



# In a CLASS of its own

After spending a week in the company of Vanmaster's new baby, Rob McCabe reckons it's as near to two-berth caravanning perfection as you can get

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

**I** speak to a lot of caravanners during the course of a year's testing, and the recurring theme during 2011 was the cost of new caravans, especially those that populate the manufacturers' premium ranges. As I write this, five out of the six Swift Conquerors are over 20 grand, as are six of the seven Bailey Unicorns by the time you've added on delivery charges; and the same applies to all four Coachman VIPs. Well, here's a thing – a hand-built caravan, tailored to your own requirements, for just under £24,000. Yes, of course that's a lot of money, but it's all relative. Vanmaster's argument is that, for just a little more outlay than going 'mainstream', you can take home the new two-berth, end-washroom Darwin and enter the world of bespoke luxury – tank-like build,

underfloor heating, solid ash everywhere, monogrammed wine glasses et al. But how persuasive an argument is it? Let's find out.

**CONSTRUCTION**  
The Darwin reminds me of Jaws (as in the James Bond villain, not the shark). No matter how hard Bond clattered his giant foe, or what he clattered him with, the big bad guy just stood there and took it all in his stride, suffering not even a scratch. Okay, I'm not entirely sure what the Darwin would look like after Roger Moore had set about it with an iron bar, but the immense solidity of this vehicle is impressive to behold – and that applies every bit as much to the interior as it does outside. Thick, immovable aluminium sidewalls are joined precisely to three huge swathes

of GRP, namely the full-height front and rear panels and the one-piece roof. The latter is wrapped over an internal wooden structure, which itself is lined with soft-feel velour. Four massive, heavy-duty corner steadies plant it all firmly on the ground.

Indoors, the hand-crafted, solid-ash furniture is the nicest I've encountered in a caravan since I was last in a Vanmaster. It's thick, deep and rich in tone, and it has been put together impeccably. Pure class.

**TOWABILITY**  
The Jaws-like build hasn't resulted in a total weight that's off the scale. Its MTPLM of 1,420kg is, for example, 30kg lower than that of the admirable Coachman VIP 460/2, meaning that it can be hauled comfortably by, say, many versions of VW's Passat estate, even when fully laden.

With fine weight distribution and the usual Al-Ko hitch stabiliser in place, towing should be a fuss-free affair. As well as the high-level brake light, there's a second set of indicators and road lights, too – a very worthwhile safety aid.

**USABILITY**  
This is an opulent caravan that goes out of its way to be practical, too. Vanmaster owners of old will be familiar with the neat little compartment on the nose that keeps the towing electrics lead tidied away; it's one of many neat compartments you'll find in the Darwin (named after Vanmaster founders John and Cyril Darwin).

The gas locker, although full width, is accessed by two hatches. Open the right-hand one and you'll find a gas barbecue point under its protective cover (do it at night and you get a really cool pink glow from the pair of interior lamps). Move to the nearside wall and you'll find a sealed wet locker, within which is a mains socket. Indoors, that beautiful woodwork contains a plethora of cupboards, lockers and open shelves. The twin-doored compartment on your right as you step inside contains the free-standing table – even this is solid ash. Every single drawer on board is made of proper wood, too – which, from a user's perspective, is great to see. The handsome dresser/cocktail cabinet on the other side of the door is host to a cabinet that contains an adjustable bracket for a flatscreen TV, plus the associated socketry. If you don't want to watch telly there, there's another mains/12V/aerial socket in the lounge.

The removable carpet sections fit beautifully, such that there's no flooring visible at all. Blinds and flyscreens, including the full-width one that protects the door, all glide up and down confidently.

The control panel for the Alde central heating, which works on gas or electric, is by the front door. It responds quickly to your commands: set your chosen temperature and it will display the current reading, which obviously changes as the caravan warms up. This process is aided by the false flooring in the bedlockers, which allows the warm air to circulate without hindrance. It's impressively quiet in operation, too.

And, boy, what a treat to sit around in a caravan in winter in your stocking soles, feeling the luxurious warmth coming up from under the carpet. The underfloor heating – controllable from a discreet valve at the back of a washroom cupboard – is a wonderful addition to the Darwin's standard specification.

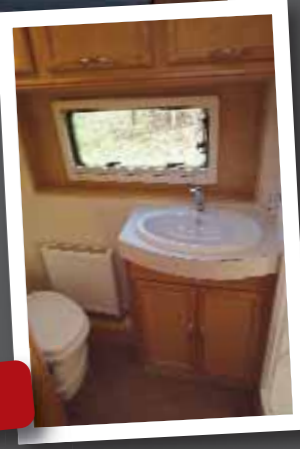
**LIVING AND SLEEPING**  
Given the opulence of the furniture that surrounds it, you wouldn't expect the upholstery to let the side down – and it doesn't. The sofas are supportive and very comfortable, aided by copious bolsters and cushions. If anything, they may be slightly too firm for some tastes, but the undoubted benefit of this is a terrific mattress when made up into the double bed. The base comprises two pine-slatted sections that pull out from under each sofa and meet in the middle, supported by fold-up legs on each corner. The legs in this test model were a bit stiff to lower into place, maybe due to their newness and lack of use.

Interestingly, Vanmaster lists the Darwin as having only the double bed, but you can comfortably use the sofas as singles if you're 5ft 10in or under.

