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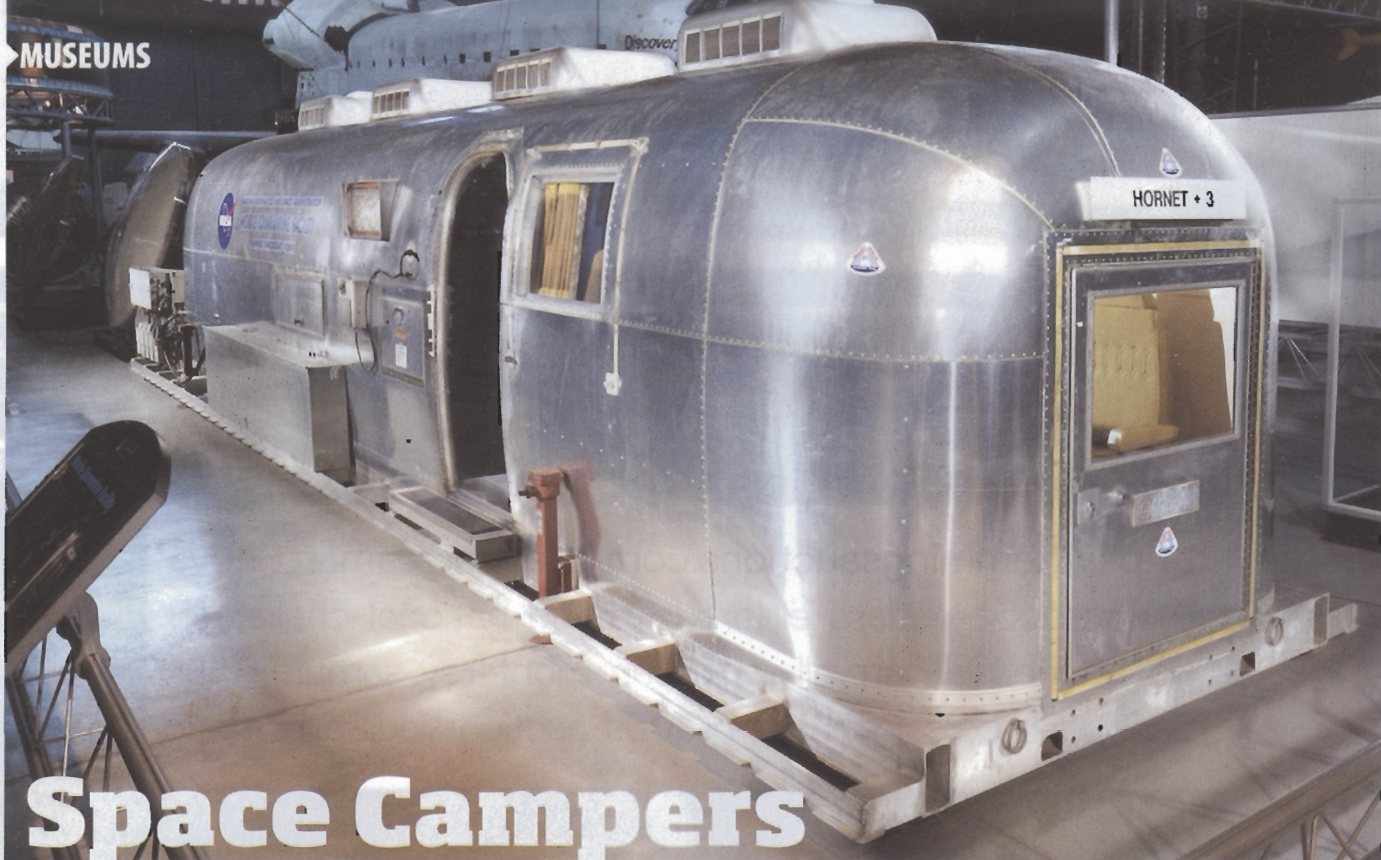
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SMITHSONIAN'S NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM

Space Campers

Airstream's unique role in the Apollo Moon missions

BY MICHAEL MILNE • PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED BY NASA OR AS CREDITED

On July 20, the world will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 Moon landing. Much of the fanfare will be about the actual mission, including man's first walk on another celestial body that occurred the next day. But there's a lesser-known component of space exploration that doesn't receive as much attention: how the astronauts were "processed" immediately upon their return to Earth.

When Apollo 11 first went to the Moon, it wasn't known if the astronauts would bring back any dangerous contagions from the lunar environment. Accordingly, steps were taken to quarantine Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins as soon as possible. Once they were removed from the space capsule that plunged into the Pacific Ocean and brought aboard the aircraft carrier *USS Hornet*, they were whisked into an Airstream trailer that had been converted into a Mobile Quarantine Facility. There, they'd spend the next three days playing cards and generally decompressing from their historic mission, while greeting onlookers — including President Richard Nixon and the Commander-in-Chief Pacific Command Admiral John S. McCain Jr. (whose son was at the time a prisoner of war in Vietnam) — through a small Plexiglass window.

