

Tin Can Tourists



Steve and Keri Norris socialize with friends by their 1955 Trotwood during a Tin Can Tourists rally at Camp Dearborn in Michigan.

KENDRA STANLEY/MLIS

Retro campers hearken back to life on the road during simpler times. **Marla Miller** investigates the allure of vintage travel.



AFTER 25 YEARS

of marriage, Bob West of Clayton, Missouri, goes with the flow when his wife, Kathy, comes up with a new idea. One day about five years ago, Kathy announced that they should buy a vintage camper.

Fast forward to today and the couple has now completed two camper restorations and joined Tin Can Tourists, a club founded more than a century ago to promote camping and the joy of vintage camper ownership.

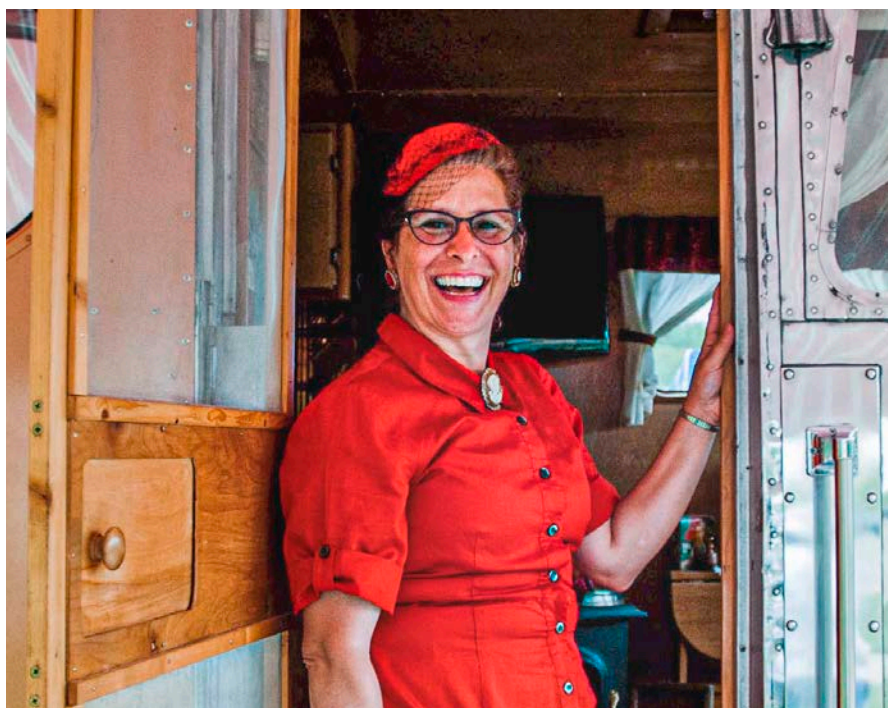
“I have fun with it,” Kathy says. “We are doing so many things and seeing so many places we would have never seen otherwise.”

Bob isn’t sure how he got roped into two camper restorations. But he’s enjoying the adventure and the chance to meet new people. “You pull up anywhere in one of these vintage campers, and everybody wants to be your friend and come over to talk about it,” he says.

You don’t have to own a retro camper to join Tin Can Tourists. The TCT club welcomes anyone with any year of trailer.

“It’s very cool to camp with 150 vintage trailers,” says Terry Bone, the club’s Royal Chief. “The club started when the Model T became popular and allowed people to travel outside their state.”

Early club records tell wild stories of people traveling from



Michigan and New York to Desoto Park in Tampa, Florida, in 1919. “There were no highways,” says Terry, who camps in a 1957 Avion. “It was two-track dirt roads. There weren’t bridges across some rivers. It took people days to get there, and travelers had lots of hardships.”

Forming Friendships

Vintage trailer owners appreciate the camaraderie around giving an old camper new life. The group encourages friendship, fun and good camping etiquette. A secret handshake, an occasional prank, and members-only rallies and gatherings are all part of the fun.

“I always tell people the trailer is the attraction, but the people are what make the club,” Terry says. “You become close friends, and then you come back to the rallies because of the friendships made.”

Some events have public open houses, where visitors can peer into these unique campers. Pink



flamingos, vintage rolling carts, antique lights and retro lawn chairs decorate campsites. Inside, the trailers pop with turquoise, pink and yellow. Some have ice boxes, antique stoves and vintage place settings. The owners like to add special touches, making their

Clockwise, from top: Delores Chabot shows off her 1946 Spartan Manor; campers lined up at a Milford, Michigan, rally; Sherrie Siler and daughter Emily as well as Roger and Jennie Merkle attend a Milford rally at Camp Dearborn; vintage camper decor.



FLAMINGO: JAMES BREVETT/GETTY IMAGES; ALL PHOTOS BY KENDRA STANLEY-MILLS

own pillows and curtains and decorating around a theme.

