

REPRINT

Vintage RV Restoration

Story By: Jim Bounds

“Honey, did you see that old motorhome over on the next row? Boy, it sure looked nice, looked like it had a new paint job. Wonder why they drive that thing?”

Have you had a conversation like this recently about some older trailer or motorhome found at the last RV park you were in? The question that always comes up is, "Why would they put all of that money in an older RV?" At the surface it may seem like an unrealistic thing to do but you need to dig deeper to see what is prompting more and more to do such a thing.



This doesn't work with just any RV because the construction

standards in some brands have not held up under the test of time, but there were RV's that were built to last. These are the ones that actually make good sense to renovate and reuse. The



wood frame covered with siding units fell to the wayside years ago so if you actually see one of them out and about it would be in rough condition not suited to renovate. Motorhomes, notably Airstream models, Revcon, Cortez and the classic front wheel drive GMC's were some of the engineer-designed coaches while Airstream and Avion, among other classic travel trailers, were also designed and built in a manner that lend themselves to being updated and reused today.

Purely style driven, these machines will always draw attention wherever they go and, if they have been refurbished, will really draw a crowd. But that's not the only reason for having one of these classic machines brought up to today's standard. The average cost of a quality-based, 25-30 foot, well-appointed motorhome is pushing, in fact, over \$100,000 with diesel pusher models easily going over that. Now, this is where the economy of renovating vintage RV's comes in. One of these special machines in original condition but still intact can be had in the \$10,000 range. Replacing the complete drive train with transmission, motor, and differential then going through the brakes and suspension, with an eye to renew it all, will run somewhere around \$20,000.

Now wrap the baby with new paint, trim, moldings, bumpers, lights, ladders and all of that will come in around \$15,000. Turn to the interior where the sky could be the limit but taking care to not go overboard, you can outfit the interior of a classic motorhome for \$20-25,000. These numbers are an average, with the final cost a function of what that particular vehicle needs. Generally you will have about \$70,000 in your classic, renovated vintage motorhome. In most cases, this is less than you might have in a comparable new motorhome.



You might say, "what about maintenance?" and this is the best news when renovating an older vehicle. With most, older rigs, there are no computers to talk to and satisfy when doing repairs. These machines were of the age where mechanics and even owners with a basic knowledge of auto repair could repair and maintain the electrical and mechanical systems. With flat rate labor costs at your local RV center topping out over \$100 per hour, wouldn't it be nice to be able to change your own oil, spark plugs and distributor cap? Or at least feel confident that the shop down the street could do your work for a greatly reduced fee from those RV super centers? Parts are recognizable and you don't have to divulge the last 8 digits of your VIN to figure out the parts you need. These machines were easy to get a part for and easy to install and set up.

Interior and other Decisions

As far as interior appointments, the sky is truly the limit and everything can be set up exactly the way you like. Want to have a TV screen in the bathroom or a movable computer table in the bedroom? That can be added. Competent shops that understand and are willing to do the work can install anything that fits your lifestyle.

Renovating a vintage RV is more involved than many average shops are willing to take on, but there are several specialty shops that see this as their main business and are more than prepared to take on any function needed to bring that classic vehicle up to a reliable, com-



comfortable and good looking condition. With the focus on adding reliability and convenience to the coach, systems are looked at in a "holistic" manner. A brake job is not merely replacing pads and shoes, the brake update will look at every component in the system assuming everything has problems and replacing it all.

The worst thing to do is purchase one of these older machines, change the tires and oil then go out for a cross-country cruise. No, you must go through each system with a sharp eye. Things that the average shop may not think of, literally every component

must be renewed and in doing this comes the reliability you must have out on the road.

Another great thing about a classic RV is that there is no devaluation as you have with a new unit. The trailer or motorhome has already bottomed out as far as its book value, and you can choose a good one and pick it up relatively cheap compared to the mortgage for a new unit. You can then either pay someone to go through the machine or you can opt to do part or the entire project yourself. You can invest money into the unit as you go and not have to take out a loan, you can pay for your dream machine as you go!

Refurbishing and driving a selected vintage motorhome or bringing along that awesome looking older travel trailer does make both economic and aesthetic sense. "Retro" style is in and looks like it will be in vogue for some time to come. Driving a classic motorhome definitely makes a statement and having one updated to all new conveniences can be very comfortable. So the next time you see one of these machines parked near you, go take a look at it, talk to the owner and see what he thinks and why he has that particular unit. These classic RV's are not for everyone and every need, but for the



person that understands and has the unit restored to a reliable condition, they can be a valued part of the family.

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Jim Bounds operates a facility in Orlando, Florida, that specializes in repairing and fully restoring vintage RVs and trailers. For more information and lots more pictures about this intriguing process, visit Jim's business site, Cooperative Motor Works, or call Jim at: 407-857-5777

The vintage RV community has a widely-supported enthusiast group. There are many clubs and organizations dedicated to this great RVing style. To learn more about the classic GMC RV, try visiting the GMCers web site.

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Reprinted from the August 2008 publication of RV Adventure Magazine for GMC Eastern States with the consent of the publisher. July 2008

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The RV club of classic GMC owners in the eastern US and Canada

