

Episode 244

Is tiny house living right for me? – with Jenna Spesard

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/244

Jenna: Back in 2013 I was living like an average mid-twenties American girl would, I suppose. I was in Los Angeles, living in a big apartment with lots of things and I was living paycheque to paycheque basically. I didn't see any light at the end of the tunnel that I was going to be able to purchase a home.

I came across the Tiny House Movement. There was an article in the Times Magazine, I believe, and I thought that looked really interesting. I've always been really interested in travel as well. But the downsizing part wasn't really something that I'd ever considered, and how it could free up my finances and change my life.

I decided one day, probably when I'd had enough of work, that I would just do that. I decided to build a tiny house and travel with it for one year and try to see if I could start a blog or write about my experiences and share my experiences. And that's what I did.

It took me a year to build the tiny house and somewhere along that line I quit my job and started the blog. Then I spent a year travelling with it in 2014 and 2015.

Ben: A couple of questions first of all as a traveller. You're much better sometimes not having any baggage with you as such, just a rucksack. Did you ever think of doing it that way or was this important that you had to have your own home as well?

Jenna: Well, I have done that. I've been backpacking around Europe and Australia at that point. Now I've gone to thirty-five countries backpacking. So, I had that experience already. But for me, I think I was also searching for a home. I knew Los Angeles wasn't going to be it and I needed something a little bit more stable.

Being someone who travels abroad so often, I didn't need a big home and I realised that. So, downsizing to a tiny house and one on

wheels in particular that could travel with me seemed like the perfect opportunity, the perfect match for me.

Ben: You've made it sound very simple as well, but there has to be costs involved, there's got to be a little bit of risk. What about the land it's on? Or is that the point that the land changes?

Jenna: Well, yes, there are some costs involved, of course. But it's more like the cost of a vehicle rather than the cost of an average home. Because the average home in the United States at least is hundreds-of-thousands of dollars. I spent about thirty-thousand dollars building my tiny house in materials. Obviously, I did the work so, I didn't have to pay anyone for labour. And that's it. So, it's just an expensive vehicle but it's one that you can live in comfortably, like a small cabin on wheels.

And it's not so simple as I've made it sound, I guess, because it was difficult learning how to build. I didn't have any experience. And it was difficult towing a ten-thousand pound tiny house around the country and trying to find places to park, other than campgrounds which can be expensive.

Ben: Technically, I have just built a house. I haven't actually done it myself. You've actually done it. So, what skills did you need? Were you following plans? How did it all happen?

Jenna: So, I bought some plans. There's a company called Tumbleweed Tiny Homes – now there's a bunch of different tiny house companies here in the US, but at the time that was pretty much the only one selling plans and trailers.

I bought the trailer which is the foundation of the house, and I bought the plans and I went to a workshop. And then I just went for it. I had plenty of help, trust me. I didn't do it all on my own. I had friends and family members and my boyfriend at the time did a lot of it. So, there was a lot of work that went into it and a lot of learning, but I definitely had help from a lot of different people.

Ben: What did you want from your house? I've seen you make hundreds of videos about people's tiny homes. But what did you want from yours?

Jenna: I say this often. I think that a lot of people have the wrong idea about what a house should do for them. In my experience, I see most people working for their homes. They are working paycheque to paycheque, their mortgage is more than forty percent of their income, and what I wanted for my house was it to work for me.

I didn't want to be a slave to my house. I wanted it to work for me in whatever fashion that might mean and whatever city I decided to plant myself in. I really wanted it to be a tool to better my life instead of something hindering my life.

Ben: What does that turn in to then?

Jenna: My house is basically a small cabin on wheels. It's a hundred-and-sixty-five square feet – I don't know that in metres if you'd like it in metric ...

Ben: That is so funny because I've just done another interview where we had exactly the same. It was going the other way around. I was doing the square metres and couldn't get it into feet. But we'll roll.

Jenna: It's very small is the point. It's about the size of a lot of people's entryways into their homes or their master bathrooms even.

So, it's got a tiny bathroom with a little composting toilet and a shower that's very small, only big enough to stand in. It's got a lofted bedroom. I can sit up in bed, that's about it. It's got a little multi-purpose area that's a tiny couch that turns into a guest bed or a dining room area, and a tiny kitchenette with a three-burner stove, a little sink, a tiny fridge and that's about it.

