



Strong, precision-fit exterior

Master stroke

Rob McCabe checks out the super-luxurious four-berth from Vanmaster, now with twin beds



Granite-effect worktop is impressive

THERE'S STILL some money doing the rounds in these supposedly straitened times and, much to Vanmaster's delight, a decent amount of it is finding its way into the company's coffers. Indeed, the Lancashire concern has had to increase production by 50% to meet demand. That's no mean feat, considering the cheapest (if that's the right word) caravan it makes costs £28,000.

Vanmaster reckons its new 2011 Occasion 640 TB will have even more folk beating a path to its door. The reason? Fixed single beds – by public demand, we're told.

CONSTRUCTION

The combination of the strength and precision-fit of the exterior build impressed me on last year's Occasion. Nothing's changed – the glassfibre front and rear panels and chunky aluminium sidewalls are still hugely impressive. The front corner steadies, awkward customers to get to last year, now wind up and down nice and smoothly.

Inside, the biggest and most noticeable change is the presence of chunky solid ash on surfaces, which is as good to the touch as it is to look at. It's not just on top, either – the drawers are made of the same stuff, which really engenders a feeling of

quality and goes some of the way towards justifying your £30k outlay.

What's more you'll hardly even notice when it's raining thanks to the layers of insulation between roof and ceiling, itself covered by soft-to-the-touch, felt-like fabric.

Given all this fine craftsmanship, the twin doors that separate the bedroom from the rest of the caravan are disappointing. There's a slight, but noticeable, gap between them, and I'd have preferred them to be a bit more substantial.

TOWABILITY

Vanmaster customers are not usually bothered by how much the caravan weighs, so long as it doesn't exceed the stellar towing weights of the Range Rovers, Land Cruisers and Pathfinders they already own. Nothing else will come close to coping with this enormous twin-axle.

An Al-Ko hitch stabiliser is standard, naturally, and so is a pneumatic jockey wheel for easier manoeuvrability.

USABILITY

Once again, the Occasion is warmed by Alde central heating, so there's no space heater on board. Normally, one of the drawbacks of a system such as this is the fact that bedding, holdalls and other paraphernalia stowed away in the bedlockers get in the way of the warm air trying to get out into the living quarters.

Vanmaster's solution? False floors. Any locker in the vicinity of a central heating outlet has been fitted with a base that sits a few centimetres higher than the actual floor, so the warm air can complete its journey unobstructed.

The multi-programmable set-up (which includes underfloor heating and hot water) is easy and quiet to use, but you'll need to be patient – it takes a while to feel the benefits.

Remembering that this nominally four-berth tourer will sell almost exclusively to couples, storage space is beyond plentiful. The four substantial bedlockers would, by themselves, almost provide enough space for two people's needs. As it is, the array of lockers, drawers and cupboards (including a wardrobe that's so deep I couldn't reach the back) provides more room than you'll ever need.

Life is made much easier by the front hatches that adorn all of the bedlockers – struggling with big, bulky upholstery sections is all but banished. And I soon got used to having a little table top right next to the entrance door, under the television cupboard and illuminated wine cabinet. It's dead useful for depositing keys, phones, torches, sunglasses and the like.

LIVING AND SLEEPING

Okay, so it's not exactly the London Planetarium, but bedtime in the Occasion gives you the chance to lie back and do a bit of faux stargazing – little lamps pepper the bedroom ceiling.

From the comfort of your bed you can also relax and listen to the radio, courtesy of the extra pair of speakers back here, or sit up a bit and watch the telly, thanks to the fitted wall bracket.

If you do need to leave such opulence in the middle of the night, each bed has its own low-level night light. Cleverly, one is at the foot of one bed and one is at the head of the other, thus spreading the subtle illumination around a bit if you want to use these for a spot of subtle extra lighting.

The single beds are truly luxurious, featuring highly-supportive and very plush, well-filled mattresses.

The lack of any shelving for reading glasses, water beakers and the like is a surprising omission, though. Unless you can be bothered to put stuff away in an overhead locker, your only option is the floor, which is hardly ideal.

Up front, the guest double bed is quickly made up by pulling out the substantial sprung-slat extensions from under each sofa. The quality of the upholstery means that this, too, is a fine place to sleep.

It also means, of course, that it's a fine lounge during the waking hours: the Occasion passes the flop-into-every-corner test with flying colours. Even when the blinds are lowered, you can wallow in the front corners without obstruction.

KITCHEN

This is very handsome indeed, what with all that highly-polished, muscular-looking, granite-effect worktop. The microwave is shut away out of sight behind its own overhead locker door, which smartens things up a bit as well.

