



RIDING ALONG ON A CARAVEL

Immediately after the NEC show, the new Buccaneer Caravel was made available to MMM for its first test outing. Lindsay Porter took it for a 'spin'



The distinctive rear end of the Buccaneer on board Le Shuttle, which it drove into easily.

It's not all fun, y'know, taking an expensive motorcaravan for test - with only ten miles on the clock. The delight that comes from using around £35 000 worth of machinery fresh out of the wrapping paper is tempered by the knowledge that vehicles in general, and leisure vehicles in particular, are at their most trouble-prone when they're new. In the event, a 600-odd mile trip through the Channel Tunnel and into the Boulogne area gave nothing that could be described as trouble, though there were the inevitable niggles.

Since the tunnel opened for business, Shan (my wife) and I have never gone to

France by any other route. This time we started the test in February, so we took no persuading to leave the cold and stormy seas well alone, thank you very much! The only question relevant to this test would be what would the extra bulk of the new Caravel be like when it came to guiding it into the shiny cylinder of Eurotunnel coaches? Our VW Caravelle slides in as easily as driving down the road, but would this much larger Ford-based Caravel be any different? In the event, it was so light to drive and so easy to place that the big Ford almost matched our Transporter for ease of manoeuvrability.

It's interesting that the new Ford Transit is the base vehicle chosen by Explorer Group for this prestigious model. To be honest, placing the word 'prestige' in the same universe as the old Transit's engine was like talking about haute cuisine and motorway services in the same sentence - utterly ridiculous. But the new Transit is different.

First, the road holding - Ford now turn out passenger cars with what is widely regarded as some of the best suspension in the business. Could this expertise be finding its way through to their commercial vehicles? The Caravel certainly suggests that it is. The

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handling is flat and smooth, with a complete absence of suspension crash over the worst of UK B-roads, and the French D-variety.

Secondly, driver and passenger comfort - the cab seats each have a single armrest and are soft but back-achingly hollow in shape. Seat adjustments seem infinite, though, while steering wheel adjustment is non-existent.

The gearchange was sweet, after the first few miles, and the other controls seemed forgettably good. But the kph markings on the speedo were useless. The side mirrors are two-part panoramic types: quite superb.

Everything falls nicely to hand, as we have come to expect from Ford. What a shame that not everything falls quite so nicely to foot! The passenger can slide easily between seat and gear stick when making a move into the living area. But for drivers, especially those like me with largish clodhoppers, there's a bit of an obstacle course to overcome. Not a mega problem, but mildly irritating, nonetheless.

In less of a pre-production vehicle, it would also have been irritating that the central locking didn't work properly, nor the Keen alarm, nor the reversing sensor. The Ford immobiliser/alarm worked though. It worked noisily, accidentally and embarrassingly well. We 'tested' it several times!

Then there's the general dynamics of



Looking forwards we see the nearside settee with dinette opposite.



The gearchange was sweet, after the first few miles, and the other controls seemed forgettably good.



The clip-on table stores in the wardrobe when necessary. The rail on the wall could annoy when you're in bed at night.



The view from the cab shows us the rear kitchen with bathroom on the left and caravan door on the right.

driving the thing. In spite of its considerable bulk, piloting the Caravel couldn't be easier. I mentioned the excellent, part-panoramic side mirrors earlier, but are they enough? Lorry drivers do without direct rear vision in many cases, but the leisure driver, in my opinion, needs all the help he or she can get. I would always prefer to drive a vehicle with a functioning interior mirror. The Buccaneer Caravel almost manages it, but not quite. If it was up to me, I'd make the rear window as low (and as large) as possible. At the moment, you can just see the top half of an artic's cab when it's behind you. I'd also prefer the side windows to be a touch lower, so that the driver can more easily see what's coming at angled road junctions.

