



AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT...

THE TWO-OFF BAILEY CARAVAN THAT WILL BE PUT INTO PRODUCTION THIS YEAR. ROB MCCABE IS YOUR TESTER



HAVE YOU ever thought about what you would include if you were to design your ideal caravan? And what the finished article might look like if a manufacturer actually went ahead and built it?

Imagine, then, how Yorkshire couple Iain and Julia Bramble must have felt

when they were handed the keys to the caravan that they designed and Bailey built – just for them.

The twin-axle Bailey Brambler was the winning prize for the Brambles, who beat off more than 850 entrants in the My Bailey Van competition, in which the Bristol company asked Club members to design

their own caravan. That huge entry resulted in some fantastic ideas, but the judges homed in on Iain and Julia's all-round package as the best of a very good bunch.

There's much of interest on board the twin-axle, twin-lounge, L-shape-kitchen, end-washroom Brambler, so let's crack on with this exclusive test.

CONSTRUCTION

The Brambler's twin-panel aluminium 7ft 6in bodyshell comes from the upmarket Pageant Limousin and Loire fixed-bed twin-axle tourers, so it's certainly been given a good start in life.

The exterior-access locker on the nearside of this prototype is being deleted on the production version and relocated to the rear, opening into the storage space under the wardrobe in the washroom.

Inside, furniture construction, because of its highly individual nature, is a bespoke project for this caravan only; but the familiar, very sturdy locker catches from other Bailey models are in evidence, which is good to see.

The only real flaw (one or two untidy bits of joinery notwithstanding) was the curved, sliding plastic door on the cylindrical shower cubicle in the end washroom. One of the runners had a penchant for derailing itself from its track; and although it wasn't that difficult to get it back on again, the door remained irritatingly obstructive, refusing to slide cleanly and derailing regularly.

TOWABILITY

The Brambler's a big, long caravan with two axles, lots of chunky furniture and a sizeable helping of equipment that plays a part in exerting upward pressure on the scales. In other words, bring on the SUV.

The refined, practical and sweet-driving Land Rover Discovery would be just the ticket here – or maybe Iain and Julia, still flushed with success, will be designing their own big towcar, too?

All the heavy kitchen equipment is sensibly placed over the axles for optimum weight distribution. There's a hitch stabiliser to help maintain a steady influence, which a twin-axle's four wheels already do very effectively: assuming a good match to begin with, twin axles almost always behave beautifully on the road.

USABILITY

Obviously, lots of individual preferences have been assigned to this caravan – that's the whole point of it, after all. There are several visual shocks to overcome when you first step over the threshold, not the least of which is the white, mottled vinyl flooring that's always visible between the loose-lay carpeted areas. It'll certainly be easy to keep clean, but it somehow doesn't look as smart as the laminate-look flooring you find when you lift the carpets in most caravans.

It seems as though the Brambles may have felt similarly overwhelmed, because the floor of the second model that's delivered to them will be in a less-startling grey.

Either way, I was puzzled by the lack of any carpet covering around the kitchen area, which imparts an air of austerity that's out of keeping: it feels cold at this time of



year, too. The carpet sections themselves are secured by user-friendly press studs, but the centre section was an ill fit, resulting in some unsightly bunching.

Storage was clearly a priority in the design brief. Even excluding the space taken up by the microwave, there are 16 overhead lockers and myriad other cupboards and open shelving, not to mention all the room in the bedlockers. One of the front lockers features a neat, pull-out drawer, but the other does without any front-opening access at all.

The big expanse of black-granite-effect dresser top along the nearside wall is another 'goodness-me-look-at that' feature. It's all-pervading, especially in that colour, but does give plenty of surface area. There's not much kitchen work space directly opposite, so there's one potential use – but it would be more useful still if it were the same height as the kitchen units. As it is, it's just a bit on the low side for effective onion-chopping or pepper-stuffing.

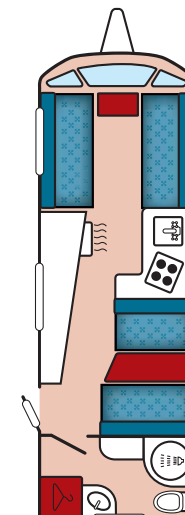
When they're not stuffing peppers indoors, the Brambles can be barbecuing outside, aided by not one but two gas points

– one on each sidewall. I can see the logic: if the prevailing breeze is going to cause smoke to infiltrate the awning, connect to the offside one. Or use both, just for the sheer one-upmanship of it all.

One idea that I can see catching on big style is the excellent laundry sack in the washroom. Although not an entirely new concept, it has been executed really well here: a hinged lid opens to reveal a substantial canvas bag secured simply and effectively by four hooks, one on each corner. Really nicely done.

The free-standing table store is just outside the rear washroom – not so ideal, given that it's a bulky old thing that you'll have to manhandle along a narrow corridor to the front lounge. It'll have to be used frequently, bearing in mind the wraparound sofa lives where the front chest normally would.

Oh, and I do hope the idea of the 'secret' set of drawers concealed behind the backrest of one of the sofas in the side dinette wasn't intended to be a security consideration, because this sentence has pretty much scuppered that, I guess...



ABOVE: Twin-lounge layout gives each age group its own space
BELOW: Usual Bailey exterior styling
OPPOSITE: L-shape kitchen dominates the front lounge area



>>



ABOVE: Spacious theme continues in the 'small' room

LIVING AND SLEEPING

In the murky, sinister world of caravan layouts, does anything polarise opinion more than the wraparound-seating front lounge? On the admittedly small-scale evidence presented here, probably not.

