



Special OCCASION

Rob McCabe gets to grips with one of the new models from the luxurious Vanmaster stable and discovers that it is something to be celebrated



Transverse island double is a pure joy

SO, WHAT caravan would you buy if money were no object? It's a question that's no doubt been asked many a time in clubhouses and at awning drinks parties over the years. Carlight's name will probably have cropped up, as will those of Airstream and Bessacarr (remember them?).

Vanmaster will have had its supporters, too. For many years, these expensive, hand-built tourers were made to order in Lancashire by the justifiably highly-regarded Tommy Green and his band of dedicated craftsmen.

It did look as though the marque would be lost to us earlier this year – but it's in new hands now. Even though the services of said craftsmen have been retained, the new-look Vanmaster is a vastly different

beast from those that came before. It's a name to live up to, of course, so the accent is very much on luxury (and let's not bother too much about the cost).

Will the name of Vanmaster – by whom there will be just 50 caravans built every year – continue to be mentioned in awning and clubhouse straw polls across the land? Our first test of the sumptuously-appointed, island bed, twin-axle Occasion 640, the biggest in the new five-model Vanmaster line-up, will go a long way towards answering that.

CONSTRUCTION

One thing you could always say about Vanmasters of yore is that they were beautifully made. It looks like the same thing can be said of the new generation.

The quality of the exterior fit and finish can be summed up in a single word – faultless. The front and rear glassfibre panels are bonded with precision to tough-as-old-boots aluminium sidewalls, while the corner steady look like something you might expect to see on the centre-spread of 'Over-Engineering Monthly'.

Accessing the front steady isn't as easy as it might be, though. You have to ease the winder into a long sleeve to meet up with the completely hidden nut; no matter how much finesse I applied to this task, I found it almost impossible to avoid clunking the winder against the bodywork as I turned it.

The bodywork enveloping the A-frame looks uncommonly neat and uncluttered. The main reason for this is the seeming lack of a towing electrics connection cable. It is there, but it's every bit as hidden as those front corner steady nuts: it lives in that dinky little compartment where you'd expect to find the gas locker on most caravans. The Occasion has twin gas lockers, one on either side of that aforementioned compartment – all three compartments have sturdy, stainless-steel hinges.

Inside, the tactile solid ash furniture is a constant reminder that you're in a caravan of real substance. Open the overhead locker doors and the all-over textured finish inside is a more subtle sign of quality.

Talking of tactile, the ceiling is covered in a soft, fabric-like finish that imparts a more homely feel. On the other side of that ceiling is a plywood roof, strengthened by cross bars, stuffed with insulation and wrapped in a massive glass fibre panel.

It's a heavy-duty bit of engineering, with the considerable benefit of keeping out much of the noise generated by heavy rain. There were a couple of substantial downpours during the test, and the lack of din was impressive – uniquely so.

Friends of ours recently treated themselves to a new kitchen, which included granite worktops at a cost of several million pounds (well, something like that). The worktops in the Vanmaster may not be granite, but they're every bit as thick as the real thing in our friends' abode and I'd say they do a highly-creditable impersonation.

Indeed, all the surfaces have a pleasing, thick, thumping appearance, adding to the overall impression that nothing on board this vehicle is going to break, come loose, bend or fall off anytime soon.

TOWABILITY

Load it up to the max, and the 640 weighs more than two tonnes. This is unashamedly a caravan where weight-saving isn't an issue and which needs a hefty 4x4 to haul it – when you're having that 'money no object' conversation, remember to leave enough dosh in your fantasy bank account for a Land Cruiser or Discovery 4.

Taking that as a given, all will be well. There's a hitch stabiliser, of course, as well as Al-Ko's ATC electronic anti-instability device. When you also consider the built-in advantage of having four wheels on the road (each of which is protected by a Tyron safety band), hauling this mighty caravan around will be delightfully fuss-free.

Well done to Vanmaster for fitting high-level road lights and indicators to accompany the lofty brake light on the rear panel – a worthwhile road safety feature.

USABILITY

If six mains sockets is overkill, so too is the amount of storage space on this de facto two-berth. There are seven drawers (including a giant one under the nearside sofa), two wardrobes, an underbed warehouse and cupboards and lockers coming at you from all directions. Some are so deep, I couldn't reach the back of them.

I like the big shelf and drawer by the caravan door – just the job for depositing mobile phones, maps, keys, newspapers and the like when you come in.

The loose-fit carpeting, sensibly divided into three manageable chunks (lounge, kitchen and washroom), lifts to reveal an attractive laminate floor. I can well imagine that some users will leave one or more areas exposed just because it looks nice – never mind the practicality of it. The carpet in the bedroom is fixed – the island bed would make it an awkward shape to lift, anyway.

Lifting that island bed reveals the free-standing table, attached to the underside of the mattress base. However, the process of lifting bed, unclipping and manhandling (and back again) is not a particularly user-friendly one, and the slide-out extension on the front chest doesn't sit flush with the rest of it, which is a bit disappointing.

An Alde combination boiler provides hot water and fires the central heating radiators, including one in the washroom that looks like it's come from home. The underfloor heating is pure luxury, but you can leave it switched off if you really don't want that much pampering.

LIVING AND SLEEPING

This is a great, long caravan with a roomy kitchen, a spacious, well-planned bedroom and a big washroom – there's little sign of compromise in any of these areas.

Something has to give, though, and it's the lounge that's been kept in check – don't expect full-size single beds up here. For all its sturdiness, though, it's lovely and comfortable. Size isn't everything and, indeed, it's sometimes the little things that make a big impression.

