

Grand Master

This unashamedly costly Vanmaster, hand-built in Lancashire, may just be the country's poshest caravan. Rob McCabe sees how the other half tours

Vehicle supplied for test by:
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So, your mortgage is a thing of the past and your great aunt has left you a handsome sum in her will. But what do you spend your inheritance on? How about something like the Vanmaster Signature 640? With its granite build, boutique hotel aura, top-quality equipment and £40k price tag, this fixed-island-bed tourer is certainly upmarket, but is it money well spent?

CONSTRUCTION

My old gran, bless her, was fond of saying "that'll see me out" whenever she took possession of something that was so well made, she reckoned it would probably still be going strong long after she'd moved on to a Better Place. And I thought of her saying that as I thumped my way around every last, muscular inch of this caravan.

The word that sums it up better than any other is 'solid' – from the massive, one-piece GRP roof and unyielding aluminium sidewalls outside to the chunky ash furniture, laminates and Forth Bridge-like locker stays indoors, solidity is all-pervading. Slide open the drawers, and the only material on view is



Kitchen has useful extendable work surface



Solid cabinetry adds a feeling of class

“There's no shortage of practicality to go with the opulence”

yet more solid wood. And as you move between each of the three distinct rooms you pass through, yes, solid wood dividing doors. I wouldn't be at all surprised if this one sees me out!

TOWABILITY

This is one of the heaviest caravans you can buy: use up all the available payload and you're hauling 2,200kg, so there's no question that your hired towing muscle needs to be big and SUV-shaped. Even BMW's X5 is out of its depth with this one, but a Toyota Land Cruiser D-4D or Land Rover's Discovery 4 will both do a good job.

Given such a fine match, all should be well. There's always a reassuring, well-planted feel to a twin-axle when you're towing it. And when you arrive on

site or back at the storage compound, it's rewarding to see how subtle turns of the steering wheel are reciprocated by the caravan, whose movements are more predictable than those of a two-wheeler.

But trying to move a thing this size by hand is asking for trouble, so try and leave enough in the kitty for a motorised mover.

USABILITY

Our test coincided with 8in of snow that then froze when overnight temperatures nosedived to -10°C, and still bore the 'minus' prefix during daylight hours for days on end. Great caravanning weather, eh?

Well, yes, actually. With the programmable Alde central heating left on its electric setting and with thick insulation, the Vanmaster was always a haven of luxury and warmth. If you want a definition of the

word 'pampered', look no further than this model's underfloor heating that not only makes it possible to walk around comfortably in your socks, it makes you want to walk around in your socks.

There's no shortage of practicality to go with the opulence. Given that the fixed-bed 640 TBEW will be used almost exclusively as a two-berther, there's an embarrassment of storage options – most couples should be able to keep the caravan completely uncluttered, even if there's no awning to fall back on. The chasm under the double bed is, of course, the biggest space but it's ably assisted by front-opening bedlockers in the lounge, deep lockers and cupboards in all areas and a full-width gas locker that's accessed by two separate doors in traditional Vanmaster style. Regular Vanmaster watchers will also nod approvingly at the neat little compartment reserved for the electrical lead.

The loose-fit carpet sections are a precise fit and are divided into sensibly-sized sections for ease of manhandling and stowage. An onboard water tank means you'll be guaranteed running water in the morning, even in the Siberia-like conditions we experienced. Having a powerful awning light on the offside as well as the nearside is a big help if you have to replenish your water supply or whisk out the toilet cassette in darkness.

The 7ft 5in-wide 640 has an aura of spaciousness throughout, with plenty of footroom in the lounge. It's an excellently planned layout, with each of the three rooms – lounge/kitchen, bedroom and washroom – free of compromise.

LIVING AND SLEEPING

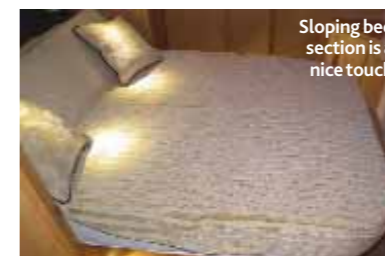
This is where any doubts that you've maybe been a tiny bit reckless in splashing out your great aunt's inheritance will melt away. As you sink back into one of the sumptuous corners (the sofas are ultra comfortable), warming your toes on the carpet as you take your first sip from your monogrammed wine glass from the bespoke illuminated cabinet, the rich stereo sound of Jazz FM oozing from the built-in DAB radio, you will almost be overcome by wellbeing.

Come bedtime, you can carry on enjoying the music – whether from radio, CD or MP3 player – because there are stereo speakers in the bedroom, too. Sound quality is superb, and you can turn it off just by flicking the switch above the headboard, next to the lighting on/off switches.

