



An Airstream Diner in Moscow, built by German Airstream dealer Roka Werk, in front of tapas restaurant "Tapa De Comida." **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Interior reveals a full commercial kitchen in a 5.3 meter (approx. 22 feet) long trailer.

PHOTO: IVAN SHISKIN



PHOTO: COURTESY OF AIRSTREAM GERMANY

Divine Dining on *Wheels, Euro-Style*

By Tom Bentley

In the past few years, food trucks have been the rage in many American cities, purveying a boggling array of comestibles—burgers, pizza, booze, barbecue, Thai, Korean, organic—from an equally boggling array of converted vans, trucks and trailers. Vintage Airstreams have been the spicy stars of these eats-on-the-street, with many a story of their saucy delights adorning these pages. (See our new feature, "Airstream Food" elsewhere in this issue.)

But most of the conversions, many of them as aesthetically appealing as they are food-functional, have been one-offs, the handiwork of a melange of shops big and small, professional refurbishers and hobbyists too. We'll have to hand it to the Europeans for truly systematizing diner conversions in ways that raise the bar for both aesthetics and functionality.

Airstream joined with Germany's Roka Werk two years ago in the production of some exquisite trailer conversions for some big players, including McCain and Veuve Clicquot, as well as supplying diners for individual businesses. Roka was a stainless steel kitchen manufacturer that developed into a producer of catering trailers, and contracted in 2007 to become the Airstream dealership in Germany. This was a match made in polished-metal heaven, and resulted in the "Airstream Diner One" in 2010, and the "Airstream Bar Trailer" in 2011.

Armin Heun, the managing director of Airstream Germany/Roka Werk, says the Airstream brand in Europe has a magical appeal. "For Germans, Airstreams

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The staff of the Moscow Airstream Diner serves at a flea market in Moscow. **BELOW RIGHT:** The Airstream Diner made for McCain by Roka Werk.

PHOTO: IVAN SHISKIN

have the same level of attraction as the Harley Davidson and Jeep brands. If Airstreams hadn't officially been in Europe over the last years, people knew them from U.S. movies and from historic photographs. I have met some older Germans that had contact with some of Wally Byam's historic Caravans through Europe in the 1960s. None of these people would ever remember a bunch of white-box trailers coming to town. For us, Airstream is not a decision for a product, but for a specific lifestyle. [So] we are very proud to bring these icons to Germany."

European Airstreams are built to different specifications than American models, due to differing legal requirements, but they are all U.S. made. Roka receives the empty trailer shells of the 534 and 684 Euro models and gets to work on a comprehensive interior fitting, which takes between 300 and 700 man-hours depending on the trailer's size. The 22-foot 534 is the most popular conversion size, as its single-axle maximum weight of 4,000 pounds makes it easier to handle than the 27-foot, maximum 6,000-pound 684. The typical production period for a conversion is four weeks.

Weight and weight distribution is the biggest challenge in these conversions, since the trailers often are fitted with custom commercial kitchens and eye-catching aesthetic touches.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF AIRSTREAM GERMANY

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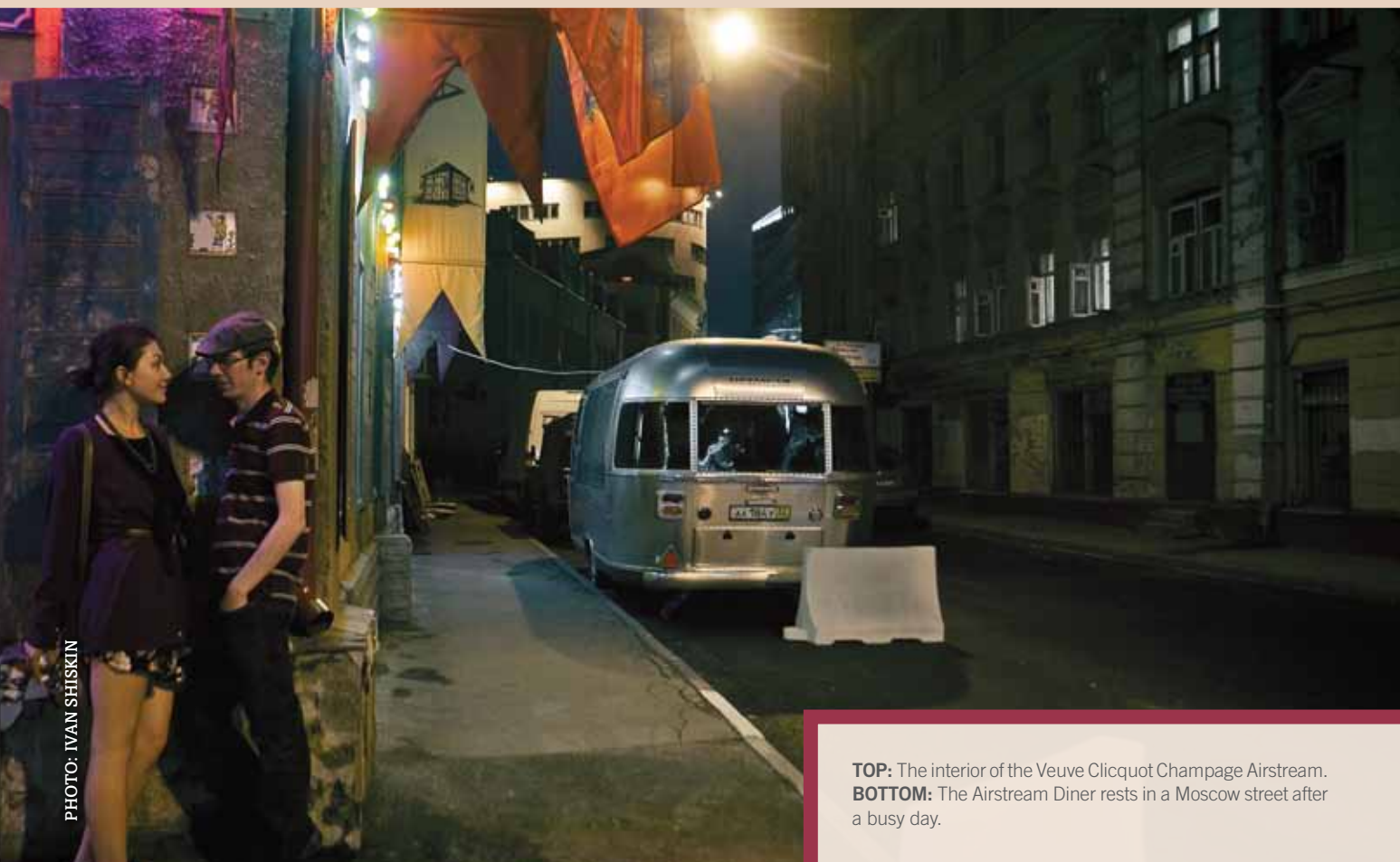


