

TOW STORY

FEW BUYERS HAVE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN
BMW AND PICKUP TRUCK, BUT ONE MEMBER
MADE THE RIGHT DECISION.

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I had just begun restoring a 1964 Airstream TradeWind, and I knew that I would need a tow vehicle when the job was done. Most choose among trucks, but I added the BMW X5 to the mix due to its superior handling and its human scale—kudos to BMW for packing so much utility into an SUV that doesn't look large. Besides, its Glacier Silver Metallic paint matched the Airstream's aluminum skin.

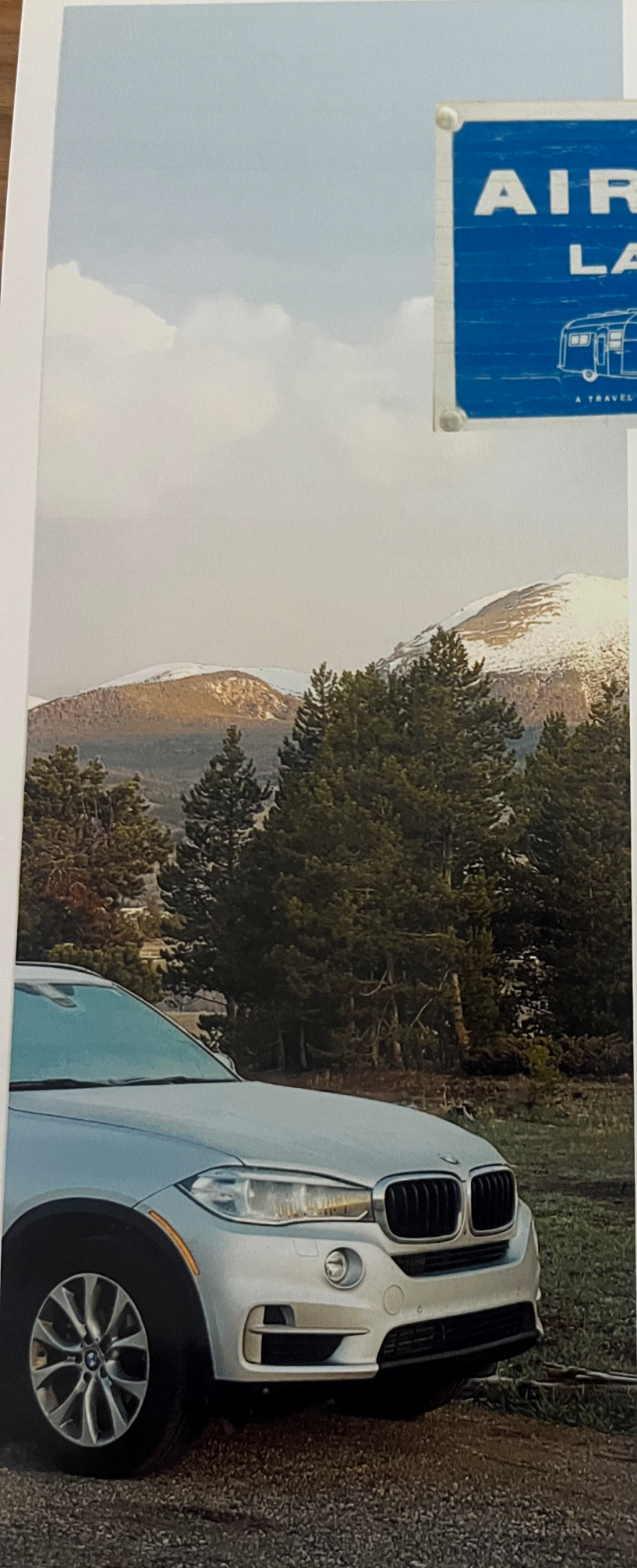
The odd pairing met a real need. Handling mattered because my tow vehicle would spend less than ten percent of its allotted miles towing a trailer; it would spend 90% of its life simply serving as my everyday ride. In this role, the Bimmer won all but one category: Gobs of grip, a tight turning radius, supportive seats, and fun to drive. A truck could haul more drywall, but even in the capacity category, one could argue that the X5 could haul more of what mattered much more conveniently.

Appearance mattered, too, because it would be a shame to spoil the longstanding Airstream aesthetic. Its shape, materials, construction, even its name derive from the airplane industry of the 1920s and 1930s, when aerodynamic streamlining and lightweight aluminum dictated every design. Airstream design roughly followed the path of the Bowlus Road Chief, an early aluminum travel trailer designed by the same engineer who managed construction of *The Spirit of St. Louis* that Charles Lindbergh flew across the Atlantic in 1927.

The design of the BMW X5 is admittedly more modern than the 58-year-old Airstream, but the designs play well together because they share the same foundation. Both exploit space and materials efficiently—no bloat in these boats! Both are built to last long past the annual model turnover. Both are austere, yet comfortable. Both catch your attention without shouting for it. Both were shaped by wind, and both share aero roots: BMW's spinning-propeller roundel myth does attest to its early expertise as a maker of airplane engines, and there's that sky-blue company color. (Okay, it's *Bavarian Blue*, but so is the sky!)

