

on the UP AND UP



IT'S LIKE A CARAVAN BUT EASIER TO HANDLE. PHILIP POND TRIES A PENNINE PATHFINDER

ABOVE: It's like a marriage of caravan and tent, giving the best features of both

When Pennine started making folding campers, the company consisted of just two people and the UK trailer tent market was dominated by neighbouring company, Conway Leisure Products. Within past weeks Pennine, now with a workforce of 58, has celebrated its 25th anniversary by taking over Conway. That's what you call going up in the world... Looking to identify the reasons for

its success, we have been testing Pennine's best-selling model, its flagship Pathfinder 600DL. Excluding the odd American import, this is the largest, best-equipped and most caravan-like folding camper you can buy. And therein lies the secret of Pennine's silver-lined success.

The story of its Pathfinder is Pennine's own story in microcosm. It's a tale of steady development, evolution and refinement plus careful marketing



LEFT: Lack of work surface other than glass appliance covers is the only criticism we can level at the kitchen, and some caravans are no better



LEFT: Forward bed is a little more shut off by the wardrobe (left) and washroom (right)

BELOW: Think of it as a caravan with two permanent double beds and its appeal widens further



which, multiplied across the five-strong range, have slowly but surely led to the company dominating the folding camper market.

Pennine's target in designing its new flagship in the mid-1990s was the established caravanner wanting something easier to tow and park but just as comfortable as their old tourer. So when it launched the Pathfinder it set new, luxury standards in this type of outfit including, for the first time, a washroom complete with toilet. Five years on, the fine tuning is still continuing and the latest 2003 version shows all the attention to detail which has become a hallmark of this manufacturer.

CONSTRUCTION



Cotton canvas is a characteristic of campers. The Pathfinder's walls and roof are made of the stuff, all in the same high-grade 320gsm TenCate material and supported on painted steel poles. Those are attached to a rigid trailer body made from exterior-grade plywood with a painted aluminium skin and vinyl inner walls, the whole lot sitting on an Al-Ko Taper-line galvanised chassis. ABS nose and tail cones have now replaced the original GRP versions, which were found to craze.

TOWABILITY



Sitting on 165x13 tyres, this Pennine is a little taller than most folding campers



The benefits of stable towing and easier storage are big selling points

but still lower than any towcar's roofline. So you get none of the wind resistance of a conventional caravan, with a resulting benefit in handling and mpg.

The all-up weight is not inconsiderable by camper standards but, given the efficient brakes and 25kg noseweight, we found it well balanced, stable and easily controllable while on tow. Extended mirrors are helpful though not essential. Towing with an MPV or all-terrain vehicle allows you to see right over the top. There are the usual 12N and 12S electrics.

PITCHING



Erecting the Pathfinder is easier with two people but one can do the job. With the camper positioned (grab handles front and rear plus the telescopic jockey wheel help), lower four corner steadies. Roll back and secure the captive weatherproof top cover. Swing the rear bed up and over through 180 degrees so that it is supported by its captive metal frame. Repeat with the front bed.

Insert four loose poles (length

SPECIFICATIONS

PENNINE PATHFINDER 600DL

RRP: £8595
INTERNAL LENGTH:
6.00m (19ft 6in)
SHIPPING LENGTH:
4.78m (15ft 6in)
OVERALL WIDTH:
2.12m (6ft 11in)
OVERALL HEIGHT:
1.39m (4ft 6in)
INTERNAL HEIGHT:
2.20m (7ft 2in)
MASS IN RUNNING ORDER:
820kg (16.14cwt)
MAX TECHNICALLY
PERMISSIBLE LADEN
MASS:
1045kg (20.57cwt)
USER PAYLOAD:
225kg (4.4cwt)
BERTHS: 6
TEST MODEL SUPPLIED
BY: Pennine Leisure
Products, Chester Street,
Accrington, Lancs BB5
0SD. Tel: 01254 385991

adjustable) into the folding roof frame, to which the canvas is already attached. Then tension that by extending the poles. Secure the canvas side walls to the camper body using Velcro and elasticated straps. (Strategically-positioned plastic sheets protect the upholstery should it be raining.)

Inside, most of the furniture, fittings and fittings are slid into place or lifted up into position from the floor, although the washroom needs some assembly. With practice, 10-15 minutes will see you pitched and ready to put the kettle on.