On the motorway at 70, there's just a bit of a 'tug' as you go past a big truck, as you might expect. But the Caravel's aerodynamics, plus that excellent Ford suspension, makes the vehicle very stable at higher cruising speeds. What's more, there's less wind noise than in many cars. Most of the time we cruised the motorway at 60 - easy, comfortable and economical. We'd have been able to listen to a CD on the good quality dash-mounted unit, no trouble. Except we forgot them. Never mind - the radio is excellent.

Finally, on the subject of the base vehicle,

there's that new Ford Transit engine. The old one was not just noisy; it was amazingly noisy! Ford's old Transit was the only van that listed ear defenders on its options list. The new DuraTorq engine is so much better. It still hums a bit of a diesel tune, but it's up there with existing Fiat and Volkswagen units. It's still behind the refinement of BMW's five-pot diesel car engine, but let's not quibble.

The DuraTorq engine has plenty of torque from about 1500 rpm, enough power for easy 70 mph cruising, and enough frugality for 25 mpg, even with a tight, brand-new engine. And the more I drove it, the more I liked it. After it's fully run in, this new engine should be a cracker.

The Yorkshire national anthem

According to Porter Publishing's Yorkshire born-and-bred accountant, Colin Hunt, the Yorkshire anthem goes (choose your own tune, on a rising note at the end) - 'how much!'

First, a bee in my bonnet. If you bought a pair of shoes for the price shown on the label, and were then told to pay another couple of pounds for the cost of delivering the shoes to the shop, would you feel cross? Of course you would, because you'd expect the cost of delivery to be included in the price, along with all the other costs involved in making and selling shoes. So, how do car, caravan and motorcaravan manufacturers get away with charging vast sums for what ought, properly, to be included in a total price? Remember - delivery is not to you, it's to the dealer (ie the shop).

But the Buccaneer Caravel costs £32 950 on the road (yes, a drive-away price). You'll still have to negotiate with the dealer to get the essential gas cylinders included, though. (We are told that motorcaravan manufacturers who are also SMMT members have agreed among themselves to quote on the road prices from now on. Hopefully this will prompt a 100 per cent move to a fairer and clearer pricing policy. Ed)

The best part of £35 000 is a lot of money. Perhaps not so expensive when you realise that the dearest Range Rover, with all accessories, costs over £100 000 and that the same £35 000 buys a secondhand Jaguar XK8, for instance. Compared to these the Caravel's price looks good.

Consider also, that the list price of a long wheelbase Ford Transit chassis cab is £19 581 - before you add the body and interior - then it starts to look like a very good deal indeed. Granted, Explorer Group don't pay list price (or anything like it) for their Fords, but the Caravel still seems good value, even to a Yorkshireman.

Ambience

Pull down the manual Omni-Step (an electric step would seem more appropriate), enter the caravan door near the rear of the vehicle and you'll see the kitchen area on your right, against the rear wall, and the washroom, wardrobe and Trumatic space heater more or less dead ahead. Turn to your left, and there's a bench seat along the left-hand wall and a pair of double dinette seats with large table to your right.

By day, you'll see that the walls are dominated by curved-edge maple doors and matching wall panelling, with eight elegant aircraft-locker-style cupboards. The carpets, nicely fitted and edge-bound, press-stud out for easy cleaning. The large windows and Heki sunroof combine with the toning, modern décor (based on fawn, gold and russet colours) to provide the 'living room' with a spacious, aesthetically-pleasing ambience.

Explorer's Marketing Director, Michael



One of the curved chrome overhead locker door handles. Very smart!



There are eight of these aircraft-locker-style cupboards. Catches are not burstproof, which could cause spillage in a road accident.



There is just room for a six-footer to shower comfortably.



Hooray for a manually flushing Thetford cassette loo.

Hold, and Chief Designer, Colin Appleby, spotted a design feature in luxury boats that the company has now managed to incorporate into some of its caravans and motorcaravans. So, by night, there's a surprise in store. Set into the tops of the high-level lockers are hidden lights supplying soft, all-surrounding illumination to the interior. It not only looks wonderful, but it also eliminates dazzle - though Explorer Group are by no means the first to use this style of illumination in a motorhome. There are also conventional lights fitted into the ceiling for those evenings when you're running on leisure

battery power only.

