

Airstream Bambi 422



► PRICE £29,950 ► www.airstreameuropa.co.uk

AT A GLANCE: It weighs only 1080kg, it's built to last for decades - and it's just about the most eye-catching thing on the road...

TEST VAL CHAPMAN | PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN CHAPMAN

TOWMATCH C



The separate shower is simply enormous



Stunningly simple in style, this L-shaped lounge is surprisingly spacious for a small caravan



The test Bambi on the shores of Derwentwater, at the Camping and Caravanning Club's Keswick site



Your view from the shower room door...

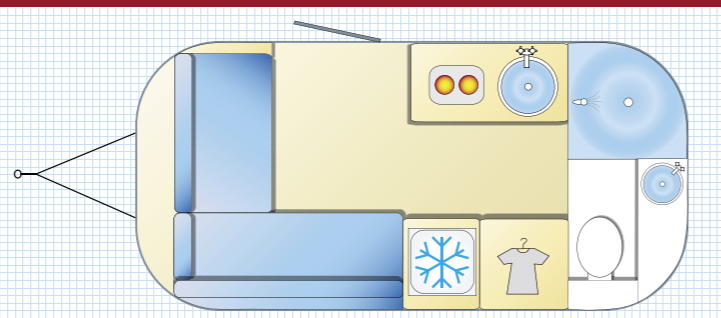
FOR eight decades Airstream has enjoyed adventure icon status in America. And it might surprise you to know that 70 per cent of all Airstreams built are still in use today.

For the last four years they've been on sale in Europe, too - and the latest launch for this side of the Atlantic, the Bambi, now gives the range its first small two-berth model.

Latest it may be for the European Airstream range - but the first Bambis were built in the States in 1961. Today's Bambi, from Airstream Europe based in Cumbria, is a very similar layout to the original.

► LAYOUT IN A NUTSHELL

- L-shaped lounge
- End washroom with shower
- Offside kitchen with wardrobe and TV position opposite



Aircraft looks - and comfort

The Airstream's silver brushed aluminium riveted body isn't the only thing that sets it apart from all other touring vehicles. It's the name. Airstream Europe is keen to make sure we get the language right. An Airstream is not a caravan. It's a "towed trailer". Difference One. Its slippery-smooth shape gives it a "20 per cent aerodynamic advantage" over a caravan. Difference Two.

More differences: the structure is "semi-monocoque" - that's two layers of aluminium bonded with fibre wood insulation. And the body is hand riveted to a frame.

There's even a difference in the type of toilet. It's a Dometic vacuum flush type. It doesn't need chemical; it's more akin to

aircraft systems than caravans.

There are, though, bits of this Airstream that put it firmly into caravan category. The Bambi is the only Airstream to have conventional caravan double-glazed polyplastic windows, with pleated blinds and flyscreens. All other Airstream models have toughened safety glass windows. You have a BPW chassis with Winterhoff stabiliser hitch, Heki rooflight, Whale water system with 45-litre in-board water tank... the fridge is Dometic. The oven is Smev, the extractor is Omnivent, the aerial is Status... Starting to sound more European?

Now take a look at the layout. Cleverly, it squeezes an end-washroom two-berth into just 4.14metres. How? The lounge, from

which the double bed is made, is L-shaped. There's plenty of floor space - and the central freestanding monopod table is easy to pick up and use outside whenever you wish.

Now for the guided tour: The door is offside, alongside the kitchen. The fridge is opposite, with a top ideally placed for your television. The washroom gives you a separate shower, a circular steel washbasin set into a white surface that stretches the full width of the little room. Under this is a large cupboard... Sounds almost conventional in caravan layout terms.

Now look at the minimalist styling. Stark red upholstery, white furniture, grey floor, metal-effect roller blinds on the wall lockers, bold red and black cushions; two have stripes, a third

has a big flower in its centre - that's your only pattern anywhere in the styling.

Stark styling is a feature of all five Airstream models but we think the stunning red, white and grey theme makes the Bambi the best-dressed and most appealing of the range. It's not just the décor that makes the Bambi different, of course. Inside, you feel, as well as see, the effect of the Airstream's curved shape. It cocoons you in a cosy environment. Cosy, maybe, but the amount of floorspace in such a small caravan is amazing.

That goes for the washroom, too. You have curved styling in here, too; this time it's stainless steel panels to roof and wall - just to remind you even when you're in the shower that you're holidaying in a unit (not a caravan!) that's like nothing else.

Equipment includes a water tank level indicator, Alde heating with programmable timer, fly blinds, door blind - and (a £900 optional extra) pull-out awning made by a company called Zip-Dee - now there's an American name if ever there is one!

While you're admiring the awning that's incredibly easy to pull out and stow away, you'll notice the chunky, wide door, on enormous hinges that are borrowed from aircraft design - as, of course, is the entire exterior concept. The gas bottle locker isn't integral to the body shape. It sits on

the drawbar like an afterthought. But it's extremely solid, like the rest of the Bambi. In fact "extreme" is a word that describes a lot of the Bambi's features. Its drawbar is extremely long, which goes a long way to explain the - yes - extreme stability on the road. And those rivets that are such a prominent feature of the styling seem to punctuate the whole structure, accentuating its aircraft-like lines.

By now, with so much talk of "solid" and "chunky" you could be forgiven for thinking the Bambi is heavy. You're in for a surprise - its MTPLM is only 1320kg. We arranged a Jeep Wrangler for the test simply because it is, like the Airstream, of American origin, not because we needed such a heavy vehicle as this to tow it, of course. And, as we'd expected, the Bambi felt perfectly balanced as we towed it from Airstream's base at Tebay in Cumbria to the Camping and Caravanning Club's site at Keswick, picturesquely located on the shores of Derwentwater.

Time for lunch - and time to assess how the Bambi measures up to British tastes in the kitchen area... You have two burners plus a Smev combination oven-grill. You have a circular sink - and just a small amount of working surface. Kitchen storage space is excellent. Under the sink is a double-doored cupboard; there are two more cupboards

at floor level, one of them under the oven. The lack of surface space means you have to prep all the food before you open the hob cover. The television-position cabinet opposite gives you additional plate space... sounds rather conventional, doesn't it? But as you get on with the cooking your eyes are drawn to that brushed steel curved wall and you know you are in an environment that's far from conventional by British standards.

The style goes on: speakers are white, mounted into the sides of the front locker assembly. Locker fronts are slatted brushed steel-effect. There's more style in the delightful end washroom that's amazingly large for such a compact caravan. The shower itself is enormous - and incorporates a seat into the plastic moulding. The shower is separated from the rest of the washroom by a tough plastic pleated door that's as much a design feature as a practical barrier. You get a large mirror on the entrance door and, usefully, three hooks for towels or clothing...

In short, cool, stark style is everywhere, the Bambi is a comfortable cosy environment, it's only 1320kg - but is it worth a price-tag that's higher than any conventional caravan? Judge for yourself. The only clue you're getting to our opinion is this: Where else can you get this amount of iconic, ultra-modern head-turning style on wheels in just 1320kg? ■