



# MINIMAL SPACE, MAXIMUM DESIGN

**Tiny home tourist explores how to pack a punch in the most petite places**

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**I**n the age of COVID-19, my dreams of international adventures were put on hold, but my escapes were not halted altogether. I planned safe and socially distanced road trips, but with a twist: tiny travel.

In October 2020, I embarked on an ongoing “tiny home tour” around the country and world. To date, my collection consists of 25 domestic and one international stay.

As a self-proclaimed minimalist, I travel light, even to far-flung destinations. The idea of a small, well-planned and efficient living space that a tiny home can provide just makes sense.

But not all tiny homes are created and constructed equally. Some people might assume beautifying a miniscule home requires minimum effort, but owners and interior designers would beg to differ. Here, several Airbnb superhosts (a label given to the top-rated and most experienced hosts) and home design stylists share their thoughts and inspiration for making the most of a small situation.

## DESIGN DETAILS

After sleeping in 26 of them, one thing is for certain: No two tiny homes are designed alike. As a short-term renter, I get to experience a new emotion influenced by the environment created by each tiny house host. Many factors must be taken into consideration, from construction



materials to décor.

Using meaningful materials in the construction of these tiny homes is equal parts resourceful and creative. James Pope’s tiny home rental on Matthew’s Creek Farm in Norlina, N.C., reflects the creative use of recycled goods. “The windows all came from Habitat for Humanity,” Pope says. “The flooring was surplus. The wood used in the loft was from a greenhouse that was taken down. The wood used for the shower was reclaimed. The window framing came from an old dilapidated smokehouse that my friend was tearing down.” >

■ **Writer Mike Goldys** poses in front of Maryann O’Keeffe’s boat-house in Charlotte, N.C. It was the 11th property on his tiny home tour.

▲ **Kathy Taylor** used items from the local art scene and antique markets in Mount Dora, Fla., to decorate her rental home’s outdoor space.

● **Capitalizing on the** gorgeous scenery in Kempton, Pa., Mark and Diane Sismour placed a bed next to a large window to give guests a picture-perfect view.





■ Gabriel Tao's love of nature is reflected in the interior and exterior décor of his Tampa, Fla., container home.

▲ In his Vienna, W.Va., tiny home, Jason Varner maximized the space with amenities without sacrificing comfort.

Mark and Diane Sismour take repurposing to a new level with their stand-alone Lakeside Tiny House in Kempton, Pa., built in 1891. The Sismours wanted to retain the integrity and original features of the detached 150-square-foot historic summer kitchen, a

stand-alone structure that separated heat-inducing cooking activities from the rest of the house during the warmer months before the advent of air conditioning. "We even protected the textured walls, keeping with the time period, by using milk paint and wax," says Diane.

Gabriel Tao filled his container home in Tampa, Fla., with unique decorations. "I love nature and wanted our tiny house to encapsulate every bit of it, from the moss on the shower ceiling to the wood cookies on the wall," says Tao. While I stayed only one night in Tao's tiny home, I kept discovering small details, from ceiling to floor.

Home designers and stylists advise tiny home owners to make the biggest impact in the limited space. "A small space should be treated as a jewel box; every piece counts," says Casey Stephenson, studio director at Pansy Bayou Design Studio in Sarasota, Fla. She recommends finding "a new use for your most treasured vintage items — retro refurb." Tao accomplished that with a whisky barrel retrofitted into a bathroom sink equipped with a door for additional storage.

### GRADE-A AMENITIES

This is where I distinguish between a tiny house and a small cabin for glamping. When booking a tiny home through Airbnb, I expect basic indoor amenities like a bathroom, shower, sink, toilet, air conditioning and

heat. Not required but nice to have is a washer and dryer (often a combo), strong Wi-Fi and a desk or table to work on. Short-term rental hosts are competing for business, so amenities are sometimes the differentiator during my search.

"I want people to have everything they need to be comfortable and not feel like they were sacrificing while staying with us," says Pope. His rental was ready with water heater on and hot water flowing upon my arrival. This might seem like a no-brainer, but some tiny homes are bare bones when it comes to accommodations.

Then there are the exterior amenities: outdoor seating, tables, patios, grills, lights and parking. While some of these aren't must-haves, they too can be a deciding factor when choosing a tiny house rental. In Florida, weather extremes — lots of sun and nearly as much rain — are the norm. So something as unexciting as a shade structure scores big in my book.

Another outdoor perk that makes a world of difference is parking. Throughout my tiny stays, I have gone from the worst-case scenarios — fighting for parking five blocks away from my rental in 40-degree weather, parking on a dirt plot in a farm field, freezing as I wipe the snow off my car windows in the host's driveway — to the best case: spacious reserved parking like the setup at Crystal O'Mara's Tiny

Tropical House in Chuluota, Fla., which has spaces just feet from the rental.

My favorite convenience? Outdoor lighting. Equally practical for safety and for navigating around the small space, lights can also be a design element. From a practical standpoint, I'm often arriving at my rental in the evening after a long day of driving. Outdoor lights help me spot the place in unfamiliar territory, >



■ Guests will find many comforts of home without a lot of clutter in Kathy Taylor's Mount Dora, Fla., rental.