The transverse bed (6ft x 4ft 3in) is every bit as comfy as it looks. Cleverly, the upper portion tilts at an angle for optimum comfort when watching TV, reading or drinking your cuppa. At lights-out, one of you just needs to hop out of bed, pull it flat >>



Tailor lighting to your mood



Sloping bed section is a nice touch



Sumptuous lounge



Above top: the Vanmaster can cope with most conditions
Above: high-power remote-controlled awning light

TECHNICAL

RATINGS

CONSTRUCTION	[Progress bar]									
TOWABILITY	[Progress bar]									
USABILITY	[Progress bar]									
LIVING AND SLEEPING	[Progress bar]									
KITCHEN	[Progress bar]									
WASHROOM	[Progress bar]									
LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS	[Progress bar]									
VERDICT	[Progress bar]									

RRP	£39,995 OTR
Overall length	26ft (7.94m)
Overall width	7ft 5in (2.3m)
Overall height	8ft 6in (2.62m)
Internal length	21ft 1in (6.44m)
Max internal height	6ft 5in (1.98m)
MRO	1,760kg (34.6cwt)*
MTPLM	2,200kg (43.3cwt)
User payload	440kg (8.7cwt)
Berths	4
NCC approved	no
Caravan Club insurance quote	£531.11**

Figures supplied by manufacturer *MRO figure includes an allowance of 20kg for gas and water
**Standard 5Cs cover based on four years' no claims discount with a £100 excess, value of £39,995, £500 contents cover and assumes the caravan has a tilt sensor, tracking device and IDC stability control. Super 5Cs cover is £622.59. Prices and conditions are correct at time of publication.

Club insurance: 01342 336610 • Info: vanmaster.net



“This isn't the biggest washroom, but it is one of the most stylish”



Top: Signature's kitchen unit features lovely contours

Above: domestic-style radiator keeps you warm in the opulent washroom

and lower the support leg at the base. Although this eats into the walk-through space a little, there's still enough room to ease by on your way to washroom or kettle. If you are called to the washroom in the night, you can reach up to turn on your floor-level night light if you need a little guidance – if anything, these (one each side of the bed) are a little too bright.

The transverse positioning of the bed means you benefit from a window in front of you as well as behind – and there's the big, wide-opening sunroof right overhead to allow you to welcome in the new day before you're ready to raise the window blinds.

If you have overnight guests, their only complaint will be that the washroom is awkwardly sited at the far end of your bedroom – not ideal for an after-hours visit. But they'll sleep well up front, where the (over-engineered, naturally) two-section bedbase slides out from under either sofa to result in a quickly made-up, comfy double (6ft 8in x a slightly narrow 3ft 5in).

KITCHEN

I did a double-take when perusing the Signature's kitchen for the first time. A ceramic hob? Wow, that's a brave move. But this unit is actually a gas ceramic hob. Two burners ignite in the usual way, their flames clearly visible under the flush-fitting surface.

Cooking on it is just the same as on a 'normal' gas hob, the only difference being the much posher, sleeker-looking appearance and the fact that it stays roasting hot for a while after you've turned the burner off. It's easy to clean, too. The separate grill and oven are both conventional gas fittings.

On the opposite wall, an overhead compartment gives a home to the built-in microwave – and the giant fridge/freezer is also built-in, giving this area a real fitted kitchen look. The swoopy worktop is pleasing on the eye – and you can specify it in solid ash if you prefer.

WASHROOM

This isn't the biggest end washroom you'll see, but it is one of the most stylish. The same luscious woodwork that graces the rest of the Signature is in evidence here, as is the ability to dial in what permutation of lighting you'd like. The domestic-style radiator in the corner provides a focal point, as well as ensuring that the room provides a toasty welcome regardless of the weather.

Storage here is bountiful and the shower offers plenty of shelf space for whatever product you like to take into the cubicle with you for your morning wash.

LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS

If you ever get bored while staying in the Signature, you could always spend an

entertaining three or four hours counting all the mains sockets on board. Or you could cheat by reading on to the end of this sentence, by which time you'll have learned that there are seven of them. Yes, seven – and that's not counting the one in the sealed exterior locker or the one that's been assigned permanent microwave duties.

In a bedroom that has his 'n' hers everything (mirrors, wardrobes, reading lights, night lights), it'll come as no surprise that you also get a mains socket each. In practical terms it means you can, for example, leave the clock radio plugged in permanently, freeing up the one nearer the washroom to be used for hairdryer, straighteners or shaver – you can easily access the big washroom mirror from there. The other mains socket in the bedroom is a high-level one to accommodate a wall-mounted TV (an Avtex unit is on the options list).

Lighting is brilliant, in every sense. There's enough illumination at the flick of several switches to make the whole caravan floodlit if you really need it. In the evening, you can use the mood lighting only, and this really shows the elegant interior off to stunning effect.

This latter lighting option consists of strips of LEDs concealed behind the front and side window pelmets: very subtle, but still useful.

The two oval-shaped ceiling lamps have two settings. The first serves up a surprise, sending out soft wisps of electric blue across the ceiling; the second gives you a 'normal', powerful light.

The bedroom ceiling is peppered with 14 small, flush-fitting LEDs that impart quite a nice ambience, although some may find it verging on the gimmicky. Needless to say, there are many other lighting permutations available, including a mains-powered wall lamp identical to the pair in the lounge. ■

VERDICT

The flagship Range Rover costs £98,395. It's a wonderful vehicle, right enough, but is it worth all that? If you really, really want the cachet of having the top-of-the-range Range Rover on your drive, you have a stark choice – take it or leave it.

And that's pretty much the same with the Vanmaster Signature 640. It's a wonderful caravan that I have no doubt would be absolutely joyous to own and use but, boy, you'll have to pay for the privilege.

