

Airstreams keep trucking after 75 years

WORLD / 23 APRIL 2006, 12:06PM /

By Judy Seckler

Los Angeles - An icon of the American road, the Airstream travel trailer, is enjoying a hip rebirth at the age of 75 as the likes of superstars Julia Roberts and Sean Penn embrace the rolling homes from home.

The streamlined riveted aluminium shell with its elegant rounded corners and reflected hues has been a classic sight bouncing along behind the family car since Airstreams began offering new vacation opportunities to pre-World War II America.

The trailer has never faded completely from public consciousness and now Airstream, Inc is marking its 75th birthday by extending its retro-futuristic look into the European market, as the company begins exporting for the first time with slimmed-down models heading for Britain.

"About 62 percent of every product we've ever made is still on the road, which amounts to 85 000 Airstream trailers," said Tim Champ, Airstream's director of marketing and brand development.

At the height of the Art Deco movement in 1931, when Wallace Merle Byam first created his cheap and practical travel alternative, the Airstream Torpedo Car Cruiser, it retailed for \$200, which adjusts to about \$2 450 on Sunday.

Over time, its proportions have been slightly tweaked about six times but essentially the company has stuck with the basic design.

But at the dawn of a new century, these creatures of the road are no longer associated with "old fogeys" off on family camping holidays, new owners say.

The upmarket department store chain Neiman-Marcus has offered a special edition Airstream for \$200 000, alongside private jets and other luxury goods.

No one would be more pleased than Byam to know that his practical travel alternative has assumed a cool, new image among some of the leading tastemakers of today, who also include movie leading man Matthew McConaughey.

McConaughey plastered the exterior of his own Airstream trailer with graphics from "Sahara," an action-adventure film in which he starred last year, before heading off on a highly publicised cross-country road trip.

ADVERTISING



Los Angeles-based interior designer Barclay Butera, who purchased an Airstream International CCD Bambi model in December for about \$40 000, said: "It's a piece of Americana and maybe that's my new inspiration."

The 39-year-old Butera has customised his silver-sided trailer with \$15 000 worth of upgrades, converting it into a combination luxury greenroom, or performers' chill-out space, and photo shoot location at the 2006 Sundance independent film festival.

Dennis Quaid, Sam Shepard, Jonathan Demme and actresses Fairuza Balk and Lili Taylor were just a few of the visitors who basked on the luxurious bench seats custom-fitted in Nottinghill black leather.

Other accessories include red velvet pillows trimmed with black bead, as

well as leopard pillows and matching leopard carpeting.

Celebrities lounged on a luxury bed while watching the built-in flat-screen television.

The 8,6m trailer has become Butera's rolling calling card, elegance with a twist plus a dash of his "Oh wow!" factor.

San Francisco-based architect Christopher Deam gets the full credit for Airstream's recent revitalisation, according to Airstream's Champ.

Deam gutted the trailer and covered most of its surfaces with plastic laminates, displaying it in New York at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in 2000. It caused a sensation, Champ said.

Airstream's place in US culture was demonstrated recently when a radio team converted two Airstreams into travelling documentary studios or MobileBooths to record the oral histories of Americans over the next 10 years.

"I think from the moment we envisioned a MobileBooth we'd pictured it in an Airstream - it's an American classic," said Matthew Ozug, operations manager for the project dubbed StoryCorps.

The familiar-looking trailers relaxed interviewees and helped them tell their stories unselfconsciously, Ozug said.

"It's an eye-catcher," he explained. "We definitely get passers-by who are initially drawn in by the physical presence of the booth itself. Sometimes, they're simply Airstream aficionados." - Sapa-AFP