Melpar Inc. of Falls Church, Virginia, a subsidiary of the Westinghouse Air Brake Company, oversaw the development of the MQFs. Rather than starting from scratch, the company created a design to modify a commercially available trailer, for both cost and time savings. After surveying all available trailer manufacturers, they chose Airstream and contracted with the company to assemble four trailers at its Jackson Center, Ohio, plant. In retrospect, the sleek silver design of the Airstream trailer was rather fitting for the *Jetsons* nature of the Moon mission. (Free tours of the Airstream assembly facility are still offered. It's a mere 17 miles from Armstrong's

hometown of Wapakoneta, which is also the site of the Armstrong Air & Space Museum.)

The primary function of the MQF was to provide biological isolation of the astronauts during transportation to Houston, Texas. Accordingly, among the custom retrofits made by Melpar was ensuring that the entire shell was air- and watertight.

The astronauts of Apollo 11, 12, and 14 all spent time in an MQF, using a different unit for each mission. (Apollo 13 never made it to the Moon's surface, so there was no need to quarantine the astronauts. The whereabouts of that MQF is unknown, although it is rumored to have been destroyed.) All three surviving MQFs are now on display, each with a different story to tell. (The numbers assigned to each MQF do not correspond to the Apollo missions they served.)



REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF AIRSTREAM, INC.

Airstream employees install wiring inside a Mobile Quarantine Facility built for Apollo astronauts returning from the moon.



Left: Apollo 11 Airstream MQF is pictured being unloaded from a C-141 transport at Ellington Airforce Base on July 27, 1969. Above: Neil Armstrong strums a ukulele while awaiting release from an MQF following the Apollo 11 mission. Right: The Apollo 12 crew heads into an Airstream MQF.



Apollo 11

MQF #3, the third one built, is on display at the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center, an annex of the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, located at Washington Dulles International Airport in Chantilly, Virginia.

According to Buzz Aldrin in his book *Return to Earth*, inside the 18,500-pound MQF, “Double-deck bunks lined either side of the long hallway, and there was a Pullman kitchen and conversation area with a table that could be used for eating or work.” The first thing the crew wanted to do was take a shower, but they were disappointed to find that there was only one. Aldrin continues, “but after eight days five more minutes didn’t hurt much, and I waited for my turn.”

Command model pilot Michael Collins called it, “a glorified trailer without wheels, modified with filters, water tanks, etc., to provide a biological barrier between those inside and the 3 billion outside.” The astronauts were joined in the MQF by two volunteers, MQF engineer John Hirasaki, and flight surgeon Dr. William Carpentier.

To keep any pesky “moon germs” from escaping, the pressure was kept lower in the MQF than outside, and all air was filtered. Arriving by ship at Pearl Harbor, the MQF was loaded onto a Lockheed C-141 Starlifter for a flight to Houston. There, the crew transferred out of the MQF into a larger decontamination facility at the Manned Spacecraft Center for a total quarantined stay of three weeks.

Apollo 12

MQF #2, for the second mission to the moon, took a roundabout journey to being on view today at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville, Alabama. After it housed the astronauts, the MQF was deemed to be surplus property and was transferred to the Centers for Disease Control, where it was used for several decontamination functions, including transporting scientists who had been exposed to dangerous viruses in Sierra Leone back to the United States — and then it disappeared. In 2007, rumors emerged about an old Airstream that had been sitting in a field at a fish farm in Marion, Alabama. Dr. Paul Johnson, the then-newly appointed director of the Alabama Department of Conservation’s Aquatic Biodiversity Center housed on that location, recognized the Airstream’s importance, after having seen the Apollo 11 MQF years earlier when it was initially on display at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center, and contacted the museum.

While the exterior was in decent condition — considering all the battering it took, it’s a testament to Airstream quality — the interior had been modified over the years. Using original construction drawings, the museum restored it to its original appearance. Learn more at www.rocketcenter.com.

Apollo 14

MQF #1, the prototype MQF which was used for Apollo 14, rests aboard the *USS Hornet* at the *USS Hornet* Sea, Air, and Space Museum in Alameda, California. It even made a brief cameo appearance in the last episode of Season 30 of *The Amazing Race*, when the final leg of the competition took place on the ship. Ironically, although Apollo 14’s MQF is on the *Hornet*, the World War II-era ship recovered the astronauts from Apollo 11 and 12, but not 14. Footprints painted on the flight deck commemorate the steps taken by the Apollo 11 astronauts as, wearing isolation garments that they had donned in the returning spacecraft as it still bobbed in the Pacific Ocean, they walked into the MQF.

Apollo 14 astronauts Alan Shepard, Edgar Mitchell, and Stuart Roosa lived in MQF #1 after their mission to the moon, along with a flight surgeon and MQF technician. After their stay, NASA decided that returning astronauts no longer needed to be quarantined upon their arrival on Earth, and another phase of moon exploration ended. For more information, go to www.uss-hornet.org.

Airstream’s moment in the sun (or moon) was a bit obscured; the famous Airstream logo at the end of the unit was covered with a sign. For example, on Apollo 11 it stated: “Hornet +3.” The Apollo 11 MQF on display now lowers that placard so the Airstream logo beams out proudly. Fortunately for the company, the vehicle’s iconic shape and polished aluminum ensured that anyone watching from around the world would know that the returning astronauts were nestled snugly in an Airstream trailer.

Michael Milne is the author of the Roadster Guide to America’s Classic Car Museums & Attractions.



MICHAEL MILNE

The Spartan accommodations inside an MQF used by the Apollo astronauts. The units were retired after Apollo 14 as the quarantine was deemed unnecessary.