

## Cool campers hit the road

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Teardrop caravans first appeared in the US in the 1930s. Photo: Hilary Walker, from My Cool Caravan.

**"HEY, aren't you a little cutie?" Is the woman on the bush path speaking to me, rubbing sleep out of my eyes as I emerge from our caravan? Or is she addressing my partner, Andrew, who's lying in the shade of a coastal banksia, reading?**

She approaches and peers into our little mobile abode. "Come and have a look at this!" she calls to her husband. "Does it pop up? What's in there? Can you stand up? What do you do in there?"



Our caravan is different to others cruising Australian roads: it is low-slung and streamlined and features art-deco curves that resemble the shape of a tear. It is called a Teardrop.

We are exploring the beaches of far eastern Victoria for a few days, road-testing the second-hand Teardrop we bought from an advertisement in our local paper.

On this maiden voyage we'll pitch up in a caravan park in Lakes Entrance and bush camp at Cape Conran Coastal Park.

This is an opportunity for us two caravan rookies to find our towing legs.

We give the woman and her husband a guided tour of the "little cutie". Inside the Teardrop, a double mattress takes up the whole floor space. (Unless you are of Lilliputian proportions, you cannot stand up.)

Doors on both sides mean an easy exit in the middle of the night. There's clothes storage above the foot of the bed and more stowing space behind our heads. A central fluorescent light and neat LED reading lights take care of night-time illumination.

Outside, at the back of the van, we lift the hatch to reveal the natty kitchenette: fridge, gas cooktop, sink, space for food preparation and storage for crockery, cutlery and pots and pans.

Fixed to the front is a capacious metal box for the wet-weather awning and non-perishable food. At the caravan park we pitch at a powered site and in the bush we use the battery. The Teardrop is light and manoeuvrable and needs neither stick-out mirrors nor the grunt of a 4WD to tow.

Teardrop trailers-for-two first hit the road in the US in the 1930s but it wasn't until after World War II that the phenomenon properly took off. The September 1947 edition of *Mechanix Illustrated: The How-To-Do Magazine* featured building instructions for a double bed on wheels in the shape of a teardrop.

Teardrops went hand in hand with Americans' desire for a simpler life after years of wartime austerity. The backwoods and the water beckoned; what better way to experience the romance of the open road than in a trim caravan with fetching retro curves?

Early models were built from salvaged World War II Jeep axles and wheels. Exterior skins came from the wings of wartime bombers.

Americans' love affair with the classic teardrop waned in the 1950s. They wanted bigger and better in their mobile homes, and over the years got what they wished for: chunky caravans featuring not only a kitchen sink but dishwashers, washing machines and dryers, top-end entertainment systems and more.

At the caravan park in Lakes Entrance, our Teardrop stands out in a crowd of big rigs resembling aircraft carriers on wheels.

Curious campers sidle past our van and stop to chat. They soon work out its kitchenette is exposed to the elements and that, no, you can't stand up inside. One couple, with a glance at our snug sleeping quarters, say wistfully, "Oh, you must love each other." They reminisce about cosy caravan holidays of times past, all the family piled in together.

We point out its features to another couple, who look at us as if we have lost our minds. "It's all you need," they declare, appraising the van's basic comforts. But is it relief I see flickering across their faces as they scuttle back to their luxury tourer, overflowing with bells and whistles?

A holiday in our jaunty little van reduces life to its simplest terms. At Marlo we pull over, raise the kitchen hatch and within minutes are sipping an alfresco coffee by the mouth of the Snowy River. We trundle into the camping area at Cape Conran at dusk, unhitch, crank the prop stands down and still have time for a swim before nightfall. In the morning we wake to the screech of rosellas high in the trees.

A Teardrop holiday might be a smallish step up from camping, but when the skies open we count our lucky stars that we are above the ground, warm and dry, and not in a tent. The LED lights cast a warm glow as we read in bed.

At Cann River we discover that our Teardrop is by no means the cutest of the pack. We stop for a picnic in the park and are approached by the local police officer. His wife is mad about Teardrops, he tells us. In his backyard shed we gaze at the sweetest, most minuscule van we've seen: porthole windows, shelves and a pint-sized bed. (They must really love each other.)

Little did we know when we set eyes on this second little cutie that our two Teardrops are part of a zeitgeist in retro caravanning. Across the globe classic caravans are becoming cool.

And how does the Teardrop fare on its inaugural odyssey? We hit our towing straps by day three; bumping in and out of campsites is a breeze. But the next day we come undone when we stop for a picnic on a rutted bush track and discover that a spring has shattered. (It's not until later that we learn our double bed on wheels, built by a DIY enthusiast in 2004, was assembled on a 1970s trailer base.)

We are rescued after dark by a chain-smoking panelbeater who winches the van on to his tray truck, where it slips and slides its way back to town.

After we've spent two nights in a motel, the Teardrop is repaired and we are back on the road. We decide this gives a new meaning to the term "tearing up".

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