

Think Small...Live Big

by Gordon Myhre

The 2009 Forest River r-pod ultra light travel trailer offers RVers a practical blend of form, function and comfort at an attractive price point. Since its release late last year, it has become an industry sensation and an instant hit among both RVers and dealers alike. After talking to a few proud owners of the r-pod, we think we know why.

In his more than 20 years of RVing, Eli Elkouri has owned a pop-up trailer, travel trailer, fifth wheel toy hauler and fifth wheel trailer. In his recent search for a new RV, he realized that he should seek out a model that would accommodate the change his RV lifestyle has undergone over the last two decades. "I don't make long hauls anymore," explains Elkouri. "I need something small, that doesn't compromise on features."

Differently, Raymond Chandler, never having owned an RV before, was eager to take his first step into the world of RV camping. So he and his wife set out to purchase a lightweight trailer that offered the creature comforts they, along with their 4-year-old grandson, would enjoy. "We were new to camping," says Chandler, "so we were looking for something that wasn't too intimidating to tow and wasn't too expensive."

Despite being on opposite ends of the RV experience spectrum, both Elkouri and Chandler have quite a bit in common. They both knew what they wanted in an RV and they both found what they were looking for in the r-pod ultra lightweight trailer, the first of its kind. Scott Rhode, Forest River's southeast regional sales manager, offers an explanation as to why the company's latest innovation is flying off the lots of RV dealers nationwide, "The r-pod has what a larger trailer has with a much lower weight and price." Faced with the realities of a troubled economy, both rookie and seasoned RVers are indeed on the lookout for budget-friendly ways to enjoy the RV lifestyle without compromising on amenities or quality. "We looked at a lot of small trailers," explains Elkouri, "but they didn't have the features we wanted." He continued, "the r-pod offers 35-gallon grey and black water tanks...the same as I had in my larger trailer."

While long-time RVers understand the value and benefits associated with having large holding tanks, newcomers to the RV lifestyle are impressed by the r-pod's more visible features. "My wife, grandson, dog and me can all sleep comfortably," explains Chandler, who gives his r-pod a glowing review after its maiden voyage. "We just got back from our first camping trip and had a great time."

Sales consultant, Lisa Padin, sold the first r-pod at Lazydays and believes that with it, Forest River is providing the type of product that the RV industry needs right now. "The r-pod's size is a strong selling point," asserts Padin. "With the economy as it is, people are looking for a trailer that they can tow behind their every day vehicle." Additionally, while most lightweight travel trailers offer a limited number of floorplans, the r-pod boasts seven distinct layouts, each offering a combination of features that provide incredible livability. "Our model has a screen room that sets up outside," says Chandler, "which is great because it gives you a whole new space to enjoy." With a weight hovering around 2,000-pounds, the r-pod is one of the most towable trailers on the market. "We have a 4-cylinder truck," says Chandler. "I was a little nervous about towing a trailer since I'd never done it before but the r-pod handled well." The r-pod also

features the same 8-ft wheelbase as most 40-ft travel trailers. Elkouri, attested to the wheelbase's contribution to the r-pod's handling, when he said, "I hardly knew it was back there. Our sales person said I didn't need a sway bar and she was right. I had no trouble pulling it at all."

Forest River's timing of the r-pod introduction was no coincidence. At the same time the auto industry discovered an ever increasing demand for smaller, more efficient vehicles, the manufacturer recognized that the same would soon be the case with recreational vehicles. "We saw the way the auto industry was heading and said 'Hey we better have a product that fits into this smaller trend' and that's what we did with the r-pod," said Rhode. Chandler said he hadn't expected to be the talk of the campsite when he and his wife took their grandson on their first camping trip in their r-pod. "A lot of folks came by and talked to me about it," he confessed. "I guess they were real curious since they'd never seen one before."

Rhode believes the r-pod is a rare example of an RV product that offers innovation for the future by taking cues from the past. "If you look at the first several decades of the RV industry, the average size of a trailer was 18 to 22 feet. As cars got bigger and trucks got bigger, so did the trailers," he recalled. When asked about Forest River's philosophical approach, Rhode borrowed the popular line "We went back to the future." He continued, "A lot of manufacturers were trying to incorporate a retro look into their new products but they were leaving out some of the modern day features and appeal. With the r-pod, we went with a retro *size* but didn't leave out any of today's popular features."

Now we all know that for any new product to succeed it must meet the approval of both the customer and retailer and by listening very closely to the feedback provided by both, Forest River engineers hit the mark with the r-pod. "It has everything we've had in our larger trailers, maybe a little more" said Elkouri. Lazydays sales consultant, Joanne Heppe, believes that the trailer is in the proverbial right place at the right time. "The r-pod is a great entry point for people who want to ease into the RV lifestyle," she asserted. "Plus, it's built with a level of quality that satisfies veteran RVers."

Upon its unveiling at an RV show in October 2008; the r-pod trailer was an immediate crowd pleaser. "We wrote hundreds of orders at that first show," recalled Rhode. "It just put a smile on people's faces." Rhode fondly recalls the giddy astonishment on the faces of those who would emerge from the trailer in groups of 4 and 5 at the show. "People were amazed that something that seems so small on the outside could have so much room on the inside. It was the hit of the show."

Newcomers to the RV lifestyle may look at the r-pod and see a future. Veteran RVers may look at it and see *the* future. With the r-pod's numerous floorplans and incredible practicality, Forest River didn't necessarily change the RV industry but they may have given it a welcomed new perspective. **RVS**