "We didn't want a square and boxy unit; we wanted an Airstream." Now that's a statement worthy of lighting up a cigar. 