

RIGHT: Distinctive and solid looks are backed up by a six-year warranty against water penetration

TONY BRADFORD HAS A BRIEF AFFAIR WITH A TOP MODEL FROM GERMANY

You don't have to be an outright chauvinist to subscribe to the theory that British is Best, because when it comes to caravans we have a lot going for us. But a brief acquaintance with a top model from Hymer of Germany has put a dent in our conceit and says quite clearly that we cannot afford to be complacent.

The Nova 555TB (that stands for twin beds) is anglicised in most ways, but not to the extent of moving the door, which remains on the Continental nearside. We found a number of other features that were unfamiliar and sent us looking for the handbook. And what a handbook: A4 size and thicker than this month's magazine, it is very detailed and covers most aspects of using the caravan. We would recommend it as bedtime reading for at least a week before venturing out on tour.

CONSTRUCTION



Built with Teutonic thoroughness, the Nova is difficult to fault. The least satisfactory feature was the lockable covers to the inlet points for mains electricity and water, which a vandal could rip off in seconds. That apart, the 30mm-thick walls and roof and the 41mm floor, using polyurethane foam, result in a good, solid body with high insulation value and a six-year water ingress warranty. A large hatch in the side-wall gives alternative access to a large locker under the front bed, while the drawbar locker has ample space for two gas cylinders and a spare wheel.

Smooth exterior panelling in grey is livened by distinctive graphics in blue and aquamarine. All windows open and have cassette blinds and flyscreens as well as interior nets, and in typical Continental style, the end walls have single large windows. They often have good weather on the other side of the Channel which is why the Nova has two large glazed

ABOVE FROM LEFT: Water tank can be filled by hose or pump. Storage can be accessed from outside. Wind-up rooflight has 'mood' lighting in its surround
OPPOSITE PAGE: Big permanent beds (double optional) take space from the aisle. No table storage problems – it's fixed, but slides on the pedestal

rooflights, one of which rises vertically with a winding mechanism.

TOWABILITY



The maximum permitted weight of the 555 is estimated in the brochure at 1670kg and the MRO as 1395kg, although the chassis plate gave them as 1700kg and 1346kg respectively. Taking the plate figures as accurate, this allows a

user load of 354kg, a quite staggering 7cwt. More remarkable is that the noseweight, with one gas cylinder and the spare wheel in the drawbar locker, was exactly 40kg. So it can be done if the design is right!

The Nova is built on an Al-Ko steel chassis with Euro-axle suspension. Again in typical Continental practice, shock absorbers are standard items, as is the Al-Ko 2004 coupling with built-in stabiliser.



A TRUE ALTERNATIVE



USABILITY



There's not a lot of open floor space in the 555, mostly as a consequence of the table being a permanent fixture, but this is not unusual in a Continental caravan. For two people and perhaps a couple of guests for a meal it works well enough, but if you want to party in it, some will have to sit on the single beds which are too wide for comfort, having no

backrests. Heating is taken care of by a Truma 3002 unit with Ultraheat blown hot air ducted round the interior. The carpets are three separate sections, removable for cleaning.

A sophisticated water system features an inboard 45-litre (10 gallon) fresh water tank that can be filled directly by hose or from an outside container via a submersible pump. A simple tank level gauge is combined with a battery condition indicator and a 12v

SPECIFICATIONS

HYMER NOVA 555TB
RRP: £14,895
INTERNAL LENGTH/
SHIPPING LENGTH:
6.13m (19ft 11in)/
7.35m (21ft 11in)
OVERALL WIDTH/HEIGHT:
2.30m (7ft 6in)/
2.66m (8ft 7in)
INTERNAL HEIGHT:
1.98m (6ft 6in)
MASS IN RUNNING ORDER:
1346kg (26.5cwt)
MAX TECHNICALLY
PERMISSIBLE LADEN
MASS:
1700kg (33.5cwt)
USER PAYLOAD:
354kg (7.0cwt)
BERTHS: 2
CARAVAN SUPPLIED BY:
Lowdham Leisureworld.
Tel: 0115 966 3838



remember switching the fridge over to 12v (though of course you should have turned off the gas cylinder before driving away).

WASHROOM



Lots of moulded plastic cupboards and compartments, large mirrors and bright downlighters give the washroom an air of sheer luxury, so you tend not to notice that it is of only average size. The basin and the shower share the head, the shower area being enclosed by a plastic curtain. The Thetford Cassette toilet has push-button electric flush and a rooflight provides ventilation, but there's no window.

LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS



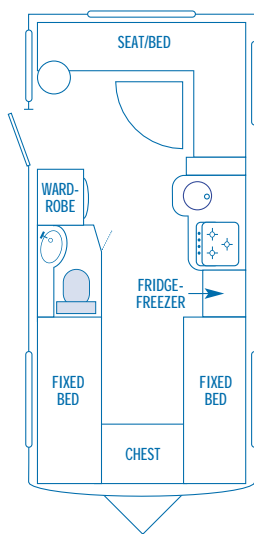
Unusual and, we have to say, not very substantial, lockable covers to the mains hook-up input (and the water filler) lose marks, but then British tourers don't offer lockable covers of any description.

Otherwise, the Nova is well equipped with dome ceiling units, spot lamps and downlights. Mains sockets are strategically placed, with a 12v control panel just inside the door having battery charge and water tank level indicators and a 12v master switch. Most of the operational controls are soon learned, but again, we were grateful for that excellent instruction manual.

VERDICT



Naturally, the Hymer has a definite Continental feel. To many that difference is what will appeal. But there is more than a bit of one-upmanship to the Nova. Build quality is very high and it has many practical features that put it among the more sophisticated brands available on the UK market.



master switch in a panel just inside the door. A Truma Ultrastore heats the water by gas or mains electricity and the single lever mixer taps are neat domestic units.

A large wardrobe, backed up with roof lockers or shelves round the interior, provides good storage space, but a UK caravanner would notice the lack of drawers. There is a mass of space under the beds, but access to the space under the seats is obstructed by that table again.

LIVING AND SLEEPING



The 555 is designed as a two-berth model, although it would be possible to sleep one or two small children on the L-shaped rear end seating. The two single beds at the front end are 6ft 7in long by 2ft 8in wide, dimensions you won't find in any UK caravan. An upholstered headboard curves across the lower part of the front window, effectively ruining any chance of a view through. A solid wood partition is provided so that the sleeping area can be closed off when required.

At the rear, the L-shaped seat is set round a quadrant table with a tubular leg

and an interesting mechanism that allows the top to lock into several positions, close to the seat for eating, away from the seat for relaxing. You can't remove it completely. On the door side is a small semi-circular table that can slide back and forth. This is about the only spot for a TV and there are handy mains and TV aerial sockets.

KITCHEN



The kitchen seems small but offers a three-ring hob and oven/grill, a sizeable round stainless steel sink (no drainer) and some permanent work surface. A good-size cutlery drawer, a pull-out unit with wire baskets and a pan locker, plus roof lockers, provide fair storage space; and an extractor fan and light plus a mains socket for the kettle are built into the underside of the roof locker. But the jewel in the crown is the Dometic 105-litre fridge with separate freezer, built in above a cupboard so you don't have to bend down. This has automatic energy selection, so you never have to worry as you join the motorway that you can't



ABOVE: Making the kitchen L-shaped adds just enough workspace to keep cooks happy
RIGHT: No separate shower, but excellent storage and lighting compensates