



Maximizing A Downsize

by Victoria Thomas

Historically, size-obsessed America might as well have been Texas: large and in charge, from road-hogging land-yachts like the 1973 Imperial LeBaron (measuring 235.3 inches / 5.98 meters long) to jumbo sodas so embarrassingly humungous that New York Mayor Bloomberg once tried to ban the sale of 32-oz beverages.

Guzzling Big Gulps proved too lucrative to outlaw, and gas-guzzling autos proved too toxic and expensive to last. So now we find ourselves in the post-“Supersize Me” era, where years of supply-chain hiccups, the cost of fuel, and the cost of housing conspire to move us into smaller spaces.



The key to enjoying a downsize is to not view it in terms of loss. You’re not losing floorspace, you’re gaining focus. In the American culture of too-muchness, this behavioral shift is an opportunity to step up and step out of a lot of bad habits that have secretly been weighing you down for years. The #vanlife phenom of the last few, along with the advent of the tiny house, have put micro-minimalism on the world’s radar as an option. Less space demands less stuff, and less stuff means more mobility and more possibilities. Think of it: you’re invited to a wedding in Dubai and you decide to go. You know that you’ve got a hot-pink silk suit that perfect for the occasion, because you’ve whittled your wardrobe down to one rack and basic black – except for the hot pink suit. See how easy?

And here’s another plus: no space for overnight guests, unless they’re of a certain kind. Meaning that the needy college chum who’s passing through your town (again) from Buffalo – you know, the one you actually changed your phone-number to ditch? – will just need to find accommodations elsewhere. And that’s a shame.

The fact is, a downsize can be an absolute upgrade. It’s the difference between gold-plate and 24-karat solid gold. Your assets are curated and concentrated, bumping up that intangible thing called quality of life. Here’s how it’s done:

USE THAT BALCONY OR PATIO. If you’ve got a piece of private outdoor space big enough for a folding chair, BOOR, it’s a lounge, a place to read the Sunday paper, practice your yodeling or sleep off a hangover. Invest in a comfortable, padded seat with waterproof upholstery, and create mystique with an airy-looking folding screen.

UPLIFT. Look up. Remember that our recent ancestors lived in the trees, so take a vertical perspective versus the ranch-style horizontal spread. A skylight (including the modern tube skylights) in the kitchen, bedroom or bath creates a luminous environment that seems larger and more deluxe, and will prevent your compact space from feeling like a closet. Hanging plants (philodendron, pothos, ferns) have a similar effect, elevating perception. Combine – skylight and hanging garden – for an especially luxurious vibe if you have a classic clawfoot bathtub and retro subway-tile floor (lucky you).

ITS ALL ABOUT THE EDIT. Marie Kondo is right, to a point. Living small invites an astronaut-pirate-vibe. ARRRR, matey! You’ll start to love the process of stripping down your ballast to keep your craft sleek and see-worthy. But this is not to say that you can’t be a collector. The Japanese, who have prized elegant austerity for millennia and now live in the world’s smallest urban spaces, are known to be avid collectors. But here’s the thing: they tend to collect small, precious things that can fit in a pocket, like a netsuke carved from a peach-pit. You’re an adult now (aren’t you)? Do you really still need that Star Trek lunchbox? Or that ratty Iron Maiden tee-shirt? Pick one, sell the other on eBay.

THINK TWICE BEFORE YOU WHITE-WASH. Common wisdom says to paint all the walls white to make a space look bigger. It’s your call, but we’re not convinced. Besides, isn’t the IKEA esthetic a bit... bleak? Color is completely subjective, but in general, a robin’s egg blue, lemon yellow, or even tangerine wall tends to make more people neurologically happier than bone, cream, ivory, gray or beige. We do advise against midnight blue or black walls, unless of course you’re going for that death-metal dungeon thing. You do you. Boo.

FORGET THE MIRRORS. This is not the Playboy Mansion. Remarkably, decorating magazines still advise placing mirrors on walls to make a space look bigger. Really? Okay, depending on placement, there may be feng shui benefits (consult an expert). But mirrors on the walls of a tiny pad will simply make you feel like you’re living in an airplane bathroom.

TEAR OFF AS MANY DOORS AS YOU DARE. Seriously, Americans are door-happy. Maybe we think it makes our houses fancier, as if we’re living in a Louis XV chateau. Interior doors are ridiculous, especially in a small space. They add bulk and mass where you don’t need it, and create a feeling of claustrophobia. The one exception is, of course, the portal to the loo, which needs to be engineered to withstand a Viking raid. The others, including closet doors, are really debatable. Start browsing for groovy tapestries, bamboo or beaded curtains and textiles to hang in doorways, depending upon whether your look is Topanga, Tiki, or tech. And let the breeze blow through.

THEN TEAR OUT YOUR KITCHEN CABINETS. Yes, really. Especially if they’re faux wood-grain. Chances are, if you’re opting for a small space, including your parents’ converted garage, there’s only one, maybe two of you, and maybe a pet. Okay, if you’re Swedish, maybe a toddler, too, but really, you have to draw the line somewhere. Meaning that most likely, you won’t be cooking Bourdain-esque banquets in your own digs. Kitchen cabinets are generally hideous, and a hideous waste of space. Stuff gets shoved way in the back, and you can never find a clean tea-towel when you need it.



Ripping those giant particle-board boxes off your walls, especially if you’re cooking in a skimmy, galley-style kitchen, makes everything better. Ruthlessly optimize your kitchen gear, meaning throw out that scratched, no-stick frying pan with the wobbly handle that you inherited when your brother moved to Boston, and that cheap, sad coffeemaker that you nicked from your last temp gig. Once the cabinets are out, and the walls are sanded and painted, get a badass magnetic knife bar to keep your cutlery on display and ready for action. Both functional and impressive.

GO EURO.

Donate appliances you never use, or used once, or have never even opened (read: rice-cooker, waffle-maker, fondue set from Aunt Laureen, circa Christmas 2017). And here’s a prime opportunity to class up the joint. One by one, donate or discard the crappy plastic housewares you’ve bought at Target, and replace with something efficient, iconic, and sexy. Case in point: get yourself a Bialetti stovetop espresso maker. Just like in every Fellini movie. This 8-sided kitchen essential made from aluminum or steel is literally revered in Italy as a national cultural treasure. It’s way cooler than your Keurig, and better for the environment (no plastic, no electricity needed - you can literally use it on a campfire).

And remember: there’s no “X” in espresso, or in the Italian alphabet, period, because “X” is a harsh, ugly sound to music-loving Italian ears. Italians have literally vetoed the “X” from their language because it doesn’t make them happy. This is relevant since we’re talking about minimum waste, maximum joy, to quote Sade. Less is not more, and it’s not a matter of making do with less. It’s a matter of choosing and relishing what’s good, celebrating what’s great, cherishing what’s more delicious and more fabulous than all the rest.