Ben: How much was it personalised or was it those initial plans, that basically this is the one that you've chosen, and you'll be living like that?

Jenna: It's extremely personalised in my opinion. The framing was mostly to plan but any of the interior walls are not structural so, I could move them anywhere I wanted, and so I did. I really did customise the interior. There have probably been dozens and dozens of houses built off that same plan now, and none of them look the same.

Ben: I don't know how you've made as many films as you have about your house. I feel like I know it fairly well. But when it's going out on the road, there's no risk of things falling apart? That seems a strange side of things that something timber frame can just go on the trailer and away you go.

Jenna: There are definitely some risks. The plans are engineered basically for earthquakes and hurricanes and everything else. These tiny houses, they're attached to the trailer in so many ways that they basically can't be parted.

I've seen tiny houses that have fallen down a hill in an accident and they're still connected to the trailer. There might be other damages, but they don't fall off the trailer and that's because of all of the overengineering that went into the plans. Everything's glued and screwed and strapped.

Ben: How warm and toasty are they? I think about this a lot. We're a podcast about ecological homes. And although I haven't gone for something this small myself, I can see the logic of everything scaling down. I often think that this is the most sustainable way to live. Would you agree with me on that?

Jenna: I don't know. There are many, many ways to live sustainably and I'm certain travelling is not one of them. But if you were to set the tiny house down and not move it, I think it's a very, very sustainable way to live. And I haven't been moving my tiny house hardly at all since 2015. So, now it's been very sustainable.

Ben: Are you living in it part-time, did I hear?

Jenna: I am. So, about a year ago I moved out of my tiny house. I became from a full-time tiny house dweller to a part-time tiny house dweller. Now I live in, I like to say, a mansion with my boyfriend. It's five-hundred square feet so, about two-and-a-half times the size of my tiny house.

Ben: But how did this go? How was the conversation here? How much was you, how much was him? Because he knows that if he's coming into this, that you're probably still going to want to keep it this way. How was that all ironed out or did you want more space too?

Jenna: Our first initial attraction I think was because he already had this five-hundred square foot home. And so, we both had something in common which was minimalism and trying to live within our means and not needing the big house with five bedrooms and a two-car garage and all that. So, that's where we connected.

Why did we decide on living in his house instead of mine? Well, it is a little bit bigger so, that's more manageable in some ways, but also location. His house is in Seattle, in the city, and it's pretty difficult to find parking for the tiny house in the city. And this is where he works so, it just made more sense to move into his home rather than mine when the time came to move in together.

So, my house is now our vacation home that we spend time in, and it's only about an hour away on a little island off the coast of Washington. So, it's quite nice.

Ben: That sounds very nice. One aspect of this then is that as you have more people with these tiny homes, you almost need different things. I can totally understand, if it was just me going into a tiny space, I think I would quite enjoy that. But what are the limitations of a tiny house as things expand, you get a boyfriend, as you think about a family?

Jenna: Tiny homes, when they're built, are sort of personalised for the person that is using them at the time. So, when you bring other people into it, it can be difficult. It's not like you can add on a bedroom. The trailer is a certain size and that's it. So, it can be difficult.

You can rearrange and people have done it, for sure. I wouldn't want to say that there are limitations too much because there are definitely people out there living in tiny homes with children. It's really personal whether you think you can do it or not and for me in particular, I think it would have been difficult to have children in my tiny house because of how I built it and the way I designed it.

Could I do it in another small home? Absolutely. And I will, I think, one day. But that one in particular, I think I'd need to rearrange quite a bit in order to fit other people in there.

Ben: I think you'd get some great videos if you tried to do the tiny house thing with the kids. Just trust me, they will wreck it, they will love it, they will be climbing on things and all the rest of it.

Jenna: And I might go insane.

Ben: Quite possibly. But it's obviously something that it sounds like you adapted to very quickly? I know it's a few years ago now, but someone looking to do this, is it just making the jump and then that's it, you adapt very quickly?

Jenna: I think humans do adapt very quickly, and I think I can say that even from my travels abroad with a backpack. You might put yourself out of your comfort zone, but within a few days you feel comfortable all of a sudden because you've gotten used to it.

