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New RV Trends: What to Watch for in 2011

Attendance was up by 10% across the board at RVIA's colossal 48th Annual National RV Trade Show held in early December. Louisville, Kentucky was definitely the place to be to check out what's new in the RV world. With exciting new model and feature changes coming in 2011, and RV sales up 45% nationwide and continuing to climb, the mood at the show was enthusiastically upbeat.

RV buyers found much to admire in the new and newly-updated 2011 RV models on display. Exciting new floor plans, increased high-tech integration, and a new emphasis on "functional luxury" caught the attention of RV enthusiasts. The continued greening of the RV industry was evident in increasingly standard use of sustainable and green materials in construction and décor. The introduction of smaller, lighter-weight travel trailers that can be pulled by smaller vehicles was one of the more interesting developments featured at the show.

Here's a rundown of the most exciting RV innovations to watch for in 2011:

Versatile floor plans. The rectangular structure of motorhomes and travel trailers has always dictated the typical shotgun floor plan, but new quad slides, full-wall slides and telescoping slides are providing more interior space which allows greater design flexibility. The 2011 American Heritage 45BT motorhome leads the industry with 460 square feet of interior living space, while Monaco's unique telescoping slide increases interior width to a gargantuan 68 inches, the widest in the industry.

RV floor plans are making considerable use of the 'L' shape to improve spatial use and flexibility. L-shaped kitchens with butcher-block islands increase counter space and invite more varied use. L-shaped sofas allow flexible seating arrangements and impart a more residential feel. L-shaped room designs are wrapping bedrooms around bathrooms or laundry stations to create walk-in closets.

Special use RVs, called toy hauler, are getting the homey touch. New crossover RVs that incorporate living quarters with hobby transport are targeting active families with larger and more comfortable living space and specialized designs. Rear door ramps the width of the vehicle provide easy access and specialized floor and wall racks increase storage space for bike, motocross and ATV enthusiasts. The most unusual crossover RV introduced was Forest River's new Ice Cabin. An ice-fisherman's paradise, the Ice Cabin features retractable wheels that allow it to slide easily onto the ice and a floor dotted with plugged, interior fishing holes that allow comfortable fishing from inside the RV.

High-tech integration. Mid-ship entertainment centers with wall-mounted 40- to 46-inch wide-screen televisions, DVD and Blu-Ray players, and integrated surround-sound systems are de rigeur in high-end RV models. Now overhead big-screen television/sound systems are beginning to pop up in bedrooms, too. New RV models are reaching showroom floors satellite-enabled and equipped to handle cutting-edge technology with integrated wireless capabilities and built-in charging stations for hand-held electronics.

Functional luxury. With an eye on the economy, RV buyers are looking for what RV makers are calling *functional luxury*, RV features that improve the quality of daily living. More RV kitchens are featuring full-size kitchen appliances and some offer a second refrigerator with outdoor access. Dual sinks and full-size showers in the master bathroom are available. More spacious and luxurious master bedroom suites feature full-size walk-around queen beds, a nook for reading or exercise, and full-size or walk-in wardrobes with shoe racks, built-in dressers or shelving, and twice the normal hanging space.

Other common upgrades include second half-baths, full-size washer/dryers, two entry doors, intuitive service centers, more comfortable bridge design, and gourmet galleys. But the No. 1 most exciting RV trend is the outdoor kitchen. Special compartments and slideouts open to expose built-in stainless steel sinks, outdoor fridge access, food preparation counters and storage cupboards, and infrared grills, all comfortably covered with a motorized canopy.

Going green. The RV industry's commitment to going green ramps up with initiation of an environmental certification program. To earn the *Certified Green* designation, recreational vehicles will be required to meet net energy-efficient and water-efficient benchmarks set by a third party certification organization.

To improve eco-friendliness, RV makers are introducing the use of stronger composite construction materials, increased use of sustainable materials in interior design, introduction of LED lighting systems, and installation of energy-efficient appliances.

RV makers are also producing more models factory-equipped with power-generating solar panels and wind turbines. Designed to power the new ultra-light motorhomes, small, fuel-efficient diesel engines are making a comeback. Jayco is the first out with the revolutionary EFOY hydrogen fuel cell. The size of a toaster oven and completely silent, the EFOY produces zero emissions while providing a constant charge to RV batteries.

Size matters. Luxury RVs may be getting bigger, but the most surprising trend at the 2011 RV trade show was the introduction of smaller, light-weight, fuel-efficient recreational vehicles geared to meet the needs of budget-conscious empty-nesters and 30-something singles, two of the fastest-growing RV populations.

In creating lighter-weight, fuel-efficient RVs, manufacturers are anticipating the expected 2011 application of federal auto mileage standards to pickup trucks and sport utility vehicles, the vehicles typically used to tow RVs. In order to meet new fuel efficiency standards, auto makers are expected to reduce the weight and size of new pickup and SUV models which will impact towing capacity. Smaller, lighter-weight RVs will be required to accommodate decreased towing capacity; and RV manufacturers are already working on development of a travel-trailer that can be towed by the typical small family sedan!