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North Alabama Lifestyle, Arts, Business, & Gossip

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W

ho hasn't done a double take when driving along the highway and an aluminum-skinned Airstream glided past? The feeling evoked might be nostalgia:

Airstreams are a symbol of American ingenuity and style, harkening back to the glory days when the family car was stout enough to pull a travel trailer on vacations. The retro allure of this iconic image doesn't escape the younger set, the so-called Millennials, who tend to embrace real things and love the idea of restoration and reclamation. No matter the age, most everyone takes notice.

I'm not sure when when my husband and I developed a passion for Airstreams. While raising our three girls, we didn't quite see the appeal of traveling around with the family packed into a small space. But as our children one by one flew the Kennedy nest, we realized that a travel trailer would be the perfect getaway for the two of us and could double as a guesthouse right here on our Tennessee farm. And, for a designer and an engineer, a travel trailer or motorhome or bus only meant one thing: Airstream. The search, one that was to take several years, was on. We were looking for a vintage model, something affordable but not too gutted for novices.

Brent and Heather Mitchell, of Moulton, Alabama, were looking for the same kind of Airstream, something in good enough shape on the inside and no structural issues to prevent a not-too-time-consuming redo. Heather says she wanted one from the first time she saw a remodel for Dierks Bentley on *Junk Gypsies*. Her husband had grown up camping and wanted to take Heather who had never camped and always said no. She pointed to the television and told him, "You get something like that, and I'll go!"



ON THE ROAD AGAIN

TEXT BY EMILY WEATHERS KENNEDY

PHOTOS BY TERA WAGES AND HEATHER MITCHELL





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Brent, a retired touring-gospel-singer-turned-insurance-agent and Heather, a professional photographer, started with a vintage Serro Scotty that they remodeled and added their touches to, like a portable toilet adapted into a small closet. But with two young girls and one bunk on each end, the twelve-foot trailer they named *Georgia* became too cramped, even for Heather, who enjoys smaller spaces.

"We put the Scotty up for sale on a Saturday and could've sold it 12 times by Saturday night!" Heather laughed. "That's how in demand vintage trailers are."

Our timing with the Mitchells, whom we have never met, was uncanny. In January of 2016, Brent and Heather, like us, found their dream Airstream. They located their 1971 International in Hanceville, Alabama, on Craigslist. Ours was one of those luck stories—the right place at the right time sort of thing. A chance meeting of friends after exercise class

morphed into "What do you want to do with your life now that you are retired?"

To which our friends, replied, "Travel around and camp."

"Oh," I sighed. "We're not even retired, but we want to do the same thing! We've been looking for an Airstream for a long time. We just can't find one."

"As a matter of fact," Sharon Johnson said in her perky voice, "we have one for sale. We just bought a motorhome."

And that was that. After texted photos and a quick look-see in Waynesboro, Tennessee, we were the proud owners of a 1989 Airstream Excella, just in time for my January birthday. I was giddy. Kerry was pleased because the hard work he had anticipated from online forums would not prove to be so tough after all. Sharon's husband, Ray, was an electrical engineer like Kerry. He knew the ins and outs of every switch, battery, tank, and system on the trailer we christened *Cella*. Most everything worked, and, even better, every piece of her was intact, save the original carpet that Ray began replacing with laminate flooring. He explained that Airstreams hold moisture and must be dehumidified often, so hardwood floors are not advised. Heather and Brent also used laminate when they replaced the floor, saying that they knew the floor had to be able to shift over time.

Our *Cella* was in a time capsule, albeit a very dated '80s one. But she was ours, and we loved her. She had more potential than Eliza Doolittle, more charm than any new model of travel trailer we had ever seen. We couldn't wait to begin work on her. Heather describes their *Pearl* (named after Heather's grandmother) as decked out in camo but perfect to adapt to her vision of light, bright, and clean.

Kerry's and my first step was research and lots of it. We were newbies to the Airstream world. We found the best information online at airforums.com. We discovered that folks were proud of the work they had done on their Airstreams and were eager to share most all aspects of their renovations, including videos and pictures. Night after night we sat side-by-side on the sofa with laptops. Kerry delved into mechanical research, looking up parts and instructions for practical things like ceiling ventilation fans and batteries. I dove into Pinterest to gather interior design ideas.

Left: Emily and Kerry Kennedy relax next to *Cella*, their renovated Airstream trailer; Facing page: Heather and Brent Mitchell's 1971 Airstream is a study in clean whites and rustic, antique finishes.



HEATHER'S
CLEAN
WHITE COLOR
SCHEME AND
WHITEWASHED
SHIPLAP
REFLECT HER
VISION OF
SIMPLICITY
AND REMOVING
EXCESS.



Facing page:
The Mitchells' Airstream featured repurposed furniture and relied on Heather's eye for styling, incorporating subtle pastels and textures, salvaged pieces, and props from her photography business.

Our next tasks were to decide what jobs we would tackle ourselves and which of my ideas could be adapted for *Cella's* interior. Because we did not have to remove cabinetry or walls, we were mostly faced with freshening up. We could both paint, I had experience making window treatments, and Kerry was handy with carpentry. But, in the end, we chose to hire local folks who happen to be experts in their areas over muddling through the work ourselves, possibly making mistakes. Most

importantly, we were able to bring friends with talents into our labor of love!

Heather and Brent weren't newbies like we were with one test project under their belts. They didn't research much but dove in and started pulling things out that didn't work for them, like the camo kitchen cabinets. With a professional photography business and lots of props in their garage, the Mitchells repurposed a Craigslist buffet into a kitchen counter/cabinet area and a table out of butcher block and odd pieces lying around.