Take, for example, the velour that runs along the top of the backrest cushions. Whenever I flopped down on to the sofa, >>



The lounge is small but very comfortable



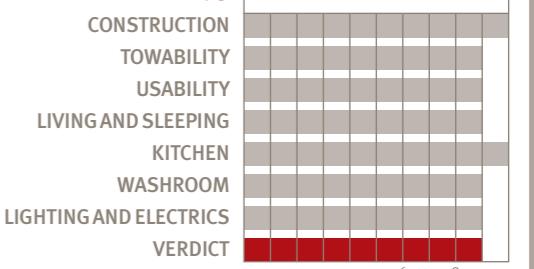
Sprung slats provide a sturdy base...



...for Occasion's smaller double bed

“The exterior fit and finish is faultless”

RATINGS



0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

RRP	£31,950 OTR
Internal length	6.4m (21ft)
Shipping length	8.13m (26ft 8in)
Overall width	2.3m (7ft 6in)
Overall height	2.57m (8ft 5in)
Internal headroom	1.98m (6ft 6in)
MRO	1640kg
MTPLM	2000kg
User payload	360kg
Berths	4

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Above: angled cooker is a classy and practical touch

Below right: the impressive washroom features a cylindrical shower cubicle

I automatically stretched my arm out along the top of the backrest – as you do. The soft-to-the-touch material was there, waiting to provide a touch (literally) of luxury.

Sprung slats pull out from under each sofa, meeting in the middle to provide a sturdy base for a good double bed – but it's the transverse island double that will get all the wows here (you can opt for an in-line double or even a twin-dinette layout within the confines of the 640 bodyshell; such is the flexibility of buying a Vanmaster).

The mattress – beautifully supportive – is split horizontally near the top, allowing it to fold so that the bed frame can be slightly pushed in during the day to allow easier walkaround access to the washroom. When fully extended, you need to fold down a supporting leg at the base, so it's not entirely zero maintenance...

It's like a hotel in here, though, what with the central heating, TV, remote radio switch, low-level night lights, two windows, groovy ceiling LED panels, two mains sockets, his 'n' hers wardrobes... Fabulous.

KITCHEN

This is a focal point and a strong point, too. The cooker sits at an angle, giving the whole area a 'planned-in' look, the fridge/freezer is vast, the microwave is neatly concealed, storage space is near-endless and there's a decent amount of work surface even before you bring the well-proportioned slide-out extension into play.

As for the LEDs that illuminate the area above the hob... well, I'm nearly beside myself. A kitchen of distinction.

WASHROOM

If you can put to one side the clamour of that extractor fan – I guess you could always ask Vanmaster not to bother fitting

it – it's great in here, too. It looks lovely and it works well. The cylindrical shower is fully sealed, and there's plenty of space for toiletries. When not in use, a fitted circular rug (matching the carpet) sits in the base to maintain that all-important posh look. Yes, the base has a waterproof covering.

Stowage and lighting are both well taken care of, and that domestic-sized radiator adds to the impression that it's a job properly done.

LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS

This aspect of the Occasion's functionality is quite bewildering. Let's just consider the allocation of lights in the bedroom alone. A mains wall light over the transverse bed is joined by two reading lights, downlighters above each corner vanity unit and subtle, floor-level lights on either side of the bed. Let's not forget the four, ceiling-mounted, frosted glass panels, each of which contains five LED lamps. Blimey.

The washroom's nicely lit, too, with a ceiling light, a lamp in the shower and a strip of LEDs above the wash-hand basin. However, the irritatingly noisy extractor fan in here comes on automatically when you pull on the light cord and there's no way to override it. Not great if you're having a shave/putting your make-up on (that's either-or, not both, by the way) and trying to listen to the radio; and it's a surefire way of waking up your other half if you flick the light on in the middle of the night.

The main body of the caravan enjoys two ceiling domes, four lounge reading lights and a pair of mains lights in the front corners. The kitchen, for once, has all the extra help it needs, with two LED strips

on the underside of the overhead lockers – one covering the sink and worktop, the other serving the angled hob.

Part of the new ethos at Vanmaster is obviously 'if it opens, stick a light in it'. There's a switchable light for the oven, one for each of the gas lockers, one in each wardrobe and that downlighter in the cocktail cabinet. Oh, both sides have an awning light, too.

The stereo radio/CD unusually features a DAB digital tuner, for reasons of increased listening choice and sound quality. However, Vanmaster also has an eye on the proposed switching-off of the FM waveband in 2015. Thankfully, there's an FM band included on this set, too: 'thankfully', because the luscious sound quality of DAB at its best isn't always achievable. It sounded great at the Club's Ferry Meadows site, mind!

As well as the usual pair of stereo speakers in the lounge, there's another pair – one on either side of the bed base – in the bedroom. So, you can listen to *Book at Bedtime* in all its digital richness while nestling under the duvet... Then just flick a switch to turn off the radio. Talk about being spoiled.

Don't fancy the radio last thing at night? Our test caravan had a wall-mounted digital TV in the bedroom, and there are another two lots of mains/12V/aerial sockets upfront for a choice of daytime telly-viewing locations.

A bank of switches by the door controls the whole shooting match.

VERDICT

Impressive to behold in almost every way. It's eye-bulgingly expensive, of course, but Vanmaster makes no apologies for that and nor should it. If you're fortunate enough to be able to afford one, I don't think you would feel short-changed. ■