USABILITY

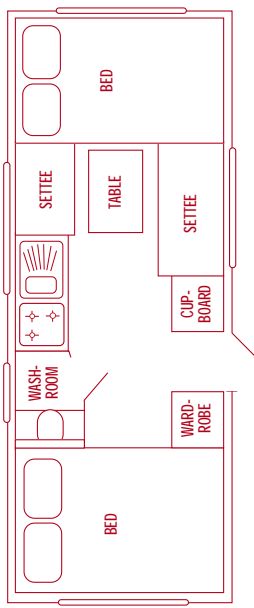


Step inside (the key-lockable door is on the UK nearside) and you could almost be excused for thinking you were in a caravan: the layout, with its carpeted floor and tasteful décor, is typical tourer.

For 2003, Pennine has made a concerted effort to lighten up the interior by using cream and beige instead of various shades of dark green and substituting a paler pear wood veneer for the elder previously used for the extensive woodwork. The overall effect, especially given the large window area, is light, airy and spacious. Headroom ranges from 1.76m (5ft 9in) to 2.18m (7ft 1in) in the central living area.

The caravan theme is continued by an assortment of drawers, cupboards, lockers, shelving and a wardrobe, which provide plenty of conventional stowage facilities. Unlike on many caravans, however, access to each seat locker can be gained only by raising the hinged top. There is room for a pair of 4.5kg cylinders in the drawbar locker, which remains accessible when pitched.

As well as an awning (£870), optional extras include a blown air heater (£495), carry racks (from £155), a sun canopy (£250), an awning extension (£240), inner tent (£67) and a safe (£42).



RIGHT: Galvanised Al-Ko chassis and ABS body ends are topped by high-quality cotton canvas

LIVING AND SLEEPING

Up to five people can be comfortable, thank you, relaxing on the two settees, complete with scatter cushions, occasional table and magazine rack. There is room for four to sit down to dinner together using the 100cm x 70cm freestanding table.

Both bedrooms are self-contained, with their own zipped doors, hanging pockets built into the fabric walls and opening windows (with flyscreens). Sprung mattresses of a quite adequate size are used and both measure 1.98m long but their widths differ – 1.22m in the rear bedroom, 1.37m at the front. Both are quite a long way up: 77cm above floor level, no less. A third double bed, also 1.98m long and between 1.15 and 1.54m wide, can be made up in the usual way using the table top and seat squabs.

KITCHEN

No shortage of mod cons here: the triple-burner Spinflo hob has an oven beneath and a good-size sink (and recessed drainer) alongside in matching enamelled steel. An electrically-switched mixer tap supplies hot water courtesy of a Truma water heater. The three-way 60-litre Electrolux fridge (with 5ltr freezer) lives opposite, underneath the wardrobe.

Two hinged, toughened-glass lids over hob and sink/drainer double as



effective worktops. The whole area is well lit at night.

WASHROOM

Overall size is a reasonable 70cm x 97cm (with full standing headroom). Apart from a shower, everything else is provided, even down to a soap dish, toothbrush rack, towel rail and mirror (with light).

The bench-type Thetford toilet has an electric flush. Above it, an ABS moulded basin fed with h&c folds down from the wall when needed. The opaque window, which has a flyscreen

panel, can be opened for ventilation purposes.

ELECTRICS AND LIGHTING

At night, the addition for 2003 of three halogen downlighters to supplement a trio of well-positioned fluorescent lights maintains the tourer effect, although there is no lighting at all in the two bedrooms.

A pair each of 12v two-pin and 230v three-pin points, strategically positioned, should meet most electrical needs. There is a third three-pin point for use in the awning. A fused distribution unit with charger/transformer and ELCB is conveniently positioned inside a seat locker.

VERDICT

The Pennine has been well thought out but it's not cheap, in any sense of the word. Starting at £8595, with all the options, this folding camper could cost you £11,000.

So this is no cheap 'n' cheerful alternative to a 'proper' caravan. But it is an alternative nonetheless, a well-equipped, comfortable and practical one for those looking for an outfit that is noticeably easier to tow and park than a full-size touring caravan. This Pathfinder will take you longer to pitch than a caravan – but not much; and there is a bit more effort involved, though not a great deal.

All in all, it should help to ensure that Pennine can look forward to at least another 25 years' profitable business.



RIGHT: The electrical distribution unit is located in a seat locker

BELOW: Low wind resistance means stormy conditions are no worry on the road



ABOVE: No shower, but you get a huge fold-away basin plus Cassette toilet