Having gone to so much trouble with the interior lights, Explorer Group seem to have overlooked both exterior lights and interior sockets.

I'm typing this on a palm-top computer plugged into one of only two 13A sockets in the 'van. I think you need more than two.

Last night when the gas ran out (it was cold last night), I'd have shaken an Explorer Group electrical fitter warmly by the hand if I'd been able to see what I was doing as I changed the cylinder. (Always assuming that he'd been passing by, in the middle of the French countryside, in March, in the snow, at two in the morning.)

Washroom

There's just room for a six-footer like me to shower comfortably, but if the pesky shelf over the window had been left off, I'd have been more comfortable. The swivel-bowl Thetford cassette loo is fine and (hooray!) the flushing pump is manual, not battery powered. What a daft idea that was - we don't have them in our homes, do we? "See you later, dear - just popping down to B&Q to buy some batteries so that I can flush the loo." Like I say, daft.

Storage space in the washroom is impressive. No it's not; it's downright intimidating. How could you ever find enough washroom stuff to put in there?

Storage

Storage capacity, in general, is pretty good -



Before starting to pack, we explored storage space. This is one of the slatted under-bed areas - some have drop-down doors at the front.

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When cooking, it is possible to turn and use the small extra work surface provided over the fridge.

though, in part, this has been achieved by placing the fresh water tank underneath (where it is more exposed to freezing). Shan and I are notorious for travelling heavy - books, magazines, cameras and computers all add to clutter of the you-never-know-if-you'll-need-this variety. Yet even Shan was reduced to spreading stuff about to use the space up, and two of the under-seat lockers didn't even get filled with French booze. For a couple making a month-long trip to Spain there would be ample room.

At the rear is a large non-locking trunk (why no lock?) and there's a solid, sliding steel locker (with flimsy lock!) in the side of the 'van.

Plus the kitchen sink

The cooking area contains a stylish four-burner hob, grill and oven in a modern, attractive steel-grey housing with ample storage beneath. Those curved, chromed cooker door handles (the ones that elegantly match the overhead locker door handles) are used, while the small stainless steel sink and drainer are fitted with an excellent, swivelling, single-handle tap (similar to the one shared by

both washroom basin and shower). All very plush, though restricted for work surface area.

Unfortunately, if the grill door is down, you can't open the washroom door without damaging its veneered surface - more thought needed there.

Sleeping arrangements

There's a double bed on the driver's side, a single bed parallel to it and a 'crow's-nest' bed over the cab. Unfortunately, there's the usual seat shape trade-off. The soft, comfortable seat bases with sloping under-thigh support become mountains, valleys and ravines when you're awake in the middle of the night.

Purely in the interest of scientific experiment, I spent a night aloft. The great thing about the overcab bed was that I woke up without the usual list of ailments - sore ribs, inexplicable bunch of cotton buds up each nostril and odd dreams about being suffocated with a large plastic bag. The downside, according to my wife, was that she was unable to apply any one of the 47 secret-but-effective, stop-husband-snoring remedies that she refuses to divulge, even to me. The



The latest Electrolux PowerFridge offers an impressive 86 litres of capacity, with a 12-litre freezer compartment.

point is, though, that with five-up, you'd have to be mighty tolerant of each other's sleeping habits. I also looked with deep suspicion at the prong-shaped switches on the recessed lights, but they didn't get me!

Of course, although the Caravel is billed as being five berths, it couldn't be, unless one person travelled by car, because there are only four seats with restraint belts. Which, strange though it may seem, leads on to a final thought on the beds.

