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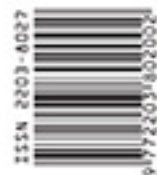


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Reg Ansett's First Class 'Flxible' Clipper

Back when air travel was unaffordable, Reg Ansett introduced Australians to the world's most luxurious coaches. Today, they're highly sought after as glamorous motorhomes.

By Kimberley Nicoll

Flxible - Is that the right spelling?

The US Patent Office deemed the word flexible to be so common, it couldn't be trademarked. So, in 1913 the Flxible Sidecar Company was inaugurated.



Boarding the Flexible clipper in the 1950s



Sir Reginald Myles Ansett is best remembered as the brilliant businessman behind the once great airline he gave his name to. But, “Sir Reg”, as he later became known, had set his business sights on providing affordable road transport long before he ever flew. In 1931 he started Ansett Roadways, linking Hamilton and Ballarat in Western Victoria with a passenger car service. He used the profits from this business to purchase his first plane, a DH Gipsy Moth. Ansett Roadways thrived to the point where it became a threat to the business of Victorian Railways, taking not only the passengers, but also the freight yield. So disgruntled was the Victorian

Government with Ansett, MPs passed a bill in parliament effectively shutting down young Reg’s business overnight. As the saying goes, opportunity arises out of misfortune. The heavy-handed action by the Victorian Government forced Ansett to move into aviation. Ansett Airways was officially launched on February 1, 1936 with daily flights between Melbourne and Hamilton. While Ansett Airways grew, the enterprising businessman never lost sight of the potential for moving passengers by road. World War II ended and Australia looked set for a period of strong growth in both wealth and population. The far-sighted transport mogul realised a government legislated

domestic airline duopoly, combined with the small aircraft at the time, would continue to make air travel unaffordable. He knew road transport would have to fill the gap. In 1945 Ansett bought out Pioneer, a road coach operation owned by A.A. Withers Bus Company in Melbourne. Determined to build up the company, he scoured the world for the best luxury coach he could find. He didn’t have to look too hard. Already in the US there was one company making a name for itself as the leader in post-war luxury road transport. In 1948 Ansett imported the first Flexible Clipper from the Flexible Company in Loudonville Ohio, USA.



It started with a sidecar

The American Clipper originated in 1912 when a motorcycle dealer called Hugo H. Young devised a flexible link to go between the bike and a sidecar. Before that, motorcycles were linked with a solid and unyielding connection, which was both dangerous and uncomfortable.



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Did you know?

In 1922 when mass production peaked, more than a million Model T Fords were built in one year for the first time. They sold for USD \$319 each, less than half of what they cost when first launched in 1909.

By 1919, the business had grown to become the world's biggest sidecar manufacturer. However, with the end of the first World War and the arrival of the mass produced Model T Ford, the company realised there wasn't much of a future in side cars and decided instead to move into motor coach building. Young's first wooden-framed coach came out in 1924 with designs being improved until 1937, when the first Clipper was manufactured. After WWII more streamlined Clippers followed with frames made entirely of steel. The first one was converted to right-hand drive in the Ansair workshops and Ansett began his first bus tour in 1949. A further 131 Ansair Flixible Clippers finished off by Ansair in the 1950s and put into the fleets of Ansett Pioneer as well as other tour companies.



Hamilton, Victoria



High bus rear

The coaches were the height of luxury for their day. Passengers loved them for their comfort, while drivers loved them because they were easy to drive. While the first prototype was fitted with a Buick straight eight engine, over the following decade, Ansair fitted diesels from Leyland, Cummins, Deutz and General Motors. Different layouts offered fixed seating for 33, or reclined seating for 29 with generous storage for luggage.

A low centre of gravity, good brakes, sliding windows and even a public address system made them ideal for road travel. The interior and exterior detail was something excitingly futuristic, especially for Australian travellers. There was great interest when Pioneer launched its first express service between Melbourne and Sydney in 1955 as well as express routes between Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide from 1962-66. Even after Ansair

stopped importing the Clippers, they remained in service up until the late 1970s and were modified with toilets, washrooms, air-conditioning and air suspension. Ansett Pioneer continued until 1992 when Sir Reg finally sold the business and even today some of the former jewels of his coach fleet are used around Australia for specialised tour services.



