

BY STEVE SAVAGE

The Customized Approach

Space Craft Manufacturing proves you can expect big things from a small company.

If you have never seen an RV produced by Space Craft Manufacturing in Concordia, Missouri, you are not alone. Concordia, a pleasant Midwestern farming community about 60 miles east of Kansas City, just happens to be home to what is possibly the smallest RV manufacturer in the United States. An anomaly in a “bigger is better” world, where the largest manufacturers count daily production in dozens of RVs, Space Craft produces only about two units a month. As you quickly discover, however, is that versatility and quality construction are not necessarily related to size. Space Craft presents itself further as an anomaly in the world of RVs; the person occupying the boss’s chair is a woman, Marsha Trautman.



Whether you’re in the market for a conventional high-end travel trailer with a hot tub, a production lot facility for the next Bruce Willis movie, or a sky’s-the-limit “toterhome” (a medium-duty truck chassis with a Class C cab, set up for towing as much as 60,000 pounds), if you can dream it, Space Craft can build it. Although most RVers have at least a passing awareness that large bus conversions are built one at a time for new owners, few if any buyers shopping for travel trailers and fifth wheels are aware they can obtain this



same level of individual, customized attention.

Better still, it is often possible to own a custom-built unit for less than comparable models from better-known high-end builders. While other RV manufacturers build standardized model lines limiting choices in floorplans and accessories, Space Craft throws away the cookie cutter and starts with the owner.

Let's suppose you are shopping for a high-end fifth wheel for full-time RV living. Pull up a chair across the



Space Craft "toterhome"

desk from Marsha Trautman and start planning. Do you want slide-outs? How many? Do you intend to use your RV when the slides are retracted? What features are most important to you?

Next up, it's time to design a floorplan. Start either by modifying a standard layout or taking pen to a fresh sheet of paper to design a "one of a kind." Space Craft fits the RV to its owner rather than trying to fit the owner to an RV designed by someone else. Space Craft's 35-plus years of experience also come into play while laying out the floorplan, where an extra inch may mean the difference between barely tolerable and truly livable. After choosing a floorplan, along with fabrics, wood trim and accessories, construction begins.

Frames for Space Craft's travel trailers and fifth wheels are made on

site according to weight and design. The smallest travel trailers come in at 28 feet, while the longest may exceed 40. Constructing the frame in-house is not only cost effective, but gives Space Craft complete control over quality. In addition, since each frame is made to order, it is never necessary to cut a frame manufactured by someone else and then re-engineer it to use in an application for which it was never intended. Toterhomes are built on new or used medium-duty trucks supplied by the buyer, or Space Craft can supply the truck as well as the custom box.

While a tour of most RV factories finds employees performing single repetitive task as units move along an assembly line, Space Craft approaches RV construction using teams of employees who perform multiple tasks. Imagine half a dozen

employees working as a team on the same RV from start to finish, often with the new owner looking on as it is constructed. The team approach demands a higher skill level from workers than you'll find on single-task assembly lines, but it also engenders a greater pride in workmanship and quality control.

As with all high-end RVs, fiberglass rather than rubber fends off elements striking the roof on all Space Craft RVs. In addition to the exterior roof, team members also make the fiberglass interior ceiling panels, the front and rear caps and all the fiberglass components found in each unit, save for the deeply gel-coated sidewalls.

Space Craft takes several novel steps to ensure their units are as durable as they are attractive. In order to eliminate the bottom seam



Space Craft kitchen

on their slideout walls, they wrap the slide in a one-piece fiberglass jacket that completely covers the slide roof running down both sides and extending several inches beneath the slide. This wrapper goes a long ways toward stopping water penetration into the sidewalls and floor of the slideouts. Rounding out the glass-work, the entire interior ceiling is constructed from gel-coated fiberglass. This method of ceiling construction is more costly, but is extraordinarily durable and remains stain free for the life of the RV.

All woodwork, except for cabinet doors, is done in the Space Craft's shop and, as one would expect in high-end RVs, there is no particle-board nor any photograph finishes in any Space Craft product. Countertops are made from genuine Corian. Some aspects of quality are not easily seen. Take the slideout mechanisms, for example. Space Craft has been building their own slide mechanisms since the '70s. The present version extends and retracts via ball-bearing supported screw drives powered by electric motors. The slide adjustments are elegant in their simplicity and appear capable of supporting many times the demands placed on them.

Air suspension, standard in trailers pulled behind Class 8 tractors, is optional in Space Craft towables. Complete offices and customized storage space are available for owners who use their RV for business. Precision Temp continuous-supply water heaters take care of hot water needs, while multiple furnaces, additional insulation and dual-pane windows fill the bill for cold weather use. Optional full-body paint is available to dress the outside.

If you find yourself asking why more builders do not follow Space Craft's lead in custom design, the answer is not as simple as cost. While it goes without saying that it is not possible to build one-of-a-kind RVs at an entry-level price, doing custom work requires a higher skill



Space Craft motorhome interior

level than is found in routinized assembly. In all probability there are not enough artisans available to challenge the numbers produced by even moderately sized competitors.

Space Craft units are price-competitive with units from high-end manufacturers, and they do not compete with entry-level RVs. Even given Space Craft's niche marketing, though, word of mouth brings a steady stream of orders to their doors, and there usually is a wait of several months after an order is placed for it to be produced.

Given the longevity of their products, Space Craft is widely known among full timers, particularly those who make their living on the road, such as carnival workers. Space Craft also produces specialty units found on studio lots and is aggressively moving into toterhome construction to broaden their lineup of work-ready rigs. Units are sold factory-direct only, again to control costs and to ensure that every unit leaves with an owner who knows how to use all of the features. If the thought of

custom construction conjures up thoughts of service nightmares, buyers will find appliances and components are all from the standards in the RV industry. That means service is never further away than the closest technician.

As discriminating buyers increasingly enter the RV marketplace, research suggests new owners are more likely to base decisions on quality and reliability rather than cost. If that trend continues, Space Craft appears particularly well positioned to meet the needs of the "you can have it your way" generation.

Steve Savage is editor of Motorhome-ReviewOnline. For more information visit www.spacecraftmfg.com.



Space Craft 5th wheel bedroom