The dinette pulls out to make a rather narrow double bed, but with little room between beds. Or, it stays put to make a single. If you leave the forward-facing seat backrest in place, you have a bed length of just over 5ft 6in. If you remove it, you gain over 6ft of bed length, but stub your toes on the padded (but hard and encroaching) seat belt support bar. Or so my wife tells me. I was tucked safely out of the way in the crow's-nest!

And finally

It should be remembered that the Caravel we tested was, we were told, Explorer's own pre-production 'mule'. It looked near perfect,



▲ To maximise bed space, a wing slides out from the end of each seat base.

◀ All the cushions go to make a large double bed, and a single, with virtually no room between. Note the undulations in the double bed.



As I suspect so many will do, we used the over-cab area for storage of lightweight items.



Explorer Group love the graphics on the Caravel and it certainly proved to be a head-turner. The reversing lights set into each side of the body were brilliant - literally!

although the presence of minor glitches showed that this wasn't what we would expect of a full production model.

We felt that a sense of quality pervaded the whole structure. Cabinetwork seemed balanced between light weight and strength;

hinges were robust; fabric of high quality.

You do need to ask yourself whether you would ever want to use this kind of luxury for shoe-horning five-up. Some will say not, others may disagree. For yet another section of the community five-up won't even be an

option, but the flexibility of the Caravel layout may be an enticement to purchase.

And for those who want this format, the Caravel /Transit combination would make a luxurious, modern choice, free of chintzy frills, and with a great deal of practicality. □



Auchan hypermarket, near Boulogne, is huge! So is the Caravel, compared to a car, but there are always two parking spaces at the furthest end of the car park.

In brief

Base vehicle: Ford Transit LWB chassis cab
Engine type: 2.4-litre direct-injection turbo-diesel
Output: 88kW (120 bhp) @ 4000 rpm
Gearbox & drive: Five-speed manual gearbox, rear-wheel drive
Make and model: Buccaneer Caravel
Body type & construction: Bonded sandwich construction body with GRP side skirts, GRP luton, GRP rear panel
Conversion NCC approved: Yes
Electrical equipment: Mains hook-up with RCD, auxiliary battery, two 13 amp sockets, one TV co-axial aerial socket
Lighting: Ceiling-mounted circular halogen lights, recessed 12V downlighters individually switched, eyeball reading lights
Cooking facilities: Combination cooker, four-burner hob with splashguards, grill, oven, built-in storage beneath
Refrigerator: Electrolux RM6291 Powerfridge, 86-litre with 12-litre freezer compartment, electronic ignition
Water heater: Truma Ultrastore gas/230V boiler
Fresh water tank: 72 litres (15.8 gallons), underfloor
Waste water tank: 56 litres (12.3 gallons),

underfloor

Space heating: Truma Ultraheat gas/230V blown-air system

Gas locker capacity: Two 6kg/7kg cylinders

Rear restraints: Two lap and diagonal inertia reel seat belts

Additional features: Anti-lock brakes; driver and passenger airbags; Ford vehicle alarm; Keen caravan alarm; reversing proximity sensor; electric front windows with one-touch on driver's side; removable carpets with vinyl floor covering beneath; tachometer; swivel cassette toilet; radio/CD player with front and rear speakers; blinds/flyscreens for all windows including Heki sunroof; fire extinguisher and fire blanket

Dimensions

(all dimensions quoted are manufacturer's figures)

Overall length: 6.30m (20ft 8in)

Overall width: 2.36m (7ft 9in)

Overall height: 3.09m (10ft. 2in)

Interior height: 2.11m (6ft 11in) maximum

Bed dimensions

Overcab bed:
2.09m x 1.17m (6ft 10in x 3ft 10in)

Lower double:
1.87m x 1.12m (6ft 1in x 3ft 8in)

Nearside single:

1.87m x 0.65m (6ft 1in x 2ft 1.5in)

Max authorised weight: 3500kg

Load capacity: 612 kg

Price

Standard model: £32 950 (on the road)

Buccaneer Caravel kindly supplied for evaluation by:

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