But the BMW's better body style and handling wouldn't matter unless it can *tow*.

When every other truck and car-maker, even Tesla, features Airstream trailers in their ads, why doesn't BMW? Why is every trailer parked at Proud Lake pulled by a pickup? When I searched the web for photos of BMWs towing trailers, why was my only hit a photo of an Isetta towing a 28-foot



Airstream? Am I being pranked?
Is the X5 a lousy choice?

The specs work: 5,000-pound tow capacity, three-liter turbocharged inline six-cylinder engine, AWD, long wheelbase, and short rear overhang for greater stability. It turns out that the rear-view mirror aligns exactly with the front and rear windows of the Airstream, giving the driver a clear view of following traffic. But the real test came last spring when we towed the Airstream from Michigan to Utah and back again, up and down the Rocky Mountains twice.

I'm glad to report that the BMW towed up and down those hills with aplomb. With a load-leveling anti-sway hitch, the trailer tracked true and induced no drama, even in crosswinds. And it looked good doing it.

Although the BMW X5 proved to be an inspired choice for me, I should mention two caveats. First, the X5's towing capacity of 5,000 pounds is perfectly suited to a vintage Airstream, but not to a new one. In 1964 a 24-foot Airstream weighed only 3,500 pounds—its nameplate shows it being towed by a bicycle—so even after renovating my Airstream and uploading water, propane, food, and gear, it still weighs less than 5,000 pounds. New Airstreams of similar size range from 4,800 to 5,600 pounds *empty*, so you would want a full-size pickup or a larger SUV to tow it.

You'll also need to add an aftermarket hitch and electric brake controller to the X5 (which any competent hitch house can do)—because the BMW factory doesn't really equip the X5 for towing, although it does test and rate it.

One more tip I got from Steve's European Automotive in Waterford, Michigan: The wiring pigtail should snake below the lower tailgate rather than above it, where it would get pinched every time you close the hatch. You have to temporarily disconnect one strut on the lower tailgate in order to feed the pigtail through, but this is easily done. **R**

AIRSTREAM RENOVATION IS

A 1964 Airstream is worth restoring for many of the same reasons that a BMW 1600ti is worth restoring: timeless design that has lasted for six decades, better performance than its competitors, and lightweight yet durable construction. I have restored several MGs and have built many cabinets, so I had a good start on the skills and tools needed to restore a vintage Airstream. For know-how, I tapped Tim Shephard's *Restoring A Dream* (favorite chapter heading: "They ALL Leak"), then graduated to his *Vintage Airstream* podcast—all 367 episodes at thevap.com. Via the Internet, I found our 24-foot 1964 Airstream TradeWind in Minnesota, then towed it home to Michigan to thoroughly evaluate it.

Our first of many big decisions was whether to restore the TradeWind to its original appearance or to renovate it to suit our tastes. The interior was mostly original, but in terrible condition, and I am no purist, anyway, so we decided to discard everything inside the trailer and build new. This allowed us to run new wiring, replace crude noisy electrical devices with quiet multi-stage chargers, LED lights, and Bluetooth-enabled entertainment; add storage; replace two single



Airstream cabinets need to be light, yet rigid.

beds with a convertible sofa; upgrade materials from birch to mahogany; and choose our own look—in this case, more Teutonic Yacht than the currently popular Hospital Corridor. We left the outside alone because we like the look and even the patina, so you wouldn't know that this is a thoroughly renovated trailer until you step inside.

Our second big decision was whether to leave the shell on or undertake a complete shell-off renovation. As in most older Airstreams, our plywood subfloors had large holes near the door and under the bathroom, and although partial



LIKE RESTORING ANY CLASSIC



Removing the interior aluminum skin allows new wiring and insulation.



The new layout is spacious, with lots of storage, natural light, and ventilation.



Like Rosie the Riveter, Karen poses with her indispensable tool.

plywood replacement is possible, we opted to lift off the shell in order repair and rustproof the entire chassis, and start erecting our aluminum tent on a spanking new plywood foundation.

The renovation process is akin to building a small house, albeit one in which most surfaces curve, and in which the builder must balance the conflicting demands of light weight (for easy towing) versus the durability to pound down ice-heaved roads at 70 mph. As with building your own house, myriad

decisions cascade over you; we coped by delegating construction decisions to me, aesthetic decisions to my wife, Karen.

Renovation was a lot of work; Karen learned to seal seams and buck rivets, and I used more than 1,000 pop rivets re-installing the interior aluminum skins. But it was worth the work, now that we can tour North America in the comfort of our own reliable land yacht—towed by a BMW X5.—*Matt Huff*



For shell-off renovation, we drilled out 150 rivets, jacked up the shell, then towed the chassis out from under it.