I think it's the same with a different home. But I will say, if it's not designed in a way that works for you, it won't be easy to adapt. So, it's really important to design the house and to spend the time designing it so that it works and is personalised for your life and your lifestyle. Otherwise it's going to be really difficult for you to transition into a small space.

Ben: Did you have any niggles with yours when you first moved in, and were they things that you could change or that you just had to live with?

Jenna: What are niggles?

Ben: Is that a UK word? Did you have any problems or anything that you hadn't foreseen? We always find these words when we do interviews.

Jenna: Well, I was giving you a little bit of a hard time. No, I don't think I did have any problems or niggles. I was just ready by the time I moved in because it took me a year to build it and was not expecting it to take that long to build a tiny house. So, I was antsy to move in, in some ways, and excited.

I had to give up some things that I missed though, like at the time I was learning how to play piano. I had been in piano lessons for a couple of years and I just couldn't figure out a way to fit a piano in my tiny house. That was sort of sad. But other than that, not too much.

Ben: You must find yourself going out of the house a bit more, is that right? Or just you're reading a book in there. You'd think that the small space, you don't have the possessions so you're not going to be probably watching loads of TV or anything like that. It's just pretty basic. So, you've got to get out?

Jenna: Right. There's a couple of things about a tiny house that open your mind to stuff like that, about living outside of your home. One is, if you don't, you're probably going to get what we call cabin fever which is just antsy, bored and miserable in some ways.

Ben: Have you had that?

Jenna: Oh, yes definitely. On days when I'm snowed in, which has happened, and I can't really leave or go too far, I can't drive anywhere, then I very much get cabin fever. Especially because it's just me and my dog.

But also, what it made me realise is that as a community, we don't really rely on each other anymore. We feel like we have to have all of our own space and our own things and it's really put up dividers between us. For instance, just doing laundry, most people here have their own washer and dryer. They don't need to go to the laundromat. But if you live in a tiny house, most likely you're going to a laundromat. Or a lot of people will have a home gym or at least some weights or workout area. There's nowhere to workout in a tiny

house. So, if you wanted to go do some exercise, you need to go to the gym or get outside.

So, just realising those few things that you need to do more often when living in a small space, it makes you realise I'm more social now because I have to be out of my house. I have to go to the grocery store two or three times a week rather than once a month.

Ben: All these things that you don't think about. Are there any other possessions that were important to get into the house? There are obviously lots that you have to leave behind. You've got to rationalise your wardrobe; probably loads of things I'm not even thinking about. What is essential to come with you into the house?

Jenna: It's very personal to the person. I don't have that much. I need my computer to work from home. It's a little laptop. I liked having a snowboard and some sort of musical instrument. So, I went from a piano down to a ukulele – much more manageable in size. And then a few wardrobe items.

But other than that, there's not a whole lot of things, actual possessions, that I needed. More appliances that I need to live day-to-day, like kitchen appliances and things like that. But as far as possessions, there's not too much. I'm not connected to that many things. A lot of it is online nowadays, photographs and whatnot, so I don't need to have photo albums. And books I can have on my Kindle so, I don't need to have a bunch of books either. Really, as far as tangible possessions, there aren't too many.

Ben: I did watch one of the videos of you doing a recipe, which I'm sure isn't your day-to-day, but you cooked something up in your tiny house. What do you do normally? It didn't seem – either you're a noodles girl, or cornflakes or something like that. How do you live normally? Because that looked like a bit too much, a full-on once a month thing.

Jenna: Yes. That was fun, just for a video. But I make food like I live, I suppose. Simple. Something, a meat, a protein and a veggie. So, it takes me twenty minutes and I can do it all in one pan. I think I'm an okay cook but I'm definitely not a chef. I don't spend hours cooking. I don't even have an oven in my tiny house because I don't like to bake. So, I do pretty much everything on the stove.

Ben: What are the downsides then? We've talked about the big upside of finances, getting everything on track and for better or for worse, being able to move around is quite exciting too.

Jenna: Of course, there are downsides to everything. Having people over can be difficult because there's just not enough space, I don't have enough dishes. Explaining the oddities of my house like the composting toilet can be difficult.