The vintage campers spark questions, photographs and nostalgia for a simpler time. “People walk into a trailer and say ‘Oh my gosh, this looks exactly like the camper we had growing up,’” Terry says. “That sensory

experience—the look and the feel and the smell—brings them back to the good old days.”

Tin Can Tourists members get to relive those good times, rolling down the road or parking at a campground where they can show off their restored—or original—mobile pieces of Americana.

“The campers dare to be different,” Kathy says. “People aren’t afraid to put their own stamp on their campers, and I like that about it.”

They also swap decorating and restoration ideas and try to outdo each other with their “staging” of vintage furnishings and outdoor



decor. At the end of the day, club members gather for potlucks or catered meals, games and music and evening campfires.

“The whole idea of owning a vintage trailer means you don’t just sit inside them and watch TV,” Terry says. “You go and talk to your neighbors.”

Tin canners pride themselves on being a diverse and friendly group. Members represent all backgrounds, ages, occupations and incomes. “It’s nice because both spouses can get involved, and it’s also fun for the entire family,” Terry says.

Many women—single, married and widowed—have taken up the hobby. And group gatherings make it safe for solo travelers. “The vintage trailer hobby is being led by women,” Terry says. Half of new club members are women.

Searching for Nostalgia

Those in the club share similar stories about going vintage. Many members are collectors, tinkers and woodworkers. The fun is in finding a project, such as a camper abandoned in a backyard, and

giving it new life. It’s a labor of love for most.

“I’m always looking around and peering behind old buildings and barns, either for cars or campers,” says Brandon Morrison, a TCT member who has brought a few dilapidated campers back to life. “It’s amazing what you can find.”

Brandon and his wife, Liz, of Muskegon, Michigan, joined the

club in 2008 after they bought their first vintage camper. (Brandon had experienced sticker shock over the high prices of new campers, and he wasn’t impressed with the quality). They restored and camped in a 1957 Trotwood before finding their current museum-quality Lutes Coach—a rare 1951 model built in Kalamazoo, Michigan—which they tow with their classic cars.

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“We just got super lucky,” Brandon says. “It’s local, rare and original.”

Now serving as TCT mid-states regional representatives, Brandon and Liz have stayed involved in the club because of the people. “The Tin Can Tourists club is just a very welcoming group,” Brandon says. “It’s not about what you have or you don’t have. It’s just a good group of people to hang out with.”

Since 2010, the Morrisons have hosted the West Michigan Vintage Gathering at P.J. Hoffmaster State Park in western Michigan. The event includes an open house that often attracts new members. “Curious people come to the open house and are blown away, or they are hunting for an old camper and end up coming to our rally the next year,” Brandon says.

Custom Classics

The club includes people new to owning a vintage camper who are looking for renovating advice. Others prefer to purchase their campers already renovated and focus on furnishing them with fun, era-appropriate accessories. Some club members customize their campers with elaborate woodwork and modern amenities—like air conditioning or TVs—and add their own personal touches.

The Wests spent six months restoring a 10-foot Shasta, which they named Starfire and hauled more than 20,000 miles across the United States. Their current camper, Bullwinkle, was a two-year “total reconstruction” project. “I decided to give it a Colorado mountain cabin theme with lots of natural wood inside and a really cool mural on the outside,” Bob says.

A 1965 Shasta camper and a vintage car draw smiles from Sandy Mastin at a Milford rally (opposite). Forrest and Jeri-Ann Bone revived Tin Can Tourists 20 years ago (right).

It’s been a fun retirement hobby. The Wests usually travel two-lane highways to see the sights. “We drive through the little towns,” Bob says. “We see every crazy thing someone has on the side of the road. It really does give a lot of meaning to the old saying that it’s as much about the journey as it is about the destination.”

At the rallies, fellow campers are welcoming and eager to help out. You might show up as a total stranger, but it doesn’t take long to make friends. “It really doesn’t matter whether the weather is bad or you had a problem traveling,” Bob says. “By the time you get there, the people make you feel really glad to be there.”

Terry says interest in camping has skyrocketed since the start of the pandemic. “Camping was one

of the only ways to get outside and socially distance,” he says.

A full schedule of 2022 rallies and gatherings is underway. “We’re back to pre-pandemic levels,” Terry says. “The most exciting thing about all of it is that we’re seeing huge volumes of brand-new members coming to our events.”

There are other perks of going vintage. The trailers are typically smaller and easier to tow. They have basic mechanical systems, meaning there’s less to fix. And they make you appreciate the simple pleasures in life.

“Your social media is sitting at a campfire and talking to people,” Terry says. “You can’t be on the cellphone because your aluminum blocks the cellphone signals. It truly is a simpler time.”

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