



The Ringelstetters' kitchenette includes a large refrigerator/freezer, regular and convection microwaves, a two-burner electric stove, a double integrated sink and a widescreen television.

► BY STEVEN MACKAY

super sleepers

More of the comforts of home showing up in custom sleepers

LARRY AND PAT MCCANN of Graff, Mo., rely on their 110-inch sleeper as they haul supplies for the U.S. Army.

Stopping anywhere to eat or sleep away from the truck can be difficult because they must maintain a constant watch on their load.

The McCanns cook full meals in their kitchenette. A combination shower/porta-potty takes care of hygiene. Final touches in the \$40,000 sleeper include a generator, a flat-screen TV and

a laptop with wireless Internet capability.

"People think this is a luxury for a truck, but it is a necessity for us," Pat McMann says, showing off the Indiana Custom Trucks-built sleeper on the back of a 1999 Peterbilt, leased to Landstar.

The McCanns are not alone in their dependence on a tricked-out sleeper. More buyers are getting features that used to be rare or, not too many years ago, unavailable in a sleeper.

In addition to the basics of bed, cabinets, clos-

et and table, sleepers have many add-ons, especially in team operations. A flat-screen TV with satellite hookup, DVD player and surround sound is common. It's not unusual to find sleepers with showers, toilets, kitchenettes and microwaves. In larger sleepers, you might even find single-unit washer-dryers, says Elwin Eash, one of ICT's founders. In light of growing anti-idling laws and rising fuel costs, generators and auxiliary heaters have become more cost-efficient; gensets are especially useful for the sleeper packed with electric appliances.

Eash says sleepers are not built to be exotic. "Some of the options might seem that way, but they really do save the trucker money if used properly," he says.

Given the 14-hour work provision of the current hours-of-service, downtime is more costly than ever. So when a driver visits a truck stop to shower, eat and do his laundry, he's not only spending money, he's losing time on the road and efficiency. Having a

sleeper with a full range of appliances, especially in team situations, can reduce truck stop time.

Until sleepers came on the market in the 1970s, truckers had to squeeze into a small compartment just behind their seat to snooze. The first sleepers were smaller than 60 inches. Their popularity grew in the 1980s as the array of options increased – first a wider bed, then a small refrigerator, then kitchen and bathroom accessories.

"In the early 1980s, the first showers appeared. We all giggled about that," says Rod Lantz of sleeper maker American Reliance Industries Co. "We thought, 'What would you do with a shower in a truck?' Nowadays you would have to be nuts if you did not put a shower in your sleeper."

ICT's sleepers range from 96 inches to roughly 230 inches – nearly 19 feet in length. The former cost in the \$30,000 range, while the 200-inch models surpass \$100,000. American Reliance's sleepers range

19 FEET OF COMFORT.

AND DON'T FORGET THE HIS AND HERS TELEVISIONS

IT'S OFTEN SAID that a trucker's cab is his home. That's true for team drivers Craig and Lisa Ringelstetter.

The couple recently purchased a custom-designed sleeper – at a whopping 230 inches – from Indiana

Custom Trucks. Of the \$275,000 they spent on their new 2006 Kenworth W900L, \$155,000 of that was for the sleeper. Save for three or so weeks a year, the Wisconsin couple lives in the three-room sleeper.

They haul military weapons and ammunition, equipment for NASA and civil defense materials. Because they haul sensitive loads, the Ringelstetters can't leave the truck unattended, so onboard accessories are a must. Features include a full-size shower, full bathroom, sofa bed, fold-down bed, kitchen with countertop stove, microwave and convection microwave, and washer/dryer unit.

Craig and Lisa Ringelstetter's 2006 Kenworth W900L, with a 230-inch sleeper, is known as Semi-Working Vacation. Rig, sleeper and trailer total 33,500 pounds. The couple is leased to Landstar, hauling mostly military equipment.



from 97 inches to 144 inches, the former starting at just under \$30,000. Prices from competitors, including Double Eagle Industries, are similar. Custom designs cost more than pre-built models.

Buyers' preferences vary by application, interests – even geography. Larry Miller's AA Truck Sleeper Inc., based in Fort Worth, Texas, for example, offers a heated floor. "A guy up in North Dakota called me and said he loved that heated floor," Miller says.

Miller's company also builds "doghouses" for the back of a cab or sleeper. The small compartment, normally 48 inches deep, is used to store such items as a motorcycle or ATV.

Mirrors on the ceilings of ICT sleepers are new, but they're not solely for decorative purposes. The unit – which comes in various designs – is used to spread the flow of air as it is blown out of the top-mounted AC unit, thus making the sleeper feel more homelike and cutting the noise level.

The Ringelstetters based their design on luxury RVs. Since the sleeper's completion last fall, the couple has been adjusting to a barrage of comments, questions and requests for tours via the CB and at fuel stations. Craig says it can take him more than an hour to fill his Kenworth because of discussions with the curious.

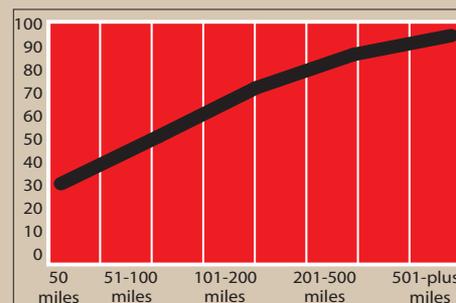
"They don't mean any harm, but at some point you got to tell people you can't let them in," he says.

The 48-foot reefer brings the total length of the vehicle to 84 feet. Even with the extra weight of the 19-foot sleeper, the Ringelstetters' rig gets 6.3 miles per gallon.

ICT's Bonnie Amaden says the Ringelstetters' sleeper is the largest her company, and to her knowledge any other American firm, has built.

The greatest payoff of the new sleeper, the Ringelstetters say, is the inclusion of a wide-screen television in the rear of the sleeper and a separate TV and satel-

PERCENTAGE OF OWNER-OPERATORS WITH SLEEPER CABS BY LENGTH OF HAUL



According to the 2005 *Overdrive Owner-Operator Behavior Report*, more than 84 percent of owner-operators have a sleeper. The longer the haul, the greater chance that the truck will have a compartment: More than 98 percent of haulers who average 500 miles per trip have sleepers. Owners cited cost and time savings as the key to owning a sleeper.

Source: 2005 *Overdrive Owner-Operator Behavior Report*

Lantz says he and his competitors keep a constant watch on each other's products. The facilities of ICT, American and Double Eagle – all industry leaders – are within a few miles of each other in Indiana.

Lantz says, "If you don't look up and see what's out there and what's new and available, you'll be left in the dust."



Photos courtesy Lisa Ringelstetter

The sleeper's bathroom features solid-surface countertops and a vacuum flush toilet, along with a separate shower. The sleeper also has a built-in kennel for the couple's dog, Cheddar.

lite line in the kitchenette.

"We're not fighting over television channels anymore," Craig says.