Of the two curious caravanners at the Club's Ferry Meadows site who popped their heads around the door to have a look at the 'Bailey What?' one was very taken with the configuration and the other was immediately dismissive of it.

I have to say that I align myself more closely with the latter Curious Caravanner.

The wraparound sofa certainly looks very eye-catching from a distance but, in practice, it is – quite literally – a waste of space. You don't so much sit on it as teeter on it; not a place to linger.

Elsewhere, the lounge is nice and comfortable with big bolsters and plenty of cushions. It's a compact area, but you could easily seat four people in comfort.

I have to say that I didn't find the enclosing presence of the L-shaped kitchen altogether welcoming. The Brambles have asked for the overhead microwave to be moved from the right to the left, swapping places with the open shelf – which I think will improve the view when you're sitting in either of the front corners.

The side dinette is a bit of a tight squeeze with the clip-on table in place, but the sofas themselves offer decent comfort. My main quibble is with the positioning of the two 12V lights, which are too close for comfort when sitting here: if they had been placed further back into the corners, they could have fulfilled the same function without getting in anybody's way.

The lower half of the table leg folds at 90 degrees to form part of the double bed base here. I'm intrigued by the idea of a family caravan that has been designed without any single beds (the front lounge is too stubby to allow for the option of singles).

Of course, the kids can share the same mattress in separate sleeping bags, but I know that my two are appreciative of their own 'space' when caravanning. Fixed bunks or, at least, a seat/bed with a cantilever bunk above allows for this – the layout of the Brambler does not.

At night time, each sleeping area is curtained off (curtains weren't fitted on the test van, however) and the occupants can snuggle down on two very comfy beds.

KITCHEN

For many people, the kitchen is the 'hub' of their homes; a room that takes on much more significance than simply the space where food is stored and prepared. The Brambles clearly intend the one on board their new caravan to fulfil a similar role, having stipulated an L-shape kitchen that dominates its middle section.

It's supremely well kitted-out, with a four-burner Spinflo cooker with oven and grill, a microwave, a big Dometic fridge and a ceiling-mounted extractor fan.

This area exerts a dominating presence over the lounge, with the cooker and microwave both jutting out and facing the front of the caravan. The hatch that separates kitchen from side lounge is covered by a smart Venetian blind.

Lighting has been thoughtfully provided – great to be able to say that about a caravan kitchen! – and there's plenty of storage options, including slide-out wire racks. There's not a huge amount of worktop, but

there's certainly no shortage of space on the nearside dresser top, and a conveniently placed mains socket means that the kettle can sit here, freeing up at least a bit of room.

The bespoke acrylic chopping board also fits sweetly over the bespoke washing-up bowl, creating another few precious extra square inches of useful surface.

WASHROOM

The aforementioned unconvincing engineering of the flimsy shower door takes the gloss off what is otherwise a likeable facility. The cubicle itself isn't the biggest, but it offers sensible options for making sure that shower gel, shampoo and the like are to hand when you hit the mixer tap.

Iain and Julia's near-obsessive quest never to run out of places to put things carries over into this room, with lots of cupboard and wardrobe space, the emphasis being on shelving rather than hanging, which is surprisingly minimalist.

I wonder how long it will be before the concealed laundry sack makes its way on to other Bailey products? Not long, I'll wager.

LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS

The highlight here is the strip of LED-generated 'mood' lighting that extends from underneath the overhead lockers in the front lounge, all the way down the side of the caravan. There's enough of it to imbue a nice, understated illumination with no other lights switched on at all.

There's plenty of choice, with ceiling domes, reading lights and downlighters placed strategically and effectively; and it's all controlled from the comprehensive master switch by the entrance door.

The flatscreen LCD TV attaches to a wall bracket for viewing in the side lounge, although I think the better option would be to take advantage of the socketry on the nearside dresser and watch the box in the more comfortable front lounge.

The built-in stereo radio/CD player offers the near-obligatory connectivity for iPods and other MP3 players.

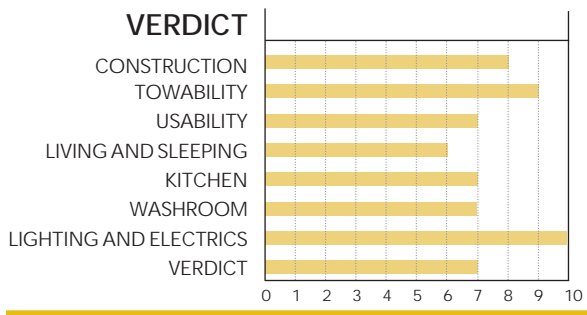
The Brambler really cuts it as a well-lit, well-connected child of the 21st century.

VERDICT

This is one couple's idea of caravanning perfection, which I respect: it's not for me to tell the Brambles what they want from a caravan. But I have reservations over the front lounge/kitchen proximity thing and the secondary lounge is too much of a compromise in both day and night use.

But I'm sure Iain and Julia must be delighted to learn that Bailey is launching the new Pageant Ardennes model, based on the Brambler, at February's NEC show. ■

Technical	
RRP	Approx £14,500
Internal length	6.24m (20ft 6in)
Shipping length	7.83m (25ft 8in)
Overall width	2.28m (7ft 6in)
Overall height	2.58m (8ft 6in)
Internal headroom	1.91m (6ft 3in)
MIRO	1460kg (28.7cwt)
Payload	190kg (3.73cwt)
MTPLM	1650kg (32.5cwt)
Berths	4



Insurance: 01342 336610
Info: bailey-caravans.co.uk