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Small lounge table is handy for a couple of mugs of tea



Triple bunks are not only a good size, they're comfortable too



# TRIPLE cream

Rob McCabe gets acquainted with a robust three-bunk layout, offering great value and a host of towing options

**H**ERE'S ONE for your next caravan rally quiz night: What's the largest caravan factory in Europe? Answer: the Adria plant in Novo Mesto, Slovenia, one of the EU's smaller and more recent member states.

This huge facility has been producing caravans for the UK for many years now and has refreshed its Blighty-spec Adora and Altea ranges for 2011.

The four-model Altea range comprises ever-so-slightly trendy caravans aimed at younger (or younger at heart) families and offers two four-berthers and two that accommodate up to six.

It's one of the latter that we're going to focus on this month: the 542 has three fixed bunks on the offside to go with a single bed opposite and a double up front that has to be made up.

## CONSTRUCTION

The glossy sidewalls don't just look nice, they're brick-wall solid, too. Unusually, these and the roof are made of polyester, while the panels at the front and back are the more familiar ABS plastic.

Inside, nothing was loose, nothing squeaked nor rattled, all the doors closed with a pleasing precision, the shelves inside lockers felt reassuringly robust and the blinds and flyscreens flew up and down assuredly. The push-button catches on a couple of the locker doors were sticky but I've almost come to expect that from these wretched things.

## TOWABILITY

Here's a well-made, proper multi-berth caravan that you can load up to its limit and attach to your Volkswagen Touran TDI without it even reaching 85% of kerbweight. The longer than usual A-frame helps with stability on the road, as does the fact that the cooker and fridge, the heaviest items of built-in equipment, are right over the axle. There's no hitch stabiliser as standard – but you can specify one as an option.

## USABILITY

A couple of user-friendly features are obvious even before you step inside. The wheelarches are stamped with the recommended tyre pressures – handy in the obvious sense, but also a constant reminder that it's a good idea to check them perhaps



The dinette converts into the Altea's best single bed (top and middle); upholstery sections fit perfectly to form a comfy lounge double (bottom)

more often than you do. And the sturdy A-frame makes a good platform – excellent for cleaning duties. Not so great are the front corner-steady winding bolts, which are so far out of reach, they barely merit use of the word 'front'. If they really must be placed so far back, a guiding sleeve would make life so much easier.

Storage is well taken care of. It's good to see some deep, substantial open shelves featuring a deeply-dished edge so that stuff can't fall off. The two in either front corner are especially commodious, and they're helped out by seven overhead lockers. There are underseat lockers at the front and in the side dinette that are easy enough to get into from the top.

The free-standing table store just to the right of the kitchen is a good use of space – Adria has fitted some shelves in there, giving it the potential to be used as an additional cupboard should you need it.

The wardrobe offers good, deep hanging accommodation – and, while we're in here, how good to see the piping to the space heater ducted neatly out of the way on the rear wall.

The window-less door is also flyscreen-less (not bin-less, though). All the windows have screens though, as well as those sweet-to-use blinds. Even the large blind at the front – often an awkward customer on single-front-window caravans – is delightfully smooth.

The little table that folds up from the front wall doesn't offer the same user-friendliness as the more familiar chest, but it's good enough for drinks and snacks, and there's also a shelf underneath that you can bring into play. For things like spreading out the newspaper or watching a photo slideshow on your laptop, though, you'll need to get the other table out.

Generally, there's a nice, spacious feel throughout the Altea, which makes good use of its generous 7ft 6in body width.

## LIVING AND SLEEPING

First mention has to go to the triple-bunk design, a configuration that seems to have its detractors and admirers in equal measure. The usual negative argument is often in regard to the relatively small bed sizes, which – generally speaking – can make this sort of layout far from ideal for older children or those who unhelpfully embark on a growth spurt.

With the Altea, that argument holds less water than a sieve. You get an idea just by looking at the bunks that they're wider than expected – and the tape measure confirms that emphatically. These are 72cm wide which, in old money, is just over 2ft 3in. That makes them more than four inches wider than in an Elddis Avanté and more than two inches better off than the equivalents in a Bailey Pegasus.

