The Argosy is More Than Pretty in Paint

Renata George can move money with her mind. No, not pick up a stack of greenbacks on a table and whoosh it into a closet just by concentrating, but as a venture capitalist, she makes careful fiscal assessments, analyses and inquiries, and delivers dollars where her thoughts best determine.

Because making million-dollar investment decisions is complex and consuming, you might think in her rare off-hours that George might plop in a hammock with a margarita for a needed nap—instead, she restores and sells Argosy trailers, the unusual lightweight, painted Airstreams only produced between 1972 and 1979.

Now that’s a venture.

After a Burning Man trip at which she arrived in a truck and bought a disappointing conventional RV right after, she bought an Airstream International that didn’t quite fit her bill. She then bought an Argosy on a whim, repainted it a bright blue (and named it Berry), and later decided the layout wasn’t adequate for extended stays. But being venturesome, she looked for another Argosy. And then another, and another, and another. Finding, restoring and selling them—and eventually living in one—became a creative pleasure.

The Airstream, and in particular the Argosy, suited her interests in design and art. “I’d never paint a unit that was created as bare aluminum,” she says. “Same as I’d never polish an Argosy. So as a painted model coming from the factory, the Argosy is the only option in my universe.”

By Tom Bentley
Photos by Renata George

ABOVE: George specified helicopter paint on her first Argosy, Blueberry. INSET: She does the majority of paint stripping inside and out before handing her trailer over to a shop for exterior work.
For a woman who has lived and traveled through much of the world—Poland, Russia, Asia, the UK, the U.S. and more—her Argosy odyssey might not seem overwhelming, but her venture capital (VC) work wouldn’t seem to give her that much leeway. “I don’t believe in life/work balance, but I do believe in integration,” she says. “Combining my work with my hobby—Airstream restoration—has become easier when I started living in an Airstream full-time. It happened accidentally, due to my plans being changed because of the pandemic, and those were the best days of my life!”

George usually finds the trailers on Craigslist or Facebook, and isn’t daunted by distance. “There’s always a choice of Argosy if you are ready to drive half the country for them. I am, because it’s a great reason for a trip,” she says.

She bought one located in North Dakota through a bidding app and picked it up six months later. “It was in great shape and the only damage was hail dimples, which were easily fixible by painting,” she says. “It was a very cheap purchase, so I decided to strip it all inside and build the layout I wanted. I had never built furniture before, but that turned out to be
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pretty easy for me. I enjoy almost any work that I do when remodeling Argosies. It’s an activity that differs greatly from my daily job, so it is a great way of letting my brain rest from intellectual work.”

That intellectual work has been considerable, including building and selling a successful media franchise network in Eastern Europe, establishing a strategic corporate venture arm for an Asian unicorn startup while working for a VC firm in Singapore, promoting venture capital educational opportunities for women and minority groups, and frequently presenting to and advising startups. She’s now managing her fourth venture capital fund focused on property tech and the intersection with fintech and other platforms. She’s also the author of two books on entrepreneurship and the VC mindset.

And then there are the Argosies. Seven in all—so far.

With vintage trailers, there’s always something to fix if not a lot of somethings. George has been very hands-on with the units she’s owned. “All original units will always need something to be replaced—water lines, furnace or hot water tank—unless they’ve been replaced earlier. So even if the seller says everything works, I’m prepared for something not working,” she says. “Painting is a messy job, but I’ve proved that it’s possible to paint the entire interior without disassembling the furniture. One needs to be very patient, though, to deal with masking and unmasking. It gives me such a great feeling when I see that I gave an Airstream a new life!”

She uses licensed shops to deal with issues like exterior paint, water and gas lines and wiring, because they have the tools and can ensure warranty. “But things that are easy to inspect at the moment of purchase, I do myself. I also try to document work that I do,” she says. Besides stripping interiors for painting, she does flooring and cabinetry work, and makes curtains and blinds.

But no matter how much work she puts in, she keeps the sale price in the $35,000–$45,000 range, which, if you know restored trailers, is more than reasonable. George does this because she’s not compelled to make a profit from her hobby.

She paid particular attention to one 1976 24-foot Argosy, because it became her home when she was displaced during the pandemic. George had left San Francisco to move to Vancouver, in Canada’s British Columbia, but returned to California to pick up her belongings. COVID then closed the border. “I quite literally became homeless, because I had let my San Francisco apartment go and my new apartment in Vancouver remained empty for the entire year while I waited for the border to reopen,” she says. But you’re never homeless when you have an Airstream. The ’76 Argosy became the Curtiss, named
for the Curtiss-Wright P-40 Warhawk fighter plane, famed for its shark-mouth insignia, which George matched on the trailer’s paint. She fully stripped the interior and built almost all the furniture from scratch to fit her tastes: she built a wider bed in the mid-bedroom and repurposed two twin bed frames into a full slide-out.

The Curtiss became her home for a year—June 2020 to June 2021—during the pandemic, moving from California’s Shasta Lake to Lake Tahoe and then to Los Angeles and back. “I spent the entire year on the road,” she says. “Those were the best days of my life—if not for COVID, I’d never have done that. Luckily, my job can easily be done remotely, so my transition was pretty smooth. Plus, I started teaching venture capital investing online back in 2016, so I was prepared for the new reality pretty well.”

And George has another new reality: she’s returned to Europe this past July to be a managing partner at a corporate venture fund. So far, she’s opened two offices: one in Berlin and one in Moscow, but hasn’t decided which one will be home. As for the old Argosy home, she’s keeping the Curtiss for now.

And challenging as it might be, there could even be an overseas Argosy in the future. “Although RV life in Europe is not as popular as in the U.S., my new partners decided to buy Airstreams anyway—I’ve just ordered brand new Airstreams for them from the dealership in Germany,” she says. “I don’t believe there are Argosies in Europe, but I might definitely set a new trend here and spark an interest in Airstreams!”

The word “argosy” means a merchant ship, especially one that carries a rich cargo. For a woman who can move money with her mind, an Argosy is just the right carrier.

Looking for answers, but have no clues? See page 57.