



Blind date

John Wickersham looks at the pros and cons of an alternative to the conventional awning

IF YOU are a caravanner who is frequently on the move, a traditional awning can take too long to repeatedly erect and take down. The solution could be a roll-out blind which can be set up in a matter of minutes and even be used during a quick roadside stop. However, in gusty winds such products can lift and potentially cause damage.

Being externally-fitted, they offer storage benefits to users. Indeed, some motor caravan manufacturers have seen this advantage and fitted roll-out blinds to their models for some while.

But it's not only motor caravanners who can benefit from such an item. Several types of roll-out blind, including Fiamma products, have recently been developed principally for touring caravans. Let's take a close look at these awning alternatives.

CANOPY COVERS

Mounting a retractable blind on a roller is an idea that's been employed by shop owners for decades. Similar systems are available for motor caravans, although excessive projection of the cassette might be deemed dangerous. As a result, Auto-Trail has created a purpose-made recess on

its coachbuilt models. Other manufacturers have adopted the idea as well, although this strategy can't be used on panel van conversions, nor can it be employed when a cassette blind is retrospectively added – though roof brackets might help solve the problem.

A large cassette-type roller blind can weigh as much as 44kg (the Fiamma F65 490, for example). Fold-out arms that withdraw and support the fabric obviously have to be robust, which is why this type of blind is primarily used on motor caravans and only rarely fitted to tourers. External walls on touring caravans are seldom as thick as those on coachbuilt motor caravans, so lighter canopies are needed.

This quest to create canopies to suit touring caravans prompted the development of fabric panels which are merely rolled-up and stored in a long fabric bag. This stitched container incorporates a flexible cord that slides into most roof-level awning rails. Hence the awning channel supports a retracted canopy complete with poles. Some owners leave the bag in place while towing their caravan, something I wouldn't recommend. Some awning rails

Roll-out blinds are more commonly found on motor caravans, but models are now being designed for tourers as well



This 2009 IH Oregon high-top has a manufacturer-fitted cassette roof blind



The Fiamma Caravanstore Zip has been purposely designed for installation on tourers



The cassette of this canopy awning on an Auto-Trail Cheyenne coachbuilt is mounted within a recessed channel



The weight of a cassette roller blind is often too great for a touring caravan



This lightweight caravan roller blind is stowed in a waterproof bag which slides into the awning rail



Each articulated, telescopic leg and side arm on a Fiamma Caravanstore stows inside the roller tube



Patience is needed when setting-up a roller blind: the pole sometimes disconnects unexpectedly



A groove under the fascia plate at the front of this Omnistor blind offers attachment for storm tapes



If you add side panels to a roller blind canopy, you can't drive off in a hurry



To discharge rainwater, many owners raise one pole higher than the other



Dealers sell various types of storm tapes, including products with ratchet tighteners

“Several manufacturers offer optional zip-in sides to provide an enclosed set-up”

are attached with standard steel screws which can rust quite early in a caravan's life. In addition, ageing sealant contributes negligible mechanical strength and a rail under stress can pull away from a wall panel – bringing the blind down as well. Obviously this is more likely to happen when a caravan is subjected to the pitching and headwinds experienced when towing, so it's wiser to detach a fabric bag before an outfit's on the move.

Among the caravan-specific lightweight products, Fiamma's Caravanstore is a good example of a compact canopy. Quick to erect, it features ingenious innovations such as articulated, telescopic legs and side bars which stow inside the roller tube. Furthermore, the roof-only 440 model weighs just 10.7kg.

SIDE PANELS

Several manufacturers offer optional zip-in sides to provide an 'enclosed awning-style'

set-up. Fitting these panels, which improve weather protection and give increased stability in windy conditions, means there are extra pegging points. They also create barriers which prevent gusts of wind getting under a roof and 'lifting the lid'.

If you buy side panels and a groundsheet, these have to be stowed separately when you take to the road. In fact, some benefits of a canopy are lost in the process. For instance, when a motor caravanner is eager to 'get up and go', there are extra tasks to carry out first. In truth, site-based motor caravan owners who require all-enclosing structures might be better served by a free-standing, drive-away awning instead.

OPERATING A ROLL-OUT SYSTEM

The canopy on a cassette system is opened using an extension handle which is inserted into a socket. Sometimes this winding-out operation calls for patience – for example, a

handle can disconnect unexpectedly and may scratch a panel in the process.

WET AND DRY

On several cassette-type canopies, rain discharging down the fabric can get held up behind the forward-facing fascia. To resolve this, many owners extend one support leg more than its partner. The resulting tilt on the roof fabric resolves the matter because rainwater gets steered to one side.

There will always be occasions when you have to leave your pitch in a hurry. That might necessitate rolling up a blind when it's wet. It's obviously better to wait until it's dry but if that's not possible, open it back out at the earliest opportunity. Mould can form at surprising speed.

BE PREPARED

Safe securing is essential and some owners have experienced a canopy roof that lifted and caused a lot of damage. To combat this, dealers sell strapping systems to help hold a roof down when it's windy. These are only as good as their anchorage allows, so check the strap's pegging points, too. Also peg down the foot plate on both supporting poles – Fiamma supplies a four-peg spreader plate to increase the anchorage of the plate even more. ■