PHOTO: IVAN SHISKIN

TOP: The interior of the Veuve Clicquot Champagne Airstream.
BOTTOM: The Airstream Diner rests in a Moscow street after a busy day.

“Another big challenge is energy,” says Heun. “Catering trailers are supposed to be mobile, but they also carry some power-demanding appliances like grills and fryers. We always try to find the best compromise between mobility and comfortable usage. Customers always want trailers big and solid. But they also want them under 2500 kilograms. With the European Airstreams as the basis for our Airstream catering trailers, both are possible.”

Though many of the branded trailers have a distinctively promotional aspect, the conversions are all intended by their owners for long-term use. Apparently the Airstream conversions have a certain cachet at events, according to Heun: “The Airstream Diner Models are the most desirable catering trailers in Europe at this time. With these units, customers get spaces at events they might not get with a standard catering trailer. Some of these Airstream establish themselves as landmarks—fans are sending pictures of Airstream Catering trailers to us as they did with Airstream travel trailers seen in public places.”

The Veuve Cliquot trailer has a special provenance, since it has a premium kitchen, a champagne bar and a VIP lounge. The highest quality stainless steel, brushed aluminum, leather and glass was employed in the conversion, which included customized LED-illuminated handles, background lighting, high-end audio-visual system and multiple flat-panel screens. You might suspect that many corks were popped after the completion of this very bubbly Airstream.

Heun says that Airstreams are more regularly seen in Europe now, but they are still a distinct minority. “In Germany we have an estimated base of more than 1 million ‘white-box’ travel trailers. We don’t know how many Airstream have been imported directly in the last decade, but including the new European models, I would estimate them somewhere between 500–1000 in Germany.”


Heun is doing his best to make sure Europeans see Airstreams, since he has toured Germany, England, the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Denmark, and Sweden since buying his 684 for his family in 2009. “Airstream has really become a part of our lifestyle. We even have a picture of our Airstream in front of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. If we needed to decide between a nice 5-star hotel in Dubai and a pitch at the waterfront at the Côte d’Azur, the Airstream decision would be 100% clear.”

Airstream Germany also has an office in Switzerland, selling to the Austrian market as well. They sell fully outfitted Airstreams, as well

as do the conversions, and even rent out converted trailers for the short-term. Heun’s most unusual sale has been for a diner conversion for a Moscow customer that was conducted entirely by email. The customer agreed on a configuration and a price, and after three months they picked it up and drove it from Germany to Moscow.

Heun was delighted to recently hear back from that Russian customer, who calls his trailer the “Gift of Nature Wagon.” The customer wrote him, “This is for sure the first Airstream restaurant on wheels in Moscow and even in Russia. And since we started rocking this summer, our wagon’s been called a ‘very special gastronomic feature’ at the most fancy events that take place in and out of the city. It’s amazing to watch the long lines of people waiting for a genuine hot dog or tenderly grilled *carnitas*. We’re constantly moving from one place to another testing this seminal concept, and looking forward to find some nice place for permanent parking.”

The Airstream/Roka collaboration has outfitted trailers for the Wondering Wine Company in Europe, for Danish butter brand Lurpark, professional caterers like Kaefer in Germany and for Aramark, the global food services company. But just knowing that there’s an Airstream diner in Moscow serving “rocking” hot dogs—that’s customer satisfaction indeed. ☺



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