▲ James Pope used recycled materials and reclaimed wood in the construction of his tiny home in Norlina, N.C.

● Multicolored recycled bottles allow light in to illuminate the inside of Maryann O'Keeffe's tiny North Carolina boathouse.

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assist with visibility as I unpack my car and prevent me from tripping as I make my way to the entrance.

## PLANNING AND PRACTICALITY

A common theme among tiny home hosts and home designers is planning. “Before you start building, make sure you can get appliances to fit in the limited area, such as a fridge, couch, countertops, hot water tank, etc.,” says Jason Varner, who rents out a tiny home in Vienna, W.Va.

Kristen Urban, interior designer at JMT Architecture in Baltimore, says owners should “lay out the space so all household and personal items have their own assigned location.”

“Space for recycling and/or compost bins is usually overlooked and becomes an afterthought,” she says.

In some instances, owners of tiny homes started with a pre-existing structure that they renovated. In such cases, design is influenced by what’s possible moving forward. It becomes a balance of structural limitations versus creativity and resourcefulness. “If I was to build another tiny house from scratch, I would definitely include plans for plumbing and electricity from the get-go,” explains Maryann O’Keeffe, who retrofitted an existing boathouse in Charlotte, N.C.

Sometimes hosts’ planning is influenced by their journey to tiny-home ownership. Pope says his

house was built from a need for shelter. “I lived in my tiny house long before I ever heard about tiny houses,” he says. Similarly, Tao lived in a storage container while overseas during his time in the Marines. “When my girlfriend suggested we should convert one into a tiny house it only made sense,” he says. Living in the dwellings provided the firsthand understanding of what’s needed in a limited space.

Varner says he keeps his tiny home builds practical by maximizing “every single inch of space,” and says the builder or designer should focus on a balance of comfort versus amenities.

“You do not need two sinks, so for the bath area use a small but tall shower and a toilet,” he says. Guests can use the kitchen sink for multiple tasks (dishes, brushing teeth, washing hands). Alternatively, there are narrow wall-hanging sinks that fit snug in bathrooms.

The layout of furnishings is another key consideration. Jennifer Kerr-Marsch, owner of Mangrove Bay Design in New Smyrna Beach, Fla., says owners need to “lay out furniture and remember human scale in a space. A person needs space to walk while carrying bags or a child. Being cognizant of these basics will make even the smallest of homes functional for generations.” The simplest advice Kerr-Marsch offers: “Don’t plan a big house — plan a big life!”



■ **The staircase design** in Mark and Diane Sismour’s Pennsylvania tiny home helps keep guests from bumping their knees on the way to the upper level.

▲ **A rocking chair** and firewood on the porch of John Carey Fulmer’s rental in New Augusta, Miss., reflect the property’s farm setting.

● **Crystal O’Mara’s rental** in Chuluota, Fla., has easy-access parking just steps from the entrance.



One of the smartest examples of practicality influencing design is a staircase in the Sismours’ Pennsylvania rental. “The stairs were designed to feel like a full step with each on an angle to prevent knees getting whacked on the climb,” says Diane Sismour. The thought and ingenuity that went into the staircase design probably saved my own kneecaps multiple times throughout my stay.

## OUTDOOR FEATURES

While the tiny-home trend started as a novelty — the movement dates back to at least the 1970s — they can now be found almost everywhere around the country. So how do some hosts elevate their rental to the next level?

Some of the homes I stayed in stood out because of what was outside. The inside of the rental is the main feast, but the outdoor space is the cherry on top.

Some embrace the local culture. “One of the cool things about decorating the outdoor areas of my tiny house was the influence of my city,” says Kathy Taylor of her rental, which she calls The Mount Dora (Fla.) Escape. “Mount Dora has a lot of art and antiques here, including Renninger’s Antique Market and a renowned Mount Dora Arts Festival. I love secondhand antiques and yard sales, so most of my outside décor was found that way.”

Others take advantage

of the home’s vibe. John Carey Fulmer says of his Tiny House at Fulmer’s Farmstead & General Store in New Augusta, Miss., “There is a rustic farm feel to our place so I definitely wanted to have that theme throughout.”

## FINAL TOUCHES

In the world of tiny-home rentals, it’s the small things (pun intended) that count. With so much competition in the market, a lasting impression is often sealed with a tiny gesture.

“We wanted our tiny house to be an experience, not just a place to stay,” Tao says. “I used my 3D printer to design and print most of the decorations to make our guests feel completely at home in a magical place.”

Other small, but satisfying touches are memorable views. During my many stays, I’ve had the opportunity to watch sunsets over the sea, take in the autumn leaves and wake up to snow-covered countryside hills. I understand this might not be realistic for all tiny rentals, but it does leave a lasting memory.

The more I tour tiny homes, the more fascinated I become, not only with these diminutive domiciles but with the owners who showcase immense creativity and craftsmanship.

The possibilities are huge in the world of tiny homes. I can’t wait to see what other exciting surprises are in store as my journey continues. ■