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High clipper bus interior



Coonabarabran, NSW

The Flixible Clipper Club of Australia was formed in 1983 and has since located 100 of the 131 Ansair adapted coaches. Some 45 of the originals are owned by members of the club, which meets monthly in Melbourne and is dedicated to retrieving, renovating and preserving the classic coaches. Club official Derek Birch says the major reason the group came to together was to share information on ways of stopping the buses rusting away. "We have about 80 members with a range of skills from panel beaters to painters, and they all help each other out with the repairs," he says. "Generally, the Clippers change hands within the club as all bar three or

four belong to members. But anyone can join, we're not restrictive!" All of the groups' vehicles are set-up as motorhomes, except for two, which are rented out for weddings and functions. Mr Birch and his wife use theirs as a personalised and retro motorhome. "I just love the appearance," he says. "They're an iconic vehicle with fantastic history." John Clune is another member of the club with a converted Clipper motorhome. Over the course of a year, he says his vehicle still clocks up over 20,000km. John says the Clippers are surprisingly fuel-efficient with their Airstream-like design plus, they drive and handle really well for a bus of their vintage. "I've even taken

mine across the beach on the sand," he remarks. "The weight distribution is fairly good but I don't think I'd do it again." Mr Clune's father was employed by Ansett Airways and he grew up watching his father working with the buses. "The clipper was quite outstanding for what it was at the time. When it first arrived in Sydney, people were lining the street to see it because it was like a space shuttle landing!" Mr Clune has now owned his own converted motorhome Clipper for around 35 years. "In the early stages, there wasn't a great deal of interest in them but nowadays they have become very popular with about 12 being directly imported from America in the past two years," he says.

“They’re wonderful vehicles, miles ahead of their time being the first of their kind with airbag suspension,” says Laurie.



Living the Rock star life

Flexible Clippers were made famous as the tour vehicle of choice for rock stars as far back as the 1950s, so it's hardly surprising they've become the most sought after motorhome by baby-boomer nomads.

Gold Coast couple Laurie Doyle and his wife, Troy, belong to the Club and own two Clippers; one of those being a recent US import. Along with two more Clipper owning club members, Bettina and Tony Phelan, the couple warmly welcomed ROAM to their Queensland property and let us look around their buses. Laurie's own father, Pat Doyle, worked for Pioneer,

first as a driver and then as an operations manager in Brisbane. "I loved the Clippers right from when I was first able to walk," Laurie says. When Troy and Laurie married in 1975 they purchased their first clipper. However, they had to sell it soon after to raise funds for their first home. They finally bought a second clipper in 1988.

"They're a labour of love just like the Sydney Harbour Bridge," says Mr Doyle. "They're wonderful vehicles, miles ahead of their time being the first of their kind with airbag suspension."

The Doyles

Laurie and Troy Doyle's Clipper is one of the 10 originals that were stretched from 33 to 37 feet to fit extra passengers. It has been all around Australia and was the family motorhome for their two children for many years, clocking over 800,000km. They completely remodelled the interior, complete with bunk beds, bathroom and kitchen. There's even sleeping quarters for their

beloved pooch Harry. "We get a lot of looks when driving around," Troy says. "It's not something you get used to." Their second Clipper is a recent import from Louisiana in the United States and is still in original condition. It was previously used as a church transport vehicle and the Doyles snapped it up the very first day it was advertised for sale online.



The Doyle's rave about the Clipper's ease of handling, saying it's easier to manoeuvre than their matching colour coordinated Volkswagen dual cab – another of Laurie's projects.



The Phelans



Bettina and Tony Phelan's Clipper has had quite a transformation. For years, it sat in a cow paddock, used as a horse and pig feeder. Laurie Doyle saw it, realised its potential and picked it up and sold it to his mate Tony for \$50. Bettina admits to being sceptical about the project at first, but after 13 months Tony had it looking pretty sharp. Now it's completely

refurbished, complete with a bed for dog Buttons. Tony says he loves everything about his Clipper. "From start to finish they're just a great part of Australian history," he says. Their favourite trip to date is an outback odyssey to Alice Springs, although they always look forward to the Clipper Club's annual Easter get-togethers. 🐾



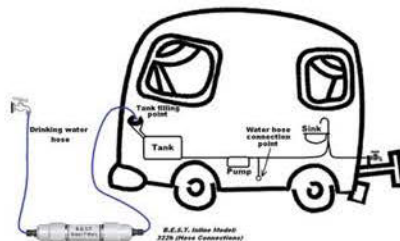
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