Do you have a preferred head-to-toe arrangement when sleeping in a made-up

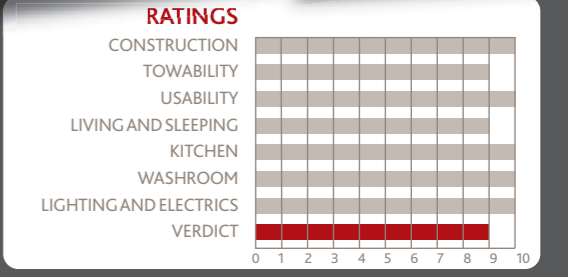


Above: practical kitchen is well equipped



Right: washroom is of the highest quality

## TECHNICAL



“The immense solidity of this vehicle is impressive to behold”



RRP	£23,950 OTR
Overall length	20ft 9 1/2 in (6.34m)
Overall width	7ft 7 in (2.3m)
Overall height	8ft 8 in (2.64m)
Internal length	15ft 1 in (4.6m)
Max internal height	6ft 6 in (1.98m)
MRO	1,285kg (25.3cwt)
MTPLM	1,420kg (27.9cwt)
User payload	135kg (2.6cwt)
Berths	2
NCC approved	no

Figures supplied by manufacturer

Club insurance: 01342 336610 • Info: vanmaster.net



“This is an opulent caravan that goes out of its way to be practical, too”

double bed at the front of a caravan? I do – my head’s always on the offside. Vanmaster’s designer obviously does it the other way around – he’s put the switch for the ceiling light and the useful, floor-level night light on the nearside, where my wife’s feet would normally be. That’s no problem, though – it’s one of the preferences you would indicate when discussing your caravan’s specification with Vanmaster before it went off and made it.

You’re spoiled for music choices while relaxing in the lounge or in bed. The JVC radio/CD player comes with three major plus points: it outputs via two excellent JVC speakers, it features DAB digital radio for stunning clarity and a wider choice of stations, and you can attach your iPod via USB lead. The unit also changes colour as it plays, which is pretty cool – shame you have to have the locker door open to see it!

#### KITCHEN

Wow – not only is there a downlighter directly above the hob and another pair over the sink/worktop area, but there are two ceiling domes as formidable supporting acts, all combining to make this the best-lit caravan kitchen yet.

Work surface is reasonable, especially if you have the sink cover on (you can still use the sink, thanks to the cover’s cutaway) and

storage is bountiful, assuming you regard the big, floor-level cupboard on the dresser opposite as being part of the kitchen.

Cooking facilities include a concealed overhead microwave and a Thetford cooker with oven (illuminated), grill and four-burner hob. If you’d prefer a hob with three burners and an electric hotplate, you can specify this at no cost. An overhead, multi-position extractor fan is in place to waft away any cooking aromas. You also have two mains sockets, one at either extremity of this quite marvellous facility.

#### WASHROOM

With its domestic-style radiator, this room feels – if anything – even toastier than the rest of the caravan when you walk into it. A tug on the pull cord brings on three lights, although the flush-fitting lamp in the shower and the ceiling dome can be switched off individually, leaving just a modestly-powered downlighter on – perfect for a middle of the night visit.

The wardrobe (and, yes, that has its own light as well) is in here, as is a quite bewildering range of stowage options: three overhead lockers, a big cupboard under the wash basin, generous shelving, two drawers and another little cupboard.

Even the cylindrical shower cubicle gets in on the act. Five spectacles for

toiletries? Come on – that’s just showing off. There’s another extractor fan in the washroom, too. Like its counterpart in the kitchen, it doubles as a skylight: turn the dial to open or close.

#### LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS

We’ve discussed the choice of TV viewing locations and the excellent stereo – both very creditworthy. Another highlight on our test caravan – albeit a £295 option – is a 3G router mounted on a locker wall that gives reliable wireless internet access upon insertion of a SIM card. There are many deals available, costing from just a few quid.

I’m tempted to dock a point for lighting overkill. The lounge looks great in the evening with just the light from the LED strips behind the pelmets atop the front and side windows. You want more? Okay, switch on the two wall-mounted mains lights. Not enough? Then, bring on the reading lamps – you’ve got four to choose from. Still can’t see? Well, turn on the ceiling dome...

The kitchen and the washroom we know about. The cocktail cabinet has its own flush-fitter and there’s one above the mirror by the entrance door. One awning light isn’t enough, of course – there’s one on each side.

The aforementioned mirror is served by a mains socket at floor level – the so-called hairdryer socket, I suppose. There are another four (five if you include the exterior one. Okay, six if you include the microwave one). ■

#### VERDICT

**I have a duty – bestowed upon me by the editor – to tell it like it is when reporting my findings on test caravans. I’m happy to oblige – what’s the point otherwise? That’s why the Darwin is given the rare accolade of so many perfect scores. You could argue that perfection is impossible, and I hear you. I did, after all, encounter a few flakes of sawdust in the recesses of a locker somewhere.**

**But it would be churlish to dock any more marks from what is the most impressive caravan I have tested in many years. It is stunningly made, brilliantly equipped, thoughtfully designed and a joy to be in (with or without shoes on...).**

**I can’t afford one, and I’m sure the same applies to many others. But, taking its price comparatively, it’s worth every penny.**