Ben: That's quite an interesting one to have in a tiny house, is it not? Or is it a good thing? I'm just thinking, when I've been in mobile home type things before, they've been the chemical toilets. So, maybe it is good to get away from that. But when you've got a compost toilet, you've got to throw sawdust down there and you've got to get rid of it all at the end, haven't you?

Jenna: Yes. Actually, speaking of sustainability, it's the way to go.

Ben: But not normally inside. You normally have it outside.

Jenna: No, it is. It's very popular here, actually. In the Tiny House Movement, I would say ninety percent of tiny houses have a manufactured composting toilet. It's not a bucket with sawdust, it's a thousand dollar toilet, more expensive than a chemical toilet by far. It uses coconut core and you only have to dump it every couple of months rather than every week like you do with a chemical toilet. It's actually really nice.

Ben: What about family then? When you said you were going to do this, what did they think?

Jenna: My dad is very pragmatic so, he had some problems with it. I had gone to college, even grad school, and worked towards a job that I had been working at for a few years. He thought it was a mistake for me to quit that job, start an entirely new chapter and leave Los Angeles. But I think I've turned him around. He's definitely on my side now.

Ben: Well done.

Jenna: Yeah. But my mum's always been on board. She's sort of a hippy at heart.

Ben: I bet she loved it then. Tell me about you then now. Where are you on this journey? You've proved you can live in a tiny house, you've travelled around a bit. Maybe that's not what's happening now but you've done very well with your YouTube channel in terms of creating all this content. So, where is it going? Because I'm sure you feel you've probably told all the tiny house stories.

Jenna: Amazingly enough, the channel just keeps growing and people want more and more and more. I'll keep making them as long as

people want them. And I'm still interested in it and I'm trying to branch off as well and make videos about other things such as travel and sustainable lifestyles.

But for me, the next step is probably to find a more traditional home, but not a large one. So, a small home that I can make into more of a permanent home that I can settle down in and have a family in. That's probably the next step for me and I'll be covering that, no doubt, on YouTube and finding ways to make space saving furniture items in a home that's maybe seven-hundred square feet that can fit quite a few people in it.

So, we'll see. That's the next step though.

Ben: And at that stage then, is it easy to find a good location to be? I'm assuming you're not on wheels anymore?

Jenna: Right. Yes, it's easier, but housing in the United States today is just getting larger and larger. So, whenever I look, which I've only just started, for small houses, they don't really exist. So, I feel like I'd have to build one. And I'd want to as well, to make it personalised and the most efficient. I'd want to put in new green practices into the home as well – solar and things like that. So, that might be the next adventure for me and the next thing that I sort of cover.

I think it will hit home, if you will, with more people because not everyone's going to live in a tiny house, but some people might be interested in downsizing and minimising a little bit and living in a small home, a home that's a third of the size of the traditional home in the United States.

Ben: And then maybe finally, just on your YouTube channel again, what videos are you most proud of?

Jenna: My most popular video is actually about me talking about the downsides of living in a tiny house. I wouldn't say I'm proud of that video necessarily.

Ben: Why did you make it?

Jenna: I was sort of feeling like I had done a lot of positivity and I wanted to also be real. So, I needed to talk also about the cons. I'd talked a lot about the pros of living small, and so I wanted to also just tell people, in my years of living small, what I didn't like about it.

It's mostly just me talking to the camera and I didn't expect it to get, I don't know how many it has now, over five-million views, but it's

gone really viral. But it didn't take a whole lot of creative filmmaking. It's just me being real on camera.

So, I'm proud of the views for that video, but if I were to say one video or a type of video that I am proud of, it would probably be more the videos about other people living small. Because I find every person I meet that's in this movement is inspirational in some way and I really just like to tell their story, how they decided to downsize, and the clever things that they're doing in their house to make it work. I find those stories to be the most interesting and I'm most proud of.

Ben: Do you think there are traits of those sorts of people?

Jenna: Yes, definitely. You have to be open-minded for sure, because you're not going to be doing the typical American dream. And you have to be ready for some scrutiny because people out there are going to think that you're strange because you don't want that big house and you don't want to buy in to the materialistic lifestyle that is the norm.

So, I would say the commonality would be someone who's ready to live outside the box.

Ben: Jenna, it's been lovely to catch up with you. Thank you so much for your time and we'll maybe chat again sometime, if you're travelling around the world?

Jenna: For sure. Thank you having me.