

On the Road: Airstream Bambi Travel Trailer

Airstream, Inc., company design

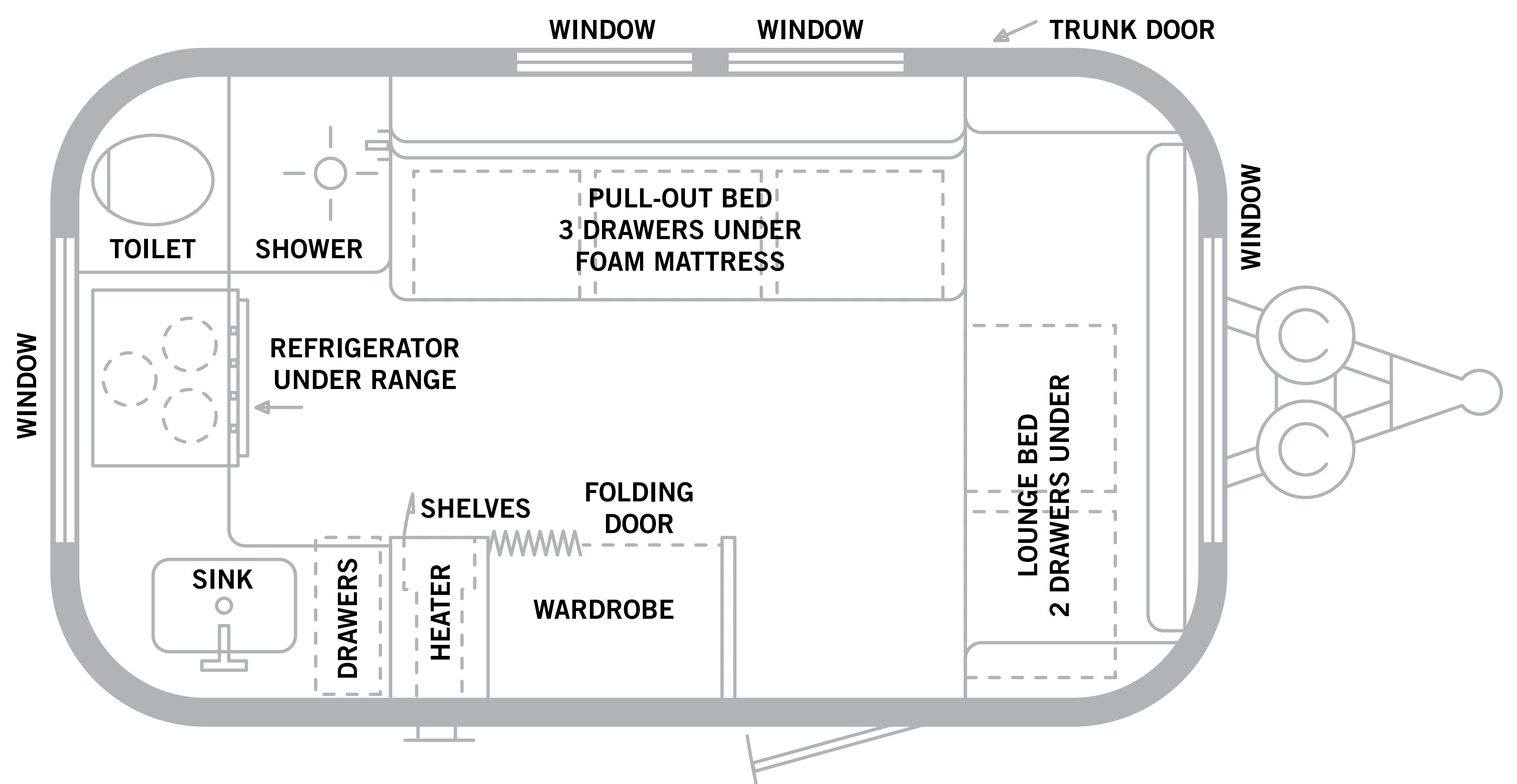
American, est. 1931

Airstream Bambi Travel Trailer 1960

Manufactured by Airstream, Inc., California, 1963

Aluminum, steel, wood, upholstery

Gift of Airstream, Inc., 2006



As a cultural icon, the Bambi Travel Trailer evokes the freedom of the open road and the comfort of a home on wheels. In the booming economy of post–World War II America, Airstream introduced the Bambi, its most compact and affordable model, to satisfy the country’s growing demand for travel and vacation leisure. Airstream’s trailers proved immensely popular, winning devotees who rallied into caravans and brought the world to their doorsteps.

Wally Byam (1896–1962), Airstream’s inventor and company founder, was central to the trailer’s success.

As a young man he spent summers herding sheep while living in a two-wheel donkey cart outfitted with a kerosene stove, sleeping mat, and wash pail. In the late 1920s he designed his first travel trailer: a crude, boxlike plywood structure mounted atop a Ford Model A chassis. It piqued so much curiosity and excitement that orders began to pour in. Byam built the early models in his backyard in Los Angeles. In 1936 he introduced the aluminum-clad Clipper, the forefather of the Bambi. Of the three hundred companies manufacturing trailers in the 1930s, only Airstream has survived.

With its aerodynamic body of gleaming aluminum, the Bambi is a machine for living and traveling: the sort of industrialized, rationalized vessel that had long been the dream object of modernist architects. Borrowing from methods pioneered in the aircraft industry, the distinctive riveted aluminum contours form a durable, lightweight monocoque skin. The curvaceous design uses skin as structure; it confers strength while lessening wind resistance. Perforated steel beams form the chassis, further lightening the tow and lowering the center of gravity for utmost stability. Inside, the cabin packs maximal function into minimal space. Kitchen, bath, bed, and storage are ingeniously combined to satisfy all the needs associated with a traditional home. This confluence of design and engineering has made the Bambi the most beloved, iconic, and enduring of travel trailers.

To complement the Bambi Travel Trailer, this display includes a selection of travel and automobile posters from the Museum’s collection.

Organized by Christian Larsen, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Architecture and Design