Heather's clean white color scheme and whitewashed shiplap reflect her vision of simplicity and removing excess while fitting everything into one place. My vision was quite different. I, too, saw white as the unifying color scheme, modernizing the space. But my vision involved more texture and color with walls, window treatments, furniture, and accessories.

The Mitchells were able to use real wood on the vertical interior walls, but we were limited to a 3/8" depth in order to keep our built-in furniture in place. So, we settled for a wood product resembling barn wood. Planing our own barn wood down to the wall allowance was not feasible. Using recycled wood was.

I asked Heather if they pulled out the Krylon spray paint for plastic recommended by the forums to cover the vinyl wall-covering. She laughed as I described to her our vision of the two of us in Hazmat suits spraying *Cella*. She said she and Brent brushed on probably four coats of white paint. Kerry and I, on the other hand, chose to hire a professional auto body painter (*See resources*). We tried removing the vinyl and getting back to the aluminum shell, but the process was chemically a mess and way too laborious.

While *Cella* was getting her white beauty treatment, her sofa was being recovered by a professional upholsterer (*See resources*), and curtains were being fashioned by a window

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treatment designer who painstakingly snipped each track clip from the old draperies and sewed them onto the new ones. (This would not have been possible had previous owners not saved window treatments and their tracks.)

Once *Cella* was spruced up, we didn't have the heart to leave the laminate countertops, so I began researching pre-finished wooden ones online. A night of brainstorming on our front porch resulted in the perfect solution: using our own walnut salvaged from felled trees and hiring our skilled woodworking friend who had made gorgeous pieces of furniture from fallen trees on his property to design countertops (See *resources*). This would be the crowning touch for *Cella*.

I asked Heather what their dreams were for *Pearl* once she is ready for the road. She laughed when she told me she had four white dishes, four white cups, and four white bowls. Easy. Clutter-free. She said her dream was to downsize their 3,000+ square foot home down to 1,500 and travel more. She likes the idea of the family being together with close trips for a while and exploring farther across the country when their

In contrast to the Mitchell's clean, bright white design, the Kennedys' Airstream is rich with color and pattern. Deep fall colors and personal mementoes fill the compact, but functional space. And, just like a tiny home, most items in this space serve multiple purposes.



© Tera Wages




I'M NOT SURE WHEN OUR PASSION FOR AIRSTREAMS BEGAN.
BUT AS OUR CHILDREN ONE BY ONE FLEW THE KENNEDY NEST,
WE REALIZED THAT A TRAVEL TRAILER WOULD BE
THE PERFECT GETAWAY FOR THE TWO OF US.



girls, Ivy (13) and Paislee (5), are older. And unlike us, she doesn't mind being on top of each other. In fact, she loves it!

People ask us all the time when we will start touring the good old US of A. Sure, Kerry and I would love to see the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone, but we are in no hurry to travel to such majestic sites just yet. For now, we just want to be together in our little home, visiting state parks and campgrounds nearby, entertaining friends wherever we go.

And, even when we are not camping, or “glamping” as the trend is now, we can leave our house and retreat alone right on the farm in Tennessee. In fact, we did this already during the last of the renovations. We came out to work leaving the visiting kids, the kitties, and the eight combined family dogs at the house. We ended up snoozing peacefully in *Cella* as rain pitter-pattered on the roof. Empty nesting doesn't get much better than this.

(As a footnote, by the time you read our story we will have taken *Cella* out on her maiden voyage to Destin, Florida, which, coincidentally, is also Heather and Brent's favorite vacation spot. We will be able to step down from her front doorway directly onto the powdery white sandy beach, and nothing will stand in between *Cella* and the crashing, sparkling waves of the Gulf of Mexico. You can read all about this and future adventures at emilykennedyauthor.com.) 

Tips from Emily:

Use bits and pieces of the things you love in your décor. Many people stock their homes-away-from-home with discarded items, saying “It's just a camper after all.” Heather and I used favorite pieces that reflect us and our tastes throughout our Airstreams.

Don't hesitate to hire experts if time constraints and particular skills are lacking. (See Source List for experts in this area who participated in these projects.)

Use what you can before discarding. The spice rack in *Cella's* kitchen was oak and decorated with '80s spindles. Removing the spindles and giving the rack a fresh coat of paint allowed us to keep an original and useful item.

Don't remove things attached to walls unless you absolutely must! People around the country search for such items as Airstream window treatment tracks. Left alone they are in keeping with the aluminum design whether or not they are used.

Honor the integrity of the Airstream design if you can. *Cella's* '80s oak is integrated with other wood varieties, giving her an “Americana meets modern design” feel. The base cabinets are painted to showcase the beauty of the walnut countertops while allowing the upper oak cabinets to carry the design scheme throughout.

Shop locally when you can. Heather and I like to give locals our business whenever we can, and we feel pretty strongly about sourcing them. (See Source Lists for *Cella* and *Pearl*.)

Think practicality with Airstream furniture. Not only are *Cella's* director's chairs (a wedding gift to us from 31 years ago) perfect for the décor, but they fold up for easy access inside and out. *Pearl's* sofa makes a bed for Heather and Brent much like *Cella's* still-intact and recovered sofa.

Modify and recycle cool things. As with *Pearl's* recycled photo props and buffet, and crate used as a large caddy, *Cella* features repurposed old wooden boxes for shelves and remote caddy in the bedroom, and a tidy holder for medicine bottles found on the farm and used as little vases in the bathroom.

Take a journal and record your adventures. Kerry and I have matching ones to jot down our thoughts when we travel.

SEE PAGE 116 FOR A LIST OF RESOURCES.