They're comfy, too – well, if the bottom >>



Rear bunk set-up creates a distinctive exterior look



Sides are polyester while front and rear are ABS plastic

“Nothing was loose, nothing squeaked nor rattled, doors closed with pleasing precision”

RATINGS	
CONSTRUCTION	9
TOWABILITY	8
USABILITY	8
LIVING AND SLEEPING	8
KITCHEN	7
WASHROOM	7
LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS	7
VERDICT	8

RRP	£12,685 OTR
Overall length	23ft 9in (7.23m)
Overall width	7ft 6in (2.30m)
Overall height	8ft 6in (2.58m)
Internal length	17ft 7in (5.36m)
Max internal height	6ft 5in (1.95m)
MRO	1,150kg (22.6cwt)
MTPLM	1,300kg (25.6cwt)
User payload	150kg (2.95cwt)
Berths	6
NCC approved	Yes

Figures supplied by manufacturer

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Above: impressive washroom boasts lots of storage space

Below: kitchen facilities are restricted, so chef will have to think carefully about meals



one is anything to go by. Nothing would please me more than to fall within Adria's stated weight limit for the upper two, but I fear I may be on the wrong side of that 70kg (11-stone) threshold.

Each occupant gets a window, a blind/flyscreen combo and lamp, plus a curtain for privacy. It's definitely one of the better triple-bunk set-ups, although it's worth bearing in mind that the upper two don't hinge up to provide storage for bigger, bulkier items when not in use.

The seating area opposite converts into the fourth bed back here, and it's the pick of the bunch, being wider and slightly longer than the three fixers. I'd be happy to sleep here: the upholstery sections are a snug fit and offer great support. Mind you, shame there's no curtain to give this occupant a modicum of privacy, too.

The front double bed gets a similar rave review. The slats are of the pull-and-forget variety and, once again, the upholstery sections – including a bespoke piece to fill

a narrow gap – make a great fit. The resulting mattress is supportive and extremely comfortable.

The compact lounge doesn't perform quite so well in daytime mode, though. The main quibble is with the depth of the sofa squab. Although there are fairly pronounced kneerolls, the seating isn't quite deep enough for my 5ft 11in. Bundling into a front corner is better, but you need to slide the curtain along to make space for your head.

And, for all that Adria deserves credit for keeping the cost of the caravan reasonable, the provision of just two little scatter cushions seems a bit tight.

### KITCHEN

This is where most of the Altea's cost-saving measures are evident. Cooking facilities extend to a Thetford three-burner gas hob and a dinky little combined oven/grill, so family mealtime menus will need to be thought out carefully.

There's little in the way of work surface, so it's especially unhelpful that the sink doesn't have a cover that could be pressed into service. Additionally, the 90-litre fridge will fill up quickly after that first holiday shop.

The Altea is well provided-for in terms of mains sockets, although there isn't the expected 'kettle' one in the kitchen, so that (or the toaster) will have to live on the shelf opposite. Storage is pretty good, especially if you've requisitioned the aforementioned table-store cupboard.

### WASHROOM

The spacious washroom in the back corner is one of the 542's crowning glories. The big shower cubicle has its own mixer tap,

a shelf to put your feet on (but one at a time, please), a decent-sized tray for toiletries and two drain holes. But even if you never intend to use it, it's the ideal place to stow the family's waterproofs, wellies or wet beachwear if you don't have the awning up. A curtain closes it off when in use.

There are plenty of places to put stuff, including a big open shelf, an overhead locker and a cupboard under the wash-hand basin. You get three hooks for flannels on the wall, too. The big mirror is illuminated by two downlighters, while a frosted window lets in a good amount of light during the day. It's roomy enough to be used as a dressing room, which is always a useful thing to have in a caravan.

### LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS

Our early test vehicle was rushed to us straight from the production line, so there was no battery fitted. As such, its score is based purely on what is provided, not its performance.

Lighting provision looks okay, with two directional reading lamps and a snazzy-looking, ceiling-mounted cluster in the lounge. The latter, with two switchable settings, features three lamps that are surrounded by an array of pinhead-sized LEDs. The long striplight on the underside of the kitchen units extends as far as the hob, so that bodes well. Another pair of reading lights looks after the side dinette and each of the three bunks has its own little lamp.

Those two downlighters should be sufficient for the washroom, but there's no other ceiling-mounted light apart from the cluster up front, so I do wonder if the area near the entrance door would benefit from a bit more help.

It's well off for mains sockets, the lack of a kitchen fitment notwithstanding. There's a low-level one down by the entrance door, from which you can easily access the washroom mirror with shaver or hair straighteners. The socket by the dresser at the rear of the lounge is accompanied by an input for a TV aerial lead. There are another two sockets serving the lounge.

Controls for water pump and water heater are easily accessed, as is the RCD box, which lives in the wardrobe. The space heater is gas only (supplemented by blown-air outlets).

### VERDICT

The loungeability of the front dinette could be better, but the Altea 542 DT's impressive build quality, fine value for money, six great beds and huge washroom will win it lots of admirers. That you can tow it with a long list of family cars is just the icing on a very tempting cake. ■