Glass lids protect both the sunken sink and the hob, the latter featuring three gas burners and an electric hotplate (you can specify a four-burner hob if you prefer).

It would be nice to think that the elegant-looking cooker hood with built-in downlighters fitted here (and on the equally-upmarket AS Kensington tested last month) will filter down to all caravans in time, making a well-lit kitchen the norm rather than the rarity it still is.

WASHROOM

Hurrah! Last year's model's raucous extractor fan that came on with the light and for which there was no override has been omitted, cast into the wilderness to go and conduct its noisy business elsewhere.

With that gone, there's no reason to offer any criticism here. It's wonderfully lit, the shower cubicle is huge (even boasting a seat), there are plenty of mirrors >>



Guest double is quickly made up



Ideal for lounging

“ The quality of the upholstery means this is a fine place to sleep ”

RATINGS	
CONSTRUCTION	9
TOWABILITY	9
USABILITY	9
LIVING AND SLEEPING	9
KITCHEN	9
WASHROOM	9
LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS	9
VERDICT	9

RRP	£33,500 OTR
Overall length	7.94m (26ft 1/2in)
Overall width	2.3m (7ft 6 1/2in)
Overall height	2.57m (8ft 5in)
Internal length	6.44m (21ft 1 1/2in)
Max internal height	1.98m (6ft 6in)
MRO	1,740kg (34.3cwt)
MTPLM	2,200kg (43.3cwt)
User payload	460kg (9cwt)
Berths	4
NCC approved	No

Figures supplied by manufacturer

Club insurance: 01342 336610 • Info: vanmaster.net



Starry, starry night: bedroom lamps are a nice touch



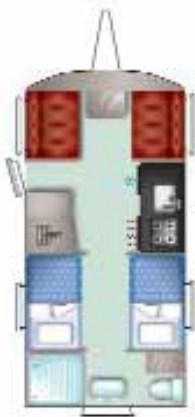
You'll need a big towcar to tug this twin-axle



Good bathroom with domestic-style radiator



Quality extends throughout the caravan



and there is enough stowage provision for the most avid toiletries hoarder. The finishing touch in this splendidly-appointed room is the domestic-style radiator.

The door can be secured open, a thoughtful option that may be appreciated when the washroom and bedroom are being used as a dressing suite before a big night out.

LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS

If you're more afraid of the dark than you are of spending a lot of money, you should buy this caravan.

The lounge is illuminated by two mains wall lights, four reading lights and two ceiling domes – and there's a third dome that just about qualifies as being in the lounge, too.

The brightness doesn't evaporate as you move to the kitchen area, either: two striplights take care of the worktop and sink, while that same sleek Dometic cooker hood floods the hob with a pleasingly-piercing brilliance.

While the 'starry sky' ceiling lights may hog the headlines in the bedroom, there's a plethora of others at your beck and call, including another pair of wall-mounted mains fittings.

Predictably, the same theme continues on into the washroom: two ceiling domes,

“The washroom is wonderfully lit, the shower cubicle is huge and there are plenty of mirrors”

a downlighter and not one, but two, lights in the shower are all operated by one tug of the pull cord. They're switchable individually as well, of course. Outside, there are two awning lights, one on each side.

When we extended our house a couple of years ago, I was amazed at how many mains sockets the builder suggested we go for. "You can never have too many of them these days," he said.

Well, it seems he's been offering advice to Vanmaster. The bedroom alone has three of the things, including one right by the washroom door that's tailor-made for the hairdryer and straighteners (your wife can use one of the other two...).

There are two in the kitchen – one in the TV cupboard and one at floor level by the entrance door (presumably so you can plug the vacuum in).

Radio addicts are well-served. You get a combined DAB/FM tuner – so you can take advantage of beautiful, hiss-free digital sound quality where the signal's perfect,

and switch to good old FM where it isn't. The lounge and bedroom both have stereo speakers and, if you like, you can have a pair in the washroom as well – it's an optional extra. As you'd expect nowadays, the head unit in the overhead locker has an aux-in socket to allow you to play your MP3 device through the caravan's speakers – which are of excellent quality.

From early 2011, the Occasion will offer wireless broadband internet access by means of a 3G high-gain aerial on the roof that's connected to a wireless router, which accommodates a SIM card to allow pay-as-you-go browsing. Vanmaster hopes to have this available at the NEC show in February.

VERDICT

In this caravan, all the important areas serve to pamper: you'll feel spoiled rotten while cooking, lying in bed, showering or even just wallowing in the lounge, admiring your monogrammed wine glasses in their cabinet. ■

Vehicle supplied for test by: Vanmaster, Unit 5 Martland Park, Wigan, Lancashire WN5 0LE. Call 01942 212194