

Airstreams Sprout in South Africa

A few acres in a South African orchard make a fine place to grow Airstreams.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY IAN EVANS

After opening an Airstream trailer park in the sky above Cape Town, entrepreneur Jody Aufrichtig now has his feet more firmly on the ground.

But far from turning his back on the American icon, he has bought another 12 of them and built an eco-friendly park on the banks of a pine forest, an hour's drive from the city.

Glistening under the African sun, the silver bullet trailers are half consumed by wooden lodges offering guests a part-trailer, part-cabin holiday.

"I love these trailers and yes, you could say I am obsessed. They remind me of youth and the way things used to be before we had the complications of modern day life," says Jody, 37.

Two years ago Airstream Life featured his first Airstream venture when he opened a trailer park on top of his Grand Daddy Hotel in Cape Town city center [Spring 2009]. The hotelier had hoisted seven Airstreams on to the roof by crane and then built a little bit of America, complete with themed interiors, bar, outdoor cinema and US-style mail boxes.

"It was a great success and we had an occupancy rate of around 80% when the average rate in the city is 45%. It was probably a 50/50 mix between South Africans and tourists. I remember once going up on the roof at 7:15 a.m. when it was still a bit cold and there was this couple in their late 60s sunbathing on the deck. They had been staying in the five-star Cape Grace Hotel in Cape Town but heard about the Airstream park.

"They said they didn't want to be in a tourist hotel and wanted to do something different. We also had many advocates [lawyers]

staying and then going off to court in the morning. It was fantastic but I did learn a few things – mostly that they were too small."

Jody later sold the hotel but retained the naming rights and concentrated on his next Airstream venture which was to be an eco-friendly trailer park near Elgin, in vine and orchard country. He teamed up with a local black empowerment trust 18 months ago which owned 320 hectares (790 acres) of land where they farmed mostly apples and pears.

They told the businessman that they had a spare 1.5 hectares of land which they could lease out with a view to Jody employing local people and especially youngsters.

Jody relates: "I went to meet them and explained what I had in mind and they loved it. We wanted to give kids an opportunity other than farming and the plot of land looked ideal – they couldn't use it for farming because it was on a slope, poor soil quality and had trees on it.

"We had to get the land rezoned and we had a lot of opposition from three local farmers who just didn't want to see change. We were confident we'd get it through and so the next stage was getting hold of some new Airstreams." Jody worked out that he would need around 12 Airstreams and the best place to start looking was Ohio.

"I contacted Bob Wheeler at Airstream who told me to come over. He said over the last thirty years, people dropped off Airstreams at the factory when they'd finished with them. Old ladies whose husbands had died and knew they wouldn't be used, would take them back to the factory – a sort of 'going home' journey."



TOP: Vintage trailers from Ohio make up much of the suites. BOTTOM: The Dirkie Sanchez Airstream suite pays homage to a Mexican wrestler.

He bought six Airstreams at the Jackson Center site, mostly 25-30 feet long – larger than the smaller ones on the hotel roof – paying a total of \$40,000.

Jody then bought another five from Steve Ruth of P&S Trailer for \$23,000 and arranged to have them shipped to South Africa. "Last time I waited months and applied so many times for import permits, but this time, because they knew me from last time, I got them in two days. The shipping was meant to take 35 days but ended up being nearly four and a half months."

The twelfth trailer he found near the Zimbabwe border in Limpopo province. The 20-footer had taken part in the Cape Town to Cairo Airstream caravan in 1959 but the owners had failed to get proper import documentation for its return entry to South Africa so it had just remained there since 1961. Jody paid R48,500 (\$7,000) for the trailer which was dirty but in good condition.

Like the trailers on top of the hotel, Jody wanted the twelve Airstreams at Elgin to be themed and decided to use the same branding for the park calling it the "Old Mac Daddy." Designers were



"Give Bees A Chance" is one of the wacky themes that resulted from a design competition.

asked to submit their entries over a three-day period which resulted in 1,340 suggestions. They were shortlisted to twenty designs and the final twelve decided by Jody and a small team.

The result is a dozen weird and wacky interiors designed by local and international artists. They include Give Bees a Chance – a play on John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance." The trailer is kitted out in yellow and black with honeycomb and bee imprints with a nod to the local fruit orchards.

Keeping with the yellow and Beatles theme, there is a Yellow Submarine with nautical clocks and dials and a working periscope. The King Midas suite offers luxury and all things gold while Digit is a homage to figures and arithmetic with numbers festooned across walls and ceilings in different guises.

Slightly more adventurous is the Metamorphosis suite, sponsored by brewer Grolsch where the interior design is ultimately up to the resident. The shelving, lights, and jigsaw wallpaper are all magnetic so the guest can switch them around to their liking. The Airstream also includes an electronic magnetic clock designed by the University of Cape Town and works by a guest dropping iron filings on the clock dial which are then attracted to the minute and hour arms.

Other trailers include Life before Colour which celebrates black and white photography, smoked mirrors, laced curtains and a general Victorian-era feel. There's the Mills & Boon trailer – a sugary and kitsch love nest for the more romantically inclined.

The Private Life of Plants doffs a Panama hat at evolutionist Charles Darwin with the Airstream full of bell jars, textbooks, plants and cages while The Dream celebrates artist Henri Rousseau's painting of the same name and is alarmingly green.

The Dirkie Sanchez suite in homage to the Mexican wrestler includes a mini boxing ring with wrestling-inspired, coloured interior which probably requires sunglasses. Realizing that South Africa

should not be forgotten, Jody has one trailer dedicated to old style Afrikaner living called For Better or for Boerwors – a South African barbecue sausage.

All trailers have queen-sized beds, cotton sheets, Smeg fridges and air conditioning, with access via a door into the adjoining wooden lodge. There is also a separate, stand-alone villa and a giant converted barn where visitors can eat in the eco-park.

But it is the Airstreams which offer the most fun and the venue's x-factor. According to Jody, "These are works of art in trailers which are a work of art themselves. They are an international brand and to me, represent the breaking away from the complexities of life. You can go in them and forget about your problems.

"We've got bookings months ahead and people have bought into the fun concept. I could have tripled or quadrupled the size of the park and still done well which is testament to the business idea and the Airstreams."

Because of his devotion to the aluminum trailers, he gets emails from overseas and South Africa offering him old models. At his offices in Cape Town he is currently babysitting a 1970 Excelsa for an old lady from Johannesburg who didn't have room for it.

"It's one of the smaller models and a bit too new – I prefer 1950s and 1960s models but it's a nice little thing. We rent it out for shoots and it's a bit of an attraction."

He would like to return to Ohio to look for more Airstreams once the business has settled and he has room for expansion. Pointing to his computer he shows me an e-mail from Dave Schumann at Airstream. "Dave's sent me a picture of a 1960 Pacer which they've got there and is wondering if I want it. He knows I love them and find it difficult to say no. I'd love to open another park – another one on top of a hotel maybe in Manhattan. That would be phenomenal, or maybe Barcelona, Paris, London – we could do them all round the world." ●●●