



Alumina Keeps Airstreams on Top in the Land Down Under

Story by Tom Bentley
Photos by Chloe McConchie

Many people see an Airstream flashing by on a highway, or one ensconced in a tree-lined campground and think, “Nice trailer! I should get one someday,” but nothing comes of it. Some folks might even research them and perhaps visit a dealership, but still not pull the trigger.

But rare indeed is the person who sees Airstreams on a foreign road, marvels, and then travels across continents to get one and bring it back. And then does it again and again for lots of other people.

Meet Chloe McConchie, Australia’s Airstream Whisperer. McConchie’s business name is Alumina, which speaks of shiny things.

“I have a love of travel, and was doing a road trip through the U.S. in the Southwest, and seeing them [Airstreams] on the road, seeing them out in the desert, I thought they were incredibly iconic things of beauty,” says McConchie.

However, she butted up to a minor inconvenience: there are no Airstream dealers in Australia. “We love to travel, we love camping, we love the outdoors, but unfortunately we just don’t have the quality in trailers here,” she says. (Aussies do call trailers “caravans,” but Chloe had mercy on us and quoted them as “trailers.”) “Seeing these beautiful creatures and knowing that they were the best of the best, I started to tweak my mind on how I could actually bring them to Australia.”

That’s an endeavor that required a lot of mind-tweaking. She began investigating the importation process and realized it was complex, with strict biosecurity laws in place to protect Australia’s flora and fauna. Trailers must be fumigated and cleaned before and after arriving in the country, the electrical systems rewired, and in some cases, there were state-specific regulations for door placement. And then there’s the shipping, a long and expensive process.



But McConchie was inspired by her own Airstream import, and knew that spark flamed in many parts of Oz as well. “I realized that there was a market here to actually help fulfill people with their Airstream dreams. People had seen them on TV here and they’d been on road trips in the States, and a lot of them have had this dream, some of them for decades, to own a vintage Airstream,” she says.

But the details were devilish: Rewiring the electrical system is a major task, as Australia uses 240-volt while the U.S. uses 120. This process is necessary for both new and vintage Airstreams, and is one of the reasons why many people in Australia gravitate towards vintage Airstreams, which often need deep restoration anyway—vintage purchasers don’t have to pay for an expensive new trailer and then refurbish it for the Australian market.

The reconfiguring runs from small details to large: “Things like the coupler on the hitch—we use a metric system rather than an imperial, so our tow ball size is slightly different. In Australia, we have an amber turn signal, which is required. So, we can’t actually use the taillights as they are. And we can’t import them with an air-con unit because of the gasses,” McConchie says.

More complex yet was the moving of the door or adding an additional door on the other side. This satisfies the safety requirements in some areas of Australia for a curb-side door. (Australians drive on the opposite side of the road from the States. If an Airstream is parked on the more common left-hand side of the road



Two 1970s Airstream Safaris are transported by flatbed to their Australian buyer. **INSET:** Chloe with her personal 1953 Airstream Flying Cloud.



in Australia, its factory-installed door would open into the street, causing a hazard.) McConchie arranges for tasks like door moving or subfloor replacement and polishing to be done in the U.S., but electrical and biosecurity certification need to be done in Australia. An added complexity is that Australian import laws have changed over the years—she’s been in business for eight—and continue to change.

McConchie works with a number of regarded restorers in the U.S., though sometimes a trailer arrives with surprises, like rodent carcasses in the underbelly, or when a trailer meant to have a subfloor installed arrived without one. And there are unique challenges, like the buyer who wanted a trailer for a pool house in their yard and it had to be craned over the house, which mandated some chassis reinforcements.

One If By Air, Two If By Sea

And then there’s life in the air, where McConchie spends a fair amount of time. Because she regularly checks on restoration projects and manages the export shipping process, she comes to the U.S. almost every three months—that’s a 15-hour flight to the West Coast, and around 24 hours to the East. She does work with a U.S. partner on scouting trailers and arranging restorations, but she brings a careful eye to the selected units.

“A lot of people tend to look online on Craigslist or eBay and they do see these beautiful Airstreams, but they don’t realize that they may need structural restoration,” she says. “There are scams and things like that, so that you need to be very mindful and wary of what you’re buying. The sourcing process is quite complex.”

ABOVE: Airstream Club Australia camping in Paradise Valley, Victoria, Australia. **BOTTOM:** A 1963 Airstream Bambi in its new Australian home in Mornington Peninsula. **OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM:** Camping in Daylesford. A 1952 Airstream Flying Cloud arrives in Melbourne. Scouting for trailers at a vintage rally in Pismo Beach, California.





Time on the water is a number she's concerned with as well, since the trailers are too wide to fit in standard ship containers and must go on car carrier ships. The trailers enjoy six weeks on the boat to her home base in Melbourne; the entire process from the U.S. to Australia can take three months or more. And shipping isn't cheap: between \$15,000 and \$20,000 alone. And since Australian dollars are now around 68 cents to the U.S. dollar, prices have only gone up.

But for her customers, the wait and the expense are worth it. One customer had never seen an Airstream in the flesh (or in the aluminum). Despite many video calls showing her the trailer in the U.S., explaining the import process, and making the purchase, she had a huge sense of anticipation. "So she came down to collect the Airstream that she'd paid for, and I lifted up the shop roller door and she was just so excited that she cried," says McConchie. "For people that have never seen an Airstream, it can be a really, really beautiful experience."

McConchie was her own first customer, and her starter trailer was a 1953 21-foot Flying Cloud that she's only now fully restoring (customers first!) and a 2015 23-foot International. She does travel in them, often with customers who have become friends. Australia has fewer huge RV parks than the U.S., and spots often don't have individual waste hookups. Going off-grid into the outback is popular as well. But the scarcity of Airstreams gives them a special cachet.

"The culture that goes with owning an Airstream—you become an Airstreamer, and that's the same whether it's in the U.S. or Australia or Europe. You instantly become part of this family," says McConchie. "Every time someone buys an Airstream from me, they join that club; they're part of us."

You can get Chloe's special welcome to the club through her site aluminia.com.au. 

